



## On Walking in Burns's "Great Shadow": Keats's Scottish Heritage

*Mémoires d'Écosse : Keats sur les pas de Burns*

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## On Walking in Burns's "Great Shadow": Keats's Scottish Heritage

We read fine things but never feel them to the full until we have gone the  
same steps as the Author.

Keats's letter to Reynolds, 3 May 1818.<sup>1</sup>

### The Scottish Tour: A Drunken Fancy

When reflecting on the art of Keats and Burns, it seemed only natural that the differences would prevail over the similarities but a closer look at their parallel lives and philosophies of creation reveals two poets who are actually walking on common grounds. Despite an obvious discrepancy in birth (one of Scottish extraction, the other a Londoner) and chronology (Burns died just a year after Keats was born), they both seemed to share the essentials and meet around a trinity of talents: a sound knowledge of the medical body, a strong sense of wit and humor, a passion for food and a good glass of "*whuskey*". Turning west from Dumfries to the coast, Keats writes to his brother Tom in July 1818: "We have now begun upon whiskey—called here *whuskey* very smart stuff it is—Mixed like our liquors with sugar & water tis called toddy, very pretty drink & much praised by Burns".<sup>2</sup> And on his gargantuesque appetite that not even the Highland excesses could pretend to match, he wrote to Fanny just a month later:

Then I get so hungry—a Ham goes but a very little way and fowls are like Larks to me—A Batch of Bread I make no more ado with than a sheet of parliament; and I can eat a Bull's head as easily as I use to do Bull's eyes—I take a whole string of Pork Sausages down as easily as a Pen'orth of Lady's fingers—Oh dear I must soon be contented with an acre or two of oaten cake

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1. H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats: 1814–1821*, 2 vols, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1958, I, p. 279.

2. Letter from J. Keats to T. Keats, 2 July 1818, in *ibid.*, I, p. 309.

a hogshhead of Milk and a Cloaths basket of Eggs morning noon and night when I get among the Highlanders.<sup>3</sup>

Like Keats, Burns had mixed feelings regarding the sources of his French inheritance. Both authors are indeed heirs to Rabelais's "carnavalesque" tradition, its eccentricity and physicality, its earthly attachments, its anatomical patterns and, to paraphrase Bakhtin, its sense of both comic and cosmic relief. Although Burns displays a strong set of influences, he shows no remorse in the way his poetry despises French cuisine (we remember the panache and gusto with which he criticizes the "French ragout" in *To A Haggis*) and sneers at France's affected modes of dancing: "nae cotillon brent new frae France",<sup>4</sup> he writes in *Tam O'Shanter*. That same reference is mentioned by Keats in his letter to Tom, when he was "kicking and twirling" to the "Highland fling" on June 30th, in the market town of Ireby:

It was indeed "no new cotillion fresh from France". No they kickit & jumpit with mettle extraordinary, & whiskit, & fleckit, & toe'd it, & go'd it & twird it, & wheel'd it, & stampit it, & sweated it, tattooing the floor like mad; The differenc[e] between our country dances & these Scottish figures, is about the same as leisurely stirring a cup o' Tea & beating up a batter pudding, I was extremely gratified to think, that if I had pleasures they knew nothing of, they had also some into which I could possibly enter. I hope I shall not return without having got the Highland fling, there was as fine a row of boys & girls as you ever saw, some beautiful faces, & one exquisite mouth. I never felt so near the glory of Patriotism, the glory of making by any means a country happier. This is what I like better than scenery.<sup>5</sup>

Whether we address the question of Keats's or Burns's artistic growth, the double portrait of the artists, if faithful, shows recurring features. When respectively looking at several pieces of biographical criticisms, Burns and Keats stand out as the two voices of "uneducated genius". Had Burns lived another twenty years, he would have defended the tar-

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3. Letter from John Keats to Fanny Keats, 5 July 1818, in H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, I, p. 316. We would do well here to insist on the tragic irony, which we now know to be a leit-motif in Keats's life, around the symbolism of the stomach. In addition to having an ogre's appetite and eating like a horse, Keats, the physician, had acquired a very precise knowledge of how the human digestive system functioned, which he here invokes with the verve of a poet rather than with the coldness of the physician: "It was probably some such vivid illustration by Astley Cooper that led Keats himself to describe to Charles Cowden Clarke the working of the stomach, 'the stomach, he said, being like a brood of callow nestlings (opening his capacious mouth) yearning and gaping for sustenance'". R. Gittings, "John Keats, Physician and Poet", *Journal of the American Medical Association*, no. 223, 1973, pp. 51–5 (p. 53).

