KEATS AS A LAST ROMANTIC POET

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ABSTRACT

In the history of English poetry, John Keats in his poetry, his letters and his personal life is phenomenal in a special way. This critical study offers an account of Keats's poetic development. By this development is meant Keats's development as a mature writer of odes. Not satisfied with the blazing enthusiasm in his early poems Keats turn to the beauty and wisdom he articulates through his five important odes. The discussion here follows in a chronological order. It is possible to see in this study Keats's contribution through his odes to the Romantic Movement and his innovative use of the poetic forms and his influence on the poetry that comes to be written later.

Key words: *Romantic, odes, nature, narrative, beauty, legend etc.*

In the history of the poetry of the Romantic revival, John Keats is a name to reckon with. His literary output is immense though his life was extremely short (1795- 1821). His contribution to the Romantic poetry is distinguished. Odes are an important sub—genre.

To understand and do justice to Keats's poetry, it is necessary to fix attention on his odes. Robert Bridges has rightly said:

"Had Keats left us only his odes,

His rank among the poets would not

Be lower than it is, for they have stood

Apart in literature."[1]

Keats wrote a number of poems to which he gave the title "ode". But when Swinburne the first critic to call attention to the pre-eminent place of these poems in Keats's work, talked of his unequalled odes , he had in mind five poems which were first collected in Keats's third and by far his greatest volume " Lamia","Isabella"," The Eve of St. Agnes" and "other poems." They were printed for Taylor and Hessey, Keats's friends and publishers in July 1820. The title of his volume calls attention to the narrative poems in it, and it also contains the unfinished fragment of an epic, "Hyperion". Narrative poetry was still though in 1820 a grander and more ambitious kind of poetry than the shorter lyric the most perceptive and sympathetic of the early reviewers, Charles Lamb concentrates on the strong poems. He also doesn't mention five great odes. These are in the order in which they appear in this study "Ode to Psyche", "Ode to a Nightingale"," Ode on a Grecian Urn", " Ode on Melancholy" , " Ode on Indolence" and " Ode to Autumn".

The order of composition was different. "Psyche", "Nightingale", "Urn" and "Melancholy" were all composed between the end of April and the end of May 1819. A fifth Spring ode "An Ode on Indolence was not included in the 1820 volume. It was published twenty seven years after Keats's death by Lord Houghton, then Richard Monckton Milnes in his "Life and Literary remains of John Keats". There is a puzzle about the date of composition. Keats sketches out the circumstances and the mood which gave rise to it, and the three allegorical figures presented in it, in a letter of March 1819. In a letter of June however, he speaks of it as the thing he has most enjoyed writing this year. It is full of what might be either echoes or anticipations of the other Spring odes, it does not equal their elevation and intensity. The readers know, however, from the March letter that the mood of ironic disillusionment with poetry that it expresses preceded, not succeeded, the composition of the greater Spring odes. "To Autumn" was composed of the 1819 and differs from the Spring odes in its impersonal serenity.

The stanza form of Keats's odes except the irregular "Psyche" are of his own invention. H. W. Garrod and M.R. Ridley have demonstrated that thee forms Spring from Keats's dissatisfaction with the sonnet form or rather with his own achievement in it. The fragment of a May ode of 1818 consists of fourteen lines showing Keats still in the grip of the sonnet form but trying by shortening some of his line lengths and avoiding the rhyme sequence of either a Shakespearean or a Petrarchan sonnet to break away from it. "Nightingale", "Urn", "Melancholy", and "Indolence" are written in a ten-line stanza consisting of the quatrain of a Shakespearean sonnet followed by the sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet. This derivation is a little disguised in "Nightingale" by the substitution of a trimeter for a pentameter in the third last line. "To Autumn" has an eleven- line stanza, the Petrarchan sestet becoming a sestet with couplet catching on to an earlier rhyme word just before the last line. These ten and eleven line stanzas are long enough to express a complex modulation of thought and feeling, but not so long as to run the risk of becoming like a sonnet in a sonnet sequence, isolated poems in themselves. "Psyche" stands apart from the other odes in this as in other ways, but it is possible to find what might be called sonnet units in its irregular sections.

Keats thus in all, but one of the odes had solved the problem of combining richness of the component parts of a thoughtful and elaborate lyrical poem with the flow and continuity through the whale. Mathew Arnold was to adopt a variation of Keats's ode stanza putting a Petrarchan sestet first and ending with a Petrarchan not a Shakespearean quatrain in the two most Keatsian of his poems "Thyrsis" and "Scholar Gypsy".

It is not pedantic to dwell upon such questions, whether or not it is true in the words of Marshall Mcluhan that "The medium is the message". It is often true in poetry that the form is the mood or the tone and for a new mood or tone Keats needed to devise a new form that would yet have rich echoes of old ones. The influence of him of Gray and Collins his most distinguished recent predecessors in the handling of the ode is a superficial one; the influence of Shakespeare's sonnet in their erotic evocation of Spring and Autumn weather, in their combination of formal beauty and opulence of rhetoric with extreme intimacy of tone is profound. From Swinburne and Hopkins onwards, it has been a commonplace among critics to compare young Keats with the young Shakespeare and it is probably most specifically Keats's odes and Shakespeare's sonnets that the

critics have in mind. The tribute of formal imitation that Arnold paid Keats in " Thyrsis" and " The Scholar Gypsy " is again probably a finer criticism in a high sense of the word criticism than his earlier denigration of Keats in his letter to Clough or even his later generous praise of Keats in ward's " English poets".

