ROMANTICISM IN PERSPECTIVE: TEXTS, CULTURES, HISTORIES
GENERAL EDITORS: MARILYN GAULL AND STEPHEN PRICKETT

Lost in a soft amaze
I gaze, I gaze!

RECEPTION AND POETICS IN KEATS: 'My Ended Poet'

Jeffrey C. Robinson

Reception and Poetics in Keats

My Ended Poet'

Jeffrey C. Robinson

First published in Great Britain 1998 by
MACMILLAN PRESS LTD
Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS and London
Companies and representatives throughout the world

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 0–333–71638–8

First published in the United States of America 1998 by
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS, INC.,
Scholarly and Reference Division,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

ISBN 0–312–21001–9

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Robinson, Jeffrey C.
Reception and poetics in Keats : 'my ended poet' / Jeffrey C. Robinson.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.
ISBN 0–312–21001–9
1. Keats, John, 1795–1821—Criticism and interpretation.
I. Title.
PR4837.R54 1998
821'.7—dc21 97–31891
CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00 99 98

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham, Wiltshire

for

Jane R. Lilienfeld

and

Gerda S. Norvig

List of Plates

1. MS of 'As Hermes once' in a letter from Keats to George and Georgiana Keats, February–May 1819 (*Houghton Library, Harvard University*)
2. *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, by Sir Frank Dicksee (*City of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery*)
3. Keats on his death-bed, by Joseph Severn (*Keats House, Hampstead*)
4. The ascent of Ben Nevis, photographed by Carol Kyros Walker, from *Walking North with Keats* by Carol Kyros Walker (*Yale University Press, 1992*)

Acknowledgments

The influence, on this book, of previous scholarship seems to reside in categories either quantifiable or beyond measurement. Of the latter sort I count Marjorie Levinson's *Keats's Life of Allegory*, William Keach's article on Keats's 'Cockney Couplets,' and Tom Clark's book of poems *Junkets on a Sad Planet;* from an earlier generation, Lionel Trilling's essay on Keats in his letters, John Bayley's *Keats and Reality*, and Aileen Ward's biography of Keats. Jerome McGann's *The Poetics of Sensibility* appeared too late to hold a serious place in my thinking about Keats's poetics, but his book retroactively, as it were, belongs with these others.

The staff at the Houghton Library, Harvard University, and at the Keats House, Hampstead, have always been gracious and helpful, as has Bathsheba Abse and her assistants at the Keats-Shelley House, Rome.

Colleen Anderson has helped immensely and expertly with the preparation of the manuscript. My daughter Miriam Robinson also contributed to the preparation of the anthology-appendix. Thanks to you both.

I am particularly grateful to the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation for a fellowship (1993) that allowed not only for the writing of a draft of part of this book but also for the drafting of another book, *Romantic Presences: Living Images from the Age of Wordsworth and Shelley* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1995), the thinking for which affected the final versions of this work.

The following publishers and agencies have graciously granted permission to include the indicated material in the Appendix of this book.

Black Sparrow Press: 'Pegasus Jockey,' 'Endymion,' 'A Pocket Apollo' and 'It is Getting Late'. Copyright © 1994 by Tom Clark. Reprinted from *Junkets On a Sad Planet: Scenes from the Life of John Keats* with the permission of Black Sparrow Press.

The Ecco Press: 'Posthumous Keats' from *Summer Celestial* by Stanley Plumly. Copyright © 1983 by Stanley Plumly. First published by The Ecco Press in 1983. Reprinted by permission of The Ecco Press.

Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.: 'Voyages' from *What the Light was Like* by Amy Clampitt. Copyright © 1985 by Amy Clampitt. 'Oatmeal' from *When One has Lived a Long Time Alone* by Galway Kinnell. Copyright © 1990 by Galway Kinnell. Reprinted by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

POETRY: 'There' by Mark Halliday. Published April 1992. Reprinted by permission of *Poetry*.

Princeton University Press: 'Scirocco' by Jorie Graham, from *Erosion*. Copyright © 1983 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

Random House, Inc.: 'A Kumquat for John Keats' from *Selected Poems* by Tony Harrison. Copyright © 1987 by Tony Harrison. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.

