

...ON THE SHORE OF THE WIDE WORLD I STAND ALONE...

Keats and the language of poetry

Ágnes Péter

(Péter Ágnes, Budapest)

For György Szőke with many thanks for our dialogues which started in 1964

In his essay, “*Что ты значишь, скучный шепот?*”, *The evolution of the language of Romantic poetry* published in 2003, György Szőke discusses the question of how poetic diction was to be completely redefined in order to enable the Romantics to articulate insights never before seen or expressed. In this process of redefinition Zhukovsky seems to be the key figure; Szőke describes him as “a kind of John the Baptist in modern Russian poetry” who “released the language of poetry from the shackles of the neoclassicist norms”, thereby initiating new linguistic norms for a discourse that was going to be an appropriate medium to convey the new ideology and the new aesthetic ideals of Romanticism. To bring out the novelty of Zsukovsky’s language Szőke gives an overview of the intolerant critical responses to the early long poem *Невыразимое* (*The Unutterable*).¹ The title of the poem itself indicates that Zsukovsky is concerned in it with one of the central problems of European Romanticism which can be seen as an implication of the radical shift in the notion of the relationship between language and language user (poet or reader) which occurred somewhere at the end of the 18th century. In 1798, the year that was so crucial in the history of the Romantic Movement in England, Novalis outlines a radically new concept of language in an essay entitled *Monolog*:

“...das rechte Gespräch ist ein bloßes Wortspiel. [...] Wenn man den Leuten nur begreiflich machen könnte, daß es mit der Sprache wie mit den mathematischen Formeln sei – sie machen eine Welt für sich aus – sie spielen nur mit sich selbst, drücken nichts als ihre wunderbare Natur aus, und eben darum sind sie so ausdrucksvoll – eben darum spiegelt sich in ihnen das seltsame Verhältnisspiel der Dinge. Nur durch ihre Freiheit sind sie Glieder der Natur und nur ihren freien Bewegungen äußert sich die Weltseele und macht sie zu einem zarten Maßstab und Grundriß der Dinge. [...] ein Schriftsteller ist wohl nur ein Sprachbegeisterter...”²

Friedrich Schlegel argues in a similar way: truth that is beyond the reach of the poet find an adequate embodiment in the poem because language, by its in-

¹ Szőke Gy. „*Mit jelent a suttogásod...*” *A romantika költői nyelvének alakulása* // „*Mit jelent a suttogásod?*” *A romantika: eszmék, világkép, poétika*. é. n. 72–76.

² Novalis. *Schriften* // P. Kluckhorn – R. Samuel (Hrsg.). Stuttgart, 1960–1988. 426–427.

herent nature, is controlled by the World Soul. In his essay, *Über die Unverständlichkeit* (*On Incomprehensibility*, 1800), he promotes a new view of the interaction of language and mind by propounding that the meaning of the poem can never be completely disclosed, because the language of poetry does not submit to the poet's intention, it conforms solely to its own inherent laws. Is communication possible? – he asks, and explains that in the journal *Athäneum* he wanted to point out that:

“...die Worte sich selbst oft besser verstehen als diejenigen, von denen sie gebraucht werden, [...] es unter den philosophischen Worten, die oft in ihren Schriften wie eine Schar zu früh entsprungener Geister alles verwirren und die unsichtbare Gewalt des Weltgeistes auch an dem ausüben, der sie nicht anerkennen will, geheime Ordensverbindungen geben muß...”³

In the Romantic period the growing awareness of the instability of the relationship between conception, articulation and reception is present in England as well, and this instability is often attributed to the instability of the linguistic signs themselves. In his notebook *Anima Poetae* Coleridge, for instance, provocatively says: “Poetry gives most pleasure when only generally and not perfectly understood.”⁴ In *A Defence of Poetry* P. B. Shelley highlights the infinite nature of the hermeneutical process since, in his judgement, the autonomous nature of language subverts the poet's control over the poem:

“All high poetry is infinite; it is as the first acorn, which contained all oaks potentially. Veil after veil may be undrawn, and the inmost naked beauty of the meaning never exposed. A great Poem is a fountain for ever overflowing with the waters of wisdom and delight; and after one person and one age has exhausted its divine effluence which their peculiar relations enable them to share, another and yet another succeeds, and new relations are ever developed, the source of an unforeseen and unconceived delight.”⁵

Discussing the difference between the Elizabethan and the Modern poets Keats complains about the narrow vision of modern poetry in one of his letters, and mentions one of Wordsworth's images in *Lines Written in Early Spring*: “the secret of the Bough of Wilding will run through your head faster than I can write it...” In his recurring speculations about the difference between the Elizabethans and his own contemporaries he seems to suggest that the Elizabethans were able to make use of the polysemous quality of language and thus the sense of totality that their representation of reality creates is an everlasting stimulus for constant re-interpretation, whereas contemporary poets, most notably Wordsworth, try to bind down language to meaning controlled by their egos:

³ F. Schlegel. *Werke in zwei Bänden*. Berlin–Weimar, 1980. Bd. 2. 200.

⁴ *The Portable Coleridge*. New York, 1961. 304.

⁵ P. B. Shelley. *The Defence of Poetry* // D. H. Reiman – S. B. Powers (Ed.). *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*. New York–London, 1977. 500.

“...for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist [?]”⁶

Keats indeed has a unique position among the Romantic poets of England due to his most specific concept of the language of poetry and the poetic tradition. When he started to be interested in poetry in 1814, there were two important linguistic models for him to rely on which had been clearly articulated in theory as well as in practice. First of all there was Wordsworth, universally acclaimed as one of the major voices of the time, aged 44, who must have long forgotten by this time the hostility of the critical reception of the *Lyrical Ballads* and must have been an awe-inspiring authority for Keats at the age of nineteen. Wordsworth meant to empower the language of poetry by replacing the poetic diction of neoclassicism with “everyday language”, and considered spontaneous natural speech as the ideal of the new type of poetry he had in mind:

“The principal object [...] which I proposed to myself in these Poems was to chuse incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible, in a selection of language really used by men...”⁷

In his lyrical ballads Wordsworth indeed meant to find out how far the language of rustic characters can be employed for poetic purposes. For the second generation of English Romantics, however, it was not so much the lyrical ballads, but Wordsworth’s meditative nature poetry which served as a stimulating standard, where he created the illusion of spontaneous speech by using the educated discourse of his time, exploiting first of all its syntactical patterns and lexis, keeping it as close as possible, however, to the language of immediate sensations.

At the same time Keats found a much more personal stimulus in the initial stage of his career in the poetry and critical assumptions of Leigh Hunt. Being indebted to Hunt in lots of ways, – for instance, for his encouragement, friendship, readiness to share his cultural enthusiasms, – in a spontaneous response Keats accepted Hunt’s authority in artistic questions without any second thoughts for a short time. (As it is fairly well-known, he did not continue to submit to this status of *Hunt’s élève* for more than a year: he was introduced to Hunt in October 1817, and in October 1818, in a letter to Bailey, he already mentions his attempt to dissociate himself from Hunt, and indeed from all direct influences: “that I might have my own unfettered scope.”⁸) In his definitions of the language of poetry Hunt propounds “a free and idiomatic cast of language”, his selection of “natural language” for poetic use is as much an attempt “to liberate poetry from the restrictive, exclusive and aristocratic poetics of neoclassicism”⁹ as Wordsworth’s insistence “on language re-

⁶ R. Gittings (Ed.). *The Letters of John Keats*. London–New York–Toronto, 1970. 61.

⁷ W. Wordsworth. *Preface to Lyrical Ballads* // S. Gill (Ed.). W. Wordsworth. A Critical Edition of the Major Works. Oxford–New York, 1984. 596–97.

⁸ *Letter to Benjamin Bailey* // The Letters of John Keats. 8 October 1817. 27.

