

John Keats

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John Keats

Reimagining History

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PREFACE

John Keats: Reimagining History originated as an attempt to understand the literariness of Keats's poetry. Even if intertextuality is a feature of most culturally ambitious poetry, the traditionalism of Keats's work had long struck me, as it has others, as especially pronounced and significant—an attribute implicated in his sudden stride to greatness, a clue to the fundamental way he imagined. And I had long been dissatisfied with reigning conceptions of poetic influence, which framed it as a dark agon over poetic priority, an idea that seemed melodramatic and unconvincing even in the case of a poet willing, at least in one phrase in one letter, to associate Milton and death. My Keats is subject merely to passing moods of intertextual or class anxiety. His retentive memory resulted in phrases from his reading coming unbidden during the process of composition. But he invoked the British literary canon so persistently as he wrote because his writing represented a conscious effort to reclaim the canon for the alternate cultural and political values that he and his fellow Cockneys endorsed; so I came to believe and so this study contends. It should come as no surprise, then, that I depend on the important scholarship done on Leigh Hunt's Cockney circle in recent years, or that the book refers repeatedly to Hunt, Hazlitt, Haydon, Reynolds, and at times even Regency journalism. My interest in Keats's Cockneyism led also to related scholarship stressing the centrality and method of Romantic historicism, especially the tendency of historicist texts to interrogate their own modernity from a historical vantage point. As it drew on these resources, *John Keats: Reimagining History* came to argue that in Keats's imaginative retrospection we witness his native bookishness

taking strategically historicist form to become the vehicle of a cultural polemic, Keats's means of engaging Regency political issues.

This organizing argument comes accompanied by several recurrent motifs. One is a commitment to close reading, an approach virtually demanded by texts as ore laden as Keats's most considered efforts. If there were ever a poet whose work made justification of close reading superfluous, surely that poet would be John Keats. The other recurrent motifs involve interrelated aspects of Keats's oppositional viewpoint. The critical consensus has agreed upon a secular, humanistic Keats since the first ascendancy of the Harvard Keatsians—but I credit the poetry with an even greater worldly realism at moments. Still influential readings of the odes have them disciplining and finally rejecting visionary nostalgia, as their lyrical plots chart the speaker's progressive, hard-won understanding of the dangers of idealizing aspiration. Yet a poem such as "Ode to a Nightingale" can dramatize that ostensibly progressive understanding only because Keats himself, in control from the onset, already understands full well the delusions attendant upon idealism: it is no accident that the poem's opening mixes longing with loss. In the odes as I read them, and throughout Keats's mature work, the rejection of idealism is ultimately neither progressive nor particularly hard won: the poems expose ideal plenitude as an illusion right from the start, when they are not in truth preoccupied with wholly other issues. And of course Keats was no more sympathetic to religion than he was to idealism. He may avow his faith in personal immortality or speculate about a "vale of Soul-making" in his correspondence, but the poetry waves off consolations based even on a revisionist theology, and deplores Christianity's alliance with political reaction both at home and abroad. Keats's oppositional viewpoint also bears, notoriously so, on another issue noticed recurrently here: his attempt to construct a successful career amid the heated partisanship of Regency cultural and political contention. My book submits the issue of career to the poetry itself by following critics who see the poems proleptically incorporating the problematics of reception and modeling the kind of reading that Keats wanted for his work. Here too Keats's historicism produces an interplay of tradition and modernity. His pursuit of professional success shows him invoking the past to secure his place among key figures on the present scene: Shelley, Byron, Hunt, and especially Wordsworth.