Weiser & Weiser: 'On Reading Keats in War Time' from *V-Letter* by Karl Shapiro. Copyright © 1944, 1987 Karl Shapiro by arrangement with Wieser & Wieser, Inc., New York.

Thanks also go to the University of Colorado for granting me sabbatical leave from teaching and institutional responsibilities during the same period.

Early versions of sections of this book have appeared in *The Wordsworth Circle* and *Studies in Romanticism* or have been given as talks at Brown University, the Modern Language Association Convention, the British Council at the University of Bologna where I was Visiting Professor in 1994, and the Keats Bicentennial Conference at the University of Bologna in 1995. Deep thanks to Giovanna Franci and Lilla Crisafulli Jones for their gracious and stimulating hospitality surrounding my visits to Bologna and for their support of my work.

I thank, for their conversations with me – perennial or singular or both – Martin Aske, Piero Boitani, Ed Dorn, Sidney Goldfarb, William Keach, James Kincaid, Marilyn Krysl, Peter Manning, Peter Michelson, Timothy Morton, Nicholas Roe, Terry Rowden, David Simpson, John Stevenson, Charlotte Sussman, and Susan Wolfson.

Marilyn Gaull's enthusiasm for this book, for which I am flattered and deeply grateful, has been instrumental in its publication. And Elizabeth Robertson has given unhesitatingly to a critique of the manuscript and a foregrounding of much of what is good in it. Her belief in the project helped me, at difficult moments, to sustain my own commitment to it.

I end by thanking, at last, Aileen Ward, the first scholar under whose guidance I thought seriously about Keats. She provided a 'space for our wandering' and set me on a path, by her example and our exchange, of a lifetime of engagement with this most engaging of English poets.

'There are gods here, too.'

Herakleitos

'... my ended poet.'

Alice Meynell on Keats

Contents

1

Introduction

The subtitle of this work, 'My Ended Poet,' an epithet for Keats from Alice Meynell's passionate 1869 tribute poem, 'On Keats's Grave,' captures a central hypothesis of my book perfectly: the pervasive image of Keats as that poet who died-too-young has for generations guided his readers towards seeing his poems as closed, elegiac monuments; the view of the poet shaped the poetics by which he has been read.

Initially, however, I wanted to write a day-book of Keats, something that would break through predictable, traditional questions asked about him, in order to release what seemed to me the 'vernal' as opposed to the 'autumnal' energies of his poems. To make that point, I called it 'Keats and Sexuality.' But a year after having finished the day-book, I discovered by chance in Harvard's Houghton Library a collection of books of poems, each volume containing at least one poem on or to Keats and written after his death beginning with a single sonnet from 1823 and stretching to the mid-twentieth century in England and North America. Since then I've encountered many other poems (including Amy Clampitt's sequence and Tom Clark's book of lyrics) that dwell on the life, the poems, and the future of the phenomenon called 'Keats.' That the number of poems seems to have increased as his 200th birthday approached; that poets seemed, consciously or subliminally, aware of October 31, 1995, tells me that Keats still continues to hold his living hand towards the making of poems. My book, therefore, began to change into a register of Keats's *living* poetics (the sexual element from the original) as it has been both denied and affirmed by the praise poems that have helped to define his afterlife.

In 1995 I was thoroughly caught up in the spirit of the celebration – even the most sentimental eulogy had and still has for me a charm, the sense of connection to the poet of the empyrean. In an age when the operations performed at the periphery of poems may seem far more compelling than the conversations held in their presence,

conversations that should renew the centrality and primacy of the poem itself at the same time that the poem disperses its energies and love among watchful persons, in such an age and at such a moment it is right to learn again the particular vitality of Keats's work, a vitality which I find first and foremost in his *poetics* and which, particularly towards the end of this book, I will reconsider.

Keats today is still by and large read as a fundamentally Tennysonian poet of closed forms and elegiac temperament. Open any of the standard books on Keats – by Stillinger, Sperry, Dickstein, Waldoff, or Vendler, for example – and you will discover in these elegant and well-argued studies a dominant drive to find the presence of a heroic closure to the poems. That is, each (of the 'best') of his lyrics – and the Odes being the *summa* of his shorter pieces – manages an impressive stay against the flux or mutability of the world and of his own vulnerable body. In the manner of Schiller's tragic heroines, the lyric subject 'endures' against its devouring enemies. Formally what counts in an assessment of Keats is his abandonment of his loose, hypothetically infinite string of enjambed couplets in his early poems and the embrace of and experimentation with sonnet forms (including the Odes): his genius is to make capacious the generic abstractions of the past but finally to stay within them, to have form reinforce the triumph of the ego against less socially definable versions of the self such as one finds in myth and in nature.

