Endymion: The Making of the Poem

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We have agreed for the next Edit. of Keats's Poems, and are to have the Refusal of his future Works. I cannot think he will fail to become a great Poet.

— John Taylor to his father at Retford.'

Late in the afternoon the Southampton coach on whose outside seat the young poet climbed up started for the Isle of Wight. Even though in the fading light, the unaccustomed hours of the journey along the open road, gave him the pleasant excitement of viewing the unfamiliar landscape of the countryside — hedges, ponds, and a little wood, at least for the first three stages, but, when the evening air of mid-April grew cold, he abandoned the economy of the outside seat for the comfort of an inside one.

The next morning the 'two Lions' (I, 129, 4) guarding the old gate of the town welcomed them at Southampton; the boat, which would go at three, took him to the Isle of Wight. Passing 'a Nest of Debauchery' (I, 132, 1-2) — military barracks for 'The scarlet Coats' (I, 108, 28), thanks to which he hoped the local young women would be 'a little profligate' (I, 132, 6-7), they went from Cowes to Newport, where by a good sleep that night and a tripping around the next day, his spirits were revived. On the trip, he went to Shanklin:

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...... I went to Shanklin, which occasioned a great debate in my mind whether I should live there or at Carisbrooke. Shanklin is a most beautiful place — sloping wood and meadow ground reaches round the Chine, which is a cleft between the Cliffs of the depth of nearly 300 feet at least. This cleft is filled with trees & bushes in the narrow part; and as it widens becomes bare, if it were not for primroses on one side, which spread to the very verge of the Sea, and some fishermen's huts on the
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other, \( \langle \text{which} \rangle \) perched midway in the Ballustrade of beautiful green Hedges along their steps down to the sands. — But the sea, Jack, the sea — the little waterfall — then the white cliff — then St Catherine’s Hill — “the sheep in the meadows, the cows in the corn.”

Though all delighted him at Shanklin, at Shanklin being at ‘twice the Expense, and three times the inconvenience’ ( I , 131, 5 ), he chose Carisbrooke, which attracted him with the castle.

⋯⋯I see Carisbrooke Castle from my window, and have found several delightful wood-alleys, and copses, and quick freshes — As for Primroses — the Island ought to be called Primrose Island : that is, if the nation of Cowslips agree thereto, of which there are diverse Clans just beginning to lift up their heads and if an how the Rain holds whereby that is Birds eyes abate — another reason of my fixing is that I am more in reach of the places around me — I intend to walk over the island east — West — North South — I have not seen many specimens of Ruins — I dont think however I shall ever see one to surpass Carisbrooke Castle.

II

When on Monday, April 14, 1817 Keats left London for the Isle of Wight, he took with him a copy of Shakespeare in seven small volumes which he had bought for the trip ; it proved to be a sort of talisman, for he found a picture of the very author in the hallway on his arrival at his lodgings in Carisbrooke. This is the Shakespeare of which he wrote in his letter to the George Keatses on 14 February 1819 that he was sitting opposite the Shakespeare he had brought from the island. On 10, 11 May 1817, he wrote to Haydon from Margate:

When in the Isle of W \( \langle \text{h} \rangle \) ight I met with a Shakespeare in the Passage of the House at which I lodged — it comes nearer to my idea of him than any I have seen — I was but there a Week yet the old Woman made me take it with me though I went off in a hurry — Do you not think this is
There was an amiable landlady called Mrs. Cook, who was kind enough to
allow him to remove the print from its place to his room and pin it up where a
print of a French ambassador had been hanging, just above the other three of
his own in a row — Haydon, Mary Queen of Scots, and Milton with his
daughters. On Keats’ sudden departure after a stay of only a week, the
picture was presented to him by the good-natured lady. This delighted him.
No wonder that he felt it to be a good omen, which would lead him, after two
years presided by the great master of literature, to find himself in the midst
of all the abundance of that fruitful year, the annus mirabilis of his 1819.

As it was, he was in the midst of all the mental turmoil — the change of
circumstances, strain, solitude, the chilly nights deprived him of his sleeping
hours. Moreover, the passage in King Lear — ‘Do you not hear the Sea?’
(1, 132, 13) (as it is, ‘Hark, do you hear the sea?’) haunted him like a pas-
sion. This he could exorcise by writing a fine sonnet On the Sea, for it
relieved him a little of his obsession that he must write; he had not been
writing anything since he came: the work reminded him of his real purpose
for which he came. With nine lines added to complete the argument, he began
to let Endymion breathe in the Latmos air, and it was just a week before he
composed the Hymn.

