Keat's Conception of Poetry: Its Scope, Development, and Place in the Literary Philosophy of Romanticism

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KEATS'S CONCEPTION OF POETRY
Its Scope, Development, and Place in the
Literary Philosophy of Romanticism

by

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VITA

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CHAPTER I
STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM AND BACKGROUND FOR ITS DEVELOPMENT

For John Keats, as for all great poets, poetry was the very stuff of life; it was the creative expression of the fundamentals of human existence and its roots were deep in the subsoil of man's universal and timeless experience. But while others of his contemporaries, of his predecessors, and even of his successors, assumed the role of the poet almost as one might that of a divine calling and made their poetry the medium for prophesying to, teaching, inspiring, and even legislating for mankind, he, as conscious as they of the poet's predestined character, saw him as a being without identity, living only in that which he created, and was content to make his poetry merely a medium for the creation of beauty. William Henry Hudson, in an attempt to prove that Keats had little or no concern with the realities of life, has given a comprehensive resume of the essential differences between Keats and his fellow poets.

And here it should be remembered that in Keats's own view of the matter, it was no part of the poet's duty or function to assume the prophetic role, and undertake the guidance and leadership of men. For Carlyle, the poet was a dir-
ect emissary of God, a vates, a seer. 'Every great poet is a teacher,' wrote Wordsworth; 'I wish to be considered as a teacher or as nothing.' Shelley, as might be expected, was consistent in his assertion of the poet's high responsibilities and far-reaching influence. 'Poets,' he declares, in the closing passage of his impassioned Defence, 'are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.' With Arnold and Lowell and Browning poetry has this same vital quality, this direct bearing upon the immediate and actual things of life: while no reader is likely to forget the young Tennyson's large claim, in the poet's behalf, to divinely-given insight and power:

'The poet in a golden clime
was born,
With golden stars above:
Dower'd with the hate of hate,
the scorn of scorn,
the love of love.

He saw thro' life and death,
thro' good and ill,
He saw thro' his own soul.
The marvel of the everlasting will
In open scroll

Before him lay.'

But Keats's interpretation of his art had nothing sacredotal or
apocalyptic about it. He did not pose as a seer, nor did he ever show the slightest tendency towards the didacticism upon which Wordsworth fixed his mind. 'To justify the ways of God to men'; to throw light upon the entangled problems of human life; to sound the battlecry of progress, firing the strong with fresh enthusiasm, and bringing the stragglers into line and step—all this was alien to his view of the gay science and its place and influence in our noisy, bustling world. Poetry for him meant relief from life's strain, sunshine lighting its darkness, music amid its harsh discord and confusion—'a thing of beauty,' and, as such 'a joy for ever'...the noblest conceivable result of poetry the gentle moving away, from time to time, of the pall by which our spirits are so constantly darkened.

Mr. Hudson has been quoted as such length here not only because he so aptly summarizes the conception of poetry held by seven great poets, contemporaries or immediate successors of Keats, but too, because his notion of Keats's conception of poetry—meant to be in striking contrast to the orthodox views thus given—is such a false and yet such a popular one. In its essence it is a representative expression of a whole school of critics who profess to see Keats as a poet whose philosophy was no more than the dedication of the spirit to sensuous beauty to the end of anesthetizing it against all that was unpleasant or painful or ugly. This particular school of critics, it is true, includes for the most part individuals

1Studies In Interpretation, pp. 16-18.
who regard Keats not only as a great but as a beloved poet; who even praise him for the sensuosity of his poetry, many of them believing, as does Mr. Garrod,\textsuperscript{2} that his poetry's real effectiveness lay only in the exercise of his five senses. Yet not Wordsworth nor Shelley nor Carlyle, Arnold nor Lowell, Tennyson nor Browning held views more alien to Keats's conception of poetry than this idea of his art which Mr. Hudson, and others, attribute to Keats himself. It is an idea which precludes an appreciation of the true value of the precious heritage he left to humanity, for in its implications it discounts the fruit of a man's experience, won through suffering, as but the perfection of a technique. And it is in refutation of any such idea that this thesis is offered, its problem to prove that while Keats dedicated his poetry to the expression of the beautiful and refused to concern himself with any of the great social or political problems of his or of past ages, it was a dedication to no shallow aestheticism but to a belief which he made the creed of his life as well as of his poetry—that beauty was synonymous with truth and that through beauty man could come to an understanding of the mystery of his existence.

There are few poets before or since who have had a more profound conception of their art than he, few who have perceived so clearly or realized so fully in their own lives the close relationship of art to life. Every aesthetic theory

he advanced was founded upon something he had learned from his own life, often through the bitterest experience; every tenet of his creed he first, in his own words, "proved upon my pulses." Nor was he a thoughtless, dreaming boy, seeking in an imaginary past an escape from the sights and sounds of a troubled contemporary world. Keats lived in and of his age, and his age had its part in making him what he was; he wrote as he did, not only because he was the kind of person he was, endowed with a particular heredity, bred in a particular environment, but too, because he lived when he did.

For any worthwhile study of Keats's conception of poetry, it is essential to draw upon all available biographical data which would help to explain his genius and its workings. But the facts of his brief life are in general too well known to necessitate any review of them in detail, and it is intended rather, in this first chapter, to sketch in the outline of his personal history and of contemporary events solely for the purpose of establishing those elements in his heredity, environment, and education which were to have a direct bearing on the formation of his character--particularly those forces at work in the evolution of his creative faculty.

He was born in the turbulent closing years of a century of revolution--an intellectual revolt which over a period of some hundred years had been gradually supplanting the system of thought by which Europe had lived since the Middle

3Letters, p. 142.
Ages had finally culminated, in France, in a political upheaval which was to usher in a whole new era of thought and a new way of life. At the time of his birth, in the last days of October, 1795, his country was at war with the newly proclaimed republic across the Channel, its leaders determined to prevent any further propagation of the principles of the French Revolution and to preserve on English soil all the political and social institutions of the old regime. The war continued throughout his babyhood and his boyhood was passed in the hectic first years of a new century, when the French armies, under the brilliant leadership of Napoleon Bonaparte, fought all over Europe until only the English stood against them. He was a schoolboy of nine the year the Corsican upstart crowned himself Emperor of the French in the medieval cathedral of Notre Dame at Paris, and he grew to manhood in that most pregnant of all modern eras, the "Era of Napoleon."

It is strange how very much like the period through which we are now living were those years. On the premise that, in the words of her foreign minister, George Canning, she was opposing "a power which, whether professing insidious peace or declaring open war, is the common enemy of all nations," England carried on her war against Napoleon. It was while Keats was a medical apprentice in the quiet little town of Edmonton that Napoleon was finally defeated on the

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battlefield of Waterloo; and that autumn the titled dignitaries of Europe met in Vienna in international congress to celebrate the triumph of reaction and to plan the re-establishment of the political and territorial status quo of pre-Revolution Europe.

During the few remaining years of Keats's life—the years of his poetic life—the forces of liberalism and nationalism brought into being by the French Revolution continued to gain momentum on the continent, in spite of repressive measures adopted to destroy them; and even in England, where the Tory government postponed schemes for parliamentary reform and humanitarian legislation, radicals like Jeremy Bentham continued to agitate for political and social reforms, Thomas Paine continued to preach the doctrines of the French Revolution, and William Godwin advanced his elaborate theories for complete social adjustment. It was the dawn of the era of national self-determination and of the struggle for constitutional liberties under governments representative of the people they governed. At the same time it was the twilight period of the 'old regime,' before the popular revolutions of the midcentury would sweep away the last vestiges of the pomp and glory of kings.

Those years of Keats's short life were epoch-making years. Perhaps their significance was not as apparent to the people who lived through them as are contemporary events to us, but it could hardly be true that Londoners at the turn of
the last century were unaware that history was being made all around them. And little as the color of the changing political, social and economic world tinges his poetry, Keats especially, with his acute perception and his fine intellect, could not but have been aware of the changes and have realized something of their significance. Only to have lived then, when intellectual horizons were widening and thinking men not alone in England nor yet on the Continent but even across the sea were constantly talking and writing in a new social, new political idiom, only to have lived then and to have read, in the glowing rhetoric and impassioned poetry of the best statesmen and writers of the day, those doctrines and theories of the New Order, so eloquently put forth, must have had its effect in quickening a mind as keen as it was sensitive.

That his writing does not reflect, as does the writing of so many of his contemporaries, the current doctrines and theories and systems rampant throughout all Europe is an evidence not of his ignorance of them nor even of his lack of concern about them, but only of his conception of poetry as something above and apart from these accidents of human existence. For him the proper theme of poetry was the substance and not the accidents of life.

Yet if there are no echoes in his poetry of the political and social aims of the French Revolution, the spirit that motivates a great part of his writing, especially his earlier writing—e.g. "Sleep and Poetry"—is the spirit of the
new era which the French Revolution had engendered, the spirit which in literature found expression in 'romanticism.' The romantic movement, in itself, was a revolt against a long established tradition and had its roots in the same soil which nourished the Intellectual Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. When the principles of that revolution had borne fruit in a political revolution at the close of the eighteenth century, its attendant artistic developments had their flowering in the literary revolution of the early nineteenth century.

After the terror of the French Revolution and the horror of the Napoleonic Wars, there was a general disillusionment with the theories of seventeenth and eighteenth century 'enlightenment,' with their emphasis on science and pure reason. Many came to feel that man had wrongly sacrificed faith for reason and that he must turn for guidance in his future destiny not to pagan antiquity, but to the Christian faith of the Middle Ages. For the cult of the head, the new generation substituted the cult of the heart, stressed not reason but feeling, emotion, sentiment. This spirit invaded literature and began a new creative era of which Southey, Coleridge, and Wordsworth, and too, Lamb and Hazlitt and De Quincey, were the vanguard, and of which Burns and Blake, Cowper and Chatterton had been the precursors.

The spirit of nationalism which the French Revolution evoked and which spread throughout Europe in the wake of Nap-
oleon's conquests not only aroused an interest in the common people, the cradle of all nationalism, which motivated Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetic theories, but also an interest in national origins in the Middle Ages. The interest in medievalism in turn led to both the supernaturalism that characterized Coleridge's work and to the antiquarianism that marked the poetry of Scott.

The new movement was characterized in general by a repudiation of the set and formal rules of the classical tradition, by a shift in outlook and spirit from the metropolitan life of the Age of Pope toward nature and rural life, and by a belief in the supremacy of the intuitive powers of the imagination over intellect and judgment. In the remote and unfamiliar, in the past and in far-off places, in the out-of-door aspects of the world and in the simple life of the common man, the romantics sought their subject matter.

Keats was born almost simultaneously with the birth of this movement and grew up in an era of literary excitement when poetry and the love of poetry were in the air. After Waterloo especially, when Europe was opened up to Englishmen, new and powerful forces were brought to focus on the creative imagination of England. The romantic period of English

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5 An example of one such force brought to focus on the creative imagination of Keats is the set of illustrations—the four volume *Musee Napoleon*—of works of classic art collected by Napoleon as spoils of war and brought by him to Paris; a print from this collection, that of the Vase of Sosibios, is supposed to have been one source of inspiration for the "Ode
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poetry entered upon a new phase and a new generation came along to solidify some, and modify others, of its principles. It was this new generation of romantic poets who were to so profoundly influence all English poetry in the last half of the nineteenth century and it was to this generation that Keats belonged.

Yet though by nature and by training he was of the romantic school and many of the qualities of his poetry were those common to his fellow romantics, much of his later and more enduring work was the fruit of his own rich personality, unique and quite independent of any literary movement, or indeed of any particular age. To account for it we must turn to a study of his personal makeup and of the environmental and educational influences which molded it.

Almost nothing is known of Keats's ancestry and not a great deal of his parents. His father would appear to have been a man of intelligence and character, a vigorous, self-reliant individual who was, too, a man of refinement, appreciative of the better things in life and ambitious to have his children enjoy the advantages of education and fine surroundings. The boy's mother was an attractive, lively woman who must have been her husband's complement in character. Hers was a clinging nature, weak perhaps, but impulsive and loving, vivacious, gay, and ardent. They seem to have been a couple ideally suited to one another and in the harmony of their on a Grecian Urn." Sidney Colvin, John Keats, p. 416.
union must have been conceived that deep and lasting affection which bound the young Keatses so closely together in childhood and in adulthood. From the fusion of their natures, so unlike but so happily mated, there sprang those qualities of their poet son which were the essence of his genius—the blending of the mother's sensitive, passionate nature, with its strain of rich sensuousness, and the father's innate fineness and sturdiness, his manliness and common sense.

It is quite evident that however obscure may have been his family and however commonplace their origin, John Keats came of good stock. If we know little of his parents, we can speak with more certain knowledge of his brothers; and it has been truly said that it is in the brothers and sisters of a man of genius that one can discover the embryo of his greatness. Both George and Tom Keats were young men of intelligence with tastes similar to his. George was less impulsive than his elder brother and of a more cheerful disposition. But he had all John's manliness and self possession and he had the same high ideals, the same generous spirit, the fine integrity that were John's. Tom had a sunny nature, too, and a sweet, affectionate, clinging disposition. Fanny Keats, only a girl in her teens when her brother died, was in maturity a woman of charm and refinement. There was in all these Keatses a strain of gentility and a certain simplicity and distinction that marked them as individuals of breeding and nobility in the true sense of the word. It is
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earliest master, John Clarke, was a man of liberal opinions in literature as well as in politics and it was in his home that Keats first became acquainted with Leigh Hunt's Examiner sometime before he met its editor. There was none of the monotony and brutality of the contemporary public school in the Clarke academy and Keats's young spirit had been given room in which to grow. Now he was free to browse at will through a library that included books of voyage, travel, history, and both classic and Elizabethan authors; with all the passion and enthusiasm of his nature he read all he could lay his hands on and for the rest of his life was an omnivorous reader. He was particularly attracted to the classical myths of Greece that were to exert a spell over him throughout his life; though he never learned the Greek language and never concerned himself with the great body of philosophical thought which was one of Greece's chief contributions to posterity, he literally absorbed the essence of Greek culture. After he had left the academy for a medical apprenticeship in Edmonton, he still had access to its library and also to the private stock of books of its headmaster's son.

Any consideration of the influences which played their part in making Keats what he was would be incomplete without a reference to his friends, and one of his first and dearest friends was this son of his headmaster, Charles Cowden Clarke. The younger Clarke encouraged his love of literature and could almost be said to have started Keats on his poetic
career. He was himself tolerably well read in the classics and in the Elizabethan writers in whom Coleridge, Lamb, and Hazlitt had fostered a revived interest and he communicated his enthusiasm for these authors to Keats. Together the two read Shakespeare, the poetry of the other Elizabethans and Jacobean, and the earlier romantic poetry of Milton. It was he, too, who introduced Keats to Spenser, the poet's poet through whom Keats, as so many others, entered into a new world—the world of the imagination—and who was to touch off in the boy's mind the creative spark. Spenser's world of chivalry, his knights and ladies, opened a great vista of poetry to the eager young lad and he was profoundly affected, too, by Spenser's craftsmanship. His very first poem was the "Imitation of Spenser," born of the inspiration of the Faerie Queen.

Undoubtedly, too, the reading of the two friends included the third and fourth rate poets of the day like Dr. Beattie and Mrs. Tighe, who were in the contemporary fashion, and novelists like Mrs. Radcliffe. The latter at least was to have some small influence on Keats's work. Though both Keats and Clarke turned away from the eighteenth century poets, with their formal didacticism, the mind and ear of the younger man was familiar with Thomson, Collins, Gray and some of the more romantically minded poets of the later eighteenth century, and his earliest verses were imitative of those men. Wordsworth and Coleridge had published their revolutionary Lyrical Ballads.
while Keats was still a baby and he was familiar with this magna charta of the romantic movement. Scott and Byron were riding the crest of a wave of popularity and Keats and Clarke read their latest publications. None of this contemporary literature was probably without its effect on the young man then just awakening to his own great gift.

To Clarke, too, Keats owed his introduction, at the time he came up to London for his medical studies, to Leigh Hunt and to Hunt's circle. Hunt was nominal leader of a little group of London suburbanites, artists, writers and musicians, who made his house in the Vale of Health the center of their activity. They formed a kind of literary bohemia, mingling their social life with their artistic. Besides Hunt, the group included Haydon, Hazlitt, Lamb, James and Horace Smith, the Olliers, Charles Cowden Clarke, Severn, Reynolds, Charles Brown, Dilke, Shelley, Charles Wells, Charles Lloyd, and Barry Cornwall. Of these, only Haydon, Severn, Reynolds, Brown, and Dilke became close friends of Keats, and Brown and Dilke he did not meet until sometime after the others. Outside this circle he made friends with James Rice, whom he met through Reynolds, and with William Haslam, whom he met through George.

These friends of his were all men of refinement and taste, interested in art, literature and the theatre. They were liberals in politics and in literature and his association with them confirmed in Keats those liberal sentiments
which John Clarke's teaching had first inculcated. In their various fashions they influenced the young poet profoundly. Hunt brought him into association not only with the Elizabethans but with the Italian writers from whom the Elizabethans drew their inspiration. He was a kindly generous man, a fine conversationalist and a discerning critic, a popular host; Keats encountered him at a stage when he could learn something from him—later he outgrew him but in the beginning of their friendship the older man stimulated the younger. Benjamin Haydon was a hectic, unbalanced individual, a supreme egotist but passionately devoted to his art and enjoying some success when Keats first knew him; he was a fascinating personality for an impressionable young man, full of energy and enthusiasm, eloquent, vehement, ardent, and the poet was drawn to him instantly. He made the world of ancient Greece tangible to Keats through the Elgin Marbles, which were of great influence in fixing the boy's poetic aim. The young artist, Joseph Severn, though never Keats's intellectual equal, was bound to him by their mutual love of nature and a shared love of music. In John Hamilton Reynolds Keats found a fellow poet, just a year younger than himself, and a firm friend; he was a handsome, witty, enthusiastic young man who came of a family of some literary background and Keats more or less adopted his family as his own. James Rice was a sensible and wise man, witty and kind, a man of taste and sound judgment. Of William Haslam we know only that he was a steadfast friend,
to be depended upon in a crisis but otherwise keeping himself in the background.

As the accepted intimate of this genial circle of artists and art-lovers, Keats quite naturally became increasingly interested in poetry and surely, if imperceptibly, less and less drawn toward the medical career for which he had been preparing himself at the London hospitals, Guy's and St. Thomas's. This very medical training, though, was not without its effect on the poet's development. It must have sharpened his powers of observation and it gave him an acquaintance with a range of society he could not otherwise have had in so short a space. In its course he ran the gamut of human nature from the brilliant surgeon to the body snatcher and he came in intimate contact with suffering, the mystery of which never ceased to concern him, becoming a theme for so much of his great poetry.

