John Keats (1795-1821)

Steve Clark

John Keats was born in 1795, son of a North London stableman. This gave rise to a mythology of poor education and social exclusion, but in fact his father was a prosperous businessman who had married his employer's daughter, and was able to send Keats to the Reverend John Clarke's excellent private dissenting academy in Enfield. Here, as recent scholarship has amply demonstrated, he had access to both a more advanced curriculum and progressive politics than more illustrious schools of the time would have offered. Keats's father was killed falling from a horse when he was eight, followed by his mother who died from tuberculosis when he was fourteen. There was a considerable inheritance of 8000 pounds, but this remained tied-up in lawsuits for the whole of Keats life; while he could reasonably consider himself a gentleman, he was periodically beset by financial problems. When he was fifteen he was apprenticed to Thomas Hammond, a surgeon, and continued his medical studies at Guy's Hospital in London, but abandoned the career after qualifying in favour of poetry. However, the influence of this training may be seen throughout his poetry and letters, in both its frame of reference (the 'pleasure-thermometer', 'proved on the pulses'), and his acute awareness of the sensation of the body, whether pleasure or pain.

Keats became a member of the literary circle centred on the radical Leigh Hunt, whose politics and style helped shape his early writing. Many early critics saw this as a regrettable influence, but more recently there has been a revaluation of Hunt's socially-oriented sentimental style, which remains the basis of Keats's late, highly-ornate rhetoric.

Keats's first two volumes of poetry made little impact; the second of these, the long and frequently impenetrable mythic romance, *Endymion*, attracted particularly hostile notices, in which he was denounced as a member of the pretentiously vulgar 'Cockney School', and mocked for his lack of classical education. Personal difficulties also followed: financial crises for his brother George in America, the death of his other brother Tom from tuberculosis, and an unhappy if passionate relationship to Fanny Brawne, to whom he became engaged.

Keats's writing career in total amounts to little more than five years. The productivity of his final months is astounding. Between January and September 1819 he composed *The Eve of St Agnes*, 'La Belle Dame sans Merci', and all of the great 'Odes', in probably the single most concentrated period of creativity in English poetry. The style achieves a kind of majestic opulence, curiously mingling evocation of the sensual pleasures of the world with anguished lament for its inevitable transience. Though best known as a lyric poet, Keats himself became dissatisfied with the idiom, attempting another epic, *Hyperion*, late recast as *The Fall of Hyperion*, not his most engaging works but impressive for the complex allegory and sustained high seriousness.

In February 1820 he began to cough blood; followed by a series of hemorrhages. He travelled to Italy for a milder climate, but with no respite; he died on 23 February 1821. His letters provide a compelling narrative of his personal heroism during these final months and are themselves a major literary achievement.

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