

# The Poetry of John Hamilton Reynolds

ROBERT GITTINGS

THERE is no biography of John Hamilton Reynolds, the friend of Keats; yet it may be thought that his family circumstances, never fully examined before, afford some clue to the enigma of his poetry. No one has ever explained why Reynolds, author of four books of verse by the age of 22, and bracketed then by Leigh Hunt with Keats and Shelley, should have degenerated into a self-confessed failure — 'that poor obscure — baffled Thing, — myself!' In case it is thought that this situation arose from a simple critical mistake by Hunt, it is worth comparing two strikingly similar passages of verse, which Hunt had before him at the time, by Reynolds and by Keats. Reynolds's come from his *The Eden of the Imagination*, published in August 1814, when he was just under 20:

Forth from my cot I'll saunter to the fields,  
And revel midst the joys which nature yields, —  
Roam down the hedge where honeysuckle grows,  
Where sweet in wildness springs the blushing rose; —  
Or idly stray along the grove's green side,  
Where poppies hang the head in gaudy pride,  
To hear the black-bird pour his morning song,  
Midst the light chirping of a feathery throng: —  
And view the lark fresh springing from her nest,  
To catch the early sunbeams on her breast.  
Through the rude brakes, at times, I may behold,  
Bright with the rising sun, a sea of gold;  
Or, when across its breast breathe western gales,  
See the blue waters studded o'er with sails.

Keats's were written exactly two years later when he was nearly twenty-one, and come from his verse-epistle *To My Brother George*:

On one side is a field of drooping oats,  
 Through which the poppies show their scarlet coats;  
 So pert and useless, that they bring to mind  
 The scarlet coats that pester human-kind.  
 And on the other side, outspread, is seen  
 Ocean's blue mantle streak'd with purple, and green.  
 Now 'tis I see a canvass'd ship, and now  
 Mark the bright silver curling round her prow.  
 I see the lark down-dropping to his nest,  
 And the broad-winged sea-gull never at rest;  
 For when no more he spreads his feathers free,  
 His breast is dancing on the restless sea.  
 Now I direct my eyes into the west,  
 Which at this moment is in sunbeams drest.

We can see now that there is more originality, though perhaps less experience, in Keats's set of fourteen lines; but if one had been Hunt, writing his 'Young Poets' article at the end of November 1816, it would be difficult to have distinguished the two productions.

Reynolds himself came from a family whose odd diversities may have left him with a flawed personality, revealed in his poems. His grandfather Noble Reynolds, whose picturesque Christian name was not uncommon in the eighteenth century, was a charity child. The son of Thomas Reynolds, a tanner of Tottenham, he was bound apprentice to a barber on 3 April 1733, and his fee of five pounds was paid 'out of the publick charity of the said parish of Tottenham'.<sup>1</sup> Though admitted to the freedom of the Barbers' Company after a seven-years apprenticeship, on 1 July 1740,<sup>2</sup> he did not prosper, and was not elected to the Livery of his Company until 19 January 1764.<sup>3</sup> Just a year and a day later, his only son George was baptised at St Olave, Hart Street, where Noble Reynolds had married on 2 June 1761 his second wife, Susannah Beardsell. Noble Reynolds appears to have died in the 1770s in poor circumstances; on 6 February 1781, the Court of the Barbers' Company, allocating the Michael Tans charitable

<sup>1</sup> Guildhall Library, MS. 5266, vol. 4.

<sup>2</sup> G.L., MS. 5265, vol. 5.

<sup>3</sup> G.L., MS. 5257, vol. 10.

legacy to 'a poor Liveryman's widow', chose Susannah Reynolds.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile her son George had been educated at Christ's Hospital as a charity pupil from 16 March 1774 to 13 October 1779. It is not known what George Reynolds did on leaving school at the early age of fourteen, but by 5 February 1788 he was living at Kingsland, on the borders of Hackney and Tottenham,<sup>2</sup> from which his family had originally emerged. It is likely that he already was, as he remained all the rest of his life, a schoolmaster; many new schools had grown up in the Hackney area in the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

