

PREFACE

I find the idea of an “English Romanticism” difficult to defend. Can one really make a strong case for including Byron in the same group with Coleridge and Wordsworth? Do more similarities exist between Blake’s poetry and Keats’s than between, for example, Keats’s and Dryden’s? Although each poet is unique, nevertheless each had his own role models. Of course literature students generally find lists of distinguishing features helpful, but if they go on to teach these poets undoubtedly they formulate their own list of characteristics that separate the English Romantics from the other “schools” that comprise British literature. This act of list making is idiosyncratic, and the chances of any two instructors of English Romanticism having identical lists are few.

Perhaps more than any other of the poets of the early nineteenth century, Keats, as the last born, has suffered most from this tradition of list making. In his own day his name appeared with Leigh Hunt’s, a man whose own work is now generally excluded from the list of “good” English Romantics and from whom Keats later tried to distance himself. In a now famous letter Byron rejected Keats’s work as “mental masturbation,” and in an equally famous letter Keats distinguished himself from Byron by telling the George Keatses that “[Byron] describes what he sees — I describe what I imagine — Mine is the hardest task.” Although Keats admired Wordsworth, he found time in a letter to J.H. Reynolds to parody the elder poet’s “School exercises” style. Shelley and Keats traded applause and admonishments. In the celebrated “Negative Capability” letter, Keats is critical of Coleridge. Blake isn’t mentioned in any of Keats’s letters or poems.

Why would these artists want to share their poetic glory with each other? Each had a healthy ego and the ambition to become the most important poet of his day. Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but it is no way to garner public acclaim. Consider too how poetry lovers often have a favorite English Romantic poet and a least favorite.

Of the features that by tradition the English Romantics share, certain features, according to one critic or another, seem to be a particular poet's specialty. Blake is the mystic, Byron the satirist, Wordsworth the empath, Coleridge the thinker, Shelley the radical, and Keats the lyricist. Yet Keats could write a "Lamia," an "All gentle folks who owe a grudge," an "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a "Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition" as well as a "When I have fears that I may cease to be." Therefore, I prefer to judge each poet on his own merits, to view each in isolation, to make as few comparisons as possible with his competition.

I wrote *John Keats and the Loss of Romantic Innocence* with the weaknesses of list making well in mind. Inevitably, all works of criticism rely on lists. Thus I offer my own list of features that to my mind are prominent in Keats's work. However, what makes my list more interesting or useful than somebody else's? It is a list with a unique variable: the Apollo metaphor. Keats's fascination with the ancient god is easy to prove. What he does with it is the subject of this book. I hope that the text contributes to Keats's deserved fame.

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