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Emerson's Keats

Helen E. Haworth

IN his journal entry for 30 November 1839, Emerson quotes six passages from Keats: two lines from "The Eve of St. Agnes," "and scarce three steps ere Music's golden tongue / Flattered to tears that aged man and poor" (ll.20-21); and five excerpts from "Hyperion": "As when upon a tranced summer night," (I, 72-78); "As Heaven & Earth are fairer, — fairer far, — . . ." (II, 206-215); ". . . for tis the eternal law / That first in beauty should be first in might" (II, 228-229); "One avenue was shaded from thine eyes" (II, 186-187); "So Saturn as he walked into their midst . . ." (II, 105-109).¹ The footnote to the quotation from "The Eve of St. Agnes" in the Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes's edition of Emerson's journals says that "Mr. Emerson loved to repeat these lines, as also the Saturn passages given in the text."²

Emerson continued to like "Hyperion" and to quote from it throughout his life. Some five months after this journal entry, Margaret Fuller wrote him, "I see Shelley in his letter to Gifford makes the same distinction in favor of Keats's Hyperion over his other works that you did."³ In a journal dated 1841, Emerson carefully copied on the flyleaf two lines which he had previously quoted from "Hyperion" and which he obviously thought an appropriate motto for his own endeavors:

One avenue was shaded from thine eyes
Through which I wandered to eternal truth;

¹ Emerson's notebooks and journals are in the Houghton Library, Harvard University. Where possible, I quote from *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. William H. Gilman, et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1960-). Otherwise, I quote my own transcriptions from Emerson's journals and notebooks by permission of the Harvard College Library. I wish especially to acknowledge the help of Miss Carolyn Jakeman in locating Emerson and Keats materials.

² *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston and New York, 1911), V, 346. They print only these two passages, omit the two lines on "eternal law," and note the beginning of the three other passages.

³ *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Ralph L. Rusk (New York, 1939), II, 291.

and later in this journal he repeats the five-line description of Saturn and Enceladus.⁴ In his own copy of Keats's poems,⁵ Emerson has carefully pencilled page and subject references to his favorite excerpts on the back inside cover:

214	Music
235	utterance
251	Enceladus
254	Beauty

"Music" refers to the passage from "The Eve of St. Agnes" quoted above; "Enceladus" and "Beauty" to two of the passages from "Hyperion" quoted in the 1839 journal entry (II, 105-109 and II, 206-215); and "utterance" to yet another passage in "Hyperion" (I, 47-51). In fact, all of the passages which Emerson had copied in his journal, with the exception of the beautiful description of trees beginning "As when upon a tranced summer night" (I, 72-78), are marked in the margins of this book. Since this particular edition of Keats's poems bears the publication date of 1854, Emerson was manifestly marking passages with which he had long been acquainted and which he wished to locate readily.

Emerson's references to Keats fall into two clusters — the years around 1840 and the period 1868-1874. An early entry in the journal for 1868-70 is especially instructive for both Emerson's view on the values offered by Keats's poetry, and the principles by which he made his selections for *Parnassus*, the anthology which he published in 1875.

A new poet dazzles us with his lustres, the sparkle of new rhetoric, with his gay vocabulary, shop-new, and it takes some time to see him truly. But I wish to say to him that I like only the important passages. Thus if I read in a newspaper Keats's line,

"In the large utterance of the early Gods,"

or Shakspeare's

"Make mouths at the invisible event,"

or Tennyson's

"The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls,"

.....

I should keep the paper, or transcribe the passage. I require that the poem should impress me so that it must recall me, or that passages should. And

⁴"H," Houghton 40 (1841), flyleaf and p. 3.