After Keats plunged headlong into Endymion, as if into ‘The surgy mur-
murs of the lonely sea’, all seemed to go well. According to Henry Stephens,
the first two-dozen lines of Endymion had been prepared at the Cheapside lodg-
ings where the medical friend came to see Keats; the famous first line,

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever

came to the poet when his unhesitating habitual correction at once rephrased
a little awkward one,

A thing of beauty is a constant joy

for the last three words to have a truer ring. So apart from the nine lines
added, the first book of the poem virtually started after he came to the island, with the description of the forest and the lawn on the sides of Mount Latmos just after the sunrise and the people gathering there for Pan's festival, with which he could fill the lines between the argument and the Hymn. Perhaps it is due to the unaccustomed circumstances, and the physical and mental conditions which were not necessarily favourable to him that we do not find any rapid pace in his writing the 169 lines between the first sixty-two and the Hymn, nor could we say he was stuck in a jam, considering that in spite of the difficult situation he is supposed to have been writing some twenty-four lines a day, the number of which almost equals to that of the one third of the argument which he had composed in his Cheapside lodgings; 169 lines a week was a steady pace, and after the week, he composed Hymn to Pan, if Richard Woodhouse's note to the date '26 April 1817' has any reliability. While it possibly needed some finishing touches yet, the intensity of the composition, together with that state of lethargy peculiar to recovery after one has written oneself out, revived the intensity of his loneliness as well. When the intensity of writing made him feel himself written out, Carisbrooke was no longer a second Margate to him: we do not know for certain when exactly the move took place, yet it was very natural that the pleasant memory of the fruitful weeks in 1816 which he had spent with Tom at Margate guided the youth to the sea-side resort again.

III

For three weeks he stayed at Margate, where Tom joined John and gave him company as six months before; the resort itself had little changed since, but this time with the obsession that he must write he found it a little different from what it had seemed to be. Before he went, he hoped that he should like Margate and 'could contrive to do without Trees' (I, 138, 20-21), yet in three weeks when he wrote himself all out again, the treelessness itself became a new obsession in its turn, and on 17 May it forced him to leave with Tom for Canterbury, complaining of the 'treeless affair' (I, 137, 5). They were there on May 22, but back in Hampstead by June 10. At some time during the eighteen days between these dates, John visited Hastings and stayed alone at the
little village of Bo Peep, Tom having returned earlier. It was at this local beautyspot in Hastings that he had an enigmatic adventure with a mysterious beautiful young woman, a Mrs. Isabella Jones; something there was about her, intelligent and sophisticated, charmed the poet. There is no knowing how far the flirtation went between them; only, the adventure seems to have contributed more to the poem than a mere flirtation would have done, in that the second book of *Endymion* began with the panegyrical apostrophe, 'O sovereign power of love!' The panegyric is a sure evidence that the book had not started before the personal romance; it took him a span of only just over a month to go through the first book; from the pace with which the 992 lines were written, it would hardly have been expected that it would take as long a time as three.\(^{14}\)

It was most likely that, now back in London at Hampstead, the amount of time which no more need to write many letters\(^{15}\) produced was easily set off against the time spent in keeping himself in close contact with his friends in town; the new kind of busyness, it seems, which relieved him of his loneliness deprived him of his time for work. It was summer; it ought to be at once time for poetry\(^{16}\) and time for widening a circle of friendship; but surely the time for the latter fairly dominated in amount, since the months were marked by the slow pace with which the making of the poem was barely under way in the second book, though in the widened part of the circle new friendships grew. The part widened by the growth comprised at least three important personages.

Keats had met Charles Wentworth Dilke in the previous spring. This versatile young gentleman who was six years older than the poet commuted between Hampstead and Somerset House to work for the Navy Pay Office. Being a competent official, he had a methodical way of doing things and an unruffled air which showed he could enjoy a 'little quiet fun' (II, 190, 18–19) and they steadied Keats as would the confident temperament of Benjamin Bailey in Oxford.\(^{17}\) After his office was abolished, at one time as owner and editor, he fully controlled the *Athenaeum*, and later managed the *Daily News*. With his schoolfellow, Charles Armitage Brown, Dilke built, in Hampstead, Wentworth Place, a double house, now the Keats House. The structure for two families came to have quite a little meaning when the Brawnes came to
live in one half of it, and Keats with Brown in the other. The house was to be where the famous fatal love story started; Mrs. Frances Ricketts Brawne had a son and two daughters, and the name of one of the two, Fanny, later Mrs. Louis Lindon, is immortal as the love to whom Keats' thirty-seven love letters were written.