Though still hard at his medical studies when he appeared in print for the first time, May, 1816, he probably on that momentous day made his decision, perhaps not yet fully realized by himself, to give up surgery for poetry. He continued his hospital courses until July, when he successfully passed his examinations for licensure; but, when in late August he went off to Margate for a well earned vacation from his months of study, it was to spend the time not in planning for the profession to which more than five years of his short life had been devoted, but in dreaming of poetry. The boy who
there first began to think seriously of poetry and of himself as a poet already bore the inexplicable stamp of genius and in the essence of his being there was that which not time nor circumstance could either unmake or wholly make; even then he had dedicated himself to the beautiful, though not yet had his belief in beauty become a creed as much of life as of poetry. But as surely, too, he was then and would always be the product of the age and of the people which bore him, of the family which bred him, and of all the cross-currents and influences of friends, education and environment which molded him.

When he came back to London at the end of September his determination was fixed to abandon medicine for writing. The next month, under the inspiration of a night with Cowden Clarke, reading Chapman's translation of Homer, he wrote his first great poem, the famous ode "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." The enthusiastic reception given the ode by his brothers and friends must have strengthened his determination. That month he became twenty-one, his own master, no longer the ward of Abbey, and it must have been then that he informed his guardian of his decision. Though he was enrolled for classes until the following March, he probably gave up

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Brown said that Keats's decision to relinquish his profession was reached "some time before May, 1817, when he wrote from Canterbury to one of his brothers,--'I have forgotten all surgery.'" Charles Armitage Brown, Life of John Keats, p. 43. This letter is not now extant.
his attendance at the hospitals immediately, and by March was instead able to bring out his first book of poetry.
CHAPTER II
THE 1817 VOLUME

The slender volume of verses which the Ollier brothers brought out in March of 1817 as the first work of John Keats was enthusiastically received in his own circle of friends but it created no stir in the literary world. There was indeed little in it to mark the book as other than the effusions of another youthful poet in an age when poetry and the love of poetry were part of the air England, all England breathed. Perhaps the only piece which deserved more than the passing attention the volume as a whole merited was the great Chapman sonnet; and yet there was that about this first work of an unknown author which might have foretold the advent of another literary genius in England—had those who read its pages been able to perceive beneath its immaturities and extravagances the strain of rare beauty that promised a richer fulfillment. As it was, only a discerning few who did not know the author, people who could sense behind the printed word a mind and a personality both unique and great, and an even smaller group who did know him, his own family and acquaintances, were able to appreciate an unimportant little book which the literati ignored.
Of course, we who read it now in the knowledge of its author's future work can attach significance to the slightest of its poems quite apart from their literary merit. For us the little book is, as Dorothy Hewlett has very beautifully put it, "dear... as the dewy wide-eyed song of the poet before the shadows had closed round his heart." There is a certain quality of nostalgia that after all these years clings to poems written before the "strife and agony of human hearts" had touched him. Nowhere is that faint air of nostalgia more appealing than in the dedicatory sonnet to Leigh Hunt.

That sonnet is supposed to have been the work of but a moment, written amid the distractions of a crowd of laughing, talking friends and while the printer's boy waited at the door. As a piece of improvisation, it is remarkable not so much for its poetic quality as for the aptness of its dedicatory theme. All that Keats then felt about what poetry should be, all that he had tried to make his own poetry in "these poor offerings" was distilled in the phrases

"Glory and loveliness have pass'd away... And I shall ever bless my destiny, That in a time, when under pleasant trees Pan is no longer sought, I feel a free, A leafy luxury, seeing I could please With these poor offerings, a man like thee."

In those lines the young poet conveyed at once the theme of his book and his earliest conception of poetry--delight in the physical world of the senses that must once have been the im-

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8Adonais, p. 78.
petus to all creative expression.

In all the poems that follow this opening sonnet of the 1817 volume there is inherent a delight in physical, sensuous beauty and it is because this quality runs like a bright thread through all his later poetry and because it was to be such an integral part of his conception of poetry that, in and of itself, his first published work is a thing of no little interest. Though a great deal written on its pages was imitative, the stuff of adolescence, it bore the authentic stamp of his genius, if then only in its embryo; and in it were to be found the first basic tenets of a poetic creed that was to underlie some of the finest and most enduring poetry of the English language.

It was Spenser and Spenser's medieval world of gorgeous pageantry, like an old tapestry come to life, which first quickened into life the boy's latent sense of the beautiful and it was in the poetry of Spenser, with its sensuous appeal, that he found both the fulfillment for his passion for beauty and the inspiration for his own creative efforts. The poem which tradition has it was the first from his pen is the "Imitation of Spenser." 9 Written in the autumn of 1813

9"From his earliest boyhood he had an acute sense of beauty, whether in a flower, a tree, the sky, or the animal world; how was it that his sense of beauty did not naturally seek in his mind for images by which he could best express his feelings? It was the 'Faery Queen' that awakened his genius. In Spenser's fairy land he was enchanted, breathed in a new world, and became another being; till, enamoured of the stanza, he attempted to imitate it, and succeeded. This ac-
or possibly even a year earlier, it appears near the end of the first section of his 1817 volume, among what might be called the miscellaneous pieces. It is less an imitation of Spenser than a boy's attempt to put into words the impression made upon him by the gifted and graceful Elizabethan who has been called the poet's poet. We know from Charles Cowden Clarke's account of Keats's introduction to the great poet what an epochal experience it was for the boy. The music of Spenser's lines—like a "subtle orchestration"—charmed his ear and the matter of Spenser, rich in the so-called tradition of the Middle Ages and the Arthurian romances, captivated his boyish imagination. With his usual eager receptivity Keats absorbed the Spenserian language and, more, the Spenserian atmosphere—"enchanted world of dim green forests and hills and meadow land and 'clouded heaven'," and then like so many boys and girls of all ages, who have been carried out of themselves by some enthusiasm, he had to try his hand at an imitation of the object of his admiration. He strove to get down on paper something of the elusive beauty he felt in Spenser's lines, and in the very striving he discovered the count of the sudden development of his poetic powers I first received from his brothers, and afterwards from himself. This his earliest attempt, the 'Imitation of Spenser,' is in his first volume of Poems..." Brown, op. cit., p. 42.


11 Ibid., p. 134.
joy of creation. He fell in love with the medium in which he worked and words, particularly adjectives, the piling on of color to achieve the most brilliant effects possible, became for him, as for so many youthful writers, the source of the very deepest satisfaction.

And so for Keats it didn't matter very much if this first poem of his didn't actually get anywhere as long as its every line was filled with color. Inevitably many hackneyed expressions crept in; the thing was they weren't hackneyed for him, no more than they would have been for any lad of his age then or now, for he was using them for the first time. Thus morning became a traditional personification, a maiden leaving her eastern chamber to walk over the "verdant" hills. The flowers, the silvery mountain streams flowing into a little lake, the "coerulean sky" with its clouds of fleecy white reflected in the bright water where gorgeously plumaged fish swam, the little island in the center of the lake, a very "emerald in the silver sheen of the bright water," whose greensward dipped down to the rippling tide fringing it like a circlet of gems, in short, everything that would contribute to the most beautiful scene he could conceive of was envisioned forth; and nothing remotely suggesting action was introduced. The poem is not better nor poorer than any eighteen year old of imagination, with more than an average knack for rhyming--for the technical mastery of the verse form cannot be disparaged as a first attempt--might have written; its only
really lovely expression is the description of the sun crowning the crest of the green hill "with amber flame." But though the spark of genius had not yet been struck, its elements were there in the boy's sheer enthusiasm for and careful delineation of each changing and varied color of the isle he had conjured up out of his imagination.

For some time to come, beauty, for Keats, was something concrete, and the feeling with which it filled him could be expressed only in elaborate word pictures of imagined ideal scenes. All his life he was to come at the beautiful through his senses, but in these early poems of his he was not yet able to see through its accidental qualities the substantial form of beauty.

Thus when in the spring or early summer of 1816 he set out to "tell a tale of chivalry"--to

"Revive the dying tones of minstrelsy,
Which linger yet about the gothic arches,
In dark green ivy, and among wild larches,"

he could get no further than the trappings of medievalism, "large white plumes" that danced in his mind's eye, "bending in a thousand graceful ways," a traditional medieval castle hall where the warriors reveled while "light-footed damsels" moved about, and a gentle knight riding a proud steed. All his vague notions of the beauty and mystery of an enchanted medieval world, he reduced to a catalogue of tangible things he hoped to see--
"wide plains, fair trees and lawny slope:
The morn, the eve, the light, the shade, the flowers;
Clear streams, smooth lakes, and overlooking towers."

Nor was he any more successful in the poem which follows this "Specimen of an Induction to a Poem." "Calidore" is like the first chapter of a budding writer's first novel. Words are poured out but the story never gets started. Indeed Keats had no story to tell, much as he longed to provide Calidore with the adventures befitting so gentle a knight. He had no story to tell, but only an impelling need to find expression for the train of ideas and impressions Spenser awakened in his fertile brain. And so, instead of a tale of knightly valor, his poem became the mere detailing of a series of lovely images evoked by the memory of Spenser's lines. The beauty and serenity of a summer's evening is in the opening stanzas—the dim green world of twilight shadows where the black wing'd swallow darts close to the water's edge, the golden glow of the setting sun, the pale blue of distant mountains, the little ivy-covered chapel where a white dove comes to rest, winging there out of purple clouds, and far away among the fir trees

"The lonely turret, shatter'd, and outworn,
...venerably proud; too proud to mourn
Its long lost grandeur:"

The atmosphere of dreamy, almost unworldly beauty Keats had managed to create is shattered by "a trumpet's silver voice"; and in the succeeding lines, his attempt to introduce characters and action into his poem resulted in one unhappy simile
after another. It was only in the closing lines of the poem, when he reverted to pure description again, that the poet re-captured some haunting echoes of the beauty that so filled his young heart when, in the shadow of Spenser, he wrote this lovely but imperfect fragment. Then the beauty and serenity of a summer's evening had deepened into the beauty and mystery of a summer's night—

"Softly the breezes from the forest came,
Softly they blew aside the taper's flame;
Clear was the song from Philomel's far bower;
Grateful the incense from the lime-tree flower;
Mysterious, wild, the far heard trumpet's tone;
Lovely the moon in ether, all alone:"

In the interim of his first and second Spenserian imitations, Keats wrote several trivial verses, some of them to commemorate trifling incidents in his life, some merely as copy-book exercises written just for the sake of rhyming. Yet even in these he expended no little pains on elaborate descriptive passages, always striving to translate into words every least shade of color and tone and texture of the beauty he perceived all around him.

Just after the "Imitation of Spenser," in the 1817 volume, there follows as the last of the miscellaneous group, the lines beginning

"Woman! when I behold thee flippant, vain,
inconstant, childish, proud, and full of fancies;"

When he wrote them, at twenty, Keats was still an adolescent trying to imitate what it had not yet been his to feel, cherishing in his boyish heart a chivalrous ideal of womanhood
which identified him with the beloved Red Cross Knight. In
the absence of any real feeling and moved by no particular
inspiration, his tribute to modest womanhood could be only a
thing of artificiality. The woman addressed has neither the
winsome appeal of Wordsworth's "phantom of delight" nor the
dark, serene loveliness of Byron's lass who "walks in beauty"; she is only a composite of adjectives--

"Light feet, dark violet eyes, and parted hair;
Soft dimpled hands, white neck, and creamy breast..."

The mere sensuously descriptive strain in Keats had not yet been refined to the point that made possible the creation of Madeline.

Of the poems written for the mathew girls, "To Some Ladies" and "On Receiving a Curious Shell, and a Copy of Verses," both of them in the style and familiar metre of the fashionable Tom Moore, nothing more can be said than that they echo an age and a boy's preoccupation with the things of his age. But even these so-called parlor verses afforded him an opportunity to indulge his fancy for moonlight and nightingales, dew drenched flowers and the crystal beauty of tumbling mountain streams; even an insignificant sea shell and tale of Moore's could call up for him visions of old romance. And, in the second of the sonnets, ("Had I a man's fair form") written sometime during this period, he cannot miss the opportunity to hearken back to the romantic age of chivalry--

"...I am no knight whose foeman dies;
No cuirass glistens on my bosom's swell..."
When Keats had left the open fields and country lanes of suburban Edmonton for the "jumbled heap of murky buildings" that was his part of London--a "beastly place in dirt, turnings, and windings"--his hunger for such visions, for the things of beauty was intensified. Away from the woods and fields he loved, his time given over to anatomy lectures and the hard and not always pleasant work of a medical student in the hospitals of that day, he found his only satisfaction for that hunger in the ideal beauty he could conceive of through poetry. In the "Sonnet to Solitude," written not long after his arrival in the city, he escaped in imagination his drab surroundings, taking refuge in

"Nature's observatory--whence the dell,  
Its flowery slopes, its river's crystal swell,  
May seem a span...  
'Mongst boughs pavillion'd where the deer's swift leap  
Startles the wild bee from the fox-glove bell."

Such sensuous delights, though, were now heightened by the intellectual pleasures of "sweet converse of an innocent mind" with a kindred spirit. The sonnet, the first of his works to appear in print, was evidently intended for George Felton Mathew and the set of verses it called forth from Mathew occasioned, in turn, the "Epistle to George Felton Mathew," which carried on its same theme--the joy to be experienced in union with a kindred mind, more particularly a "brotherhood in song." Again the joy was heightened by the fitting background of

12Letters, p. 4.
"Some flowery spot, sequester'd, wild romantic," where all the choicest, if most incongruous ingredients of a romantic atmosphere might mingle—the rose flush of dawn, moonlight and rippling waters, the song of nightingales, faery feet on dew-drenched lawns, an ancient forest and an old ruin, and all the glory of flowers, yellow clusters drooping from the "dark-leav'd" laburnum tree, white buds of the Cassia bush, and, nestling "atween the pillars of the sylvan roof" violet beds and cowslip bells.

Visions of old romance, of that magic age "when chivalry lifted up her lance on high," he wrote too into the charming verses he composed for George to present to his lady—Georgiana Augusta Wylie—on the Valentine's day of 1816. Later expanded for publication in the 1817 volume, where it appeared among the miscellaneous pieces titled simply "To***," this verse has all the gay gallantry of the traditional Valentine missive; but underneath its playful compliments there is an undertone of sincere and tender affection for the young girl who, as his brother's bride, was to become a dearly loved sister. If the description of Georgiana's beauties is no less anatomical than that of the unknown woman eulogized in the poem referred to earlier, if Keats was not yet able to conceive of beauty apart from its physical, concrete manifestations, at least this poem has about it a warm, human quality that saves it from the artificiality of the former poem. And it is a companion piece to the sonnet in which he addressed her as
"Nymph of the downward smile and sidelong glance..."

When in his next poem, the sonnet beginning

"How many bards gild the lapses of time!"

Keats sought a simile for the harmony he felt in the varied 
"beauties" of the poets who most delighted his fancy, he 
turned again to the tangible world of the senses. The music 
of the "many bards" was as the mingled sounds of evening--

"The songs of birds--the whis'pring of the leaves--
the voice of waters--the great bell that heaves 
With solemn sound..."

It was after writing the second Spenserian imitation that the country-bred boy, longing for the open spaces from which he was cut off by city walls, composed the sonnet beginning--

"To one who has been long in city pent..."

Written in June when the city must have seemed most stifling, it has in it one of Keats's favorite props for the ideal setting of beauty--the song of the nightingale. And in the graceful thank you note, "To a Friend Who Sent Me Some Roses," written the same month, there is the familiar touch of adventurous knights and the characteristic reference to "happy fields."

In August, at Margate, Keats wrote the sonnet to George which has in it the lovely phrase, "the feathery gold of evening" and the perfect description of the sea--

"The Ocean with its vastness, its blue green, 
Its ships, its rocks, its caves, its hopes, its fears,--
Its voice mysterious..."
The same month he wrote the "Epistle to George," in which he poured out to his brother his doubts about his poetic powers, at the same time confessing the experience of those rare and thrilling moments when nothing existed for him but poetry. He strove to express the vast, overwhelming conception he had of poetry, the feeling of exaltation tinged with awe with which it filled him. In the serenity, the wide spaciousness and the majesty of nature as it was spread out before him on a summer evening, he sensed a kinship with the idea of poetry he hugged to his heart. The lofty, flower-crowned cliff towering above the ocean waves, the "ocean's blue mantle streak'd with purple, and green," the clean curving arc of "the lark down-dropping to his nest," and the rhythmic rise and fall of "the broad winged sea-gull...his breast...dancing on the restless sea" were all poetry in its essence. From the great blue dome of heaven, out of "the far depth where sheeted lightning plays," through "feathery clouds...floating all along the purple west" came the music of Apollo, and it was one with "the revelries and mysteries of night," the beauty of moonlight and starlight.

Whenever he was very close to nature Keats wrote well, using descriptive phrases wonderfully expressive of each detail of light and shadow, color, tone and movement of what he saw. But in his early writing his imaginative flights were apt to be overdone, his adjectives too many and often ill chosen. And so when he pictured for George the scene where he
sat writing thus of his hopes and ambitions, no single word was out of place, no phrase but contributed to the cumulative effect he intended; but when he wrote in prophecy of his future greatness, of the immortality he dreamed of achieving through his poetry, his style had none of the clarity, the simplicity, the purity and the instinctive rightness of the artist who is master of his medium; it became overlaid with imagery, an imagery at once crude and mawkish. His lays became the delight of "gay villagers...when they have tired their gentle limbs with play." The village queen wore

"Between her breasts, that never yet felt trouble,
A bunch of violets full blown, and double."

Her audience greeted the reading of his poetry

"with stifled cries,
And rubbing of white hands, and sparkling eyes:"

The boy who could write phrases like these and in the same poem get off so concisely perfect a description as

"The stalks, and blades,
Chequer my tablet with their quivering shades"

was indeed immature, his genius still germinative.

The epistle "To Charles Cowden Clarke," a work of the next month, was a confession of the feeling of inadequacy that assailed him when he tried to write poetry, especially poetry for his friend who was familiar with the best the classics could offer and who had taught him all he knew. It was little more than a reminiscence in verse of the happy days they had spent together. There is no real poetry in all its 130 odd
lines and its only claim to immortality is its tribute to a friendship that would endure while Keats lived and be an old man's cherished memory a half century later.

Sometime in that summer of 1816 Keats began the poem he first entitled "Endymion" but which appeared at the opening of the 1817 volume without a title. It was December when he finished it and the last half of the poem lacks something of the fresh realism of the opening lines, but in mood and spirit it belongs to summertime, to youth dreaming through a summer morning. The ingredients are the same as in earlier poems—white clouds like flocks new shorn "on the blue fields of heaven," a woodland alley, bowery clefts, flowers, a rippling stream, and moonlight all contribute to a familiar patternless jumble. But the poet's subtle perceptive faculties are sharper, his imagination at keener pitch than ever before. For the first time Keats had no special story to tell, no occasion to commemorate, no particular idea to express but only "to pluck a poesy of luxuries," to delight in the "many pleasures" which before his vision started.

