

John Keats and Leigh Hunt

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The history of the friendship between John Keats and Leigh Hunt is the story of Keat's development as a poet. Between the years 1816 and 1821, Keats became a mature poet, moving from the uneven workmanship of his youth to the mastery evidenced in his odes, in *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, in *Lamia*, in *The Fall of Hyperion*, and so on. These were the years also of his friendship with Leigh Hunt. Their relationship centered around poetry from the start, and poetry was responsible for many of the sufferings which it involved. It is the reason also for the special importance of that friendship.

This paper will look at three aspects of the relationship between Keats and Hunt: 1) the progress and character of the friendship, 2) Hunt's criticism of Keats's work and 3) Hunt's influence on Keats.

Progress and Character of the Friendship

Along with his brothers John and Robert, Leigh Hunt edited and published the *Examiner*, a liberal weekly that did much to improve the literary quality of English journalism and did more to rile the conservative government of his time. Indeed, John and Leigh Hunt spent two years in prison, from January 1813 to January 1815, after being convicted of libel because they had called the Prince of Wales, among other things,

. . . a violator of his word, a libertine over head and ears in debt and disgrace, a despiser of domestic ties (he companion of gamblers and demireps, a man who has just closed half a century without one single claim on the gratitude of his country or (he respect of posterity! <1>

The concerns of Hunt and the *Examiner* extended the censoring of the new Regent's antics. Barnette Miller, in her book about Hunt and his friendships, has enumerated the issues about which he was especially concerned:

. . . Catholic Emancipation; reform of Parliamentary representation; liberty of the press; reduction and equalization of taxes; greater discretion in increasing the public debt; education of the poor and amelioration of (heir sufferings: abolition of child-labor and of the slave trade; reform of military discipline, of prison conditions, and of the criminal and civil laws, particularly those governing debtors. <2>

I Hunt's responsibilities with the *Examiner* were many and varied political essays about the above issues, literary essays and theatrical reviews -- but he maintained also an active interest in poetry. <3> He also published his own poetic works in the *Examiner*.

Hunt became quite familiar to Keats through his publication. Around 1810 Keats, then aged fifteen or so, began reading and studying with an unanticipated diligence. The *Examiner* was among his regular readings at that time. <4> Charles C. Clarke, then Keat's

former teacher and close friend, wrote that "the first proof (he) had received of his having committed himself in verse" was a sonnet titled "Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison." <5> In 1816 in a letter to his brother George, the young poet referred to Hunt as *Libertas*; the the context of the reference shows an appreciation of Hunt as both reformer and literary critic. <6>

It was through his friend Clarke that Keats first met the much admired Hunt. Clarke brought Hunt a few of Keats's poems. He relates Hunt's reaction in his *Recollections of Keats*:

I could not but anticipate that Hunt would speak encouragingly and indeed approvingly, of the compositions - written, too, by a youth under age; but my partial spirit was not prepared for the unhesitating and prompt admiration which broke forth before he had read twenty lines of the first poem. <7>

Clarke introduced Keats to Hunt during the spring of 1816. <8> After a first meeting, "which stretched into three 'morning calls', . . . Keats was suddenly made a familiar of the household, and was always welcomed." <9>

The first year of the friendship was the most intimate and the most harmonious. Indeed, Hunt seems to have had an extraordinary capacity for forming friendships. <10> He also tended to idealize them. Thus, years later, writing about their relationship in his *Autobiography*, Hunt says that except for one circumstance "(for I have no reserve myself with those whom I love) . . . Keats and I might have been taken for friends of the old stamp, between whom there is no such thing even as obligation, except the pleasure of it." <11> Perhaps such would not have been an unrealistic assessment of their friendship during the year following the spring of 1816. During that time Keats was a frequent visitor of the Hunts' cottage. He and Hunt would read together and compete in poetry writing contests. The sonnets *To the Nile* and *On the Grasshopper and the Cricket* are products of those contests. To his first book, *Poems by John Keats*, published in the spring of 1817, Keats added a dedicatory sonnet to Hunt. Its last lines are as follows:

And I shall ever bless my destiny,
That in a time, when under pleasant trees
Pan is no longer sought, I feel a free,
A leafy luxury, seeing I could please
With these poor offerings, a man like thee. <12>

Hunt printed some of Keats's poetry; and on December 1, 1816, he published the notice "Young Poets," in which he numbered Keats among three "young aspirants . . . who promise[d] to help the new school [of poetry] to revive Nature and [t]o put a new spirit of youth into every thing." <13>

Things began to take a turn for the worse, however. It is clear from Keats's letters that by May of 1817 he had become suspicious of Hunt. He was encouraged or led along in this attitude by Benjamin R. Haydon, a painter of modest abilities but of great pretensions. In

a letter to Keats dated May 10, 1817, he wrote, "I love you like my own Brother, beware for God's sake of the delusions and sophistications that is (sic) ripping up the talent and respectability of our Friend (Hunt). . . . <14> The following day Keats returned a letter, in which he wrote,