To critics of Keats in the past quarter-century this may seem a strange claim, given in particular the tradition of deconstructive readings of Romantic poems and the more recent historicizing of that apparently most ahistorical of poets. Deconstruction asserts that closure itself is problematic; historical research is recovering a wealth of contexts that locate Keats's poetry amid lively political, and literary-political, debate. To take several instances: Nicholas Roe has recently shown that Keats's Enfield School dwelt, since its founding, in a predisposition of radical dissenting politics that permeated its educational practices and that therefore, in all probability, colored Keats's experience there. Marjorie Levinson has argued for a Keats highly self-conscious about his marginal social position in poetic inheritance relative to more 'aristocratic' contemporaries like Wordsworth, Byron, and Shelley. As a result, he appropriates or quotes from the tradition in a pastiche foreign to the notion of originary genius or fount of inspiration that tradition posits as the Romantic lyric. In a similar counter to that notion is Jack Stillinger's work on multiple authorship, arguing that friends, editors, and

publishers contributed to a number of Keats's final published versions of poems: where does Keats end and his friend Richard Woodhouse, for example, begin? William Keach has shown that the severe criticism heaped upon Keats's first volume of 1817 was largely disapproval of his 'Cockney couplets' that flaunted the orthodoxy of Pope's beautiful closed systems with a plethora of enjambment, slant rhyme, and internal full stops indicating to reviewers that 'loose' couplets went hand in hand with 'loose' reformist ('Cockney') politics. Christopher Ricks[1] located the center of Keats's poetic interest in a pervasive and irrepressible eroticism, more specifically, in the sense of embarrassment that might accompany the public (poetic) display of the erotic. Finally, feminist readings (e.g. those of Susan Wolfson and Margaret Homans)[2] of Keats's life, his poetry, and his readership have destabilized the sense of his identity as singularly, confidently, and stereotypically masculine.

It is precisely such destabilizations from traditional conceptions of Keats in history and in poetry that one expects would lead to a rethinking of his poetics, but – with the possible exception of Keach's work – this has not yet happened. Indeed, in Romantics criticism generally and that of Keats in particular discussions of poetics currently seem to be lagging behind cultural, political, and thematic studies. It's almost as if the release from traditional ways of seeing Keats in various cultural and historical contexts has been allowable as long as the poem itself remains secure amid the predictable forms, and assumptions about form, from the past. The final sections of this book will begin to alter the picture.

So how do we speak of the relationship between form and the elegiac temperament? Keats's poetry, first of all, refers often to death and the ending or vanishing of the images of persons and things; from one point of view his poetry shows his concern with fadings, vanishings, grievings, forgettings, and with the immediacy of oblivion as the spectral possibility of a world without poetry – what Wordsworth in *The Ruined Cottage* calls nature's calm oblivious tendency. This much is no news. The history of Keats criticism, of poems about Keats, of the cultural shrines to Keats all attest to the presence of the issue of oblivion in his poetry, and his letters, underscored by his early death. Moreover, for Keats to have died so young was to have played out the script for the truly 'authentic' poet: to die young for poetry, to sacrifice so obviously 'life' for 'art' is just what Chatterton and Burns did two generations earlier.

Keats, and Shelley a year later, rebel, as it were, against the passionately wished-for life in poetry, resolute and independent, urged by Coleridge and Wordsworth and Charlotte Smith and Helen Maria Williams who note with a mixture of admiration and dismay the failure of social, psychological, and biological life to support the poet's whole-souled entry into the collective imagination that is poetry. Keats's life, references in his work, and a certain myth of poetic authenticity have thus conspired to make him the poet of death. But what is *not* necessary and yet what has predominated historically is that we conflate his death-perfused world with a poetics of closed forms and with what Keats, quoting Hazlitt, called his 'morbidity of temperament.'