For Keats's sense, a classical and traditional sense of transience Arnold substitutes in " Thyrsis" and " The Scholar Gypsy" the more local Victorian sense of the constant worry, hurry and push of history, change; for Keats's institution of the eternal in nature, art and myth. Arnold substitutes the idea of a temporary escape from Victorian public worries to the placid meadows round Oxford. "Thyrsis" and" The Scholar Gypsy "are beautiful poems, but set against the odes, they seem diluted, local and minor. The exercise in imitation may have given Arnold his first awareness of Keats's real greatness, his permanent and classical quality.

To Keats's early reviewers and to early commentators on him, the odes did not stand out as the crown of his work, as they do for the readers though " Nightingale", touches of plaintiveness and self-pity lines " Here where men sit and hear each other groan" [2] gave currency to the legend propagated maliciously by Byron in " Don Juan" and in good faith by Shelley in " Adonais" of Keats as a weak, womanly creature whose heart and health had been broken by Croker's savage review of " Endymion, A poetic romance 1818" in the " Quarterly Review" and by Lockhart's much more personal and poisonous attack, an expression of Tory- class hatred, on " Johnny Keats" and the Cockney School of Poetry in Blackwood's. In fact, Keats was as conscious of the weakness of Endymion as Croker himself and so far was he from being heart- broken that the year following these articles was the year of Keats's greatest poetic creation. His first volume "poems" (1817) which in fact had been treated by the reviewers more kindly than it deserved and Endymion together would have left him. If he had died in 1818 with the reputation only of a minor poet with some talent largely misused. It was after the unfavourable reviews of "Endymion" that he gathered his forces together to produce in 1820 volume, one of the greatest single volumes of poetry of modern times. Unfortunately about a fortnight before the appearance of the 1820's volume, Keats had had a haemorrhage which announced to him all too clearly with his accurate medical knowledge, the fatal nature of his illness. The favourable reviews which the new volume received could no more cheer him now than the attack on "Endymion" and himself had been able to daunt him two years earlier. With his health, with his hopes of marrying Fanny Browne, his confidence in his genius collapsed also. He died on 23 February 1821 eight months after the appearance of the volume that has given him immortal glory, instructing his friend Severn to put no name on his Roman tombstone, but only the phrase:

"Her lies one whose name was writ in water"[3].

The pathetic circumstances of Keats's death aroused sympathy, Shelley's "Adonais" helped to create a picture of Keats as an over- sensitive weakling, a picture that Arnold, Hopkins and Swinburne were still having to combat forty years later. The Victorian age was also on the whole a more snobbish period than the Romantic age the feeling carrying over from "Blackwood's "attacks. There was something mawkish and vulgar effeminately self-indulgent in Keats's character that he

was no gentleman. His hampered Victorian public reputation. Even Arnold and Swinburne are embarrassed by the Fanny Browne letters and the main service of Lord Houghton's biography of 1848 was to show Keats as a gentleman. He was almost sent to Harrow, Houghton said, he knew some respectable and distinguished people, he was born in the upper rank of the middle class.

The Victorian snobbery fortunately did not affect poets. His readers have noticed Keats's direct influence on Tennyson and on Arnold though the young Arnold was in principle an anti-Keatsian. The whole pre-Raphelite movement might be thought of as springing out of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and "The Eve of St. Agnes". Hopkins so different in temperament from Keats disapproving of his sensuality, is yet sensual or sensuous in a Keatsian way; the bitter or sweet sloe bursting in the filling the whole being in "the Wreck of Deutschland". It is sensuous in the same manner as the "draught of vintage" at the beginning of "Nightingale". Hopkins defends Keats's "manliness" in a letter to Canon Dixon: ((an obsession with "manliness "was not confined to muscular Christians such a Charles Kingsley and Tom Hughes)). Observing truly that it is not only women who are sensual. In this letter like Swinburne he picks out the odes for special praise and dwells on Keats's Shakespearean quality.

Victorian criticism of poetry tended to be either general or prescriptive or cursory and panoramic the first book-length study of Keats appeared in 1880. Its author, Mrs. F.W.Owen, the wife of a clergyman schoolmaster who has been Oxford don, is strongly influenced in style and attitude by Walter Pater. She dwells almost gloatingly on that languor and failure of the Springs of life that she finds in "Nightingale" in the sense in " Nightingale" and " indolence" both of the failure of vitality, the beginning of the end the appealing beauty of the flower which is about to fall . Mrs' Owen responds not only to the sense of sadness of all joy in 'Melancholy", but to the health and serenity of "To Autumn". She is the first critic to use Keats's letter to throw light on the odes for its wide ranging thought, high conception and repressed feeling. Arnold has considered Keats as a very bad influence, a poet of beautiful scattered images without leading ideas or a unifying sense of structure. In 1880 he sees that there is flint and iron in Keats. Arnold sees Beauty is Truth, as certainly not the all that the readers need to know, but as a partial truth the reader must know. He sees that Keats is anything but a poet without leading ideas.

