

Leigh Hunt and John Keats

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Two things, as Bate has pointed out in his biography of Keats, make it a tricky business to discuss and evaluate influences on Keats's poetry¹. The first is that he was such a "literary" poet. His early poems revolve around the problem of the poetic vocation; he read voraciously; he took as passionate a delight in a fine phrase as a lover greeting his beloved. Such spirited delight would naturally take the form of experimentation by imitation as a writer gropes his way to his own distinctive style. The second difficulty is that Keats died so young. Consequently, when we closely examine his early attempts at poetry, we bring all our powers of scrutiny to bear on pieces which, had he lived, Keats might easily have relegated to oblivion or to the safety of classification as "juvenilia". Forgetting that, critics are likely to observe with regret that Keats embraced so many of Hunt's "unfortunate" techniques, and to judge that those techniques "marred" Keats's early works. Hunt's influence was both personal and technical. It developed from affinities which Keats recognized and, to a certain extent, continued to feel even as his style matured and his enthusiasm for Hunt, both personal and professional, had begun to wane. That Keats so far outstripped his master does not mean that Hunt had nothing to teach him, or that what he taught was mere gaucheries which had to be outgrown. Keats's superiority rests in the degree to which he was able to turn Hunt's influence, and that of other writers, to his own finer uses.

Bate has traced with a great deal of sympathy the various connections between Keats and Hunt.² While at Enfield Academy (1803-1811), Keats became a close friend of Charles Cowden Clarke, eight years his senior, whose father directed the school. The Clarkes subscribed to Leigh Hunt's liberal journal, *The Examiner*. Charles was an enthusiastic supporter of Hunt's liberalism, and shared his passion for politics as well as for Spenser with young Keats, for whom largeness of mind, political liberalism, and poetic vocation seemed to coalesce. In 1812, Hunt and his brother John were successfully prosecuted for libel against the prince Regent and sentenced to two years in jail. Upon Hunt's release (2 Feb., 1815) Keats composed his sonnet "Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison", the first of his poetical efforts which he showed to Clarke. It was the first also of a series of poems inspired or suggested by Keats's experiences with Hunt. In October, 1816, Clarke introduced Keats to Hunt. Keats had by this time read Hunt's poetry and Clarke had shown some of Keats's verses to Hunt. "'T will be an Era in my existence" wrote Keats in anticipation of the visit.³ So in fact it proved to be. Keats, as Bate notes, did not make friends easily, and relied on the interventions of such friends and relations as he had to create new social circles around him. Moving into Hunt's social world expanded his own. He met the

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painter Benjamin Robert, John Hamilton Reynolds, Shelley, and Wordsworth. Though Keats later took a disgust to what became to him mere chatter about literature and art, he nevertheless found at Hunt's a forum for questions of art, at times, a furnace for its creating, as in the spontaneous contests which produced "The Grasshopper and the Cricket" and "On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt." The meeting marked an era in another sense. Keats was then at a critical point in his career. He had obtained certification as a surgeon and apothecary and was just come of legal age to practise. His guardian, Richard Abbey, kept a tight purse string on Keats's inheritance and was pressuring him to devote himself to a "useful" profession. Keats, moreover, who had been testing his poetic capacities during the summer 1816, spent composing at Margate, and was still uncertain of his powers. Hunt, who shared so many of Keats's literary tastes, who had successfully turned out a narrative poem ("The Story of Rimini"), and embodied Keats's political ideals, was an effective answer for Keats to bring to bear in his own mind against Abbey's exhortations and his own doubts. Hunt was unfailingly kind and encouraging, extending to Keats the use of his home; usually generous in his praise, even when he sensed himself outstripped. Hunt brought many of Keats's poems to the public, and acted as his advocate, in the pages of *The Examiner*. Though he was later to devalue Hunt as a "serious" artist, and in fact quarreled with him during his last illness, Keats in his final letters mended the quarrel and expressed his gratitude for the various and substantial kindness Hunt had extended him.

