

IDEAS OF LANDSCAPE IN JOHN KEATS' TEIGNMOUTH POEMS

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ABSTRACT

In the spring of 1818 John Keats journeyed to Teignmouth in Devon to care for his dying brother. This essay explores his idea of landscape in three poems of the period. The term "landscape" designates not only the geographical sense of land but also the meanings that are imposed upon or emanate from issues concerning land. Keats made clear in letters to close friends that he held Devon and its people in low esteem. Yet, in his poetry, he curiously rejoices in the beauties of Devon and its people, assuming even the idiosyncrasies of a south-west country brogue. What accounts for these extraordinary shifts in mood? The essay argues that even when the reality of Devonshire failed him, Keats' poetry reflected a willingness to reach for an imagined landscape where, free of the tribulations of actual existence, he lay kissing a milk maiden in the fields and embracing the images of country life.

In 1818 John Keats journeyed to Teignmouth in south Devon. His brother Tom was dying of tuberculosis and had come to Teignmouth for palliative care in an environment celebrated for the healthy qualities of its climate and sea air. During the initial period of his stay at Teignmouth, Tom was cared for by his brother George at a house near the quayside – 20 Northumberland Terrace. When George was forced to return to London to make arrangements for his forthcoming migration to America, John Keats undertook to take his place. While in Teignmouth, Keats completed the monumental poem *Endymion*, and wrote also (with the exception of the opening two or three verses) the whole of *Isabella; or the pot of basil*. In addition to a sheaf of letters, a number of songs and sonnets were composed during Keats' seven-week sojourn (here referred to as the "Teignmouth poems"). This essay explores the idea of landscape in three of the Teignmouth poems. In literature, "landscape" is a term that designates not only the physical, geographical sense of land but also the meanings that are imposed upon or emanate from issues concerning land. Keats' interest in land-

scape is well documented. From the expansive domains of *Hyperion* to the wintry moonscapes of *The Eve of Saint Agnes*, Keats reveals a willingness not only to articulate ideas of space but also to show how the demarcations and significances of landscape may shift and blur.

While Keats' stay in Teignmouth has been widely noted by critics, there has been a dearth of substantive critical appraisal of the Teignmouth period as a discernible and important stage in the poet's writing. Comprehensive studies by Sperry (1973), Clark (1993), Matthews (1995), Roe (1997), Woof and Hebron (1997), Walsh (1999), Everest (2004), and Cooperman (2004) all neglect or underplay the importance of this phase of Keats' career. A good account of the Teignmouth period is to be found in Motion's (1999) book, *Keats*. Here, Teignmouth is mentioned extensively, but almost always with regard to the issue of John Keats caring for his sick brother, Tom. Even in this extensive and admirable tome, none of the shorter Teignmouth poems is addressed in any detail and no recognition is accorded to Keats' sense of landscape with regard to the south Devon region.

The period immediately preceding Keats' arrival in Teignmouth had been frenetic and productive. February 1818 saw him in prolific creative form in London, producing a sheaf of poems (including "To a Lady seen for a few moments at Vauxhall" and "To Spenser") and the opening stanzas of his Boccaccian tale *Isabella; or the pot of basil*. His spirits were high and his muse prolific. He travelled directly to Teignmouth, declining the invitation of a friend to detour and stop off in Oxford for fear that his brother Tom, having declared himself to be feeling better, might abandon Teignmouth and return to London. There is every reason to imagine that he was in high spirits as he approached Devonshire in the early part of March.

Keats' arrival in Teignmouth on Wednesday 11th March 1818 coincided with an appalling squall of bad weather, in which rain and heavy sea mists rolled into the port town and must have dampened the spirits of both the poet and his ailing brother. The inclement conditions certainly drew from Keats an exasperated and ironic tenor in a letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey of 13th March 1818:

I have used it [his wet jacket] these three last days to keep out the abominable Devonshire Weather – by the by you may say what you will of Devonshire: the truth is, it is a splashy, rainy, misty, snowy, foggy, haily, floody, muddy, slipshod county. The hills are very beautiful, when you get a sight of 'em; the primroses are out, – but then you are in; the cliffs are of a fine deep colour, but then the clouds are continually vieing with them

(Forman 1984: 241).