⁹ A. Mizukoshi. *Keats Hunt and the Aesthetics of Pleasure*. Palgrave, 2001. 18.

ally used by men” Hunt, however, makes no specific reference to social register, what he wants to adopt is the natural usage of all thinking men:

“...the proper language of poetry is in fact nothing different from that of real life, and depends for its dignity upon the strength and sentiment of what it speaks. It is only adding musical modulation to what a fine understanding might actually utter in the midst of its griefs and enjoyments. The poet therefore should do as Chaucer or Shakspeare [sic] did, – not copy what is obsolete or peculiar in either, any more that they copied from their predecessors, – but use as much as possible an actual, existing language...”¹⁰

Unlike the Russian Romantics, who were thrown upon the necessity to create their own language from nil, in England there was a rich native tradition that could be revived as an antidote against the abstractions of neo-classicists diction. This is shown by Keats’s itinerary: he arrived at the study of contemporary poetry after a crucial, albeit short, initial period that was dominated by his absorbing interest in the Renaissance. He found exquisite delight in the richly decorative language, the easefully flowing musicality of Spenser’s diction which he discovered accidentally and it was this discovery – as it is usually put by the biographers – that made him a poet. Compared to the natural, everyday language of the beginning of the 19th century, Spenser’s language must have been absolutely the opposite of natural, and must have opened up historical horizons that the natural language of Wordsworth or Hunt did not claim to have. After a few experiments in downright imitation, in his first period Keats tried to combine Hunt’s linguistic ideal of natural language charged with strong sentimental effects and the allegorical picture-language and complicated musical effects that he found in Spenser’s narrative poetry. Probably no major poet in the English tradition has ever been so savagely censured upon entering the literary scene as Keats. The critics considered his first (*Poems*, 1817) and second (*Endymion*, 1818) volume disconcerting and dangerous: in a language that was *ad hominem* abusive and degrading he was judged to be absolutely inadequate as a poet: his sentimentalism and sensual eroticism were attributed to his vulgar taste, his prosodic mannerisms were seen as the poetic gestures of someone ignorant of the rules sanctioned by tradition. Coming from a humble middle-class background, he was seen as an ignoramus who had had no access to the privileged education of the social élit, consequently did not know the ancient authors and had no refinement to understand the sophisticated wit of the neoclassicists. After all, as testified by his sonnet *On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer*, he never read Homer in Greek, and in *Sleep and Poetry*, his first serious attempt to outline his poetic ambitions, he described Pope disdainfully as foreign to the native traditions. His first critics derived his predilection to break the neo-classicist metrical rules and to give a sensuous colouring to his language not only

¹⁰ In op. cit. 20.

from his low birth but also from his radical political views which were usually illustrated by a reference to the first twenty three lines of *Endymion III*.

Apart from the friendly review of Leigh Hunt, in which he calls attention to three young poets of promise, P. B. Shelley, J. H. Reynolds and Keats, and which he published in his own weekly, *The Examiner*, the first review of the 1817 volume and *Endymion* appeared in the conservative *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in August 1818. The anonymous reviewer described Keats as a politically subversive social upstart, who spread sedition, and who presumed to write about *Endymion* without having read Ovid or Wieland:

“His Endymion is not a Greek shepherd loved by a Grecian goddess; he is merely a Cockney rhymester dreaming a fantastic dream at the full of the moon. [...] [Hunt and Keats] write about Apollo, Pan, nymphs, muses and mysteries as might be expected from persons of their education [...]. No man whose mind has ever been imbued with the smallest knowledge or feeling of classical poetry or classical history, could have stooped to profane and vulgarise every association in the manner which has been adopted by this ‘son of promise’.”¹¹

A few weeks later the *Quarterly Review*, another quarterly with Tory sympathies, carried a critique in which Keats was described in the following terms:

“he is unhappily a disciple of what has been somewhere called Cockney poetry; which may be defined to consist of the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language.”¹²

His last volume of 1820 received some positive responses. In the *Edinburgh Review*, which by this time assumed a completely Whig attitude, one of the founders of the quarterly, Francis Jeffrey, pointed out: “[The] imitation of our older writers, and especially of our older dramatists [...] has brought on, as it were, a second spring in our poetry; – and few of its blossoms are either more profuse of sweetness or richness in promise, than that which is now before us [...] it is impossible to resist the intoxication of their sweetness.”