A charity child, like his father before him, respectably but only very summarily educated, the future father of John Hamilton Reynolds seems a surprising match for the wife he married on 7 January 1790 at St Mary le Bone Church. Charlotte Cox, whose two relatives signed the register, came from a totally different background. Related remotely by blood to the Coxes of Dunmanway, an Irish baronetcy, whose first member, Sir Richard Cox (1650-1733) was Lord Chancellor of Ireland, her ancestors had even more interesting and distinguished connections by marriage. One of the Coxes had married a Jane Hamilton, closely related to the Earls of Abercorn.<sup>4</sup> One of this latter family, Maria, daughter of the Honourable George Hamilton, was the mother of the famous William Beckford of Fonthill, author of *Vathek* and reputed to be the richest commoner in England, though his fortune, like his notorious mansion, eventually proved to have unstable foundations. Another and even more significant literary connection for John Hamilton Reynolds was that with William Beckford's cousin, Peter Beckford, scholar and classic writer on hunting and travel. Peter Beckford's prose style certainly influenced Reynold's own; the characteristic mixture of sporting technicality and literary allusion is common to both, making Reynolds's *London Magazine* essays on such subjects as wrestling and cockfighting almost a match for Peter Beckford's unrivalled description of the Palio at Siena. Such

<sup>1</sup> G.L., MS. 5257, vol. 11.

<sup>2</sup> G.L., MS. 5265.

<sup>3</sup> MS. Account, Hackney Public Library.

<sup>4</sup> General information in MS., Society of Genealogists.

glittering if sometimes tenuous relationships were actively perpetuated by the middle names given to Charlotte Cox's close relatives. That of her only son commemorated the Hamiltons, while her only brother was William Beckford Cox. He, like a large number of the Coxes, was a military man, serving in India and the East Indies; his eldest daughter, Jane, born in Sumatra, was the 'Charmian' of Keats's letters, attractive, worldly, poised and an heiress at the age of only nineteen.<sup>1</sup>

This union of two eighteenth-century families, one largely assisted by charity, the other associated with some of the most wealthy, attractive and talented people in England, may well have produced an extraordinary home life for their only son, John Hamilton Reynolds, born at Shrewsbury, where his father had gone to teach, on 9 September 1794. The picture we have of this home, from the letters of one of its most frequent visitors, John Keats, is of a household dominated by women, Mrs Reynolds and her daughters, Jane, Marianne, Eliza Beckford and Charlotte. Keats never says a word of the father, George Reynolds, and more than once suggests that the son, John Hamilton, would be better away from his mother and sisters, who were pretentious and snobbish. On the other hand, it is fair to mention that a charming poem by a former Shrewsbury pupil of George Reynolds, J. F. M. Dovaston, 'Lines to Mrs Reynolds with a Goose', is a eulogy of the happy married life of the Reynoldses at Lambeth. The family had returned to London in 1806, George Reynolds to take 'various places of emolument' in the teaching profession, and his son to go to St Paul's after having spent three years at Shrewsbury School. He left in summer 1810 to become a clerk in the Amicable Insurance Society, and in October 1812, at the age of 18, he had his first poem published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, an 'Ode to Friendship', dedicated to the family friend, Dovaston.

From the outset of a literary life that was to last for the next forty years, John Hamilton Reynolds showed the flaw that was to mark and eventually to mar his whole career as a poet. He

<sup>1</sup> Fort Marlborough Baptisms, N/7/1/181, India Office Records.

had an incurable lack of confidence in his productions. It may be, as one explanation, that he was pushed too early to emulate his mother's ancestors. He was certainly overpowered by his home atmosphere. Keats knew the family in 1817, when they were living in 19 Lamb's Conduit Street, and from early 1818 onwards, when they had moved to one of the 'Master's houses' near Christ's Hospital on George Reynolds being appointed Writing and Mathematical Master to his old school.<sup>1</sup> Here, in Little Britain, Keats describes his attractive friend as being 'very dull at home',<sup>2</sup> where he is 'among the strife of womens tongues'.<sup>3</sup> He even seems to have managed, by asserting his influence as a licensed apothecary, to extract Reynolds from his family, and get him to recuperate from an illness at the house of some former friends in Lambeth, the Butlers. The curious lack of ease, which penetrates even Reynolds's best poems, may perhaps be traced to this family background. It must have been a strong sense of inferiority that led him to write, when only 21,

I am one of those unfortunate youths to whom the Muse has glanced a sparkling of her light — one of those who pant for distinction, but have not within them that immortal power which alone can command it.<sup>4</sup>

The pursuit of distinction, without the 'immortal power' to attain it, had the effect of making Reynolds's early poetry almost entirely imitative. *Safie, An Eastern Tale*, published early in 1814 by his friend John Martin, is simply a rehash of Byron's popular productions of that time, as a few lines show:

Wounded and fainting Assad fell  
Upon the carnage-cover'd ground;  
But outward he was hale and well,  
Compar'd with inward wound.

