THE ROMANTIC POETS
Graham Hough

(London: Hutchinson 1953 & eds.; Routledge 2017)

[Note: Hough's chapter on Keats begins with "The Realm of Flora" (sect. i), followed by sections on "Negative Capability" (ii), and "The Two Hyperions" (iii). Page numbers given below are those at top of page in the Grey Arrow reprint edition of 1964 given at Internet Archive [accessed 24.08.2019; reviewed 11.05.2023.]

[…]

CHAPTER V: KEATS

[…]

ii. 'Negative Capability'

So far, the most living thing in Keats's poetry has been the re-creation of sensuous beauty, first as a source of delight for its own sake, then as a symbol of the life of the mind and the emotions. Speculative and philosophical interests always formed the major part of Shelley's experience, and the young Wordsworth for a time was hag-ridden by them; there is almost no trace of this in Keats, The academic education which he never had tends to foster abstract thought; but Keats would never have lived by it whatever his training. He not only cared [170] little for, but positively resented intellectual truths which make demands upon the mind without being verifiable in inunediate experience. "Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses. We read fine things, but never feel them to the full till we have gone the same steps as the author." (*Letters*, I, 154.) Keats almost hates a writer who tries to force the world and the reader to his own conclusions, and at times he felt that Wordsworth did so. "For the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an egotist … . We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us." (*Letters*, I, 103.) Argument and dialectic seem to him an offensive self-assertion. "Man should not dispute or assert, but whisper results to his neighbour." (*Letters*, I, 112) He distinguishes the poetical character to which he belongs from the "Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime'': its essence is that

> it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion Poet. (ibid. I, 245.)

For Keats, the necessary precondition of poetry is submission to things as they are, without trying to intellectualize them into something else, submission to people as they are, without trying to indoctrinate or improve them. (We meet all this again, developed into a whole poetical creed, in Yeats's early essays.) Keats found this quality at its fullest in Shakespeare.

> "It struck me what quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." (*Letters*, I, 77.)

This way of feeling grows naturally into a strong active and dramatic tendency, a wish to in the life of others, [171] and an understanding of other people that is everywhere evident in the letters. Often Keats feels that this participation in the life of others, "the agony and strife of human hearts", ought to be the mainspring of his poetry. But it is not. The dealings with character and emotion are not the most memorable things in Keats's poetry. There are natures whose passion for life includes, but goes beyond,

personality. D. H. Lawrence was perhaps one of these, and there is something of it in Keats. The total impression of the moment, the fusion of his own subjective emotion with sensations from the outside world is the ultimate reality for him; and the most typical and individual remarks in the letters seem to be in passages like the following:

> I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness— I look not for it if it be not in the present hour— nothing startles me beyond the Moment. The setting sun will always set me to rights—or if a sparrow comes before my window ; I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel." (*Letters*, I, 74.)

Such a nature is not likely to find its best expression in a narrative of character and events, (or, as Keats hoped, in drama). It is at its height in moments of impassioned contemplation, when the life of the spirit is closely bound up with the objects of immediate sensuous experience. It was in some such mood that the *Ode on Indolence* was written. It is the first of the great Odes, written in March 1819; and all of them were written in this year. In the *Ode on Indolence* not Love, nor Ambition, nor Poetry makes it worth while to give up the luxurious enjoyment of the moment: none of them is

> so sweet as drowsy noons
> And evenings steep'd in honied indolence;
> O, for an age so sheltered from annoy,
> That I may never know how change the moons.
> Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

Lines which might have served Matthew Arnold as the text for his sermon on Keats, the relaxed and sensuous man. [172] "But what shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion Poet."

> My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er
> With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:
> The mom was clouded, but no shower fell,
> Tho' in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;
> The open casement pressed a new-leaved vine,
> Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay;

It is all exquisite and all utterly transitory; and out of the knowledge of this is born a longing for a world in which such moments could become eternal. All the Odes are closely bound up with this theme of transience and permanency. Yeats, on the same theme, wrote simply

> Man is in love, and loves what vanishes.
> What is there more to say?

