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A STUDY OF JOHN KEATS

The Evolution of Keats' Idea of Beauty

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Introduction
Chapter I " The Realm of Flora and Old Pan "
Chapter II " The Cave of Quietude "
Chapter III " Dying into Life "
Chapter IV " Beauty in All Things "
Conclusion
Bibliography

INTRODUCTION

In *Aurora Leigh,* Mrs. Browning gives an impressive metrical characterization of Keats:

> The man who never stepped
> In gradual progress like another man,
> But, turning grandly on his central self,
> Ensphered himself in twenty perfect years
> And died, not young—(the life of a long years
> Distilled to a mere drop, falling like a tear
> Upon the world's cold cheek, to make it burn
> For ever).
> (I. 1004–11)

N.B. The quotations from Keats' poems and letters in this paper are from Edmund Blunden's edition of *Poems of Keats* and from Hyder E. Rollins' edition of *The Letters of John Keats*.

In this passage she points out one of the most important aspects of Keats, that which aroused my interest in his poems—how Keats " turned grandly on his central self " throughout his short life. At the age of romantic revival two things had an especially great influence on contemporary poets; one was the French Revolution, and the other, William Godwin's *Political Justice*. Excited by the French Revolution, most of the English Romantics conceived abstract ideas about liberty and perfectibility, and most were revolutionists in one sense or another. In 1793 William Godwin published his *Political Justice;* his ideas of the millennium attracted the hearts of many young poets, including the young Wordsworth and Shelley. However, neither revolutions nor political theories occupied Keats' mind. His primary concern was not politics, nor abstract theories, nor natural science, but always poetry. In his exploration of poetry, Keats' mind was directed inwards. Facing himself bravely, he thought of things from out of his own experience. Accordingly, his view of life was based, not on metaphysical doctrines, nor on political theories, but on his own experience. To Keats " even a proverb was no proverb until his life had illustrated it."[1]

Another reason why Keats attracted me is that the evaluation of his poems differs greatly among the critics. Some critics regard him as the effeminate aesthete, or as the poet of sensuous beauty. Others think Keats to have been the great poet of humanitarianism, while there are yet other critics who believe that Keats was a young Shakespeare. I think that these divergences of opinion are caused by differences in their views of Keats' " Beauty."

Keats devoted his whole life to expressing his " Beauty " in poetry. What, then, was Keats' " Beauty "? I cannot define it in my own words, for Keats' idea of Beauty evolved in accordance with the development of his view of life. He wrote to his brother:

> They are very shallow people who take everything literally. A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory, and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life—a life like the scriptures, figurative—which such people can no more make out than they can the Hebrew Bible. Lord Byron cuts a figure but he is not

[1] Letter: To George Keats, March 19, 1819. Vol. II, p. 79.

figurative—Shakespeare led a life of Allegory: his works are the comments on it. . . .

(Letter: To George Keats, Feb. 18, 1819. Vol. 11, p. 65)

Fortunately for the eyes that care to see the mystery of Keats' life, his letters remain. Although there is danger in paying too much attention to the letters, in them we can follow to some extent the movement of his mind.

With reference to his letters, therefore, I will attempt in this paper to trace the evolution of Keats' idea of Beauty as it appears in those letters and in his poems. This paper consists of four chapters. In the first chapter, I will study the poems written in 1816; in the second, *Endymion;* in the third, the poems written in 1818; in the fourth, the odes. Great poetry embodies the history of the poet's soul. By surveying Keats' poems in this way, I want to observe the movement of Keats' soul, and to understand what " Beauty " it was that Keats pursued during the brief years of his poetic life.

CHAPTER I " The Realm of Flora and Old Pan "

When Keats wrote most of the poems in his first collection, he was a student of medicine and he suffered incessantly from the conflict between medicine and poetry. However, no line and no imagery reveals these facts. Instead, we can find one remarkable literary tone in the poems written at this period—poetry and nature were one to Keats. Indeed, both were means to escape from dull reality.

In his " Epistle to George Felton Mathew," Keats confessed the struggle of his poetic genius in an oppressive environment of " the jumbled heap of murky buildings "[1] in London. He complained that his exhausting duties in the hospitals were holding his faculties in thrall and that the dark city was strifling his poetic inspiration:

> But might now each passing moment give
> To the coy muse, with me she could not live
> In this dark city, nor would condescend

[1] Letter: To Charles Cowden Clarke, Oct. 9, 1816. Vol. I, p. 113.

'Mid contradictions her delights to lend. . . .
(31–35)

When, however, he was surrounded by natural beauties, he was charmed away from all his troubles, and his poetic imagination was inspired:

I stood tip-toe upon a little hill,
The air was cooling, and so very still,
That the sweet buds which with a modest pride
Pull droopingly, in slanting curve aside. . . .
. . . I was light-hearted,
And many pleasures to my vision started;
So I straightway began to pluck a poesy
Of luxuries bright, milky, soft and rosy. . . .
(" I Stood Tip-toe Upon a Little Hill," 1–28)

Thus the escape to the sensuous beauties of nature was the indispensable condition to stir his poetic inspiration. Accordingly, his powers of composing poetry were closely identified with his ability to response to nature. In this way, nature and poetry were one to him. He believed that Nature created her poets. In " I Stood Tip-toe Upon a Little Hill," he addresses the moon:

. . . Maker of sweet poets, dear delight
Of this fair world, and all its gentle livers; . . .
For what has made the sage or poet write
But the fair paradise of Nature's light?
(117–27)

This identification of poetry with nature is symbolized in the sonnet " On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." This sonnet shows Keats' joy at being introduced to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* by Chapman's translation. Just as the kinds of poetry which Keats had explored before then are expressed by the images of islands and countries:

Much have I travell'd in the realm of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealtry to Apollo hold. . . .
(1–4)

So Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are represented as " one wide expanse /

That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne." Keats compares his excitement at this literary discovery to Herschel's excitement at his discovery of the planet Uranus, and to Cortez's (really Balboa's) excitement at his discovery of the Pacific Ocean. Thus Keats implies that the exploration of the realm of nature is, at the same time, the exploration of the realm of poetry for him.

