

Introduction

In *Adonais*, sometimes criticised for creating an image of Keats as weakly vulnerable, Shelley saluted his fellow poet, just a few months dead, as a living, dynamic presence in civilisation's great battle and as destined for poetic immortality:

And he is gathered to the kings of thought
 Who waged contention with their time's decay,
 And of the past are all that cannot pass away.
(430–2)¹

Stirring Keats/*Adonais* rises here from the ashes of Tory, patrician condescension and rejection, and assumes a truly regal identity, one among 'the kings of thought'.

We might want to remark that Keats was more a poet of 'Sensations' rather than of 'Thoughts' (*L* 1, 185), remembering his asserted preference for the former over the latter. Yet both feature prominently in his work and do so with a unique cast, and it is unsurprising that in the same letter the young poet contemplates the nature and, implicitly, the acquisition of 'a complex Mind' that 'would exist partly on sensation partly on thought', one, he goes on to say, 'to whom it is necessary that years should bring the philosophic Mind' (*L* 1, 186).

Keats's life and works are vibrant with tensions. The man is at once ablaze with passion and ambition, yet ready to embrace a near-passive openness to experience. Liberal in his political views he may have been, but he was not inclined to 'believe' in a vapidly optimistic 'sort of perfectibility'; 'the nature of the world will not admit of it' (*L* 2, 101), he adds, with the tough realism of a young man who knew, on his pulses, the brutal, sapping fact of mortality, having lost his father to a tragic accident, then nursed his mother and younger brother Tom through their final illnesses; having, moreover, treated sick people as an apprentice apothecary, and seen first-hand at Guy's Hospital the sufferings of those requiring surgical intervention in an age without

effective anaesthetics. He was, as befits a medically trained poet, ardent that poetry should be 'a friend to man' (48), as his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' would put it. At the same time, he relished poetry's capacity for recreating experience through acts of verbal expressiveness. And he was aware of and, indeed, drawn to poetry's possibly treacherous offer of imaginative escape and transcendence. Moneta, the stern muse-figure of *The Fall of Hyperion*, is ventriloquised as asking the poem's 'I', in a tone halfway between mockery and genuine enquiry, 'What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe, / To the great world? Thou art a dreaming thing; / A fever of thyself' (l. 167–9). In so doing, she decisively sets the terms for any authentic exploration of poetic value. Her question is one that Keats asks of the art he loves and brings to the fore as a central concern of modern poetry.

Keats registers such tensions and frames such questions with a generosity of spirit, and with qualities of courage, honesty, delighted attention, and verbal originality that have drawn generations of readers to his work as well as to the fascinating, tragic story of his brilliant short career. His letters, among the finest ever written by a poet, combine spontaneity and affection for his fortunate addressees with self-aware commitment to his development as a writer; they are required reading. And his poems have inspired many responses from later writers, including the sequence 'Voyages: A Homage to John Keats' by the American poet, Amy Clampitt. Referring to the correspondence buried with Keats's body, correspondence particularly from Fanny Brawne, the young woman with whom he had forged a deep intimacy, Clampitt concludes the sequence with the affecting phrase, 'Letters no one will ever open'.² The phrase allows Clampitt to suggest, beyond biographical fact, that there are aspects of Keats we shall never fathom, that he possesses the inexhaustibility of those few writers who are necessary.

It is clear from the sustained production of first-rate biographies, critical studies, and even cinematic work that Keats continues to enchant and challenge readers both within academe and beyond. The present volume responds to that enchantment and challenge, and seeks to understand them and provide frameworks for enhanced analysis and appreciation. Each essay supplies a succinct, informed, accessible, and incisive account of some particular context for the study of Keats's life and work. The essays display first-hand responsiveness while showing awareness of relevant critical discussion and debate. The volume's title is *John Keats in Context*, and its contents bear out the view that Keats and his texts matter as much as, are, indeed, part of, what it comprehends by 'context'.

One of the pleasures of shaping and assembling the collection has been observing the many-angled lights brought to bear on Keats's oeuvre by the

