Contradictory Keats

on Stanley Plumly's *Posthumous Keats: A Personal Biography* Norton, 2008

Michael Theune

There are already so many Keatses: even just cribbing from Jack Stillinger's "Multiple Readers, Multiple Texts, Multiple Keats" (in *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*, edited by Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1998)) one is reminded of aesthetic, art for art's sake, Keats; sensuous Keats; philosophical Keats; theatrical Keats; political Keats; radical Keats; vulgar Keats; Cockney Keats; suburban Keats; effeminate Keats; masculine Keats; consumptive Keats. Virtually all of these Keatses are good to have and to know. These various Keatses arise out of critical necessity: Keats was a complex person and poet, and no one study could ever hope to encapsulate his genius, ardor, and circumstances. Some of the more recent Keatses, such as the political, radical, and Cockney Keatses—the last of which also is a very old label, one of the first—also arise from the vital need to comment upon and correct particular versions of Keats that have become critical commonplaces, especially New Critical versions of Keats. To borrow some of Keats's own language (from a letter to Benjamin Bailey, dated 22 November 1817), such recent Keatses challenge what could be called the "consequitive reasoning" of some earlier versions—versions which can only succeed, as is the wont of consequitive reasoners, by "putting aside numerous objections"—by admitting omitted material and then reconsidering Keats. The fruit of such labor is the gift of a new perspective from which to see, understand, and, likely, appreciate Keats and his work, which, combined with other versions of Keats, allows for a fuller comprehension.

In his new book, Stanley Plumly presents another Keats: posthumous Keats. Keats himself refers to his last months of life as a "posthumous existence," and Plumly wants to pick up on this, to tell the story of how Keats's mortality—which is,

according to Plumly, already "total" in Keats's final year and a half, that is, which Keats for some time *lives through*—is transmuted into his immortality, in his poems and in his own and his work's own after-life, the existence his memory and his work have after his death. Like so many other recent books of Keats criticism, Plumly's book ultimately arose from the sense "that certain connections and crossovers in the John Keats story had not fit the profile of strict biographical narrative." As an example of this kind of omitted or underrepresented material, Plumly offers the example of the story—which he first wrote about in an essay in which he comments on his own poem "Posthumous Keats" (in *Singular Voices: American Poetry Today*, ed. by Stephen Berg (NY: Avon Books, 1985))—told first by Joseph Severn, Keats's companion and nurse on his trip to and stay in Rome, of Severn's activity of gathering wildflowers and putting them in the carriage which Keats rode in on their trip from Naples to Rome. According to Plumly, the conclusion of this apocryphal story is that, by the time Keats and Severn reach Rome, "Keats is witness to his own funeral." Interested in such strangely powerful, and even—in hindsight—seemingly prophetic, "moments and meetings," material idiosyncratic enough to offer "texture" but resistant to "structure," Plumly sets out to write a book that is, admittedly, more textural than structural. This "circular rather than linear," book allows him "to think a warm mind through the mortality—and its meander—that helped to bring about [Keats's] ultimate immortality," and to speak in "a voice, in Keatsian terms, that could deal with the biographical issues with 'disinterestedness' and the poems with selection and passion," in order to "process how, in the exemplary instance of Keats, the mystery of immortality becomes manifest."

There are, to be sure, many moving passages in *Posthumous Keats*. When Plumly does improve our understanding of Keats, he does so by helping us to better *feel* Keats's life and situation. For example, in a single, succinct but terrifying paragraph, Plumly can draw together an answer for one very difficult question: why did none of Keats's closest friends accompany him to Rome? To cite only the beginning of his response, Plumly offers

this moving analysis: "Although everyone seems to want him to go to Italy, no one seems to have an awareness of how to pay for it. Motives, too, seem mixed. Keats is loved, but he also presents a problem. He is essentially homeless; he is, as a few of his friends intuit, contagious; and he is church poor. On some level Italy makes sense; on another level Italy is exile..." "*Keats is loved, but he also presents a problem*" is chilling. A master craftsman, Plumly constructs a number of sentences and passages so precisely that one can feel in and through them the ways that real-life circumstances can seem to coalesce and turn, seemingly suddenly, into a fate. This is a fine skill to put to use in a lyrical version of a life, but it also could be badly used in a more serious study by seeming to offer evidence where in fact there is none, or very little.

