

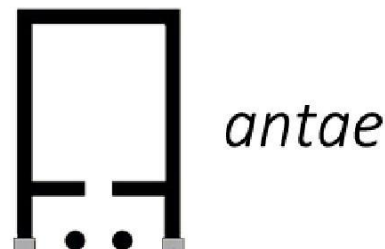
‘Keats as a nebula’: An Interview with Nicholas Roe

The *antae* Editorial Board

antae, Vol. 1, No. 2. (Jun., 2014), 72 – 78

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‘Keats as a nebula’: An Interview with Nicholas Roe

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ANTAE: We are aware that you have recently published *John Keats: A New Life*.¹ Could you tell us what led you to this new biography, and what one may expect upon reading it?

NICHOLAS ROE: *John Keats: A New Life* grew out of my sense that there was more to find out, to see, and more to say about the poet’s early childhood in London, and how those experiences may have helped shape the poet he became and the poetry he later wrote. Keats has often been described as a ‘liminal’ poet who haunted borderlines and thresholds of various kinds; what I wanted to explore was whether there were any aspects—of the places he lived in, visited, or simply saw as he passed through—that might have fostered that imagination. So readers can expect a fuller account of Keats’s early years at Keats’s Livery Stables in Moorfields and the suburban streets of north London, and more on the influence of various places in which Keats chose to write.

A: What would you say is the most intriguing episode of Keats’s life?

NR: There are many of them: his peculiar relationship with the enigmatic woman Isabella Jones, for example, whom he had first encountered in the spring of 1817 and met several (perhaps many) times afterwards. It was Isabella who suggested the theme of *The Eve of St Agnes*, so she was important to Keats’s imaginative life too. But who she was, or what became of her, I am still trying to find out. She’s one of Keats’s friends that we can only see through a kind of mist.

A: In a letter to J. H. Reynolds, Keats writes that he compares ‘human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which [he] can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon [him]’.² Do you think biographies on Keats can open the closed doors to his life?

NR: I think Isabella Jones liked to keep her various acquaintances separate—if not secret—so in a sense her life was indeed lived in separate apartments, and compartments, with doors shut to enquiring eyes.

Keats says that a poet such as Shakespeare led a life of allegory, and that his works are comments upon it. Taking the hint, perhaps we could read the formal restlessness of

¹ Nicholas Roe, *John Keats: A New Life* (New Haven, CT, London: Yale University Press, 2012).

² John Keats, ‘To J. H. Reynolds, 3 May 1818’, in *Selected Letters of John Keats: Revised Edition*, ed. by Grant F. Scott (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 120-125 (p. 124).

Keats's poetry—his search for a better sonnet form, for example—as a kind of commentary upon the rootlessness and shapelessness—the dissatisfactions, if you like—of much of his life, even if we knew nothing about that life as it had been lived 'in reality'.

Equally, the fragmentary state of a good handful of Keats's poems might offer a way into a different biographical speculation about the life.

A: Would you agree with Martin Heidegger's assertion that 'Romanticism has not yet come to its end'?³ Do you think it is a question even worth discussing?

NR: This assertion seems to assume that Romanticism is a singular and stable category, rather than a more diffuse or elusive possibility: Keats might describe it as being 'blind in mist', Heaney as a 'door into the dark'.⁴ I find it difficult to think of such states of mind, of feeling, or intuition as having an 'end', by which I mean a steady purpose or a conclusion.

A: In light of the previous question, one might remark that post-romanticism (if there is such a thing) does not seem to be on the theoretical radar all that much, and some would further claim that its absence is conspicuous. What do you yourself understand by 'post-romanticism'? Do you find it at all necessary to speak of it? And if so, what becomes of poetry in post-romanticism?

NR: Is there such a thing? The concept of 'post-romanticism', whether or not it appears on the 'theoretical radar', supposes the priority of a stable entity called 'Romanticism' that can be confidently located and identified. I am not sure that is the case, or whether to speak of 'post-Romanticism' would be possible or necessary. But it's certainly a discussion that could be had.

A: In 'A Defence of Poetry', Percy B. Shelley writes that 'Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change'.⁵ Does this remain a good perspective on the nature of poetry, in your view?

NR: It describes Shakespeare pretty well, so it sounds good to me.