Bate further suggests that, in matters of literary technique, Hunt's influence was also on the whole beneficial. As a model, "he did not inhibit but in fact encouraged fluency," with the added benefit that, as a model, he "could in time be surpassed."⁴ Though he later grew restive at the epithet of "Hunt's eleve,"⁵ Keats was genuinely impressed with Hunt's poetry, and admitted, when discussing a discarded preface to "Endymion", "though I am not aware that there is anything like Hunt in it... if there is, it is my natural way, and I have something in common with Hunt."⁶ For Keats, "the Story of Rimini" had the combined attraction of tradition, being a long narrative romance, and of the briskly new, an old medium made over in a new idiom.⁷ The last was quite important. Hunt set himself up as the Opposition to Toryism in poetry as much as in politics — poetic Toryism being, in this instance, Pope's standards of versification and diction. His attack of those is voiced by Appollo in "The Feast of Poets":

But even since Pope spoiled the ears of the town
With his cuckoo-song verses, half up and half down,
(17-18)

and is echoed by discipline in "Sleep and Poetry"

with a puling infant's force
They sway'd about upon a rocking horse
And thought it Pegasus.

(185-187)

“The Story of Rimini” was built on these new principles. It was the design of the poem as a whole that “languor and sentiment become brisk; they are shown in rapid magic lantern slides with colloquially phrased commentary to accompany them.”⁸ The commentaries are usually banal:

and he knew too,
That sweet was his daughter, and prepared
To do her duty, where appeal was barred,
She had stout notions on the marrying score.
(II, 25–28)

Keats fortunately learned to discard them. But that episodic, or cinematic technique he absorbed and developed, from the sequence of imagined vistas in “I Stood Tip-toe” and the figures of the various poetic mode is “Sleep and Poetry” to the haunting sequences of scenes, stripped of all commentary, in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”.

Keats’s early poetry was not primarily lyrical. His two common forms were the sonnet and the verse epistle,⁹ the latter of which he expanded into his longer efforts: “Sleep and Poetry”, “I Stood Tip-toe”, and finally “Endymion”. In such a format the couplet was crucial, and it is in the structuring of his couplets that Hunt’s lessons were brought to bear. Bate and de Selincourt have outlined these principles of versification. Hunt wished to break open what he felt as the “sea-saw” cadence of Pope’s heroic couplet, to quicken it and adapt it to new sentiment and subject matter. He avoided end-stopped lines. If a line were end-stopped, it would usually be the first line of a couplet, with the second flowing on into the next couplet,

Another start of trumpets, with reply;
And o’er the gate a sudden canopy
Raises, on ivory shafts, a crimson shade,
And Guido issues with the princely maid,
And sits:—
(I, 103–107.)

Keats uses this run-on line with varying success in his early poems, sometimes with a quite effective blending of verbal and thematic movement.

Stop and consider! Life is but a day;
A fragil dew-drop on its perilous way
From a tree’s summit; a poor Indian’s sleep
While his boat hastenes to the monstrous steep
Of Montmorenci.
(“Sleep and Poetry”, 85–89.)

Hunt favored feminine rhymes, often with ludicrous effects.

How placidly, yet fast, the days succeeded
 With one who thought and felt so much as she did.
 (III, 16-17.)

Keats in his enthusiasm often rivalled his master:

What is more gentle than a wind in summer?
 What is more soothing than the pretty hummer
 That stays one moment in an open flower?
 And buzzes cheerily from bower to bower?
 What is more tranquil than a musk-rose blowing
 In a green island, far from all men's knowing?
 ("Sleep and Poetry", 1-6)

Hunt also varied pauses within the lines of his couplets, shifting the caesura from after the fourth or fifth syllable to a point much earlier, or much later, in the line, often following a weak syllable.

Twelve ranks of squires come after, twelve in one,
 With forked pennons lifted in the sun,
 Which tell, as they look backward in the wind,
 The bearings of the knights that ride behind.
 (I, 159-162.)

Keats employs the same rhythmic effects:

How silent comes the water round that bend,
 Not the minutest whisper does it send
 To the o'erhanging shallows; blades of glass
 Slowly across the chequer'd shadows pass.
 ("I Stood Tip-toe", 65-68.)

Hunt's most harmful effects on Keats is usually judged to be diction. In order to give verve to his verse, Hunt employed several devices. He created what de Selincourt refers to as "adjectives of the delicious order",¹⁰ constructing them out of verbs ("plashly pools", "scattery light", "places of nestling green"), turning participles into adjectives and adverb ("Leaned with a touch together thrillingly"), and, what was attended most often with disaster, employing coy terms and colloquialisms. These usually served totally to undercut any sort of dramatic or emotional effect he had endeavoured to produce. Thus, at the culmination of a 250 line procession, when the long-awaited bridegroom is to appear, we find such felicities as:

And then an interval —, a lordly space:—
A pin-drop silence strikes o'er all the place.

