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Keats and 'Nehemiah Muggs'

ALTHOUGH Keats left no formal literary criticism, the critical acumen displayed in his letters is well known, and it is not surprising that his services as reader and critic were occasionally put in requisition by his friends. Early in 1818, Horace Smith,¹ who had made his acquaintance at Leigh Hunt's in 1816, apparently wishing to avail himself of Keats's opinion, submitted to him the manuscript of a long anti-Methodist poem he had written entitled 'Nehemiah Muggs.'² Keats wrote to his brothers about the poem in a letter of 14 February 1818: 'Horace Smith has lent me his manuscript called "Nehemiah Muggs, an exposure of the Methodists" perhaps I may send a few extracts.'³ And five days later he wrote to Smith: 'I am being greatly amused with your Poem — it has a full leaven of Wit and imaginative fun. I thank you for it . . .'⁴

The original of Keats's letter to his brothers, with or without extracts from 'Nehemiah Muggs,' is not now known, but Jeffrey transcripts of the letter and of fifty-four lines of extracts are in the Harvard College Library,⁵ and a note by Jeffrey at the head of his transcript of the extracts states that they were duly enclosed with the letter of February 14. The letter, in its Jeffrey transcript, has long been in print, but of the extracts only eight lines have hitherto been published,

¹ Horatio — or Horace — Smith (1779-1849) is remembered today for his share with his brother James in the *Rejected Addresses*, but he was once a popular novelist, and produced a large quantity of light verse as well. He wrote several plays and in addition contributed frequently to such periodicals as the *London* and *New Monthly Magazines*. Several letters of Smith to Henry Colburn, publisher of the *New Monthly*, were printed by Professor Hyder Rollins in the *HARVARD LIBRARY BULLETIN*, III (1949), 359-370.

² 'Nehemiah Muggs' was not Smith's first anti-Methodist poem. In *Horace in London* (London, 1813), a series of imitations of Horace's odes by Smith and his brother James, Book I, Ode VIII (pp. 37-39), is entitled 'To Huntingdon, the Preacher,' and is strongly anti-Methodist. The piece first appeared in the *Monthly Mirror*, n. s., VI (1809), 295-296, under the title 'To Rowland Hill.'

³ *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. M. Buxton Forman, 4th ed. (London, 1952), p. 100.

⁴ *Letters*, p. 104.

⁵ These Jeffrey transcripts came to Harvard in 1941 in the collection of the Marquess of Crewe acquired by Arthur A. Houghton, Jr, and now form part of the Keats Collection in the Houghton Library.

along with other portions of Smith's poem in the *London Magazine*.⁶ The extracts are printed herewith in full, for their value to Keatsian studies.⁷

The choice of passages is interesting as an expression of Keats's individual taste and of his attitude towards Methodism, but even a brief survey of the anti-Methodist currents in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries makes clear to what a considerable extent he shared the views of writers preceding and contemporary with him. It will be helpful, therefore, before we turn to the extracts themselves, to glance back at the tradition to which 'Nehemiah Muggs' belongs and see what surrounding influences may have affected Keats's attitude towards the poem.

Methodism was the object of satire — both in verse and prose — almost from the moment of its inception.⁸ The attack was many-sided, coming mainly from the divines of the Established Church. Their assault was in truth more of a defense, by which they sought to uphold the conventional, conservative Anglicanism of the time and to preserve the Establishment unchanged. This defense, partly doctrinal, partly Erastian in nature, runs like a thread through the sermons, pamphlets, poems, and plays attacking Methodism. There is a far greater amount of prose than of verse, but a steady and fairly vitriolic succession of poems satirizing Methodism — in one form or branch, or another — appears from the inception of the movement.⁹ In the literature I have examined, certain alleged features of Methodism recur constantly and are exposed to more or less unflagging ridicule. Among these features are enthusiasm, hypocrisy, and ignorance. Enthusiasm

⁶ *London Magazine*, III (February, March, June, 1821), 200-202, 280-282, 648-650. Only 403 lines, including introduction and proem, were printed out of an original nine thousand, resulting in what is little more than a series of excerpts. No mention of Methodism by name was made, but the contemporary reader — perhaps versed in the tradition of satirical attack — probably had little difficulty in identifying what sect was meant. The fragments in the *London Magazine* have remained the only publication of 'Nehemiah Muggs.'

