

*'Touchstones of the Heart'*¹: The Progress of Keats's Suffering

John Keats's thinking about the meaning of suffering began in 1818 on his ascetic pilgrimage across the Highlands and Hebrides, culminating in an ascent of Ben Nevis. Racking up six-hundred-and-fifty miles on foot², in hardcore conditions, on a meagre diet of eggs and oatcakes, some argue this hike propelled Keats to his early death.³ But this strenuous journey also helped carve Keats into the man he could have been – his most productive period as a poet commenced at the end of it, in August 1818, and was sustained manically until October 1819. Keats used the journey to “*use me to more hardship... and strengthen more my reach in poetry.*”⁴ Evidenced by letters and poems produced across the hike, and after, Keats succeeded.

Keats's life was filled with suffering: both parents died when he was a boy, he watched tuberculosis destroy his younger brother, – giving him insight into his own fate – he struggled to connect with his sister, and he was forced to endure the pulmonary torture of his own consumption. Death, failure and falling in love all frightened Keats. The Highland expedition proved the hardest trial of Keats's life so far. Keats rejected the Christian account of the world as a “*vale of tears*,”⁵ arguing for a “*vale of Soul-making*,”⁶ where suffering *conditions* our character, and our art. For Keats, pain and circumstances are “*touchstones of [the] heart*”⁷ – leaving permanent marks on our souls. His argument was that suffering does not always take away from life, at times it enriches it.

In the first weeks of his hike, Keats expected inspiration to stem from “*the clouds, the trees, the rounded hills*,”⁸ but Burns' death overshadows nature in *On Visiting the Tomb of Burns*:

*The short-liv'd, paly summer is but won
From winter's ague for one hour's gleam
...All is cold Beauty; pain is never done.*⁹

Winter hangs over summer here, as death hangs over Keats's life. ‘Ague’ is a gradual, painful sapping of strength, linking to Keats's grim assertion that ‘pain is never done.’ We are always dying. Even in the prime of life, when suffering recedes it will gather again. This fatalism persists at Burns' birthplace. Keats is too conscious of his “*mortal body of a thousand days*,”¹⁰ seeing his own “*day of doom*”¹¹ in Burns'. The anaphora of “*Yet can I*” in the sonnet's sestet drives the idea that soon Keats will die. Keats struggles at this stage in the hike to combat the idea that pain and death are unbearable facts of life. They permeate the world around him.

Only by continuing his journey does Keats resolve this problem. One week after visiting Burns' birthplace, in *Lines Written in the Highlands After a Visit to Burns Country*, Keats develops a solution. The poet decides on our “*soul's memorial*”¹², binding our souls with suffering in a positive way:

No, no, that horror cannot be...

¹ A reference to John Keats's long letter of April 1819, written to his brother George.

² (accessible: <https://johnkeats.uvic.ca/1818-08-07.html> (last accessed: 12/03/2021))

³ Walker, Kyros, Carol, *Walking North With Keats*, (Yale University Press, London, 1992), p5

⁴ *ibid*, ‘Letter to Benjamin Bailey’ p192

⁵ Keats, John, *To George and Georgiana Keats*, 28th April, 1819 (accessible:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35698/35698-h/35698-h.htm> (last accessed: 12/03/2021))

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ *ibid*, ‘On Visiting the Tomb of Burns’ p160, l2

⁹ *ibid*, l5-6, 8

¹⁰ *ibid*, ‘This Mortal Body of a Thousand Days’ p218, l1

¹¹ *ibid*, l4

¹² *ibid*, ‘Lines Written in the Highlands after a Visit to Burns Country’ p195, l40

...room is there for a
prayer
...That he may stray league after league some great
birth-place to find
And keep his vision clear from speck, his inward sight
unblind.”¹³

Hiking grants value to suffering here. Keats achieves clarity of thought by overcoming a journey's struggles. The 'leagues' covered are arduous, but they can help us to 'keep our vision clear'. This is only a 'prayer,' but Keats argues that journeys like these weaken the 'horror' we encounter in life and death. The poet refuses to let bleaker feelings overwhelm him. He aims to “straddle Ben Lomond with [his] soul!”¹⁴ Although Keats's thoughts during the week between these poems are unrecorded in his letters, the development is inspiring. He goes from feeling weighed down by Burns' death to arguing that some amount of stability and clarity can follow from pain.

The physical challenges of Keats's hike hastened his decline in health, but strengthened his resolve that he could achieve great things. He refused himself breakfast until he had hiked a certain distance each morning. Conditions grew harsher, wetter, rockier, steeper, the further North he pushed. Reaching Oban, Keats threw himself up Ben Nevis after an exhausting stint in the Hebrides against his friend's advice. He would not give up. He repeatedly exceeded his expectations of his physical abilities. This demanding journey fuelled his inspiration and elicited clarity in his writing. He flourished off exhaustion. In *Ben Nevis*:

...a poor witless elf
...all my eye doth meet
Is mist and crag, not only on this height,
But in the world of thought and mental might! ”¹⁵

The poem is about mankind's ignorance of “hell”¹⁶ and “heaven”¹⁷ symbolised by the mist on Ben Nevis' summit, but Keats's perception is clear. The 'mist and crag' and the taxing climb have enhanced his vision rather than diminished it. We are as insignificant as 'witless elves,' compared with nature, and we are likely to suffer in life. Again Keats alludes to suffering's inevitability, but the transformative effect of his hike is that he does not try to search beyond this 'fog.' He sees our ignorance and pain despite the mist, and is undeterred. Here Keats achieves the clarity predicted in *Lines Composed in the Highlands after a Visit to Burns Country*. Ben Nevis tested the mettle of Keats's developing ideas of pain. The ascent proved the end of his journey. He returned South shortly afterwards, with an ulcerated throat.

In the following months, contrary to some, Keats bared vicious criticism from John Lockhart's review of *Endymion* well,¹⁸ at the same time nursing his dying brother. He went on to write his most famous poetry. Keats's hike made him increasingly defiant. Defiant of criticism, of his rapidly worsening health, of his destructive voyage to Italy. Defiant until his death. The poetry Keats produced on his expedition instructs us to embrace suffering wherever we can, in the hope that we will grow from it. His poetry shows us how

¹³ *ibid*, 137, 43, 45, 46

¹⁴ Keats, John, 'Letter to B. R. Haydon' (accessible: <http://keatslettersproject.com/letters/letter-64-to-benjamin-robert-haydon-8-april-1818> (last accessed 12/03/2021))

¹⁵ Keats, John, *Poems with an Introduction by Alice Meynell*, (Blackie and Son, London, 1903), 'Ben Nevis', p167, 111-14

¹⁶ *ibid*, 15

¹⁷ *ibid*, 17

¹⁸ Sanders, Andrew, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004), 'Letter to James A. Hesse, October 9, 1818', p391

adversity makes indelible marks, and these marks are not always ugly. Above all, his poetry testifies how much our souls can endure. Keats teaches that suffering, often, can be overcome.

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