

Keats's When I Have Fears

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When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charact'ry,
Hold like rich garner's the full-ripen'd grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour!
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love! — then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

ONE of Keats's most popular poems, almost unfailingly chosen for even the shortest anthologized presentations of his work, is his sonnet "When I Have Fears." The poem has, however, received surprisingly little critical consideration, and even less agreement among its critics on the worth of individual parts and the meaning of the poem as a whole. Though I shall refer briefly to some of these previous comments, my chief task will be to present an interpretation of the poem along lines which come, I hope to show, closer to the poet's intention than any we have previously seen.

It would seem a fair statement that the wide popularity of the poem rests almost entirely on the sentiments expressed in the first quatrain. The second quatrain has proven to be difficult and mysterious to commentators, though, unlike the third, it is generally admired. In her biography of Keats, Amy Lowell says of the poem: "The first two quatrains of the sonnet are nothing less than magnificent, and were it not for the change and drop in theme, tenor, and diction of the succeeding quatrain and couplet, "When I Have Fears" would rank among the best sonnets that Keats did." Walter Jackson Bate, in my view the best biographer of the poet, likely had

this criticism in mind when he wrote that the end of the sonnet is "always felt to be something of a drop." Neither biographer attempts an explication of the whole poem. The only full studies of the sonnet are by M.A. Goldberg and T.E. Connally.¹ Connally, in the shorter and more limited discussion, emphasizes his belief that a sharp distinction should be made between the first two quatrains: "The second quatrain simply does not go with the first, for it contains the consolation of the sonnet. The two quatrains treat entirely different problems and raise entirely different questions." Connally, like some other commentators, is bothered by the diffusion of images in the second quatrain and is especially troubled by the phrase "the magic hand of chance." He says of it: "Obviously Keats was not thinking of his poetry, and the line has another meaning." He concludes that the second stanza deals with the "spiritual significance of life." M.A. Goldberg, who admits that his debt to Earl Wasserman's reading of Keats's poetry is "apparent," interprets the poem as a movement toward apotheosis where, at the end, the protagonist "achieves some kind of height. . . ." Goldberg sees the movement in the sonnet as one from poetry to love until finally a fellowship with something higher, an "essence", can be attained. He concludes: "Thus, in the final line, when poetry and love 'to nothingness do sink', thing has been subordinated to value, poetry and love have been subordinated to their essence, and the world of mortality has been left behind for the immutable, the fixed, the essential."

In obvious contrast to these views, it seems to me that there are few poems in which Keats is more wholly concerned with the claims of this world than in "When I Have Fears". The first quatrain is a vision of poetic accomplishment; the second, a description of the imaginative process which leads to composition; the third, a lament for the impossibility of having a love uncontrolled by time, followed by a couplet which states that the enormity of the possibility of imminent death reduces all worldly desire to inconsequence. This final thought is the culmination of the musings begun in each quatrain and is the logical and emotional conclusion of each.

"When I Have Fears" was written in January, 1818, but was not published until 1848. It is the first of Keats's Shakespearean sonnets; he had employed the Petrarchan form just a few days earlier in the sonnet "On Sitting Down To Read King Lear Once Again", and as this poem and letters written at the time show, Shakespeare was a conscious influence on his work. "When I Have Fears" is a pure example of the English form. It is a single sentence with each of the three quatrains containing independent imagistic concepts related to a common theme and ending in a couplet which is not only the logical and emotional conclusion of each, as noted, but the grammatical conclusion of each as well. There is a cause and effect relationship between each quatrain and the couplet, and it is possible to make three completely satisfactory poems by appending the final two and a half lines to each quatrain; the effect of the quatrains, however, is cumulative, and each adds an enriching variation to a theme. As in the earlier sonnet "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer," example is added to example to form illustrative material, but unlike that poem which uses as objective correlatives the observer of the night sky and the Spanish explorers to help the reader understand an emotion already felt by the poet, "When I Have Fears" is a poem of unfolding discovery for both poet and reader in which the full import of speculation is not reached for either until the end.

