THE ROMANTIC POETS
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CHAPTER V: KEATS

i. The Realm of Flora

For all our tendency to couple them together, there was no such alliance between Keats and Shelley as there was between Wordsworth and Coleridge. Their qualities were antithetical but not complementary. Shelley was "much disposed to dissect or anatomize any trip or slip" in *Endymion* — or Keats thought he was: and Keats was inclined to deplore Shelley's dissipation of his powers on other objects than pure poetry. Keats writes to Shelley:

> received a copy of the *Cenci* ... . There is only one part of it I am judge of—the poetry and dramatic effect, which by many spirits nowadays is considered the Mammon. A modern work, it is said, must have a purpose, which may be the God. An artist must serve Mammon; he must have 'self-concentration'—selfishness, perhaps. You, I am sure, will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity, and be more of an artist, and load every rift of your subject with ore. The thought of such discipline must fall like cold chains upon you, who perhaps never sat with your wings furled for six months together. (*Letters*, ed. M. B. Forman, 1935, p.94.)

The letter reveals admiration but imperfect sympathy. Some of the reasons for this were irrelevant social ones; but the main reason is indicated above. Keats hardly shared at all in Shelley's political and social passions. He did not see the poet as the trumpet that sings to battle, or the unacknowledged legislator of the world. "An artist must serve Mammon"—that is, his own art rather than humanity: and Keats is, therefore, the first of those in the nineteenth century who wished to carve out a separate kingdom for the arts, and this letter perhaps [157] marks the beginning in England of the doctrine that was later to develop into "Art for art's sake". However, it is only the beginning, and the development belongs to a later story. Keats is never really happy in this belief and never works out its implications to his own satisfaction. Its significance for the study of Keats himself is that it shows him as above all the conscious artist, anxious to load his poetry as fully as possible with its own special kind of excellence. We see the result of it in the devoted critical care he gives to his own poetical development, the constant effort to correct faults in technique and emotional tone, to abandon harmful models and choose better ones, above all to think out the essentials of his own kind of poetry to the exclusion of everything else.

During his short career, therefore, Keats's work is always changing and developing. At his death he seems to have been on the edge of a further stage of growth. If Shelley had lived longer there would have been more Shelley, but probably more of the same kind. We feel of Keats that there was much to come that would have been new and different. It is not much use to speculate on the direction in which he would have moved. There were so many conflicts unresolved at the time of his death. The relation of art, his own kind of art, to human life as a whole was a question that perplexed him from the beginning. What he says to Shelley above can be countered, as we shall see, by passages in which he implies the opposite—that the "magnanimity" of sharing the distresses of humanity is essential to the poet's growth. He lived in an age when a smack of the philanthropist, the "friend to humanity", was expected of liberal and enthusiastic youth; and he began his career in a circle of liberal enthusiasts. Yet he cannot really worry himself about many of the things that worried them; he feels obscurely of a great liberal of the past that he was not quite a "friend to humanity" in the contemporary sense, and we find him wondering "whether Milton's apparently less anxiety for Humanity proceeds from his seeing farther or no than Wordsworth".' He ultimately concludes that "a mighty providence subdues the

mightiest minds to the service of the time being".' But, we nought add, the whole tendency of Keats's work is to show that [158]

Providence does not always do so in the most obvious way, that the artist does not necessarily proceed to the heart of humanity by the plainest and most-trodden route.

We must remember, too, what we all know, but perhaps without feeling it fully, that Keats's artistic intuition is far in advance of his ordinary experience—that at the time of his death the commonest problems of personal adjustment, even of a position in the world, were still, because of illness, because of poverty, not even on the way to a solution.

> His art is happy, but who knows his mind?
> I see a schoolboy when I think of him.
> With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,
> For certainly he sank into his grave His senses and his heart unsatisfied.
> And made—being poor, ailing and ignorant Shut out from all the luxury of the world,
> The coarse-bred son of a livery-stable keeper—
> Luxuriant song.
>
> (Yeats, "Ego Dominus Tuus")

So Yeats wrote of him a hundred years later. Keats had far fewer advantages of circumstance than any other of the romantic poets. His passion for poetry began at school. A short attempt as a surgeon's apprentice was soon abandoned, and from then he devoted himself entirely to poetry. How he lived is somewhat of a mystery in these days when a poet's first duty is to find a steady job. But at that time even the arts seemed able to subsist in a precarious independence. His introduction to the literary world was through Leigh Hunt, a man to whom it is difficult to be fair. He was a sufficiently sincere political liberal to suffer for his beliefs, and a good minor essayist; but he was a poor minor poet, and an aesthete and professional beauty-lover of a particularly lax and tiresome kind. His was not an age or milieu with any great security of taste. The civilized decorum of the eighteenth century was departing and the Victorian moral responsibility had not arrived to take its place. It was under Hunt's auspices that Keats's first book of poems appeared in 1817.

