



The Odes of John Keats (Belknap Press)

Helen Vendler

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Helen Vendler widens her exploration of lyric poetry with a new assessment of the six great odes of John Keats and in the process gives us, implicitly, a reading of Keats's whole career. She proposes that these poems, usually read separately, are imperfectly seen unless seen together--that they form a sequence in which Keats pursued a strict and profound inquiry into questions of language, philosophy, and aesthetics.

Vendler describes a Keats far more intellectually intent on creating an aesthetic, and on investigating poetic means, than we have yet seen, a Keats inquiring into the proper objects of worship for man, the process of soul making, the female Muse, the function of aesthetic reverie, and the ontological nature of the work of art. We see him questioning the admissibility of ancient mythology in a post Enlightenment art, the hierarchy of the arts, the role of the passions in art, and the rival claims of abstraction and representation. In formal terms, he investigates in the odes the appropriateness of various lyric structures. And in debating the value to poetry of the languages of personification, mythology, philosophical discourse, and *trompe l'oeil* description, Keats more and more clearly distinguishes the social role of lyric from those of painting, philosophy, or myth.

Like Vendler's previous work on Yeats, Stevens, and Herbert, this finely conceived volume suggests that lyric poetry is best understood when many forms of inquiry--thematic, linguistic, historical, psychological, and structural--are brought to bear on it at once.

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