4. R. Burns, "Tam O'Shanter", in T. Burke (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Robert Burns*, London, Wordsworth Poetry Library, 2008, p. 5.

5. H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, I, p. 307.

geted "Cockney poet" against the attacks of contemporary reviewers with those words: "Gie me ae spark o' Nature's fire, / That's a' the learning I desire; / Then tho' I drudge thro' dub an' mire / At pleugh or cart, / My Muse, tho' hamely in attire, / May touch the heart" (v. 73–78).<sup>6</sup> In line with the works of Allan Ramsay and Robert Fergusson, Burns, feigning a naïve form of ignorance, celebrates modesty as the only path to authority. And Keats would not have it any other way: "How many bards gild the lapses of time! [...] And often, when I sit me down to rhyme, / These will in throngs before my mind intrude: / But no confusion, no disturbance rude / Do they occasion; 'tis a pleasing chime".<sup>7</sup> No "anxiety of influence" there, no sense of occasion: just plain reverence in the form of a sweet melody.

On that same note, another counterpoint comes to mind. When reading the literature on Burns, the Keatsian expression "chameleon poet", the most "unpoetical"<sup>8</sup> poet of all, free to assume any facet of Nature's identity, also seems to appear once or twice. There again, such adjectives as sensuous, anamorphic, extravagant would likely fit both their poetic selves—as would provocative and bawdy, in the grand eighteenth century tradition of Swift or Smollett whom Keats admired just as much as Burns, mixing body and soul with satirical excellence. The final similarity is one we should deplore: shortened lives and untimely deaths leading to spoiled gifts and potentials. Burns and Keats, lived with great intensity, but were buried too soon, everyone agrees. Keats himself called the Scottish Tour "a sort of Prologue to the Life I intend to pursue"<sup>9</sup>—one that had started with the sad note of George leaving for America but, as he told Benjamin Bailey, still hopeful in the creative virtues of a walking trip which would help him "identify finer scenes, load [him] with grander Mountains, and strengthen more [his] reach in Poetry".<sup>10</sup> We are left to wonder when one or the other is mentioned alongside their more fortunate fellow poets, what they might have produced if they had lived the longer lives of their peers: Wordsworth and Blake, for example. There lies the double curse of a youth interrupted, although Burns did live a full ten years more than Keats—a tragedy which makes the readings, the investigations and the

6. R. Burns, "Epistle to John Lapraik, an Old Scottish Bard", in T. Burke (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Robert Burns*, p. 163.

7. J. Keats, "So many bards gild the lapses of time!", in J. Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1978, p. 33.

8. Letter from J. Keats to R. Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, in H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, I, pp. 386–87.

9. Letter from J. Keats to B. R. Haydon, 8 April 1818, in *ibid.*, I, p. 264.

10. Letter from J. Keats to B. Bailey, 22 July 1818, in H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, I, p. 342.

realm of endless possibilities all the more pleasurable to us: “How many bards gild the lapses of time / A few of them have ever been the food / Of my delighted fancy [...]” (v. 1–3).<sup>11</sup>