Beautiful phrases abound in this poem, some of them as fine as any he ever wrote. Few poets there have been who could better understand and appreciate the beauty perceivable to the senses than the boy of twenty-one who "stood tip-toe upon a little hill" to view in delight the loveliness nature had spread out before him. All the sights and sounds and smells of summer were borne to him and, sensitive to each
fleeting impression, he managed to capture in some perfect phrases the very essence of summertime--

"A little noiseless noise among the leaves, 
Born of the very sigh that silence heaves... 
The frequent chequer of a youngling tree, 
That with a score of light green brethren shoots 
From the quaint mossiness of aged roots... 
sweet peas, on tip-toe for a flight: 
With wings of gentle flush o'er delicate white, 
And taper fingers catching at all things, 
To bind them all about with tiny rings."

Of such simple things as these was born the song of the first Poet, and in them existed the reason for poetry's being--

"For what has made the sage or poet write 
But the fair paradise of Nature's light?"

Yet for all its fresh loveliness, which not even an occasional offensive or awkward simile can wholly mar, it is the poem of one still very young and immature who could not yet understand nor appreciate beauty except as it appealed to his senses.

And then in the October of 1816 Keats wrote his first great poem, "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," the poem which, Mr. Murry has said,

is a perfect crystallization of a mood of thought and feeling which exists in solution throughout the volume. In the sonnet Keats succeeded in expressing, with a strange completeness and concision, a complex condition of thought and feeling which finds imperfect and partial utterance in nearly all his serious poems of the same period.

The condition is not easy to describe, it needs to be
demonstrated; but we may call it, provisionally, the ardour of exploration and the excitement of discovery...a double excitement was fermenting in Keats: the excitement of a discovery of nature and of a far fuller discovery of poetry. But the excitement is one...the two explorations are a single process...so the ardour of exploration and the excitement of discovery become threefold: of the beauty of nature, of the beauty of poetry, and of his own power to utter the beauty of Nature in poetry.13

This famous sonnet is, as it were, the culmination of all the thought and feeling of the past months. It was as though all the parts of the whole had fallen suddenly into place, and in a moment of breathtaking wonder the poet had caught his first glimpse of the infinite beauty of the universe which lay at the heart of all beautiful things.

In November of 1816 Keats wrote the lines "Addressed to Haydon," at a time when he was completely under the spell of the artist. Later the same month he addressed another ode to Haydon, placing him with Wordsworth and Hunt among the "great spirits now on earth...sojourning." Neither sonnet is imbued with any real feeling in spite of Keats's enthusiasm for their subject. But the tender, wistful sonnet written for Tom's birthday on the eighteenth, "To My Brothers," has the eternal and universal appeal of true lyrical poetry, and the sonnet which follows it in the 1817 volume--the one with the

13John Middleton Murry, Studies in Keats, pp. 21, 24, 25.
lovely line--

"The stars look very cold about the sky"--is filled with the same happy contentment. Other sonnets of the volume are none of them very good. Two of them, though, "To Kosciusko" and the one beginning "Happy is England!," reflect something of Keats's feeling for the spirit of his age. And the third of the group is the one that won Keats his first recognition as a poet. Those lines "Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison" were in the traditional eighteenth century manner, formal and even high flown with the use of epithets like "minion of grandeur" applied to the Regent; together with the lines "To Hope," written in February, 1815, and so reminiscent of Milton's "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso," they evidence some small effect upon Keats of the classic tradition. The improvisation "On the Grasshopper and Cricket" is worth passing mention, too, for its fine description of the white quietness of winter--"when the frost has wrought a silence."

All through the autumn and winter of 1816-1817 Keats had been working on the poem with which he chose to close and so epitomize his first published book of poetry, his youthful hymn to Poesy. "Sleep and Poetry" was his first expression of an organized and thoughtful poetic creed, the basic tenets of which he never altered but only expanded. As in the epistle "To George," and as in the sonnet written at about the same time, "On Leaving Some Friends at an Early Hours," he was seek-
ing words that would encompass the vastness, the sublimity of
his idea of poetry, and so he wrote extravagantly and not al-
ways coherently. But through the maze of imagery in which he
sought adequate expression for the feeling poetry inspired in
him, his plan for writing it stood out clearly. Given ten
years in which to overwhelm himself in poesy, he would spend
part of it in the realm of "Flora, and old Pan," where only
such "pleasure that my fancy sees" would be the subject of
his verse. Only when he had experienced all the beauty and
happiness the tangible world of his senses could afford him
would he make his poetry a record for "the agonies, the strife
of human hearts." Faithfully Keats adhered to that plan,
bidding farewell to "these joys" of the world of Pan for "a
nobler life" only when his own experience with "the agonies,
the strife of human hearts" had taught him a deeper meaning of
beauty. At twenty-one it was enough for him that

"The winds of heaven blew, the ocean roll'd
Its gathering waves...The blue
Bared its eternal bosom, and the dew
Of summer nights collected still to make
The morning precious."

He could only rail against those who, "nurtured by foppery and
barbarism," had been blind to such beauty, too

"closely wed
To musty laws lined out with wretched rule
And compass vile,"

to be more than mere handicraftsmen who "wore the mask of
Poesy." Thinking of the new poetry of his age, though, he did
feel that there had come to England "a fairer season"; but
still there were those who would divert poetry from its proper sphere--

"yet in truth we've had
Strange thunders from the potency of song;
Mingled indeed with what is sweet and strong,
From majesty: but in clear truth the themes
Are ugly cubs, the Poets' Polyphemes
Disturbing the grand sea. A drainless shower
Of light is poesy; 'tis the supreme of power;
'Tis might half slumb'ring on its own right arm."

Or, as Mr. Murry has interpreted this passage:

'Themes'--that is didactic and
dogmatic thought--muddy the clear
truth of poetry, which is marked
by an effortless majesty and an
unobstrusive magnificence...
Pure poetry...does not assert,
it reveals; it does not bludgeon,
it persuades.14

Here, obscurely expressed, was the germ of that later poetic axiom--"We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us,
and, if we do not agree, seems to put its hand into its
breeches pocket."15

At twenty-one Keats believed, too, that the great end of poetry was

"that it should be a friend
To soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man."

He never recanted that belief. For him poetry always had in it something of the divine and by its very nature must "lift the thoughts of man." But though he came to know that it was not the poetry of "luxuries," of moonlight and nightingales, flowered vales and picturesque mountain streams, which could

14Keats and Shakespeare, p. 21.
15Letters, p. 96.
satisfy man's eternal longing for the ideal, which could com-

pensate to him for the pain and disillusionment of an existence which must inevitably fall short of the ideal, though in but three more years he could write, as he did in "Hyperion," that none could usurp the height of poetry.

"But those to whom the miseries of the world
Are misery, and will not let them rest..."

in 1817 he still believed that

"They shall be accounted poet kings
Who simply tell the most heart-easing things."

And confidently, in that last and culminating poem of his first published volume of poetry, he proclaimed his faith in his own poetic destiny--a faith founded on the imaginative vision, the "vast idea" there ever rolled before him by which there was revealed to him "the end and aim of Poesy."

But what, it may be asked, was this 'vast idea'? Nothing more and nothing less than the conception of poetry as a distant and separate mode of attaining that final truth which can only be described in language borrowed from Keats himself, as the truth of the soul, which comprehends and reconciles the partial truths of the heart and of the mind.16

Not all the poems John Keats had written up to the time of its publication were included in his first book--notably one misses the "Hymn to Apollo" and the sonnet "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," the latter probably written too late.

for inclusion; but far the greater part of them, both good and bad, had found a place in it, the fruits of more than three years' work. Inevitably there was a wide disparity among these poems for the years between eighteen and twenty-one measure more than three in a boy's development, and Keats did not always show discrimination as to the poems he chose to include or omit. But such as it was, the 1817 volume was essentially representative of the boy who even then had dedicated himself to the "principle of beauty in all things," and whose aestheticism was to become so essential a part of his being, rooted in the profoundest depths of his nature. Immature in conception, unfinished in execution, extravagant and even in bad taste though many of its lines were, it was yet the true seed of his later and finer work, and its publication marked the beginning of a new era in English literature.
CHAPTER III

THE LETTERS OF 1817-1818 AND ENDMION

From an anecdote or two culled from the memories of his friends years after his death, and from an occasional personal reference in his poetry, the biographers of John Keats have reconstructed his early life, almost completely dependent on their portraits of the child and the boy upon their own imaginations and the exercise of their individual judgments. Even a study of the evolution of Keats the poet must begin with surmise, for what is known of the first tentative stirrings of his poetic imagination is only what may be gathered from Charles Cowden Clarke's account of his schoolboy interest in books or what may be deduced from a hint dropped here and there in his early poems.

But with the beginning of his regular volume of correspondence, there was given to all future students of his work a chronicle no less valuable as a running commentary on and definitive interpretation of all he thought and wrote and believed in, than as an autobiography. In those letters, written over a period of about four years, there is contained the bulk of his poetic theories and the essence of his conception of poetry, not only in its final form but revealed to
us in the very process of its coming into being. To read his letters is to know Keats almost as intimately as those who knew him in life, a remarkable thing to be so of a man whom more than a century separates from us. Not alone does the vivid personality of the man live in his letters, the traits of character and the warm human little touches familiar to those who lived at his side; but the very workings of his mind are discernible, the actual inception and growth of his ideas and the progress of his intellect toward an understanding of the art to which he dedicated himself.

From the time his first volume of poems came off the press until the publication of *Endymion* that intellectual progress was especially rapid, and both the letters of the period and the poem reflect it. Indeed the composition of *Endymion* is inextricably bound up with the half hundred or so letters Keats wrote from April of 1817 to April of 1818, and together the poem and the letters are an important chapter in a study of his poetic development.

When Keats first started to write, poetry for him was only a past-time, a medium of expression for the creative impulse rising within him. Everything was grist for his mill and much of what he wrote had no significance beyond the moment. In those days his vocation lay in medicine, or at least he supposed it lay there, and poetry at best could be only an avocation. But with his determination to abandon his medical career and to devote himself exclusively to writing, more par-
particularly with the actual publication of a volume of his poetry, his avocation became an all-absorbing vocation; and with his increased absorption in poetry, his conception of his art broadened and deepened as he himself matured.

It was to John Hamilton Reynolds that he wrote--on April 17, 1817, from Carisbrooke on the Isle of Wight, where he had gone to rest and study away from the distractions of London and to begin work on his first long poem--

I find that I cannot exist without poetry--without eternal poetry--half the day will not do--the whole of it--I began with a little but habit has made me a Leviathan...17

And to Leigh Hunt he wrote the next month--from Margate--that he had, while on the Isle of Wight

thought so much about Poetry so long together that I could not get to sleep at night...I was too much in solitude, and consequently was obliged to be in continual burning of thought as an only resource.18

The subject of so much thinking was the same feeling he had expressed to his brother George almost a year earlier--his own inadequacy for any great accomplishment in poetry. And yet at the very moment of expressing such misgivings, his faith in his poetic destiny was unbounded, almost exuberant in its quality. He told Hunt:

I Vow that I have been down in the Mouth lately at this Work.

17Letters, p. 21.
18Ibid., p. 25.
These last two days however I have felt more confident— I have asked myself so often why I should be a Poet more than other Men.—seeing how great a thing it is,—how great things are to be gained by it.—What a thing to be in the Mouth of Fame—that at last the idea has grown so monstrously beyond my seeming Power of attainment that the other day I nearly consented with myself to drop into a Phaeton—yet 'tis a disgrace to fail even in a huge attempt and at this moment I drive the thought from me. I began my Poem about a Fortnight since and have done some every day except travelling ones—Perhaps I may have done a good deal for the time but it appears such a Pin's Point to me that I will not copy any out. When I consider that so many of these Pin points go to form a Bodkin point (God send I end not my life with a bare Bodkin, in its modern sense) and that it requires a thousand Bodkins to make a Spear bright enough to throw any light to posterity—I see that nothing but continual uphill Journeying! Now is there any thing more unpleasant...than to be so journeying and miss the Goal at last. But I intend to whistle all these cogitations into the idea where I hope they will breed storms violent enough to block up all exit from Russia.19

And the very next day he wrote to Haydon:

...I must think that difficulties nerve the spirit of a Man— they make our Prime Objects a Refuge as well as a Passion. The Trumpet of Fame is as a tower of Strength the ambitious bloweth it as is safe. I suppose by

your telling me not to give way to forebodings George has mentioned to you what I have lately said in my letters to him—truth is I have been in such a state of mind as to read over my lines and hate them. I am 'one that gathers Samphire dreadful trade' the Cliff of Poesy Towers above me—yet when, 'Tom who meets with some of Pope's Homer in Plutarch's Lives reads some of those to me they seem like mice to mine. I read and write about eight hours a day. 'There is an old saying well begun is half done'—'tis a bad one. I would use instead—Not begun at all till half done' so according to that I have not begun my Poem and consequently (a priori) can say nothing about it. Thank God! I do begin arduously where I leave off, notwithstanding occasional depressions: and I hope for the support of a High Power while I clime this little eminence and especially in my Years of more momentous Labor. 20

It was on such a high note of confidence that he began the poem which, as Amy Lowell has put it, he viewed "as a stupendous task to be undertaken as a necessary part of his initiation to poethood," 21 and the disappointments and the dissatisfaction he experienced at one time or another during its composition only served to crystallize nebulous, half formed ideas he had conceived into definite and tried poetic theories. He was in love with beauty when he wrote the opening lines of Endymion, sensuously in love with all beautiful

20 Ibid., p. 29.
things as he had been when he wrote each single line of the 1817 volume. Beauty was the keynote, the announced theme of Endymion but when he began it he had not yet formulated his aesthetic creed. It was only after seven months of intense preoccupation with the trials of Endymion that the idea of beauty first awakened in his heart by Spenser's lovely lines and later heightened and intensified by his contact with Chapman's translation of Homer and with the Elgin Marbles took definite form as a theory of art which was also a theory of life.

Yet even when he began Endymion, the natural beauty of the world of Pan which had inspired his early poetry was no longer enough in itself to satisfy him. That which delighted him that April of his twenty-second year was what had always delighted him and what he had filled all his poetry with—

"Such the sun, the moon
Trees, old and young, sprouting a shady boon
For simple sheep and such are daffodils
With the green world they live in; and clear rills
That for themselves a cooling covert make
'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:
And such too is the grandeur of the dooms
We have imagined for the mighty dead;
All lovely tales that we have heard or read:
An endless fountain of immortal drink,
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.

But now he felt the beauty of such things to be more than a moment's delight—

"Nor do we merely feel these essences
For one short hour; no, even as the trees
That whisper round a temple become soon
Dear as the temple's self, so does the moon,
The passion poesy, glories infinite,
Haunt us till they become a cheering light
Unto our souls, and bound to us so fast,
That, whether there be shine, or gloom o'er cast,
They always must be with us, or we die."

And he felt, too, that in the beauty of such things there was
balm for the hurts of life—

"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
Rull of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman deearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways,
Made for our searching; yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits."

Endymion has often been called an allegory of the
soul's search for ideal beauty; as Sir Sidney Colvin has
phrased it, "a parable of the adventures of the poetic soul
striving after full communion with this spirit of essential
beauty." Very probably Keats did not intend it as an alleg­
ory, but in the course of its composition Endymion's search
for his dream goddess became so interwoven with his own at­
tempt to find a meaning for the beauty, and for the pain too,
of life, and to give form to his gradually evolving conception
of poetry, that the poem did become a kind of personal alleg­
ory, so much so that it is an easy thing for the reader to
identify the author with his hero and to see in the trials of

the hero the problems and perplexities of the author. Keats set out merely to tell a story and to so fill the bare circumstances of that story with poetry that a tale of old mythology might be touched to new life with the imaginative beauty he brought to it and his first deliberate poetic effort might achieve the rich variety and the magnitude he felt was required of one who would follow where the great poets of the past had led. But it was not easy for him to remain wholly objective in his treatment of the story he had chosen—he did not then have nor was it given him in his short life ever completely to achieve the dramatic vision of Shakespeare or Chaucer which enabled them to remain outside the stories they narrated—and inevitably he let a great deal of himself creep into his tale until for the reader Keats becomes one with Endymion and the quest of the Greek shepherd is too the quest of the young poet. Dorothy Hewlett has said that this quest is after beauty and for the love of woman. "Love, Beauty, Truth, all these things were to merge in Keats's mind, a spiritual entity: in Endymion he is groping through the mists of unformed thought and imperfect poetic imagination towards all three."23

Clarence DeWitt Thorpe feels that the quest is of the 'Mystery,' that is of ultimate, ideal truth. I believe, too, that Keats was dimly outlining in this poem the successive stages of poetic imagination.

development toward realization of this truth, and was, moreover, showing the relation of these gradations and experiences to each other. In other words, when in the final book it is disclosed that Cynthia, the ideal of sensuous beauty, the Indian Maiden, representative of the realities of earth, and the moon, symbolic of the 'Mystery,' are one, Keats is declaring not only for the necessity of rising to a height of insight into the secret of the universe through the gradations of sensuous and human reality, but he is also asserting an essential final unity in the three orders—Nature, Humanity, and the higher spiritual essence. That is, a poet not only reaches an understanding of the ideal through deep and thorough intimacy, first with the physical beauty of this world, then with the depths of human passion and suffering, but must find in the end that all merge into one.

If Keats did have some such idea it was still germinal in his subconscious mind, was still the vast, ineffable idea of "Sleep and Poetry," and was, as Mr. Thorpe admits, only dimly outlined in the poem. His story was primarily a love story and in the first book of the poem he struck its dominant chord. Reona, having heard Endymion's account of his dream encounter with a being of heavenly beauty, can only wonder at her brother's weakness in allowing a mere dream to so darken his happiness and to deter him from his rightful pursuit of glory. Her words are meant to arouse Endymion to a

24The Mind of John Keats, pp. 55-6.
realization of the futility of pursuing a dream phantasm—

"...how light
Must dreams themselves be; seeing they're more slight
Than the mere nothing that engenders them!
Then wherefore sully the entrusted gem
of high and noble life with thoughts so sick?
Why pierce high-fronted honour to the quick
For nothing but a dream?"

But Endymion's retort is only to ask her—"Wherein lies happiness?" His answer to his own question is an expression of Keats's as much as it is his philosophy of life. Happiness, he tells his sister, lies in that which lifts us out of ourselves and brings us into divine fellowship with the essence whence we have sprung. In the touch of a rose leaf, in the sound of music can we achieve a oneness with divinity. But it is love beyond and above any other experience of life which can lift us to the peak of happiness for it is love which is at the core of the universe and which is the very essence of life. And far surpassing any mortal love is the love he has conceived for an immortal.