Since nature and poetry were one to Keats, the discovery of nature was one with the discovery of poetry—the thing in itself and his own powers of poetic imagination. Therefore, the ardour of Keats' exploration and his excitement of discovery were directed toward three objects: the beauty of nature, the beauty of poetry, and his own power to express the beauty of nature in poetry.[1]

However, Keats' sensuous delight in the loveliness of nature is only a prelude to his real purpose. In " Sleep and Poetry " for the first time he indicated his decision to leave the world of natural beauties for the world of human beings. In " Sleep and Poetry " he first enjoys " the realm of Flora and old Pan," as in earlier poems. At last, however, he draws back with the question:

> And can I ever bid these joys farewell?
> Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life
> Where I may find the agonies, the strife
> Of human hearts. . . .
>
> (122–126)

Keats thus strives to put romantic fancies away from him in preference for a serious contemplation of life. Later in the poem, he embodies the spirit of poetry in a vision of a charioteer. The charioteer drives a chariot from the sky to the mountains and listens intently to the " murmurs, laughs, and cries " of " shapes of delight, of mystery, and fear " which appear from the trees and mountains. Keats, like this charioteer, wants to learn to reveal in poetry the hidden beauty and meanings of life, that is, to " seize the events of this wide world." This attitude of Keats toward poetry suggests that now poetry has for him become more than a means to escape from reality. At last he seems to have glimpses

[1] J. M. Murry, *Keats*, London, The Alden Press, 1955, pp. 163–165.

of a true poetic kingdom.

A similar idea is expressed in his letter to Reynolds written more than a year afterwards.[1] In this letter he compares human life " to a large mansion of many apartments." The first is called " the infant or thoughtless Chamber." This is the life of mere sensations. The second is called " the Chamber of Maiden-Thought"; here delight in sensuous beauties becomes a conscious passion. This consciousness " sharpens our vision into the heart and nature of man " and " convinces one's nerves that the world is full of Misery, and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and Oppression." Then this Chamber of Maiden-Thought " becomes gradually darkened, and many doors are set open—but all dark." The poet gives us no conclusion in the letter. Keats mbraced these ideas in his poetry. For instance, he expressed the " infant and thoughtless Chamber " in " Sleep and Poetry " as follows:

> A pigeon tumbling in clear summer air;
> A laughing school-boy, without grief or care,
> Riding the springy branches of an elm.
> (93–95)

However just as Keats realizes in the letter that " the Chamber of just Maiden-Thought " awakens a man to human suffering, so in " Sleep and Poetry " he decides to pass beyond " the realm of Flora and old Pan " into the nobler life, where one "may find the agonies, the strife of human hearts."

Yet we cannot say that now Keats has truly left that happy realm in his essential poetic development. In spite of his resolution to train himself for sterner themes of human life, the natural habitation of his mind was the kingdom of romantic beauties. In " Sleep and Poetry," Keats' Beauty is still a conventional sensuous beauty, symbolic forms have no character of gravity, but symbolize merely the happiness and joy of life. For instance, after criticizing the poetry of Pope and Byron because their themes are " ugly clubs " and that they are " Polyphemes / Disturbing the grand sea," Keats asserts that poetry " might be half slum-

[1]. Letter: To J. H. Reynolds, May 3, 1818, Vol. I, p. 277

bering on its right arm," and that " those shall be accounted poet kings / Who simply tell the most heart-easing things." These statements give us the impression that Keats still thinks of poetry as a means of escape from reality into a paradise in which he can lose himself in luxuries of beauty, rather than as a grave means to grasp " the agonies and the strife of human hearts."

It is true that, at the end of the first period of his poetical life, Keats awoke to stern reality and was convinced that he had to face it. He saw " a vast idea " before him. However, feeling tremors of fear, he then returned to " the realm of Flora and old Pan." Let me consider in later chapters how he developed from this immaturity and came to have his own idea of Beauty.

CHAPTER II " The Cave of Quietude "

Keats' first volume, containing poems up to and including " Sleep and Poetry," was published in March, 1817. In April he began his most ambitious work, *Endymion*. His letter to Hessey displays his own characterization and judgment of the work.

> It is as good as I had power to make it—by myself. Had I been nervous about its being a perfect piece, and with that view asked advice, and trembled over every page, it would not have been written; for it is not in my nature to fumble—I will write independently. —I have written independently without Judgment. I may write independently, and with Judgment, hereafter. The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man. It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in its itself. That which is creative must create itself. In *Endymion* I leaped headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice. I was never afraid of failure, for I would rather fail than not be among the greatest. . . .
>
> (Letter: To J. A. Hessey, Oct. 8, 1818. Vol. I, p. 374)

Indeed we might call *Endymion* an exploration by Keats of his power to search for and to believe in Beauty. " The tale of the loves of the Greek shepherd-prince and the moon-goddess turns under Keats' hand into a parable of the adventures of the poetic soul striving after full communion

with the spirit of essential Beauty."[1] Refusing any help from Hunt or Shelley, Keats made a trial of his powers of imagination and invention in *Endymion*. He searched for Beauty, steering by " the rudder of Imagination and using Fancy as sails."[2] As many critics point out, *Endymion* is marked with a great deal of immaturity in construction and expression, and indecision of theme. To use Keats' own words, " it was a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished."[3] Yet it shows a remarkable poetic development in his philosophy of Beauty; it is this which distinguishes the work from his earlier poems. In Book I, he sets " gradations of happiness even like a pleasure thermometer "[4]:

> Wherein lies Happiness? In that which becks
> Our ready Minds to fellowship divine;
> A fellowship with essence, till we shine
> Full alchemized and free of space. Behold
> The clear Region of heaven! . . .
>
> (I. 771–81)

The birth of his characteristic philosophy of beauty is presented in these lines. Up to now, as I analysed in the previous chapter, he had been enraptured with beautiful things and wandering thoughts, without any conscious object except that of delighting in their luxury. Now he is asking himself why he has become a collector of luxuries and is trying to account for the profound value of " a thing of beauty." We might say that in earlier work he had just described the beauties seen through his eyes, while in *Endymion* he created his own Beauty in his mind. He regards the deepest happiness to be the communion with " essence," a communion which can be achieved through the apprehension of the beautiful. Yet *Endymion* is no mere dream, nor merely the desire of the moth for the star. Endymion himself explains the motives of his adventures to his sister Peona, who is a representative of " rational " human beings:

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[1] Sidney Colvin, *John Keats*, Glasgowe, The University Press, 1921, p. 167.

[2] Letter: To Benjamin Bailey, Oct. 8, 1817. Vol. I, p. 170.

[3] Letter: To John Taylor, April 10, 1818. Vol. I, p. 270.

[4] Letter: To John Taylor, Jan. 30, 1818. Vol. I, p. 283.

I'm sure,
My restless spirit never could endure
To brood so long upon one luxury,
Unless it did, though fearfully, espy
A hope beyond the shadow of a dream . . .
(I. 853–857)

Really, Keats dealt with his pursuit of Beauty in close relation with reality, not literally, but symbolically, for Keats' humanitarianism appears consistently throughout the work. Keats attempted to place in his poem " the agonies and strife of human hearts," which he had had a glimpse of in " Sleep and Poetry," and to conduct his search with human sympathy.