A: What do you make of Keats's attempt to grapple with his desire to escape from an immanent life that can only offer 'weariness', 'fever' and 'fret'? In his desire to be carried 'on the viewless wings of Poesy', the poet hopes for transcendence through art

³ Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy: From Enowning*, trans. by Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 349.

⁴ John Keats, 'Sonnet written on top of the Ben Nevis', *The Other Poetry Of Keats*, ed. by Gerald B. Kauvar (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1969); and Seamus Heaney, 'The Forge', *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 20.

⁵ Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'A Defence of Poetry', *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, A Norton Critical Edition, 2nd edn, ed. by Donald H. Reiman and Neil Fraistat (New York, NY, London: Norton & Company, 2002), pp. 509-535 (p. 533).

which counters the transience of life which he dreads. But in thus soothing 'a burning forehead', or quenching 'a parching tongue', Keats is equally aware of missing out on something else: the suspended kiss of the 'Bold Lover' in 'Ode to a Grecian Urn', which seems to disappoint Keats as much as it pleases him aesthetically. Later on, Keats seems to prefer the state of being 'Awake for ever in sweet unrest' rather than being as 'steadfast' as the titular 'Bright Star'.⁶ What are your views on this?

NR: Well you describe those Keatsian dilemmas extremely well and leave little further to be said. I think there might be more to be mentioned about the alternatives posited by 'desire to escape', 'desire to be carried', 'hopes ... which counter', 'missing out', 'suspended', 'disappoint', 'pleases'. These suggest a Keats who swerves between opposite states—a creature of 'fits and starts', as his publisher once put it.⁷ There is another Keats who contrives to experience such alternatives, or opposites, simultaneously—in a Shakespearean sense, but also as Leigh Hunt had relished them, as 'luxuries'—experiences or moments that seem to bring contraries together: warmth and coolness, light and shadow, melancholy and pleasure. Already, one can sense in these complex sensations the kind of poetry Keats writes in 'I stood tip-toe', and, later, in a masterpiece like 'To Autumn'. This is the Keats who writes about 'being in a mist'—aware of different possibilities, doubts, uncertainties—and finding himself, at times, able to write from and through and perhaps beyond the mist. This is Keats as a nebula, a luminous mist in which bright stars are gradually formed.

A: The final inscription on Keats's tombstone reads:

This Grave contains all that was mortal, of a YOUNG ENGLISH POET, who on his Death Bed, in the Bitterness of his heart, at the Malicious Power of his enemies, desired these words to be Engraven on his Tomb Stone - Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water.⁸

Severn's words here point to a sense of Englishness on which Keats placed great value during his lifetime. How do you think Keats's identification with his homeland affected his poetry? By extension, do you think that the poor reviews to which he was subjected made distance appear all the harsher, precisely to the extent that it essentially seemed a betrayal and rejection by his very home?

NR: The famous final words of the epitaph were Keats's own; the rest of the memorial inscription had been suggested by Keats's friend Charles Brown, and adapted by Severn. It's a complicated story... Yes, Keats identified strongly with 'Englishness', as his hope of being numbered among the English poets indicates. It was in the autumn of 1819, I think,

⁶ John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale', *Keats: Poems* (New York, NY, London, Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), pp. 28-31 (p. 29); Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', *Keats: Poems*, pp. 32-34 (pp. 33, 32); Keats, 'Bright Star! Would I were steadfast as thou art', *The Picador Book of Love Poems*, ed. by John Stammers (London: Picador, 2011), p. 58.

⁷ Edmund Blunden, *Keats's Publisher* (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd., 1936), p. 56.

⁸ Brett Foster and Hal Marcovitz, *Rome*, Bloom's Literary Places Series (New York, NY: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), p. 121.

that he started to think about Englishness and how the English language ought to be purged of alien, French inflections that he thought had arrived with the Normans and subsequently infiltrated Chaucer's poetry. Somewhat oddly, he thought that Thomas Chatterton wrote the 'purest' English.