In the writing of this particular passage Keats seems to have been able to work out to his own satisfaction an important tenet of his creed—the idea of the place which human love of a man for a woman must hold in the plan of the universe and of its part in the fulfillment of man's destiny. When he was proofreading Endymion he wrote his publisher, John Taylor, in explanation of his request that the passage be altered somewhat to include "a preface...necessary to the subject,"25 that he considered this argument on happiness to have
been for himself "a regular stepping of the Imagination towards a Truth...It set before me at once the gradations of Happiness even like a kind of Pleasure Thermometer--and is my first Step towards the chief attempt in the Drama--the playing of different Natures with Joy and Sorrow."25

It is this passage on happiness, which Keats considered significant enough to emend after the poem had gone to the printers, on which Mr. Thorpe chiefly bases his argument for an allegorical interpretation of Endymion. In a continuation of the passage quoted above he says:

The thought contained in this section on happiness bears out the idea of successive stages. Happiness--and Keats means the poet's goal--lies in that which invites our minds to 'fellowship with essence.' But this 'fellowship divine' can be attained only through gradations 'leading by degrees to the chief intensity.' The first is a sort of higher sensuous stage, where the 'airy stress of music's kiss' touches the free winds and unbinds the Aeolian magic. Old songs, old ditties, 'ghosts of melodious prophesyings, rave.' And at the instant of feeling all these things,

...that moment have we stept
Into a sort of oneness,
and our state
Is like a floating spirit's.
(Book I, ll. 795-797)

But there are richer entanglements than these sensuous ones,

25Letters, p. 91.
'enthralments far more self-destroying.' The highest of these is love and friendship. Love is at the very 'tip-top,' 'an orbed drop of light.' Then follows an enlargement upon the luxuries of the passion of love, a love in which most men are content to live and 'let occasion die.' Beyond this human love is a love immortal.

Now, if this earthly love has power to make
Men's being mortal, immortal;
to shake
Ambition from their memories,
and brim
Their measure of content:
What merest whim,
Seems all this poor endeavor
after fame,
To one, who keeps within his steadfast aim
A love immortal, an immortal too.
(Book I, ll. 843-849)

...So here he means that he is ever keeping his eye steadfastly fixed on the final goal of poetry, an understanding of the Mystery, his 'immortal love' (represented by the Moon), that above all mortal passion and all the treasures of all the sensuous world, is that loftiest realm of the super-sensuous world, into whose heights the true poet must ascend.26

By January, 1818, when the letter to Taylor was written, Keats's original dim notion on the purpose served by sensuous beauty and human love in man's striving for happiness may very well have thus sufficiently clarified to allow him to link them with knowledge of divine essence in their proper as-

cending order. But at the time of writing the poem, it would seem that Keats had worked out no more definite an allegorical pattern for it than the general one indicated by Dorothy Hewlett—that is that the whole poem was, in a sense, a record of his own groping through the mists toward love, beauty, and truth. Not yet had the three merged, as Mr. Thorpe's interpretation would suggest, into the spiritual entity they were to become. Indeed at the time of writing Endymion, I believe, truth had not yet entered the picture and Keats was still concerned only with the relationship of love and beauty.

For Keats love was the acknowledgment of beauty and beauty begot love. Endymion, praying for the help of Diana in his search for his beloved, addresses the moon goddess as one

"Too keen in beauty, for thy silver prow
Not to have dipp'd in love's most gentle stream..."

Love and beauty were closely related to pain, too, both its solace and its cause. Endymion could win his love only through bitter pain. He must, he is told,

"wander far
In other regions, past the scanty bar
To mortal steps, before thou can'st be ta'en
From every wasting sigh, from every pain,
Into the gentle bosom of thy love..."

And that pain is both of the senses and of the spirit. Led into the caverns of the earth by the mysterious voice which answers his prayer to Cynthia, he is subjected first to the pain which is deprivation from the beauty of the earth.

"He cannot see the heavens, nor the flow
Of rivers, nor hill-flowers running wild
In pink and purple chequer, nor, up-pil'd
The cloudy rack slow journeying in the west,
Like herded elephants; nor felt, nor prest
Cool grass, nor tasted the fresh slumberous air..."

His anguished plea to Diana is that she may restore him to
the "sweet contents" of the green earth she haunts--

"Within my breast there lives a choking flame--
0 let me cool't the zephyr-boughs among!
A homeward fever parches up my tongue--
0 let me slake it at the running springs!
Upon my ear a noisy nothing rings--
0 let me once more hear the linnet's note!
Before mine eyes thick films and shadows float--
0 let me 'noint them with the heaven's light!
Dost thou now lave thy feet and ankles white?
0 think how sweet to me the freshening sluice:
Dost thou now please thy thirst with berry-juice?
0 think how this dry palate would rejoice!
If in soft slumber thou dost hear my voice,
0 think how I should love a bed of flowers!--
Young goddess! let me see my native bowers!
Deliver me from this rapacious deep!"

And then he must suffer the agony of spirit which is his who
having known perfect happiness has lost it. He finds his be-
loved but after a period of blissful union with her, he is
left alone again--

"Now I have tasted her sweet soul to the core
All other depths are shallow: essences,
Once spiritual, are like muddy lees,
Meant but to fertilize my earthly root,
And make my branches lift a golden fruit
Into the bloom of heaven: other light,
Though it be quick and sharp enough to blight
The Olympian eagle's vision, is dark,
Dark as the parentage of Chaos."

But his passion, his grief spent, assumes a quiet tone--

"Love's madness he had known:
Often with more than tortured lion's groan
Moanings had burst from him; but now that rage
Had pass'd away: no longer did he wage
A rough-voic'd war against the dooming stars."
In the depths of the sea, where next he finds himself, the pale and tranquil loveliness of the moonlight flooding the subterranean waters is in harmony with this softened mood and affords him consolation. His love is creative of beauty and that very beauty is a palliative for the pain he has known through love—

"O love! how potent hast thou been to teach
Strange journeyings! Wherever beauty dwells,
In gulph or aerie, mountains or deep dells,
in light, in gloom, in star or blazing sun,
Thou pointest out the way, and straight 'tis won...

On gold sand impearl'd
With lilly shells, and pebbles milky white,
Poor Cynthia greeted him, and sooth'd her light
Against his pallid face: he felt the charm
To breathlessness, and suddenly a warm
Of his heart's blood:"

Yet as he ponders over his strange love and thinks, too, of the moon goddess he had worshipped as a child, he is filled with a new pain. Although the place Cynthia had held in his heart has been taken by his unknown love, he feels still the power of the moon goddess's charm and is torn by the thought of disloyalty to her, and too, by the thought that the power of her beauty over him might blind him to the beauty of his present love. But it is when, after further adventures, he sees the lovely Indian maiden and feels himself irresistably drawn to her, too, that his heart is indeed troubled. Nor is the bewilderment, the self-revulsion which he feels the full measure of his pain. Despairing of ever again seeing his beloved, he seeks forgetfulness in the beauty of the Indian maid, but she too is to be denied to him. With
her he is being borne through the air on a pair of rayen horses when he sees

"her body fading gaunt and spare
In the cold moonshine. Straight he seiz'd her wrist;
It melted from his grasp: her hand he kiss'd,
And, horror! kiss'd his own--he was alone."

And it is then, worn out by his trials, numbed by grief, that Endymion experiences the utmost in human misery, and in the Cave of Quietude, that inmost recess of the soul "which has the virtue of receiving into it and regenerating the whole of the pain-tormented human being,"27 achieves the peculiar serenity of spirit of those whom intense anguish has rendered insensible to further suffering. Keats was writing here from his heart. Sometime during that month when he must have composed this particular passage on the Cave of Quietude, he had, in a letter to Bailey in which he mentioned Tom's ill health and in connection with it commented on the vexations of this unquiet world, analysed a numbness of spirit which was wont to descend upon him at intervals throughout his life; he told Bailey: "This leads me to suppose that there are no Men thoroughly wicked--so as never to be self spiritualized into a kind of sublime Misery..."28

For Endymion, when his steed has borne him back to earth, reality breaks the spell period of "sublime Misery"--

"to him
Who lives beyond earth's boundary, grief is dim,

28 Letters, pp. 55-6.
There he finds his Indian maid again and tries to persuade her and himself that they can yet find happiness together. But he must undergo another trial—he is told that their love is forbidden and that they must part. He accepts the maid's decision and tells Peona, who has now appeared on the scene, that he will spend the rest of his life a hermit. He prepares for a farewell meeting with the maid, resigned to his unhappy fate. But his destiny has been fulfilled and his trials are at an end. Through pain he has been spiritualized and he is worthy now of union with a divinity. Before his eyes the Indian maiden assumes the face and form of his dream goddess and he knows her for who she is.

Perhaps Keats meant Endymion's inward struggle to reconcile his feeling for the goddess he saw in his dreams and whom he subconsciously identified with Diana, with the passion roused in him by the beauty of the Indian maiden to symbolize the conflict but also the essential union between spiritual and physical love. More probably he was merely telling a love story but in the very telling, consciously or unconsciously, he was striving to etherealize physical passion. Love for Keats was a religion, and young and inexperienced though he was, he felt that physical love had its counterpart on a higher plane, that love's perfect fulfillment was the union of soul and body. His boyish reverence for
the great central mystery of creation is evident in even the most mawkish passages of Endymion. He was aware of his ineptitude to encompass the full meaning of sexual love and his inexperience, his naivete embarrassed him and his embarrassment betrayed him into unfortunate, even offensive, descriptions. In the preface he prepared for the poem he analysed better than could any critic its faults and the root of his own weakness, when he wrote of the poem as "a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished," and when he said:

The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceeds mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste in going over the following pages.

But whatever the flaws of Endymion, the writing of it was of immense value to Keats, for in the months of its creation, his aesthetic creed was taking shape, and in the months which he spent preparing it for the press the vague outlines of that creed crystallized into the clear cut critical dicta which illuminate his correspondence for the period from the fall of 1817 to the spring of 1818. His correspondence for that period reveals the evolution of the main ideas which would constitute the nucleus of his poetic theory. In
four separate passages, the first written in November just after he had finished the writing of *Endymion* and the last written in April just before *Endymion* was published, he set forth his opinions on the relationship of imagination to beauty to truth, on the quality of intensity in an art, on negative capability, and on the principle of beauty. It was in those passages that Keats proclaimed the creed by which he would live—the principle that beauty is synonymous with truth and that the possession of one is the possession of the other. It can hardly be supposed that at the time of writing these passages he realized he was formulating a creed; then he was only trying to express for the comprehension of his friends and brothers an idea which had taken gradual form in his mind while writing *Endymion*. Only subsequently he came to believe that in that principle lay all that was needed or required for an understanding of and an ability to cope with life.

The first of the passages in question occurs in a letter to Benjamin Bailey written on the 22nd of November—

> 0 I wish I was as certain of the end of all your troubles as that of your momentary start about the authenticity of the imagination. 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 the affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing 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, 0 for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts! 29

In that passage Keats declared positively that what the heart fixed its affections upon, what the imagination recognized as beautiful, must also be true, so authentic was the imagination, so sublime and holy the dictates of the heart. And the dictates of the heart were holy because the passions of the heart were, in their sublime, actually creative of beauty. Intuitively and directly the imagination could perceive truth which the slower, step by step reasoning of the mind later confirmed. Or, as Mr. Bate has interpreted Keats's meaning, the imagination conceives rather than perceives... it will grasp an object with all the qualities and attributes of that object amalgamating and fusing themselves into a concrete unity of a general sensation or conception.

It is precisely because of this embracing, conceiving quality which characterizes its apprehension of truth that what the Imagination seizes 'must be

truth—whether it existed before or not; for into the Imagination’s apprehension of its object are woven the very subtlest threads of association, which escape the scrutiny of the intellect but which strike, however faintly, a common emotional note, which the logic may not detect but which the intuition will feel. These concomitant associations blend into chords of feeling which are not analyzed, picked apart, or dissociated from the phenomenon which they surround. They will be united and intermingled with the fusion already gained by the Imagination, the function of which is in character so essentially like that of a common sense; for they will form an inseparable part of the truth of that phenomenon, and are a necessary part of an accompaniment of a true poetic insight; and the Imagination, in this sense, will look upon 'the Sun the Moon the stars, the Earth and its contents, as materials to form greater things—that is to say ethereal things.'

Keats would seem, too, in this passage, as Mr. Murry says in effect, to link the passion of the imagination for beauty with human love, both of them passions of the heart, and would seem to mean, to quote Mr. Murry, "that the sacred affections of the Heart, loyally obeyed, lead to the same ultimate truth which is prefigured to the Imagination as Beauty." In this, he was, we can suppose, giving more concrete expression to the idea dimly suggested in Endymion by

30 Walter Jackson Bate, Negative Capability, pp. 22-3.
31 Studies in Keats, p. 38.
the metamorphosis of the Indian maid into Diana, that the concrete, particular beauty to which the Heart responds, which awakens its love, is one with the ideal beauty the Imagination seizes as the prefigurement of eternal truth.

In his earlier study of Keats, Mr. Murry had said:

'The Heart's affections' and 'Imagination' are two kinds of the experience which Keats calls Sensations, which he contrasts with and prefers to Thoughts. The Heart's affections are the instinctive impulses, Imagination is intuition. Keats...links them together... follow the instincts, says Keats, and you will reach intuition, and by intuition you will reach the final goal, essential Beauty, which is essential Truth. And then he states quite simply, as a fact of his own nature, that he has never been able to understand how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning...That is to say, the rational mind is partial, because it excludes everything that is non-rational; it applies a scheme to reality and denies reality to all that will not enter the scheme. Against this method Keats pits his own: of denying truth to nothing that is really experienced, and above all not to the instinctive impulses, for they eventually sublimate themselves into Imagination...He holds fast to two certainties--the sacredness of the instinctive impulses, and the truth of that which the intuition seizes as beauty--he knows that they are connected, but he does not know how. That knowledge and that ignorance are alike fundamental to Endymion;
If this conception of the role of the imagination is extravagant, and even dangerous, it is so because Keats was assigning to the imagination attributes above its nature—was seeking to prove that the imagination was a valid guide not alone to the poetic insight Mr. Bate speaks of, but to a way of life. Because he longed to think only with his heart—he himself came to realize the mistake of this—because he could accept only what was proved to him on his pulses, he was insisting that he could come at truth instinctively. His mistake was just the sort that a youth, lacking fundamental philosophical training and imbued with the prevalent romantic notions on the supremacy of the imagination over reason, could make. But there is nothing of cant about his statement to Bailey. It is the sincere and deeply felt conviction of a boy who, realizing that one could arrive at truth by the philosopher's "consequentive reasoning," honestly believed that for himself, at least, there was a better way—the imagination's way of recognizing truth through its essential beauty.

In the second tenet of his creed, stated the next month in a letter to his brothers, he again linked beauty and truth; but this time the truth was not the abstract philosophical quality but a quality inherent in art which made it a true interpretation of life. He wrote:

32Keats and Shakespeare, pp. 28-9.
The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with beauty and truth.\(^{33}\)

Mr. Murry has suggested that for Keats 'intensity' "is a state of comprehension,"\(^{34}\) that "intensity in the true work of art excites intensity in the man who truly understands it..."\(^{34}\)

The core, the essence, the necessary quality of every great work of art, as Keats saw it, was its power to suggest the vision of an eternal reality its creator perceived in the moment of inspired insight when his creation was conceived, its power to excite the spectator to an imaginative speculation on the universal revelation of life it interpreted and preserved. Something of what he meant Henri Bergson more explicitly expressed when he said, to give Mr. Bate's paraphrase: "The regaining, by an effort of sympathetic intuition, of the intention that runs beneath life, is the task of the artist."\(^{35}\)

Even the ugly and the tragic could be beautiful if in the intensity of their portrayal they could suggest or reveal the reality of what is and of which they are a particular manifestation. Keats's own "genius for turning horror into beauty" by his imaginative grasp of the realness and therefore

\(^{33}\)Letters, p. 71.

\(^{34}\)Keats and Shakespeare, p. 222.

the truth of human experience, Sir Sidney Colvin recognized in *Isabella*, particularly in the passage describing Isabella's discovery and disinterment of her lover's body.36

When Keats declared this particular tenet of his creed he had been reading *King Lear* and just the day before had gone to see Benjamin West's painting, "Death on the Pale Horse"; his conclusion had been reached as the result of a comparison between these two works of art. Shakespeare satisfied his norm for greatness, as West did not, because Shakespeare, in the tragic story of Lear, filled though it was with ugly passions and abnormal, inhuman acts, with its "fierce dispute betwixt Hell torment and impassion'd Clay," had the power to rouse the reader to speculation upon the universal reality of filial ingratitude. Here, in art, was truth one with beauty. By the intensity of his imaginative conception of a life truth, the artist gave beauty to his work and only in the beauty of that work could the truth he had comprehended be expressed.

In the same letter to his brothers containing the reference to intensity in art, Keats laid down his famous dictum on negative capability--

...it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously--I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertain--

ties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason--Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration. 37

This observation was the indirect result of a disquisition he had had with Charles Dilke--Dilke of whom later Keats would write:

Dilke was a Man who cannot feel he has a personal identity unless he has made up his mind about every thing. The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up ones mind about nothing--to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts. Not a select party. The genus is not scarce in population. All the stubborn arguers you meet with are of the same brood. They never begin upon a subject they have not preresolved on. They want to hammer their nail into you and if you turn the point, still they think you wrong. Dilke will never come at a truth as long as he lives; because he is always trying at it. He is a Godwin-methodist. 38

The disquisition with this friend of his who must make "up his mind about every thing," had caused several things about which

37 Letters, p. 72.
38 Ibid., p. 426.
he had been thinking to dove-tail in his mind and he realized that the man of literary achievement could not afford to so cage his mind, to leash it down to only that which it could understand and accept as proveable; rather, he must allow his mind to lie open to all impressions and, if necessary, must be content with half knowledge, content to dispense with facts and reasons and to accede wholeheartedly to what his imagination asserted to be beautiful without demanding that his intellect be fully satisfied as to its reasonableness, its concrete factualness. So far would Keats carry his conception of beauty, its absolute identity with truth, that he would say that beauty made unimportant the uncertainties, mysteries, doubts of which the intellect would demand knowledge for its satisfaction. Beauty would not merely overcome, it would obliterate all dissatisfaction with half knowledge and it would do so because it would in its own sphere so eminently satisfy the yearning for truth of which the desire for facts was a particular manifestation, because the "fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the penetralium of mystery" contained as much of the truth of the universe as the proveable theorem.