In Book II, after the passage beginning with " Wherein lies Happiness," he indicates three criteria of happiness: sensuous delight in nature and romance, the pleasures of friendship, and those of love. Friendship and love, he says, are " richer entanglements " than the oneness felt in communion with Nature, because they are more " self-destroying." As the effacement of self is more complete in them, one can thereby reach the pinnacle of love, which is the final " fellowship with essence." In the under-world of Book II, Endymion, who until then has had no thought of anything but his own plight, is moved by the pangs of Alpheus and Arethusa and prays to the moon-goddess to assuage them. In reward for his sympathy for the sorrows of others, " the giant sea " appears above his head to help him in his pursuit. It is also because Endymion forgot his own woes and felt pity for another's miseries that Glaucus taught him a great deal and gave him human experience. We can conjecture, from these examples, Keats' idea that a heartfelt human sympathy is the path to the ultimate goal, ideal Beauty.

Keats' humanitarianism reflects the influence of Wordsworth's doctrine, expressed, for instance, in *The Excursion,* that a poet must learn to go out of himself and to live and feel as a man among fellow men. As his letters written in September show, in the fall of 1817, Keats studied especially Wordsworth's poems and humanitarianism, with Bailey as his " instructor." It is significant that in September Keats was writing Book III of *Endymion,* in which he reveals his belief in the

importance of human sympathy most clearly.

At the same time, during the composition of *Endymion,* Keats had been devoting himself to his study of Shakespeare. The deep influence of Wordsworth overshadowed and gradually replaced the momentary influence of Wordsworth. We found Keats' first rejection of Wordsworthian human sympathy in his letter to Bailey of October 29, 1817. He admitted honestly that his heart was not always susceptible to sympathy for humanity:

> I wish I had a heart always open to such sensations—but there is no altering a Man's nature and mine must be radically wrong for it will lie dormant a whole Month. This leads me to suppose that there are no Men thouroughly wicked, so as never to be self spiritualized into a kind of sublime Misery—but alas! 'tis but for an Hour—he is the only Man "who has kept watch on Man's mortality" who has philanthrophy enough to overcome the disposition to an indolent enjoyment of intellect—who is brave enough to volunteer or uncomfortable hours....

Moreover, in the same letter he objects to Wordsworth's *Gipsy,* saying that it is "a kind of sketchy intellectual landscape—not a search after Truth." Poetry for Keats was always "the stepping stone of Imagination to a truth."[1]

In November 1817, having entirely rejected Wordsworth's humanitarianism, he began to establish his own philosophy, which he developed out of Shakespeare's plays. In his letter to Bailey on November 22, he drew a distinction between "men of Genius" or men with "simple imaginative" and "Men of power" or men with "complex" mind. "Men of Genius," by which he implies the Shakespearian character, have no individuality or determined character; they "are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect." As they have no self, "if a Sparrow comes before their window, they will take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel." On the contrary, "Men of Power," by which Keats implies the Wordsworthian character, possessing dominant individuality, are rational as well as imaginative. In order for them to be happy, "the old Wine of Heaven which Imagination brings" is not sufficient; it is also necessary that "years should

[1] Letter: To John Taylor, Jan. 31, 1818. Vol. 1, p. 218.

bring the philosophic Mind." Identifying himself with the Shakespearian character and Bailey with the Wordsworthian character, Keats asserts that only " imaginative Mind," the Shakespearian character, may attain the intuition of beauty and truth.

Keats' philosophy originates in this distinction. Keats, becoming more and more certain of his own ideas, reconsidered the problem of " Men of Genius " and " Men of Power " a month later.[1] This time he defined the Shakespearian character as possessing " Negative Capability," which is the state of mind " when man is capable of being in nucertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." He gives Coleridge instead of Wordsworth as an example of an egotistic poet who " would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Pene tralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge." He regards a negatively capable poet as an ideal poet, a man of achievement; " Negative Capability " becomes the most essential element in poetic creation.

In his letter to Bailey of November 22, there is the first clear presentation of Keats' view of Beauty:

> I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections, and the truth of Imagination. What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same idea of all our passions as of Love: they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty. . . . The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth:—I am more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning—and yet it must be. Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever arrived at his Goal without putting aside numerous objections? However it may be, O for a life of Seusation rather than Thoughts! It is "a Vision in the form of Youth," a shadow of reality to come . . . .

" The Heart's affections " and " Imagination " are two kinds of experience, which Keats calls " Sensations " and which he contrasts with and prefers to " Thoughts."[2] The Heart's affections are its instinctive impulses, while the Imagination is intuition; Keats links them together.

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[1] Letter: To George Keats, Dec. 27, 1817. Vol. I, p. 192.

[2] I owe this interpretation of the letter to J. M. Murry's *Keats and Shakespeare*, London, Oxford University Press, 1949, p. 28.

He firmly believes in two certainties—the truth of that which the intuition seized as Beauty, and the sacredness of the instinctive impulses. The sacred affections of the Heart, he insists, if loyally obeyed, lead to the same ultimate truth as is apprehended under the form of beauty by the Imagination. We can thus discern why Keats calls all our passions, including the passion of Love, creative of Beauty; in their sublimity, that is, when they are pure, they discover Beauty where it is hidden. He goes on to say that the rational faculty, or " Thoughts," can never achieve the truth, and that instinctive apprehension through " Sensations " is the sole faculty by which an ultimate truth can be recognized under beauty. Keats substantiates these concepts of Beauty in Book IV of *Endymion*. Endymion's dream comes true just like " Adam's dream," for Endymion looks at the crescent moon-goddess in his dream and, excited with joy, he awakens and finds her actually bending towards him in the sky. After his travails, Endymion can be one with ideal Beauty at the end of Book IV; he is thus convinced that what his Imagination seizes as Beauty is true.

