

Designs Less Palpable: Emotional Manipulation and Even-Handedness in Keats

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In a February 3, 1818 letter to his friend Reynolds, Keats rejects a reading experience that he associates primarily with Wordsworth: “We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket.” The reproach is so scathing because it acutely observes how rapidly the poetry’s interest in its audience cools, from the importunate heat of the design to the indifferent withdrawal to the pocket. Keats is fuming primarily at Wordsworth’s dogmatism and propensity for self-congratulation, as we hear earlier in the letter, where Keats complains of being “bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist.”

At first glance, this might seem like a rarefied chafing, a protest against an intellectual irritation or an effusion of rivalry peculiar to talented writers. Yet the kind of readerly hatred that Keats memorably articulates becomes more comprehensible when we think of art that has palpable designs not on our ideas but on our feelings: the swelling soundtrack that jerks at our tears, the so-cute cartoon kitty kitty that beguiles us into wuv. Every reader has caved in to this sort of appeal at one time or another, and many readers look back on such acquiescence abashedly, or worse. How to admit, even in hindsight, to having been *manipulated*, to having feelings that can be summoned and practiced upon with such infuriating confidence?

Granted, Keats is (perhaps uncharacteristically) more vigilant regarding his head than his heart in protesting Wordsworth’s palpable designs in the letter to Reynolds. Even so, the body language image through which Keats figures his resistance shrewdly shows us the difference between evocations of emotion that manipulate and evocations that are moving. Poetry, personified, withdraws the hand initially offered so eagerly. The withdrawal insists that the poetry is contemptuous of its reader’s resistance.

The usual word for such manipulation is sentimentality, and readers tend either to reject this description of an embarrassing eruption of the feels out of hand—“I’m not crying, *you’re* crying!”—or to rephrase it into something more respectably emotional. Objections to sentimentality usually focus on a malformation of the emotion, some overstatement in the poem, some miscali-

bration in the reader's affective response. The lines are excessive, or the reader who submits to them is lazy, responding too much or too easily to an aesthetic stimulus cynically trite. What I would claim instead is that the poetic evocation of emotion becomes manipulative or sentimental when it demands a certain relationship not between reader and poem but between reader and poet. Keats's turning of poetry into a person in his complaint deftly foregrounds this substitution. This relationship necessarily involves an imbalance of power, an intolerable skewing that Keats nearly recognizes as his letter concludes its vituperative assessment of Wordsworth:

The secret of the Bough of Wilding [in Wordsworth's "The Two April Mornings"] will run through your head faster than I can write it—Old Matthew spoke to him some years ago on some nothing, & because he happens in an Evening Walk to imagine the figure of the old man—he must stamp it down in black & white, and it is henceforth sacred.

The problem isn't that Wordsworth felt something, or even that he wrote about having felt something. It's his expectation that what was a fleeting if arresting reminiscence for him will be "sacred" for all who read of his departed friend. It's not just that the reader is expected to feel with Wordsworth, the poem almost ceasing to be the point except as an inky shadow of the poet himself. It's that the reader is expected to feel only and exactly what Wordsworth prescribes, precisely because Wordsworth said so.

One need not agree with Keats's assessment of "The Two April Mornings"—I have to admit that I don't—to appreciate the concern as he describes it. An evocation of emotion is not manipulative or sentimental merely on the basis of its intensity or triteness. It is manipulative when the author's skill in evocation becomes the point, when the reader's recognition of the writer's mastery in dealing with feelings is demanded over and above the reader's awareness of competing possibilities of feeling. Poets, like doctors, test our reflexes. But the tap on the knee, the tug on the heartstrings, exists to confirm the patient/reader's health. It's not supposed to be about the practitioner's skill with the rubber-headed mallet, or with an astutely calculating affective vocabulary.

Keats associates the overbearing requisitions of Wordsworth's poetry with the older poet's own egotism. Yet some of Keats's greatest poems risk a similarly intrusive claim on a reader's feelings, a claim dependent on an asymmetrical relationship between poet and audience. Consider the lines that open the sixth stanza of "Ode to a Nightingale," where the speaker almost turns uneasy listening into a brazenly unafraid earful:

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain.

What's potentially manipulative here is not, strictly speaking, a matter of authorial ego, as Keats persuasively suspects it is at times in Wordsworth. The passage's claim upon readers is amplified by what they often cannot help but know of Keats's curtailed existence, and this knowledge insists that we hear bravery instead of bravado. In reiterating its own hushedness, the soft names and the quiet breath, it deftly draws the imagined ear of its audience closer, exacts a hearing that must love more than halfway. And its skill is rewarded by readers obliged to the ardent confession that Keats bears his morbidity better, more legitimately, than they ever could.