This emphasis upon the “profuse sweetness” of Keats’s poetry will be one of the leitmotifs in the critical history of Keats up till the 70s in the 20th century. Two years after Keats died Hazlitt (who was incidentally also labelled a Cockney in taste as well as in political philosophy by the conservative critical circles) published an anthology under the title *Select British Poets* where he includes, beside Byron and Shelley, Keats, too, in the company of the already canonized few: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth and Coleridge. In the Preface to the volume he made the disconcerting element in Keats’s poetry even more pronounced: sweetness he had in a great degree, indeed, but he lacked intellectual pro-

¹¹ J. Strachan (Ed.). *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on The Poems of Keats*. London–New York, 2003. 35–36.

¹² In op. cit. 34.

fundity, Hazlitt seemed to suggest, to give universal meaning to what he absorbed of the world through his acute sensibility:

“He gave the greatest promise of genius of any poet of his day. He displayed extreme tenderness, beauty, originality and delicacy of fancy; all he wanted was manly strength and fortitude to reject the temptations of singularity in sentiment and expression. Some of his shorter and later pieces are, however, as free from faults as they are full of beauties.”¹³

The Victorian cult of Keats was actually based upon that “sweetness”: it was found his dominant trait but deemed an endearing virtue now: his sensuous pictures and music made him in their judgement a forerunner of Aestheticism. He was seen by the Victorians as the apostle (and martyr) of Beauty, who created an artificial world of perfection “to leave the world unseen” (*Ode to a Nightingale*, l. 19.), to escape from the sordid facts of reality. In Hungary, because of the unquestioned critical authority still enjoyed by the critics of the periodical *Nyugat*, who in their critical orientation were influenced by the assumptions of the Victorians, up to the present day it is Keats the aesthete who haunts exam papers and grammar school textbooks. Although by the time Antal Szerb published his *History of World Literature* in Britain and the United States the assessment of Keats’s poetry had radically changed, in Szerb’s view Keats was still the solitary genius who pined away because of neglect and his own self-destructive longing for the beautiful. The emphasis in by the middle of the 20th century had shifted from the sensuous to the intellectual aspect of his art, from the escapism in the first phase of his career to “the profound tragic impersonality” of his maturity. The most characteristic critical positions until the 70s can be read in the light of the authoritative pronouncement of F. R. Leavis, who was the first to use the collection of letters not as a source of biographical data but as the documents of the development of Keats’s critical intelligence and of his astonishing growth towards a philosophy that shows a combination of clarity of vision and disinterested engagement in the moral dimensions of the human condition, an intellectual growth that went a long way beyond his biological age. Leavis suggests that it is in *The Fall of Hyperion* where Keats eventually found the perfect linguistic and narrative medium to embody the insights of his letters. Though he still maintained that the greatness of Keats’s poetry can be found “in the perfection attained within a limiting aestheticism”, he distinguishes Keats’s aestheticism from that of the *fin-de-siècle* by emphasizing his commitment to moral principles as well as his “strong grasp upon actualities, upon things outside himself”.¹⁴ Under the influence of Leavis’s Keats-portrait, for a time the dichotomy between escapist aestheticism and profundity of thought was resolved by relegating his early poetry – where “the manly strength and fortitude” were

¹³ In op. cit. 42.

¹⁴ F. R. Leavis. *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (1936). Harmondsworth, 1964. 221, 223.

missing as Hazlitt had declared – to his “juvenilia” thus dividing his career into two periods and suggesting that the poet, who escaped from actual reality into a linguistic reality that was effeminate, sweet and overwhelmingly rich in pleasurable sensuous details, on the peak of his growth attained pure, classical serenity which was the perfectly adequate medium of his mature philosophy of art and vision of the world. “His yearning passion for the Beautiful”¹⁵ was seen, as had been suggested already by Matthew Arnold, not as the passion of a sensuous and sentimental boy, but as “an intellectual or spiritual passion”.¹⁶ Perhaps it is Earl R. Wasserman who offers the assessment of Keats that is most typical of the middle of the 20th century when he points out “the three coexistent terms that dominate Keats’s deepest meditations and profoundest system of values: the oxymoronic heaven’s bourne (see *Endymion*, I. 295) towards which his spirit yearned; the pleasure thermometer (see his letter to John Taylor, 30 January 1818: the ascent of the mind towards understanding by an ever greater degree of identification with the things outside him), which he conceived of as the spiritual path to that goal; and the self-annihilation (see *Endymion* I. 777–802; his definition of *Negative Capability* in his letter to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27 (?) December 1817; or his definition of the *camelion poet* in his letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818), that he understood to be the condition necessary to that journey”.¹⁷