However, in the case of passions of Love, we have at least two kinds, earthly Love and divine Love. Both of them can achieve sublimity, and they often fight each other in reality. How can we be settled if the passions of the Heart are contradictory? This is the question which Keats strives to answer in " the Cave of Quietude." In Book IV Endymion is tortured by the fearful conflict between his human passion for the Indian Maid and his heavenly passion for the moon-goddess. His human love can achieve sublimity, as can his love for a divinity. Endymion asks himself about the self-destroying character of his love for the Indian Maid:

> What is this soul then? Whence
> Came it? It does not seem my own, and I
> Have no self-passion of identity. . . .
> (II. 475-77)

Only when in despair at the sudden disappearance of the Indian Maid does Endymion reach " the Cave of Quietude," for " the Cave of Quietude " is to be won only when misery has reached an extremity. In

the Cave, consciousness can no longer respond to sorrow or joy:

> There anguish does not sting; not pleasure pall:
> Woe-hurricanes beat ever at the gate,
> Yet all is still within and desolate.
> Beset with plainful gusts, within ye hear
> No sound so loud as when on curtain'd brier
> The death-watch tick is stifled....
>
> (VI. 526–31)

As even sorrow is a kind of passion, I think "the Cave of Quietude" is a symbol of the sublime state in which the passions are transcended. In the Cave, as Endymion is entirely self-destroying, he feels neither grief nor woe; rather, his misery calmly changes into a profound content.

However, Endymion is borne to earth again. The return to common things is accompanied by much pain. "His first touch of the earth went nigh to kill" (IV. 614). He decides to renounce his vain pursuit of the moon-goddess and declares he will live with the Indian Maid. However, the Indian Maid refuses Endymion's proposal, saying that she is prohibited from accepting. Endymion is thrown into despair by this failure in both human and divine love.

Finally the terrible conflict between human love and divine love is resolved by a miracle, by the actual metamorphosis of the Indian Maid into the immortal goddess. The transfiguration signifies Keats' faith that earthly love and celestial love, in their sublimity, are identical. According to Keats, human love, at the height of its perfection, is a response to the same ideal Beauty which the Imagination seizes as the sign of Truth. It is his conviction that the "Imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as a human life and its spiritual repetition."[1] Hence, in *Endymion*, Keats' idea of Beauty is not ethereal, but is always related to human life.

The sublimity of the passions, which Keats points out in *Endymion* as the indispensable quality if one is to become one with Beauty, is also a very important aspect of Keats' idea of Beauty. In his letter to George

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[1] Letter: To Benjamin Bailey, Nov. 22, 1817. Vol. I, p. 185.

Keats on December 27, 1817, this quality is developed into the idea of "intensity." He insists that "the excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relation with Beauty." He goes on to say that a work of a negatively capable poet, like Shakespeare's *King Lear*, has "intensity," because a negative capable poet has no self, and does not hunger after reason; "his sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration or rather obliterates all consideration."[1]

One more important point of *Endymion* is that Love and Beauty are indissolubly united. Keats believes that Love intuits essential Beauty in its sublimity. Love warrants us of the presence of Beauty, through which Love can reach Truth. Nothing can be true unless it can be loved. Nothing can be loved unless it can be seized as Beauty. Therefore, where there is Love, there are Beauty and Truth. This conception leads to Keats' later philosophy that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." But *Endymion* does not develop as far as that. In most of *Endymion*, Keats is still enraptured with mere sensuous beauty. Yet, as I have shown, in Books III and IV especially Keats deals with the pains and contradictions of the human heart, and the beginnings of his original idea of Beauty are manifested. We might say, therefore, that in *Endymion* Keats stands at the threshold of his own genuine philosophy. *Endymion* was completed in December of 1817. In composing *Endymion*, Keats confirmed "Negative Capability," which was to become the principle of his life and poetic creation.

Chapter III "Dying into Life"

1818 was a crucial year for Keats. The ordeal began with his fear of death before the achievement of his poetic ambition:

> When I have fears that I may cease to be
> Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain. . .
> ("When I have fears," 1–2)

It was continued by his heart-ache at the discordance of humanity, a

[1] Letter: To George Keats, Dec. 27, 1817. Vol. I, p. 192.

feeling which was directly caused by quarrels between his close friends. The turmoil of his soul reached its climax in March with the fatal turn of his brother Tom's consumption. Keats thus tested his principle of "Negative Capability" by the experience of pain and grief. What was the consequence? His doubts about the authenticity of the Imagination are clearly shown in his poetic epistle to Reynolds. He says in the epistle that he is tormented with the horrible visitings of disjointed and disturbed phantasms which must befall all men except those few whose dreams are only of beauty. The Imagination, which he defined as "a rudder" to intuit truth in the form of beauty, now apprehends disagreeable things in spite of the beauty of the form. It reveals the mutability of beauty, and gives him an insight into "an eternal fierce destruction" in beautiful nature, for he finds "The shark at savage prey, the hawk at pounce, / The gentle robin, ravening a worm." This vision of the pain and evil of the world is completely opposed to his previous vision of the beautiful and good. He gropes for a condition of the soul in which the good and evil of the world will be seen as a harmony and loved as a harmony. However, he exclaims in despair:

> Oh never will the prize,
> High reason, and the lore of good and ill
> Be my award! . . .
> ("Epistle to John Hamilton Peynolds," 73–75)

Keats supposed the existence of a final harmony, but he could not find it yet. Intellectual comprehension was impotent. Even the Imagination was "lost in a sort of purgatory blind." How, then, did he try to achieve "the lore of good and ill"?

First, he turned to Wordsworth's humanitarianism, because he believed that Wordsworth had attained "the balance of good and evil."[1] Therefore, he asked the help of knowledge and reason in controlling his imagination and in reconciling his intuitions of good and evil. Though in February in 1818 he wrote of his firm belief in "Negative Capability,"

[1] Letter: To Reynolds, May 3, 1818. Vol. I, p. 286.

> Let us not go hurrying about, and collecting honey, bee-like buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be aimed at, but let us open our leaves; like a flower and be passive and receptive. . . .
> (Letter: To Reynolds, Feb. 19, 1818. Vol. I, p. 232)

now in May he proclaims the necessity of positive knowledge:

> An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people—it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease "the Burden of Mystery." . . . The difference of high Sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this; in the latter case, we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and blown up again without wings with all the horror of a bare shouldered creature—in the former case, our shoulders are fledged, and we go thro' the same air and space without fear. . . .
> (Letter: To Reynolds, May 3, 1818. Vol I. p, 277)

To Keats Wordsworth seemed to "martyr himself to the human heart." He decided to do some good for the world through his poetry, as Wordsworth had.[1]

However, even Wordsworth's humanitarianism could not console him amid his adversities. He went through despair after despair: his brother George's emigration to America, his brother Tom's approaching death, the hostile reviews of *Endymion* and his new perception of the evil of human beings. Though he believed in the importance of knowledge until his death, Keats in October rejected humanitarianism and resumed his philosophy of "Negative Capability." His view of the poetical character represents his reaffirmation of "Negative Capability":

