
READING

*The Eve
of
St. Agnes*

THE MULTIPLES
OF COMPLEX
LITERARY
TRANSACTION

Jack Stillinger

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I have worked on *Kubla Khan* for thirty years and I do not know if it is a poem about poetry or politics, or is in three sections or five, or is satirical or celebratory, or whether it makes different sense if you are a lesbian or a royalist. I could speculate about whether it is a complete poem or a fragment, but answers to the questions I described would be negotiable.

J. C. C. Mays

Poetry is like shot-silk with many glancing colours. Every reader must find his own interpretation according to his ability, and according to his sympathy with the poet.

Tennyson

I still think the business of criticism is interpretation. I just no longer believe that interpretive criticism is transparent, or that it sees the world steadily and sees it whole. Nor is interpretation properly “supplementary” to its object, like reader’s guides and *Cliff Notes*. I believe instead that interpretation is always partial, that it never “fills up” its object, and that its “partiality” needs to be interpreted in its turn.

Michael Bérubé

The earth tilts and spins around. A thing
is true one time and then another is.
Proverbs all have equal opposites.
Believe everything; one time it’s true.
Many other meanings is what it means.

William Bronk

I think I shall be among the English critics after my death.

Anon.

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PREFACE

JOHN KEATS (1795–1821) WAS THE youngest of the currently canonical British poets writing in the early years of the nineteenth century. Practically all the other major British writers lived two or three times longer than Keats, and it is a fact of literary history that not one of them, if they had stopped writing as early as Keats did, would be known or read today. Keats also had the shortest literary career on record, hardly more than three and a half years. For the first two and a half years of this brief span, he was not a distinguished poet. In his final year of writing—actually, his final nine months of writing—he suddenly (and unexplainably) began producing, one after another, a sizable number of what are now the most admired works in standard English poetry: *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Hyperion*, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Lamia*, the ode *To Autumn*.

The year during which I wrote and delivered the lectures on which this book is based, 1995, was the two hundredth anniversary of Keats's birth year, and events were scheduled weekly to mark the occasion: conferences all over the world, speeches, dedications, lectures, layings of wreaths, unveilings, commemorative walks, musical celebrations, poetry readings. A John Keats rose was specially cultivated. A Keats coloring book and a Keats T-shirt were put on sale. A comprehensive "Calendar of Events" issued by the Friends of Keats House in Hampstead ran to ten legal-size pages of single-spaced entries.

What, one may ask, lies behind all this attention? Why are we still reading and thinking about Keats two hundred years after his birth? What is it about Keats that makes so many people think he is better than many other writers who do not inspire international events to celebrate a significant anniversary and in fact are totally unknown after such an interval? In short, what is so great about Keats?

I have been reading and teaching Keats seriously for some forty years, and what increasingly impresses me is that a good Keats poem means something different every time I read it—and I speak from the experience of hundreds of teachings and thousands of readings. For a long time I just took this richness for granted, thinking how lucky it was that when I was in graduate school I decided to specialize in Keats instead of some other writer. Now I am making it a subject of scholarly investigation. I want to know (and then tell everybody else) how it is possible that Keats's texts—which never in themselves change from one reading to the next—can keep producing new meanings.

In this book I shall use *The Eve of St. Agnes* to make several points about Keatsian inexhaustibility. I am interested in three basic questions: how a Keats poem registers its effects on a reader; why the effects that are registered differ from one reading to another; and why we are still, in large numbers (for this kind of activity), reading and admiring Keats's poems two hundred years after his birth. The questions are of course related, and the answer to the last should follow from the answers to the first two.

These could be considered theoretical questions—the first implying or involving a theory of reading, the second a theory of interpretation, and the third a theory of canonicity. But I am above all concerned with the practical situations of real readers reading (they *do* such and such in the process of reading), real readers disagreeing with one another (students, teachers, critics *say* such and such to explain what they have read), and everybody, whatever the processes and results of their reading, in general agreeing about the quality of the poetry (Keats undeniably is in the canon). I am, then, reversing the more common sequence of theory followed by illustrative example (as, for example, in E. D. Hirsch's *Validity in Interpretation*). And although it is hardly possible to write about reading, interpretation, and canonicity without being theoretical, my primary aim here is practical improvement of the ways we read, teach, and write about literature.

