

I

INTRODUCTORY

Our concern in this study will be the poems and letters of John Keats, regarded as literary works which are interesting and worthy of detailed scrutiny in themselves. There is a reason for making this rather obvious point at the start of the undertaking. For we shall be dealing with a poet who is a great literary figure in a special sense—in so special a sense, indeed, that at least as much attention has been paid by writers on Keats to the story of his life as has been given to the study of his poetry. There would not be anything very seriously wrong about this if the attention devoted to the poetry had always done it proper justice. Let it be said right away that the tale of Keats's development from his feeble poetic beginnings to the magnificent odes is one of the great stories of any kind of history, and that we cannot separate that development from the superb qualities of intelligence, the heroic determination to make a poet of himself, to which his biographers have paid justified tribute. It is hoped that some sense of those qualities will be brought home to the reader in the chapter on the letters.

To see the achievement of Keats in the context of the short but prodigiously fertile life out of which it sprang must naturally have its own fascination, and there is plenty to recommend such an approach provided that the achievement, the actual achievement in terms of literary art, really is seen. But some of Keats's most engagingly sympathetic biographers have displayed a curiously marginal kind of interest in the poems he actually wrote. There has been a tendency, both persistent and perverse, to talk more about the poetry he might have written had he lived longer!

Now this must be deplored. To put the matter as baldly as possible, Keats is a great literary figure for us today because of the words that he actually set down on paper. It is in them that he truly has his life, and those biographers, however well-intentioned,

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09419-1 - John Keats
 Robin Mayhead
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who do not treat his achieved work as the centre of their subject, are doing their hero a disservice.

Our concern, then, will be with the work itself. This does not mean that I shall pay no attention to that almost incredibly rapid development so amply celebrated by Keats's biographers, the development which makes him 'a great literary figure in a special sense'. But what we have to say about it, apart from the chapter on the letters, will be based entirely on scrutiny of the poems themselves.

Keats's work exhibits extraordinary variety, of both quality and kind. To say this is not in itself to praise him. By no means all that he wrote is 'great'. A very considerable amount—as he well knew—is not even particularly good; and some of it is downright bad. Since this book aims at increasing the number of people who understand and enjoy Keats, it is inevitable that attention should be centred on what is best in his writing. In order to define, or to help to define, that 'best', however, and to suggest the development from which the 'best' came, it will be necessary to give a certain amount of space to some of his works which are less than great. The procedure has more point in the case of Keats than it would have with most poets. No other poet in English has risen from mediocrity with such dramatic speed, and in few writers are hints of future strength so oddly entangled with much that is weakest in their earlier and inferior productions. But our object, whatever the quality of the poetry we are dealing with, will always be the same: to endeavour to see the poem in question as it really is, to determine the ways in which the poetry 'works'—or, in the case of the inferior poems, the ways in which it fails to 'work'.

The approach will be very broadly chronological, but cannot be strictly so. This is because Keats, in his short creative life, determined as he was to make himself into a poet of real worth, experimented in a number of different directions more or less simultaneously. The odes, however, strike us as the crown of his achievement, and it is for this reason that the two chapters devoted to them come after the treatment of *Lamia*, for example, although that poem was actually written later than the odes.

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-09419-1 - John Keats
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Beauty must die. Beauty, which we are accustomed to thinking of as something to be contemplated and enjoyed in all its living vividness, is seen as something which must inevitably be taken away. Likewise with Joy, 'whose hand is ever at his lips *Bidding adieu*'. In the very experience of happiness is contained the recognition that it must come to an end, for it is perpetually on the brink of departure. Pleasure is there as well, but it is '*aching Pleasure*', carrying within itself the possibility of future pain, as its sweet nectar turns to 'poison'. And in the place where one would least expect to find her, 'in the very temple of *Delight*', Melancholy 'has her sovran shrine'. As a final paradox, it is only the man capable of experiencing intense happiness, the man who can experience it with the vividness of acute physical sensation, the man 'whose strenuous tongue Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine', who can actually 'see' Melancholy herself.