It is full of echoes of his early poetical enthusiasms. Themes [159] of romance and chivalry, derived mainly from Spenser, are found in Calidore and Specimen of an Induction; one of the poems is an avowed Imitation of Spenser; and a passion for Homer, known through the Elizabethan translation of Chapman, is recorded in the famous sonnet. It is often said that Keats, being ignorant of Greek, drew his knowledge of Greek myth and literature from Lempriere's *Classical Dictionary*: and no doubt Keats, like other boys, read his classical dictionary. His vision of Greece really came to him, however, through Elizabethan and seventeenth-century poetry, soaked like all Renaissance literature in Greek myth and allusions, yet luxuriant, disorderly and mediaevalized. [See n.5.] The country he was really exploring at this time was a legendary fairyland, and whether its ostensible situation was Hellas or Lyonnesse did not make much difference.

The imagery in detail, however, is not literary: it is drawn from a very minute and delicate sensuous observation. Keats, like Gautier, was "un homme pour qui le monde visible existe'\ And the visible world for Keats meant chiefly the world of nature; not nature with all the mystical and moral overtones that Wordsworth found in it, but simply the unanalysed delightfulness of living and growing things. It is the delicacy of the perception that strikes one first. There are many examples in *I stood tip-toe upon a little hill*, the first poem in the book.

> —the sweet buds which with a modest pride
> Pull droopingly,n slanting curve aside,
> Their scantly-leaved and finely-tapering stems. (3)
>
> Here are sweet peas, on tip-toe for a flight
> With wings of gentle flush o'er delicate white,
> And taper fingers catching at all things,
> To bind them all about with tiny rings. (57)

Where swarms of minnows show their little heads,
Staying their wavy bodies 'gainst the stream. (72)

There is nothing here that could not be seen in a summer afternoon on Hampstead Heath, and, most happily, in all Keats's later excursions into the exotic and the remote, this [160] delighted observation of familiar things is allowed its part. His dream-landscapes are always made up out of elements that are actual enough, not out of the starry and cloudy imaginings of Shelley. Nobody who could see actual things with this sort of fresh fineness could ever become entirely lost in luxuriant sentimentalizing; but the beauties of these poems are chiefly in fragments, and there are other fragments of a more unhappy kind.

The verses *On receiving a Curious Shell* and *A Copy of Verses from some Ladies* make one reflect that Keats would have been better off at this stage of his career without so many ladies, or with ladies of a different kind; and some of the familiar sonnets suggest a small and rather silly mutual admiration society. It is not only a question of technical immaturity, or even entirely of emotional immaturity, but of a sort of complacent *schwarmerei*, bred of

T the daily 'Tea is ready',
Snug coterie and literary lady

that Byron so much detested.

Give me a golden pen, and let me lean
On heap'd up flowers, in regions clear and far;
Bring me a tablet whiter than a star
Or hand of hymning angel, when 'tis seen
The silver strings of heavenly harp atween:
And let there glide by many a pearly car
Pink robes, and wavy hair, and diamond jar.

This is almost worthy of glorious Technicolor; it is remarkable that a description of such concentrated vulgarity could be produced by the writer of the lines quoted earlier. And it turns out in the end that the occasion of these pantomime splendours is only that the poet has to go home early from a party.

It is customary to blame the badnesses of Keats's early verse on Hunt; but it is a rarely performed act of justice to see what Hunt's poetic vices really were and how far Keats borrowed them. *The Story of Rimini* was at this time Hunt's great claim to notice. It is a handling of the Paolo and Francesca [161] episode from Dante, debased to utter vulgarity by an affectation of colloquial ease and a sort of chatty pertness. He combines this with a cocky sniggering appreciation of feminine charms. The verse, in deliberate reaction to the antithetic regularity of the eighteenth-century couplet, is loose, the sentences ambling easily from one couplet to another; and the vocabulary is common and slovenly. All this is odd, for Hunt wrote some excellent light verse, and was an Italian and Latin scholar of some attainment: but there does seem to have been an essential vulgarity of mind. Keats imitates the slipshod neologisms, and sometimes the cosy familiarity with beauty of the poetry-lover's circle: and a lip-smacking appreciation of obvious sensuous charms. But the emotional tension of his verse is far too high for him to follow the Cockney chattiness of Hunt; and the sometimes excessive richness and luxuriance of his early verse is not like Hunt at all.