Perhaps it is a self-delusion to say so -- but I think I could not be (sic) deceived in the Manner that Hunt is -- may I die tomorrow if I am to be. There is no greater Sin after the 7 deadly than to flatter oneself into an idea or being a great Poet . . . <15>

Haydon not only suspected Hunt of self-delusions; he also distrusted his motives. <16> Later Haydon advised Keats not to show *Endymion* to Hunt. In October 1817 Keats wrote, "Haydon says to me(,) Keats(,) dont (sic) show your Lines to Hunt on any account or he will have done half for you -- so it appears Hunt wishes it to be thought." <17> The nervousness and depression which was made evident in his letters was probably one reason for his willingness to doubt the motives of one who had recently been a close friend. <18>

There was, however, probably more to the conflict than Keats's unbalanced temper. Keats's poetic pursuits and ambitions complicated the situation. In this respect, three different problems seem to have been weakening the friendship between 1817 and 1820: 1) Keats's dislike for Hunt's style of poetry and Hunt's disapproval of *Endymion*, the epic poem which Keats wrote during the summer and fall of 1817, 2) his desire not to be considered a follower of Hunt, and 3) the idea that Hunt somehow harmed his aesthetic sense.

Keats's letters give evidence of these concerns. With respect to the first, he wrote to a friend about a proposed preface to *Endymion*, "Since you all agree that the thing is bad, it must be so -- though I am not aware there is anything like Hunt in it, (and if there is, it is my natural way, and I have something in common with Hunt"); <19> and about Hunt's criticism of *Endymion*, he wrote earlier to his brother,

. . . he allows it not much merit as a whole; says it is unnatural and made ten objections to it in the mere skimming over. He says the conversation is unnatural and too high-flown. . . . The fact is he and Shelley are hut 1, and perhaps justly, at my not having showed them the affair officiously -- and . . . they appear much disposed to dissect and anatomize, any trip or slip I may have made -- But whose (sic) afraid? <20>

Evidence of Keat's desire not to be seen as a follower of Hunt is shown in his correspondence with Benjamin Bailey, and the desire seems to have been related to Haydon's notion that Hunt "will have done half." Keats wrote to Bailey in October of 1817,

You see Bailey how independent my writing has been . . . and after all I shall have the Reputation of Hunt's eleve. His corrections and amputations will by the Knowing ones be traced in this Poem. This is to be sure the vexation of a day . . . <21>

Keats preferred being an "Eagle" with Shakespeare and Milton to being an "owl" with Hunt and Wordsworth. <22> Finally, in a lengthy journal letter, composed during December 1818 and early January 1819 to his brother George and his wife, Keats wrote, "Hunt does one harm by making fine things petty and beautiful things hateful. . . ." <23> The winter of 1818-1819 seems to have marked the low point in Keats's esteem for Hunt. <24>

The result of this reaction and disillusionment was that Keats no longer enjoyed Hunt's company -- there is no indication, however, that Hunt was dissatisfied with Keats. The young poet repeated in his letters that he was "tired" of it all. He no longer valued conversations with Hunt:

. . . men and tin kettles are much the same in these days. . . . Conversation is not a search for knowledge, but an endeavor at effect. In this respect two most opposite men, Wordsworth and Hunt, are the same. . . <25>

Nor did he show his former admiration for Hunt's liberal principles. <26>

The summer of 1820 revived the friendship. Keats was very ill with tuberculosis and, during his illness, had been sharing a house with his friend Charles Brown. When Brown left on his annual summer hike through the Hebrides, Keats moved to a house near Hunt's residence in Kentish Town. On June 23rd he moved in with the Hunts. <27> His letters bespeak his appreciation of Hunt's kindness toward him. The renewed friendship was temporarily dampened when one of Hunt's servants opened a letter to Keats from Fanny Brawne. Keats was very upset by this and left Hunt's house. He recognized his overreaction, however, and wrote to Hunt, "I hope to see you whenever you call get time(.) for I feel really attached to you for your many sympathies with me, and patience at my lunses." <28>

Not long after these events, Keats left for Italy. The *Indicator*, a supplement to the *Examiner*, marked his departure with an "Adieu to Keats," saying he would "soon be back." <29> Such was not the case; Keats died in Rome on February 23, 1821.

Hunt's Literary Criticism

Keats had published three volumes of poetry: *Poems by John Keats* 1817; *Endymion*, 1818; and *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems*, 1820. Hunt's criticism of each of these volumes will be considered.