In passage (c) the element of paradox is not so vividly apparent, but it is there nevertheless. The face is that of the Goddess Moneta, a face that is 'wan', and '*bright* blanch'd By an immortal sickness which kills not'. It is a face whose uncanny whiteness is beyond the whiteness even of 'The lily and the snow'. In this context there is a certain oddity in the word 'bright'. Its obvious function is to define the extreme and frightening whiteness of Moneta's face; it is 'bright' in the same way that the lily and the snow are 'bright'. But it is hard, if not impossible, to keep out of one's mind associations of the word 'bright' that are at odds with what strikes one as the general atmosphere of the passage. 'Bright', after all, cannot help suggesting radiance and life, both of which are opposed to 'wan' and 'deathwards progressing'.

Again, the 'sickness' by which Moneta's face is 'bright blanch'd' is described as 'an *immortal* sickness which kills not'. Admittedly the word 'sickness' need not invariably be associated with the idea of death, but to think of such an association is a more obvious thing to do than to link sickness with immortality.

The use of 'immortal', like the use of 'bright', can of course be literally explained. The word may be interpreted in two perfectly satisfactory ways, one that is quite straightforward, the other a little more subtle but still far from obscure: (1) Moneta's

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sickness is immortal because she eternally suffers from it; and as she cannot die, for it 'kills not', the sickness itself cannot come to an end. (2) The sickness is an immortal sickness as opposed to a mortal sickness, for a mortal sickness has the effect of bringing death to the person who suffers from it. By giving those explanations of the word, however, we do not banish the persistent impact of differing associations in the combination of 'sickness' and 'immortal'.

We can go further in our quest for paradox. Moneta's face, we are told, was 'deathwards progressing': that is to say, it gave every indication that she was journeying towards death. Yet we are then immediately informed that this progress led '*To no death*'. Death, indeed, would be for Moneta something devoutly to be wished, '*happy death*' in all truth, for it would bring to an end the sorrow of which, as we shall see later when we return to the poem, she is both the victim and the symbol. But Moneta is a Goddess, and '*happy death*' can never be her lot. To be 'pin'd by *human sorrows*' would for her be enviable, since there is always an end to what is human.

Without at this point discussing the function of paradox in the two passages, we may establish one important thing. Both passages are decidedly complex, complex because our response to them as readers calls for considerable mental alertness and flexibility. In neither passage are we allowed to get away with simple acceptance of the obvious. The effect of both passages is quite disconcerting; we are made to feel uncomfortable.

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;

That opening statement, 'She dwells with Beauty', sounds so serene, so reassuring. It is as though the melancholy with which the poem is concerned were something simple and straightforward—a trifle sad, no doubt, but with the sadness softened by the presence of beauty. Yet no sooner have we heard the statement than there comes the discomfiting qualification, '*Beauty that must die*'.

Observe that a great deal of the effect has to do with the rhythm of the words. The opening statement begins with three words of one syllable each, reaching a climax with the two syllables of the emphatically stressed word 'Beauty'. There follows a pause in the middle of the line, and then a repetition of

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'Beauty', adding extra stress to the already heavy emphasis on that word. This repetition may appear to sound a note of triumph, but the remainder of the line utterly negates this impression by giving us the reverse of the pattern found in the first four words. Instead of the rise through three monosyllabic words to a climax in 'Beauty', we now have a falling sequence of three monosyllables—'that must *die*'. It is literally a 'dying fall'.

In the ensuing words there is a fine example of Keats's genius in the use of his verse-structure:

And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
 Bidding adieu;

When we reach 'lips' we make a momentary pause, as well we must, for this is the end of a line. We do not know quite what is to follow, for there is not in itself anything obviously saddening in the mental picture of Joy with his hand 'ever at his lips'. But then, after the momentary suspension of the sense, come the two words sadly explaining why Joy has been thus depicted to us—'Bidding adieu'.