### “An Author’s Pulse”: Echoes and Essences

On the subject of organic affiliations between Keats and Burns, Dr. William Findlay wrote an interesting essay, dated 1898, entitled *Robert Burns and the Medical Profession*, which underlines the close intimacy the poet shared with the world of physicians. This nexus between poetry and medicine on the basis of the human bond linking the man of letters to the man of science (Dr. Mackenzie and John Moore for Burns, Stephens and Sir Astley Cooper for Keats) is, of course, nothing extraordinarily new in terms of theoretical perspectives. On Keats, plenty has been written already on the “weariness, the fever, and the fret”<sup>12</sup> of the young surgical apprentice. However, it brought about a greater illustration of this pulsating sense of walking in another author’s footsteps: such gigantic steps which were left for Keats to explore by the “Rustic, haggis-fed” poet as “the trembling earth resounds his tread!” (v. 37–8).<sup>13</sup> To have “axioms” of his poetry beating to the sound of the Scot’s, Keats, after some noisy stamping of his own on Burns’s floor, attempted to revive the memory of this “great soul” by “prov[ing it] upon [his] pulses”:<sup>14</sup>

My pulse is warm and thine old barley-bree,  
My head is light with pledging a great soul  
My eyes are wandering, and I cannot see,  
Fancy is dead and drunken at its goal;  
Yet can I stamp my foot upon thy floor,  
Yet can I ope thy window-sash to find  
The meadow thou hast tramped o’er and o’er,—  
Yet can I think of thee till thought is blind,—  
Yet can I gulp a bumper to thy name,—  
O smile among the shades, for this is fame! (v. 1–14)<sup>15</sup>

11. J. Keats, “How many bards gild the lapses of time”, in J. Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 33.

12. J. Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*, in *ibid.*, p. 280.

13. R. Burns, “To a Haggis”, in T. Burke, *The Collected Poems of Robert Burns*, p. 133.

14. Letter from J. Keats to J. H. Reynolds, 3 May 1818, in H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, I, p. 279.

15. J. Keats, “This mortal body of a thousand days”, in J. Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats: Complete Poems*, p. 272.

Like the comfort of Chaucer's earlier presence, which Keats felt as early as 1817—"I was not right in my head when I came—At Canterbury I hope the Remembrance of Chaucer will set me forward like a Billiard-Ball"<sup>16</sup>—, when he started dozing off, in *Sleep and Poetry*, on the father-poet's book of verse, the pulses are infinite when it comes to celebrating the vision of a wandering shadow and the essence of "two dead eternities": "Thou answer'st not, for thou art dead asleep; / Thy life is but two dead eternities, / The last in air, the former in the deep— / First with the whales, last with the eagle skies [...]" (v. 9–12)<sup>17</sup>. In *On Visiting the Tomb of Burns*, the Romantic poet also navigates in between those same worlds, praising both heritage and experience in a "strange mood", he writes to Tom, and "half asleep".<sup>18</sup> Dare we speak then of a "fellowship with essence"<sup>19</sup> between Burns and Keats when the poet, a better writer for all his scientific awareness, takes pride in his plural identity, both captive and empathetic. The external reality becomes an internal phenomenon and the ideal of a poem is less thought out than it is felt within. Such vital feelings like a man's pulse which the quick-witted Burns is able to detect even in the most "feeble" symptom of a beating heart. In his "Letter to John Goudie in Kilmarnock", they take on the form of a diagnostic against empty words and bad medicine. From one pulse to the next, it can be seen as a "striking specimen"<sup>20</sup> of those pre-Keatsian modes of medicinal verse. Down to the "gallopin consumption", Burns has it all mapped out for his successor, and, in the end, celebrates, with a smile and in his own prosaic way, the marriage of observation and intuition:

Poor gapin', glowrin' Superstition,  
Wae's me! she's in sad condition;

16. Letter from J. Keats to Taylor & Hessey, 16 May 1817, in H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, I, pp. 146–7.

17. J. Keats, "To Ailsa Rock", in J. Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 206. On the origins of this sonnet on the Scottish Tour, Walter Jackson Bate writes: "Back in Scotland, they started north to Ballantrae, Ayr, and Glasgow. Since Charles Dilke considered himself something of an antiquarian, Brown wanted to fool him by getting Keats to compose a ballad in Scotch dialect that Dilke would think was genuine. Keats tried to oblige, and wrote 'A Galloway Song' ('Ah! ken ye what'), taking the subject from a wedding party they saw on the road; but, as Keats remarked simply, 'it won't do'—no Scot would think it genuine after the first two lines. They passed Ailsa Rock, which, looming up over a thousand feet from the sea, 'struck me very suddenly—really I was a little alarmed'; and in the inn at Girvan (10 July), Keats tried a sonnet 'To Ailsa Rock', less interesting than 'On Visiting the Tomb of Burns' but less uneven". W. J. Bate, *John Keats*, Cambridge, MA., The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963, pp. 355–6.