⁵*The Poetical Works of John Keats. With a Life.* (Boston, etc., 1854). This volume is also in the Houghton Library.

inestimable is the criticism of Memory as a corrective. We are dazzled, I say, by the new words, & brilliancy of color which occupies the fancy & deceives the judgment, but all this is easily forgotten. later, the thought, the happy image which expressed it, & which was a true experience of the Poet, recurs to mind, and sends me back in search of the book. the poet should foresee this habit of readers, & omit all but the important passages.⁶

One could wish that the last statement were facetious! But when Emerson did publish *Parnassus*, he gave his readers what he called "gems of pure lustre," brief passages from many poets, under classifications such as "Nature," "Contemplative," "Moral," "Religious," "Heroic."⁷

And if Emerson valued Keats and other poets only in "important passages," his concept of the particular values of Keats's poetry seems equally odd. In the journal for 1868-70 he noted that the lyrics of Beaumont and Fletcher, Ben Jonson, Waller, etc., along with "certain lines" in "Hyperion," belonged to a vanished age in poetry: "This kind of poetry is not producible now, any more than a right Gothic cathedral. It belonged to a time & taste that is not in the world."⁸ Exactly what Emerson meant by "this kind of poetry" was clarified when he published this passage in "Poetry and Imagination" in 1875, where it becomes "this *dainty* style of poetry" (italics mine).⁹ "Hyperion?" we might ask.

However inadequately he may have seemed to understand the virtues of "Hyperion," Emerson continued to prefer it. In a long list of extracts to be included in *Parnassus*, he noted to himself: "Be sure to insert the good lines of Keats (Endymion) Hyperion."¹⁰ The initial citation of *Endymion* is interesting, for his dislike of that poem is well known. In 1868, he wrote that "Keats *had* poetic genius, though I could well spare the whole Endymion"¹¹ — an assertion that receives wry confirmation when one notes the uncut pages in Book

⁶ "NY," Houghton 84 (1868-70), pp. 33-35.

⁷ *Parnassus*, ed. Ralph Waldo Emerson (Boston, 1875), p. iii.

⁸ "NY," Houghton 84 (1868-70), p. 61.

⁹ *Letters and Social Aims*, vol. VIII, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston and New York, 1904), 65. I have assumed that the "dainty" is Emerson's own addition, despite J. E. Cabot's account of how this particular book was put together. Mr. Cabot assures us that "There is nothing here that he did not write . . . but I cannot say that he applied his mind very closely to the matter" ("Preface to First Edition," p. xiii).

¹⁰ "ST," Houghton 85 (1870-1875), p. 148.

¹¹ *Letters*, VI, 19.

IV of his copy of Keats's poetry. It is not surprising to discover that three of the six extracts from Keats in *Parnassus* are from "Hyperion": "As Heaven and Earth are fairer far" (p. 143), the passage he had called "utterance" and now calls "Thea" — improbably classified under "Poetry of Terror"! (p. 509), and the passage formerly called "Enceladus" and now called "Saturn" (p. 518), or even that he identified the lines on music from "The Eve of St. Agnes" (p. 128) as being from "Hyperion" (Index of Authors, p. xxxiii). Since he also included "Sonnet: On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (p. 94) and stanza 7 of "Ode to a Nightingale" — "Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird" (pp. 34-35), he at least added variety to his collection of Keatsian favorites.

The passages from Keats which Emerson quotes and marks are remarkably similar in style and content. Through careful selection, he may be said to have created his own Keats.¹² And although in his direct statements about Keats he normally emphasizes Keats's mastery of imagery and style, a careful examination of the subject matter of his selections, and of the context in which he quotes Keats, can show us the further values he found in Keats's poetry. In the lead essay, "Thoughts on Modern Literature," which he published in the second issue of *The Dial*, October 1840 (I, 137-158), he states that the two dominant trends of modern literature are "subjectivism" and a feeling for the infinite, for the One Mind of which man is a part (I, 148). The ideas on subjectivism were originally developed in the journal entry for 11 December 1839, immediately following the quotations from Keats.

We are misled by an ambiguity in the use of the term Subjective. It is made to cover two things, a good & a bad. The great always introduce us to facts; small men introduce us always to themselves. The great, even whilst he relates a private fact personal to him, is really leading us away from him to an universal experience. Their own interest is in Nature, & of course all their communication leads outward to it, starting from whatever point.