There were two others who especially loved the poet's company when he was back in Hampstead in the summer of 1817; one of whom was an artist, his elder by two years, who was humble at heart, but very eager to be with him no matter when and where the poet might go. It was in the spring of 1816 that Keats first met Joseph Severn through William Haslam. The casual acquaintance was to develop into an everlasting friendship; he was the only friend who could be with him at Keats' deathbed in Italy. Being a painter, Severn 'helped to enlarge Keats's visual sense on their visits to galleries and exhibitions of paintings. Their conversations about the Greek spirit and their enjoyment together of the Elgin Marbles found their way into Endymion. It is no accident that Book Two became more pictorial, a series of highly-coloured tableaux, lovingly described, as its hero, bidden to seek his love in earth, water and air, wanders through underground galleries, whose alcoves contain scenes like classical paintings — Venus and Adonis, Alpheus and Arethusa — thier details laid on in Titian colours.¹⁸ The region where those wondrous scenes were found was in the depths of the earth to which the hero went down which possibly resembled the interior of the cathedral in Canterbury¹⁹ where the author must have been a pleased visitor.

IV

In contrast to the one, who longed to be in Keats' company for what, the painter thought, the poet had in himself in plenty, which he really had (poetic sense and intelligence, and knowledge of history, of which the last the painter was just beginning to have not a little interest in, because the historical paintings were now in fashion),²⁰ rather than for the poet's sprouting green fame and promise, was the other, who could not appreciate his company so much for his evident genius as for his fascinating nature and looks.²¹ Benjamin Bailey, more than four years older than Keats, perhaps considerably old
for an ordinary undergraduate, was an Oxford student who had his rooms in Magdalen Hall; being born of a family, undoubtedly the wealthiest of Keats' close friends, he was studying to take orders in the years to come. Twenty-seven years after Keats' death, a letter from Colombo, Ceylon surprised a respectable biographer:

My dear Sir ——

You will perhaps be surprised at so familiar an address from an utter stranger in one sense, though not in another. But I cannot address one by a colder and more distant title, though we be personally strangers, who has done such justice to the genius and character, the manliness, and morale, of a man whom living I loved, and whose memory I cherish with no ordinary feeling to the present hour. — I am that “Mr. Bailey,” of whom at p. 62. of your first Volume, you say “Brothers they were in affection and in thought —— brothers also in destiny. Mr. Bailey died soon after Keats.” My “destiny” had indeed led me out of the circle of my former friends; happy, in my estimate of early death, had it been as you state. For I have much faith in the touching lines of our great poet of the Lakes, and now of the laurel: ——

“The good die first;
And they whose hearts are dry as summer dust,
Burn to the socket.”

There was a lady called Mrs. B. W. Procter who sent to the same biographer a description of the personal appearance of the poet as follows:

You wish me to tell you what I remember of Keats. I never saw him but twice, but the countenance lives in my mind as one of singular beauty and brightness —— It had an expression as if he had been looking upon some glorious sight —— His Eyes were large [ & ] blue, and his hair Auburn, he wore it divided down the centre of his head and it fell in rich masses on each side of his face, his mouth was full and less intellectual than the rest of the face —— At this time, it was in 1818…… he was in perfect health and life offering all things that were precious to him. …… The
shape of his face had not the squareness of a man's, but more like some women's faces I have seen (particularly one in the Looking Glass) it was so wide over the forehead and so small at the chin.34

This is the 'sketch' to which the clergyman refers in depicting the poet's looks in his second letter to the biographer on 7 May 1849. After a bit of description of his character, Bailey's sketch of his appearance is as follows:

On my first visit to London...... I was introduced to him. I was delighted with the naturalness & simplicity of his character, & was at once drawn to him by his winning & indeed affectionate manner towards those with whom he was himself pleased. Nor was his personal appearance the least charm of a first acquaintance with the young Poet. He bore, along with the strong impress of genius, much beauty of feature & countenance. The Lady's sketch (Life Vol 1. p. 103) comes very near to my own recollection. The contour of his face was, as she describes it, not square & angular, but circular & oval; & this is the proper shape of a poet's head. Boccacio's & Spenser's faces & heads are so formed. It is in the character of the countenance what Coleridge would call femininity (see his Table Talk) which he thought to be a mental constituent of true genius. His hair was beautiful—a fine brown, rather than auburn, I think; & if you placed your hand upon his head, the silken curls felt like the rich plumage of a bird. I do not particularly remember the thickness of the upper lip, which is so generally described, & doubtless correctly;—but the mouth struck me as too wide, both in itself, & as out of harmony with the rest of the face, which, with this single blemish, was eminently beautiful. The eye was full & fine, & softened into tenderness, or beamed with a fiery brightness, according to the current of his thoughts & conversation. Indeed the form of his head was like that of a fine Greek statue:—& he realized to my mind the youthful Apollo, more than any head of a living man whom I have known. Mr. Severn's portrait, admirable as it is, does not convey to my mind & memory the peculiar sweetness of expression of John Keats during the,—alas!—short period of my personal intercourse with him.35
To Bailey, Keats' features must have appeared to be glowing with their happiness that they are truly expressive of most desirable inner qualities. His first shocking letter, written on 15, 16 October 1848, already quoted, goes on to say to R. M. Milnes:

His *manliness* was a principal feature of his character. His integrity and good sense were not inferior. Socially, he was the most *lovable* creature, in the proper sense of that word as distinguished from *amiable*, I think I ever knew as a man. And he had abundantly more of the *poetical character*, a hundred times told, than I ever knew in any individual.²⁶

Bailey may have first got acquainted with Keats when he found only a friend in him, but in the end he did not fail to find a true poet in him. Keats was also a man of empathy and sense of humour;²⁷ Bailey, of rigidity and principle; to a man like Bailey, Keats' acquaintance must have been a relief.

So was the quiet of Magdalen Hall to a poet when he arrived in Oxford in midafternoon on September 3, with only a few students remaining to study during the summer vacation. It gave him not only relief but time for work. Besides, being a man of rigidness and principle, Bailey worked for hours without interrupting Keats, nor was he kept from studying hard by Bailey. Like yawning, Bailey's diligence proved to be contagious²⁸ enough to make him start the third book on the day after next, after his arrival, writing the fifty-one lines in one day. The fact that the rate of the poet's writing was up was quite obvious in comparison with the rate with which the second book had been written, taking him as long as three months to finish it; he completed the third book on September 26. On September 21, he wrote to John Reynolds that by the day he had written 800 lines of it. The five days finished the remaining part, after the seventeen completed the 800. Since the unfinished part consisted of 232 lines, by doing the two calculations roughly, we get almost equal answers; the difference between the results we get should be surprisingly little; whether they are more or less than forty-seven lines a day, it is quite negligible:

'His mode of composition of the third Book, of which I was a witness,
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is best described by recounting our habits of study for one day during the month he visited me at Oxford,'

writes Bailey in the same letter in which his comment on the lady's sketch is found, about the poet's stay at his quarters.

'He wrote, & I read, sometimes at the same table, & sometimes at separate desks or tables, from breakfast to the time of our going out for exercise, — generally two or three o'clock. He sat down to his task, — which was about 50 lines a day, — with his paper before him, & wrote with as much regularity, & apparently with as much ease, as he wrote his letters. Indeed he quite acted up to the principle he lays down in the letter of axioms to his publisher, (my old & valued Mr. Taylor) on which you justly set the seal of your approbation — "That if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves of a tree, it had better not come at all." This axiom he fulfilled to the letter by his own practice, me teste, while he composed the third Book of Endymion, in the same room in which I studied daily, until he completed it. Sometimes he fell short of his allotted task, — but not often: & he would make it up another day. But he never forced himself. When he had finished his writing for the day, he usually read it over to me; & he read or wrote letters until we went out for a walk. This was our habit day by day. The rough manuscript was written off daily, & with few erasures.'