And, indeed, it turns out that beyond the handful of such critical/lyrical instances scattered throughout it, *Posthumous Keats* is an extremely problematic book. Under the cover of supposedly innovative, "personal" biographical writing, Plumly presents a troublingly vague and repetitive Keats. While in some ways *Posthumous Keats* is circular and textural—for instance, different sections of the book circle around, or meander through, particular topics, including renderings of Keats's likeness, Keats's epitaph, Keats's life around the time of the death of his brother Tom, Keats's relationship with Fanny Brawne, and the ways in which Keats and his body of work have been remembered—it is *not*—like, say, Tom Clark's *Junkets on a Sad Planet: Scenes from the Life of John Keats* (Black Sparrow, 1994), a collection of lyrical and meditative poems and prose poems—centrally lyrical. Rather, *Posthumous Keats* most often seems like a well-researched and closely-argued text, often displaying research, referring to previous studies of Keats, and even taking time to consider one piece of evidence in light of another.

The problem, though, is that *Posthumous Keats* is frustratingly selective and often vague in what it reveals and discusses. For example, the book's picture of the development of Keats's fame, the focus of the book's final, 50-page chapter, contains an unfathomable *one sentence* on the role the New Critics played in canonizing Keats. And at this crucial juncture in his book,

instead of exploring the vagaries of canon formation—including, say, speculating on the significant effect the simple fact that Keats was a man and not a woman has had on his posthumous canonization—Plumly largely switches modes to discuss some of Keats's "great odes" in New Critical detail to suggest that they were fated to be remembered due solely to their intrinsic qualities. Here, the fate that Plumly's writing indicates feels less like a revelation, or even a real investigation, and more like a cover-up, the elision of difficult material.

The Keats who emerges from such frayed textural writing is, at turns, incredibly vague or else already pretty well-known and in need of little reintroduction. It is at times very hard to say what Plumly really means by "posthumous Keats." Certainly, for Plumly it means selectively considering the after-life of Keats's work and reputation after Keats's bodily death, but it is difficult to understand what this means for Keats the man and artist when he is *living* posthumously. Plumly offers details about Keats's posthumous existence—his journey by sea to Italy, his letters to Fanny Brawne, Keats's bad medical care, his strained relationships, the progress of his disease. But it's not clear what this information is supposed to do or what it's supposed to show, as, according to Plumly, all of Keats's significant poetry has already been written prior to this posthumous time. (The exact dates of this posthumous time are never settled—Plumly is uncertain of them even in his book's final sentence in which he states that Keats's posthumous existence could have started either "in the autumn of 1819, when the last great lines get written," or in "the autumn of 1820, when he sails into the unknown and the known, when he disappears into the sublimity of his words.") It seems, according to Plumly's account, that posthumously living Keats really mostly has his dying to do.

But the fact that this part of Keats's life seems this way, again, is much more due to Plumly's selectively choosing and not really investigating the events of Keats's life. For, in fact, Keats *was* writing during this time, composing, among other works, a comedic drama and a satire. And Keats, during the final year and a half of his life, was still very often a riot in his letters, one of which, written to his sister-in-law in January, 1820, is an

extended, incandescent comic letter that still deserves its share close critical attention and popular fame. In fact, it could very likely be the case that the phrase "posthumous existence" is, in part, a pun, referring to the character Posthumous from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*, who, like Keats, was exiled and separated from his secret love—after all, it is in the letter in which Keats mentions his "posthumous existence" that Keats also mentions that just a few weeks prior he "at [his] worst, even in Quarantine, summoned up more puns, in a sort of desperation, in one week than in any year of [his] life." But any real consideration of Keats's liveliness and productivity during his living posthumous existence is passed over by Plumly because, one assumes, it doesn't fit very well Plumly's picture of Keats.