The “multiples” of complex literary transaction have been a special interest of mine for the past several years. In older critical thinking, the standard transaction of author, text, and reader involved a single author creating a single text for a single reader (an imagined ideal reader, perhaps, or the teacher in a literature class, or the latest critic “performing” the reading in a book or an essay). More recently, several concepts of multiples are complicating this traditional thinking: a multiple of collaborative authors instead of just the one writer whose name is on the title page; multiple versions of a work rather than a single ideal text (whether the earliest, the latest, something in between, or an editorial composite); and, what is most obvious, multiple readers—and, as a consequence, multiple readings—everywhere one turns. My *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (Oxford University Press, 1991) contributed to the complication of the authorship end of the transaction, and my *Coleridge and Textual Instability: The Multiple Versions of the Major Poems* (Oxford, 1994) to a similar expansion of the middle component of the transaction. The present work focuses on multiplicity at the reception end of the business.

If there is an opponent against whom all this is addressed, let it be Matthew Arnold, who, for all his wisdom in nearly every paragraph he wrote, bears a large

responsibility for some of the worst aspects of our literary profession in the present century: the basic idea of literature as a substitute for religion, and the consequent ideas of texts as sacred documents, teachers and critics as priestly authorities, students and general readers as a lay audience incapable of understanding or evaluating a text without authoritative pronouncement from above (by the priestly keepers of the touchstones). Our ordinary practices in the classroom—teacher as lecturer, student as notetaker and examinee—follow from Arnold’s fundamental thinking; and if, over the decades, most of the lecturers and examiners have been male, that is because criticism as an “old-boy” activity is inherent in the concept of critic as priest. All such authority is just now being called into question by multiple authorship, multiple texts, and multiple reading.

I believe in major authors and in major works by those authors. This makes me a conservative critic in today’s culture wars. At the same time I believe that no poem or play or novel has a single correct interpretation, because the meanings of literary works reside in the activities of those who read them and no two people read in exactly the same way. This makes me a radical critic in today’s culture wars. I want to show how these positions are compatible. My ideal is, in effect, interpretive democracy, and, like political democracy, it negotiates between individual freedom (as in the notion of “no-fault reading” introduced in the penultimate section of chapter 4) and some familiar restraints (in the form of factuality, comprehensiveness, and consensus).

The overall progress of my argument should be clear from a glance at the Contents. The Introduction expands on the ideas just mentioned—the literary transaction and the complication of multiples—and poses a preliminary question about the nature and whereabouts of “meaning” when we read a poem. Chapter 2 provides several kinds of background information about *The Eve of St. Agnes*, chiefly to make the point that all the different ways of reading the poem proceed from the same starting materials. Chapter 3 describes some of the numerous interpretations of *The Eve of St. Agnes* proffered over the past several decades, including recent readings that have followed from poststructuralist theory. Chapters 4 and 5 attempt to explain *why* there have been (and continue to be) so many different ways of reading this poem, examining first the creative activity of readers and then the more complex prior creativity of the poet, a multiple author within himself as a genius of internally contradictory tendencies. My Conclusion connects the multiple meanings of Keats’s poems with his enduring status as one of the canonized English poets. The three appendixes provide a variorum text, a token list of “Fifty-nine Ways of Looking at *The Eve of St. Agnes*” (originally a handout at several of my 1995 lectures), and information about paintings and other illustrations related to the poem. But I am perhaps making my work sound overly comprehensive. This is not, I should emphasize, an exhaustive study of *The Eve of St. Agnes* but, rather, a study in the poem’s continuous inexhaustibility.

MY GREATEST DEBT, as always, is to Nina Baym, who has been my muse and best practical helper for three decades now. Other individuals whom I wish especially to thank—for information, suggestions, encouragement, challenging skepti-

cism—include Mike Abrams, Hermione de Almeida, Bob and Jane Hill, Mark Jones, Laura Mandell, Barbara Michaels, Matt Mitchell, Leslie Morris, Bryan Rasmussen, Julia Saville, Peter Shillingsburg, Stuart Sperry, Tom Stillinger, Charles Webb, and Jim Weil. I am also much obliged for the positive responses and questions of my lecture audiences celebrating the Keats Bicentennial at Loyola University of Chicago, the University of Texas at El Paso, the Clark Library in Los Angeles, Harvard University, Southwest Texas State University, and the University of Illinois. In connection with those lectures, I owe particular thanks to Steve Jones, Lois Marchino, Beth Lau, Paul Sheats, Ron Sharp, Bob Ryan, Allan Chavkin, and Nancy Grayson. Several parts of the book have appeared in earlier form in *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* (October 1997) and *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*, edited by Robert M. Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp (University of Massachusetts Press, 1998). I am grateful to the editors and publishers for permission to use the materials again here.

