



A Fictional Perspective On Keats

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Received- 09.05. 2019, Revised- 20.05.2019, Accepted - 26.05.2019 E-mail: aaryavart2013@gmail.com

Abstract: *The paper seeks an impression of Keats through a fictional perspective, to put it into simple language to look at a fictional work and, at once, at the life and works of that poet. Now on, what will subsequently follow, it might appear that we are surreptitiously smuggling Keats novelistic, or fictional that is non-Keatsian, non-poetical into a seminar on a poet. Indeed, so, in a sense but we can't help that, since at least one novel has been written on Keats "today" is identified with the twentieth century, one long-short story also, in the nineteen hundreds, which will make the fictional tally two. We shall, any way, be talking about the novel. This paper, therefore, is going to be some sort of a critical double speak, dealing with a novel, and alongside with a poet.*

Key Words: Ravishment, smuggling, double-speak, mockery, fumbling, groping, octave, longings, intriguing.

This brief paper seeks an impression of Keats through a fictional perspective; to put it in simple language, to look at a fictional work and, at once, at the life and works of that poet. Now, from what will-subsequently follow, it might appear that we are surreptitiously smuggling Keats novelistic, or, fictional, that is non-Keatsian, non-poetical into a seminar on a poet. Indeed so, in a sense; but we can't help that, since at least one novel has been written on Keats "today", that is, in the post-second War period; and if "today" is identified with the twentieth century, one long-short story also, in the nineteen-hundreds, which will make the fictional tally two. We shall, any way, be talking about the novel. This paper, therefore, is going to be some sort of a critical double speak, dealing with a novel, and, alongside, with a poet.

This implies a little bit of theorymongering; what is the nature of such a novel : a historical novel or a character-novel ? As it seems, it shares features of both, while, still, does not belong to any of these categories. For, Keats, for that matter Milton, or whoever, the major character in such a novel, is and yet is not, a historical, creative writer, One's impression/response would, therefore, be two fold: of/to a fictional character and a historical person (who has been familiarized through literature). Such novels, to our knowledge, have not often been

written, but when they are, they most certainly become worth a renewed waking up to the frontiers of fiction. More of that, however, later on.

The novel we shall be speaking on is by the late Anthony Burgess, one of the most prolifically successful novelists of the age following the Graham Greene milieu, who has written novels on Shakespeare, on Marlowe, and at least one long-short story, on French symbolists and Browning ; this novel is ABBA ABBA1 the scheme of the Italian sonnet, octave. It deals with about the last two years of Keats's life in Rome. (1820-1821; but that has to be inferred from the text till about the last chapter), and is split into parts One and Two, the first consisting of 10 chapters, and the other just one single chapter with a number of sonnets at the tail end. It is One which draws the major attention, although Two is certainly not superfluous.

The narrative opens with the fictionalized Keats playing with language (e.g., "mockery" is "mawkery²) in his talks with his friends and Clarke, his doctor mostly on his illness, women, his poetry, and the art of poetry, and these are mostly authentic.³ The novel develops through his fumbling, groping for the perfect sort of poetic articulation, at times in intense conversations with [guiseppe] Belli the Italian sonneteer; this groping grows to arrive at its ideal in the Petrarchan octave, along with which



his illness grows; and, in chapter ten, he is dead (82-83).

This mixture of the fictive Keats and the historical Keats is a clever way of illustrating his poetic outlook on life, including the linking up of the two passions he is famous for: the love of pure art and the love for the well-known Fanny Brawne. The significant feature of this portrayal is that neither the narrative poems nor the famous odes nor dramas⁴ (though not major attempts) but the sonnet is made the ideal aim of this search for self-fulfilment. One does not have to agree with this, but this fits the Keats-paradigm of the text. For, the ABBAABBA pattern is, here not literal but the representative-metaphor of the sonnet⁵ which itself is made to be the metaphor of life, love, death, all bunched together as the ideal sense of life discerned by Keats, and at the same time, by the novel. Some lines may be helpful. For example, Belli is made to say, ". . . one perfect Sonnet. . . , an octave ABBA ABBA and a sestet. . . the wordless sonnet also . . . yet speaks. It says . . . In my eight lines X in my six lines Y . . . the ultimate statement whose meaning is itself, What is this but the true image of God?" (68-69; my italics) Keats, who is otherwise sharply contrasted with Belli, comes to nearly the same conclusion; he thinks, ". . . ABBA ABBA. . . Petrarchan sonnet octave might subsist above language. . ." (81-82; my italics). These are obviously plausible ideas, whereby the sonnet and the octave become tropes, as it were, of life. Moreover, one is reminded, by the text, of the fact that he wrote, among others, on Fanny Brawne, too (71) the sonnet called "Keats's Last Sonnet",⁶ for instance ("Bright Star"), which blends the two aforesaid two passions of Keats, art and Fanny Brawne. Beyond such longings, the fictional Keats could not live, and neither perhaps the historical poet.

Two, the second part is somewhat like a coda, opening, "so John Keats died on February 23, 1821, and Napoleon died a little over two months later (86), giving historical dimension to the narrative. What is intriguing in it is the introduction of an imagined modern poet, J. J. Wilson who also is rather

fond of the sonnet and translates some of Belli's sonnets (at the ending of the novel), and who dies young in New York City.

To one familiar with Burgess's novels, this is Burgess in disguise (the actual name is John Anthony Burgess Wilson), with differences, also, with the said Wilson. What is significant in the narrative of *Two* is that the narrator imperceptibly, inaudibly, asks. . . " he Wilson died prematurely (but what, when we think of Keats, can this be made to mean?). . ." (91; my italics). Obviously, this means an analogy of the two; the laying down of the synchronic axis between the nineteenth and the twentieth-century poetic sensibilities, of which the sonnet-octave is made to be the symbol.

Indeed, what can this be made to mean, this novel, that is? There need not be meaning in all this, still, a novel like this perhaps shows the immensity of the range fiction is capable of. Fiction sprawls when written in prose, and can, therefore, freely indulge in the interpretation of a creative writer and his writings. And, because it is inventive, it can ignore, if it so likes, the actuality of the interpreted.

By doing these, this novel opens a hermeneutic window on Keats in the shape of the sonnet. One need not be persuaded into accepting that; whether to follow it up or otherwise is the business of the Keats-scholar. Meanwhile, this novel functions like yet another portrait of an artist as a young man, a moderately well-drafted medium introducing Keats in a new, fresh light.

REFERENCES

1. Anthony Burgess, *ABBA ABBA* (London: Faber & Faber; 1977); page-references to the text are to this edition. Incidentally, the long-short story mentioned is Rudyard Kipling's 1902 tale, "Wireless".
2. One notes that Keats wrote "mawkish" in the Preface to the *Endymion*.
3. See, e.g., *The Letters of Keats*, ed., Robert Gittings (OUP paperback, 1992), 398-99, which include allusion to Keats's fondness



- for punning.
4. Not Lamia, nor St. Agnes, nor, say, otho the
Great; strange, fascinating.
5. Keats wrote both kinds of the sonnet,
Shakespearean and Petrarchan; this novel
6. presents his concern with just the
Petrarchan.
This sonnet is Shakespearean, and yet an
instance of the sonnet-metaphor of the text.
