

1. Rhodes, *The Power of Eloquence and English Renaissance Literature* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992), p. viii.

2. Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977), p. 13. Quoted in Rhodes, *The Power of Eloquence*, p. 51.

3. Nashe is linked to Shakespeare in Rhodes's book *Elizabethan Grotesque* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

4. Juliet Fleming in her review essay has criticised Rhodes for misreading Derrida; see "An Apology for Reading," *Modern Philology* 104.2 (November 2006) 229–38.

5. See for instance Ralph Berry in the *Contemporary Review*, 286/1671 (April 2005) 245–6; Russ McDonald in the *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 57/3 (Fall 2006), 351–4; John Lee in *Modern Language Review* 101/3 (July 2006) 822–4.

6. See *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print*, ed. Rhodes and Sawdy (London: Routledge, 2000), or a brilliant recent article on how Marshall McLuhan's doctoral dissertation on Thomas Nashe fed into his later and more well-known writings: "On Speech, Print, and New Media: Thomas Nashe and Marshall McLuhan," in *Oral Tradition* 24.2 (October 2009). Cf. Rhodes, "Mapping Shakespeare's Contexts: Doing Things With Databases," in Andrew Murphy ed., *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare and the Text* (Blackwell, 2007), 204–220.

7. Rhodes uses this phrase to describe *The Sonnets*, but it seems expressive of his general view of Shakespeare's textual universe.

8. S. T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. Nigel Leask (London: J. M. Dent & Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1997), p. 190.

9. Klaus Dockhorn has discussed the comparable sequence of "passions, characters, incidents" as well as the concept of "circumstances" in Wordsworth's writings in the

context of classical rhetoric in "Wordsworth and the Rhetorical Tradition in England" (1944), trans. Heidi I. Saur-Stull, in Don H. Bialostosky and Lawrence C. Needham ed., *Rhetorical Traditions and British Romantic Literature* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995), 265–280, p. 270.

Keats Posthumously Personalized

Stanley Plumly, *Posthumous Keats: A Personal Biography* (New York & London: W. W. Norton, 2008)

"A Man's Life of any worth is a continual allegory – and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life," wrote Keats to his brother George in the spring of 1819.¹ Stanley Plumly's magnificent book, pursuing the mystery of how the poet's immortality is achieved, is perhaps more respectful of what Keats worded as the figurative aspect of one's life than any other biography. The essays, though rich in suggestions, admit again and again the need to be able to remain in uncertainties about how much we can know. Plumly's speculations about the importance and rich ambiguities of the images of mist and veiling in Keats's poetry are brilliant in this respect. Commenting on passages from *Endymion*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, "To Autumn," and the letters, Plumly writes that air is the medium of transformation and disappearance for Keats, the means of "erasure, chameleon

adaptation, anonymity, mystery, spirit, the veil, the mist, himself absorbed” (302). Yet it entails the promise of something transformed – a life mysteriously preserved, veiled and to be revealed, in the words of the poems.

Posthumous Keats reconfigures traditional biographies (such as, for instance, the famous Keats biographies of the 1960s written by Walter Jackson Bate, Aileen Ward, and Robert Gittings) by leaving behind the need for narrative and linearity. Plumly is pursuing “connections and crossovers,” thus the chapters move around key ideas in a circular and essayistic fashion, often using an emblematic scene or image as central (15). This yields an occasionally anecdotal, but highly insightful and truly elegantly written book: a personal biography, which reveals its author as a keen and thorough researcher as well as a poet endowed with a Keats-like sympathetic imagination.

The central idea Plumly’s book sets out to investigate is how the immortality of Keats’s poetry is necessarily bound up with his mortality, his tragic early death – a biographical fact that has all too often been emphasized, yet, Plumly claims, cannot be neglected. The immortality of Keats’s poetry and fame is achieved against all odds and, to use Severn’s great phrase, in spite of the “intellectual lottery” of the afterlife (361). Plumly follows the ups and downs of this afterlife from the moment Keats died and was buried in the

little Protestant Cemetery surrounded by green pastures with grazing sheep. He discusses the friends’ disputes about a more proper monument and epitaph, the planned and postponed memoirs and biographies, the idealizing images of the abundant posthumous portraits, the fate of the Keats house in Rome and of the letters written to Fanny Brawne. All of the commemorating gestures of the friends and admirers tend to the immortality of the poet’s fame; yet nothing can bring about “the fragile, lucky, deferred thing that immortality is” more than the words of the poems, “scraps of words written in fire” (362–4).