> As to the poetical character itself (I mean that sort, of which, if I am anything, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian or egotistical Sublime; . . .) It is not itself—it has no self.—It is everything and nothing.—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon Poet. . . . A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body. . . .
> (Letter: To Woodhouse, Oct. 27, 1818. Vol. I, p. 386)

In saying that "the poetical character enjoys light and shade," he suggests that he, possessing a poetical character, enjoys all things whether

[1] Letter: To John Taylor, Arpil 24, 1818. Vol. I, p. 271.

they are good or evil. He had written to George three days before: " The mighty abstract Idea I have of Beauty in all things strifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness " (Vol. 1, p. 403). By " Beauty in all things " Keats does not mean the Platonic ideal Beauty which is partially manifested as a shadow in all the beautiful things of the earth; he means that Beauty which exists in all things.[1] According to Keats, Love is the sign of Beauty, as I explained in Chapter II. Therefore, it is because he could love all things, whether good or evil, that he saw Beauty in all things. Thus, through the passiveness of the soul, which is characteristic of " Negative Capability," he could find at last " the lore of good and ill."

The process from " Purgatory blind " to " the lore of good and ill " is also manifested in *Hyperion,* which was begun in September of 1818 at the bedside of his dying brother. The life of the defeated Titans in Book I and II has much in common with the life of Keats at this time. Just as Keats was destined to suffer from a painful life undeservedly, so Saturn was destined to be defeated without himself being foolish. Keats gives for Saturn's overthrow the reason of " fresh perfection," which means that even the beautiful must be conquered by " a power more strong in beauty." This reveals that Keats at this time believed in the gradual evolution of the world toward perfection. How, then, did he justify Tom's approaching death? He made Oceanus speak his " eternal Truth ":

> Now comes the pain of truth, to whom 'tis pain;
> O folly! for to bear all naked truths
> And to envisage circumstance, all calm,
> That is the top of sovereignty. . . .
>
> (II. 203–5)

Thus Keats endured " the Burden of Mystery " by accepting life calmly.

In Book III Keats identifies himself with Apollo, one of the Olympians surpassing the Titans in their " power more strong in beauty." Apollo becomes a god when he gets the " knowledge enormous " of life reflected in the silent face of Mnemosyne, his guardian diety; her

[1] Murry, *Keats and Shakespeare,* p. 72.

face contains all life, consisting of "agonies, / Creations and destroyings." When Apollo recognizes real life, he falls into an agony:

> liker still to one who should take leave
> Of pale immortal death, and with a pang
> As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse
> Die into life. . . .
>
> (III. 128–31)

Through this suffering, he becomes a god. Just like Apollo, Keats was torn with the extreme anguish and pain of human life through this year of "Purgatory blind," which ended with Tom's death in December. When Keats had written "Sleep and Poetry" and *Endymion,* although he had known that he had to overcome pain, "the agonies and strife of human hearts" had not yet touched him directly. Accordingly, in these poems he had remained almost within "the realm of Flora and old Pan." Now, however, that he was convinced upon his pulses of the pain and misery of the world, completely drawing himself out of the happy realm he came to receive painful life quietly by believing in "Negative Capability." Just as Apollo becomes a god through the agonies of "dying into life," so Keats becomes a great poet by attaining "the lore of good and ill" and the idea of "Beauty in all things," once he knew real life by means of his own painful experiences, that is, when he "died into life." The idea of "Beauty in all things" is the most profound principle of Keats' idea of Beauty. It became more and more concrete throughout the remainder of his life.

Chapter IV "Beauty in All Things"

Through his year of "Purgatory blind, 1818, Keats had learned "the lore of good and ill" and reached "his mighty idea of Beauty in all things." Even in 1819, however, Keats' actual life was far from one in which he could see beauty in all things. After Tom's death, Keats struggled against his love for Fanny Brawne, impossible because of the insecurity of his income. He was also vexed by the loss of his poetic reputation through malignant reviews of *Endymion.* In addition, his

ill-health caused him to fall into a state of physical idleness and mental apathy, preventing him from composing poetry. How could he accept his own cruel destiny as beautiful? How could he submit his unsatisfied desires to " the lore of good and ill "?

From the middle of February of 1819, for nearly three months, he suffered from " idle fever " and " experienced the satisfaction of having great conceptions without—the trouble of sonneteering."[1] " The lore of good and ill " must be one of those conceptions, for we can trace the process of its becoming concrete in his letters written in this idle period. In his letter to George on March 19, Keats explains his idleness:

> This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless: I long after a stanza or two of Thompson's Castle of Indolence—My passions are all asleep from my having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fiber all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness—if I had teeth of pearl and the breath of lilies I should call it langour—but as I am, I must call it Laziness—In this state of effeminacy the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body, and to such a happy degree that pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown. Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenace as they pass by me—whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguisement. This is the only happiness; and is a rare instance of advantage in the body overpowering the Mind. . . .

Poetry, Love and Fame were the three chief things which Keats had desired to attain most; his unsatisfied desires for them had gnawed at him. Now on this morning they have become faint and shadowy. Keats welcomes the state of physical debility and mental apathy in which he is unable to feel the pain which unsatisfied longing has inflicted on him.

The same vein can be seen in the sonnet " Why did I laugh? " in which, instead of mental apathy, Keats finds in Death a solution to the problems of Verse, Fame and Beauty. By accepting Death he conquers the agonizing thought that these desirables might be denied him:

> Why did I laugh? I know this Being's lease,
> My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads;
> Yet would I on this very midnight cease,
> And the world's gaudy ensigns see in shreds;

[1] Letter: To Benjamin R. Haydon, March 8, 1819. Vol. II, p. 43.

Verse, Fame and Beauty are intense indeed,
But Death intenser—Death is Life's high meed. . . .
(" Why did I laugh?" 10–16)

However, in the latter part of his " indolent " letter on March 19 Keats calmly accepts reality without the help of mental apathy or Death:

> This is the world—thus we cannot expect to give many hours to pleasure. Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting. While we are laughing, the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of the events —while we are laughing it sprouts, it grows, and suddenly bears a poison-flower which we must pluck. . . .

Keats is not pessimistic; he envisages a life of good and evil with detachment. Concerning " the core of fierce destruction of nature," which he spoke of with despair in an epistle to Reynolds a year before, he says in the letter that if disinterestedness were to prevail through the world, life would be injured, for " the Hawk would lose his breakfast of Robin, and the Robin his of worms." Although he values " a complete disinterestendess of Mind," he admits that human beings are naturally as instinctive and egotistic as animals. Indeed, he finds beauty in this instinctiveness:

> Though a quarrel in the Street is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest Man shows grace in his quarrel. By a Superior Being our reasonings may take the same tone—though erroneous they may be fine. This is the very thing in which Poetry exists.