The most important poem in the 1817 volume is *Sleep and Poetry*. It is an early attempt to formulate his poetic ideals, and is still written very much in the Huntian manner. (It was actually composed in Hunt's house.) But it contains within itself the reasons why this manner was not to satisfy Keats for long. The central part of the poem describes prophetically what he foresees to be his course in poetry.

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

These lines and the twenty that follow describe a phase of delighted communion with nature, and with all the external and obvious beauties of the world. He wonders whether he can ever bear to give up these sensuous ecstasies, but realizes in the same breath that they are only a stage in his progress.

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

[162]

A sort of vision follows, in which "shapes of delight, of mystery and fear," are seen, coming from the clouds and moving about the earth—symbolical of all the variety and passion of life, all that cannot be apprehended simply as sensuous beauty. This is the earliest statement of the problem that haunts Keats throughout his short life—the attempt to reconcile the loveliness of the world with its transience, its pleasures with its pain, the longing to enjoy the beautiful with the suspicion that it cannot be long enjoyed unless much that is not beautiful is faced. He was never to find a solution to these conflicts, and was never resigned as a modern poet might be, to write poetry of blank conflict: he was entering on a new phase of exploration when he died. The theme recurs in a letter of the next year to his friend Reynolds.

> "Well, I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me. The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think. We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten into it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle within us—we no sooner get into the second chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight. However, among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing one's nerves that the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression—whereby this Chamber of Maiden-Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages' ... Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them." (*Letters*, I, 156.)

But these utterances are yet largely prophetic, and Keats is [163] Still in the realm of Flora, or the bright chamber of Maiden' Thought. To return to Sleep and Poetry \ the vision of his own development is followed by a short essay in criticism, chiefly interesting for showing the view of the history of English poetry that prevailed in Hunt's circle. In former days the altar of poetry ',shone e'en in this isle"—presumably in Elizabethan days. At that time "the Muses were nigh cloyed with honours": but in the succeeding age all this was forgotten, and a schism

> Nurtured by foppery and barbarism,
> Made great Apollo blush for this his land.
> Men were thought wise who could not understand
> His glories: with a puling infant's force
> They swayed about upon a rocking-horse
> And thought it Pegasus. (182)

—the puling infants being, one supposes, Dryden and Pope, and their exercises on the rocking horse the balanced antithetic couplets in which, for instance, the portraits of Achitophel and Sporus were written. As criticism this is little more than boyish impertinence, but it shows how the dogma of romanticism was already beginning to harden. The Augustan age already appears as an unfortunate interregnum in the history of poetry; and this becomes so much the established orthodoxy that fifty years later Matthew Arnold, a critic of by no means exclusively romantic leanings, can describe Dryden and Pope as "not classics of our poetry, but classics of our prose", in the tone of one who is saying what no one has ever doubted. Keats's attack is conducted with considerable spirit, and with an energy of contempt that makes it almost worthy of the eighteenth century itself: but the view of English poetic history is at least as partial as that which, a hundred years earlier, would have informed us that Mr.

Denham and Mr. Waller were the first refiners of our numbers, and that the sweetness of English verse was never practised before the institution of their reforms.

The major fruit of this period of Keats's tareer is Endymion, which appeared in the next year, in 1818. The preface, however, [164] shows that Keats was dissatisfied with it as soon as it was finished, and that the dissatisfaction was not only with the technique, but with the general state of feeling in which it was written.

> "The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life betwe, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undeci,d, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceed mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste in going over the following pages.''

This is a surprising piece of self-criticism for a man of twenty, and disarms in advance almost all that need be said on the matter. The technical signs of the ferment and indecision are chiefly in the handling of the long narrative. It is not that the poem is without a plan—it started with a reasonably clear one; but the transitions are not clearly made, so that it is often difficult to tell what is happening; and the whole is desperately obscured by a profusion of ornament. Keats cannot refrain from chasing any descriptive butterfly that turns up, and the reader finds it genuinely hard to follow him in his ramblings. The classical "schism nurtured by foppery and barbarism" had laid down rules for the conduct of an epic poem, and expected any narrative poem to be planned with lucidity and logic. Many of the rules were arbitrary; but it is unfortunate that when they were thrown overboard the underlying ideal of lucidity often went with them. Antipathy to the "rocking-horse" rhythm of the eighteenth-century couplet was an article of faith in the Hunt circle. This arose partly from blindness to the real energy and variety of eighteenth-century verse, partly from a perfectly just recognition that its bite and sharpness are not the only effects of which the couplet is capable, and a perfectly natural desire to aim at other sensations. *Endymion* is therefore written in the loose Huntian couplet, and this reinforces the effect of laxity produced by the structure.

