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An English Poet in Scotland: John Keats's Letters to His Brother Tom

Travelling is at the core of the romantic experience of life, as it implies a form of reaching out in quest of experience, which will then be, to quote famous words, “recollected in tranquillity”. The romantic poets travelled considerably, both physically and mentally, and I will try to address the two forms of journey in this paper, since I believe that imaginary excursions colour our view of new territory, and shape our prejudices. John Keats was a well-read traveller, who had been impressed by Robert Burns’s poetry; largely from these poems, he formed an image of Scotland before going there.

Keats’s way of travelling was rather unorthodox: he was not unlike our modern hikers who, armed with a backpack and the *Rough Guide*, try to discover a foreign country with as little money as possible. He considered his walking tour in the North as a decisive step in his life, even before setting out.¹ We discover his feelings thanks to the journal-letters he wrote to his brother every day, which makes for immediacy, but also thanks to the letters he sent his friends, on a less regular basis. The comparison between the two forms of writing is often significant. This medium itself is decisive in helping Keats come to terms with his experiences in Scotland, and later in making it possible for him to compose poems connected with these experiences.

I will begin by analysing Keats’s reactions when confronted with the foreignness of Scotland, and try to show how his letters can both overcome geographical distance and provide some primary form of self-expression, necessary as an outlet for Keats at this stage. He never fails to underline the humorous side of his journey, and the humorous distance thus created seems to me to be a first step towards aesthetic distance. However, the sense of foreignness should not hide the fact that Keats could relate to some aspects of Scotland, namely, the aesthetic and literary dimensions. Although the reality of Scotland sometimes shocked him because it was so different from both his familiar experiences and his expectations, his pleasure in the Scottish landscape and his admiration of Burns provided a sense of belonging to the same tradition, of sharing a common culture. Yet this very sense of

¹ In a letter to his friend Bailey, sent in July 1818, he wrote: “I should not have consented to myself these four Months tramping in the highlands but that I thought it would give me more experience, rub off more Prejudice, use [me] to more hardship, identify finer scenes load me with grander Mountains, and strengthen more my reach in Poetry, than would stopping at home among Books even though I should reach Homer –” “To Benjamin Bailey”, 22 July 1818, in *The Letters of John Keats 1814 – 1821*, Hyder E. Rollins, ed. , Cambridge, Mass. , Harvard University Press, 1958. 2 vols, I, p. 342. All subsequent references to the letters will be taken from this edition. The name of the addressee, the date, the volume and the page will follow each quotation in the text.

belonging also led him to question his own calling as a poet. Finally, I'll turn to the poems written by Keats about his trip, or inspired by it, so as to understand how art could provide some answer to the experiences he had undergone, how the alien could finally be integrated within his consciousness and then shared with others.

The 1820's were a time of integration for Scotland, within Britain; the last Jacobite risings were remote enough in time, people in Scotland had sided with the English in the war against the American colonies, merchants were making money in Glasgow, the Caledonian Canal was being built, and other travellers, including poets, were beginning to discover Scotland: Dorothy and William Wordsworth had been on a walking tour of Scotland once before and were about to go on a second one.² Of course, the publication of Burns's poems had triggered a new interest in Scotland for more Southern poets. Yet when one reads Keats's letters, the primary feeling is definitely one of otherness, of shock when confronted with such different habits.

His sense of being in a foreign country is shown by his use of vocabulary: he only uses the word "Britain" once, when he tells his brother that he has ascended Ben Nevis, which is "the highest Mountain in Great Britain" ("To Tom Keats," 3 August 1818, I, 352). This use of the word obviously comes from knowledge found in books, not from any experienced perception of reality. There appears to be some kind of abstract entity called Great Britain, from which one can linguistically derive an adjective "British", but Keats's attitude when discovering Scotland is that of a person entering a foreign country.