18. "Cowden Clarke once inquired how far Keats liked his studies at the hospital. [...] 'The other day, for instance, during the lecture [of anatomy], there came a sunbeam into the room, and with it a whole troop of creatures floating in the ray, and I [Keats] was off with them to Oberon and fairyland'". W. M. Rossetti, *Life of John Keats*, London, Walter Scott, 1887, pp. 19–20.

19. J. Keats, *Endymion: A Poetic Romance*, in J. Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 83.

20. W. Findlay, *Robert Burns and the Medical Profession*, London, Alexander Gardner Paisley, 1898, p. 11.

Fy, bring Black-Jock, her state physician,  
 To see her water;  
 Alas! there's ground for great suspicion  
 She'll ne'er get better.

Auld Orthodoxy land did grapple,  
 But now she's got an unco' ripple;  
 Haste, gie her name up i' the chapel,  
 Nigh unto death;  
 See how she fetches at the thrapple,  
 An' gasps for breath.

Enthusiasm's past redemption,  
 Gane in a galloping consumption;  
 Not a' the quacks, with a' their gumption,  
 Will ever mend her;  
 Her feeble pulse gies strong presumption,  
 Death soon will end her.

E'en swinge the dogs, an' thresh them siccar;  
 The mair they squeal, aye chap the thicker;  
 An' still, 'mang hands, a hearty bicker  
 O' something stout;—  
 It gars an author's pulse beat quicker,  
 An' helps his wit!<sup>21</sup>

Surely in Keats, the “pulse” is much more feverish and bloody—“Without a motion, save their big hearts / Heaving in pain, and horribly convuls'd / With sanguine feverous boiling gurge of pulse” (II, 26-28)<sup>22</sup>, he writes in *Hyperion*—, mimicking some of the more graphic pages of his *Anatomical and Physiological Notebook*:

The Stream of Blood in a Vein near to an artery has a distinct Pulsation. Where the Blood meets in the right Auricle the force of the two Streams of Blood from the ascending and descending Cavæ oppose each other and respectively drive back a portion of Blood into Vessels which made the Ancients suppose that the Blood ebb'd and flow'd.<sup>23</sup>

But the objective stays the same, whether it comes out of the convulsions of a dying divinity or from the Barley-bree oozing out of the dead poet's pores. Keats injects warm inspiration and a new sense of rhythm

21. T. Burke (ed.), *The Collected Poems of Robert Burns*, p. 174.

22. J. Keats, *Hyperion*, in J. Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 257.

23. M. B. Forman (ed.), *John Keats's Anatomical and Physiological Notebook, printed from the holograph in the Keats Museum, Hampstead*, Brooklyn, Haskell House, 1970, p. 13.

into Burns's pulsating limbs. With drops of his own "inspiring bold John Barleycorn",<sup>24</sup> Burns is literally brought back to life by the "physician Nature" of his inheritor. In this life-in-death resuscitation process, drinking is about the only thing that saves you from disappearing completely—another reminder of Rabelais's etymology: Pantagruel is the "all-thirsting one" born with gaping jaws ("*la gueule ouverte*"). And after the long draught which follows the giant's birth, we are left with this piece of earthly philosophy: "Ah! thrice happy that year the man who had a cool, well-plenished wine-cellar underground (Book 2, chapter 2)".

