WILDE AND KEATS: LA DONNÉE

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Oscar Wilde shared John Keats’s views and feelings on the aesthetic role of poetry to the point that, when his first collection of poems appeared in 1881, most of the reviewers did not fail to notice a sensual and languid idiom “which grows out of a misunderstanding worship of Keats”.¹ Although they stand at the temporal extremes of the nineteenth century, there is no division, intra Keats and Wilde, but continuity; they have much more in common than either of them has with the intervening Victorian versifiers.

M.H. Abrams, in his still valuable The Mirror and the Lamp, examines the four, main critical-theoretical currents prevailing in the early nineteenth century (the “mimetic”, the “pragmatic”, the “expressive” and the “objective”). He writes that poetry, within the “objective” school (where he places Keats), was thought to be a self-sufficient entity, independent of external factors; its aim was not to instruct or give delight but, simply, “to be”, existing in its own “perfect” sphere of reference.²

Abrams selects Keats as its leading exponent because of the poet’s belief in the power of the Imagination which, free from all social and moral constraints, can grasp the ultimate Truth and reach a superior Reality through an analogical and sentient process. This makes him a precursor of what the later Victorians were to call the “fleshly school of poetry” — that “art for art’s sake” movement which was to find in Oscar Wilde, a self-confessed disciple of Keats, its “belated” advocate.

Keats himself had declared, in a famous letter to Benjamin Bailey, that “what the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth — whether it existed before or not — for I have the same idea of all our passions as of


Love; they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty.” It is precisely this aspect of Keats’s poetry that appealed to Wilde, along with its complete abandonment to the flux of fleeting perceptions as they come to be crystallized into a series of sensuous, concrete images.

Keats is frequently recalled (often by name), in Wilde’s early poetry (as in “The Garden of Love”); he is alluded to in “Amor Intellectualis” as he is, again, in “Endymion”, that explicit homage to his literary mentor. He was the one poet to whom Wilde constantly referred while he travelled up and down the northern half of the American continent in 1882, lecturing on what he called “The English Renaissance”, whose spirit, he said, “in Keats it seemed to have been incarnate, and in his lovely ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ it found its most secure and faultless expression”.4

In a letter written while he was still in the United States (in Omaha, Nebraska, dated 21 March 1882), he expressed his most sincere gratitude to Emma Speed for having given him the manuscript of Keats’s “Sonnet on Blue” (“Blue! ’Tis the life of heaven ...”). Emma Speed was the daughter of George Keats, the poet’s younger brother who had emigrated to America in 1818. Wilde had mentioned that particular sonnet in the course of a lecture held at Louisville (in Kentucky), where Keats’s niece was then residing and where, having met the Irish poet, she invited him back to her house to inspect her most precious of family relics.

“It is a sonnet I have loved always”, Wilde wrote to her with typical exuberance, “and indeed who but the supreme poet and perfect artist could have got from a mere colour a motive so full of marvel: and now I am half enamoured of the paper that touched his hand, and the ink that did his bidding”.5 Four years later, in the July issue of the Century Guild Hobby Horse, he wrote a prose article specifically on this sonnet; having the original manuscript in his possession, he could thus compare it not only to the definitive version which Lord Houghton (in his Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats) had published in 1848, but also to the one which A.J. Horwood, unaware of Lord Houghton’s publication, had sent on to the Athenaeum.

In his article, Wilde tried to demonstrate that, of the three, his was the most “primitive” and, as a result, the closest to Keats’s original intentions.

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