Many years after Keats had died an anonymous poet wrote in a similar vein lines which express something of what Keats meant—

"It is not wisdom to be only wise
And on the inward vision close the eyes,
But it is wise to believe the heart...
To trust the soul's invincible surmise..."
This passive receptivity was an essential ingredient of Keats's nature\(^{39}\) and an integral part of his creed of poetry. When he wrote Reynolds—on February 19, 1818—of the pleasant day a man might pass in indolent contemplation of a single passage of literature, he was not merely sophisticating to excuse his own indolence. The beauty of the morning operating on his sense of idleness had inspired this expression of his thoughts, but the thoughts were deep-rooted in his soul and though, the thrush to the contrary, he would soon be fretting after knowledge, he would never believe other than that:

Man should not dispute or assert but whisper results to his neighbour and thus by every germ of spirit sucking the sap from mould ethereal every human might become great, and Humanity instead of being a wide heath of Furze and Briars with here and there a remote Oak or Pine, would become a grand democracy of Forest Trees! It has been an old comparison for our urging on—the Beehive; however, it seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the Bee—for it is a false notion that more is gained by receiving than giving—no, the receiver and the giver are equal in their benefits. The flower, I doubt not, receives a fair guerdon from the Bee—

\(^{39}\)"The sure way Bailey, is first to know a Man's faults, and then be passive—if after that he insensibly draws you towards him then you have no Power to break the link." Letters, p. 84.
its leaves blush deeper in the next spring—and who shall say between Man and Woman which is the most delighted? Now it is more noble to sit like Jove than to fly like Mercury—let us not therefore 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—budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every noble insect that favours us with a visit—sap will be given us for meat and dew for drink.40

Here again, as in laying down the second tenet of his creed, Keats was speaking as a poet rather than as a philosopher. Negative capability was the desirable attribute of a man of literary achievement, the man of creative imagination who rightly "should not dispute or assert but whisper results to his neighbor." It was not the desirable attribute of the seeker after abstract truth, the philosopher who would legislate for mankind.

The fourth and last of the passages which contain the nucleus of Keats's poetic theory occurs in a letter to Reynolds of April, and is in a sense a summary of the other three. Writing of the preface he had prepared for Endymion, Keats said:

...I have not the slightest feel of humility towards the public—or to anything in existence,—but the eternal

40Ibid., pp. 103-4.
Being, the Principle of Beauty.

In this last and summary expression of his creed Keats has given a wider connotation to "Principle of Beauty" than a merely aesthetic one. A full year before, he had begun what he considered his first serious poetic venture with the assertion that "a thing of beauty is a joy forever," and now, dissatisfied though he was with that venture, he reiterated its theme. In a year of poetic development he had evolved a theory on the place of beauty in the scheme of things which would motivate all his future work. But the Principle of Beauty had become for him more even than a principle of poetry; it had become the principle which might govern a man's life and direct his search for the meaning of existence. For beauty was one with truth— inseparable not only in the work of art but inseparable in life. To know beauty—and one knew it instinctively, through its appeal to the imagination—was to possess truth. To be passively receptive without any "irritable reaching after fact and reason" and to be content with the knowledge of the heart was to have wisdom.

As a philosophy of poetry, this one the young Keats had worked out for himself was an admirable one, for imagination is poetry's real realm. But as a philosophy of life, it could be dangerous, for it implies that truth was subjective rather than objective; that there need be no central authority.

\[41\textit{Ibid.}, \textit{p. 130}.\]
but that each man could be a law unto himself. Keats might have gone aground, following this creed. That he did not, at least as far as he was able to travel in his short life, was perhaps because his dedication to the Principle of Beauty was more than a dedication to beauty founded on emotionalism; it was a dedication to "essential" beauty that he made a personal religion. He was never the mere "aesthete" expressing his love for beautiful things after the eccentric manner of the nineteenth century decadents. What he was ever striving for communion with was the essence of beauty at the heart of creation. This was the beauty which was one with truth, the beauty that for him was the way to an understanding of life. This was the beauty that gave meaning to pain because pain, by purifying the soul of its dross, made it crystal-clear for the comprehension of beauty. Finally, this was the beauty that could bring him, who would be tragically without the consolation of religion, peace in death.

The essence of Keats's growing conception of poetry, which after the publication of his first volume had expanded to include the idea of beauty not merely as it is sensuous, concrete, but as it is abstract, related to and one with truth, are contained in the four passages referred to above. But not all his ideas on poetry worked out during this period while he was writing and preparing for the press his second volume are exhausted there.

There is, for one, the belief he expressed to Bailey
in October of 1817 that a poetical excellence lately forgotten, but truly the "Polar Star of Poetry," was the ability of the poet to spin out a tale of great length and comparable beauty from some slight incident, relying on his imagination to make up in beauty and variety of images for paucity of narrative detail. At this, the outset of his poetic career, Keats was convinced that a great poem must be a long one and he meant *Endymion* to be a trial of the power of his imagination, a task the successful completion of which would set his foot on the road to fame.

And then there was his condemnation of poetry which is not its own excuse for being but which has an ulterior motive. To Reynolds, in February, 1818, he wrote indignantly of the poetic philosophy of Wordsworth and of the shortcomings of Hunt's poetry--

We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great and unobstrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself, but with its subject.

Finally there are the poetic "axioms" he set down for John Taylor.

1st I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity—it should strike

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the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance--2nd. Its touches of Beauty should never be half way thereby making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural natural too him--shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of Twilight--but it is easier to think what Poetry should be than to write it--and this leads me on to another axiom. That if Poetry comes not naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.44

Such then was the creed of John Keats at the time of his second venture into print—a creed of beauty that identified beauty with love and truth and that held this tri-entity to be a media to man's understanding of the mystery of his existence. Keats had gained assurance in the year he was writing and revising Endymion and that assurance was reflected in these observations of his on life and art. The boy who had written "Sleep and Poetry" was an eager, ardent young person, filled with dreams and aspirations, only half aware of what the realization of those aspirations must involve; but the boy who bravely offered Endymion for the criticism of the "men who are competent to look, and who do look with a zealous eye, to the honour of English literature," had come into his own and it remained for him only to gather the fruit of his experience.

44 Ibid., p. 108.
CHAPTER IV
LETTERS OF 1818-1820

In the months following the publication of Endymion when the shadows first began to gather in his personal life and to darken the happiness he had found in his whole-hearted dedication to poetry, Keats sought anew in himself and in his world for that which would satisfy the unfulfilled longing of his heart. In the sensuous beauty of nature and of the poetry which epitomized nature he had once found satisfaction for this heart-hunger. Later he had realized a deeper gratification in his conception of beauty linked with love and still later of abstract beauty identified with truth. But even before the proofs of Endymion were finally corrected, he had discovered that beauty alone, even beauty one with love and truth, would not satisfy his yearning. Beyond the realm of the physical senses, beyond the realm of intuitive knowledge, there was yet the unchartered realm of the reasoning intellect, and it was now borne in upon him that, as he wrote his brothers in January, 1818, "nothing is finer for the purposes of great productions than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers."45 Before he pursued further the calling

of poetry, he determined to "follow Solomon's direction of 'get Wisdom—get understanding'..." Thus he wrote to John Taylor on the 24th of April, 1818, and in that letter went on to tell his publisher that he had already found he could

have no enjoyment in the World but continual drinking of Knowledge—I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good for the world—some do it with their society—some with their wit—some with their benevolence—some with a sort of power of conferring pleasure and good humour on all they meet and in a thousand ways all equally dutiful to the command of Great Nature—there is but one way for me—the road lies th/r/ough application study and thought. I will pursue it and to that end purpose retiring for some years. I have been hovering for some time between an exquisite sense of the luxurious and a love for Philosophy—were I calculated for the former I should be glad—but as I am not I shall turn all my soul to the latter. 46

But, as Mr. Murry has pointed out, when he speaks of 'Philosophy' Keats does not mean the technical subject which bears that name. What is meant is a comprehension (and a comprehension of a peculiar kind) of the mystery of human life... philosophy for Keats is intuitive, and knowledge is organic; and by this word 'organic' is meant that it is not a knowledge that can be added to oneself. Memory is not knowledge. This knowledge is es-

46 Ibid., pp. 134-5.
sentially self-engendered; it is the self's creation of itself out of experience; it is a shaping of the soul by a true contact with reality...  

Three days after the letter to Taylor, when he wrote to Reynolds, his plans for getting understanding had taken even more definite shape. In the months he intended to pass at Teignmouth, where he had gone to relieve George of the care of their sick young brother, he would

learn Greek, and very likely Italian—and in other ways prepare myself to ask Hazlitt in about a years time the best metaphysical road I can take. For although I take Poetry to be Chief, yet there is something else wanting to one who passes his life among Books and thoughts on Books—I long to feast upon old Homer as we have upon Shakespeare, and as I have lately upon Milton. If you understood Greek, and would read me passages, now and then, explaining their meaning, 'twould be from its mistiness, perhaps a greater luxury than reading the thing one's self.  

His next letter to Reynolds, dated the 3d of May, contains this passage:

Were I to study physic or rather Medicine again, I feel it would not make the least difference in my Poetry; when the mind is in its infancy a Bias is in reality a Bias, but when we have acquired more strength, a Bias becomes no

47Keats and Shakespeare, pp. 60, 62-3.
48Letters, p. 137.
Bias. Every department of Knowledge we see excellent and calculated towards a great whole. I am so convinced of this, that I am glad at not having given away my medical Books, which I shall again look over to keep alive the little I know thitherwards; and moreover intend through you and Rice to become a sort of pip-civilian. 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 the Mystery; a thing I begin to understand a little, and which weighed upon you in the most gloomy and true sentence in your Letter. 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 being blown up again without wings and with all/the/ horror of a bare shoulderd creature—in the former case, our shoulders are fledge, and we go thro' the same air and space without fear...It is impossible to know how far Knowledge will console us for the death of a friend and the ill 'that flesh is heir to'—With respect to the affections and Poetry you must know by a sympathy my thoughts that way.49

Further along in this same letter he described for Reynolds what he called a

simile of human life as far as I now perceive it; that is to the point to which I say we both

49Ibid., pp. 140-1.
have arrived at—Well—I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me. The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think—We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of this thinking principle within us—we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there forever in delight: However among the effect this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing one's nerves that the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression—whereby this Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages—we see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist. We are now in that state—We feel the 'burden of the Mystery,' To this point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote 'Tintern Abbey' and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark Passages. Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them...50

81

50Ibid., pp. 143-4.
Nothing could better explain the evolution of Keats's genius than this at once autobiographic and psychological resume of the course of human life. The reading of Spenser had carried him across the threshold of the Chamber of Maiden-Thought and the heady delight he felt in its "pleasant wonders" was of the essence of his first volume of poetry. While writing *Endymion*, however, his first conscious poetic effort, his vision into the heart and nature of Man was sharpened and, through personal experience, his nerves were convinced that the world was indeed full of misery and heartbreak, pain and sickness.

Even in October of 1817 he had written to Bailey that: "Health and Spirits can only belong unalloyed to the selfish Man—the Man who thinks much of his fellows can never be in Spirits—when I am not suffering for vicious beastliness I am the greater part of the week in spirits."51

It was Tom's illness—he must have been thinking of Tom when he wrote the above for in that same letter he had declared that in "this World there is no quiet nothing but teasing and snubbing and vexation—my brother Tom look'd very unwell yesterday..."52—that was the first great sorrow of Keats's adult life. He had written to Reynolds on November 22, 1817, of his regret that he could not accompany Tom into Devonshire and in that letter assured his friend that "heart-

51 Ibid., p. 57.
52 Ibid., p. 54.
vexations" would never surprise him—"a man should have the fine point of his soul taken off to become fit for this world."\textsuperscript{53} The next March he did go down to Teignmouth to relieve George as Tom's nurse. Then it had not yet become apparent to either George or John that the boy had not long to live. George could still write to John later that month, in the face of news of a relapse Tom had suffered, of a time when he would be "completely recover'd,"\textsuperscript{54} and John was able, early the next month to write to Reynolds, then himself recovering from an illness, that "Tom is getting better he hopes you may meet him at the top o' the hill."\textsuperscript{55} But Tom's condition must have weighed heavily on the hearts of both brothers; Keats's letters to his friends contain frequent references to the state of his brother's health and it must have been of Tom he was thinking primarily when he wrote of the Chamber of Maiden-Though becoming gradually darkened, for at the end of that letter he mentioned that Tom had just spit blood.

Shortly, too, Keats was to know a new sorrow—the pain of separation from George, who in June was to marry Georgiana Augusta Wylie and with her emigrate to far away America. It would mean a double loss for John—he had conceived a deep affection for his intended sister-in-law—but

\textsuperscript{53}Ibid., p. 65.
\textsuperscript{54}Ibid., p. 120.
\textsuperscript{55}Ibid., p. 132.
it was the thought of losing George, the brother who from their childhood had been the being upon whom he most depended, which shook his life to its foundations. All their lives George had been his ballast, and his going would leave a great void in his elder brother's life. To Bailey Keats described the torpor which he felt at the idea of his brother's departure.

However I am now so depressed that I have not an Idea to put to paper--my hand feels like lead--and yet it is an unpleasant numbness it does not take away the pain of existence. I don't know what to write--Monday /25 May/.--You see how I have delayed--and even now I have but a confused idea of what I should be about my intellect must be in a degen/er/atting state--it must be for when I should be writing about god knows what I am troubling you with Moods of my own Mind or rather body--for Mind there is none. I am in that temper that if I were under Water I would scarcely kick to come to the top. I know very well 'tis all nonsense. In a short time I hope I shall be in a temper to fell /for feel/ sensibly your mention of my Book--in vain have I waited till Monday to have any interest in that or in any thing else. I feel no spur at my Brothers going to America, and am almost stony-hearted about his wedding. All this will blow over...56

But the depression which had seized him deepened with the passing days and in his next letter to Bailey, writ-
ten a little more than two weeks later, he gave vent anew to
the despondency which filled his heart.

I was in hopes some little time
back to be able to relieve your
dullness by my spirits--to point
out things in the world worth
your enjoyment--and now I am
never alone without rejoicing
that there is such a thing as
death--without placing my ulti-
mate in the glory of dying for
a great human purpose. Perhaps
if my affairs were in a differ-
ent state I should not have writ-
ten the above--you shall judge--
I have two Brothers one is driv-
en by the 'burden of Society' to
America the other, with an ex-
quise love of Life, is in a
lingering State. My Love for
my Brothers from the early loss
of our parents and even from
earlier Misfortunes has grown
into a/n/ affection 'passing
the Love of Women'--I have been
ill temper'd with them. I have
vex'd them--but the thought of
them has always stifled the im-
pression that any woman might
otherwise have made upon me. I
have a Sister too and may not
follow them, either to America
or to the Grave--Life must be
undergone, and I certainly de-
rive a consolation from the
thought of writing one or two
more Poems before it ceases.57

It was for a shield against the misery and heart-
break which he thus knew so well was man's heritage in this
world that he looked to knowledge and experience. Not yet
did he "know how far Knowledge will console us for the death
of a friend and the ill 'that flesh is heir to,' but he had

57 Ibid., pp. 151-2.
come to realize that beauty, even beauty idealized by its identification with love and truth, was alone too fragile a protection against the sharp realities of everyday existence. In the knowledge which lay in books, with their accumulated wisdom of the past, and in the experience which derived from travel and concourse with one's fellow men, he hoped to find that which might better armor him to cope with life and better fit him to interpret it in his poetry. He had not rejected the intuitive insight which through imagination might lead, he still believed, to a higher degree of truth than that arrived at through reasoning but had simply, in the words of Mr. Thorpe,

found that philosophy and reason have a place in poetry, and so far from being antagonistic to the imagination, they are really adjuncts to it, and furnish the only true and proper basis for its development to the highest possible reaches. Only through study and experience can the mind be so strengthened that the imagination shall have a substance to it adequate to the production of great poetry.58

And so Keats, having settled Tom at Hampstead among friends and having seen George and his bride safely through the first stage of their long journey, with almost a light heart—so resilient was his nature—set out in the company of Charles Brown for the walking tour of Scotland which was to be part of his program for acquiring knowledge and enlarging his

vision—"a sort of Prologue to the Life I intend to pursue— that is to write, to study and to see all Europe at the lowest expence"\textsuperscript{59} and to "see the Kingdoms of the Earth and the glory of them..."\textsuperscript{60}

The letters which cover his Scotch trip are cheerful and filled with plans for the future, and there are passages in them which evidence his changed point of view—that, as he had written to Bailey the previous March: "Scenery is fine—but human nature is finer."\textsuperscript{61} The mountains and waterfalls of Wordsworth's Lake country prompted him to declare to Tom:

\begin{quote}
I shall learn poetry here and shall henceforth write more than ever, for the abstract endeavor of being able to add a mite to that mass of beauty which is harvested from these grand materials, by the finest spirits, and put into ethereal existence for the relish of one's fellows.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

But in Scotland, the sight of children performing one of their native dances inspired in him a feeling "near the glory of Patriotism, the glory of making by any means a country happier. This is what I like better than scenery."\textsuperscript{63} And in Ireland

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{59}Letters, p. 128.
\item \textsuperscript{60}Ibid., p. 132.
\item \textsuperscript{61}Ibid., p. 111.
\item \textsuperscript{62}Ibid., p. 157.
\item \textsuperscript{63}Ibid., p. 163.
\end{itemize}
he was impressed by the

nakedness, the rags, the dirt
and misery of the poor common
Irish... We had the pleasure of
finding our way through a Peat-
Bog--three miles long at least--
dreary, black, dank, flat and
spongy: here and there were
poor dirty creatures and a few
strong men cutting or carting
peat. We heard on passing in-
to Belfast through a most wretched
suburb that most disgusting of
all noises worse than the Bag
pipe, the laugh of a Monkey, the
chatter of women solus the scream
of /a/ Macaw--I mean the sound
of the Shuttle. What a tremen-
dous difficulty is the improve-
ment of the condition of such
people. I cannot conceive how
a mind 'with child' of Philant/
h/ropy could gra/s/p at possibi-
licity--with me it is absolute
despair. 64

And he was greatly taken by the "Duchess of Dunghill" they
met on their return from Belfast--"What a thing would be a
history of her Life and sensations." 65

He more or less summed up his Scotch trip and its
effect upon him when he wrote Bailey, after a month of con-
stant traveling, that he

should not have consented to
myself these four Months tramp-
ing in the highlands but that I
thought it would give me more
experience, rub off more Prejud-
ice, use /me/ to more hardship,
identify finer scenes load me
with grander Mountains, and

64 Ibid., p. 174.
65 Ibid.
strengthen more my reach in Poetry, than would stopping at home among Books even though I should reach Homer. 66

And in a particularly appealing letter to Tom he made plans for supplementing his summer of traveling by a winter of study--

Immediately on my return I shall begin studying hard with a peep at the theatre now and then--and depend upon it I shall be very luxurious...You will help me to talk of George next winter and we will go now and then to see Fanny. 67

But the hardships of his journey, accepted though they were all in the stride of youth, taxed him beyond his strength. A sore throat, harbinger of the disease which would end his life, forced him to cut short his travels. He came home in August, far from well himself, to find Tom was gravely ill and that he could not longer entertain any hope for his recovery. Shortly after his homecoming the savage reviews of Endymion appeared in Blackwood's and the Quarterly; and though at the time they had no visible effect on him--his concern for Tom excluded any lesser consideration--they took their toll of the lighthearted, ambitious and determined young poet of the year before.