The great importance of rhythmic effects such as these is the contribution that they make to the meaning. They are not mere appendages to the meaning, ways of more or less gracefully dressing it up, but are part of the meaning itself. It is therefore not surprising that where we have complex meaning, we find also subtle and varied rhythm. Now, whatever may be said about passage (*a*), it cannot be asserted that its rhythm is either subtle or varied:

For, indeed, 'tis a sweet and peculiar pleasure,
 (And blissful is he who such happiness finds.)
 To possess but a span of the hour of leisure,
 In elegant, pure, and aerial minds.

If one were asked to describe the kind of rhythmic effect made by the lines, one would probably say immediately that in them one is highly conscious of an emphatic beat:

For, indeed, 'tis a *sweet* and *peculiar pleasure*,

In other words, one is very much aware of the metrical pulse. This is because there is perfect conformity between the speech rhythm and the metre. Even if the line were part of a piece of

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prose, one would still put the stresses quite naturally in the places assigned to them by the metre when the words are seen as part of a stanza.

Compare this with what happens in passage (*b*):

And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
 Bidding adieu;

Have we the same conformity between speech rhythm and metre here? Evidently not. The metre is easily recognizable as the familiar iambic pentameter:

And Joy, | whose hand | is e | ver at | his lips
 ∪ – ∪ – ∪ – ∪ – ∪ –

But it certainly cannot be said that the manner in which we stress the words invariably follows that pattern. In the first four words there is obvious conformity. Here speech rhythm and metre fit as exactly as they can ever be expected to fit: 'And *Joy*, whose *hand* . . .' In the last three words, however, one does not feel quite so sure. Individual readers will vary somewhat in the precise amount of stress they give to each word, but who is likely to feel that to give 'his' so light a stress as slavish conformity to the metre would dictate is altogether natural? 'At his *lips*.' To be sure, this way of stressing the words does not make nonsense of them, as it can hardly be said to obscure their basic meaning. Yet one has an undoubted feeling of discomfort, a feeling that the words do not 'go' quite like that. It is as though 'lips' had been rather heavily underlined, with the apparent intention of making them more than usually conspicuous. The truth is that the way in which one most naturally stresses the words is to give all three approximately the same degree of weight, with a shade more emphasis on 'lips' than on the others, partly because it is the word to which those others have been leading up, and partly because it comes at the end of a line, the emphasis being imparted more by intonation than by any additional vehemence of delivery.

When we come to 'Bidding adieu', the discrepancy between speech rhythm and metre is vividly obvious:

Bidd | ing a | dieu;
 ∪ – ∪ –

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Can we possibly be satisfied with 'Bidding'? Of course not, because we all know that the correct way to say the word is just the reverse—'Bidding'. 'Adieu', on the other hand, fits the metrical scheme.

Now it would be absurd to maintain that *To Some Ladies* is inferior to the *Ode on Melancholy* simply because speech rhythm and metre are more at variance with one another in the latter than they are in the former. Playing off speech rhythm against metrical structure certainly often gives rise to rhythmic subtlety and variety, but it is not a virtue in itself, and a high degree of conformity between the two is not in itself a weakness. If we feel, none the less, that it *is* a weakness in the case of this stanza from *To Some Ladies*, where does the explanation lie?

In this poem Keats is setting out to pay a series of graceful compliments. Complimentary verse is not always negligible, and it so happens that a good deal of the best poetry in this genre is rhythmically exceedingly regular. The regularity can give a particular precision and *point* to the words; it can give them the neatness of well-turned compliment. The seventeenth century is rich in examples:

I did not live until this time
 Crown'd my felicity,
 When I could say without a crime,
 I am not thine, but Thee.

(Even that apparently quite regular stanza has its moments of nonconformity, as anyone who ponders the manner in which 'Crown'd' ought to be stressed will realize.) If we hold that in some way the obviousness of the 'beat' is here a virtue, whereas in *To Some Ladies* it is a weakness, the explanation must lie in the question whether or not the obviousness of the beat in that poem is appropriate to what Keats is setting out to do. Does it, or does it not, give Keats's words the neatness of well-turned compliment?