Keats insists that the egotistic instincts of creatures, which produce much of the evil in nature, are yet beautiful, and that these egotistic instincts are the very things of which poetry consists. For Keats, spontaneity is the greatest axiom of poetry; " if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all."[1] He says in the letter to his brother that, as human beings are instinctive, if the poet takes an instinctive attitude his poetry can achieve spontaneity.[2]

Keats completed his consideration of " the lore of good and ill " in a letter to George on April 21. In this letter he reconsiders the evil imposed upon creatures:

[1] Letter: To John Taylor, Feb. 27, 1818. Vol. I, p. 223.
[2] Letter: To George Keats, March 19, 1819. Vol. II, p. 79.

> The whole appears to resolve itself into this ; that Man is originally a poor forked creature subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardship and disquietude of some kind or anothr. If he improves by degrees his bodily accomodations and comforts—at each stage, at each ascent there are waiting for him a fresh set of annoyances—he is mortal and there is still a heaven with its Stars above his head. . . .

Since man is a part of nature, Keats says, he cannot escape the evil which is inherent and necessary in nature. In every level of his development man has to encounter evil. If he escapes one evil, he has to suffer the evil of another level. He thus denies the perfectibility or the ultimate happiness of human life such as he depicted in Book III of *Hyperion.* Yet he is not despairing nor cynical, but empirical and realistic. Discerning a harmony of good and evil of nature, he asserts that if the condition of man were perfectible, he would become discordant with the harmony:

> The point at which Man may arrive is the parallel state in inanimate nature and no further. For instance suppose a rose to have sensation ; it blooms on a beautiful morning, it enjoys itself, but then comes a cold wind, a hot sun—it cannot escape it—it cannot destroys its annoyances—they are as native to the world as itself—no more can man be happy in spite, the worldly elements will prey upon his nature. . . .

According to Keats, not human life in general, but the individual man can be perfect if he truly possesses his Soul. In the same letter he expounds how this Soul can be created. He divides man's being into three divisions: The Mind or the Intelligence, and the Heart, and the Soul. The Mind is " a spark of the divinity " which comes directly from God or the Original Essence; however, it has nothing of the Soul. The Heart is " the seat of Human Passions," that is, the seat of man's instinctive being. Keats insists that the Mind becomes the Soul when it possesses " Identity," that is, " a bliss peculiar to each one's individual existence," through the instinctive reaction of the Heart toward the world. He places the Heart supreme over the Mind. The Mind acquires its ideas of the world through the Heart, it is shaped and coloured by the passions of the Heart, and it develops into a Soul, that is, " the Heart is the Mind's Bible, it is the Mind's experience, it is the

teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity." Keats now calls the world "the Vale of Soul-Making," in which, "feeling and suffering in a thousand diverse ways," the Heart acts on the Mind to make it the Soul. Keats goes on to say:

> I will call the world as a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read—I will call the human heart the Horn Book used in that School —and I will call the Child able to read, the Soul made from that school and its hornbook. Do you see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?

Regarding the world of agonies and miseries as the necessary medium for Soul-Making, he tries to accept the pain of life.

Thus at the period of "idle fever" Keats confirmed his "lore of good and ill"; first, he was made sure of a harmony of the good and evil of life; secondly, finding beauty in the instinctive and egotistic, he reaffirmed his idea that beauty exists in all things; thirdly, by reconciling the Mind and the Heart, he justified the necessity of a painful world.

The sonnet "On Fame" exhibits the composure of Keats' mind after he had established his own philosophy. Although Fame was one of his previous three greatest desires, the sonnet really applies to all three of them. Recalling his fevered desires, Keats says:

> How fever'd is that man who cannot look
> Upon his mortal days with temperate blood,
> Who vexes all the leaves of his life's book
> And robs his fair name of its maidenhood . . .
> ("On Fame," 1–4)

He decides that he will be untroubled by the menace of death and desires. His acceptance of death in this sonnet is not ecstatic, as in the sonnet "Why did I laugh?" He does not now demand of death the solution to his frustrated desires, but receives death as a fact of life, just as Shakespeare expresses his acceptance of one's destiny in *King Lear*:

> We must endure
> Our going hence even as our coming here;

Ripeness is all. . . .

(V. ii. 9–11)

When this " idle fever " passes away, the period of the great odes begins. Keats' six great Odes, " To Psyche," " On Melancholy," " To a Nightingale," " On a Grecian Urn," " On Indolence," and " To Autumn " were written in his most creative period, from spring to autumn in 1819. These odes are the summit of Keats' poetic genius in the perfection of their form and in the depth and vividness of these inspiration.[1] How, then, does Keats present his idea of the " Beauty in all things " in these odes?

In " Ode to Psyche," Keats does not refer to " the lore of good and ill." The ode presents only his yearning—love for the serene beauty of Psyche, the last Greek deity. This love has a melancholy undertone, because Keats identifies the meaning of " Psyche," " love's soul," with that meaning " a moth," a symbol of melancholy.[2] Thei dentification is most clearly shown in the last lines:

And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!

(58–61)

Keats says that, in the fane which he builds for Psyche " in some untrodden region of his mind," he will set up a bright torch and open a casement in order to attract Psyche, the timorous moth-goddess, who symbolizes melancholy love.

Of the six great Odes, " Ode on Melancholy " is the only one which shows Keats' calm acceptance of " the lore of good and ill." Although the ode presents the evanescence of beauty, it has a serene tone and no trace of Keats' pessimistic emotion. In it Keats is aware of the close interrelation of beauty and decay, joy and sorrow, life and death. The perception of beauty is for Keats a premonition of its decay. Yet he

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[1] C. L. Finney, *The Evolution of Keats' Poetry*, New York, Russell & Russell, 1963, p. 610.

[2] H. W. Garrod, *Keats*, London, Oxford University Press, 1926, p. 99.

does not hate Melancholy, nor does he fall into despair, for he believes that the good and evil in the world are both necessary for human life.

