

Endymion

I have long thought that there is a peculiar kinship between the composer Franz Schubert and the poet Keats. Born within the space of two years, both prodigies lived largely in poverty, blossomed in their teenage years, progressed miraculously to produce major artworks in their early twenties, and died tragically young (Keats at 25, Schubert at 31). Schubert's musical star was at one with the poetic lyrics of his contemporaries (as expressed in his *lieder*); Keats, for his part, felt that if he hadn't been a lyric poet he would have been a composer and that his ideas for the combinations of sound in poetry were closely allied to those in musical composition. Overwhelmed, too, by the colossal achievements of their artistic mentors – Beethoven, Mozart, and Haydn for Schubert; Byron, Wordsworth, and Milton for Keats – it is perhaps no surprise that both experienced difficulties in producing works that could compete on the same scale. Hence, Schubert and Keats became master innovators of the smaller, more lyrical, chamber forms by which they are remembered: the song cycle, the string quartet, the poetic Ode.

Although, Schubert and Keats are largely remembered for their exquisite brevity – the latter's self-penned epitaph being 'Here lies One Whose Name was writ in Water' – both did successfully attempt longer works, and it is testimony to the passion and persistence of Timo Leinonen that he has at last translated the whole of Keats's most extensive work – *Endymion* – into a more lasting form in Finnish.

Understandably enough, *Endymion* – Keats's first full long poem as an apprentice poet – is a poem about poetic apprenticeship. What is it to be a poet? What does it give you that other professions do not? (All pertinent questions for the teenage Keats who was at that exact moment giving up the medical profession in favour of becoming a poet.)

In this light, Book I may be seen as an introduction to the problem, as Endymion is a shepherd prince who finds that he is in love with poetic truth and beauty (not to mention the powers of the imagination), but does not realize that those powers are also in love with him. He has, in fact, been chosen as a consort by the moon goddess, Cynthia – sister, and co-regent to Apollo (god of the sun, healing, poetry, medicine, and prophecy). Yet because Cynthia (who is ever secretive about her love-life) only meets him directly in sleep and dreams, Endymion, who admires her from afar, is unsure of where his feelings come from, or what they mean. And accordingly, he searches through the forests, fields, and mountains of his kingdom for the elusive source of his reciprocal love.

Following the journey of Virgil's Aeneas into the underworld (an adventure which the teenage Keats had read admiringly in Latin), Book II takes the apprentice poet into that region: a plane in which Cynthia (looking down from afar) can endow him with visionary and prophetic experience to add to his sense of beauty, teaching him too – through visions (including some highly charged with eroticism) – how to distinguish between the true and the false.

Emerging transformed from the underworld of the imagination, Endymion finds himself at the beginning of Book III at the bottom of a vast sea, filled with the detritus of history and the records of mythical or historical beings whose lives and experiences are preserved there: awaiting the coming of someone who can access and understand them. Daring to take on the

challenge, Endymion unlocks these histories, thereby strengthening his knowledge of the past and gaining a new understanding of the Circean errors into which so many human beings have managed to entangle themselves over time. So that, finally, in Book IV, he can return to reality regenerated: accepting human love and imagination for what they are at the same time as he can appreciate (though never fully comprehend) their spiritual dimensions).

Now empowered to find true beauty and love in a world full of illusion, deception, and despair, Endymion has passed through his apprenticeship: becoming a poet whose values are fully anchored in the 'real' world.

Beginning in 2021 for the 200th commemoration of Keats's death, Timo Leinonen's lively Finnish translation of all four books is now complete. Wisely avoiding the problems of verse translation (as the English rhythms of Keats's rhymed iambic pentameter do not sit easily within the trochaic structures which are more characteristic of Finnish), Leinonen's prose version is ideally adapted to dramatic performance: a virtue that the Director, Maaret Perälä, has been quick to capitalize on: creating four mini-dramas – one for each book: which emphasize Endymion's youth, humour, and energy in coming to terms with the demands of the poetic. Supported by music generated by the star signs of Keats's birth and death, but overlain by contemporary songs (performed by the younger actors) which would have triggered a smile from the poet's lips, this is a play which is packed with verve and imagination: symbolized at its heart by a conch which, when lifted to the ear, transforms the sound of the blood in your veins to the sound of the sea. Here: take it. Listen ... listen ...!

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