*The Eden of the Imagination*, printed by the same publisher later in the year, is Wordsworthian, as the extract already quoted demonstrates. It resembles Wordsworth's *An Evening Walk*, even down to the ponderous footnotes, in one of which Reynolds eulogizes Wordsworth himself. A conventional *Ode* (1815) on the

<sup>1</sup> H. C. Shelley, *Literary By-Paths in Old England*, p. 326.

<sup>2</sup> *Letters*, ed. Rollins, II, 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters*, I, 236.

<sup>4</sup> *The Champion*, 7 April 1816.

fallen Napoleon was followed in the next year and with new publishers, Taylor and Hessey, by the poem praised by Leigh Hunt, *The Naiad*. This, based on a Scotch ballad, was, in its turn, an inflated romance in the style of Walter Scott. Perhaps encouraged by some kindly advice by Byron himself over *Safie* — ‘you should not be discouraged . . . a timid mind is apt to mistake every scratch for a mortal wound’ — Reynolds sent *The Naiad* to Wordsworth. He probably hoped the Lake poet would notice that two minor poems in the volume, ‘Margaret’ and ‘A Tale’, reproduced, again all too faithfully, the manner of *Lyrical Ballads*:

She was the spirit of the place  
 With eye so wild, and cheek so fair;  
 Her form so playful in its grace,  
 Mock'd her own mountain air.

Instead he received a reply from Rydal Mount, full of the somewhat humourless precision that marked Wordsworth at this time, suggesting that the main poem of 541 lines would be better if 203 of them were removed. Reynolds did not forget this perhaps unintended snub.

Reynolds's most considerable work in poetry was written in the years 1817 to 1821, and was published not long after Keats's death, in the volume *The Garden of Florence and other poems*. They had been years of stress and decision for Reynolds, though with nothing of the tragic intensity they held for Keats, and they had matured him up to a point. The 1816 *Naiad* volume had contained two sets of ‘Stanzas’ to a girl with whom Reynolds had been in love, and who had died young, before the beginning of 1815; but these, though obviously sincere, are conventional. At the end of August 1816, however, he went down to Exeter and Sidmouth with two friends, James Rice a lawyer, and Benjamin Bailey, whose brother had married the sister of John Martin, Reynolds's first publisher. These two had already introduced Reynolds by proxy, through his books, his poems, and his general reputation as a person ‘in whose actual acquaintance we are . . . confident you would be pleased’ to three

Devon girls.<sup>1</sup> Once met, these girls, the Leigh sisters of Sidmouth, introduced Reynolds to their Exeter friend, Eliza Powell Drewe, with whom he fell in love. To marry, Reynolds would have to find something more profitable than the insurance clerkship, though this was now supplemented by considerable and regular journalism for *The Champion*, a weekly edited by John Scott. Reynolds's friend Rice, who had recently qualified himself, advised the Law, and on 4 November 1817 paid the premium for Reynolds to be articled for five years. Directly he qualified, in 1822, Reynolds married Eliza Drewe, and went into partnership with Rice.

The circumstances of Reynolds's life while writing the poems in *The Garden of Florence* strongly resemble, therefore, those of Keats while writing the *Lamia, Isabella, Eve of St Agnes* volume. Both had fallen in love, lacked money, hoped that a book of poems might make their fortune, while Keats, though never actually going back to the profession for which he was qualified, spoke frequently of training again and working as a doctor. In addition, both tried a stage-play as a quick means of making money. It is natural to compare the two books, since they are made up of similar components. Reynolds, like Keats, has three main narrative poems, the title-poem, *The Romance of Youth*, and *The Ladye of Provence*, while his 'Lines' describing the valley of the Ide, near Exeter, echo Keats's *Fancy*. His volume lacks the central weight of the Keats Odes, whose place is taken by a number of sonnets, and there is nothing like the monumental fragment of *Hyperion*; but the impression made by the two books, published within a year of each other, is very similar, especially when it is remembered that two of Reynolds's poems, derived from Boccaccio, were intended to have been published with Keats's *Isabella*.