A: Do you think that the novelisation of Keats's and Brawne's relationship in the 1960s novel by Joan Rees, and later in Jane Campion's *Bright Star*, has been given recognition that somehow shifts attention away from the poetry itself?⁹ Or is it, as Andrew Motion comments in an interview for *The Guardian*, that this focus has 'the further benefit of embracing the period in which Keats wrote his greatest poems'?¹⁰

NR: There have been quite a few creative interpretations of Keats's life over the years, and there is no sign that interest in the poetry and letters has been distracted as a result. Rather the opposite, in fact. Jane Campion's film was accompanied by new paperback selections from Keats's poems and letters, and there was a marked increase in visitors to the Keats House at Hampstead, as well as the Keats-Shelley House at Piazza di Spagna, in Rome.

A: Keats's writing life is largely characterised by his grappling with Milton and Shakespeare in turn. David Pollard has recently stated that this tension, 'after a tumultuous struggle, is resolved in favour of Shakespeare'.¹¹ Do you think, as Pollard does, that ultimately Keats has overcome Milton?

NR: In September of 1819, Keats said he had 'but lately stood on [his] guard against Milton', which suggests a belated wariness about Milton's 'vein of art' rather than a more protracted and 'tumultuous struggle'.¹² This was more than two years after he had dared to speculate that Shakespeare might be his 'good Genius', his 'Presider'—so I think that a sequence of successive influences, drawing in other writers, artists, and musicians, might be closer to what happened.¹³ Keats was a virtuoso mimic, as his schoolmaster and friend Charles Cowden Clarke observed, and part of his genius lay in adopting and adapting others' voices.

I also think that there may have been a different reason for Keats saying that 'Life to [Milton] would be death to me'.¹⁴ Does this mean that, with Milton surviving for posterity as the poet of *Paradise Lost*, Keats could not hope to live as a poet too? Or does it gesture towards a darker affinity—that Keats knew *Paradise Lost* was the work of a blind poet,

⁹ See Joan Rees, *Bright Star: The Story of John Keats and Fanny Brawne* (London: Harrap, 1968); and *Bright Star*, dir. by Jane Campion (BBC Films, 2009).

¹⁰ See 'Rebel Angel', *The Guardian*, Saturday 24th October, 2009
<<http://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/oct/24/keats-jane-campion-bright-star>> [accessed 17 June, 2014]

¹¹ See 'Keats: On Overcoming Milton' <<http://www.davidpollard.net/keats-overcoming-milton>> [accessed 17 June, 2014]

¹² John Keats, 'To the George Keatses, 24 September 1819', in *The Letters of John Keats - Volume II: 1819-1821*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 184-217 (p. 212).

¹³ John Keats, 'To B. R. Haydon, 10, 11 May 1817', in *Selected Letters*, Scott, pp. 22-25 (p. 23).

¹⁴ Keats, 'To the George Keatses', *The Letters of John Keats*, p. 212.

and that the thought of living for years without eyesight, as Milton had done, was akin to death for Keats? I think that Keats, who may have been born prematurely, had problems with his eyesight and possibly a misalignment or 'cast' in one of them (Severn's sketch from 1816 may suggest as much). I wonder, too, if the doses of mercury Keats is known to have taken adversely affected his sight. On their Scottish tour, Keats and Brown were mistaken more than once as vendors of spectacles—perhaps Brown, who wore glasses, appeared to be the salesman and Keats his specimen patient. If Keats was worried about becoming blind ('Life to Milton would be death to me'), then perhaps the famous lines—'Darkling, I listen; and for many a time | I have been half in love with easeful Death'—may be more disquietingly close to actuality than might have been thought.¹⁵

A: In conclusion, in what direction do you see contemporary studies, those specifically revolving around Keats, going towards? What suggestions would you have for an early-career academic of British Romanticism?

NR: There is much exciting new work on Keats at the moment, as was apparent at the recent 'John Keats and his Circle' conference at Keats House, Hampstead, held on the second to the fourth of May, 2014. We had presentations on Keats in relation to surveillance, the visual arts, medicine, London, and in relation to other poets, as well as Keats in his letters and Keats as a proto-punk. The field of Keats studies seems to be expanding and diversifying in all kinds of fruitful ways. As for early-career suggestions: stay focused on the publication of a handful of substantial essays in peer-reviewed journals or essay collections, by way of seeing a way forward, over the slightly longer term, towards a first book.

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¹⁵ John Keats, 'Ode to a Nightingale', *Keats: Poems*, pp. 28-31 (p. 30).

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