Keats is not capable of this sort of twentieth-century stoicism; he must attempt to reconcile the contradiction. Perhaps this is one of the diflFerences between classical and romantic poetry. It is the classical poet who accepts with resignation the passing of earthly joys and is, therefore, free to gather his rosebuds while he may (Yeats is writing above in an untypically neo-classic moment); the romantic poet tries desperately to find some permanent and unchanging refuge in a world of flux, longing for an age in which he may never know the moon's changes, or for a shadowy isle of bliss where he can forget the beating of the steely sea. Thus for the romantic there is always the element of conflict, either in the poetry, itself or just outside it; and since he is asking questions to which there is no answer, he is little likely to reach a serene conclusion. The best he can do is to find a way of facing a contradiction whose intensity he refuses to minimize; and this is better than saying you don't believe in ghosts while there is one breathing down your neck.

The *Ode to Psyche* seems the farthest away from all this, the most purely fanciful. It would be easy to take it as a piece of [173] lovely decorative mythology: but it is probably something more. Psyche is the soul, not recognized as a goddess in the classic Greek mythology. But neither is she the soul in the Christian sense. The absence of any specifically Christian feeling, indeed of any kind of orientation to Christianity, is remarkable in Keats. His main religious feeling is a longing, perfectly expressed in the fourth stanza of this ode, for the natural piety of antiquity

> When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
> Holy the air, the water and the fire.

Yet Keats still makes the practical distinction between what is believed and what is merely imagined, and is quite unable to attempt to believe in nature-spirits or Olympus' faded hierarchy. Psyche, the last addition to the ancient pantheon, never formally worshipped in the ancient world, is the only one of the old deities who is still real.

> Yet even in these days so far retired
> From happy pieties, thy lucent fans
> Fluttering among the faint Olympians
> I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired.

So the last stanza with its promise to

> be thy priest, and build a fane
> In some untrodden region of my mind,

with its lovely, half-inspired, half-natural imagery, is not merely a piece of fanciful devotion to an obsolete myth; but a recognition by Keats that his own exploration is to be of the interior landscape, that his ultimate devotion is to be neither to the objective world, nor to any power outside himself.

Indolence records a moment when sensuous happiness is complete and sufficient and its own justification. The trouble with such experiences, as the poem implicitly recognizes, is that they are only momentary. To Keats, with his appetite for [174] the immediately experienced, they are the most real and important things in life. "We become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere" of such moments: but among the effects they give rise to is that "of convincing one's nerves that the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and Oppression". At the time he wrote the *Ode to a Nightingale*, Keats needed little reminding of this. It was only a few months after the death of his brother Tom from a painful and distressing illness, and the memory of this is in the third stanza. The poem is not, as is sometimes said, a contrast between his own despondency and the happiness of the bird. It is about the contrast between his own immediately experienced happiness in the bird's song, his imaginative participation in an untroubled natural life, and a less immediate but more enduring knowledge of sorrow. Happiness is momentary and transient: the only thing certain is

> The weariness, the fever and the fret
> Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
> Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
> Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies,
> Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
> And leaden-eyed despairs.

The heart-ache and the drowsy numbness of the opening lines do not describe mere dejection, but a sort of drugged state, which can only be maintained by further intoxication (Stanza 2). Wine is the traditional soother of men's cares, the traditional means of prolonging a drowsy sensuous enjoyment; and Keats sometimes said he enjoyed claret. But though he had his Anacreontic intervals, they are no real answer for him, and in the fourth stanza he realizes that the only way of escaping to share the happiness of the bird is "on the viewless wings of Poesy". Poetry means first of all imagination—imaginative participation in the bird's life: secondly, it means the actual poetry he is writing—the incantatory loveliness of the fourth and fifth stanzas does make this moment permanent, in a sense: but not in the sense that Keats the living and suffering human being [175] really desires. The only way in which it can really be made eternal is to die at the moment of greatest sensuous happiness. "I have been half in love with easeful death." Much ink has been spilt on the romantic poets' pursuit of death. "Keats's longing for death and his mother has become a by-word among the learned" (W. Empson). Maybe it has; but like the Freudian death-wish which has also become a by-word, it does not mean what is most obvious on the surface. The Freudian death-wish is the desire of the cell to resist the encroachments of outside experience, to remain enclosed in its own kind of contentment. So the romantic poet's desire for death is not a longing for extinction, it is the desire to make a happiness that he Imows to be transient last for ever. And Keats is only half in love with easeful death—the other half of his consciousness knows well enough that this answer is only the negation of any possible answer. But art offers a type of

permanence; and by a startling transformation in the seventh stanza the nightingale becomes a symbol of the artist and its song a symbol of art.