Urbana, Illinois
February 1999

J. S.

CONTENTS

ONE

- Introduction: The Literary Transaction 3
Author—Text—Reader: Where's the Meaning? 3
The Complication of Multiples 7
The Legitimacy of Audience 11

TWO

- The Starting Materials: Texts and Circumstances 17
Composition, Revision, Publication of The Eve of St. Agnes 18
The Textual Versions 23
Keats's Comments on the Poem 32

THREE

- The Multiple Readings 35
The Stories of the Poem 36
The Three Bears and Single Meanings 37
A Token Fifty-nine Interpretations 39

FOUR

- Why There Are So Many Meanings (I):
Complex Readership 79
Multiple Readers 80
The Reading Process 82
Keats's "Innumerable Compositions" 87
A Practical Theory of Multiple Interpretation 89
Multiple Meanings and the Improvement of Reading 93

FIVE

Why There Are So Many Meanings (II):
Complex Authorship 97

The Idea of Incongruity 98

Multiple Keats 101

The Keats Map 107

SIX

Conclusion: Keats “among the English Poets” 115

The Origins of Canonicity 115

Canonical Complexity 120

The Union of Complex Authorship and Complex Readership 126

Appendixes

A. *Text and Apparatus* 131

B. *Fifty-nine Ways of Looking at The Eve of St. Agnes* 147

C. *Paintings and Book Illustrations* 151

Notes 155

Bibliography 167

Index 179

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The Eve of St. Agnes

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ONE

INTRODUCTION

The Literary Transaction

THIS IS A BOOK ABOUT how we read *The Eve of St. Agnes*. The “we” in this case is a large subject—no less than all the readers of the poem from the time it was first written, in 1819, until today. And one could carry this forward to all future readers as well. The poem has been read in many different ways, in whole and in each of the separate parts, and will continue to be read in more and more different ways in a continually expanding complexity of cumulative interpretation. I have written this book to argue that all of these different readings are justified, that all are in some reasonable sense “right” (as opposed to “wrong”), and that the abundance and variety of these readings are just what we should expect—the standard rather than the exception—when a piece of canonical literature is the object at hand.

I shall begin with some modest generalizations about what I call the literary transaction—the relations among author, text, and reader in the process of communication—to make clear where I think the various activities of creativity, reading, and interpretation take place. After this initial chapter, the focus will be more strictly on Keats and *The Eve of St. Agnes*.

Author—Text—Reader: Where’s the Meaning?

In a long-established tradition—almost from the beginning until, say, yesterday—the literary transaction has been thought to involve three basic elements: a creating agency (the Author), an object of creation (the Text), and a receiving agency (the Reader). In one obvious model for these elements, the Author was God; the Text, depending on one’s particular theological interest, was either nature (the world) or some divinely authored scripture (the Bible, the Torah, the

Koran, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Vedas); the Reader was all of humanity, individually or collectively. When priests became a part of this model, their job was to interpret God's creation—nature or scripture—to humanity. The inescapable parallel in literary terms is the Critic mediating interpretively between Text and Reader, and the transaction then involves four instead of three elements: Author, Text, Critic, and Reader. But let us stick with the simplicity of the original three for a while—a simplicity not unlike the fabled perfect unity of God, nature, and humans in medieval thinking.

The elements in the first part of my section heading (“Author—Text—Reader”) constitute a blackboard diagram that I use for different purposes in virtually every course I teach these days. They identify three important areas of theoretical inquiry: how literature is produced (questions of origin); how literature exists (questions of ontological identity); how literature registers effects (questions of reception, affect, response, interpretation). They also are focal points of three continuing interests of teachers and practical critics: history (including biography of authors, historical contexts, the methods of textual production); formal analysis (including standard New Critical focuses such as theme, structure, plot, relation of theme to form, relation of theme and form to style); and reception (including original audience, history of reception, current reading and, again, interpretation). They reflect a succession of distinct cultures impinging on one another, and they are adaptable to other matter besides literature: art, architecture, music, food, clothing, gardening, and so on, where in each case the author-figure (artist, architect, composer, chef, designer, gardener) produces something corresponding to a text (a painting, a building, a sonata, etc.) for a class of spectators, listeners, or consumers. Each such scheme has its separable elements of creation, existence, and reception, and one can employ them to organize any number of theoretical discussions concerning production, modes of existence, structures of effect, and canons of value.