This petulant outburst must be put in some kind of context. Devon's reputation for agreeable weather and wholesome living was axiomatic in Keats' day, both in *belles-lettres* and populist pamphleteering. Between 1801 and 1804, Jane

Austen and her immediate family, attracted by Devon's fashionably therapeutic reputation, took a number of holidays in the Teignmouth area – and that town, along with the Sidmouth and Dawlish, are part of the romance of her novels. The novelist Grace Aguilar, a near-contemporary of Keats, moved to Teignmouth in the early nineteenth century because it was felt the ameliorative qualities of its climate would improve her father's health. A litany of health and spa pamphlets published in the first quarter of the nineteenth century celebrate south Devonshire as a bastion of healthy living, imaging its wholesomeness in terms of smiling maidens carrying baskets of flowers and fruit or trays of Devon cream.¹

So Keats had some cause to feel aggrieved at the relentless rain that wore him down in his journey through Devonshire and continued, unabated, after his arrival in Teignmouth. It was not at all as he had expected and, compounded with the all the emotions involved in rendezvousing with his dying brother once again, these circumstances must have cast a pall of gloom over his thoughts. That his whole stay in Devonshire was riddled with emotional misgivings and challenges is confirmed in the despondent tenor of the opening sentence of his letter to Reynolds on 3rd May 1818, seven weeks after he had arrived and on the eve of his departure for London: "What I complain of is that I have been in so an uneasy state of Mind as not to be fit to write to an invalid" (Forman 1948: 275).

In the intervening time, though, Keats managed to recover and sustain the creativity that had hallmarked his work in London during February. On 13th March, on the second full day of his stay in Teignmouth, he wrote the light-spirited "Four seasons fill the measure of the year." The next day he composed "Where be ye going, you Devon maid?" and, a few days after that, "For there's Bishop's Teign". "Over the hill" was composed on 24th March and, a day later, the last of his celebrated rhymed verse epistles, addressed to his friend John Hamilton Reynolds. In the weeks that followed, the poet proof read the last section of *Endymion*, wrote a few minor poems, and set to work, with gusto, on the completion of *Isabella; or the pot of basil*.

The shorter March 1818 Teignmouth pieces are not particularly substantial, and they lack the power of the more mature poet but they are revealing in their characterization of landscape. In "Where be ye going, you Devon maid?" (1-12) – written on 14 March 1818, according to Blunden (1955) in *Selected poems*,

¹ As the century progressed, the theme of Devonshire health and well-being was reiterated in sources as diverse as railway advertising (once Isambard Brunel's railway link with London had pushed through to Teignmouth in the 1840s) and chocolate boxes depicting flower-strewn Devonshire milk maidens. I am grateful to the following collections for allowing me access to their Keats collections and to early nineteenth century pamphlets and publicity brochures relating to south Devonshire: Teignmouth Library, the Devon Record Office, the North Devon Record Office, the British Library, and the University of London libraries.

and within twenty-four hours of the letter to Bailey – Keats curiously rejoices in the beauties of Devon:

Where be you going, you Devon maid?
 And what have ye there in the basket?
 Ye tight little fairy, just fresh from the dairy,
 Will ye give me some cream if I ask it?
 I love your hills and I love your dales,
 And I love your flocks a-bleating;
 But oh, on the heather to lie together,
 With both our hearts a-beating!
 I'll put your basket all safe in a nook;
 Your shawl I'll hang on a willow;
 And we will sigh in the daisy's eye,
 And kiss on a grass-green pillow²

The previous day Keats had proffered a very different view of the countryside, imaging its flora as enduring under an Acrasian spell – the now-obsolete term “Acrasian” suggesting qualities of disorder and unpleasantness. Indeed, to Keats' estimation in a letter of 13 March 1818 to Bailey, there is even something insubstantial about the Devonshire people themselves, as if the mist and the fog has somehow bestowed upon them spectral nonentity:

I fancy the flowers, all precocious, have an Acrasian spell about them; I feel able to beat off the Devonshire waves like soap-froth. I think it well for the honour of Britain, that Julius Caesar did not first land in this county: A Devonshirer, standing on his native hills is not a distinct object; he does not show against the light; a wolf or two would dispossess him” (Forman 1948: 241-242).