Throughout that autumn he scarcely left Tom's bedside, cutting himself off from even the consolation poetry.

66 Ibid., p. 193.
could afford him. A letter to Dilke of the 21st of September describes his feelings thus:

I wish I could say Tom was any better. His identity presses upon me so all day that I am obliged to go out—and although I intended to have given some time to study alone I am obliged to write, and plunge into abstract images to ease myself of his countenance his voice and feebleness—so that I live now in a continual fever—it must be poisonous to life although I feel well. Imagine 'the hateful siege of contraries'—if I think of fame of poetry it seems a crime to me, and yet I must do so or suffer. 68

To Reynolds, then preparing for his marriage, he wrote with affection, rejoicing in his friend's happiness, and grieving only that I am not at the same time happy—but I conjure you to think at present of nothing but pleasure…I pity you as much that it cannot last forever, as I do myself now drinking bitters.--Give yourself up to it—you cannot help it—and I have a consolation in thinking so. I never was in love—yet the voice and the shape of a Woman has haunted me these two days—at such a time when the relief, the feverous relief of Poetry seems a much less crime—This morning Poetry has conquered—I have relapsed into those abstractions which are my only life—I feel escaped from a

68Ibid., p. 216.
new strange and threatening sorrow.--and I am thankful for it. There is an awful warmth about my heart like a load of Immortality.69

In October he wrote his brother and sister-in-law of his intention of sending them a prose tale which I must begin on account of the activity of my Mind; of its inability to remain at rest. It must be prose and not very exciting. I must do this because in the way I am at present situated I have too many interruptions to a train of feeling to be able to write Poetry--So I shall write this Tale, and if I think it worth while get a duplicate made before I send it off to you--70

These months spent watching helplessly the slow and painful death of the lad who had such "an exquisite love of Life," were for Keats among the hardest of his life. He was separated by more than three thousand miles from the brother who, as he wrote Mrs. Wylie, "has ever been more than a brother to me, he has been my greatest friend"71; and he was denied even the comfort of his little sister's companionship, for the Abbeys permitted her, however well intentioned their reasons, to visit the dying Tom probably but once. His brother's lingering illness took its physical toll of him, too: who can doubt that the months of confinement in the

69 Ibid., p. 217.
70 Ibid., p. 238.
71 Ibid., p. 208.
sick room at Hampstead hastened his own death. Yet the pain there was in those days of anxiety and patient watchfulness gave him a maturity that in turn brought him into the fulness of his poetic power. Sorrow strengthened his spirit and gave him a deeper insight into the why and wherefore of human suffering; brought him into closer touch with the eternal mystery of existence. And nothing which he would yet write could surpass in its serene and courageous acceptance of life the profoundly moving and beautiful letter which he wrote to prepare the brother and sister so far from home for the passing of a dear one.

I am grieved to say that I am not sorry that you had not letters at Philadelphia; you could have had no good news of Tom and I have been withheld on his account from beginning these many days; I could not bring myself to say the truth, that he is no better but much worse—However it must be told and you must my dear Brother and Sister take example from me and bear up against any Calamity for my sake as I do for your's. Our's are ties which independent of their own Sentiment are sent us by providence to prevent the deleterious effects of one great, solitary grief. I have Fanny and I have you—three people whose Happiness to me is sacred—and it does annul that selfish sorrow which I should otherwise fall into, living as I do with poor Tom who looks upon me as his only comfort—the tears will come into your eyes—let them—and embrace each other—thank heaven for what happiness you
have and after thinking a moment or two that you suffer in common with all Mankind hold it not a Sin to regain your cheerfulness.  

Tom Keats died on the morning of December 1st, and his death closed a chapter in the poet's life. His time of apprenticeship was over and in the coming year he would garner the precious fruit of his experience of life--all its beauty and heartbreak--in some of the most hauntingly lovely and exquisitely sensitive poetry of our language. During the months of his brother's illness, when he had found it impossible to write, his thoughts had never been far from poetry and his letters of that period are filled with critical dicta which reveal a growing understanding of his art and a further development of his poetic creed.

When James Hessey, one of his publishers, sent him a copy of The Morning Chronicle which carried two letters from readers of the journal condemning the unjust and cowardly criticism of his work by the Edinburgh Quarterly Review, he acknowledged its receipt with a calmly detached estimate of his own ability and accomplishments:

As for the rest, I begin to get a little acquainted with my own strength and weakness.--Praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic on his own Works. My own domestic criticism has given me pain without com-

72Ibid., pp. 229-30.
parison beyond what Blackwood or the Quarterly could possibly inflict, and also when I feel I am right, no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary reperception & ratification of what is fine. J. S. is perfectly right in regard to the slip-shod Endymion. That it is so is no fault of mine.—No!—though it may sound a little paradoxical. It is as good as I had the power to make it—by myself. Had I been nervous about its being a perfect piece, & with that view asked advice, & 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, & 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 & watchfulness in 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, & the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea & comfortable advice.—I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest. 73

Later, in one of his long journal letters to George and Georgiana, he referred to these Chronicle letters with equal assurance in that now famous declaration: "This is a mere matter of the moment—-I think I shall be among the Eng-

73Ibid., pp. 222-3.
lish Poets after my death."

To Richard Woodhouse's allusion to a discussion they had had in which he had understood Keats to say that "you thought there was now nothing original to be written in poetry...& that you should, consequently, write no more," he wrote in answer:

The best answer I can give you is in a clerk-like manner to make some observations on two principle points, which seem to point like indices into the midst of the whole pro and con, about genius, and views and achievements and ambition and coetera. 1st. As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing perse and stands alone) it is not itself--it has no self--it is every thing 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 camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. 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

74 Ibid., p. 232.
75 Ibid., p. 226.
Body--The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute--the poet has none; no identity--he is certainly the most un-poetical of all God's Creatures. If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more? Might I not at that very instant have been cogitating on the Characters of Saturn and Ops? It is a wretched thing to confess; but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature--how can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself; but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me that I am in a very little time an/nihilated—not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children: I know not whether I make myself wholly understood: I hope enough so to let you see that no dependence is to be placed on what I said that day.

In the second place I will speak of my views, and of the life I purpose to myself. I am ambitious of doing the world some good: if I should be spared that may be the work of maturer years--in the universal I will assay to reach to as high a summit in Poetry as the nerve bestowed upon me will suffer. The faint conceptions I have of Poems to come brings the blood frequently into my forehead. All I hope is that I may not
lose all interest in human affairs—that the solitary indifference I feel for applause even from the finest Spirits, will not blunt any acuteness of vision I may have. I do not think it will—I feel assured I should write from the mere yearning and fondness I have for the Beautiful even if my night's labours should be burnt every morning, and no eye ever shine upon them. 76

Here in this passage, in his discussion of his plans for the future, is a reiteration of his desire to make his poetry not merely a thing of beauty but a thing of beneficence to mankind. In "Sleep and Poetry" he had said that the great end of poetry was "to soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man." Upon the completion of Endymion he had declared he found "no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good for the world," and now, in almost those same words, he spoke of his ambition "of doing the world some good." Not his final but at least his last and at once most comprehensive and most sublime expression of this particular tenet of his poetic creed he made in the recast of "Hyperion," and there it stands an everlasting refutation of the theory that for Keats poetry was a way of escape from life.

Almost a recapitulation of his poetic creed, insofar as it had developed by the fall of 1818, is the statement made to his brother and sister-in-law:

76Ibid., pp. 227-9.
The only thing that can ever effect me personally for more than one short passing day, is any doubt about my powers for poetry—I seldom have any, and I look with hope to the nighing time when I shall have none. I am as happy as Man can be...with the yearning Passion I have for the beautiful, connected and made one with the ambition of my intellect.**

And a re-affirmation of two of the principal tenets of his creed is that other note in one of the letters to America [the italics are mine]:

The more we know the more inadequacy we discover in the world to satisfy us...Mrs. Tighe and Beattie once delighted me—now I see through them and can find nothing in them—or weakness—and yet how many they still delight! Perhaps a superior being may look upon Shakspeare in the same light—is it possible?...But I'll go no further—I may be speaking sacrilegiously—and on my word I have thought so little that I have not one opinion upon any thing except in matters of taste—I never can feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its Beauty—and I find myself very young minded even in that perceptive power—which I hope will encrease—A year ago I could not understand in the slightest degree Raphael's cartoons—now I begin to read them a little—and how did I learn to do so? By seeing something done in quite an opposite spirit—I mean a picture of

**Ibid., p. 241.
Guido's in which all the Saints, instead of the heroic simplicity and unaffected grandeur which they inherit from Raphael, had each of them both in countenance and gesture all the canting, solemn melodramatic mawkishness of MacKenzie's father Nicholas. When I was last at Haydon's I look/ed/ over a book of Prints taken from the fresco of the Church at Milan the name of which I forget—in it are comprised Specimens of the first and second age of art in Italy—I do not think I ever had a greater treat out of Shakespeare—Full of Romance and the most tender feeling—magnificence of draperies beyond any I ever saw not excepting Raphael's. But Grotesque to a curious pitch—yet still making up a fine whole— even finer to me than more accomplish'd works—as there was left so much room for Imagination.  

"What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth," he had written Bailey in November of 1817; and now more than a year later he was declaring that he could never "feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its Beauty." "The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth"—even the ugly and the tragic could be beautiful and these early Italian prints were beautiful, for all their grotesqueness, because they "left so much room for Imagination," because they could excite a "momentous depth of speculation."

Ibid., pp. 259-60.
Thus far had he come when the death of his brother released him from the lethargy of pain and grief which had long numbed his senses. The sharp anguish he felt over the passing of that dearly beloved brother, than whom none other would dull with the passage of time, loneliness. But the very poignancy of his loss was to make him im peculiarly sensitive to any emotional stimulus, and this was for him a state of mind particularly conducive to creation. And so it was that in the year that followed he produced his best and most enduring work.

Throughout that year of great poetic achievement he held fast to his idea that knowledge was the important prerequisite to creative effort. He wrote Woodhouse in December of 1818 that he had had "a new leaf to turn over—I must work—I must read—I must at least write."79 And to Haydon, who had written in approval of his plan for travels and study, he avowed his resolution "never to write for the sake of writing or making a poem, but from running over with any little knowledge or experience which many years of reflection may perhaps give me; otherwise I will be dumb."80

And during all those months of the brilliant final chapter of his poetic career, when he was writing with such inspired genius, he was thinking long thoughts on poetry and philosophy and their relation to life. In the journal letter

79Ibid., p. 270.
80Ibid., p. 285.
to George and Georgiana which covers the months from February to May, 1819, there are some richly speculative passages. Once he quoted Hazlitt to the effect that poetry, that imagination, delights as much in power and excitement as it does in truth, in good, in right, whereas pure reason and the moral sense approve only of the true and good; that this tendency to immediate excitement or theatrical effect will in poetry sometimes triumph over principle, sacrificing reason to effect, and that when this is so, the delight afforded is in proportion to the effect achieved and not in proportion to the moral desireableness of the act dramatized.

In an entry made some six days later he expressed an idea akin to this of Hazlitt's and somewhat reminiscent of his October letter to Woodhouse, developing it into an analysis of the difference between poetry and philosophy.

Though a quarrel in the Streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest Man shows a grace in his quarrel--By a superior being our reasoning/s/ may take the same tone--though erroneous they may be fine--This is the very thing in which consists poetry; and if so it is not so fine a thing as philosophy--For the same reason that an eagle is not so fine a thing as a truth... 82

Commenting on this particular passage, Thorpe says:

81See this text, pp. 95-7.

82Letters, p. 317.
Objects in the world, actions, men--no matter how trivial or mean or ugly--become in themselves, apart from any moral relationships, of interest and value as subjects for poetry. That is why Keats is led frankly to admit that if this is true, poetry 'is not so fine a thing as philosophy...for the same reason that an eagle is not so fine a thing as truth'. Philosophy weighs with cold, analytical nicety, and judges on a basis of intrinsic and moral worth. Therefore her judgments should have the validity of reasoned conclusions based on all the facts. Poetry merely takes delight in revelation; in the interpretation of life as it is, on its own account, without any nice discrimination of ultimate values. But it is this very quality that makes poetry infinitely more desirable to Keats than is philosophy. Viewed in the abstract, philosophy may be a finer thing than poetry, but actually...in its special province of illuminating life, poetry is to Keats unique and supreme! For Keats, the artist, philosophy has a place, but it is a means, not an end: its function is to prepare the intellect of the poet for its most significant and intensest adventures; in this capacity, it is indispensable to the greatest poetry, enriching its meanings, deepening its reach, and lending it, withal, the voice of authenticity and power.

Under date of April 15th he expounded in this same

83_op. cit., pp. 100-1.
journal letter his theory on "soul making." In this world of pain and trouble intelligences, or atoms of perceptions--sparks as it were of the Divine Being--without any proper identity--are given the identities which make them souls. This world is "The vale of Soul-making.'...

A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! Not merely is the Heart a Hornbook, It is the Minds Bible, it is the Minds experience, it is the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity. As various as the Lives of Men are--so various become their Souls, and thus does God make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the Sparks of his own essence...

...If what I have said should not be plain enough, as I fear it may not be, I will but /for put/ you in the place where I began in this series of thoughts --I mean, I began by seeing how man was formed by circumstances--and what are circumstances?--but touchstones of his heart?--? and what are touchstones?--but provings of his heart? and what are provings of his heart but fortifiers or alterers of his nature? and what is his altered nature but his Soul?--and what was his Soul before it came into the world and had these provings and alterations and perfectionings?--An intelligence--without Identity--and how is this Identity to be made? Through the medium of the Heart? And how is the heart to become this Medium but in a world of Circumstances?®4

This theory is a restatement of his idea that man must gain his experience and knowledge of life through pain and of his acceptance of the necessity for pain in the scheme of the universe. It is, as Charles Du Bos has put it, his definition of life—"the truest and deepest human interpretation of Life ever uttered by the soul of man." 85

Keats was indeed thinking long thoughts on poetry and life in these days of his richest creative period and greatly had he changed in the two years since he had so exultingly proclaimed

"For what has made the sage or poet write
But the fair paradise of Nature's light?"

In May of 1819 he wrote to Miss Jeffrey that "the world has taken on a quakerish look with me, which I once thought was impossible—

'Nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass and glory in the flower.'" 86

"I have of late been moulting," he told Reynolds in July, "not for fresh feathers and wings: they are gone, and in their stead I hope to have a pair of patient sublunary legs. I have altered, not from a Chrysalis into a butterfly, but the contrary, having two little loopholes, whence I may look out into the stage of the world..." 87 And in September, out of his retirement in the quiet cathedral town of Winchester, he

85 What is Literature, p. 11.
86 Letters, p. 345.
87 Ibid., p. 358.
wrote George and Georgiana of the change in himself their mutual friends had noted since his brother and sister-in-law had left England.

Some think I have lost that poetic ardour and fire 'tis said I once had--the fact is perhaps I have: but instead of that I hope I shall substitute a more thoughtful and quiet power. I am more frequently, now contented to read and think--but now & then, haunted with ambitious thoughts, Qui/e/ter in my pulse, improved in my digestion; exerting myself against vexing speculations--scarcely content to write the best verses for the fever they leave behind. I want to compose without this fever. I hope I one day shall.88

He told them, too, of his studies.

In the course of a few months I shall be as good an Italian Scholar as I am a french one. I am reading Ariosto at present: not managing more than six or eight stanzas at a time. When I have done this language so as to be able to read it tolerably well--I shall set myself to get complete in latin, and there my learning must stop. I do not think of venturing upon Greek. I would not go even so far if I were not persuaded of the power the knowledge of any language gives one...89

And in October he wrote Haydon:

...I feel every day more and more content to read. Books

88Ibid., pp. 421-2.
89Ibid., pp. 424-5.
are becoming more interesting and valuable to me. I may say I could not live without them. If in the course of a fortnight you can procure me a ticket to the British museum I will make a better use of it than I did in the first instance. 90

Out of those days of contemplation and quiet study there was born Keats's final conception of poetry—the conception of poetry as the distilled essence of the poet's knowledge and experience of life born of the integration of his mind and soul, heart and imagination. Once poetry had been for him a joyous, emotional paean to beauty, but sorrow taught him that man must draw for strength upon the resources of his mind as well as of his heart; that while beauty, whether it be the sensuous beauty of nature or the more intellectual beauty of art, can assuage the hurt of a broken heart, it is only knowledge that can "ease the burden of the Mystery." And as in life, so it was in poetry which was the very stuff of life—the poet must have knowledge and experience to strengthen his reach and give grandeur to his conceptions. His own last and greatest volume of poetry is fraught with the knowledge and experience he had garnered in his brief but intense life. Yet its poems are, too, the exquisite flowering and the perfect fulfillment of that creed of beauty he never abandoned but by which he lived even in the last painful days of his existence, and to which his art was ever dedicated; above all

90 Ibid., pp. 432-3.
those poems are, though, the rich and varied expressions of the happiness which filled his being to overflowing in the magic year of 1819.
CHAPTER V
THE 1820 VOLUME

All the magic of that year 1819 was centered in the girl who had entered Keats's life during the dark autumn of 1818 and to whom, after a brief courtship, he had become engaged at Christmas. He had been instantly attracted to Fanny Brawne when first he met her, not long before Tom's death, and his relationship with her was to revolutionize his life. The idea of marriage changed all his plans—he who had said he would never write merely for the sake of writing began to toy with the thought of earning a living from the press and even contemplated giving up poetry altogether to return to the practice of medicine; but the real revolution was within Keats himself. The deep, the all-absorbing love he conceived for her was a completely new experience for him and after he fell under her spell he was never quite the same man again. The intensity of his passion shook him to the depths of his being, and that at a time when he was still emotionally keyed up by his sorrow over his brother's death. It brought him at once a fierce joy and a great pain and inevitably, since the man who creates turns something of himself into his creation, his love for her had a marked effect on his poetry. Indeed, it
was the spark that set fire to his genius and in that period of singular happiness and torment which followed his betrothal to her the "torch of his life flamed up in a blaze of poetry."