Because he has read about Scotland and has had access to guide books, he has a literary view of the country, a view that leaves no room for the very real poverty he discovers during the tour. As a result his impressions often show a clash between expectations shaped by the words he has read and reality. Ironically enough, language is the first sign of foreignness he notices. "I am for the first time in a country where a foreign Language is spoken – they gabble away Gaelic at a vast rate – numbers of them speak English –" (I, 338). Not making sense of the words he hears obviously matters a great deal to this young poet. Then come food and drink, oatcakes as a sort of curse, whisky as the national drink, so comforting for Keats after a long day walking in the rain, but above all he is shocked by the poverty of the country.

² They went walking in Scotland in 1803 and in 1822. Dorothy Wordsworth published her *Recollections* in 1805, and later her *Journal of My Second Tour of Scotland*, in 1822.

His description of the cottages where he has to stay at night, not being rich enough to pay for an inn, also betrays his dismay when confronted with such backward ways.

I cannot give you a better idea of Highland Life than by describing the place we are in – The Inn or public is by far the best house in the immediate neighbourhood – It has a white front with tolerable windows – the table I am writing on surprises me as being a nice flapped Mahogany one; at the same time the place has no watercloset nor anything like it. You may if you peep see through the floor chinks into the ground rooms. (...) If you had gone round to the back of the House just now – you would have seen more hills in a Mist – some dozen wretched black Cottages scented of peat smoke which finds its way by the door or a hole in the roof – a girl here and there barefoot There was one little thing driving Cows down a slope like a mad thing – all up to the ankles in dirt – (“To Tom Keats”, 21 July 1818, I, 338-9)

This is not the picturesque description of a peasant cottage one might expect! Keats is obviously upset by what he sees, and his vision of Scotland is clearly coloured by his Englishness. He feels superior, convinced that his own way of life is by far more comfortable and healthier, but also betrayed because this is not what he was expecting. When his own comfort is not threatened, he can enjoy the picture of Scotland, and his bewildered anger usually appears after he has been complaining of blisters or hunger, when the reality of life intrudes. Then he takes it out on the Scottish way of life, although the sense of otherness is mostly felt within himself, as it were. When he writes, “I cannot manage the cursed Oatcake –” (I, 338) one may wonder whom he is more angry with, the Scots or himself, for failing to rise to his own standards. Thus, obviously, the journey to Scotland, because of the physical exercise implied as well as the discovery of other customs, leads Keats to redefine his own sense of identity. Writing letters helps him do so, by providing a form of expression which thrives on immediacy.

However, even though he is troubled by the reality he discovers, characteristically, Keats tries to make fun of it. His empathic approach to other men can be felt when he describes a dancing class he has watched:

... we were greatly amused by a country dancing school, holden at the Tun, it was indeed ‘no new cotillon fresh from France.’ No they kickit & jumpit with mettle extraordinary, & whiskit, & fleckit, & toe’d it, & go’d it, & twirld it, & wheel’d it, & stampt it, & sweated it, tattooing the floor like mad; The differenc[e] between our country dances & these scotch figures, is about the same as leisurely stirring a cup o’ Tea & beating up a batter pudding. (“To Tom Keats”, 1 July 1818, I, 307)

In these lines, we can discover both the feeling of otherness (“we” being clearly opposed to “they”) and some sympathy for the people he describes, although felt to be

different from him. Humour is essential, because it provides distance and perspective, and in this case, also makes the account more literary, since Keats is imitating Sterne's description of a young filly. Keats's pleasure in words is here taking over; he is using reality to conjure up a comic scene and to make his brother laugh. In other words, after being shocked because what he discovers fails to come up to his expectations, he then succeeds in re-assessing his own perceptions with humorous distance. This will, in other letters, lead to more distance and to a more literary description of his experiences. When writing daily to Tom, however, he is intent on sharing his perceptions in the most direct way, and this is why his main concern is to render his impressions as faithfully as possible, hence the hybrid form he chooses at the beginning of the journey:

Here beginneth my journal, this Thursday, the 25th day of June, Anno Domini 1818. This morning we arose at 4, and set off in a Scotch mist; put up once under a tree, and in fine, have walked wet and dry to this place, called in the vulgar tongue Endmoor, 17 miles; we have not been incommoded by our knapsacks; they serve capitally, and we shall go on very well. ("To Tom Keats", 25 June 1818, I, 298)

This sounds very formal, as though Keats were intending other readers along with his brother. It is also the first of Keats's journal letters, and he was to write a few more, mostly to his other brother George, who had emigrated to America. The first lines show that he is thinking of a diary more than of a letter. The text is not addressed, the date and the formal tone, along with the Latin words, all reveal that this is a solemn enterprise. One may wonder what is more solemn, though, the trip itself – and the self-discovery it implies – or the diary, i. e. the act of writing about his experiences.

This hybrid form, i. e., a diary explicitly addressed to a specific reader, may embody Keats's way of coming to terms with his own identity,³ as he is being confronted with otherness. Indeed, by organising his impressions as a diary, by vowing to give an account of his every move and feeling, as though for himself, he is creating some discipline for himself and at the same time finding time during the day when he can reflect on what has happened, and put physical discomfort at a safe distance. Writing is something he can master more easily than his experiences. The sense of distance is created more easily because the diary is also a letter, and because, like many travel writers, Keats is intent on entertaining his audience.

³ Indeed, the poet who conceived of himself as a "camelion Poet" ("To Woodhouse", 27 October 1818, I, 387) always had doubts concerning his own identity. Even his tombstone in Rome does not bear his name, but refers to him as a "Young English Poet".

Instead of using the diary as an outlet, he also tries to make his impressions interesting for other readers, and this is why we can sense a difference between the journal letters to Tom and letters sent to other addressees during the same trip. The addressees act as a safeguard, preventing Keats from dwelling on his discomfort and shock, unless they be made amusing. Thus, in one of the letters he sends his friend Reynolds, he jumbles together his sore feet and his sense of the sublime in the same enumerative sentence:

I'll not run over the Ground we have passed. that would be merely as bad as telling a dream – unless perhaps I do it in the manner of the Laputan press – that is I put down Mountains, Rivers Lakes, dells, glens, Rocks, and Clouds, With beautiful enchanting, gothic picturesque fine, delightful, enchancting, Grand, sublime – a few Blisters &c – and now you have our journey thus far: (“To J. H. Reynolds, 11 July 1818, I, 322)

Thanks to the language he masters, he can polish off the sense of unpleasant experience, and even show his awareness of doing so. Yet, we can see that the tone has changed: instead of trying to recapture each event in its sequence, so as to be faithful to reality, Keats is here organising his discourse, recomposing his previous experience, and doing so with literary references.

The letter thus anticipates on a form of literary expression, as we saw with the description of the dancing class, and this will become more obvious when Keats reacts to the landscape and when he visits Burns’s cottage. Indeed, these two elements are linked to literature and beauty for the poet, and automatically lead him to care about the style of his writing.

Keats had gone to Scotland for experiences, but also to see some beautiful landscapes, “to gorge wonders” (“To J. H. Reynolds”, 9 April 1818, I, 268), as he put it in a letter to Reynolds a few weeks before leaving on his tour. Here reality even surpasses his expectations, and his descriptions of Loch Lomond, of Staffa and of Ben Nevis all show how excited and impressed he is. Confronted with the landscape, his only reaction is enthusiasm, in this case the movement towards disappointment is reversed, and his best way of rendering what he has felt will be to create poetry about it. In this respect, Scotland becomes accepted as part of his experience, and the sense of otherness is replaced by a feeling of communion, and of joy.