> She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
>   And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
> Bidding adieu- and aching Pleasure nigh,
>   Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
> Ay, in the very temple of Delight
>   Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine, . . .
>
> (21–26)

In these lines Keats does not express his sadness at the mutability of beauty; rather, he accepts life quietly. He conceives that he must hold to a " wakeful anguish " in order to observe Melancholy in beauty and joy, for if " the wakeful anguish " is " drowned," his poetic insight will perish. Therefore, he says that only those who know joy well know the heart of Melancholy:

> Though [Melancholy is] seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
> Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
>   His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
>   And be among her cloudy trophies hung.
>
> (27–30)

However, Keats' continuing inward conflict is revealed in " Ode to a Nightingale." The voice of the nightingale invites him to the realm of the forgetfulness of the painful human world. Although he tries to persuade himself that " a world of Pains and troubles is necessary to school an Intelligence and make it a soul," his inward being rebels against this belief; he yet longs to escape the pains of reality, which he describes thus:

> The weariness, the fever, and the fret
>   Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
> Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
>   Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin and dies;
>   Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
>   And leaden-eyed despairs,
>   Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
>   Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. . . .
>
> (25–32)

The nightingale's happiness makes him intensely conscious of his own sorrows and mortality. He yearns for the immortal Beauty of the voice:

> Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
> No hungry generations tread thee down;
> (61-62)

He surrenders himself to the spell of the song and flies into the world of beauty in which, he imagines, the nightingale lives and sings:

> Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
> Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
> But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
> Though the dull brain perplexes and retards . . .
> (31–34)

But romantic escape is impossible, for the consciousness of painful reality intrudes itself into the imaginary world and draws him back to earth. He bids farewell to the world of immortal Beauty: " Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf" (73–74). Even as he tries to accept life in spite of agonies, the consciousness that he must not escape human life never leaves him. To indulge himself in mere happiness and joy, which are removed from real life, seems to him to be " too happy " and to be a kind of crime. In the final stanza, he can no longer appreciate the nightingale's happiness; rather, reading his own sorrows into the bird's song,[1] he calls it " a plaintive anthem" (75).

In " Ode on a Grecian Urn " Keats contrasts the mortal life of pain and decay with the immortal life of art. The song which the people in the Urn sing appeals not to " the sensual ear," but to " the spirit " and " is for ever new." The natural creatures that the Urn depicts do not suffer either the decay or the death of mortal life. The lover on the Urn loves not a " Beauty that must die," but one which will be fair for ever. His love is " for ever warm and still to be enjoy'd, / For ever panting and for ever young " (25–26):

> All breathing human passion far above,
> That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,

[1] Finney, *Evolution of Keats' Poetry*, Vol. II, p. 633.

> A burning forehead, and a parching tongue. . . .
> (27–29)

Keats longs for permanent Beauty expressed in ideal art.

However, when he contemplates the empty little town on the Urn, whose inhabitants are attending the sacrifice, he becomes aware that the pure and ideal art of this " silent form " has a certain coldness:

> . . . little town, thy streets for evermore
> Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
> Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. . . .
> (38–40)

Keats' imagination suddenly has shifted its ground, " he now views the artistic arrest of life as though it were a mistreatment of the sphere of reality."[1] As compared with the warm human world which Keats actually knows, what reality have these figured creations? The beholder, kept so long removed from sense in the region of thought, is now assailed by " misgivings about the value of a work of art so remote from the warm breathing life of the sensible world."[2] Therefore, in the last stanza, Keats calls the Urn a " Cold Pastoral " (45). As he is recalled from the immortal world of the nightingale to reality, so again he is brought back from immortal life of art to mortal life by the consciousness of reality.

Keats entrusts to the Urn the duty of sending a message for posterity annoyed with human miseries:

> " Beauty is truth, turth beauty,"—that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
> (49–50)

thus reasserting his old principle that " what the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth." By realizing " the lore of good and ill," Keats now loves reality, his Imagination now sees beauty in all things, even in the instinctive and the egotistic. Therefore, he comprehends human life; he comprehends that, although reality is full of agony,

[1] Sidney Colvin, *John Keats*, Glasgow, The University Press, 1921, p. 518.
[2] H. W. Garrod, *Keats*, London, Oxford University Press, 1926, p. 196.

beauty is reality and reality is beauty.

In these two odes, Keats has tried to escape to the immortal world of nature and art, but finally has returned to reality. In " Ode on Indolence " Keats again longs to throw away reality. The ode is a metrical paraphrase of the " indolent " letter to George of March 19 which I have already quoted. Although Keats recongnizes the painful truths of life and tries to accept them with stoical fortitude, he still welcomes sleep and mental apathy, which give him a momentary relief from the gnawing thoughts of Love, Ambition and Poetry:

> O folly! What is Love! and where is it?
> And for that poor Ambition! it springs
> From a man's little heart's short fever-fit;
> For Poesy! no, she has not a joy,—
> At least for me,—so sweet as drowsy noons,
> And evening steep'd in honied indolence . . .
>
> (42–47)

" To Autumn " is the most purely sensuous and imaginative of Keats' odes. He once explained the origin of this ode in a letter:

> How beautiful the season is now—How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather—Dian skies—I never lik'd stubble fields so much as now—Aye better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm—in the same way that some pictures look warm.
>
> (Letter: To George Keats, Sept. 19, 1819. Vol. II, p. 189)

In " To Autumn," Keats does not contrast the transitoriness of human life with the immortality of the beauty of the season, as he does with the immortality of the beauty of the nightingales's song and of the Grecian Urn. His imagination is not disturbed by the consciousness of reality. Rather, he celebrates the visit of autumn in a peaceful mood. Unlike as in the other odes, Keats himself plays no part here. He loses himself completely in the contemplation of what he is describing. His imagination finds a symbol of autumn in a gleaner, or in a peasant woman " sitting careless on a granary floor" or " sound asleep on a half-reap'd furrow" (14–18). Keats' five senses actively work as he describes through his eyes and ears the beautiful and calm scenery of autumn.

not abstractly, but very concretely:

> While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
>   And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue:
> Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
>   Among the river sallows, borne aloft
>   Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
> And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
>   Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
>   The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
>   And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.
>
> (25-33)

Thus, in most of the odes, Keats is haunted by "the lore of good and ill" of reality. However, because of that consciousness of reality, he cannot immerse himself in the pure sensuous enjoyment of the beautiful in the imaginary world; he is always recalled to reality. Accordingly, his imagination is frustrated, and cannot develop completely in the imaginary world of the nightingale and the Grecian Urn. H. W. Garrod aptly describes this movemett of Keats' divided mind:

> Out of that luxury of sensation, which is his true effectiveness, Keats must be forever scheming himself into some unhappiness; now he runs from sense to thought, to metaphysical reflection; now from mere poetry to a poetry of social suffering; and yet again here, he is not happy till he can discover in the joy of the senses themselves—without the need to go outside them—not unhappiness, merely, but some fated and immortal anguish. . .[1]

Conclusion

Though Keats' literary life came to a close after only four years or so, his poetical development was very remarkable. A clear evolution of his idea of Beauty, as I have studied in this paper, is especially presented in his poems and letters. In those four years, Keats' idea of Beauty developed from a principle of abstract beauty into the principle of "Beauty in all things"; that is, from an ecstatic contemplation of beauty to his recognition of the beauty existing in both good and evil.