<sup>1</sup> MS. letter by James Rice, 9 October 1815, Leigh Browne Collection, Keats House, Hampstead. An actual introduction before August 1816 has always been assumed but there is no evidence for this: while, dating from 8 September 1816, Devon, never mentioned before, becomes one of Reynold's main themes in both poetry and prose. His poem 'Devon' in 1817 seems to speak of an introduction the previous Autumn, from which he dates his love of Devon; while it is certain that he spent his summer holiday in 1815 not in Devon but at Bradgate Park in Leicestershire, giving that date for his verse and prose descriptions of the place.

The difference is largely one of maturity of mind. Keats had embraced, through experience, the realities of life and death; with Reynolds, even at his best, these themes still tend to remain subjects for a poetic exercise. This is painfully clear since nearly every poem in this book shows the direct influence of particular passages from Keats. Reynolds is not always the inferior. His counterpart to Keats's *Fancy* has some memorable lines:

The bird sang late upon the tree  
 Its lonely song. The hush of night  
 Was born before its time: the light  
 Seem'd left unusually alone  
 In the wide heavens, — and the tone  
 Of our own voices was endued  
 With the mellowness of solitude.

Yet Reynolds's description of a feast in *The Romance of Youth* is only a poor cousin of Keats's in *The Eve of St Agnes*:

And golden berries, steep'd in cream, were soon  
 Brought there from stores in Asian palaces;  
 And from the lonely Mountains of the Moon,

will hardly stand much comparison with

And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;  
 Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd  
 From Fez.

The most interesting parallel, unnoticed by critics, is that between another passage in the same poem by Reynolds and Keats's *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, his recasting of *Hyperion*, which, though unpublished in his lifetime, was well-known to Reynolds.<sup>1</sup> Here Reynolds, like Keats, embodies his vision of reality in a terrifying, veiled female figure:

Before him stood  
 A figure tall, and in a shadowy dress:  
 It was as some lone spirit of the wood,  
 With eyes all dim, and fixed with distress, —  
 And sunken cheeks, — and lips of pallidness, —  
 Standing with folded arms, and floating hair,  
 The shadow of a woman! — but a tress  
 Was sometimes lifted by the gusty air,  
 And now the waved robe a heaving breast did bare.  
 He gazed — his hand paused on a turning leaf,  
 And his blood ran in coldness to his heart: —

<sup>1</sup> Paul Kaufman, 'The Reynolds-Hood Commonplace Book; A Fresh Appraisal', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. x, Winter, 1961, p. 46.



He gazed — but still his eyes felt no relief;  
 For that dim lonely form would not depart:  
 It stood — as prison'd there by mystic art,  
 Looking upon him steadily; — he tried  
 To utter speech, but not a word would start  
 From his weak lips — his very feelings died,  
 As he beheld that spirit of melancholy pride! . . .

It vanish'd — and his slumber vanish'd too;  
 But not with that the frightful recollection:  
 The shape — the shadowy hair — the snowy hue  
 Of the dooming lip — the desolate dejection  
 Of the whole form, sank him in mute reflection  
 Day after day.

This is Reynolds at his best, free from the trivial or the bathetic that so often spoilt an initial good effect. Even so, it cannot stand beside the vision from which it so obviously derives, Keats's:

But yet I had a terror of her robes,  
 And chiefly of the veils, that from her brow  
 Hung pale, and curtain'd her in mysteries  
 That made my heart too small to hold its blood.  
 This saw that Goddess, and with sacred hand  
 Parted the veils. Then saw I a wan face,  
 Not pin'd by human sorrows, but bright blanch'd  
 By an immortal sickness which kills not;  
 It works a constant change, which happy death  
 Can put no end to; deathwards progressing  
 To no death was that visage; it had pass'd  
 The lily and the snow; and beyond these  
 I must not think now, though I saw that face —

One line typifies the difference in stature between the two poets, who only a few years before had seemed so alike. Keats's astounding set of ten separate syllables:

That made my heart too small to hold its blood.

emphasizes the ordinariness of Reynolds's:

And his blood ran in coldness to his heart:

Writing to Reynolds about the first *Hyperion*, Keats had asked him to 'put a mark X to the false beauty proceeding from art, and one // to the true voice of feeling'.<sup>1</sup> There is no doubt which of these two lines would receive the X and which the //.

