SHELLEY’S KEATS

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The title of this essay, “Shelley’s Keats”, could easily have been reversed as “Keats’s Shelley”, since my aim here is to discuss the lifelong intuitive dialogue which took place between the two Romantic poets. That dialogue, despite various interruptions and disagreements, and the infrequency of direct contacts, established a strong mutual influence which may have not affected their intellectual development, but did cast a special light over their poetry. I have drawn attention to this tacit dialogue because I wish to emphasize the extraordinary atmosphere of dialectics and discourse which was set up between the English Romantic poets; it was this that created the climate, the very stuff of their works. Much has already been published about the many long conversations between Wordsworth and Coleridge, their walks together and their fruitful discussions and arguments about the writing of poetry, and also about Byron and Shelley and their friendship. As is made clear in Shelley’s Julian and Maddalo, Byron and Shelley decided during their encounters in Venice (as again later in Pisa) to enter into friendly challenges over the great themes of life and art. One result was the sleepless nights that sorely tried Shelley’s delicate spiritual and physical make-up but enhanced the sanguine constitution and creativity of the author of Don Juan. Much is also known about Leigh Hunt’s “Cockney” circle in Hampstead.¹ Its members — Reynolds, Hazlitt, Haydon, Lamb, Keats, Shelley and others — not only talked to each other. They were also keen to cement friendships while producing writing and aesthetic forms not out of mere rivalry but as if in imitation of a Platonic Symposium, whose true aim was a finished artistic form or a completed pattern. This was an exercise in creativity which made art its arena, but it was also a shared and radical ideology which rooted itself in a process and developed only when nourished by the attention and challenge of the others within the group. In

¹ The sarcastic appellation of “Cockney school” was given to Hunt’s circle by Blackwood’s Magazine in October 1817.
addition, this was where the readings and writings of Shelley were witnessed by a fortunate Mary and where she permeated the judgement of her young companion with her sound opinions. Romantic discourse may not have brought flesh and blood to the poets’ dreams, but it did help them to conceive and give visible expression to their ideas. That wide-ranging dialogue stands as evidence against the ivory tower concept within which much criticism has tried to enclose them; it demonstrates that the Romantics were not blind and deaf to the rush and flurry of the world. Their conversations became transmuted into documents and actions that were able to fill the philosophical abyss which even the youngest poets experienced at moments of political or personal crisis. Through the very process of writing and through close relationships with the lives of their contemporaries and those they admired among their past masters, they discovered both a key to the chaos of the world and the single, unifying principle of their naked mortality. There is also a less obvious reason for considering Keats and Shelley together — the question of how the trajectories of their lives and poetry repeatedly crossed before proceeding onwards separately.

For a long time Shelley and Keats have been compared superficially; their association has been viewed as the ground for wider literary disputes which privileged one or the other poet according to the theoretical mood of the time. Today we can safely repeat what Medwin said of the two poets in his Life of Shelley:

The editor of the Athenaeum has drawn a parallel between Shelley and Keats, a parallel that reminds me of what Goethe says of the controversy between the Germans, respecting the comparative merits of himself and Schiller: and on which he remarks, — “They may think themselves lucky dogs in having two such fellows to dispute about.” —

Following this assumption, let me start with two quotations that are significant, at least in their consequences.

The first is an extract from Keats’s draft preface to Endymion: “One word more .... Should anyone call my attention to Chatterton affected I answer as followeth: ‘Were I dead Sir I should like a book dedicated to

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