Despite how importunately it appeals, however, I still usually find myself more drawn to "Ode to a Nightingale" than to the austere allure of "Ode on a Grecian Urn." I prefer the fever and the fret to the cold pastoral. This preference is encouraged by Keats's frank willingness to burn with the enthusiasm he requires of his audience; he listens to the nightingale every bit as raptly as he hopes we listen to him. He's also willing to puncture his own presumptions, as the conclusion of that sixth stanza attests. Even the richest, least painful death has to be admitted to have some drawbacks, as the speaker explains to the nightingale: "Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain— / To thy high requiem become a sod." Singing a love song to endless silent rest, Keats concedes, is at best a contradictory aspiration.

If this concession diminishes the ode's potential for a palpable design, it also runs a risk of its own. As Leslie Jamison has recently observed, the recoil from prescribed emotional excess can itself develop into a form of affective coercion:

Sentimentality describes the moment when emotion becomes a prop to everyone involved . . . But doesn't anti-sentimentality simply offer an inversion of that same affective ego boost? We reject sentimentality to sharpen a sense of ourselves as True Feelers, arbiters of complication and actual emotion.

When we feel manipulated as readers, it is often because we suspect that some emotional response has been extracted from us, in a way that flatters the writer's skill more than our own sensitivity. Yet the indiscriminate rejection of such manipulation can rapidly deteriorate into a readerly self-flattery, reversing the imbalance between reader and writer while preserving its extent. Refusing to feel on cue can be a principled response to a palpable design. It can also be

a performance in itself. In its most extreme forms, this performance fails to acknowledge the feeling that isn't merely compelled. If it is a less damaging or exhausting mishandling of emotion, it is a mishandling nonetheless.

Keats's gravestone affords a telling example of how these ostensibly divergent impulses—irresistible gushing and absolute self-restraint—can meet and even compound. Keats wanted only nine words carved: "Here lies one whose name was writ in water." Perhaps he imagined these words figuratively echoing only in his own posthumous "soft conchéd ear." Yet an inscription so spare invites multiple parsings. The phrase might read similarly to "Forget it, Jake. It's Chinatown," an acrid resignation to the sheer corruptibility of the forces that shape poetic reputations. Or, more likely, the phrase asks to be read as a niftily deployed paradox, an attempt at being ruefully but unforgettably forgettable. Either way, its reticence tempts us toward inquiries and expressions of concern. ("What's wrong?" "Nothing." "It doesn't sound like nothing's wrong.") This temptation succeeded at least once, judging by what Keats's friends Severn and Brown felt compelled to have carved further, by way of preface to those last nine words: "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." This gloss frankly asserts a palpable design on the churchyard visitor. It also retroactively refigures Keats's concluding phrase, already a suggestion of withdrawal or occlusion, as something very like a hand tucked in a breeches pocket. Such at least is the composite effect, if not the original intent. Despite their apparently divergent attempts at coming to grips with a loss, the ways in which Keats has touched, and his friends retouched, his tombstone become complementary rather than contradictory gestures. From different directions, they converge in urging a substantial sorrow. They also insinuate that the inability to produce the requisite woe is more a loss to the visitor than the deceased. So mourn already.

It might be fairly objected that epitaphs differ from other kinds of creative expression under discussion here, in that the whole point of an epitaph is for the words to foster a profound consciousness of the person inspiring them. If an epitaph cannot extract a passing thought or a pang, it fails absolutely, and fails at something very like what we have been calling manipulation. Yet the claim and counter-claim scoring Keats's gravestone remind us of something relevant to more sophisticated aesthetic utterances, even across the necessary distance just described. Writer and reader, like dearly departed and mourner, are always in each other's hands. This ongoing involvement is sometimes comfort and sometimes confrontation, from embrace to grapple and back, and back again. It is probably too much to expect this reciprocal handling to benefit everyone involved equally. There is no fully unmanipulating poet, or poem; there is no entirely unmanipulated, nor merely pliable, reader. The best we can hope for is

that knowing we are in each other's hands also amounts to knowing that we aren't obliged to handle everything within our interlacing grasps identically.

Keats marvelously conveys the solaces and misgivings of this interdependence in a stark, fragmentary lyric that he may or may not have meant to have a life of its own.

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood,
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd. See, here it is—
I hold it towards you—

At first blush, no beckoning scrap of verse could design more palpably. It pleads, not at all subtly, for a unidirectional transfer of vitality from addressee to speaker. The longer one listens, though, the more clearly the lines admit themselves to be only a plea, and one that can only be urged so far. The speaker cannot conceal the desire to be restored to life at the expense of the auditor, but the desire sounds circumscribed, the voice conspicuously detached from what it entreats to be reanimated: “*This* living hand,” “if *it* were cold,” “See, here *it* is— / I hold *it* towards you.” Beginning to conceive of the hand as no longer living, the speaker cannot entirely convince himself to acknowledge it as his own. And this reluctance permits the listener's own resistance. The speaker can conjure, but cannot compel, and “This living hand” moves without manipulating. It moves because it expresses an awareness of wanting to manipulate, but also an acquiescence to the limits of manipulation. Being warmed or chilled are both possible for us as readers. There is still room to decide, however, how to set our emotional temperature. The hand is held toward us, insistently, but it is up to us to do what the hand no longer can. It is up to us to grasp.