.....

¹² As far as I know, Emerson makes only two other direct references and one, probable, indirect reference to Keats in his journals and notebooks. In 1843, he jotted down in an entirely irrelevant context: "Keats a seven months child" ("R," Houghton 45 [1843], p. 107); in 1836 there is an unexplained list of three authors: "Fontenelle, Keats, Allston" (*Journals*, ed. Sealts, V, 233). Sealts conjectures that in the statement "But I alas write my diagrams in Water" in 1835 "Emerson may have been thinking of Keats's request that on his tomb should be engraved the words, 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water'" (V, 84).

But the weak & evil, led also to analyze, saw nothing in thought — but luxury. Thought for the selfish, — became selfish. They invited us to contemplate Nature, and showed us an abominable self.¹³

Emerson scattered sentences from this entry (from which I have quoted about one fifth) throughout the essay on modern literature, and he specifically included Keats among modern poets possessing both subjectivism and aspiration.

Nothing certifies the prevalence of this taste [for the infinite] in the people more than the circulation of the poems, — one would say, most incongruously united by some bookseller, — of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats.¹⁴ The only unity is in the subjectiveness and the aspiration common to the three writers (I, 149-150).

With the possible exception of the excerpts from the Scottish letters published by James Freeman Clarke in the *Western Messenger* in June and July 1836, Emerson could not have known of the poetic ideals expressed in Keats's letters, first published in 1848 by Richard Monckton Milnes.¹⁵ Thus Emerson could not have known the extent to which Keats shared his demand for "good subjectivity" in literature, or that he and Keats recognized, and valued, the same attribute in Shakespeare, a lack of "egotism." Keats, however, viewed all subjectivity as bad, distinguishing only between "the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime" and the "camelion Poet" who "has no Identity," "no self."¹⁶ Emerson's distinction between good and bad subjectivity is both more sophisticated and more useful than Keats's outright condemnation, for it allows him to value that poetry which, unlike

¹³"E," Houghton 37 (1839-42), p. 86.

¹⁴*The Poetical Works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats. Complete in One Volume* (Paris: A. and W. Galignani, 1829). This work was extensively reprinted in the United States. See J. R. MacGillivray, *Keats: A Bibliography and Reference Guide with an Essay on Keats' Reputation* (Toronto, 1949), pp. 8-12; and Hyder Edward Rollins, *Keats' Reputation in America to 1848* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), pp. 26-30.

¹⁵*Life, Letters, and Literary Remains of John Keats*, ed. Richard Monckton Milnes, 2 vols. (London, 1948).

¹⁶See Hyder Edward Rollins, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), I, 387; and "Shakspeare; Or, the Poet," *Representative Men, The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston and New York, 1903), IV, 215. Neither originated the phrase; Hazlitt said of Shakespeare that "He was the least of an egoist that it was possible to be" ("Shakspeare and Milton," *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe [London and Toronto, 1930], V, 47).

Shakespeare's, is non-dramatic, which makes use of the first person and represents personal emotions. Unlike those later critics who thought the English romantic poets indulged in private emotion for its own sake, Emerson knew, as he said in his journal quoted above, that the great writer, "even whilst he relates a private fact personal to him, is really leading us away from him to a universal experience." The Chapman's Homer sonnet, which Emerson included in *Parnassus*, is a supreme example of "good subjectivity": it relates a personal experience in a manner that makes it a universal one, fusing one man's reading of a book with the history of western civilization as simultaneously embodied in humanity's mental and physical explorations.

All of the passages from Keats valued by Emerson possess this "good subjectivity," and many possess the quality of "aspiration" as well. When Emerson copied Oceanus' profession of faith in "Hyperion,"

As Heaven & Earth are fairer, — fairer far, —
Than Chaos & blank Darkness tho' once chiefs;
And as we show beyond that, Heaven & Earth
In form & shape compact & beautiful,
In will, in action free, Companionship,
And thousand other signs of purer life,
So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,
A power more strong in beauty, born of us,
And fated to excel us as we pass
In glory that old Darkness.