As I have shown, Imagination was everything for Keats; like the oth-

[1] H. W. Garrod, *Keats*, London, Oxford University Press, 1926, p. 195.

er English Romantics, he tried to find the truth through the imagination. Throughout his poetic life, he was faithful to his principle of " what the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth." Yet his Imagination was not anything ethereal; it was identical with instinctive impulses. For Keats, " the Heart was the Mind's Bible," and instinctive impulses were " the very things in which poetry exists." He led a " life of Sensations," not a " life of Thoughts." His instinctive impulses actively reacted both to the inward and the outward worlds. Accordingy, not only his eyes and ears, but all his five senses operate through all his poetry. From this point of view, I think he is well called a sensuous poet.

Keats was truly a natural poet who could not write but out of that which he had himself experienced. A merely intellectual reality was no reality at all to him; to him, " nothing is real until it was experienced."[1] Therefore, he was not carried into a world of the transcendental order of things as were Shelley or Coleridge; rather, he tried to find truth in the world of human beings. At last he intuited beauty in all things in human life. I think that " Ode to a Nightingale " and " Ode on a Grecian Urn " show Keats' dilemma, caught as he was between reality and a vision of existence devoid of human suffering. In spite of their sombre or even sad mood, or rather because of Keats' struggle, these odes have an intense and poignant beauty. They also show Keats' triumph over his longing to escape reality, for after all he returns to reality at the end of these odes.

" Beauty in all things " was Keats' great poetic intuition, and the revelation of this beauty was, for him, the great purpose of human life. That intuition involved a calm acceptance of life as it is, a passing beyond all rebellion, not into the apathy of stoic resignation, but into a condition of the soul to which all things in life, " foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor," are regarded as necessary and true and beautiful. He wanted not only to attain this " high reason, and the lore of good and ill," but to reveal to men, as Shakespeare did, that good and ill

[1] Letter: To George Keats, March 10, 1819. Vol. II, p. 81.

are to be loved. He wanted, that is, to show us the secret harmony and high design which lie behind all human troubles.

Such an achievement, Keats thought, was possible only in the dramatic poetry such as Shakespeare had used. The composition of Shakespearian dramatic poetry was the goal toward which he had been endeavouring since he began to study Shakespeare's plays. In 1817 when he was composing *Endymion,* as I explained in Chapter II, Keats extracted from Shakespeare's plays the principle of negative-capable poetry in which a poet, entering sympathetically into the minds of other men, expresses their emotions and actions in an objective form. After that " Negative Capablity " became Keats' principle in life and in poetic creation. Yet he felt he had to postpone dramatic composition until he had more experience in life and more knowledge of human nature. Thus, although in September of 1818 he began *Hyperion* in dramatic style, he abandoned this version midway. After composing all the great odes save " To Autumn," however, he finally tried to put into practise his principle of " Negative Capability " in *Otho the Great.* He wrote to Bailey on August 14, 1819:

> It was the opinion of most of my friends that I should never be able to write a scene. I will endeavour to wipe away the prejudice. . . . One of my Ambitions is to make as great revolution in modern dramatic writing as Kean has done in acting. . . .

It was Keats' ambition to establish a school of Shakespearian playwriting as Kean had established a school of Shakespearian acting. However, because of his inexperience in dramatic composition, *Otho the Great* was unsuccessful. When he later also abandoned the composition of the chronicle play *King Stephen* in November 1819, realizing the immaturity of his dramatic skill, he thought he would train his skill by first composing poems in which the romantic sensuous beauty of *The Eve of Saint Agnes* would be combined with human character. He wrote to Taylor on November 17 in 1819:

> As the marvellous is the most enticing, and the surest guarantee of harmonious numbers I have been endeavouring to persuade myself to untether Fancy and let her manage for herself. I and myself cannot agree about this at all. Wonders

are no wonders to me. I am more at home amongst men and women. I would rather read Chaucer than Ariosto. The little dramatic skill I may as yet have however badly it might show in a Drama would I think be sufficient for a Poem. I wish to diffuse the colouring of St. Agnes Eve throughout a Poem in which Character and Sentiment would be the figures to such drapery. Two or three such Poems, if God should spare me, written in the course of the next 6 years, would be a famous Gradus ad Parnassum altissimum. I mean they would nerve me up to the writing of a few fine plays—my greatest ambition when I do feel ambitions . . .

But Keats had not the time to improve his genius for dramatic poetry, for cruel death was approaching him.

To our regret, in spite of the agonies and efforts to accept life which are represented in his letters, he left almost no poetry which justified his idea of the " Beauty in all things." Today, the excellences of Keats' poems are almost always regarded to be their naturalness, as that of " the leaves coming to a tree," and their supreme sensuous beauty. H. W. Garrod says of the character of Keats' poetry:

I still think him the great poet he is only when the senses capture him, when he finds truth in beauty, that is, when he does not trouble to find truth at all. . . .[1]

However, if he had had time, Keats might well have left us poetry which represented the " Beauty in all things " without any antagonism between reality and vision. Keats sensed this himself. He wrote to Fanny Brawne from his sickbed:

" If I should die," said I to myself, " I have left no immortal work behind me, nothing to make my friends proud of my memory, but I have loved the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time, I would have made myself remembered."

(Letter: To Fanny Brawne, February, 1820. Vol. II, p. 263)

I cannot tell / whether Keats would have been a second Shakespeare. It is certainly true, however, that, like Shakespeare, he knew " the agonies and strife of human hearts " and yet loved life. He was never an effeminate aesthete, nor a dreamer. He was one with the bravest and wisest poets, those who devote themselves to life steadily and unflinchingly. Poetry for Keats was the altar only those who know human

[1] H. W. Garrod's note to *Keats*, London, Oxford University Press, 1931, p. 6.

suffering can arrive at:

> " None can usurp this height," . . .
> But those to whom the miseries of the world
> Are misery, and will not let them rest. . . .
> (*The Fall of Hyperion*, I. 147–9)

When we remember Keats as a poet who tried to reach his Beauty through " dying into life," the beauty of his works still more intensely appeals to us, giving our soul an eternal joy, just as Keats himself proclaimed at the beginning of *Endymion*:

> A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
> Its loveliness increases; it will never
> Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
> A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
> Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing. . . .
> (I, 1–5)

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