

special importance not only to the commentators but to the translators of the Sonnets, because they point out those words which keep the poems together both structurally and psychologically.

*The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* is a book of almost 700 pages; one cannot say that it makes an easy reading. It is worth reading throughout, but it will surely be helpful for those who only wish to read one or two commentaries. The Quarto facsimiles of the Sonnets are intended to satisfy not only the philologist but also the devotee of beautiful books. There is an extra supplement to the book, a CD with Helen Vendler reading sixty-six of Shakespeare's Sonnets.

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## **The Roundness of a New Keats Biography**

Andrew Motion: *Keats*, London:  
Faber and Faber, 1997

After Walter Jackson Bate's (1963), Aileen Ward's (1963), and Robert Gittings's (1968) excellent biographies of Keats, which already made extensive use of Hyder E. Rollins's annotated edition

of the *Letters* (1958), there can hardly be any justification for a new *Life* – unless, of course, some new documents have been unearthed – but the excavation of new significances by applying a radically new approach to the already established data.<sup>1</sup> That is exactly what is claimed by Andrew Motion in the *Introduction* to his 636-page *Keats*: as part of the new historicist reassessment of the Romantic Movement (Marilyn Butler, Jerome J. McGann, John Barnard), his ambition is to recreate Keats “in a way which is more rounded than his readers are used to seeing.(...) My intention is not to transform Keats into a narrowly political poet. It is to show that his efforts to crystallise moments of ‘Truth’ combine a political purpose with a poetic ambition, a social search with an aesthetic ideal” (xxv). He promises to give substantial interpretations of the “forms and idioms” (xxiii) of the works in this “rounded” way, thus the reader expects some exciting interplay of “resonance and centrality” (Stephen Greenblatt): the autonomy of the self-centred vision and the cultural complexity of the age “resonating” in the integrity of the work.

As Motion remarks, there is no need to prove the radical liberalism of Keats. The traditional view of him as

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Coote's *John Keats: A Life* in 1995 went practically unnoticed by academia as it made no claim for new insights.

effeminate, which he traces back to Shelley's "Adonais" and Leigh Hunt's memoir, is getting essentially re-shaped in the current historicist urge to see him as more socially and politically engaged. As representative volumes, Motion mentions Nicholas Roe's 1995 collection of essays *Keats and History*, and his book *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, which appeared too late, in 1997, for him to consult seriously. However, Motion's *Keats* is the first book-length study of the poet's life and work incorporating similar views. The fairly great number of current studies with a historicist approach makes the reader wonder to what extent this can be taken as the authoritative and representative perspective of our age. We might be warned, what the author might have thought valid in his relationship with the world might be overshadowed, as Roland Barthes's definition of the critical activity suggests, by the terms and attitudes the current critical language establishes with the language of the author.

Motion's biography excels in the sociographic portrayal of the figures surrounding Keats, and gives an enjoyable reading into the Georgian and Regency worlds. It also presents valuable information about the medical practices of the age; his extensive reading in that field is most memorably reflected in the portraits of the figures in Guy's Hospital, who can be supposed to have had a

shaping influence on Keats's personality. His factual documentations of some of the possible sources of the poems are also serviceable.

All in all, he does a good job in the presentation of data, also including the recurrent quotes from the letters as his most important source. Also, he adds to the interpretation of the texts by trying to reconstruct the possible associations of the contemporary reader. Nevertheless, this intention may lead both to valuable and dispensable emphases, as, for example, his reading of the ode "To Autumn" shows. After interpreting how the poem balances abundance and decay, and affirming Keats's persistent intention to transmute history in the working of the imagination, Motion states that the poem refers to the social anxieties that dogged him all his life. Thus in the image of Autumn in the second stanza ("And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep/ Steady thy laden head across a brook") we might realise that "the reference to the gleaner is more certainly charged with contemporary references. Gleaning had been made illegal in 1818, and although the figure is part of an appeal to the world of Classical fulfilment, and a refracted expression of Keats's wish to glean his teeming brain [cf. the sonnet "When I have fears" – K.P.], it also refers to his sympathy for the denied and the dispossessed. So does the description of the bees. They are a

reminder of the miserable facts of labour that Keats had condemned during his walking tour in Scotland ..." (p. 462) Motion also remarks, the fact that the poem was written in the aftermath of the Peterloo Massacre does not establish it as a political poem, but offers a possible context that we should weigh. The problem with these possible contexts is that they are not necessarily justified in a close reading to give an integrity of interpretation, and thus may remain facts of mere contiguity. It may be particularly difficult to feel sorrow for the dispossessed bees when "they think warm days will never cease, / For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells."