The theme of the poem is one that is endemic in romantic [165] literature—the pursuit in the world of an ideal love who has been glimpsed dimly in vision. So far it is the same as that of Shelley's *Alastor*. Keats embodies it in a rehandling of the Greek fable of Diana's love for Endymion, a mortal shepherd: but he lays the emphasis on Endymion's love for Diana rather than on hers for him. The goddess visits Endymion in sleep, and when he awakes he resolves to seek her through the world. After numerous confusing adventures he meets an Indian maiden who is sad and homesick, lamenting a lost love. He is sorry for her, and because he is sorry for her comes to love her; and for a time he forgets his goddess. This seems an infidelity, but is not really so, for in the end Diana and the Indian maiden turn out to be the same. That is to say, ideal beauty can only be achieved by love and sympathy for the beauty immanent in human life. The conclusion is quite different from that of Alastor, who, not finding his veiled maid, can only die disappointed. Keats does not accept the blank Shelleyan dichotomy between the world of experience and the world of imagination. Endymion achieves his quest, but only by apparently compromising his love for a goddess by love for a mortal. Keats is recurring here to the idea we have met already in *Sleep and Poetry* in the letter to Reynolds, and that we are to meet again in the second *Hyperion*; the idea that the love of beauty, like other passions, cannot exist fruitfully in isolation, that it can only fulfil itself through participation in the actual conditions of human life. Thus the leading idea of *Endymion* is not something mawkish or undecided, but a quite vigorous existentialist principle that Keats saw clearly from the beginning of his life. The trouble is that he sees it as a principle before he is able to grasp it in any concrete embodiment. Convinced that he must leave the joys of "the realm of Flora and old Pan" for "the agony and strife of human hearts", he still does not know how to do it. The descriptive passages are rich, luxuriant and fertile in invention, but uncertain in purpose. Sometimes they give the impression that he is perfectly content with this catalogue of "luxuries" (a favourite word with Keats at this time), and content to let it obscure the ground-plan of the work; at other times he seems to be chasing through all this loveliness of detail [166] some other kind of loveliness that he is not yet able to grasp. And the presentation of emotion is sentimental and monotonous —simply because

it is unrealized, because Keats has yet had little experience of the divagations of the heart, little time even to look into his own. Perhaps if he had had more he would have found that narrative poetry was not to be the medium in which he was really to express himself most fully.

The three short narratives *Lamia*, *Isabella* and *The Eve of St, Agnes* all belong to the volume of 1820 which also contained *Hyperion* and the Odes. *Isabella* was written immediately after the completion of *Endymion*, and belongs to the same emotional phase. Shortly after it was written the *Quarterly* published a contemptuously abusive review of *Endymion*, concentrating its fire on the style and diction, but more fundamentally offended by the sentiment. After this Keats hesitated for a time over the publication of *Isabella*, He was not, as is often said, particularly distressed by the rough handling he received. He describes Isabella as "a weak-sided poem, with an amusing sober-sadness about it" (*Letters*, II, 426). and quite good-humouredly recognized that its adolescent sentiment lays it open to the same kind of crude man-of-the-world mockery as had greeted its predecessor. In one sense it attempts more than Endymiony for it tries to deal with grief and passionate love, even to some extent with character. Again we find Keats knowing the direction in which he wants to move before he is actually capable of taking the step. He wants to do something nearer to "breathing human passion" than the love of a mythical shepherd for a goddess, but as he says himself, "There is too much inexperience of life and simplicity of knowledge in it". The sweet and gentle sentiment of the poem is incongruous with the horrible theme, and slips easily into sentimentality. This results often in a weak luxuriance of diction:

> So said, his erewhile timid lips grew bold,
> And poesied with hers in dewy rhyme.

A tender prettiness is the note of the poem, which remains after all an incomplete attempt at exploring one of the passages leading out of the chamber of Maiden-Thought. [167]

Lamia was written after the *Endymion* review, and is a conscious attempt at correcting its technical immaturities. So far from being "snuffed out by an article" Keats was set on by it to a sober attempt at technical improvement. Soon after the completion of *Endymion* Keats also experienced a revulsion against the taste of Hunt and his circle. "Hunt does one harm by making fine things petty and beautiful things hateful." *Lamia* is accordingly written in a much tighter form of couplet, and a much clearer and less sprawling kind of narrative—both being derived perhaps from a study of Dryden, though the verse is not very like Dryden in detail. A rather unhappy attempt at easy, man-of-the-world cynicism in the tone is probably aimed at making the poem less obnoxious to hard-boiled *Quarterly* ridicule. Keats valued it as a break from the sentimental atmosphere of his earlier work, and there is some very fine verse in it; but it remains otherwise a rather purposeless poem, and it looks rather like an exercise in verse-narrative.