(I, 251–252.)

The crowd hushed so dramatically into silence is, by the way, observing the entire procession “with tip-toe looks”; and each woman is endowed with “A climsome waist, and bosom’s balmy rise”. Keats even in his early poetry usually contrived to be lush rather than cute even as he employed Hunt’s devices. He too has “bowery clefts”; his nymphs move “smilingly”. If his borrowings are sometimes as precious as Hunt (“I Stood tip-toe on a hill”), he often uses them with greater decorum than Hunt could attain (“Here are sweet-pass, on tip-toe for flight.”). His most direct borrowings are elevated. Hunt is much given to epithets constructed from participles. ... Paulo is gifted at “Fore-thoughted chess.” Keats could break up an epithet to great dramatic and visual effect. Hunt’s “sidelong-eyed” nymphs become “venus looking sideways in alarm.” Later, Keats will develop Hunt’s trick into a means of drenching his poetry with sensuousness ... as in the “full throated ease”, the “deep-delved earth”, and the “purple-stained mouth” of “Ode to a Nightingale”.

Apart from the unevenness of quality in Keats’s early verse, the feeling against it is tied to a sentiment about Hunt’s poetry in general, a sense that, apart from occasional felicities in isolated lines and passages, the poetry is somehow “lacking in high seriousness”. De Selincourt finds in it vulgarity of the worst sort — a failure in the endeavour to use the “language of real life” which results from not recognizing (he is speaking in particular about Hunt) that such language “depends for its dignity upon the strength and sentiment of what it speaks.”¹¹ He finds the informing emotion of any piece crude and uneven; the expression inexact, and both perhaps inappropriate for poetry. Keats in his view later redeems himself from Hunt’s vulgarity by “justifying” his “intense sensuousness — with spirituality.” John Bailey however makes a plea for the unredeemed, more “Hunt-ian” Keats. Keats’s greatness, he maintains, “its heavy truth, is profoundly involved with badness, and cannot seem to exist without it.”¹² That badness, that “vulgarity”, he sees as a “helpless being oneself”, a kind of earnestness and sincerity which lends itself most favorably to Hunt’s fluid diction and versification. Indeed, Bailey sees the major qualitative difference between Hunt and Keats in Keats’s unwavering sincerity, redeemed by a more sweeping vulgarity than Hunt’s from the threat of banality even as he seems most to expose his simplicity and ingenuousness. Hunt was “bad” enough to be good, though he was “bad” enough to be useful to Keats’s thematic concerns. “Hunt’s ‘trusting animal spirits,’ “says Bailey, “are not entirely unselfconscious — he gives us a sidelong glance as he plays the eager enthusiast. Keats’s temperament transforms his attitude without altering its idiom.”¹³ Keats can be as luxurious as Hunt. He can use Hunt’s very words in doing what Hunt observed to be his fine talent and what he wished himself to do — “to sympathize with the lowliest commonplace”,¹⁴ imbuing it with more energy and actuality than Hunt could command. Hunt’s “nestling green” is converted to the undersea world “Where the fish” ever wrestle / With their

own sweet delight, and ever nestle / Their silver bellies on the pebbly sand". Keats could take from Hunt the assurance that, as Bailey puts it, "one's fantasies are as real as one's food." As with the lessons in versification and diction, he carried Hunt's principles to the next degree, and instead of presenting as with the banalities of the "knottier points, / With knife in hand, of boar and peacock joints," sets before us the luscious dainties of "The Eve of St. Agnes".

Notes

1. Bate, W. J., *John Keats* (New York, 1966), preface.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 119-121.
3. Gittings, R., *Letters of John Keats* (New York, 1970), To C. C. Clarke, 9 October, 1816.
4. Bate, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
5. Gittings, *op. cit.*, p. 78.
6. *Ibid.*, To S H. Reynolds, 9 April, 1818.
7. Bate, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
9. Bate, *The Stylistic Development of Keats* (New York, 1945), p. 14.
10. See the preface of the *Poetical Works of Keats* by de Selincourt.
11. *Ibid.*, XXIV.
12. Bailey, W. J., "Keats and Reality" (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, 1962), p. 98.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 100.