In the late 70s there emerged two completely new modes of evaluating Keats’s poetic career and in their wake the “early phase” of his development has become more and more seen as an integral part of his overall achievement. The new historicist readings (Jerome J. McGann, Marilyn Butler, Marjory Levinson) and the feminist analyses (Margaret Homans, Susan J. Wolfson) have placed his poetry in the macro context of the time and the socio-political milieu in which he worked, and reassessed the linguistic and metrical mannerisms of Keats, considered previously as problematic, even embarrassing, by identifying them with the militant gestures of the middle classes which in a new discourse expressed their radical opposition to the privileges of the elitist, aristocratic high culture supported by canonical traditions and university education. In her book published in 2001 (*Keats, Hunt and the Aesthetics of Pleasure*), Ayumi Miyukoshi defines the “vulgarism” of Keats and the Cockney School as the radically new and subversive discourse of an ideologically close-knit suburban middle-class circle who, simultaneously with clamouring for political reform, “wanted to take a share in (high) culture”.¹⁸ In her judgement Keats remained a poet of sensuous pleasures till the end of his career.

¹⁵ See to George and Georgiana Keats, 14–31 October 1818, to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818. // *The Letters of John Keats*. 158, 171.

¹⁶ Qtd in *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on The Poems of John Keats*. 44.

¹⁷ Qtd in *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook on The Poems of John Keats*. 47.

¹⁸ A. Mizukoshi. 27.

Keats's romanticism is a category *per se* because of his idiosyncratic concept and use of language. On the one hand, through verbal echoes he is able to evoke a host of varied linguistic traditions which makes his texts detached and removed from the personal, on the other, a sophisticated use of archaisms, the brightness of the pungent words on which he lavished the kind of care that went together with the art of the Renaissance craftsmen, give his language an unusual degree of corporeality which is distinctly different from the ideal of spontaneous speech that e.g. Wordsworth and Byron strove to achieve – distance his voice most emphatically from the discourse of contemporary writing. Up to the end he seemed to display a passionate interest in ways of appropriation: he experimented with the metrical and linguistic effects of the poetry of the past. As testified by statements in his letters, language gratified a quasi-physical appetite in him. In 1817 he wrote to J. H. Reynolds for instance: "I find that I cannot exist without poetry – without eternal poetry – half a day will not do – the whole of it – I began with a little, but habit has made me a Leviathan."¹⁹ This physical desire for sensuous images is often associated with erotic desire in his poems and letters. In the sonnet *On sitting down to read King Lear once again* poetry appears as a temptress whose attraction is sinister and hard to resist:

*O golden tongued Romance, with serene lute!
Fair plumed Syren, Queen of far-away!
Leave melodizing on this wintry day,
Shut up thy golden pages, and be mute...*

In *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* a very typical union is forged between eating, erotic desire and the magic of language:

*She found me roots of relish sweet,
And honey wild, and manna dew,
And sure in language strange she said –
"I love thee true."*

It is after her speech in a strange language that the knight-at-arms finds himself in her elfin grot and after all the four kisses does he have the terrifying dream about the victims of the fairy's child.