Conventionally used to describe the literary transaction, the blackboard diagram symbolizes a straightforward process in the direction of left to right: the author puts meaning in a text; the text contains or represents the author's meaning; and the reader goes to the text to learn what the author meant to convey. For a long time, in theory at least, there were no problems with such a scheme of communication—though the practical working of the scheme almost always depended on contextual clues that were not themselves part of the original three elements. If I leave an undated and unsigned note on the family bulletin board saying “I’ll be home at 5:30,” my wife knows perfectly well who wrote it and what it means in its entirety. But many practical communications are like Peter Shillingsburg’s “This year’s juice,” an inscription on three containers of grape juice that Shillingsburg discovered in his freezer, with no indication of how many months or years the juice had been in the freezer (*Resisting Texts* 63–64). If I were to leave my same note—“I’ll be home at 5:30”—beside a classroom door in our English Building, it would be virtually meaningless: no one would know who wrote it, which day (or even, in strict logic, which part of the day, A.M. or P.M.) the “5:30” refers to, or where “home” might be in such a case. These are not far-fetched examples. Inscriptions like “Back in 5 minutes” pinned or taped to an

office or business door almost never indicate when the specified time period began or will have passed.

The precariousness of practical communication has sometimes led theorists, especially in the heyday of deconstruction, to abolish the idea of transaction altogether. Authors do not know what they mean anyhow (and with Barthes's and Foucault's proclaimed "Death of the Author" three decades ago, were stripped of their right to have opinions in the matter); the texts by themselves convey no determinate meanings; readers have no authority for the interpretations they construct. But still, in practical literary situations (as opposed to "This year's juice" and "Back in 5 minutes"), not only authors on their side but readers, critics, teachers, students, and anybody else on the recipient side collaborate as best they can in the working of the traditional scheme: the author writes, producing the text; the reader reads the author via the text; and the common goal is the reception of meaning.

Of course, the idea of "meaning" in a literary work may strike some readers of this book as woefully old-fashioned. We do not, these days, approve of translating or converting literature into some nonliterary other thing; the paraphrase, the bare statement of idea or moral, the author's message or "philosophy." A poem is not supposed to mean something but to be something—or, even better, to do something. Even so, in practical situations it is impossible to read without receiving or constructing meaning. A meaningless literary work has never existed. The most ordinary descriptions of what happens in works, no matter how brief or simplistic, constantly refer to their meanings ("Porphyro rescues Madeline in *The Eve of St. Agnes*"; "No, it is Madeline who rescues Porphyro"; "The *Nightingale* speaker wishes to die while the unseen bird pours forth its song"; "The speaker realizes that, having died, he will no longer be able to hear the nightingale"). Our basic critical activity is first and foremost interpretation; whatever else we do, whatever theory or theories we subscribe to, our day-to-day reading, teaching, and writing about literature center on questions such as "What is this work about?" "What kind of character is this?" "What does this word mean?"

The second part of my section heading poses the most important question usually raised about this blackboard diagram: "Where's the meaning?" Obviously, at least at the outset of the inquiry, there are three basic possibilities.

In the commonest and longest-established theory, the meaning of a work resides with the author, that is, in the author's mind. It is the task of the recoverer of authorial meaning somehow, usually (one supposes) by reading the text, to gain entrance to the author's mind and thereby discover the author's thinking. For many decades in our profession, the idea of the author's intended meaning was fundamental to the activity of critical interpretation; the universal standard for the "correctness" of a reading, or the superiority of one reading over another, was the better likelihood that it repeated or recreated what the author meant to convey. Similarly, until quite recently, the goal of virtually all scholarly editing was the fulfillment or "realization"—approximation, recovery, (re)construction—of the author's final intentions.¹

But there are serious problems with lodging the meaning of a work with the author in these ways. Authors are often dead or otherwise unavailable. Even if

they were available, there is still no guarantee that they would explain what they meant in a work, and—even more of a problem—there is no reason to think that they themselves would know what they meant. Authors write for all sorts of reasons and from all sorts of impulses. For many authors, their works, at least in first-draft stage, were for all practical purposes intentionless.