⁷ Permission to publish the extracts has been granted by the Librarian of the Houghton Library.

⁸ See Richard Green, *Anti-Methodist Publications Issued during the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1902), and Curtis H. Cavender, *Catalogue of Works in Refutation of Methodism, from Its Origin in 1729, to the Present Time*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1868).

⁹ See J. Albert Swallow, *Methodism in the Light of the English Literature of the Last Century* (Erlangen, 1895), and Thomas B. Shepherd, *Methodism and the Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1940).

meant any excess of religious fervor or any claim to direct divine inspiration or communication. Under hypocrisy were included saintliness (or pseudo-saintliness), piousness, and sanctimoniousness, all as covers for lechery, tergiversation, and other evils. Ignorance usually referred to the state of the ill-qualified, ill-equipped Methodist preachers, especially the lay preachers — rude mechanics or uneducated tradespeople, or to the condition of their followers. Most of the verse is written in tetrameter couplets and belongs in large part to the Hudibrastic tradition.¹⁰ The language is often coarse; vilification is frequently indulged in; and the tone varies from contemptuous superciliousness to almost hysterical hatred, although now and then the satire is good-natured.

It was in this tradition that Smith wrote.¹¹ Versified attacks on Methodism — although fewer — continued into the first quarter of the nineteenth century. It appears, from his own declaration, that Smith followed in the path of the defenders of established institutions. 'My main object,' he wrote to Edward Du Bois, in sending him 'Nehemiah Muggs' for criticism, 'is a defence of the Established Church against the Sectaries & Evangelical Clergy.'¹² But Smith, a liberal, may simply have been suiting his words to the conservative Whig opinions of his friend Du Bois. After all, he also sent the poem to Leigh Hunt, a thoroughgoing deist.¹³

There is some evidence that Smith was not exactly unfriendly to deism. Benjamin Robert Haydon, the painter, describes a dinner (January 1817) at which Smith, Shelley, Keats, Leigh Hunt, and Thomas Hill were present, and in the course of which Shelley made

¹⁰ See Edward A. Richards, *Hudibras in the Burlesque Tradition* (New York, 1937), pp. 88-91, 95. See also 'Nehemiah Muggs,' *London Magazine*, III, 281, II, 168-169.

¹¹ He seems to have been influenced also in his depiction of low life by such poetry of Burns as 'The Jolly Beggars' and 'Tam O' Shanter.'

¹² From an unpublished autograph letter in the Harvard College Library; quoted with the permission of the Librarian of the Houghton Library. The letter, headed 'Knightsbridge,' can be dated roughly between 1810 and 1818, when Smith resided at Knightsbridge Terrace; see Arthur H. Beavan, *James and Horace Smith* (London, 1899), pp. 122-123, 133. Greater precision is difficult, although I incline to a date about 1816 or 1817. Edward Du Bois was editor of the *Monthly Mirror* 1807-11; see footnotes 2, 14, 25.

¹³ See Luther A. Brewer, *My Leigh Hunt Library* (Cedar Rapids and Iowa City, Ia., 1932-38), II, 119, letter of Smith to Hunt, presumably dated 1817 or 1818.

a violent attack upon Christianity.¹⁴ He was soon joined in the assault by Hunt, and while Haydon held them both at bay 'neither Smith, Keats or Hill said a word.' Yet Haydon viewed all present as deists except himself. Be that as it may, Smith might well have been sounding out various possible reactions to 'Nehemiah Muggs' by sending the poem to Du Bois on the one hand and to Hunt on the other, although apparently his primary object in both cases was to obtain the benefits of a revising hand. As a matter of fact, however, both conservative Anglican and liberal deist united in a dislike of Methodism. Smith's poem was equally safe with Du Bois, with Hunt — and with Keats.