And there is a clear Keats in *Posthumous Keats*. Plumly's Keats is "handsome, manly, serious, disinterested"; however, more often, Plumly's Keats comes into focus through seeing what he is *not*. Plumly's Keats is *not* weak. He most certainly is not the "flower too frail for the harsh winds of enemy criticism" made famous in Shelley's *Adonais* and in canto XI of Byron's *Don Juan*, which marvels that Keats's "mind, that very fiery particle / Should let itself be snuffed out by an article." And Plumly's Keats most certainly is not the Keats presented in Yeats's "Ego Dominus Tuus" in which Yeats states,

> I see a schoolboy when I think of him,
> With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,
> For certainly he sank into his grave
> His senses and his heart unsatisfied,
> And made—being poor, ailing and ignorant,
> Shut out from all the luxury of the world,
> The coarse-bred son of a livery-stable keeper—
> Luxuriant song.

While Plumly certainly is right that the actual Keats was not this particularly weak Keats, two facts should be recognized. First, Plumly's own strong Keats is the product less of careful biography and more of another sort of mythologizing—in Plumly's own formulation, he is rescuing a "vital, tragic Hyperion" Keats from those who "wish to turn the suffering poet into a dream-

er-Endymion." And, second, the weak Keats Plumly argues against repeatedly, though this picture of Keats held sway for some time, has been outmoded for a long time, for at least the last half-century. Beneath the frayed texture of *Posthumous Keats* is the stuffing of a straw-man structure.

Unsurprisingly, nothing truly new emerges from *Posthumous Keats*. Mostly, Plumly (re-)presents canonical Keats—the Keats who achieves his poetic apotheosis in his great and seemingly apolitical "To Autumn" (for Plumly, there is no hint of the Peterloo Massacre in this poem); the Keats who, as presented yet one more time in a "highlight essay of the assertive, speculating, symbolist Keats as drawn from the first volume [of letters]" that Plumly compiles near the end of his book, writes lots of cryptic and seductive phrases about poetry. This is New Critical Keats, slightly warmed up, but now also clearly creaking with age.

More problematically, outside of the lovely and wise glimpses he occasionally offers, Plumly subjects readers to outright contradiction. For example, in a discussion of Keats's two masks—the life mask made by the artist Benjamin Haydon in preparation for painting Keats's likeness, and Keats's death mask—Plumly states that "[t]he face under the face of the referred-to death mask feels...more alive..."; however, in making this totally subjective claim, Plumly forgets the claims he made earlier in his book in regard to other people's perception that "[t]here is, of course, no accounting for the eye of the beholder...[w]e see, more often than not, what we want to see, and make of it what we can." More significantly, though throughout his book Plumly argues again and again that his manly Keats died from a combination of consumption and some very bad medical diagnoses and treatment, and that his Keats did not die from psychological causes rooted in his mistreatment by critics as so many of Keats's friends and acquaintances believed, shockingly, in the end, Plumly is willing to consider that Keats in fact *did* die from (just slightly revised) psychological causes; according to Plumly, Keats died in large part from having written "To Autumn." Plumly states,

> No wonder the doctors were confused as to what was ailing Keats: in a way it was neither this nor that but everything, manna as well as matter. And it starts with his most perfect poem, as if an open circle had been drawn to close. That is to say, the recognition of what is true and fated for years arrives like a vision, and that vision is "To Autumn," whose emotional and spiritual realities represent both a full cup and exhaustion, their sequence and consequence. It is as if Keats's only choice after "To Autumn" is to die…

Perhaps the thinking embodied in the above paragraph is disinterested or, to use a Keatsian phrase Plumly evokes many times, negatively capable, but then this only serves to show how little disinterestedness and negative capability, so easily turned into euphemisms for blurry vision, faulty and contradictory argument, and delusional magical thinking, really have to do with the creation of great—vital, accurate, serious—texts.