In the first quatrain Keats expresses his fear, not of dying, but of a time when death will curtail his ability to write. In this sonnet there is no interest in death itself, but in the effacement of life, a concern which grows in the poem until as an *idée fixe* it blots out all other considerations from consciousness. When, elsewhere, death itself is considered, as in "Ode To A Nightingale" or as the concluding image in the sonnets "After Dark Vapours" and especially in "Why Did I Laugh Tonight" it is seen, in the greatest extension of Keats's "contrariedades", as the most intense of experiences, an ultimate consummation devoutly to be wished. No such desire is seen in "When I Have Fears"; the things sought here are firmly anchored to the values of living in this world; verse,

fame, and beauty make their strong claims.

There can be little doubt that the strongest of these is verse. Two-thirds of the poem is about poetry and the way it is written; his fear is not for himself or even for unfulfilled personal experiences, but that there will not be time to write. There is something more awful in the blank vacancy of the phrase "cease to be" than in any idea of death or dying, for these are at least the end of an organic process related to life, but ceasing to be is the total disappearance of sentience, and is directly related to the image of nothingness at the end of the poem.

The possession of unhurried time as a necessary ingredient in the production of poetry and in meaningful human love is the strong integument which binds together seemingly disparate parts of the poem. It is an organic concept in which Keats sees slow time wedded to process; though this concept of time is discussed in each quatrain, it is no doubt most easily seen in the famous autumn metaphor at the beginning of the poem. The autumn season as a topos of completion is, of course, an ancient one, but it seemed to be especially appealing to Keats in that it represented the end of a slow-moving inevitable development, the conclusion of which was implicit in its beginning. This same portrayal of time and process was to be used later with equal success in "Ode To Autumn" when the season is painted at the zenith of completion and abundance moving toward a kind of denouement in which the personification of the season is seen as having no more work to do and can be found "sitting careless on a granary floor" or waiting beside a cider-press "with patient look" watching "the last oozings hours by hours". Time, in this soft setting, is a friend so familiar, so taken for granted, that it need not even be considered. In the sonnet, the poet is all too aware that he is barely past his seed time. Great fecundity is implicit in the image of the teeming brain, but also implicit is the understanding that this abundance is inchoate and must experience the gleaning pen which will separate poetic chaff from grain. The books he envisions writing will be "rich garnerers" of "full-ripen'd grain"

but to reach this harvest he will need a luxurious expansiveness of time, for growth through time is the *only* way the grain can be ripened fully and the only way the rich but shapeless material of his brain can be given form and meaning. And even after time and season have brought forth a field ready for the harvest, the gleaning pen must perform its selective task so that only rich garnerers may be kept.

The first quatrain ends with a vision of work wonderfully fulfilled; the second quatrain is an investigation into the way such work is conceived and written, and in this way is an extension and amplification of concepts already introduced. The verb "behold" in line five sets the tone. The poet is an awed observer, not only of the magnificent display of stars in the clear night sky, but of a vast inspirational field from which future poems may be fashioned. It is an image of infinite but as yet unformed possibility, glorious in the promise of an accomplishment still free from a less than perfect actuality. It is not only that Keats is inspired by nature, as he surely is, but that the empyrean contains symbolic information which, if properly followed, can be transmuted into poetry; but such a paraphrase is too literalistic and formulaic for the experience Keats goes on to describe. Because the essence of his reaction is an unforced intuitive response, he foils any attempt at a simply rational reduplication. In a series of carefully chosen images, he takes us, step by step, with a logic which seeks to subvert logic, ever further away from ratiocinative investigation. The face of the night is clear, but the symbols which it contains are huge and cloudy. These symbols are all we are told of a "high romance" which they suggest, but because the cloudy symbols are all we can ever know of this "romance", it is even more remote from our ken than they are. Keats does not want us to think of his "high romance" as a *kind* of poetry, certainly not of the specificity of chivalric or medieval verse, but he is talking about what must be called the *stuff* of poetry, the very nature of the poetic experience. But he knows how far he is from any kind of apprehension of this essence; even the symbols of it are huge and cloudy and he contemplates no greater nearness