He tries hard to find the right words to convey his pleasure and the beauty of the landscape, and several times he regrets the fact that he cannot draw what he has seen, saying words cannot pay justice to reality. Here again language is an issue, as though no English words could rise to the occasion: trying to share his impressions in a letter is a stage in the process that will lead a poet to carry out the process of poetic creation as Wordsworth had defined it a few years earlier.⁴ When he writes to his brother, because these are letters meant to touch the addressee, to convey the writer's presence to him,⁵ Keats tries to be as accurate as possible, but also to convey his emotions. Thus, still in the first letter, before he actually sets foot in Scotland, he describes the lake of Windermere: "I cannot describe them [the Lake and Mountains of Winander] – they surpass my expectation – beautiful water – shores and islands green to the marge – mountains all round up to the clouds" ("To Tom Keats", 25 June 1818, I, 298). The absence of verbs or link words, and the use of dashes all show that Keats is here acting like a painter, sketching a landscape, adding touches rather than organising a full-scale picture. This impressionistic description is meant to strike Tom, as Keats himself was struck when seeing the lake for the first time. Yet language is not enough, and in this sentence the meaning, the emotion seem to lie in the silence, embodied by the dashes, more than in the actual words. When he reaches Loch Lomond, he finds the lake so beautiful, and his own attempt at expressing what he has seen so clumsy, that he includes a drawing of the lake within the letter.⁶

But occasionally, as we have seen, he also writes to another addressee, and the letter to Reynolds which I quoted earlier is a case in point. Since he does not write as often to others as to his brothers, he has more time for composition and the result is definitely literary. At the very end of the trip, just before sailing back to London because of a persistent sore throat, he writes a letter to Mrs Wylie, the mother of his brother George's new wife, and sums up his journey:

... I have been *werry* romantic indeed, among these Mountains & Lakes. I have got wet through day after day, eaten oat cake, & drank whiskey, walked up to my knees in Bog, got a sore throat, gone to see Icolmkill & Staffa, met with wholesome food, just here & there as it happened; went up Ben Nevis, & N.B. came down again; ("To Mrs Wylie", 6 August 1818, I, 360)

⁴ Keats admired Wordsworth considerably, and had tried to visit him when in the Lake District, before crossing into Scotland.

⁵ Tom Keats was ill at the time, and he would die of tuberculosis in December 1818. As a consequence, Keats made special efforts to entertain his brother with his letters.

⁶ See Rollins I, 334, n. 4.

As in the letter to Reynolds, Keats has added some distance to his perceptions, a distance which is again made humorous, even fanciful. Once again, he seems to enjoy enumerating elements which apparently have nothing in common, although they all refer to his experiences in Scotland. The very real pain and discomfort are hidden by the language, which here fashions ingredients to create a vision. Thus, enumeration is a way of hiding the painful emotions behind facts and actions. Even having a sore throat (which is a disease, a state of being) is here made active, and this makes the ailment appear less ominous, although Keats had to abandon his walking tour and to sail back to London because of it. This letter acts as a form of conclusion to the walking tour, and Keats here puts the beauty of Scotland on the same level as its otherness.

The second source of attraction to Scotland was Burns and his work, especially as Keats was himself a poet. Going to visit Burns's cottage, to see his grave, were symbolic gestures showing a sense of having common roots, of shared cultural and spiritual values, even though the reality here again contradicted his expectations.

Indeed, Keats was depressed to discover that the poet he admired had led such a miserable life. This is one of his comments in a letter written to Reynolds:

One song of Burns's is of more worth to you than all I could think for a whole year in his native country – His Misery is a dead weight upon the nimbleness of one's quill – I tried to forget it – to drink Toddy without any Care – to write a merry Sonnet – it wont do – he talked with Bitches – he drank with Blackguards, he was miserable – (“To J. H. Reynolds”, 13 July 1818, I, 325)

The reality of Burns's life, as glimpsed through talks with the people who had known the poet, came as a disillusion to Keats: the man was not as attractive as his poems, reality proving inferior to words once again, and perhaps more significantly, showing that Burns's words had failed to convey the reality of his life. What's particularly interesting is that while looking up to Burns, Keats longed to forget about the Scotsman's surroundings. In another letter, this time addressed to his brother, he has these revealing words:

Poor unfortunate fellow – his disposition was southern – how sad it is when a luxurious imagination is obliged in self defence to deaden its delicacy in vulgarity, and riot in things attainable that it may not have leisure to go mad after things which are not (“To Tom Keats”, 9 July 1818, I, 320)

Although the first words show Keats trying to assimilate Burns into his own English consciousness by associating Burns with the South, the generalisation also reveals the fact that his assessment of the Scottish poet is in fact a comment on himself, as a poet, and on the difficulty of being a great poet in unfavourable circumstances. Thus, while Burns's association to his native country is rejected, his greatness is still welcome, and even more so, by contrast, when Keats discovers the place where he lived. This leads Keats to question what makes a great poet.

Thus, taken in context with Keats's reactions to Burns, the letters from Scotland also tackle more directly the young poet's concern with art, and with the relationship between the artist and his surroundings.

Keats is disappointed when he meets the man in Burns's cottage, but he had been highly impressed by the view as he was approaching Ayr:

then we set forward to Burnes's town Ayr – the Approach to it is extremely fine – quite outwent my expectations richly meadowed, wooded, heathed and rivuleted – with a grand Sea view terminated by the black Mountains of the isle of Arran. As soon as I saw them so nearly I said to myself 'How is it they did not beckon Burns to some grand attempt at Epic' ("To Tom Keats", 13 July 1818, I, 331)

Thus, the landscape is explicitly associated with poetry, and in good eighteenth century fashion, it also fashions men's behaviour. As he discovers the Scottish landscape, Keats feels inspired to write poetry as well, although most of the poems he writes during the trip are light verse, not serious poetry.

However, when in Burns country he composed two sonnets. As mentioned in the letter to Reynolds, he wrote one as he was visiting Burns's cottage.⁷ He had also composed a sonnet after seeing Burns's tomb,⁸ and both poems, not Keats's best, express his dismay as he fails to feel any poetic emotion: "My eyes are wandering, and I cannot see,/ Fancy is dead and drunken at its goal;" ("This Mortal Body of a Thousand Days", 7-8). The sonnet "On Visiting the Tomb of Burns" concludes with a significant couplet: "Great shadow, hide/Thy face – I sin against thy native skies." Here the difference between the letters and the poems is obvious: while in the poems Keats appears to be paralysed by his lack of feeling, in the letters he can express his sadness and his anger, as he discovers that the great poet's cottage is now

⁷ "This Mortal Body of a Thousand Days".

⁸ "On Visiting the Tomb of Burns".

occupied by a drunkard. The poems are meant to celebrate Burns, and can hardly dwell on these circumstances, hence their laboured rhetoric. Keats shows his awareness of the problem in ‘On Visiting the Tomb of Burns’, through the final couplet. He cannot manage to accept the reality of Burns’s life, while still admiring his fellow-poet, hence the use of the word “sin”. This of course also means that he is wondering about his own life, and his own – future! – achievements as a poet. On the other hand, the letters appear more violent, and less concerned with representation than with sharing Keats’s disappointment with his addressees.

However, this contrast between letters and poems cannot be felt when reading the other poems sent from Scotland. Most of them are light verse, in which he imitates the Scottish dialect or imagines a dialogue between a very fat lady who was said to have ascended Ben Nevis, and the mountain itself. What’s interesting is that the humorous distance that led him to use Sterne’s vocabulary and rhythm when describing his impressions about Scottish dancing, or to allude to Swift when trying to sum up his journey for Reynolds, appears to be the first step towards literary creation, and these funny poems, about the gadfly or the bagpipe, represent the second step. Contrary to the poems written in Burns country, the others appear closer to the letters which carry them, and they are closely related to the letters in which they were sent, both through their contents and through their style. All these light poems make gentle fun of sources of discomfort, and attempt to establish some distance.