It has often been said that this is an audacious paradox, that the nightingale, so far from being immortal, has a considerably shorter life than man, and that its song is only immortal in the sense that through history there have always been nightingales' songs and that they have always had the same power of enchantment. But it is only in this sense that immortality can be predicated of poets; in fact, the poet's position is stronger, for his individual song endures. There is, therefore, no breach in the poetic logic. But the argument is a casuistry none the less, because the special case of poetic immortality is used, or is on the point of being used, as if it offered the kind of enduring happiness that Keats seeks as a man. But it does not, and cannot do so. (It is small consolation to the sorrows of Eohippus, as T. H. Huxley once remarked, that one of his remote descendants is some day to win the Derby.) So the last word of the seventh stanza, "forlorn", recalls Keats the poet who creates, foreseeing a poetic immortality, to Keats the man who suffers, foreseeing only sickness and sorrow and an early death. The song of the nightingale fades, and Keats finishes where, unlike Shelley, he generally finishes, with his feet on the ground. On [176] the level of ordinary human experience there is no solution to the conflict. The poet who creates can offer little consolation to the man who suffers: but on the level of poetic creation the conflict disappears. Transitory human happiness is given permanence in a different sense by being embodied in art.

The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* rakes up the thought of the seventh stanza of the *Ode to a Nightingale.* De Selincourt suggests as its motto a phrase of Leonardo's: *Cosa bella mortal passa e non d'arte* — Mortal beauties pass away, but not those of art. It is a much more objective and descriptive poem than the Nightingale. It is too often forgotten that Keats's imaginative glimpse of Greece was derived not only from translated literary sources, but also from actual Greek plastic art, and that he had had more chance of experiencing it at first hand than earlier and more learned neo-classical connoisseurs; for the Elgin marbles had been recently acquired by the British Museum, and Keats had been profoundly impressed by them. Indeed the imagery of the ode seems to have been suggested more by these sculptures than by any individual vase-painting. The urn is taken as a type of enduring beauty; and again the immortality of art is only a quasi-immortality; for though ceramics last longer than most things they are not in any metaphysical sense more indestructible than mere human clay. There is no real analogy between the loves and pastoral felicities on the urn and "breathing human passion"; the contrast between the permanence of the one and the transience of the other is another poetic casuistry. But this time it is directed to a different end. The poet's momentary emotional state enters less into the poem. He is concerned to establish at least one enduring value below the sphere of the moon, and he finds it in the existence of the beauty of art. It is the only way in which human feeling and natural loveliness can be given lasting significance. The happy boughs that cannot shed their leaves and the lover who can never kiss, but whose love can never fade, are types of the only earthly paradise that exists; and the fact that it is not quite of the kind that men are looking for is not now in the foreground of consciousness.

The last two lines of the poem have been much discussed. [177] That beauty is truth, truth beauty is not all that we know on earth, and certainly not all that we need to know. In the days when it was the custom to take romantic modes of expression simply at their face value these lines were often read as the expression of a profound philosophy. Dr. Richards has taught his disciples to laugh at this reading of them, that the statement is conceptually meaningless and is only there for its value in communicating and organizing emotion. Neither of these views is particularly helpful. The lines must be read in their context, and in the context of the other odes. They are of course in the first place the expression of a moment of rapturous recognition of a beautiful object, and so far are equivalent to an exclamation of joy and reverence. But the sensuous resources of Keats's verse are so rich that he has no need to disguise his emotions of this kind as philosophical statements, unless he also means them in some sense to be so. And he says the same thing in prose: 'T never can feel certain of any truth, but from a clear perception of its Beauty" (*Letters,* I, 281). In this context, where transience and permanence are the two poles of the argument, "truth,' means "that which has lasting value". (The truth is great and shall prevail.

