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A Rocky Debut: A Note on John Keats's *Poems* (London: Charles and James Ollier, 1817), with Remarks about the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library's Copy of the Book

Published on March 3, 1817, John Keats's *Poems* was a commercial and critical disappointment. Only six reviews appeared—three written by friends of the poet—and the few people who bought copies of the volume evidently soon repented of having done so. Less than two months after the book's release, Keats's brother George wrote the publishers, complaining of its sluggish performance and urging them to bestir themselves on its behalf. The reply he received from them is famous: "We regret that your brother ever requested us to publish his book, or that our opinion of its talent should have led us to acquiesce in undertaking it. . . . By far the greater number of persons who have purchased it from us have found fault with it in such plain terms, that we have in many cases offered to take the book back rather than be annoyed with the ridicule which has, time after time, been showered upon it." Even individuals who might have been expected to take a special interest in the *Poems* seem to have given the collection a tepid reception. The most poignant case involves William Wordsworth, whom Keats venerated and to whom he sent an inscribed copy. When Wordsworth died in 1850, the book was found in his library, most of its pages uncut. Nor have the *Poems* fared better with subsequent generations of readers. Though posterity elevated Keats into the pantheon of English poetry on the basis of his later work—mainly the stunning odes he wrote in 1819—even his most fervent admirers have tended to regard the book as prentice work composed largely under the unfortunate influence of Leigh Hunt; and with the exception its vigorous sonnet "On First

Looking into Chapman's Homer," they have found little in the collection to excite enthusiasm.

Nevertheless, the volume is a landmark. It is the inaugural collection of a very great poet, and one of only three books he produced in his short life. (The second is *Endymion*, which appeared in 1817 and which was the object of the notorious attacks by *Blackwood's*, the *Quarterly Review*, and the *British Critic*; the third and final book is *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems*, which was issued 1820 and which remains one of finest collections of verse ever published in English.) Further, the poems in the collection are remarkable in ways that have never been fully appreciated. Even the weakest poems have wonderful descriptive details, such as the minnows that in "I Stood Tip-toe Upon a Little Hill" face upstream and hold themselves steady against the current, or the flames that play over the coals in the sonnet "To My Brothers." Most important, we see Keats developing, in "Sleep and Poetry" and in the collection's three verse epistles, his singular talent for moving fluidly between description and meditation—a talent that would enable him to create, in his odes, a new kind of middle-length poem, one that fused image with argument and featured both lyric concentration and discursive breadth. And so far as such modern poets as W. B. Yeats, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Yvor Winters, W. H. Auden, Richard Wilbur, and Philip Larkin have all at times adopted, varied, and extended this lyrical-essayistic form, its flickering emergence in the *Poems* is the dawning of a long and fruitful tradition.

The copy of Keats's *Poems* in the current exhibition was presented by the author to John Byng Gattie, who was the brother-in-law of the publishers, Charles and James Ollier. (It was apparently James, the more business-oriented of the brothers, who wrote the harsh letter to George Keats; Charles, the more literary of the brothers, retained his faith in Keats's work and continued his friendship with the poet even after the failure of the *Poems* and the firm's repudiation of the collection.) The volume stayed in the Gattie family for some decades, but was eventually acquired by the noted collector Winston H. Haggan. In 1918, William Andrews Clark purchased it from the rare-book and manuscript dealer

George Smith, at a cost of several thousand dollars more than the original price of six shillings.

Bibliography: J. R. MacGillivray, *Keats: A Bibliography and Reference Guide*, University of Toronto Press, 1949; W. Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, Harvard University Press, 1963; Ian Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, Oxford University Press, 1967; Robert Gittings, *John Keats*, Heinemann, 1968; G. M. Matthews, *John Keats: The Critical Heritage*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971; John Keats, *Complete Poems*, edited by Jack Stillinger, Harvard University Press, 1978.

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