In his journal-letter to his brother and sister-in-law of May 1819, he gives an account of a completely different dream: "The fifth canto of Dante pleases me more and more – it is that one in which he meets with Paulo and Francesca – I had passed many days in rather a low state of mind and in the midst of them I dreamt of being in that region of Hell. The dream was one of the most delightful enjoyments I ever had in my life – I floated about the whirling atmosphere as it is described with a beautiful figure to whose lips mine were joined as it seemed for an age – and in the midst of all this cold and darkness I was warm – even flowery tree tops sprung up and we rested on them sometimes with the lightness of a cloud till

¹⁹ *The Letters of John Keats*. 7.

the wind blew us away again – I tried a Sonnet upon it – there are fourteen lines but nothing of what I felt in it – o that I could dream it every night.”²⁰ The sonnet upon the dream seems to describe a process towards an ever greater degree of the loss of personality:

*As Hermes once took to his feathers light,
 When lulled Argus, baffled, swooned and slept,
 So on a Delphic reed, my idle sprite
 So played, so charmed, so conquered, so bereft
 The dragon-world of all its hundred eyes;
 And, seeing it asleep, so fled away,
 Not to pure Ida with its snow-clad skies,
 Nor unto Tempe, where Jove grieved that day;
 But to that second circle of sad hell,
 Where in the gust, the whirlwind, and the flaw
 Of rain and hailstones, lovers need not tell
 Their sorrows – pale were the sweet lips I saw,
 Pale were the lips I kissed, and fair the form
 I floated with, about that melancholy storm.*

In the abrupt opening Keats already speaks in a strange language. Not a single word is said in the sonnet in propria persona: in the first line the speaker already identifies with Hermes, he plays on the reed to put the world asleep so that he could get away to get lost totally in another dimension of reality by suspending his self and submitting completely to the motion of the wind. The “dragon-world”, that is, the reality of time and space, being repudiated, the moment of the consummation of the desire is extended eternally. It is, however, not only the erotic desire that drives him on towards the eternal: he also strives to escape from the task, the obligation to make speech out of words, to make poems out of language: he wants to reach a realm of being where “lovers need not tell their sorrows”. As is well documented by the biographers, Keats tried desperately to “wean himself” from Fanny,²¹ from the destructive passion, because poetry was a more powerful temptress, who enthralled him more irresistibly as long as he did not give in to reality: he ran a self-destructive race in order to be able to realize his poetic ambitions. His own determination “to be among the English poets after his death”²² was an all-exclusive imperative for him. In the sonnet he seems to manage to flee from the world of verbs – *lulled, baffled, swooned, slept, played, charmed, conquered, bereft, fled* – to the world of nouns – *gust, whirlwind, flaw of rain, hail-stones* –, where he hopes to remain in the illusory eternity of floating inertly round and round for ever in the whirlwind. His hunger for sensuous pleasure which is the master passion of his life as his letters as well as his poems show, is eventually

²⁰ *The Letters of John Keats 1814–1821*. H. E. Rollins (Ed.), 2 vols. Cambridge, 1958. 91.

²¹ See his letter to Fanny Brawne. February (?) 1820 // *The Letters of John Keats*. 358.

²² See his letter to George and Georgiana Keats. 14–15 October 1818 // *The Letters of John Keats*. 161.

gratified here, but, of course, this a reality beyond life, it is pale and deadly. It is in this pale and mute passiveness that the ideal language can be found. In the sonnet *When I have fears* the thought of being defeated by time unties him from the obligation of writing and loving, and, like Attila József, released from the obligation of loving, would sit on the shore of tranquillity contemplating the worlds like flowers in the meadow,²³ Keats also can see himself released from the bondage of existence, and attain the calm he has longed for so intensely:

...then on the shore
Of the of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

In October 1819, when he was already far too sick to suppress his fears, when he was already completely exhausted: fully aware of his obligation to complete *The Fall of Hyperion* but unable to write, full of gratitude to his fiancée for her love, but full of doubts about her love, Keats sent a letter to Fanny Brawne which was as tender as it was savagely cruel. Below his signature he wrote three words from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*: "oh hertè mine! The 'unutterable' can be uttered only in silence: И лишь молчание понятно говорит,²⁴ says Zsukovsky like so many Romantic poets including Keats, or in a "strange" language as witnessed by this PS: in a strange language that released him from the bondage of self-awareness.

²³ a fehérhabú zöld egek,
fecsegő csillagfellegek

mellé a nyugalom partjára,
a nem üres űr egy martjára,
szemlélni a világokat,
mint bokron a virágokat.

²⁴ В. А. Жуковский. *Избранное*. Л., 1973. 118.