Keats' mood shifts have been well-documented by his biographers but even allowing for the vagaries of an artistic temperament, the transformation of spirits and perspective in “Where be ye going, you Devon maid?” (3-4) is quite extraordinary. Keats embarks on a full-bodied celebration of the Devonshire working class girl, summoning even the accoutrements of a south-west country brogue, and mixing the emblematic sense of wholesome rustic womanhood with just enough sexual innuendo to preserve the poem from frittering into platitude

Ye tight little fairy, just fresh from the dairy,
 Will ye give me some cream if I ask it?

² Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Keats' poetry are from John Barnard's (1977) edition of *The complete poems*.

Compare this work to the measured sophistication of "To a Lady seen for a few moments at Vauxhall", written just over a month earlier, where the poet declares himself "snared by the unglowing of thine hand". In the Vauxhall poem there is control and propriety, nurtured by the mores of the city whose literary society had been captivated by Keats. But in "Where be ye going, you Devon maid?" the landscape has proffered more liberal licence, a freedom to be trivial, risqué, lusty. Keats, in a sense, epitomizes the freedom of a society poet on holiday.

Could "Where be ye going, you Devon maid?" have been based on a real experience or was Keats merely sitting in his brother's rented house on Northumberland Terrace in Teignmouth, drawing on a collective consciousness of Devonshire's popular reputation? In the days after his arrival in Teignmouth, the inclement weather persisted, as he himself repines. He may have journeyed to a nearby farm. Devonshire was famous for its creameries, so it would have been the tourist thing to do but, having only just arrived, it seems unthinkable he would have gone without his brother, Tom. The dairies in the Teignmouth hills adjacent to the town could have been reached by carriage but given the persistent rain, the precipitous routes would not have made for an easy or safe journey. In fact the most accessible dairy would have been at Laurel Farm House in Shaldon, just over the wooden bridge (demolished in the 1930s) that in those times traversed the Teign estuary – a more or less level journey of perhaps a mile and a half. There was also a ferry that ran (and still runs to this day) across the estuary to Shaldon, and its Teignmouth pick-up point on the beach off Quay Road is no more than forty paces from 20 Northumberland Terrace where Keats and his brother were lodging.

So, it is possible that at the point of writing "Where be ye going, you Devon maid?" Keats had seen dairy maids, and the hills and dales they inhabited, but not entirely plausible. It seems more reasonable to conclude that Keats' first poetic renderings from Teignmouth were not phenomenological responses reaching for a realistic representation of the Devon of mid-March 1818. More likely, they embrace the popular iconic signifiers of Devon life that Keats would have garnered from publicity brochures and popular report: the rolling green meadows, the dairy and agricultural emblems, the wholesome Devon maids. "Where be ye going, you Devon maid?" presents itself as an imaginary anecdote, a reverie – a construct of landscape in which the persona sets his idyllic working class woman (his "tight little fairy") and builds upon her image the imaginary narrative of romantic encounter.

This does not render the poem disingenuous, at least not in the sense that some of Robert Burns' poetry, linguistically topiarised to please the eye of an Anglo-Scottish court, may be so construed. On the contrary, the poetic muse has always afforded licence to move beyond the tangible present. And in "Where be ye going, you Devon maid?" Keats may be allowing his poetry to transcend the

immediate circumstances of his own predicament (the fatal illness of his brother Tom; his own failing health; the imminent migration of his brother George; the inclement weather conditions) and to reach for a different kind of truth. In a sense, “Where be ye going, you Devon maid?” perhaps allows the Keatsian persona to step back from the real-time present and to seek solace and satisfaction in an imagined springtime present. In “Ode on a Grecian urn,” which itself seeks to eternalize spring, the poet is doing something similar but the impossibility of conjoining the actual and the imagined, the hard fact and soft dream, leave both persona and reader curiously short of fulfilment. “Where be ye going, you Devon maid?” on the other hand, presents an alternative, liveable world. An option. It is not an option that a man of the city, like Keats, would ever take but it was exactly the kind of rustic idyll that he knew Wordsworth was living at Rydal Mount in the Lake District and, in occasional fleeting moments, the possibility of his own relocation might well have crossed his mind.