<sup>1</sup> *Letters*, II, 167.

Reynolds scored only one minor success denied to Keats during this time. In summer 1819, while Keats entangled his gifts in the Jacobean elaborations of his poetic drama *Otho the Great*, Reynolds succeeded in making some money out of the theatre with his lively farce, *One, Two, Three, Four, Five: By Advertisement*, a piece which, suitably updated, could well stand revival. Its plot might be an allegory of Reynolds's own strength and weakness. In it, an elderly gentleman from Shropshire — perhaps a version of Reynolds senior — comes to Town and advertises for a suitor for his daughter. She has already chosen the hero, 'Harry Alias', an amateur actor, who punishes and bewilders the old gentleman by answering the advertisement in the character of a number of the leading actors of the day, playing their best-known parts. This piece, written for the mimic John Reeve, is dramatically effective, and contains some charming lyrics in Reynolds's best vein.

In fact, the Muse, which Reynolds invoked so despairingly and renounced so frequently, only to fall into her toils again, was perhaps not that of Poetry but of Parody. 1819 was also the year of his brilliant anticipatory skit on Wordsworth's *Peter Bell*. This parody, sharpened by his rebuff earlier by Wordsworth, is the only work by Reynolds to be printed in the *Oxford Book of Nineteenth Century Verse*. Like his own *Harry Alias*, Reynolds was at his best when consciously taking on another's personality for comic reasons; when he does so unconsciously and with serious purpose, he hardly ever succeeds. After 1821, Reynolds, though for some years at the top of his form as a prose writer for the *London Magazine*, had little poetic success with anything but light verse. In 1826, he collaborated in this line with Thomas Hood, who had become his brother-in-law. Their *Odes and Addresses to Great People* are too dated to be enjoyed now, though Reynolds's parody of the correspondence columns of a learned journal could still be topical:

B. asks of C. if Milton e'er did write  
 'Comus' obscured beneath some Ludlow lid; —  
 And C., next month, an answer doth indite,  
 Informing B. that Mr Milton did!

While Reynolds's poetry turned to comedy, his life turned to tragedy. Though he settled the money affairs of Keats's surviving brother and sister, getting small thanks from either, his legal practice never flourished after the death of his partner Rice in 1833. In 1835 he lost his only surviving child, a ten-year-old daughter, and the same year was involved in the bitter quarrel between the whole Reynolds family and Hood. He was bankrupt in 1838, having, according to the proprietor of *The Athenaeum*, C. W. Dilke, assisted his own ruin by giving up his shares in that paper in a fit of pique. He took to drink, was seen less and less, while old friends warned each other not to play cards with him.<sup>1</sup> In 1847 he left London to become assistant clerk of the County Court at Newport, Isle of Wight, where he died on 15 November 1852. His last known poem, in 1848, quotes from the 'Ode to a Nightingale', of which he owned the original manuscript, now in the Fitzwilliam Museum. His copy of Monckton Milnes's *Life etc. of Keats*, which he proposed to interleave and annotate, contains only a few drunken scrawls.<sup>2</sup>

Reynolds's prose was admirably selected and edited four years ago by Leonidas M. Jones;<sup>3</sup> his poetry has not been published since the small selection made by George L. Marsh in 1928, and long out of print.<sup>4</sup> A collection, or at least a full selection, is surely needed. His minor talent may have been pressed too hard by circumstances, by an unstable temperament, or by the illusions bred of his heredity; but it is far from negligible. The true voice of feeling does break through: most characteristically in the curious pastiche *The Fancy* (1820), whose romantic author-sportsman 'Peter Corcoran' is some sort of projection of Reynolds's youthful hopes and fears into the personality of his relative Peter Beckford. One lyric, good enough to inspire his friend John Clare's better-known 'Remembrances', could be a key for the unwritten biography of Reynolds.

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Blunden, *Keats's Publisher*, p. 222.

<sup>2</sup> Keats Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard, EC 8, K2262.

<sup>3</sup> *Selected Prose of John Hamilton Reynolds*, ed. Leonidas M. Jones, 1966.

<sup>4</sup> *John Hamilton Reynolds: Poetry and Prose*, ed. G. L. Marsh, 1928.