The 1880 also saw Swinburne's fine tribute to Keats, first published in the "Encyclopedia Britanica" and later collected in the volume "Miscellanies". Swinburne's shrill tone of voice can disguise from modern readers what a good critic he is apart from an over-estimation of the plays, his relative placing of Keats's various poems is the most exactly that of the best modern criticism.

The most distinguished of the early appreciators of Keats was the poet Robert Bridges. In 1896 he printed privately a small edition of "A critical Introduction to the poems of John Keats". Bridges chapters on the odes in his books is wrong headed. One may feel some of it to be the one magisterial treatment of these poems. Similarly his often wrong- headed and unfair introduction to the first edition (1918) of his friend Hopkins poems remain more lively and provocative peace of English critical prose than the subsequent more enthusiastic or more scholarly introduction of Charles Williams and W. H. Gardner. He has the courage of assertive positive judgement. He rates" Urn"

lower than any other critic finding in it merely the repetitive illustration of a true but trite idea. He rates "Psyche" which Professor Kenneth Allott ha well described as the "Cinderella of the great odes" higher than any other critic except T. S. Eliot who thought of it the finest of them all. He ranked "Autumn" first. Next came "Nightingale "for its splendour, richness and variety. Then came "Melancholy" for what the reader would today call its emotional sincerity. "Psyche" came after "Melancholy" and "Urn" disputed with "Indolence" for the last place. "Maia" was praised as a splendid fragment.

These late Victorian critics had isolated the odes as a group of poems deserving special admiration and had drawn attention to the problems of the order of excellence of the poems within the group. By their very disagreements with each other they had suggested that there might be problems about the meaning, tone and structure of the odes. The treatment of the odes by twentieth century critics can be thought of under three main headings: a scholarly approach to the text and the history of its composition, in which the two main figures are H.W. Garrod and M. R. Ridley; long critical essays or chapters on the odes as a group or on individual odes and their problems in which modern methods of close reading or structural analysis are employed; and biographical approaches to the odes, to the conditions of their composition, using Keats's letters and other contemporary material.

The basic theme of the odes, the tension between our painful sense of transience and our intuition of the eternal, the relationship in a more abstract sense between the pain of life and the delight of poetry, the relationship is still more abstract sense between life, art and death, it is a central theme of modern poetry. W. B. Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium" and "Byzantium" for instance can be read as a modern variation on the themes of Keats's odes and though they are still great poems, they are not greater than the odes. They are also modern in the sense that they are symbolic poems. They are modern in finding "objective correlatives" artistically distanced for intimate and painful states of personal feeling.

For the North American critics the odes of Keats are most aptly approached as symbolic structures, symbolic presentations and resolutions of tense and paradoxical inner states. They approach a poem almost in the frame of mind of the engineer, looking for the pushes and pulls that hold it together, the conquered elements of inertia or friction the dynamic that makes it work. Kenneth Burke and Cleanth Brooks typify this approach at its extreme. English critics of the ode have on the whole clung to the Arnoldian tradition of seeing poetry as a criticism of life. They have been concerned with the human or the moral meaning of the odes. This is true not only of Middleton Murry or F.R. Leavis, very consciously moralistic critics, but true of William Empson whose close linguistic analysis of the paradoxes of "Melancholy" is essentially a criticism of something that seems to him extreme and over- strained in the romantic attitudes. The American critics are more concerned with the beauty of Keats's odes, the English with their truth.

In the final analysis it can be said that John Keats (1795-1821) was the greatest member of the second generation of the English romantic poets who blossomed early and died young. His immediate predecessors, Byron (1788-1824) and P. B. Shelley (1792-1822), and William Wordsworth (1770-1850) outlived him and literary careers spanned a longer stretch of time. All these romantics, however, shared several significant features so much so as to become

indistinguishable. All look upon Nature as the perennial theme of the romantic poetry, although their treatments differ in certain respects. Wordsworth is considered the high priest of Nature; Coleridge is mystifying, if not mysterious. Shelley's cloud and the west wind are strongly symbolical and are carriers of his prophesy, his vision of the future, glorified by liberty and equality for all. Keats is simpler, more direct, and more disinterested than either of these poets. Keats is a poet of the senses and he loves nature because of her sensuous appeal, her appeal to the sense of sight, the sense of hearing, the sense of smell, the sense of touch. Woods and fields, fruits and flowers, the streams, the snow, the moon and the rainbow he loves. Only he does not have any mystic communion with nature. But this does affect his position as the last romantic of the age of Wordsworth.

NOTES

1. Robert Bridges, "A Critical Introduction to Keats" (London: Oxford University Press,1929),p.250.
2. Helen Vendler, "The Odes of John Keats" (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983),p.77
3. Stephen Coote, "John Keats A Life" (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p.325.