I contend that it does not, and that the reason for this is simply that it attracts too much attention to itself. Instead of acting as a kind of 'frame' for the words, as in our seventeenth-century example, keeping them in their proper places and thus giving an effect of conciseness and precision, the metre here gives the

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words an obtrusively bounding gait. The metre Keats uses here, of course, is not the same as that of the seventeenth-century poem, so we do not expect it to have exactly the same kind of effect. But how can the effect that it does have be described as anything other than inappropriate? ‘Ti-ti *tum* ti-ti *tum* ti-ti *tum* ti-ti *ta-ta*’—that is a crude way of representing what, in this kind of verse, is a crude rhythm. This sort of rhythm, we feel, might be all very well in a drinking-song roared by a convivial gathering of gentlemen after dinner; but in what is supposed to be a piece of delicately complimentary verse, addressed to ‘elegant, pure, and aerial minds’, it is out of place. There is, indeed, a woefully inept choice of means to the end. It is as though Keats, so to speak, were ignorant of the correct way to behave, not knowing the decorum proper to the occasion.

To put it differently, the lines give an impression of vulgarity. Keats is trying to sound well-bred, and doubtless for the moment he thinks he is succeeding, but his clod-hopping movements (which were plainly meant to be light and ‘aerial’) give him away as the unmistakable parvenu.

The gait of the words is not alone in betraying vulgarity. It is there in the very choice of language itself. ‘A sweet and peculiar pleasure’; ‘elegant, pure, and aerial minds’. Keats is all too conscious of being ‘elegant’ himself, with all the self-assurance of a youth who thinks that he knows exactly how to flatter the gentle sex in the right way. One visualizes a complacent smirk on the face of the poet, especially when he comes to ‘aerial’, which, as the culminating master-stroke of the poem, he emphasizes with what he takes to be a graceful wave of the hand.

In *To Some Ladies*, Keats is admittedly imitating the kind of bad, self-consciously ‘elegant’ verse in vogue at the time he began writing. No poet with the stuff of distinction in him could have remained for long under such an influence. But in Keats the development away from that sort of writing to the power and concentration of the odes and *The Fall of Hyperion* was accomplished in a mere handful of years. And it is to the poetic facts of this development that we must now turn our attention.

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 978-0-521-09419-1 - John Keats
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THE EARLY WORK

There is no need to devote further space to Keats's boyish attempts at delicately complimentary verse. We turn now to something equally youthful, but far more interesting:

There the king-fisher saw his plumage bright
 Vieing with fish of brilliant dye below;
 Whose silken fins, and golden scales' light
 Cast upward, through the waves, a ruby glow:
 There saw the swan his neck of arched snow,
 And oar'd himself along with majesty;
 Sparkled his jetty eyes; his feet did show
 Beneath the waves like Afric's ebony,
 And on his back a fay reclined voluptuously.

That stanza comes from a fragment headed *Imitation of Spenser*, and it points to one of the major influences on certain aspects of Keats's poetry. Spenser, in various guises, is a continually recurring presence in his work, both early and late. Here the influence appears in the simple form of an attempt to reproduce the effect of the Spenserian stanza—the stanza of *The Faerie Queene*. The exercise is fairly successful, for Keats has managed to sound some characteristically Spenserian notes. There is the decorative effect of 'plumage bright', 'brilliant dye', 'golden scales' light', 'a ruby glow', and 'Afric's ebony', for one thing. Furthermore, the apprentice poet has caught much of the 'musical' quality of Spenser's verse, that quality which comes from Spenser's concern with making patterns out of the sounds of his words, and reducing to the smoothest minimum the rhythmic jolts and jars to which the English language is prone. This is particularly evident in the third line, where Keats is very consciously weaving patterns out of sibilants and labials:

Whose *silken* fins, and *golden scales'* light

All this is just what one might expect from a youth who had read Spenser attentively.