### "My Heart's in the Highlands": Breathing in Burns's Memorial

When Keats crossed the Scottish border and ventured onto unfamiliar territory, he did not take such a risk all by himself but remained under the protection of his loyal friend, Charles Brown. A very down-to-earth, mercantile and "liberal"<sup>25</sup> spirit, Brown was not only an "inveterate traveler" but also a vigorous, half Welsh, half Scottish *übermensch*, who never got sick and who never got tired. This is how he depicts himself in a letter to Charles Dilke's father: "Imagine me with a thick stick in my hand, the knapsack on my back, 'with spectacles on nose', a white hat, a tartan coat and trowsers, and a Highland plaid thrown over my shoulders ... Keats calls me the Red Cross Knight, and declares my shadow is ready to split its sides as it follows me".<sup>26</sup> For all the vigor of his enthusiasm, Brown could not completely save Keats from ill-health and bad weather, nor could he spare him the pangs of exhaustion and its share of disappointments. The choice of bringing along with them on their journey the three-volume miniature set of Cary's translation of Dante and a copy of Milton was certainly not random. Those two books were reminiscent of Burns's famed "Satanism", his hellish inclinations and taste for the natural

24. R. Burns, "Tam O'Shanter", in T. Burke (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Robert Burns*, p. 5.

25. Charles Brown "was the most scrupulously honest man I ever knew—but wanted nobleness to lift this honesty out of the commercial kennel—He would have forgiven John [Keats] what he owed him with all his heart—but had John been able & offered to pay, he would have charged interest, as he did George. He could do generous things too—but not after the fashion of the world. His sense of justice led him at times to do acts of generosity—at others of meanness—the latter was always noticed the former overlooked—therefore amongst his early companions he had a character for any thing rather than liberality—but he was liberal". Charles Dilke in his annotations to Milnes's biography (Morgan Library). H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers, and more Letters and Poems of the Keats Circle: 1816–1878*, 2 vols, Cambridge, MA., Harvard University Press, 1948, I, p. xix.

26. *Ibid.*, I, 362. The other famous "Scot" of the Keats Circle was John Jeffrey, Georgiana's second husband (she remarried after George's death), who sent Milnes letters and autograph poems, a protector of the Keatsian heritage, although a somewhat unreliable source who, like Joseph Severn, came to be known for some of his erroneous transcriptions.

disorder” of things. And, for Keats, out of breath and fearing for his life, Dante and Milton stood as ominous symbols of what he felt was like a body without its soul crossing over into a Scottish *Inferno*: “I [Burns] am resolved to study the sentiments of a very respectable Personage, Milton’s Satan—‘Hail horrors! hail, infernal world!’”.<sup>27</sup> After the hard climbs (Skiddaw, Ben Nevis), the coughs, the ruggedness and the chills (it was a cold month of July for a Southerner), Keats’s original bliss was starting to wear off, as is manifest in this Swiftian piece of bathetic humor taken from the only letter Keats wrote to Reynolds during the entire Tour: “That is I put down Mountains, Rivers, Lakes, dells, glens, Rocks, and Clouds, with beautiful enchanting, gothic picturesque fine . . . Grand, sublime—a few Blisters &c—and now you have our journey thus far”.<sup>28</sup> Succumbing to fatigue and irritability also meant giving way to “positive incapability” as one starts to long for the not so mysterious, not so unfamiliar warmth of classical feelings: “I know not how it is, the Clouds, the sky, the Houses, all seem anti-Grecian & anti-Charlemagnish—I will endeavour to get rid of my prejudices, & tell you fairly about the Scotch”.<sup>29</sup> In all fairness, Keats’s first signs of a consumptive mood made him quite ill-prepared for both the physical and the intellectual challenges ahead. But as he enjoyed the early days of Scottish dancing and feasting, he also seems to have been eating and drinking Burns up, as he would Chaucer or Shakespeare, surviving on such happy ingestions which would make his short life as a poet a little less hard to digest:

Souls of poets dead and gone,  
 What Elysium have ye known,  
 Happy field or mossy cavern,  
 Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?  
 Have ye tippled drink more fine  
 Than mine host’s Canary wine?  
 Or are fruits of Paradise  
 Sweeter than those dainty pies  
 Of venison? O generous food! (v. 1–9)<sup>30</sup>

The memorial, as it is put together by Keats, is erected following a bizarre celebration where we, as readers, often fail to distinguish one

27. Letter from R. Burns to Mrs. Dunlop, 30 April 1787, in J. De Lancey Ferguson (ed.), *The Letters of Robert Burns*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1931, I, p. 86. “Give me a spirit like my favorite hero, Milton’s Satan”. Letter from R. Burns to James Smith, 11 June 1787, in *ibid.*, I, p. 95.