In his reading of the poems, Motion may slip into statements that are irritating not because they would be untrue, but because they do not sound relevant, or remain powerful assertions without validating elaboration. It could be illustrative to quote the main argument he makes about the sonnet "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer": "It is a poem about exclusion as well as inclusion. Its title suggests that Keats felt he had come late to high culture (it is 'On First Looking'). It draws attention to the fact that he could not read Homer in the original Greek. It mistakes Balboa (whom Robertson rightly credits as the discoverer of the Pacific) for Cortez, and so undermines its air of learning. It even, for all its

wonderfully bold energy, succumbs to a moment of awkward translationese ('pure serene') which creates a sense of Keats standing apart from the main event. (...) It is a poem written by an outsider who wants to be an insider – on his own terms" (p. 112). Reviews have already pointed out the errors of some of these views,<sup>2</sup> since, obviously, his exclusion from "high culture" is exaggerated in view of his prose translation of the *Aeneid* into English before the age of nineteen. Moreover, it would be odd to read the poem as a negative discovery of exclusion and ignorance, rather than a tribute to Chapman, whose work meant the discovery of a new and rich demesne: a potential example. I would think that the poem's ascending imagery is more rooted in Keats's feeling of exultation over his own mastery of poetic expression than in frustration. The last lines can read as self-revelation: he is able to mount that height of poetry, and thus he *becomes* an insider, both in the sense that with this poem he enters the company of English poets, and confirms his belief in the power of imagination. Regarding the other psychoanalytically based arguments of the book, Motion might draw his main idea from the anxiety theory of Harold Bloom, which, of course, in itself is convincing, surely

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<sup>2</sup> e.g. Helen Vendler, "Inspiration, Accident, Genius" *London Review of Books*, 16 October 1997.

there is much anxiety in Keats to create his own poetic idiom, but it may be more fruitful to discuss that problem for instance in the context of his relation with Spenser, or with Milton in *Hyperion* to show his struggle to extricate himself from their influence.

The very same argument is recurrent in the book, for example in Motion's reading of the "Ode to Psyche": "Keats sees himself, like the goddess, a kind of arriviste, struggling to find place in the hierarchy of poetry without the 'privileges of birth and education.'" (In slightly exaggerated terms, do not they both, the goddess and the poet want to build a fair enough career?) Once again, the argument could not be untrue, the quote comes from the letters, Keats must have felt the sore lack of these privileges, but to offer it as the main line of interpretation is a bit fruitless for me. As Motion searches for this argument thematized in various poems, not only does he fail to give complex and insightful readings for those who rely on him as a source, but also ignores the intertextuality Keats's poems create with each other and the recurrent motifs of the poetic idiom. He also fails to fulfil another expectation of ours: he, being a poet himself, could possibly provide insights into the way form coheres in the poems. The problem is not that he offers some external perspectives, but that one is left with the sore absence of what is swept aside for their sake. In all cases,

the feeling of an integrated wholeness of interpretation, of roundness is missing.

It follows from the nature of the approach that the social aspects of Keats's works are favoured: the liberal sympathies, the healing power of the poem, which should be a friend to man, and the means of gaining ever widening knowledge, a process of soul-making. Yet he cannot avoid commenting on the independence of the creative imagination and it is at that point that he often seems to handle the problem with simplified theories and to shift the viewpoint back to some socio-historical arguments.

With Keats's definitions of the imagination in mind, the reader may be struck by Motion's recurring interpretation of imagination as a power for compensation: for creating alternative or parallel universes in the poems where the difficulties of life can be confronted, as in a kind of projection, in "a way of achieving control of experience through explanation. (...) When he began writing poetry, he devised strategies for making it seem a parallel universe in which loss and gain could both be examined with equal clarity. The half-real, half-statuesque existence of his mythical figures allows this, and so do characters such as Porphyro, Madeline, Isabella, Lamia and Lycius in his narrative poems. Part familiar and part allegorical, they prove their breathing humanity while insisting they are deliberately created things" (p.

41). When he refers back to the Chapman sonnet, Motion writes that Keats's feelings of exclusion "prompted him to create an imaginative substitute for what he had been denied" (p. 404). With this theory Motion does not imply an escapist attitude: his book is dedicated to the exploration of the social and psychoanalytical context of this poetry, and, after all, it gives enlightening examples of the transfiguration of these stimuli. For instance, "the traumatic, broken shape of Keats's relationship with his mother – losing her first to Rawlings [her second husband – K.P.], then recovering her, then losing her again to death – created a pattern of possession and abandonment which runs throughout his poems" (p. 42). However, it is difficult to reconcile his theory of visionary alternatives with Keats's faith in the power of imagination not to compensate but to transcend time and the self. I raise these objections not only because Motion's language is overloaded with notions implying a rather consciously devised, possessable and workable construction at its best (e.g. invent, devise strategies, examine, explain), whereas Keats's poetical conceptions are rather worded in the language of passion, inspiration and intensity. (We should recall the axioms from the letters, and the richness of its metaphors, as the only sufficient means to describe the revelation felt by the writer and the reader). But Motion also

seems to avoid Keats's belief that some inconceivable knowledge can be gained through the workings of the imagination, that the spiritual significance of experience can be constituted in this way, something finally life-affirming and life-enriching against all indicative urge to escape into an alternative reality.

While reading the biography, a short passage from the letters kept lurking in my mind. Written to his brother George in December 1818, these lines read like a piece of admonition: the reality and intensity of our experience, he seems to say, depends on our ability to live in two worlds: both in that of historical reality and that of the creative imagination. The leisurely elegance of the sentences as they keep winding express the duality and interplay: each world gains its significance through the existence of the other: "recollect that no Man can live but in one society at a time – his enjoyment in the different states of human society must depend upon the Powers of his Mind – that is you can imagine a roman triumph, or an olympic game as well as I can. We with our bodily eyes see but the fashion and manners of one country for one age – and then we die. Now to me manners and customs long since passed whether among the Babylonians or the Bactrians are as real, or even more real than those among which now I live.