Keats is an epitomizing example of a writer in this “intentionless” category. The evidence includes his original draft manuscripts, records detailing circumstances in which he wrote his poems, and his own comments in letters and elsewhere concerning spontaneity in writing, as in his famous axiom, in a letter to his publisher John Taylor, that “if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (*Letters* 1:238–39). Discussing his “mode of writing” with his friend Richard Woodhouse, the poet explained “that he has often not been aware of the beauty of some thought or expression until after he has composed and written it down. It has then struck him with astonishment—and seemed rather the production of another person than his own. He has wondered how he came to hit upon it. . . . It seemed to come by chance or magic—to be as it were something given to him.”² Remarks like these suggest that Keats did his best work when he wrote without a plan. They also suggest that the reader who reads in order to recover what Keats consciously meant to convey—that is, who wishes to base an interpretation on Keats’s original intentions—is looking for something that may in fact never have existed.

In a second theory, the meaning of a work resides in the text and is always there for anyone who takes the trouble to read it. This is the old New Critical concept of the autonomous “text in itself,” which was devised in the first place, in the later 1920s, to oppose the then-current academic overemphasis on authors’ lives at the expense of their works. I. A. Richards’s *Practical Criticism* (1929), probing his Cambridge University students’ inability to read and understand even a short poem, was an important initial influence in turning the focus from author biography to textual analysis. The epitomizing theoretical statement seventeen years later, W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s “The Intentional Fallacy” (1946), maintained that both the meaning and the value of a literary work exist independently of the author’s intentions and must be determined, therefore, from the text.

There has, however, been considerable subsequent argument both by theorists and by empirical researchers that texts cannot have meaning in themselves. In theory, it takes a human being—an author at one end or a reader at the other—to register meaning; there is no meaning possible without a human being to *think* it. Try to imagine a closed book containing *The Eve of St. Agnes* that nobody has written and nobody is reading. Can there be meaning in that closed book with no human presence on the scene? The commonsense answer is obviously no. Even to imagine such a book containing such a poem is to cast the imaginer as reader; there has to be a writer or a reader to *mean* something by the text.³ And empirical evidence shows repeated disagreement concerning meaning in all but the simplest situations, even among experts. If the meaning really resided in the text, more people should agree about the text.

In the third theory, the meaning of a work resides in the mind of the reader, possibly the best position simply by default. If authorial intention is in fact unrecoverable apart from the texts that the authors produced, and if texts do not speak for themselves, the only remaining choice, if we cannot do without meaning, is the meaning produced by a reader's interpretation at the recipient end of the transaction. But this theory offers something more. Reader's meaning has the attraction of being practically attainable in ways that the other kinds (the author's meaning, the text's meaning) are not; it can be stated, repeated, refined, discussed, queried, and (if anyone wishes) gathered collectively and even treated statistically. This is the kind of meaning that seems the most promising for further investigation, and it is the main focus of the present study.

The Complication of Multiples

The simplicity of the blackboard diagram, showing three principal locuses of meaning and seeming to imply a unified entity for each of them, reasonably represents earlier thinking about the literary transaction. Although literary art itself involves both unity and disunity, literary criticism until a couple of decades ago emphasized the former, not the latter. We have been constructing unity in works, in groups of works, in single authors, in groups of authors, in whole periods and whole centuries, and making much of these unities, as if we had found them instead of constructed them. Thanks to the assumption that each work had a single author, a single text, and a single reader (usually each critic individually, positing himself or herself as the ideal reader), it followed that there was a single interpretation of the work, which was, of course, the critic's own reading.

In more recent thinking, each of these onenesses has been supplanted by a plural. We now have multiple authors rather than single solitary geniuses. We now acknowledge the existence of multiple versions of works rather than just one text per work. Instead of a single real or ideal reader, we have multiple readers everywhere: classrooms full of individual readers in our college and high school literature courses, journals and books full of readers in our academic libraries, auditoriums full of readers at our conferences. All of these readers are constructing interpretations as fast as they read. As one might imagine, for a complex work, the interpretations differ from one another as much as the readers do. It is not possible that only one of the interpretations is correct and all the others are wrong.

My own scholarship of the past decade has paralleled and contributed to this thinking. In a progression moving in the same left-to-right direction as the traditional transaction itself, I have been complicating this simple diagram by studying each of the three elements as a complex of multiples: multiple authorship, multiple versions of text, and multiple readership. In *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius* (1991), which had its origins in textual work that I had done earlier on Keats, Wordsworth, and John Stuart Mill, I suggested that numerous works, including plays by Shakespeare, novels by Dickens, poems by Keats,