Keats shared in the general attitude of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and other great writers of his time towards Evangelicalism, and doubtless for him — as for them — the Methodists were the most widespread and powerful group in the Evangelical movement.¹⁵ It was not only the religious aspects of Evangelicalism, the narrowness and fanaticism,¹⁶ but the political and intellectual reactionism that aroused his opposition.¹⁷ The Evangelicals, especially the sterner kind, opposed all non-religious literature root and branch, and it was only natural that authors who refused to bow to their dictation should oppose them and, in turn, be attacked by them.¹⁸ Keats's references to Methodism in

¹⁴ *The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats*, ed. H. Buxton Forman (London, 1883), IV, 349-351. Thomas Hill (1760-1840) was a literary patron, bibliophile, gossip, and proprietor of the *Monthly Mirror* 1795-1811.

¹⁵ Sydney Smith, in reviewing Robert A. Ingram's *The Cause of the Increase of Methodism and Dissension* (London, 1807), remarks: 'We shall use the general term of Methodism, to designate these three classes of fanatics [namely, Arminian and Calvinistic Methodists and Evangelical clergymen of the Church of England], not troubling ourselves to point out the finer shades, and nicer discriminations of lunacy, but treating them all as in one general conspiracy against common sense, and rational orthodox christianity' (*Edinburgh Review*, XI, 1808, 341-342).

¹⁶ For an excellent general discussion of important aspects of the moral and religious climate with which Keats was confronted, see Maurice J. Quinlan, *Victorian Prelude: A History of English Manners 1700-1830* (New York, 1941).

¹⁷ For some of the attitudes to which Keats objected see William S. Ward, 'Some Aspects of the Conservative Attitude toward Poetry in English Criticism, 1798-1820,' *PMLA*, LX (1945), 386-398; and also Newman I. White, *The Unextinguished Hearth: Shelley and His Contemporary Critics* (Durham, N. C., 1938), pp. 7-17.

¹⁸ As Philip A. Child, in his unpublished doctoral dissertation, 'Evangelicalism and English Literature 1798-1830: A Study in Literary, Religious, and Social Interrelations' (Harvard, 1928), p. 56, writes: 'The great writers of the period misunderstood the religious and moral significance of Evangelicalism; but there was real ground for their fear of the effects it might have on the state of literature.' While the growing Puritanism of the age had a salutary effect on manners and morals, it laid a heavy

his letters are for the most part either unfriendly or satirical, although he is not violent; he mentions the sect, directly or indirectly, at least thirteen times.¹⁹ His attitude may have developed independently, at least in part,²⁰ but he was probably influenced most forcefully in his thinking on this matter by Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt.²¹

An essay by Hazlitt on the causes of Methodism appeared in the *Examiner* for 22 October 1815, and was reprinted in *The Round Table*, 1817.²² Hazlitt's tone is scornful, and he defines Methodism as 'religion with its slobbering-bib and go-cart.'²³ In another *Examiner* essay, 'Character of the Country People,' published 18 July 1819, he writes: 'The missionaries and fanatics sometimes indeed set up a methodist chapel, where the staid inhabitants go in an evening to spite the parson of the parish, or to while away an hour or so; perhaps a melancholy mechanic has a serious call and holds forth, or a pining spinster, moved by the spirit to listen to him . . . but the younger and healthier sort make a sport of it as of any other fantastical innovation; throw owls and skeletons of kites and carrion crows into the place of worship; and make a violent noise all the time the parson is preaching, to drown the nasal twang of evangelical glad-tidings, and the comfortable groans of the faithful. — All this while there is no end of the bastard-getting and swearing . . .'²⁴

Hunt's opposition was larger in scope. He opened his attack in 1808

hand on the freedom of the artist. And literary men, recognizing the burgeoning power of the Evangelicals, recognized also their hostility to literature. As the Evangelical movement spread, the leading writers of the era became sharper in their opposition. 'Southey, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron, Hunt, Hazlitt, De Quincey, Landor, Sydney Smith, Cobbett, and others,' Child declares (pp. 57-58), 'inveighed against Evangelicalism (lumping all sects under the term "Methodist"), with greater or less severity.' Quotations are made with the permission of Professor Child.