The bad weather finally lifted. In his letter to B. R. Haydon of 21st March 1818 Keats records that having previously given Devonshire “a good blowing up” for its “urinal qualifications,” he has now “enjoyed the most delightful Walks these three fine days, beautiful enough to make me content” (Forman 1948: 249). In the same letter, Keats presents his poem “Here all the summer could I stay” – a poem that accurately records a six mile journey along the northern estuary of the River Teign. Again, given the history of bad weather since Keats’ arrival, it is most unlikely he would have missed the opportunity to take his brother out into the fresh spring air – so this journey was mostly likely undertaken by carriage rather than by foot. The poem records encounters with Bishopsteignton (“Bishop’s Teign”), Combeinteignhead (“Comb at the clear Teign’s head”), Newton Abbott (then termed “Newton Marsh”) and finally Barton (a village beyond Newton Abbott).³

For there’s a Bishop’s Teign,
 And King’s Teign,
 And Coomb at the clear Teign’s head;
 Where, close by the stream,
 You may have your cream,
 All spread upon barley bread. (opening stanza)

³ All of the places mentioned, save for Barton, are north estuary parishes, each celebrated for their differing beauties. Bishop’s Teign (Bishopsteignton) is still noted for its hillside orchards and forests; Combeinteignhead offers moorings for small boats travelling the estuary as well as a wonderful inn dating back to medieval times; Newton Marsh (the marshlands were later to be partially cleared for the construction of what is now Newton Abbott, though marshland vestiges remain on the seaward side of the town) was and still is a vibrant livestock and market centre; Barton remains a quaint village on the way to Exeter.

A number of the villages and towns in the area take their name from the River Teign ("Teignmouth" being a good example) which is a tidal waterway and an important economic force in south Devon life. The River Teign is pronounced "teen"; Teignmouth is pronounced "tin"; in both Bishopsteignton and Kingsteignton the river's name is pronounced "tain". Keats' opening stanza disaggregates the village names into their original derivations, illustrating his knowledge of the perfect rhyme of the "teign" in Bishopsteignton and Kingsteignton. Of the host of villages that carry "teign" in their name, only these two carry the pronunciation "tain". The "teen" of Combeinteignhead is conspicuously separated from them. Obviously this is something Tom, or one of his local acquaintances, would have pointed out to Keats. What appears as a rather placid, repetitive opening stanza, reiterating the old Devon archetypes of cream and barley bread, may well be doffing its cap rather more assiduously to local customs than a preliminary reading would suggest.

The burst of good Devonshire weather serves quickly to turn Keats against the London he knew so well. The final stanza, looming in the wake of a swathe of rustic praise,⁸ eschews the good spirits of what has gone before and rounds sharply on the very people and places that had defined his life:

Then who would go
 Into dark Soho,
 And chatter with dank-hair'd critics,
 When he can stay
 For the new-mown hay,
 And startle the dappled crickets?

"Here all the summer could I stay", at its end, is consumed by a dark mood in which Keats recalls Soho, the artistic but highly urbanized and slightly seedy centre of London. To the critics, Keats attaches an adjective, "dank", usually connected more with place than person and in so doing he further imbues the image of "dark Soho" with a sense of disagreeable place. It is not that he entirely disavows the critics but, rather, he suggests it is they who have become the victims of their landscape – to the point where they have become *like* their landscape. Contrast this, Keats' persona seems to be saying, with the ameliorative effects of countryside on the human condition. How much superior is the labour of the fields, and the company and meaningless chirping of dappled crickets (a deliberate resonance with dank-haired critics!), to the company and meaningless chatter of those who have been possessed by the damp gloom of the place they inhabit.