My attention to these recurrent motifs produces yet another "story of Keats," in Jack Stillinger's phrase, one that takes the poems in chronological order so as to reconstruct the poet's development. My first chapter sets forth my approach by reviewing Keats's Romantic historicism in Cockney context,

his poetics of literary history, and the (cultural) politics to which he characteristically dedicates his poems. Thereafter the book's chronological organization can assist readers to the issues and poems of particular interest to them. My second and third chapters concern the early Keats. [Chapter 2](#) focuses on *Poems* (1817) for Keats's gestures of poetic self-validation: first, his presentation of himself as the heir to a vocationally legitimating tradition; and secondly, the volume's coterie aspect, as extended by Keats's historicism beyond Hampstead to a broader canonical community of supportive "presiders." Here discussion addresses Keats's construction of a Spenserian lineage for his work; his deference to history in the volume's two framing poems, "I stood tip-toe" and "Sleep and Poetry"; and his awareness of both the imaginative uses and fugitive irretrievability of the past, as shown in the famous Chapman's Homer sonnet. [Chapter 3](#) reads *Endymion* as a venture in Cockney Elizabethanism that discloses Keats's growing restiveness with the personalities and values of Hunt's circle. The influence of *Alastor* on *Endymion* has long been acknowledged. Elaborating on that recognition, I argue that *Endymion* embodies a more acerbic and thoroughgoing denunciation of Shelleyan idealism than has been previously realized. When *Endymion*'s reawakening of the drowned lovers in Book 3 gives way to his love for the Indian maiden in Book 4, and to a conclusion that numerous readers find unconvincing, we see Keats's turning from Hunt and rejecting a Marlow-and-Hampstead paganism that celebrated sexual passion for its power of social liberation. The claim makes for an easy transition to my subsequent chapter. [Chapter 4](#), devoted to Keats's medieval romances, begins by reading *Isabella* as a rejection of Hunt's recasting of Dante's *Inferno* in the amatory sentimentality of *The Story of Rimini*. For Keats's obverse optimism about love there is *The Eve of St. Agnes*. I interpret *The Eve of St. Agnes* in light of Hazlitt's praise of Shakespeare's depiction of first love in *Romeo and Juliet*—and against Stillinger's classic account of its skeptical irony—so as to present the poem as Keats's celebration of Madeline and Porphyro's imaginatively constructed passion. The chapter concludes by adding "The Eve of Saint Mark" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" to *Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* as texts lamenting the problem of poetry's public reception.

[Chapters 4](#) and [5](#) address the great odes. My historical reading of "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which dominates [Chapter 4](#), privileges the notion of proximate context and refers the poem to the aesthetic controversy that swirled around Robert Benjamin Haydon, particularly although not exclusively his defense of the Elgin Marbles. I argue that Haydon's undervalued influence

explains why Keats's poetry, and certainly "Ode on a Grecian Urn," presupposes a naturalistic reclamation of neoclassical universalism. Great art, "Grecian Urn" insists, both emerges from but also ramifies beyond a local historical and cultural ground, in that way becoming an invaluable "friend to man." As with *The Eve of St. Agnes*, my account of "Grecian Urn" demotes critical emphasis on the text's supposedly ironic conclusion. In my view, the Urn's assurance that the identity of Beauty and Truth is "all you need to know" is not a bit of dramatic irony functioning as self-undermining overstatement, but, rather, an affirmation of the mesmerizing intensity of aesthetic experience merely *while* such experience is in progress. So the closing lines of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" proclaim Keats's genuine faith in the consolatory potential of poetry—although it is a potential that often miscarries due to the marginalization of literary culture in modern Britain. With [Chapter 5](#) the book turns to Keats's exploration of aesthetic consolation in three additional odes: "Psyche," "Nightingale," and "Autumn." I stress the secularism of these three richly intertextual meditations: "Psyche" does not recuperate traditional notions of an immortal soul; "Nightingale" is best understood as a dramatic soliloquy rather than a sublime quest, and as a poem that exposes visionary havens as antithetically constituted contradictions; and "Autumn" offers readers a quietly moral response to natural temporality. My final chapter follows this trajectory into the Hyperion project, Keats's culminating consideration of the purpose of poetry. His devotion of *Hyperion* to a historicist dialogue between the canonical and the contemporary is clear from his opening conflation of *Paradise Lost* and *The Excursion*, with its famous Prospectus: Milton is not available for appropriation, readers are to understand, except as mediated by Wordsworth's prior appropriation. And to Keats, Wordsworth's enlistment of Milton remains deeply unacceptable for sanctioning the Pedlar and Pastor's spiritual justifications of political reaction. Declining theodicy for tragedy, and attempting to think beyond Wordsworth's Miltonism, the Keats of *Hyperion* also thinks beyond the merely political to the historical principles that determine particular political events, and that both Hyperion texts associate with existential tragedy. The book concludes by following this interest in tragedy to Keats's 1819 experiments with the tragic drama and, briefly, to his despairing epitaph.