¹⁹ *Letters*, pp. 100, 104, 109, 129, 186, 326, 386, 402, 426, 444, 465, 477, 489.

²⁰ Unfriendly reviews such as that in the *Eclectic Review*, n. s., VIII (1817), 267, may possibly have affected him.

²¹ Charles Brown's influence should probably not be overlooked. Chatterton (see *The Works of Thomas Chatterton*, ed. Robert Southey and Joseph Cottle, London, 1803, I, 7-10, 109-112, 122-123, 326-334), Goldsmith (see *The Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, ed. J. W. M. Gibbs, London, 1884-86, II, 226, III, 399-402), and other eighteenth-century figures whom Keats admired may also have influenced him.

²² Keats was a faithful reader of the *Examiner* and had read *The Round Table* also.

²³ *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. Percival P. Howe (London, 1930-34), IV, 58.

²⁴ *Complete Works of Hazlitt*, XVII, 71.

with a series of seven essays in the *Examiner*, entitled 'An Attempt to Shew the Folly and Danger of Methodism,' later gathered into a book.²⁵ The titles of some of the essays may serve to indicate the nature of his attempt. The first is 'On the Ignorance and Vulgarity of the Methodists,' the fifth 'On the Melancholy and Bigotry of the Methodists,' and the sixth 'On the Indecencies and Profane Raptures of Methodism.' He declares that Methodist preachers are 'vulgar and vehement,' and that 'a melancholy barber has nothing to do but to receive the *new light*, and he instantly begins to "shine before men."'²⁶ Hunt returned to the subject at various intervals over the next decade: in 1812, in 1815, and in 1819, he makes hostile references to Methodism.²⁷ But the attack on Methodism was only one aspect of Hunt's general attitude towards organized Christianity, an attitude shared in part by Keats.²⁸

Keats's distrust and dislike of established religion and its clergy are evident in his letters and poetry;²⁹ his reaction to 'Nehemiah Muggs' and his selection of passages from it confirm his similarly unfriendly feelings towards Methodism, or more broadly Evangelicalism. The extracts he made for his brothers, preserved in Jeffrey's transcript, are written in ink on the verso and recto of two loose sheets, measuring roughly 7½ by 12½ inches, one ruled, the other unruled. The extracts are reproduced herewith, according to the arrangement of the transcript; the comments within parentheses are Jeffrey's.

(The following Extracts from Horace Smith's Manuscript are on a loose sheet enclosed in the previous letter of date Hampstead — February 16th —)³⁰

²⁵ *Examiner*, 8 May–25 December 1808; *An Attempt to Shew the Folly and Danger of Methodism* (London, 1809). A long and favorable review of the book appeared in the *Monthly Mirror*, n. s., VII (1810), 275–284.

²⁶ *Examiner*, 8 May 1808, pp. 302, 301.

²⁷ *Examiner*, 3 May 1812, 5 November 1815, 8 August 1819.

²⁸ Haydon wrote: 'He had a tending to religion when first I knew him, but Leigh Hunt soon forced it from his mind' (*Benjamin Robert Haydon: Correspondence and Table Talk*, ed. Frederic W. Haydon, London, 1876, II, 71). As usual, Haydon oversimplifies and exaggerates, but there is probably a good deal of truth in his assertion. See, for example, Keats's approval of Hunt's 'Battering Ram against Christianity' (*Letters*, p. 23).

²⁹ As instances see *Letters*, pp. 300, 311–312, and the sonnet 'Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition' (*The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. W. Garrod, Oxford, 1939, p. 530).

³⁰ Jeffrey's date should be February 14.