Any poet whose work is as continually progressive as that of Keats must make these tentative and unfulfilled explorations. His most completely successful short narrative poem is the one where he remains most completely within the range of decorative romantic experience. This is *The Eve of St Agnes*. It was written in the first flush of his acquaintance with Fanny Brawne, before illness and, perhaps, her lack of real sympathy, had made the hope of an idyllic and happy love impossible for him. It is full of a dreamy sensuous happiness which finds its i expression (and this is typical of Keats) in a rich decorative: pattern rather than in any precise delineation of passion and sentiment. The poetic equivalent for an emotion with Keats is commonly a picture: what he has to say about feeling as such is often quite vague and generalized: even his rhythms are less I acutely responsive to changes of emotional tone than those of many other poets: it is by the precision of his sensuous imagery —bright and clear, yet rich, like the figures in a painted missal —that he commands the response that he wants. This imagery is chiefly visual: (the clear pictorial quality explains his appeal to the pre-Raphaelite painters) but images of sound, of touch, even of taste, also play their part; and the reader who is content [168] to respond simply to the rich sensuous surface of such a poem as The Eve of St, Agnes is in the end likely to understand Keats better than one who is too addicted to philosophical short cuts. The story is slight to the verge of insignificance, the setting is romantic-mediaeval, from Mrs. Radcliffe,

Chatterton and Spenser; but all the senses are alert and their apprehensions touched with the greatest precision and delicacy.

> The silver, snarling trumpets ‘gan to chide
> (iv)

> Out went the taper as she hurried in;
> Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died.
> (xxiii)

> A casement high and triple-arched there was,
> All garlanded with carven imageries
> Of fruit, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
> And diamonded with panes of quaint device.
> (xxiv)

> The arras, rich with horseman, hawk and hound,
> Fluttered in the besieging wind’s uproar:
> And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.
> (xl)

With our post-symbolist tastes we are too likely to be unappreciative of this sort of descriptive writing, even while we recognize its aptness. But we should be wrong to think of it as *merely* “decorative”. The idea of a lucky love triumphant over obstacles could never express itself in Keats by the rhapsodic anatomizing of sentiment that we find in *Epipsychidion*: this succession of clear, bright images of sight, sound and touch is the only means by which his imaginative life can find its incarnation. The fragment of *The Eve of St. Mark* has the same quality —a fairy-tale theme and setting combined with the most vivid and delicate realization of detail. Keats has been reproved for wishing once for a life of sensations rather than of [169] thoughts: the key to his poetry is that most of the time his sensations were his thoughts, the kind of thought that could not be embodied in sensuous and pictorial form was hardly possible to him.

The lover in *The Eve of St Agnes* wakened his Madeline by playing

> an ancient ditty long since mute
> In Provence called ‘La Belle Dame sans Mercy’.

The name appears to have fascinated Keats, and not long afterwards he wrote the poem of that name. It is thus dramatically conceived, and springs out of the atmosphere of *The Eve of St, Agnes.* But it is a far less conscious poem, and springs perhaps from a different layer of the mind. *La Belle Dame* is the fatal woman-figure, like Circe or Tannhauser’s Venus, who haunts romantic literature. She is the opposite of the pure and ideal Madeline, and yet the same person; one of the many forms the woman image assumes in the unconscious imagination. The imagery and phrasing have the perfect harmonious strangeness of a dream. If the essence of romantic poetry is to rely on sources of inspiration other than the rational intellect can supply, this poem may be justly considered its quintessence, and its hidden source is shown in the magical compulsive rhythm, less opulent and deliberate than is usual with Keats, more unexplainably haunting.

NOTES

1. Keat’s *Letters,* ed. M. B. Forman (1935); p.94.
2. ibid. I, 153.
3. ibid. I, 157.
4. Yeats, *Ego Dominus Tuus*.
5. The Greek influence on Keats has been vastly exaggerated. He neither knew nor cared anything about Greek history and civilization. He was fascinated by legend and mythology, and what he knew of Greek plastic art; but the world of Plao and the world of Pericles were alike closed to him. Besides Homer, transmitted via Chapman, the major influence at work is [194] the mythologizing Ovid. To

regard this as representing Greece would be rather like omitting Goethe, Kant and Beethoven and representing Germany by Wagnerian opera and Grimm's fairy tales.

6. Sonnet: 'On leaving some friends at an early hour'
7. Letters, I, 156.
8. ibid. II, 426.

[…]