It has been a pleasure to write on Keats; it is a pleasure also to acknowledge the debts I have incurred in doing so. Keats has been fortunate in his modern academic critics, and I have tried to take full advantage of the excellent scholarship available on his poetry, at least through 2014,

although I occasionally manage to cite some later work. I have made a particular effort—in keeping with my book’s attention to the interplay of present and past in Keats—to accommodate both recent scholarly innovation and the best, occasionally even magisterial, accomplishments of previous decades. As always, my immediate and extended family has been wonderfully supportive, my wife Kelly Brennan above all. At the University of Alabama, Deborah Weiss, Albert Pionke, and Phil Beidler all contributed to my formulation of my project; with my fellow Romanticist Steve Tedeschi I have discussed Romantic literature and the current state of Romantic studies on an almost daily basis for the last several years. I am also immensely indebted to Susan Reynolds for her expert proofreading. A version of my reading of “Ode to a Nightingale” from [Chapter 6](#) appeared previously in *Studies in Romanticism* 55.4 (Winter 2016) 449–469; for permission to reprint it here I am grateful to the Trustees of Boston University, and to Deborah Swedberg and Charles Rzepka for their generous collegiality. Turning to Palgrave, I am delighted to thank my learned outside reader, whose discerning responses saved me from errors and allowed me to improve my argument at several points; Jayanthi Senthil and the superb Palgrave production team; and my editor, Ben Doyle, who has proven a model of supportive and respectful professionalism throughout the editorial and production process. If it was enjoyable to write on Keats’s poetry, it is of course enjoyable also to see the book finished. My best thanks again to all who helped—and now to Keats.

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ABBREVIATIONS

Poems by such well-known writers as Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and so on are not referred to any specific edition unless there is a textual issue. Keats's poems are cited from the Stillingr edition listed below (*Poems*) unless otherwise noted.

- Barnard Barnard, John. *John Keats*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.
CCK *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*. Ed. Susan J. Wolfson. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Chandler Chandler, James. *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998.
- Cox Cox, Jeffrey N. *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and Their Circle*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- CWH *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*. Ed. P. P. Howe. 21 vols. London: J. M. Dent, 1930–1934.
- ELH *English Literary History*
- JKCD Roe, Nicholas. *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*. Oxford: Clarendon P, 1997.
- KC *The Keats Circle*. Ed. Hyder E. Rollins. 2nd ed. 2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965.
- KCH *Keats: The Critical Heritage*. Ed. G. M. Matthews. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971.
- KCP *Keats: The Complete Poems*. Ed. Miriam Allott. Longman Annotated English Poets. London: Longman, 1970.
- K&H *Keats and History*. Ed. Nicholas Roe. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995.

- KL *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821*. Ed. Hyder E. Rollins. 2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958.
- KSJ *The Keats-Shelley Journal*
- NCE *Keats's Poetry and Prose*. A Norton Critical Edition. Ed. Jeffrey N. Cox. New York: W. W. Norton, 2009.
- Poems *The Poems of John Keats*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1978.
- Sperry Sperry, Stuart M. *Keats the Poet*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973.
- SIR *Studies in Romanticism*
- Stillinger Stillinger, Jack. “*The Hoodwinking of Madeline*” and *Other Essays on Keats's Poems*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1971.
- SWLH *The Selected Writings of Leigh Hunt*. Ed. Jeffrey N. Cox, Greg Kucich, Charles Mahoney, John Strachan. 6 vols. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2003.
- Watkins Watkins, Daniel P. *Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination*. Madison: Farleigh Dickinson UP, 1989.
- Wolfson Wolfson, Susan. *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986.