Poem. Nehemiah Muggs — An Exposure of the Methodists —

Muggs had long wished to be a father
 And told his wish without succeeding
 At length Rose brought him two together
 And there I think she show'd her breeding

Behold them in the Holy place
 With others all agog for Grace
 Where a perspiring preacher vexes
 Sundry old women of both sexes

Thumping as though his zeal were pushing
 To make a convert of the cushion

But in their hurry to proceed
 Each reached the door at the same minute
 Where as the[y] scuffled for the lead
 Both struggling stuck together in it

Shouting rampant amorous hymns
 Under pretext of singing Psalms

He shudder'd & withdrew his eye
 Perkd up his head some inches higher
 Drew his chair nearer to the fire
 And hummed as if he would have said
 Pooh! Nonsense! damme! 'who's afraid'³¹
 Or sought by bustling up his frame
 To make his courage do the same
 Thus would some blushing trembling Elves
 Conceal their terrors from themselves
 By their own cheering wax the bolder
 And pat themselves upon the shoulder

A Saints' a sort of human Mill
 That labours when the body's still
 And gathers grist with inward groans
 And creaking melancholy moans
 By waving heavenward o'er his head
 His arms & working them for bread

³¹ Keats may have been echoing this line when, in writing to his brothers of Hunt's and Shelley's attitude over his failure to consult them on *Endymion*, he exclaimed: 'But who's afraid? Ay! Tom! demme if I am' (*Letters*, p. 87).

Is it that addled brains perchance
 When the skull's dark with ignorance
 Like rotten eggs surveyed at night
 Emit a temporary light?
 Or is that a heated brain
 When it is rubbed against the grain
 Like a cats' back though black as charcoal
 Will in the gloom appear to sparkle

New Missions sent

To make the Antipodes relent
 Turn the Anthropophagetic race
 To suckling lambs & babes of grace
 Or tempt the hairy Hebrew rogues
 To cut their beards & Synagogues

This grave advertisement was seen
 "Wanted a serious Shopman, who
 To Gospel principles is true
 Whose voice for Hymns is not too gruff
 Who can grind brick dust, mix up snuff
 And has an undisputed nack in
 Fearing the Lord & making Blacking

(The above in all probability is published but they are copied to show John Keats choice in the selection of Extracts)

As we have seen, only eight of the fifty-four lines quoted by Keats afterwards appeared in the *London Magazine*. These are the group beginning 'Is it that addled brains perchance.' The passages chosen by Keats are all sharply critical of specific aspects of Evangelical or Methodist behavior. A comparison with the published verses makes it apparent that Smith was at pains to lessen the crudity and harshness of the impact of his original composition. Yet he dared to retain a patent attack upon the Society for the Suppression of Vice.

If Keats's choice of passages from 'Nehemiah Muggs' indicates a sympathy with the eighteenth century's distrust of religious enthusiasm, his remark on the poem's humor also reveals his kinship with the preceding century. 'Nehemiah Muggs,' he wrote, has 'a full leven of Wit and imaginative fun,' and it seems reasonable to conclude that he sincerely felt that the lines he excerpted displayed these qualities. The

humor of these lines is rough, coarse, even crude, but it is at the same time vigorous, sharp, and broadly farcical. Keats's own sense of humor covered a wide range. It could be delicate and playful as in 'Lines on the Mermaid Tavern,' it could be bitter as in *Lamia*, it could be wry and ironical as in many of the letters, but it could also be very broad as in 'Over the Hill and over the Dale,'³² or in his story of the pregnant woman.³³ He had a decided taste for rough fun, burlesque, and stinging sarcastic satire. It would not be an exaggeration, I think, to say that, in spite of the fact that he shared the love of his period for punning, his sense of humor is predominantly of the eighteenth century in tone, and that Swift, Fielding, Smollett, and Sterne are among the comic writers he most highly regarded. The excerpts from 'Nehemiah Muggs' are important for the further evidence they provide of the pervasive influence of the eighteenth century not only on Keats's religious views but on his perception and judgment of what is comic in life and art.

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³² *Poetical Works*, ed. Garrod, pp. 486-487.

³³ *Letters*, pp. 444-445.

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