than to trace the shadows of these symbols. Indeed, even this tracing of shadows cannot be a volitional act, for it must be done with the hand of chance. Thus, though it is far from the high romance, the hand of chance can be seen as the hand of the poet, the distillation at last rendered in human terms. The realization must now come, however, that chance is a very time-consuming process. No one was more aware than Keats of how willful the muse could be; if fine things must come randomly, then patience and time are required to wait for the flash of gold in the washings. Therefore, because it is his fear that such an abundance of time will not be afforded him, his hand, guided by chance, the gleaning hand which will transform the shadows into high-piled books, becomes a magical thing not only because it has the alchemical power of making poetic gold from gossamer, but because such a thing may be denied him, and to be without it is to see its possession by others as magical. Thus, like the progress of seed to harvest shock, the process from the first promptings of the imagination to the writing hand of the poet is one which needs the full indulgence of benevolent time. The magic hand of chance holds the gleaning pen, and both quatrains speak to the poet's fear that this living hand will be stilled far too soon.

In the last quatrain, Keats moves from his discussion of the relationship between time and poetry to the relationship between time and love. Though the sonnet tells us that his desire and need to be a poet is probably the most important general consideration in his life, his need for love is more immediately intense and his sense of the loss of love concomitantly more immediately painful.

Though there has been speculation by Woodhouse and others that the "fair creature of an hour" in line nine refers to a real woman, specifically to some unknown girl the sight of whom entranced Keats one night at Vauxhall, the quatrain goes beyond a single incident, and probably beyond a single woman, to a statement about the loss of love. The impress of time on the poet's consciousness is such that it is possible to interpret the "fair creature of an hour" as literally an hour, a unit of time made fair because he feels it may soon be gone,

but such a reading must be an addendum; his strongly stated feeling in these lines is of his fear that time will prohibit all personal love, whether of the transience of a momentary encounter at Vauxhall, or the even more deeply wished for permanence of a lifetime love which would become so much a part of the pattern of his life that it would be freed from the anxiety of conscious concern. As in the previous quatrains, the most important realization here is that the possibility of the denial of time once more drops a dark curtain between the poet and his most ardent desires. His love seems to him of necessity the fair creature of an hour, but the great unspoken wish is that she might somehow be more than this. He knows that others have enjoyed love seemingly uncircumscribed by time, and by this is meant no platonic or astral relationship, but a worldly one which matures and ripens through years. There is no need for such a love, once possessed, to be ever at the forefront of one's cares; it is in this sense "unreflecting" for it becomes as much a part of life as breathing. And to the poet who despairs of ever having such a love and is never without the sound of time's chariot hurrying near, those who have it must be seen to have a "faery power" in their seemingly godlike enjoyment of a benign, expanded life and love. As the hand of chance was magic because it seemed to escape time, love which the years so lightly touch also belongs to the same exalted order. Indeed, for one who feels that life may soon be taken away, *all* women become creatures of an hour, and no love can be unreflecting — the frame of time in which love must then be seen must always bring the poet back to his sole self with the result of an inevitable disappearance of love, as his attention, in spite of all his desires, ineluctably shies from the speculation of anything except the spectre of his demise.

The final two-and-a-half lines of the poem make a summary statement. The things of the world have receded from the poet's consideration and lie behind him as the land lies behind someone standing on the ocean's shore, but there is no sense of observation, that is, that anything is being *looked* at, for all the remarkably acute senses have imploded to a single

thought, and it is of one man alone. The world is wide and vacant as the moon, for there are no human figures on it beside the poet to give it dimension and scale. It is an image of what we would now call a modern existential position, modern in the sense that it goes beyond the unresolved anxieties of the Victorians to both an intellectual and emotional acceptance of the absolute isolation of the individual.

Yet an important distinction must be made between contemporary existential thought and the figure of the isolated poet at the end of the sonnet. He has arrived where he is not because philosophical speculation has brought him to these conclusions about man's place, but because he has fears that it will be his. Nor does the sonnet contain the anger and despair that is the prevailing tone of much recent work; though the final image is one of absolute solitude, the poem as a whole is exultingly Romantic. for in spite of the realization that death will reduce him to a sod, the desires so vividly expressed in the poem tell us, as they do so often in Keats, of the great excitement of the imaginative mind at work and of the limitless riches to be found in the repository of nature.

NOTES

- 'T.E. Connally, "Keats's When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be." *Explicator* (December, 1954) Item 14; M.A. Goldberg, "The 'Fears' of John Keats" *Modern Language Quarterly* (June 1957), 125-131.