Edmund Blundell in his book on the *Examiner* praises Hunt's farsighted review of *Poems*. He is "not blind to faults, but he discerns excellences with prophetic quickness." <30> As for faults, he reveals two kinds: an indiscriminate notice of details, and variety in versification without proper "consideration of its principles." <31> Hunt is kind in his praises of Keat's early poetry:

We come now however to the beauties; and the reader will easily perceive that they not only outnumber the faults hundred fold, but they are of a nature decidedly opposed to what is false and inharmonious. Their characteristics indeed are a fine ear, a fancy and imaginations at will, and an intense feeling of external beauty in its most natural and least expressible simplicity. <32>

Keats's second volume, *Endymion*, was attacked in the press by *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review* and was attacked in a series of articles directed primarily at Hunt; his circle was labeled the "Cockney School" and Keats was considered to be a member of that group. Hunt did not write a response defending *Endymion* against those very negative reviews. He merely published a retort by John H. Reynolds. Hunt was criticized for this and it seems that Keats expected some defense of his work by Hunt. <33> Miller has pointed out the correctness of Hunt's response. He could not adequately defend that of which he disapproved, and, moreover, his reply would probably only have resulted in greater injury to Keats. <34>

In a review of Keats's third volume, Hunt refers to *Endymion*. He writes,

Endymion with all its extraordinary powers, partook of the faults of youth, though the best ones; but tire reader of *Hyperion* and these other stories would never guess that they were written at twenty. [They weren't !] <35>

The emphasis which Hunt places on Keats' maturity of genius and on his mastery of imagery and versification as shown in the third volume is striking. It was the absence of these characteristics which troubled him before. In *The Eve of St. Agnes*, he finds a passage which "affords a striking specimen of the sudden and strong maturity of tile author's genius." <36> Hunt attempts to describe Keats's genius:

The character of his genius is that of energy and voluptuousness, each able at will to take leave of the other, and possessing in their union, a high feeling of humanity not common in the best authors who can combine them. Mr. Keats undoubtedly takes his seat with the eldest and best of our living poets. <37>

Whatever the changes in their friendship, Hunt continued to see great promise and poetic genius in Keats.

Hunt's Influence on Keats

Hunt's influence on the public's opinion of Keats in his time was unfavorable. <38> Indeed, Keats was ignored at first and later attacked largely because of his affiliation with Hunt. Clarke tells of the reception which his early work received, blaming its failure to be well received on Hunt's reputation:

The whole community, as if by compact seemed determined to know nothing about it [the first volume]. . . .[H]e might have had a better chance of success had he been an anti-Jacobin. Keats had not made the slightest demonstration of political opinion; but . . . he

had dedicated his book to Leigh Hunt, a Radical and a dubbed partisan of the first Napoleon; because, when alluding to him, Hunt did not always subjoin the fashionable Cognomen of "Corsican Monster." <39>

As was mentioned earlier, the damaging review of *Endymion* from *Blackwood's Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review* were part of a general attack on the "Cockney School."

Hunt also had an influence on Keats' poetry. His effect on Keats' early poetry was considerable. Keats moved away from Hunt's influence, however, and his later works show little that could have been taken from Hunt. According to Miller, "What influence lingers is seen in the general theory of versification and in the diction, with some trace in matters of taste." <40>

Conclusion

Probably the clearest movement in the friendship between John Keats and Leigh Hunt, after its having been established, was Keats' movement away from dependence upon Hunt and away from close association with him. It is not surprising, considering Keats' preoccupation with poetry, that it figured in their coming together and in the suspicions and attitudes of Keats. Indeed, Keats's progress through the relationship was steadily toward greater independence he refused Hunt's recommendations and Shelley's invitations to him to depend on Shelley, because he cherished his independence. During the summer of 1820, Keats was forced into dependence by his illness. By then, however, the relationship was very different from what it had been at the start. Keats' poetry follows the same route, from an early dependence upon Hunt's example to a conscious independence.

Notes

1 Edmund Blunden, *Leigh Hunt's "Examiner" Examined* (London: Harper & Brothers, 1931), p. 23.

2 Barnette Miller, *Leigh Hunt's Relations with Byron, Shelley and Keats* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1910), p. 13.

3 Blunden, p. 93.

4 Sidney Colvin, *Keats* (New York: Martin's Press, 1968), pp. 9-10.

5 John Keats, *The Poetical and Other Writings of John Keats*, edited by H. Buxton Forman, vol. 5. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons., 1938-39), p. 332.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 337.

8 Colvin, p. 222.

9 Keats, vol. 5, p. 338.

10 Miller, p. 222.

11 Leigh Hunt, *Autobiography of Leigh Hunt* (New York: Harper & Brothers), p. 39.

12 Keats, vol. 1, p. 5.

13 G. M. Matthews, ed., *Keats, the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 42.

14 Keats, vol. 6, p. 39.

15 Keats, vol. 6, pp. 43-44.

16 Miller, pp. 40-41.

17 Keats, vol. 6, p. 75.

18 Miller, p. 40.

19 Keats, vol. 6, p. 186.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 138.

23 *Ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 165.

24 Robert Gitting, *John Keats: the Living Year 21 September 1818 to 21 September 1819* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1954), p. 47.

25 Keats, vol. 7, p. 165.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 139.

27 *Ibid.*, vol. 8, p. 199. (editor's note)

28 *Ibid.*, p. 226.

29 Blunden, p. 158.

30 Ibid., p. 67.

31 Ibid., p. 132.

32 Ibid., p. 134.

33 Hunt, pp. 38-39.

34 Miller, pp. 41-42.

35 Blunden, p. 157.

36 Ibid., p. 152.

37 Miller, p. 51.

38 Ibid., p. 37.

39 Keats, vol. 5.

40 Miller, p. 58.

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