Keats' stay with Bailey in Oxford brought to him more than the remarkable increase in the speed of writing; the religious and philosophic of the poem is most concentrated in the third book, where, while a thing of beauty may never pass into nothingness, a thing of humanity comes into its own, apparently making the Glaucus episode which is meant to be the core of the book the core of the whole poem. It would be no mere hazardous conjecture to say that, surrounded by the 'old Gothic buildings — Spire — towers — Quadrangles — Cloisters Groves &' (I, 154, 21–22) in 'the finest City in the world' (I, 154, 20), the poet's reading and talking with the future clergyman did its utmost in the making of the book. Great was the exaltation,
therefore, when he finished the third book, but after reading it over he was not much pleased with the result. The poet who said,

‘You will be glad to hear that within these last three weeks I have written 1000 lines — which are the third Book of my Poem. My Ideas with respect to it I assure you are very low — and I would write the subject thoroughly again. but I am tired of it and think the time would be better spent in writing a new Romance which I have in my eye for next summer — Rome was not built in a Day. and all the good I expect from my employment this summer is the fruit of Experience which I hope to gather in my next Poem,’ ( I, 167, 19—168, 8)

had in spite of himself outgrown the poem in the frame, though I doubt he did the same to the book in the core, that he did the same to the poem in the core. Behind him the door of ‘the infant or thoughtless Chamber’ ( I, 280, 22 ) were closing abruptly ; he must have been as much aware that he had found himself in ‘the second Chamber’ ( I, 280, 24 ), that is, what he called ‘the Chamber of Maiden-Thought’ ( I, 281, 3 ) as he was aware that he was reading and writing, thinking and talking with Bailey in his quarters. Although ‘This Chamber of Maiden-Thought’ ( I, 281, 10 ) was yet to be ‘darken’d’ ( I, 281, 10 ), we should be equally aware that the ‘awakening of the thinking principle’ ( I, 281, 1—2 ) was already having its effect upon him of convincing his nerves ‘that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression’ ( I, 281, 8—9 ) in view of the humanism and philosophy of the young author manifesting itself in the Glaucus episode.

V

Back to London in October, again he came to be thrown into turmoil, this time even in London, or since he was in London, just as he had been in the Isle of Wight, though this time not by solitude ; John Lockhart’s review signed ‘Z’, in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, had attacked ‘Johnny’ in August that year. Besides, what with the infection which made him use mercury, the disappointments he was beginning to feel in some of the personages of his
circle, and his increasing certainty that Tom had consumption, we find Keats standing on the threshold of 'the Burden of the Mystery' (I, 277, 9-10), which he was yet to be really under; his life as a poet was 'in a Mist' (I, 281, 13), while he had to finish the final thousand. After, suddenly as if it were born of his despondent mood, came to him Ode to Sorrow, just as came to Endymion's ear that mysterious song sung by a beautiful stranger, he could write barely three hundred of them by the end of October. In order to escape from the hurly-burly of town, again he went into the country, choosing this time the beautiful Burford Bridge for his temporary residence, when time had shifted well into November only to leave with him as much as the last half of a book unwritten. In an inn, completely confining himself in Endymion, he seems to have been getting along with it, keeping a good pace of seventy to eighty lines a day, quite free from his letter writing habit. At Burford Bridge, when the autumnal mist was just beginning to expect the drear night of December, the shepherd's earthly residence came to an end.

Notes

1 Tim Chilcott, A Publisher and His Circle, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 25.
3 With some alterations in the type of the numerals denoting the volumes, and in use of commas instead of colons, and in use of hyphens between the numbers denoting more lines than one, based on A Key-Word-in-Context Concordance to the Complete Letters of John Keats which, compiled by David Pollard, was first published by Geraldson in 1989.
5 Ibid., I, p. 131.
7 Rollins, op. cit., p. 142.
9 King Lear, IV, vi, 4.
10 Endymion, I, 121.
12 Ibid., p. 199n.
13 Bate, op. cit., p. 167.
14 Gittings, op. cit., p. 212.
16 Ibid., p. 125.
17 Bate, op. cit., p. 280.
18 Gittings, op. cit., p. 217.
19 Ward, op. cit., p. 126.
20 Gittings, op. cit., p. 216.
21 Ibid., pp. 219-220.
22 Ibid., p. 224.
24 Ibid., pp. 157-158.
25 Ibid., pp. 267-269.
26 Ibid., p. 261.
27 Bate, op. cit., p. 200.
28 Ibid., p. 206.

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