28. Letter from J. Keats to J. H. Reynolds, 11 July 1818, in H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, I, p. 322.

29. Letter from J. Keats to T. Keats, 2 July 1818, in *ibid.*, I, p. 309.

30. J. Keats, “Lines on the Mermaid Tavern”, in J. Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 166.

devouring bard from the other. At the cottage in Ayr, the blood in Keats's veins seems to be so filled up with Burns's whiskey that they are ready to pop. In the end, an old ghost's misery meets a young fool's drunkenness, after which Keats pays homage to his dead host by spilling out bits and pieces of what sounds like a resurrected form of Burnsian prose:

We went to the Cottage and took some Whiskey—I wrote a sonnet for the mere sake of writing some lines under the roof—they are so bad I cannot transcribe them—The Man at the Cottage was a great Bore with his Anecdotes . . . O the flummery of a birth place! Cant! Cant! Cant! It is enough to give a spirit the guts-ache—Many a true word they say is spoken in jest [...] I cannot write about scenery and visitings [...] One song of Burns's is of more worth to you than all I could think for a whole year in his native country—His Misery is a dead weight upon the nimbleness of one's quill—I tried to forget it—to drink Toddy without any Care—to write a merry Sonnet—it won't do—he talked with Bitches—he drank with Blackguards, he was miserable—We can see horribly clear in the works of such a man his whole life, as if we were God's spies.<sup>31</sup>

As he approaches the tombstone with similar empathy, in memory of the long lost "Scotch", Keats finds traces of him in his own insides. They are the last living organs, although amputated and even at times "deadened", of Burns's "luxuriousness". On 9 July 1818, Keats writes, thinking about Burns but really talking about himself: "Poor unfortunate fellow—his disposition was southern—how sad it is when a luxurious imagination is obliged in self-defence to deaden its delicacy in vulgarity, and riot in thing[s] attainable that it may not have leisure to go mad after thing[s] which are not".<sup>32</sup> Against the impending threat of a "sickly imagination and a sick pride", Keats fights for the glory of this "cold dream" born out of the Scottish hills, as he would against his own illness, reaching the unattainable, for the sake of the poet's sanity:

The town, the churchyard, and the setting sun,  
 The clouds, the trees, the rounded hills all seem,  
 Though beautiful, cold—strange—as in a dream  
 I dreamed long ago. Now new begun,  
 The short-lived, paly summer is but won  
 From winter's ague, for one hour's gleam;  
 Though sapphire warm, their stars do never beam;  
 All is cold beauty; pain is never done

31. Letter from J. Keats to J. H. Reynolds, 11 July 1818, in H. E. Rollins (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, I, pp. 324–5.

32. Letter from J. Keats to T. Keats, 9 July 1818, in *ibid.*, I, pp. 319–20.

For who has mind to relish, Minos-wise,  
 The real of beauty free from that dead hue  
 Sickly imagination and sick pride  
 Cast wan upon it! Burns! with honour due  
 I have oft honoured thee. Great shadow, hide  
 Thy face—I sin against thy native skies.<sup>33</sup>

The “pain is never done” but as erotic Desire (*Eros*), Wisdom (*Minos*) and Death (*Thanatos*) all come together for one last feast, Keats, the proud sinner, relishing in truth and beauty as he takes one step further towards his own memorial, speaks in Burns’s name under his very own “native skies”. In the end, the young Romantic comes out of it looking both brave and foolish like a clumsy lover, a bit disoriented and with a partial sense of belonging but overall confident, like his Scottish model, that we can praise and revive the living dead without losing their tracks, perverting their honour or desecrating their verse.

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33. J. Keats, *On Visiting the Tomb of Burns*, in J. Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 266.