Yet, what is truly revealing is how the world he has left behind breaks through at the very end of this poem to reclaim his mind and thoughts. Devon

remains today one of the poorer counties of England; as indeed it was in the time of Keats. In his travels through the villages Keats would have witnessed a level of poverty that to a man of his sensibilities would have struck discordant notes. Yet, his preference is to aggrandise what he has seen. At the end, though, the imaginary landscape of Devonshire is either not powerful enough or not persuasive enough to bring his fears and aspirations to concordance. Whatever he was haunted by – the plight of his brother, the critics, his own mortality – Keats could find only temporary respite in the idyllic construct of Teignmouth and its environs.

Within a week, Keats' humour had clearly altered dramatically. His final verse epistle to Reynolds, written on 25th March 1818, dwells on the prospect of his brother's death and broods intensely on the brutality of earthly life. He begins by confiding in his friend that he has experienced a mysterious and unsettling vision:

Dear Reynolds! I have a mysterious tale
 And cannot speak it. The first page
 I read Upon a lampit rock of green sea-weed
 Among the breakers; 'twas a quiet eve,
 The rocks were silent, the wide sea did weave
 An untumultuous fringe of silver foam
 Along the flat brown sand ...

(Forman 1948: 259).

Keats most probably refers to Teignmouth sea front here with its distinctive plane of limestone beach ("flat brown sand") and customarily docile wave line ("untumultuous fringe of silver foam"). His gaze, though, moves beyond the shoreline and out to sea where the mind's eye perceives the ruthless order of the ocean: "The greater on the less feeds evermore" in a process of "eternal fierce destruction." The substance of this contemplation decimates his sense of well-being and happiness:

And so from happiness I far was gone.
 Still am I sick of it, and though to-day
 I've gather'd young spring-leaves, and flowers gay
 Of periwinkle and wild strawberry,
 Still do I that most fierce destruction see
 The Shark at savage prey, the Hawk at pounce,
 The gentle Robin, like a Pard or Ounce,
 Ravening a worm- Away, ye horrid moods,
 Moods of one's mind!

(Forman 1948: 262-263).

Life's predatory inclination is overwhelming and, for all his pastoral inclinations to gather flowers and fruit, it cannot be ignored. The sharks and the hawks and even the robins that devour their prey have come to signify all those unremitting forces of life and death that he now perceives predate on his brother, Tom, and perhaps on himself. The unrelenting carnivorous train that defines existence and non-existence – and all of it viewed tremulously from the placid vantage point of Teignmouth beach.

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Tom died on the 1st December 1818. The year 1819 saw the mature Keats at the very acme of his art: *The eve of St. Agnes*, *The eve of St. Mark*, the *Odes*, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, *Lamia*, *To Autumn*, snatches of *Hyperion*. The year following Keats' sojourn in Devon has received enormous critical attention, with at least one critical book (Gittings' *The living year*) entirely devoted to it. It was a year, too, of self-doubts, frustrated ambitions and low spirits. Twice Keats began and abandoned *Hyperion*; and in March and April 1819, the exact anniversary of his stay in Teignmouth, he experienced an appalling bout of depression. The seven weeks he spent in Teignmouth in 1818 revealed a young man who was anxious to inhabit an idyllic space, dappled with the symbols of wholesome rural life. Even when the reality of Devonshire failed him, Keats' poetry reflected a willingness to reach for an imagined landscape where he lay kissing a milk maiden in the fields and embracing the images of country life. In the end, though, the imaginative leap seemed not substantial enough to overcome the more impelling and forceful certainties of his life. Even in Teignmouth other, darker landscapes impinged on his happiness – the stalking spectres of mortality and unwholesome urbanity. His irony and perhaps his sadness was that the dark fears and forces that tormented his mind were the very same forces that drove him to poetic greatness. The landscape of south Devon, be it real or perceived, may have promised Keats the happiness he thought he desired but his was an urban greatness that seemed to require the geography of London and the Home Counties for its truest inspiration. Teignmouth, then, stands as an important resting place on Keats' arduous journey to enduring celebrity – the kind of place where all such as him must sometimes pause and wonder if the journey is worth finishing.

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