Plumly’s nice metaphor of words written in fire hopes to explain their survival. Yet, as he notes, not only Keats’s name but also his reputation looked as though written on water in the decades-long shadowy aftermath of his death. At the worst, John Taylor, his publisher and benefactor, sold the copyright to the poems and unpublished manuscripts in 1845 for almost nothing. By this time Keats’s work was effectively out of print in England. As for a written account of the poet’s life, which was so absent during those decades, all the members of the Keats circle planned to write their biographies, memoirs, or monographs, including, among others, George Keats, the early mentor Leigh Hunt, the friend and surrogate brother Charles Brown, and Joseph Severn, who was the only witness to Keats’s last months. Their

quarrels show that each of the potential biographers claimed to know the real Keats, while, as Plumly poignantly remarks, none of the friends was a direct and complete witness to Keats's entire life, his maturation, and his growth as a poet. Although each of them left at least notes and fragmentary comments behind, as well as letters and other memorabilia, in reality they all had to die (except for Severn) before Keats's work in context with his death, and with due narrative perspective and insight, could be addressed. As is probably true in most cases of biographies, an impartial – and in time removed – outsider is needed to collect and arrange the various sources. Richard Monckton Milnes will become that collector and “arbiter of value” - his *Life and Letters of Keats* published in 1848. Ironically, he will also become the biographer of the Keats circle, underscoring the fact that our knowledge of Keats relies so much on his letters to the friends and, in turn, on their views, however fragmentary they are.

One of the strengths of *Posthumous Keats* is that it reconstructs points of view and offers historical insight through the gathering of actual material sources. The well-chosen initial chapter, for instance, follows the history of the portraiture of Keats and gives incisive comments about the numerous portraits, engravings, busts, and copies of these that wish to resurrect Keats's face and presence after his death. Plumly finds that most of them have a

“palpable design” for the viewer: they make Keats either into an overly sensitive, effeminate poet, the victim of unfavorable reviews, or an ideal handsome poet “no mere mortal harm can come to” (43). An imposed a staged image of what a poet should look like also appears; such is the case with Severn's official portrait of the contemplative young poet seated by a window, with Shakespeare's portrait hanging above his head. Most of the portraits seem to lack any knowledge of the real Keats and, masking their uncertainty about his reputation, draw the myth instead. Plumly convincingly argues that only a few of them convey the living presence of the poet: Brown's pencil sketch of Keats's face from the summer of 1819, the poet's profile on Haydon's wall painting “Christ's entry into Jerusalem,” and the deathbed drawing by Severn. These are mostly sketches, drawn spontaneously, but therefore capture better the exceptional intensity of the living Keats. It is a pity that no illustrations accompany Plumly's commentary; the reader has to resort either to other sources or to the small reproductions of the most important portraits at the chapter headings.

With *Posthumous Keats* we gain a fellow poet's insight, rich in sympathetic identification with the young Keats, and bold in its leaps to connect biographical facts to their larger significances for Keats's poetry. One of the bold leaps is when Plumly writes that the intense creativity of Keats's living

year stems from having nursed Tom and witnessed his death: “he becomes that central quality of imagination we call inspiration, a grief figure that again and again needs to be addressed, reinvoked, reconciled . . . as an enlarging emblem, a motivating measure, a rich resource of loss to which – to paraphrase Wordsworth – the poet repairs as to a fountain” (114). Tom’s death will become transformative, but, as Plumly suggests, it will also signal for Keats that the slow process of death by increments – a fact about the lingering condition of consumption – has begun for him as well.

The essayistic biography is interspersed with brief but perceptive and beautifully written commentaries on the poems. In a masterly reading of the “overbrimmed” descriptions of the ode “To Autumn” and “Ode to a Nightingale” Plumly makes the important claim that the moments of immense richness still to be enjoyed as if suspended and extended beyond their proper bounds are some of the most characteristic moments of Keats’s poetry. In Keats’s poems it is difficult to choose between the falling dusk and the fallen day as “the richest moment of lost time” (344). Moreover, Plumly notes that the modernity of Keats’s poetry lies in its ability to re-write the lyric poem as an independent entity outside the self. The odes and the best passages of the Hyperion poems emphasize a necessary distance between the poem and the poet: the sublimity of

the poem becomes “something other than the ‘egotistical sublime’ of the poet” (353).

Keats hoped to be “among the English poets,” but as his life was wearing away, he gave up that hope, regardless of the greatness of the poetry he had already written. If “posthumous” can mean life after the death of the promise, Plumly speculates, we might date the start of Keats’s posthumous existence well before the letter to Charles Brown in November 1820, in which he writes about his “habitual feeling of my real life having past” (*Letters*, p. 398). His posthumous life might have begun after the last great lines of the *The Fall of Hyperion* and the last ode, written in the autumn of 1819. For Plumly the ode “To Autumn” is therefore emblematic: the slow process of wearing away, he writes, begins with this poem of farewells and suspended endings, where the poet completely disappears into the poem. Yet, if mortality is the most important subject of Keats’s mature poetry, its promise is the eternity of art: “If poetry – Keats is saying – is finally about the flesh vanishing, disappearing, turning cold . . . it is also, in its afterlife, about the word as spirit, aspirant on the air, invisible, articulate, available” (347).

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Note

1. All parenthesized references to the letters are to this edition: Robert Gittings ed., *Letters of John Keats* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 218.