.

. . . for tis the eternal law

That first in beauty should be first in might,¹⁷

he must have been as moved by the evolutionary optimism, by Keats's use of the greater beauty of the Olympian gods as a symbol for a higher ethical and spiritual order, as by the massive beauty of the lines themselves.

The significance of this passage in Emerson's thought is emphasized by the fact that it is the first poem he quotes under the section entitled "Contemplative — Moral — Religious" in *Parnassus*. For Emerson too believed that beauty is representative of the ultimate goodness of God's universe:

Beauty, in its largest and profoundest sense, is one expression for the universe. God is the all-fair. Truth, and goodness, and beauty, are but different faces

¹⁷ "L," Houghton 37 (1839-42), p. 85.

of the same All. But beauty in nature is not ultimate. It is the herald of inward and eternal beauty. . . .

For both Keats and Emerson, then, beauty is a symbol that "eternal law" is beneficent. But for Emerson, to complete the quotation above, while beauty is such a symbol, it

is not alone a solid and satisfactory good. It must therefore stand as a part and not as yet the last or highest expression of the final cause of Nature.¹⁸

Emerson may very well have felt that Keats did not go far enough in his statement on the relationship between beauty and eternal law.

For a writer who equates beauty and truth as closely as Emerson does, it is surprising that he makes no mention, as far as I have been able to find out, of the concluding lines from "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The Emerson who could write, "The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the aim of both"¹⁹ could hardly have failed to notice "Beauty is truth, truth beauty."²⁰ After all, Emerson quoted from "Ode to a Nightingale" in *Parnassus* and the two odes are invariably printed in tandem, and were in his copy of Keats's poems. I would suggest that Emerson could not use these lines as a motto, as he did other lines from Keats, for two reasons. First, the real and the other world are firmly opposed throughout the Ode; the "real world" inhabited by the poet and the world of art symbolized by the urn are clearly separate. For Emerson, art, man, and nature are not opposed; rather, art is defined as "nature passed through the alembic of man."²¹ Second, Emerson would not have agreed with the rest of Keats's couplet, "that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know." Emerson accepted no such limitation for man, believing that the individual could not only maintain communication with the Over-Soul but could transform his world. Although Emerson saw Keats as an "aspiring" poet, Keats simply did not aspire enough.

¹⁸ *Nature*, by Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed. Kenneth Walter Cameron (New York, 1940), pp. 30-31.

¹⁹ *Nature*, p. 69.

²⁰ In "Emerson on Plato: The Fire's Center" (*American Literature*, XXXIV [January, 1963], 490-491), Ray Benoit uses Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" to help explain Emerson's mystical synthesis of matter and spirit. While I find the discussion illuminating for both writers, there is no evidence that Emerson read Keats in this way.

²¹ *Nature*, p. 30.

But Keats and Emerson were remarkably close in their program for writers. It is tempting to think that Emerson knew the excerpts from Keats's Scottish letters published by James Freeman Clarke in the *Western Messenger* in June and July 1836. There were both personal and professional relationships between Clarke, a Unitarian minister and editor of the *Western Messenger*, and Emerson. In September 1836 Clarke and Emerson were among the co-founders of the so-called "transcendental club";²² a poem by Clarke follows Emerson's essay on modern literature in *The Dial*;²³ Clarke published several of Emerson's poems in the *Western Messenger* as well as favorable reviews of *Nature* and the Phi Beta Kappa and Divinity School addresses;²⁴ and in the April 1843 issue of *The Dial*, Emerson published a memoir of George Keats by Clarke, followed by Keats's remarks on Milton written on the fly-leaf of his copy of *Paradise Lost*.²⁵ Clarke, who thought that Keats's prose writings were "of a higher order of composition than his poems"²⁶ would probably have brought these letters to Emerson's attention and Emerson, if he read them, must have agreed wholeheartedly with at least some of their sentiments. After meticulously describing the Ambleside waterfall, Keats writes:

What astonishes me more than any thing is the tone, the coloring, the slate, the stone, the moss, the rockweed, or, if I may so say, the intellect, the countenance of such places. The space, the magnitude of mountains and waterfalls are well imagined before one sees them; but this countenance or intellectual tone must surpass every imagination and defy any remembrance. I shall learn poetry here and shall henceforth write more than ever, for the abstract endeavor of being able to add a mite to that mass of beauty which is harvested from these grand materials, by the finest spirits, and put into ethereal existence for the relish of one's fellows. I cannot think with Hazlitt that these scenes make man appear little. I never forgot my stature so completely — I live in the eye; and my imagination, surpassed, is at rest.²⁷

The Emerson who wrote in *Nature*, "I am become a transparent eyeball," would surely have relished that last sentence. Moreover, the

²² *Journals*, V, 194.

²³ "First Crossing the Alleghanies," I (October, 1840), 159-160.

²⁴ "Each and All," VI, 229-230; "To the Humble-Bee," VI, 239-241; "Good-bye, Proud World!" VI, 402; "The Rhodora," VII, 166. *Nature* reviewed, II, 385-393; Phi Beta Kappa Address, IV, 184-188; Divinity School Address, VI, 37-42.

²⁵ III, 495-504.

²⁶ *Western Messenger*, I, 773.

²⁷ *Western Messenger*, I, 776.

Emerson who wrote in his essay on modern literature that the "true end" of the poetry of his own time was to express "an infinite good, alive and beautiful, a life nourished on absolute beatitudes, descending into nature to behold itself reflected there" (I, 149) would again have appreciated Keats's desire "to add a mite to that mass of beauty which is harvested from these grand materials."

Emerson, however, went much further than Keats in his feeling of loss of self in nature.

Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. The name of the dearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental. To be brothers, to be acquaintances, — master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty.²⁸

Keats's experience at Ambleside is certainly not to be compared with this, either in terms of the actual experience or the conclusion to which it leads. Keats would have violently rejected any experience which cut him off from the real world of men and women; in the language of "The Fall of Hyperion" he would have classified Emerson as a "visionary" as opposed to those who "Labour for Mortal good."²⁹ Moreover, Keats makes a very clear distinction between himself and the universe; he is no mystic; he certainly does not believe in an "Over-soul." And as always with Keats, the surrounding scene is concretely felt before he makes any speculative remarks; Emerson exists in a non-concrete world of bare ground, air, and light. Once again, Keats does not "aspire" as much as Emerson. He is too rooted in the phenomenal world, and even in his dedication to poetry will simply "harvest" descriptions of beautiful scenery — a laudable endeavor in Emerson's mind, but not the final end of poetry.

Considering the temperamental and philosophic differences between the two men, each in his own way a "Romantic," it is not surprising that Emerson makes so few references to Keats, or that they focus

²⁸ *Nature*, p. 13.

²⁹ See Canto I, ll. 150-201. Although Keats makes a distinction here between the poet and the dreamer, Emerson, gladly cutting himself off from the real world, would qualify as a "dreamer," who "venoms all his days . . ." (l. 175). See also "Lines Written in the Highlands after a Visit to Burns's Country," where Keats writes that it is "horrible" "to lose the sight of well remember'd face, / Of Brother's eyes, of Sister's brow . . ." (ll. 33-34).

so narrowly on a few poems. What Emerson took from Keats were a few lovely passages which represent the incredible beauty of the natural world and which on occasion express faith in the ultimate goodness and unity of man and nature, man and art, man and his culture. He simply ignored in Keats, even among those poems to which he had access, passages and poems which did not fit into a very limited mold. For these passages which Emerson quoted have one final characteristic: a calm nobility, a dignity, an elevation of expression not always to be found in Keats. The best term for them is "sublime." That they do not do justice to all of Keats is perhaps irrelevant; they obviously represent Emerson's Keats very clearly.

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