Characteristically it was her beauty which drew him to her. "All my thoughts," he told her at the time of their first separation,

my unhappiest days and nights have I find not at all cured me of my love of Beauty, but made it so intense that I am miserable that you are not with me...why may I not speak of your Beauty, since without that I could never have lov'd you. I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have for you but Beauty.  

And the close relationship he had perceived between beauty and pain was realized for him in their love. "I have never known any unalloy'd Happiness," he wrote her in his earliest letter to her extant,

for many days together: the death or sickness of some one has always spoilt my hours--and now when none such troubles oppress me, it is you must confess very hard that another sort of pain should haunt me. 

Later, in his illness, he told her that

...when I look back upon the pains and torments I have suffer'd for you from the day I

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91 Hewlett, op. cit., p. 248.
93 Ibid., p. 353.
left you to go to the Isle of Wight; the extasies in which I have pass'd some days and the miseries in their turn, I wonder the more at the Beauty which has kept up the spell so fervently.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 467-8.}

Under the spell of her beauty, inspired by his love for her, he wrote most of the poems of the 1820 volume. They are expressive in all their varying tones--some of them of tender beauty, some mystical, dreaming, sensuously appealing, others heartbreakingly haunting, or again filled with a warm and serene beauty--of the beauty he saw in his beloved.

Most of them belong to the period between the Christmas of 1818 and September of 1819, but a kind of prelude to this group are two which belong to a time before Keats and Fanny Brawne had become engaged. The one, "Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil," was written indeed before he met her, in April of 1818, when \textit{Endymion} was scarcely off the press, and there is much in it reminiscent of the 'conceits' of \textit{Endymion}. The story Keats borrowed from Boccaccio and in its theme there is the "simplicity and quiet pathos"\footnote{Ibid., p. 223.} Reynolds ascribed to it, but there is too the inexperience of life Keats later felt in it. "'A weak-sided Poem' with an amusing sober-sadness about it," he described the poem to Richard Woodhouse in September 1819, when he was discussing his reasons for not publishing it.
There is too much inexperience of live /for life/, and simplicity of knowledge in it—which might do very well after one's death—but not while one is alive. There are very few would look to the reality...If I may so say, in my dramatic capacity I enter fully into the feeling; but in Propria Persona I should be apt to quiz it myself.  

Love for Keats, at its writing, was still something his mind might conceive but his heart had not yet felt. As unreal, in its way, as the extravagant passion of Endymion and his mistress is the pale passion of Lorenzo and Isabella. But Keats's portrayal of human passion has risen above the sensuous level and he has managed to infuse the love story of Lorenzo and Isabella with a spiritual tone—there is in the feeling of the lover for his beloved a reverential tenderness, an almost holy awe that suggests, as the shadow does the substance, the later "The Eve of St. Agnes." And the poem does remain true to its author's unswerving belief—love is born of beauty and is one with it. The shade of Lorenzo, realizing awfully the abyss which separates him from his beloved—

"I am a shadow now, alas! alas!  
Upon the skirts of human-nature dwelling  
Alone...  
And thou art distant in Humanity"

—utters those words which Keats would later quote to Fanny Brawne with the same intensity of feeling—

96 Ibid., p. 391.  
97 Ibid., p. 461.
"Thy beauty grows upon me, and I feel
A greater love through all my essence steal."

The other poem, in intention at least, pre-dates
"Isabella," for even in January, 1818 Keats had written Hay- don of his plan to treat the story of Hyperion, assuring his friend that the contemplated poem would afford a wider choice than Endymion for a subject of one of the painter's illustrations and promising Haydon that it would be done "in a more naked and grecian Manner" than Endymion. Actually Keats began "Hyperion" in September, 1818, and at the end of the following year was still working on a revision of it. It had its genesis in the unhappy period of Tom's illness and there is that in its somber tone, in its undertone of pain and gigantic striving against inevitable, fateful tragedy, which suggests the poet's attempt to sublimate personal grief by a philosophy which would have it that out of all suffering some good is born. For

its sadness is not the icy chill of intellectual des- pair, but the warm, rich, still sadness of a suffering heart determined to control its pain. It throbs, for all that its figures are great and immortal, with 'the still, sad music of humanity.' Of humanity, indeed, for these divine figures are lovely and human, their sufferings and anger are human and their wis- dom is humane.99

98 Ibid., p. 82.
99 Murry, Keats and Shakespeare, p. 85.
An epic of the overthrow of the old gods, it has long been identified by Keats's critics, and indeed by Keats himself, as Miltonic in its inspiration. It has not, Mr. Ridley says,

the full harmonies of Milton, nor is it the work of a mere imitator; but if has a considerable measure of that grave, ordered progress, never hurrying, and halting only by deliberate design, that relentless march of the legions, of which Milton alone among English poets knew the secret. 100

Yet it was, too, a poem intensely personal to Keats, embodying a great deal of his essential philosophy, and more than any other poem of the 1820 volume it bore evidence of his profound thought on poetry's relation to life. Its theme is the triumph of beauty even at the cost of pain and its very austerity, the quiet restraint of its style, the magnificent grandeur of its setting, the dramatic sweep of its narrative, lend new weight and dignity to Keats's life-long belief in the supremacy of beauty.

Akin to beauty is the noble sorrow of Thea, "tender spouse of gold Hyperion."

"But oh! how unlike marble was that face: How beautiful, if sorrow had not made Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty's self."

And out of her sorrow, the sorrow of all "the sky-children," there is conceived a new beauty; out of the humiliation of

Saturn's fallen dynasty a new dynasty of gods springs, more beautiful and therefore greater in glory than the race of immortals it supersedes. In the words of the Sea God, who speaks to his fellow-gods of the overthrow of their power, it is an incontrovertible, eternal truth that

"...as thou wast not the first of powers,  
So art thou not the last; it cannot be:  
Thou art not the beginning nor the end...  
Now comes the pain of truth, to whom 'tis pain;  
0 folly! for to bear all naked truths,  
And to envisage circumstance, all calm,  
That is the top of sovereignty. Mark well!  
As Heaven and Earth are fairer, fairer far  
Than Chaos and blank Darkness, though once chiefs:  
And as we show beyond that Heaven and Earth  
In form and shape compact and beautiful,  
In will, in action free, companionship,  
And thousand other signs of purer life;  
So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,  
A power more strong in beauty, born of us  
And fated to excel us, as we pass  
In glory that old Darkness; nor are we  
Thereby more conquer'd than by us the rule  
Of shapeless Chaos. Say, doth the dull soil  
Quarrel with the proud forests it hath fed,  
And feedeth still, more comely than itself?  
Can it deny the chiefdom of green groves?  
Or shall the tree be envious of the dove  
Because it cooeth, and hath snowy wings  
To wander wherewithal and find its joys?  
We are such forest trees, and our fair boughs  
Have bred forth, not pale solitary doves,  
But eagles golden-feather'd, who do tower  
Above us in beauty, and must reign  
In right thereof; for 'tis the eternal law  
That first in beauty should be first in might:"

Because the "eternal law" Oceanus thus proclaims is a truth, it is beautiful, and therein lies the solace for the pain it must bring to those who fall before it.

Mr. Thorpe feels that, in conception if not in execution, the epic's theme is, too
the progress of the human intellect, the evolution of man's mind from trust in brute force and the imperfect knowledge of mere reason to the god-like wisdom of intuitive understanding...Hyperion and the rest went down just as incomplete and imperfect knowledge, largely dependent on reason, must ever give way to complete and perfect knowledge with its origin largely in direct imaginative perception. Hyperion fell before a power 'more strong in Beauty,' more strong, that is, in ability to understand and grasp and use the secrets of the universe, more strong in soul knowledge, as it were...it is intuitive knowledge, gained neither by book, nor precept, nor consecutive reasoning, that...linked with his already sweet gift of song, that is to give Apollo the power, the strength, and the perfection to enable him to dispossess the comparatively crass Hyperion...the moment of deification through knowledge is the moment of the birth of Beauty in his soul...not an easy birth, but...accomplished in a travail of agony...Keats wanted to show that only those could attain the heights of insight who had known suffering and misery.101

The death of Tom Keats interrupted his brother's work on this poem. Keats wrote his brother and sister-in-law in America on December 18th that he had gone "on a little with it last night--but it will take some time to get into the vein again."102 Further along in the same letter he spoke of the

101op. cit., pp. 138-43.
poem as having been "scarce began," and in a later journal letter to America, in a February entry, he mentioned that he had "not gone on with Hyperion--for to tell the truth I have not been in great cue for writing lately--I must wait for the spring to rouse me up a little." 103

Not in cue for writing on such a subject he must have meant. In his new found happiness with Fanny Brawne he felt out of harmony with the somber tone of the projected epic. And when a year after he had begun it, he attempted to reconstruct the poem, he could not recapture the initial inspiration, the "naked and grecian Manner" of the original poem. To Reynolds in September, 1819 he wrote:

I have given up Hyperion--there were too many Miltonic inversions in it--Miltonic verse can not be written but in artful or rather artist's humour. I wish to give myself up to other sensations. English ought to be kept up. It may be interesting to you to pick out some lines from Hyperion and put a mark x to the false beauty proceeding from art, and one // to the true voice of feeling. Upon my soul 'twas imagination I cannot make the distinction--Every now & then there is a Miltonic intonation--but I cannot make the division properly.104

Paul Elmer More has advanced the theory that "Hyperion" was never finished because Keats intended it as a paean of new beauty and it became instead a dirge for the passing of the

103 Ibid., p. 300.
104 Ibid., p. 385.
"The Fall of Hyperion" differs from "Hyperion" chiefly in the preface Keats added to explain a theory of poetry he had worked out. As it was reconstructed, the epic was to be cast in the form of a dream—a mortal's dream of an experience among the immortals—which only a poet might find words for recounting.

"Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave a paradise for a sect; the savage too from forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep Guessthat the shadows of melodious utterance. But out bare of laurel they live, dream, and die; For For Poesy alone can tell her dreams, With the fine spell of words alone can save Imagination from the sable chain And dumb enchantment. Who alive can say, 'Thou art no Poet—may'st not tell thy dreams?' Since every man whose soul is not a clod Hath visions, and would speak, if he had loved, and been well nurtured in his mother tongue. Whether the dream now purpos'd to rehearse Be poet's or fanatic's will be known When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave."

Here, in poetry, is an echo of a remark made to Reynolds almost two years earlier—"Many a man can travel to the very Heavens, and yet want confidence to put down his self-seeing. Here is the poetic expression of his maxim that poetry "should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance."
At the shrine of a fallen deity, where in his dreams he finds himself, the mortal poet is told that

"None can usurp this height...
But those to whom the miseries of the world Are misery, and will not let them rest."

Not those who, feeling "the giant agony of the world," are content merely to "labour for mortal good," come to this temple, no for

"They are no dreamers weak,
They seek no wonder but the human face;
No music but a happy-noted voice--
They come not here, they have no thought to come--"

Only he comes here, the goddess Moneta informs him, who is of the dreamer tribe, to whom neither joy nor pain is distinct, but who

"...venoms all his days,
Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve."

Not a true poet, "a sage; a humanist, physician to all men," is such a one--and he, Keats, is of that dreaming tribe.

"'Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?
The poet and the dreamer are distinct,
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.
The one pours out a balm upon the world,
The other vexes it.'"

Keats, then, identifies himself with the dreamer who, having known the profoundest depths of human misery, yet lacks the capacity to heal humanity's pain, who can only suffer, venom-ing "all his days, bearing more woe than all his sins deserve." But because, admitted into the temple where only they can come who are conscious of the weight of the world's misery, he there had the strength to overcome death, the power "to die
and live again before thy fated hour," he is saved from being a mere dreamer who, lacking that power, had rotted "on the pavement where thou rottedst half." Mr. Murry has contended, and he relies on Woodhouse for his authority,\(^{108}\) that Keats wished to delete this passage in which Moneta distinguishes between the poet and the dreamer, placing him among the dreamer tribe who can only vex the world. He bases his contention on the premise that Keats "did not admit that he was a mere dreamer; he knew—had he not spent those last bitter months, and all his poetic life, in learning it?—the difference between a poet and a mere dreamer."\(^{109}\) He holds that Keats had learned to reject mere dreams and having become the poet from whom the dreamer is distinct, he could not allow the passage to stand which would confuse him with the mere dreamer.

However Keats intended to expand this theme throughout the narrative of the fall of Hyperion and the triumph of Apollo, as the unfinished poem stands it is a lesser thing than the splendid fragment it was meant to supplant, and it is not hard to understand Keats's sense of frustration with regard to it. The spirit of the first poem, its rude majesty, had eluded him and the forced character of the later poem—though for us it is the obscurity of imperfect expression in what is a profound document of a great soul's striving to

\(^{108}\) The lines in question, "Woodhouse tells us, 'Keats seems to have intended to erase.'" Murry, *Studies in Keats*, p. 98.

\(^{109}\) Ibid., pp. 101-2.
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108 The lines in question, "Woodhouse tells us, 'Keats seems to have intended to erase.'" Murry, Studies in Keats, p. 98.

understand itself—must have been to him as the incense of his priests was to the fallen Hyperion—

"Instead of sweets, his ample palate takes
Savour of poisonous brass and metals sick."

Aside from these two poems, "Isabella" and "Hyperion," and the short poems, "Lines on the Mermaid Tavern," "Robinhood," "Fancy," and the ode "Bards of Passion and of Mirth," which belong to 1818—the first two to February of that year and the last two to November—all the other poems of the 1820 volume were written during the first nine months of 1819 when Keats was living some of the happiest days of his life and writing in his most brilliant and finished vein.

Within a month of his engagement he had written
"The Eve of St. Agnes," almost a wedding hymn and one of the loveliest things of its kind in our language. Filled with bright, luminous beauty and exquisite tenderness, it is Keats's reverent treatment of a theme given new and wonderful meaning by personal experience—the sacredness of the love between man and woman. It is his most perfect interpretation and superb glorification of that tenet of his creed which held that love is born of beauty and beauty is the consummate expression of love.

Two poems not included in the 1820 volume but which belong to this 1819 group are "The Eve of St. Mark," written in February, and "La Belle Dame sans Merci," written in April. The first is one of the tantalising fragments of our literature, as richly suggestive in its own fashion as "Kublai Khan."
It is the epitome of calm, lucid beauty, touched with medieval mystery reminiscent of Chaucer or even of Chatterton. Keats himself best described the effect it achieves in the letter to George and Georgiana in which he quoted it:

The great beauty of Poetry is, that it makes every thing every place interesting—the palatine venice and the abbotine Winchester are equally interesting. Some time since I began a Poem call'd 'The Eve of St. Mark quite in the spirit of Town quietude. I think it will give you the Sensation of walking about an old county Town in a coolish evening.\(^{110}\)

There is a quaint charm about this poem, an atmosphere of what Mr. Brooke has called "an isolated and solitary beauty."\(^{111}\)

The description of the medieval city, of Bertha's room and its furniture and books, of the minster seen from her window, are as warm with the firelight and the scent of ancient rooms, as the city streets, and arched porches, and the pious folk travelling to the minster service, are chill in the April evening. And Bertha, within her panelled chamber, in which we breathe the dim air of a quiet medieval home, is a still, dreamy, shadow-haunted burgher-maiden, worthy of her room, of her missal, and of the minster square.\(^{112}\)

\(^{110}\)Letters, p. 414.

\(^{111}\)Stopford A. Brooke, Studies in Poetry, p. 248.

\(^{112}\)Ibid.
er mood is "La Belle Dame sans Merci," a poem of weird, bewitching beauty, closely related to Coleridge's "Christobel" and prophetic of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market." It is unique among Keats's poems for it represents his only excursion into a field so popular with romantic writers—the supernatural. Though, like most of his generation he read Mrs. Radcliffe and probably "Monk" Lewis, there is no taint in his poetry of the horror literature of the German school of which these writers are representative. With "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "The Eve of St. Mark" "La Belle Dame sans Merci" is Keats's representation of the color, the lore, and the mysticism of the Middle Ages.

A return to classicism is the "Ode to Psyche," also written in April. Psyche, goddess of the soul and beloved of Cupid, belonged to a later age than that of the ancient gods of Olympus, he explained to George and Georgiana.

The following Poem—the last I have written is the first and the only one with which I have taken even moderate pains. I have for the most part dash'd off my lines in a hurry. This I have done leisurely—I think it reads the more richly for it and will I hope encourage me to write other thing/s in even a more peace/able and healthy spirit. You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the Augustan age, and consequently the Goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour --and perhaps never thought of in the old religion—I am more
The poem, dedicated though it is to a goddess of love, has a detached dispassionate quality, and yet it is a lovely thing. There is in it the rich content of love fulfilled and beautiful indeed are the lines

"O latest born and loveliest vision far
Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!
Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star,
Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;
Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,
Nor altar heap'd with flowers;
Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
Upon the midnight hours;
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
From chain-swung censer teeming;
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming."

April was the most fruitful month of that year for it was then Keats also composed the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and the "Ode on Melancholy." The first of these poems was written in a contemplative mood and is the ultimate expression of that tenet of his creed which identified beauty with truth. It was a tribute to the immortality of art which can capture and hold inviolate against time's ravages, and for the consolation of unborn generations, the artist's fleeting moment of divine insight into an eternal truth and its oneness with eternal beauty--

"Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

it is of the everlasting reality that lies behind the mere surface and seeming of earthly things; whoever has imaginative power sufficient to grasp it, has laid hold of permanent, indestructible truth..."115

Mr. Murry interpreted it to mean that without beauty there could be not truth—that is without beauty which awakened love for it in the human heart a truth remained only a fact, devoid of meaning.

But it does seem unnecessary to go beyond Keats's own simple statement. For him beauty is truth; there is a real identity of the two.

The relation between Beauty and Truth...is that between Beauty and Truth there is, there can be, no relation that stops short of that very identification that Keats so boldly propounds...Beauty...is always the clothing of a Truth that could never have been uttered otherwise, that could never have been uttered at all but through the Beauty that clothes it...The old platonic definition: 'the Beautiful is the splendour of the True' is of abiding, of timeless pertinence...these essences that we feel in concrete shapes of beauty are the truths that lie inside them. Beauty is the sphere wherein, in the exact philosophical acceptation of the two words, essences come to existence..."116

In the "Ode to Melancholy" Keats gave voice to an


"116Du Bos, op. cit., pp. 88-91."
idea he had expressed earlier in a letter to George and Georgiana. On March 19th, referring to the expected death of Haslam's father, he had said:

This is the world--thus we cannot expect to give way 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 events--while we are laughing it sprouts is /for it/ grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck. 117

Even so, in the very heart of beauty--and here he means not the timeless beauty of the Grecian urn but physical beauty--there was the seed of its own destruction, in the very moment of perfect happiness the shadow of its transiency.