This, of course, is greatly overstating the case of how Keats is read, and is not meant to overlook the view that Keats is a poet of enormous energy. But the history of criticism would suggest that when it comes down to reading a Keats poem, the reader will opt for a traditional sense of British poetics – that, no matter how much play or even 'hoodwinking' is in the writing, it is finally bounded and defined by a sense of the poem's containment within its borders: a poem represents an event now over, having, as Lionel Trilling said about the Grecian Urn in Keats's Ode, 'pastness as one of its attributes.'[3]

Stuart Sperry, in his standard book *Keats the Poet* that has influenced many other readers, in effect argues that Keats's heroic response to the pervasiveness of death in his world is to work to create an aesthetic coherence as a counter to the entropy of his life. Thus he is very interested in the way that the early (*1817* volume) poetry develops from loose associative writing into rock-like structures. Of the early verse epistle 'To Charles Cowden Clarke,' Sperry says: 'Since the poetic voyage, as he conceived it should have no predetermined course, he could only hope that, while allowing his medium, the rush of sensation, to bear him forward, he could from time to time arrest and transform its flow of images into the brighter, harder shapes and symbols of a crystallizing intention.'[4] Or, '"I stood tiptoe" begins as an accumulation of disparate and minute observations of nature which gradually achieve the cohesiveness and depth of landscape. ...'[5] Associations, accumulations of detail, listings exhibit that winning quality of Keats, his generous exuberance, but ultimately need to be abandoned or, more capaciously channeled, for the higher concerns which demand a greater coherence in the writing. Leon Waldoff, in the title of his book

Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination, gives a psychoanalytic turn to Sperry's work. Associations and accumulations of detail seem roughly equivalent to the powerful incoherences of the unconscious, which in Keats's situation means 'irrevocable loss and human mutability,' against which '[a]n important part of the imaginative effort in each of Keats's major poems goes towards working out a defense. ...'[6] Combining Sperry and Waldoff as representative of much of Keats criticism, a 'major Keats poem' is a closed form designed to foreground the heroic resistance of an expansive ego against the powerful and seductive but 'errant' pathways of youth and the unconscious, pathways ruled primarily by an elegiac combination of desire, longing, and severe loss.

Another kind of loss resides in the background of much of this criticism: the decline, historically beginning sometime in the eighteenth century, of the perceived power of poetry, what Sperry refers to as 'the relatively somber prospect for poetry that lies ahead.' In this light the Odes test 'imaginative inquiry [reaching] its limits.'[7] Visionary poetry according to this thesis is on the way out, and poets have come to feel that there is little left for them to do, a position articulated by W. J. Bate in *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* but previously alluded to in his 1963 biography of Keats, and developed or echoed by Harold Bloom, Paul de Man, and Sperry himself.

But such a view of Keats's poetry does not square either with the history of poetry in the West (including non-Anglo-American writings) since the Romantics or with the particular inspiration Keats has afforded major modern and postmodern and Beat poets who have pursued open forms in their own work. The moments of Keats's legacy that seem to have appealed greatly to these poets are the twin notions of Negative Capability and the camelion poet:

> ...what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason – Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.[8]

> As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself – it has no self – it is every thing 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 philospher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body – The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute – the poet has none; no identity – he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures.[9]

Taken together the two passages point the way to a 'poetry of aperture.'[10] Rather than finding the purpose of the lyric to reside in the individuation of the self over and against the world, the conservation of the self, the negatively capable and camelion poets lose the self to the world in which they as fully as possible participate. Keats's preoccupation with 'easeful death' and with dying-into-life refers to this feature of open-form poetry.

I have been aided, indeed inspired, in my conviction that Keatsian poetics can been viewed differently, by poets from our own century and hemisphere, in the tradition of Whitman and Pound and William Carlos Williams and some members of the Beat Generation of poets and their followers. And here I am asking a more general question of reading: what happens to our experience of a major poet from the past if we emphasize less the poetics and values of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English poetry and aesthetics and more those to which we are immediate heirs? To read the past through the lens of more recent poetries and manifestoes forces the issue about how we read into the tradition – to what degree we acknowledge present biases and commitments. In this sense to read from the viewpoints of our best experimental poets is to assume a vantage of current *practice*, to take seriously the resonance of Keats in the work of recent laborers in poetry and claim it for ourselves as dedicated readers.