What is true all the week is “truer” than what is true only on Monday morning.) Keats is saying that beauty is “truer” than love, pleasure and other forms of value, because they pass away while beauty can be embodied in a lasting quasipermanent form. When poets say “ye” they are often addressing themselves or other poets. That beauty is truth and truth beauty is all that the artist, as artist, knows, and all he needs to know for the practice of his art.

> *Tout passe: I”art robuste*
> *Seule de l’eternité.*

Again, Keats finds a solution to his conflict valid for the artist, but leaving the suffering and experiencing man exactly where he was.

In the *Ode on Melancholy* and the *Ode to Autumn*, the problems of the artist are in abeyance, and Keats returns to ordinary human experience, to the problem of happiness in life. [178] The *Ode on Melancholy* recognizes that sadness is the inevitable complement of the moments of intense sensuous happiness that so far has been the peaks of his experience.

> She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die,
> And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips,
> Bidding adieu.

It is therefore as vain to attempt to escape from this inevitable pain as to expect a light not to cast shadows. Melancholy springs from the transience of joy, and the transience of joy is a part of its nature. But the note of the poem is not that of Carpe dieniy or Gather ye rosebuds while ye may. They suggest an eager grasping at pleasures that are soon to be snatched away. The whole movement and vocabulary of the Odes suggest a rich, slow brooding over beauty and joy, with a full realization both of beauty and the pain that its disappearance will bring, but with an enjoyment of such intensity and depth that it makes the moment eternal, in quality if not in duration.

The Ode to Autumn is pre-eminently the record of such an experience. It is in a sense a return to the mood of the Ode on Indolence —making the moment sufficient to itself. It is the most perfect in form and detail of the Odes, and also the most difficult to penetrate below the surface, for it is apparently the most purely objective and descriptive. The emotion has become completely fused with the object, and expresses itself completely through it. There are no questions and no conflict in the poem: the season of ripeness and fulfilment is seen as though it is quite final. Autumn as a poetical symbol is commonly the prelude to winter. Keats sees it as a still pause in time, when everything has reached fruition and ripeness is all. The old question almost raises its head in the last stanza:

> Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?
> Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.

But it is immediately stilled, and the poem ends with the quiet relapse of consciousness into the soft natural loveliness that surrounds it. [179]

It would be idle to try to turn the Odes into great philosophical poems. They come to no conclusion and make no synthesis. Keats does not wholly avoid confusion between *permanent value and value permanently accessible to the individual*. His temperament, with its eager love of life, would have been satisfied with a speculative solution like Yeats’s belief in reincarnation: but he would surely have dismissed it as too fantastic: or like that of Mr. Dunne, whose New Immortality, if I have not misunderstood it, suggests that after death a kind of consciousness persists, that is in permanent possession of its past experience.

> These metaphysics of magicians
> And necromantic books are heavenly.

But theirs was not the kind of speculation to which Keats was prone. Yet the Odes are not merely decorative and descriptive poems, as parts of them appear to be; nor yet poems of luxurious self-abandonment; nor yet mere manipulations of feeling. The deep conflict from which they spring is both emotional and intellectual; yet they proceed solely by the methods peculiar to poetry, not by the aid of

the speculative intelligence. They are in fact supreme examples of Negative Capability, “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”.

Keats found his real medium here, far more than in the narrative poems. They are the summit of his achievement, for Hyperion was only the beginning of a phase that he did not live to complete. More than any other poet of his age he had the power of externalizing his experience, of finding adequate outward symbols for his experiences, instead of merely talking about them. This does not necessarily mean that he had the dramatic gift: indeed, his knowledge of human character and actions had hardly gone far enough for this to be possible. Sensuous beauty and meditation on sensuous beauty was the central experience of his life. It is in the Odes that he explores this most fully, and perhaps for the time exhausts it. It is not likely that he would have rested in this phase. Fighting against [180] it all the time was the active and dramatic tendency we have noticed above, the desire to make “the agony and strife of human hearts’’ the material of his verse. We must trace his further movement in this direction in the two versions of *Hyperion*.

NOTES

[…]

11. ibid. I, 103.
12. ibid. I, 112.
13. ibid. I, 245.
14. ibid. I, 77.
15. ibid. I, 74.
16. ibid. I, 281.

[…]