After visiting Staffa, he spends a long part of a letter trying to describe the island for Tom, and towards the conclusion of his description, he shifts to poetry: “As we approached in the boat there was such a fine swell of the sea that the pillars appeared rising immediately out of the crystal – But it is impossible to describe it – Not Aladin Magian / Ever such a work began, / Not the Wizard of the dee / Ever such dream could see...” (“To Tom Keats”, 26 July 1818, I, 349). Since Keats cannot draw, poetry is called upon to describe the landscape, and the letter gradually turns into poetry. The feeling here is that only poetry is fit to convey such beauty, and we can notice an evolution: earlier in the trip, Keats had lamented the fact that language could not satisfactorily convey the beauty of the landscape. Now, he tries poetry, although, characteristically enough, the verse is devoted to this failure of language, and the poem is unfinished.

However, thanks to poetry, he manages to consider the Scottish past as his own. The following are lines written about his approach to Burns’s cottage, and they show that he shares the sense of a common history with the country: “There is a joy in footing slow across a silent plain/Where Patriot Battle has been fought when Glory had the gain;/ There is a pleasure on the heath where Druids old have been, /Where Mantles grey have rustled by and

swept the nettles green” (“To Benjamin Bailey”, 22 July 1818, I, 344). Unlike the sentence I quoted earlier about Gaelic, these lines, thanks to the use of impersonal phrases, stress the universal quality of the experience. This response represents Keats’s way of integrating strange experiences, as a poet, as a fashioner of language. The poems included in the letters however show that he was not completely ready to do so during the trip. He needed more time for the experience to rest before he could use it in fully accomplished poetry.

And time proved useful, since once he had returned home in Hampstead he started to compose his *Hyperion*. Critics have pointed out that some of the lines in the opening were inspired by the walking tour of Scotland. Thus, the “cathedral cavern” (*Hyperion*, I, 86)⁹ which serves as a background to Thea and Saturn’s despair in Book I is an unmistakable reference to Fingal’s cave. This is exactly the process described by Wordsworth in his famous preface; Keats himself had used the image of the silkworm in a letter to Reynolds.¹⁰ My point here, however, is not to analyse the poetic process at work or to comment on poetic creation, but merely to show that by composing a poem some weeks after leaving Scotland and using material gathered in Scotland, Keats makes Scotland home to himself, within his mind and thanks to his creative use of language; what was alien has now been integrated, digested, to use a very Keatsian phrase, and has now become part of a common heritage.

Moreover, when, a year after the walking tour of Scotland, Keats composed his *Fall of Hyperion*, he probably remembered how reality had failed to match the expectations raised by books, and how difficult he had found it to reconcile his poetic vision with the reality he had met. The poem stages a discussion between the goddess Moneta and the narrator, about the distinction she creates between poets and dreamers. Keats’s doubts about the use of the poet in society, voiced on many occasions in his letters and poems, took a new turn with the walking tour of Scotland, partly because of his experience in Burns’s cottage.¹¹

Thus, the walking tour of Scotland provided Keats with experience, as he had anticipated, and sowed the seeds of the great poems he was to write in the next year. I believe that the letters written during the tour helped Keats begin a creative process which ended with *The Fall of Hyperion* and the composition of the great odes, all devoted to the tension between the reality of life and the ideal world of art. Because of their special status, his letters

⁹ Indeed, in the letter to Tom quoted earlier, in the poem “Not Aladin Magian”, we find the phrase “this Cathedral of the Sea” twice. See “To Tom Keats”, 26 July 1818, I 350.

¹⁰ “I endeavour’d to drink in the Prospect, that I might spin it out to you as the silkworm makes silk from Mulberry leaves –” (“To J. H. Reynolds”, 11 July 1818, I, 323)

¹¹ The other significant experience in this respect had occurred when Keats tried to pay Wordsworth a visit, and discovered that the poet was out canvassing for Lowther.

allowed him to express his emotions and to start distancing himself from them; they also helped him find words for these experiences, and try to experiment with language. In a word, they acted as an artist's workshop.

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