contributors. Certainly now is an appropriate time for a full-scale reconsideration of Keats's achievement and its enabling contexts. Keatsian criticism will always be associated with the work of critics such as W. J. Bate (*John Keats*, 1963), Helen Vendler (*The Odes of John Keats*, 1983), Stuart M. Sperry (*Keats the Poet*, 1973; 1994 rev. edn), and others, critics who emphasised the poet's sympathy, artistry, and capacity for development. But challenges to or nuancing of these approaches arose from critics who drew energy from new historicism, feminism, and deconstruction: these critics include Jerome J. McGann ('Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism', 1979), Marjorie Levinson (*Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*, 1988), and Anne K. Mellor (*Romanticism and Gender*, 1993). Andrew Bennett contributed a sophisticated study of Keats as a narrative poet in 1994: *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing*. After the reassessments prompted by the poet's bicentenary in 1995, especially collections of essays edited by Nicholas Roe (*Keats and History*, 1995), Michael O'Neill (*Keats: Bicentenary Readings*, 1997), and Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (*The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*, 1998), there has been significant work in recent years exploring his thought and his intellectual and cultural situatedness: books such as Jeffrey N. Cox's *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School* (1998), Porscha Fermanis's *John Keats and the Ideas of the Enlightenment* (2009), and Shahidha Bari's *Keats and Philosophy: The Life of Sensations* (2012). Susan J. Wolfson's 2001 Cambridge Companion to the poet provides a valuable resource, while her recent study of the poet, *Reading John Keats* (2015), responds creatively to the invitation implicitly extended by Stuart Sperry in 1994, who asked whether we could 'continue to prize as he deserves the poet who of all the great Romantics was the most pleasure-loving and pleasure-giving, the most generous and humane in his responses, and the most committed to the life of the imagination'.³

The present volume offers an exciting body of work that engages with Keats's biography, writing, and cultural meaning. The volume is aimed at undergraduate, postgraduate, and academic audiences as well as interested non-academic readers. Building on recent interest in Keats's world, on his life, times, and affiliations with others, it explores his letters, his poetic artistry and development, his relationship with previous poetry, myth, and religion, his influence on other writers, and his critical reception.

It consists of the following six parts: 'Life, Letters, Texts'; 'Cultural Contexts'; 'Ideas and Poetics'; 'Poetic Contexts'; 'Influence'; and 'Critical Reception'. 'Life, Letters, Texts' contains eight chapters discussing Keats in relation to biographies and film; his formative years, including his medical

training; his involvement in the medicine and science of the time; his relationships with Fanny Brawne and other women; his understanding of mortality; his experience of travel; his achievement as a letter writer; and the complex history of his manuscripts and dealings with his publishers and editors. 'Cultural Contexts' contains six chapters and examines his participation in Leigh Hunt's circle and possible membership of a 'Cockney' school of poets; the London of the pre- and post-Waterloo period; the poet's attitude to political matters, especially as shown in and by his style; the importance he gave to friendship and sociability; the influence on him of painting and sculpture; and his thinking about religion and myth.

'Ideas and Poetics' contains six chapters, five of which explore the nature and the contexts of Keats's thinking, including his response to the Enlightenment, especially its ideas about history; and to Hazlitt and his notion of disinterestedness. It also considers his attitudes to beauty, truth, and imagination; his notion of the poetical character; and his dealings with the senses and sensations. The last chapter in this part considers the embodied sensuousness of Keats's verbal craft in the prosody and versification of his odes. The fourth part, 'Poetic Contexts', contains seven chapters: they explore Keats's relationship with previous and contemporary poets, including Dante and Shakespeare; Spenser, Milton, Dryden, and Pope; Tighe, Radcliffe, Southey, Burns, Chatterton, Hunt, and Wordsworth; and Coleridge, Byron, and Shelley. This part also examines the ways in which his poetry breathes new and individual life into various genres: ballad, romance, and narrative; epic and tragedy; and shorter lyrical forms.

The fifth part, 'Influence', consists of three chapters and inspects Keats's influence on British poets from Tennyson to Wilde (in one chapter) and on a group of poets writing in English from Hardy to Heaney in another. The second chapter in the fifth part includes reference to two American poets, Stevens and Bishop, and a subsequent chapter considers his influence on a range of American writers. The final part, 'Critical Reception', consists of four chapters which describe, in turn, the response of his contemporaries, especially in reviews; nineteenth-century criticism after his death; twentieth-century criticism up to the publication of W. J. Bate's biography in 1963; and criticism after Bate's book to the present.

'That which is creative must create itself' (*L* 1, 374), Keats wrote to his publisher with *Endymion* in mind. All good poetry asks to be experienced for what it is, in and on its own terms, but this is unusually the case with Keats, a writer who invites his readers to display an answerable capacity for 'sensation & watchfulness' (*L* 1, 374). Keatsian creativity prompts, too, our desire to know more about its shaping contexts and ability to go on

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shaping our own culture. The present volume, in its editor's view, offers a variegated, polyphonic approach to a poet whose 'knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade' (*L* 2, 360) continue to compel.

Notes

- 1 *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
- 2 Amy Clampitt, *What the Light Was Like* (London: Faber, 1985).
- 3 Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (1973; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 346. For further significant work by Susan J. Wolfson, see, among other publications, her chapter in *Formal Charges: The Shaping of Poetry in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997) and chapters on questions of Keats and gender in her *Borderlines: The Shiftings of Gender in British Romanticism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).