KEATS AND THE NOTION OF TRUTH

DENNIS HASKELL

The title of this essay may lead you to expect a deeply philosophical disquisition on the concept of truth. The essence of “truth” is one of the traditional concerns of philosophy, from one point of view is the fundamental concern of philosophy and is intricately linked with questions of being and identity. There is a good deal of philosophical writing on the competing claims of the Coherence Theory of Truth, the Correspondence Theory of Truth, the Idealist Theory of Truth and others. My title may have generated expectations of a discussion about vehicles of truth, truth as disquotation (as W.V. Quine describes it), about predicates and first level predicables, about developments in neurology and a littering of logic tables using Greek or Polish mathematical symbols. These, I am sorry to record, and you are probably relieved to find, I’m not capable of giving. Heidegger said that “The question of truth — even if the answer is not yet forthcoming — already sounds, merely as a question, very presumptuous”. If it may have sounded presumptuous in Heidegger’s hands it certainly would in mine, for I am not a professional philosopher, but a poet and literary critic — so that I take great comfort from statements like that of C.J.F. Williams, Professor of Philosophy at Bristol University, “the results of this enquiry have been pretty baffling”. The justification for my writing comes in the first word of my title, “Keats”, for Keats was even less of a professional philosopher than I am, but like all poets he was implicitly concerned with questions of truth. Unlike most poets he was also often explicitly concerned with the question of truth.

Keats, always aware that he was “not wealthy in the dower / Of

spanning wisdom”, 4 exhibits in letters and poetry a restless, sometimes even feverish, seeking after knowledge. “Truth”, “knowledge” and “wisdom” are, of course, not synonymous; I take it that “knowledge” constitutes awareness of truths but that “wisdom” is something greater, a kind of quality of knowledge, an ability to draw on knowledge in order to make judgements. “Wisdom” seems to suggest extensive knowledge; in one sense this is true but in another exactly the opposite may be the case, partly because innocence has its value and partly because it may take a great knowledge to be aware of ignorance. Keats’s comment about being poor in wisdom comes from the early poem “Sleep and Poetry”, published in his first book, in 1817. In the following lines he makes a claim for a truth possessed despite lack of knowledge:

... though I do not know
The shiftings of the mighty winds that blow
Hither and thither all the changing thoughts
Of man: though no great minister reason sorts
Out the dark mysteries of human souls
To clear conceiving: yet there ever rolls
A vast idea before me, and I glean
Therefrom my liberty; thence too I’ve seen
The end and aim of Poesy.

(ll. 285-93)

In earlier lines we have been told what this aim is: “A drainless shower/ Of light is poesy; ’tis the supreme of power” and its “great end” is to “be a friend/ To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man” (ll. 235-36, 245-47). This is a kind of Keatsian “Defence of Poetry”, in which it may be important to stress an intellectual element in that last clause, lest poetry simply seem to pour a balm out upon the world and never to vex it. This is the ongoing argument in critical discussions of Keats’s poetry — to what extent does Keats’s poetry escape from “the weariness, the fever and the fret” of human life into a realm of beautiful aestheticism and to what extent does Keats’s poetry critique the proclaimed truths of human life? The argument originated in Keats’s lifetime, as a defence against politically motivated attacks on Keats’s work, and is neatly summarized in Nicholas Roe’s “Introduction” to the collection of essays, Keats and

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