"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, Though 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."

It was in May, with the writing of the "Ode to a Nightingale," that Keats attained the climax of this richest creative period of his life. In the sheer lyricism of that poem Swinburne called "one of the final masterpieces of human work in all time," 118 his intense love of beauty, his acute

118Algernon Charles Swinburne, Miscellanies, p. 211.
awareness of the agony and heartbreak of life, and his longing for happiness fused and crystallized. The song of an English nightingale, the magic of its melody on a spring morning filling his quiet garden with moonlight and faeried romance, became for him the symbol of immortal, indestructible beauty over which time had now power. The piercing sweetness of its throbbing plaint thrilled him with pain, awakening memories of a beloved brother's loss and intensifying the loneliness of his separation from dear ones. Yet in the rapturous ecstasy of its music he found release for the wild new happiness, the unfulfilled longings of the past months. And out of its immortal harmony he wove an ode of haunting beauty; as long as there are people to read the language, the wonderful seventh stanza of this Ode--the very heart of its text--will remain one of the finest passages in the writing of mankind. If only by reason of that picture of Ruth standing "amid the alien corn," the passage would be immortal. But there are, too, the incomparable closing lines of which, along with three lines from "Kubla Khan," Kipling has said: "Remember that in all the millions permitted there are no more than five--five little lines--of which one can say 'these are the pure Magic. These are the clear Vision. The rest is only poetry.'"

From July to September, off and on, Keats was working on "Lamia," the poem given first place in the 1820 volume. On July 11th he wrote Reynolds from the Isle of Wight where he

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was vacationing with Rice that he had finished the first part of "Lamia" in an interval between the first and second acts of "Otho the Great." A letter to Bailey, dated August 14, refers to the poem as "half finished," and a letter to Taylor of the 5th of September speaks of it as finished.

Keats was pleased with this composition. His criticism of "Isabella," did not extend to "Lamia" he told Richard Woodhouse. And to George and Georgiana he wrote:

I have been reading over a part of a short poem I have composed lately call'd 'Lamia'--and I am certain there is that sort of fire in it which must take hold of people in some way--give them either pleasant or unpleasant sensation. What they want is sensation of some sort.

For its theme he chose an incident recorded in Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy from Philostratus's life of Apollonius. Far afield from his creed of the oneness of beauty and truth, Keats made the snake woman a symbol of beauty that must dissolve at its contact with truth. Lamia has not the virgin innocence of Isabella or Madeline. She is a woman of seductive charm whose power over Lycius is dependent on wile. Hers is a beauty grounded only in passion, an illusion sane

120 Letters, p. 358.
121 Ibid., p. 368.
122 Ibid., p. 381.
123 Ibid., p. 391.
124 Ibid., p. 402.
reason must banish. At the first indication her bridegroom's thoughts are straying from her charms, she seeks to distract him,

"knowing well
That but a moment's thought is passion's passing bell."

And in a poetic aside Keats wrote those words that have become famous as his condemnation of philosophy, of scientific truth—

"Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade."

Yet considering that Lamia's was a false beauty, that she herself was a lie, it might be better said that the poem is a vindication of Keats's belief in the interdependence of truth and beauty. "What the imagination seizes as beauty must be true," Keats had said and now, in effect, he was saying that what the intellect rejected as false had only an illusory beauty and was without the reality of existence; "a thing of beauty is a joy for ever," he had proclaimed, "its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness," but the thing that is Lamia melts "into a shade."

In the cathedral town of Winchester Keats passed the late summer and early autumn of 1819 and there he wrote his last great poem—"To Autumn." In a letter of September 21
described the little town to Reynolds and then commented on the beauty of the season:

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--This struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it.125

The poem he composed has none of the traditional sadness of autumn about it, only its golden beauty, its warm rich color, its peace and serenity born of nature's fulfillment in harvest time. Somehow the poem is symbolic of Keats's own maturity and is a fitting consummation to his year of greatest poetic achievement; in the final stanza there is a quiet happiness that bespeaks the contentment of work well done--

"Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they? Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,-- 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."

John Keats had reaped the precious fruit of his experience, of the months of study and of the years of intense

125 Ibid., p. 384.
and unflagging devotion to his art. He would write little more, nothing more of real consequence, but with these poems of the magic year 1819 he had already earned, if he had not yet won, the high place he was to hold after his death "among the English poets." Many years would pass before his genius would have a wider recognition than a small circle of personal friends and an occasional admiring reader. But the volume of poetry Taylor and Hessey published in July, 1820, with an almost diffident note of apology for the inclusion of an unfinished poem, would prove to be another of humanity's priceless heritages of beauty, within its covers some of the final masterpieces of English literature. At twenty-four its author had fulfilled his destiny—to give tangible form and substance to the principle he loved and believed in beyond all else—the "principle of beauty in all things." In his illness, five months before the book was released, he had written Fanny Brawne—

Now I have had opportunities of passing nights anxious and awake I have found other thoughts intrude upon me. '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 lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remem-ber'd.' \^{126}

The immortality of the 1820 volume is posterity's

\[^{126}\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 468.\]
refutation of this Keats's own estimate of his achievement. Little time was vouchsafed him but in that little time, such was the beauty he created that truly has he made himself remembered.
A just and accurate analysis of any artist's conception of his art cannot follow from the divorce of the man's work from his life nor of the man from his age. This is as much true of him whose creations transcend his time and setting as of him whose art was bounded by and representative of only a particular period and locality. And so any real understanding of the scope and development of John Keats's conception of poetry, and of its place in the critical philosophy of English letters must stem from a knowledge of his era and of his personal background.

That his age had its part in making him what he was cannot be discounted. His genius undoubtedly could have flowered in another period and in another clime for there elements in it of the universal and the eternal. But it is hard to believe that, as it did flower, it was not molded by the temper of late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England.

Thirty years earlier, or later, he would not have come in the first flush of the discovery of the old English poets—espec-
ially those of our Renaissance, to whose spirit and vocabulary he owed so much...
He is also of the time in his growing unrest, and in his reaching out after the infinite, and in that mixture of pain with his enjoyment...and in his needless noble touches of fear and scruple lest he should become inhumanly wrapped up in his art. He could hardly have lived at any other epoch and written as he did. 127

Keats himself recognized the essential link between a man and his age, and what he wrote of Milton, when comparing his genius with Wordsworth's, is true of himself.

Here I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton—though I think it has depended more upon the general and gregarious advance of intellect, than individual greatness of Mind—From the Paradise Lost and the other Works of Milton, I hope it is not too presuming, even between ourselves to say, that his Philosophy, human and divine, may be tolerably understood by one not much advanced in years, In his time Englishmen were just emancipated from a great superstition—and Men had got hold of certain points and resting places in reasoning which were too newly born to be doubted, and too much opposed by the Mass of Europe not to be thought ethereal and authentically divine—who could gainsay his ideas on virtue, vice and Chastity in Comus, just at the time of the dismissal of Cod-

pieces and a hundred other
disgraces? Who would not
rest satisfied with his hint-
ings at good and evil in the
Paradise Lost, when just free
from the inquisition and burn-
ing in Smithfield? The Reformation produced such immediate
and great benefits, that Prot-
estantism was considered under
the immediate eye of heaven,
and its own remaining Dogmas
and superstitions, then, as it
were, regenerated, constituted
those resting places and seem-
ing sure points of Reasoning--
from that I have mentioned,
Milton, whatever he may have
thought in the sequel, appears
to have been content with these
by his writings--He did not
think into the human heart, as
Wordsworth has done--Yet Milton
as a Philosopher, had sure as
great powers as Wordsworth--
What is then to be inferr'd? O
many things--It proves there is
really a grand march of Intellect--
It proves that a mighty providence
subdues the mightiest Minds to
the service of the time being,
whether it be in human Knowledge
or Religion--128

Mr. Thorpe, quoting Taine to the effect that only a
genius of a type harmonious with the temper of his time can
rise above mediocrity, that the men of great genius have al-
ways been reflectors of the spirit of their respective ages,
compares his utterance with the expression of Keats's just
given and makes this distinction:

Taine I believe is thinking
for the most part of the mere
surface manifestations of life

128Letters, pp. 144-5.
in poetry, such as an atmosphere of gloom or joyousness, of pessimism or optimism, disbelief or faith, and so forth, and goes no further except as these elements may be considered as indicative of the deepest life processes. The idea of environmental influence as suggested by Keats, however, is slightly different. For him the fundamental in poetic greatness is determined not so much by the spirit of the age, as by intellectual and imaginative insight—the ability to understand the permanent facts of human life, rather than to grasp temporary moral, theological, or political problems. Yet Keats would hold, I should say, that though the greatest poets should be prophets of a higher ideal order, they can never be much more than the interpreters of the highest life and thought of their day; at least they are bound and restricted according to the level of the common intellect and the pressing needs of their own time. 129

Keats, product of his time, entered too into the life of his time. Not in his poetry, it is true—for he believed art's function was to interpret the universalities of human existence rather than the particular ideas of an age—but in his letters there are evidences of his thought on contemporary issues. Writing to George and Georgiana Keats in October of 1818, he observed that present politics were "only sleepy because they will soon be too wide awake..."130

130Letters, p. 234.
In a later letter to America he reviewed for his sister and brother the political trend of the day, which was so largely influenced by the good and bad effects of the French Revolution.

It put a stop to the rapid progress of free sentiments in England; and gave our Court hopes of turning back to the despotism of the 16th century. They have made a handle of this event in every way to undermine our freedom. They spread a horrid superstition against all innovation and improvement. The present struggle in England of the people is to destroy this superstition. What has rous'd them to do it is their distresses--Perhaps on this account the present distresses of this nation are a fortunate thing--tho so horrid in their experience. 131

And in a letter to Dilke of September 22, 1819, commenting on articles in the Examiner, he wrote: "Notwithstanding my aristocratic temper I cannot help being very much pleas'd with the present public proceedings. I hope sincerely I shall be able to put a mite of help to the Liberal side of the Question before I die." 132

Finally, there is Keats's violent reaction to the tyrannical despotism of Naples where sentinels invaded even the opera house. Severn quoted him as saying, in explanation

131 Ibid., p. 407.

132 Ibid., p. 394.
the historically significant era in which he lived out his brief life and if he failed to make them a part of his poetry, they were yet not without effect upon him, if only indirectly in their effect upon the literature which engendered his poetry.

Literature, one must remember, reflects history and suits its style to the tempo of the period it reflects. The ages when men are discovering new horizons, geographical or intellectual, are the great poetic ages, as witness the Age of Elizabeth. In an age whose intellectual vistas were less panoramic than those of the Romantic Age the genius of Keats might have found an outlet in an entirely different literary form, or at least in poetry of a more restricted, more formal style than that the romanticism of nineteenth century England made current. For one cannot forget that Keats, for all his individuality, was one with the romantics, one with them in their repudiation of the set and formal rules of the classical tradition, one with them in their emphasis on natural and rural beauty, and, above all, one with them in their belief in the supremacy of the intuitive powers of the imagination over intellect and judgment.

The part heredity plays in the making of a genius is still a moot question but there is little doubt that a knowledge of his ancestry and family contribute toward an understanding of the innate bent of mind of the man of genius. In Keats's case, his sensuosity, his sensitivity to beauty, and
the strain of painful sensibility that brought him into such intimate contact with pain, grew out of his nature, a heritage bequeathed him by his mother; and the strength of character and intellectual ambition which molded these ingredients of the artist into a creative force capable of self-expression were his paternal heritage.

Nor can one overlook the influence of education and environment and all the outward circumstances of his life. In his brief life Keats experienced a great deal of personal sorrow but his was a life, too, filled to overflowing with love and understanding from his family, his friends and even his tutors. He knew no obstacle to the realization of a poetic career and while he had his financial worries, poverty, real poverty, never touched him. In short, he lived a life that for all the agony of its brief span afforded his genius unfettered scope for its development.

That development was steady and sure and consistent from the moment his creative genius was awakened. He did not always have a fixed and definite conception of what poetry should be--only gradually did his ideas take shape--but from first to last the core of his belief was an acknowledgment of the supremacy of the beautiful and around that creed he built his theory of poetry. And contrary to the opinion Mr. Thorpe has made the theme of his work on Keats's poetic philosophy, the growth of the poet's aesthetic ideas evidenced a steady progression, rather than "a continual intellectual struggle..."
as to the true nature and end of poetry, "137 and a never-ending attempt to reconcile the pull of the sensuous-loving side of his nature toward a dream world with the pull of his more thoughtful self toward the actual world of men and women and pain and sorrow. No more is it true, either, as Mr. Garrod holds, that in his vacillation between these two worlds, represented to himself as a "contrast...sometimes as that between mere poetry and a poetry of social interests, sometimes as an antagonism of the senses with the mind, of the emotional life with the life of philosophical reflection,"138 that the weakness of his poetry lies; and it does Keats a grave injustice to believe, as Mr. Garrod does, that "only as he sustains the earnest sensuosity to which nature dedicated him does his genius thrive."139

In the beginning his imagination did draw entirely upon his sensory impressions for its crude materials and he was content to make his poetry but a mirror for "the fair paradise of Nature's light." Enthusiastically, unreservedly, out of sheer delight, he had fallen in love with the beauty of The Faerie Queene, and from that instant beauty had become his criterion of value, a criterion acceptable both to his mind and to his heart. Beauty existed for him then in nature and in books, in the loveliness of the English country-

139 Ibid., p. 33.
side, in the old tales of beautiful Greece, in an idealized medieval chivalry. And with beauty he linked love, love then a misty unreality, compounded largely of daydreams and visions of old romance, with a touch of Tom Moore sentimentality. This was the period of his life when he dwelt within the second Chamber of the allegorical Mansion of life and was still intoxicated with its light and atmosphere, its pleasant wonders.

Yet even then he was aware that poetry has a nobler end, the poet a higher mission, and even before the Chamber of Maiden- Thought had grown dark he had promised himself to the furtherance of that end, to the fulfillment of that mission. Beyond the world of nature was the world of men and eventually, when experience had prepared him for it, he meant the burden of his song to be "the agonies, the strife of human hearts."

A period of searching self-analysis and profound contemplation of the high seriousness of the poetic calling, of the demands it would make upon him and of the rich rewards it might bring him, followed the publication of his initial volume of verse and preceded the writing of the long poem that was to be his first deliberate bid for fame. And then in the months devoted to the composition of that poem, when his vision into the heart and nature of Man was being sharpened, the vague notion of beauty he had cherished throughout his boyhood became part of a grander conception of beauty, as an integral
part of the scheme of creation and in that scheme closely re-
related to love. Love, which then had evolved into something
concrete, into an awareness of physical passion, was the ac-
knowledgment of beauty and begotten of it.

When still later he sought beyond the things of the
senses for that which would satisfy the intellect and knowl-
dge and experience of the world became dearer to him, he
strove to understand and express the relationship of beauty
to truth. He came to feel that the beauty his senses per-
ceived and his heart acknowledged was one with the truth which
is the foundation of the universe and that that truth might
be more surely arrived at through the intuitive processes of
the imagination capable of grasping the meaning of beauty,
than through the reasoning processes of the intellect capable
of accepting only factual knowledge. No longer was it merely
to the beauty of nature that Keats dedicated his poetry, that
beauty concrete and perceivable only to the senses, but to the
idea of beauty which lay behind all beautiful things.

He clung to 'things' in order
that beauty as he conceived it
should not become too impalpable;
but it is the 'principle' that
is more and more the object of
devotion as he develops toward
fullness of power...It is this
that saves Keats, on the one
hand, from being a worshiper
of impalpable abstractions,
and, on the other, from being
a mere reveler in sensuous
beauty.140

140 Solomon F. Gingerich, "The Conception of Beauty in the Works
part of the scheme of creation and in that scheme closely related to love. Love, which then had evolved into something concrete, into an awareness of physical passion, was the acknowledgment of beauty and begotten of it.

When still later he sought beyond the things of the senses for that which would satisfy the intellect and knowledge and experience of the world became dearer to him, he strove to understand and express the relationship of beauty to truth. He came to feel that the beauty his senses perceived and his heart acknowledged was one with the truth which is the foundation of the universe and that that truth might be more surely arrived at through the intuitive processes of the imagination capable of grasping the meaning of beauty, than through the reasoning processes of the intellect capable of accepting only factual knowledge. No longer was it merely to the beauty of nature that Keats dedicated his poetry, that beauty concrete and perceivable only to the senses, but to the idea of beauty which lay behind all beautiful things.

He clung to 'things' in order that beauty as he conceived it should not become too impalpable; but it is the 'principle' that is more and more the object of devotion as he develops toward fullness of power...It is this that saves Keats, on the one hand, from being a worshiper of impalpable abstractions, and, on the other, from being a mere reveler in sensuous beauty.140

140 Solomon F. Gingerich, "The Conception of Beauty in the Works
And his imagination, until then but a sensitive recording instrument which translated the tangible beauty of the world around him into language, became creative; it drew upon sensory perceptions, but too upon knowledge, the knowledge of books and of men, and upon experience, experience often won through pain, and fused all these elements into a new pattern of beauty in the expression of which it raised the particular to the level of the general and came as nigh to eternal truth as it is given to man, with his imperfect understanding, to come on his own power, unaided by divine teaching.

Too, as he grew older and came to know pain--separation from loved ones, harsh criticism of his work and ill health--he discovered the affinity between sorrow and beauty, the pain inherent in all beauty and the beauty which might heal all pain. And finally, when in the person of one woman love became a heart-filling reality for him, the three things for which he had been groping, love, beauty, and truth, merged into a spiritual entity, the nucleus of his final poetic creed which held that beauty was part of the whole fabric of existence and the motivating principle of all his poetry.

And it was then that he wrote the poetry of time-less and enduring beauty that has placed him among the immortals, then when the rich sensuosity of his nature, his

unthinking, almost pagan, delight in the beauty of the tangible world of Nature, had been schooled by contact with the harsher world of suffering humanity, when his imaginative grasp had been strengthened by the knowledge a developing intellect craved, and when he had tasted the bitterness of defeat, felt the deep hurt of bereavement, known the mingled ecstasy and torment of love, and, in short, come to grips with those realities of man's existence which must make his art a truer interpretation of life. The richest creative period of Keats's life, which Mr. Garrod speaks of as "those eight golden months in which alone Keats' genius flourished in the fullness of pure sensuous experience, escaped from that craving for thought which, besetting him at so many other times spoiled his singing," mark not, as he would intimate, a relapse into a mood of sensuous luxuriance, a "return to the inspiration of the senses" which was for him the true poetic mood, but are rather the fulfillment of all that had gone before. They are the consummation of the months of thinking and studying, and suffering too, which preceded them and without which they could not have been. They represent not a surrender to his sensuous self but the almost perfect integration of his sensitive perceptive faculty with his emotionally creative and thinking faculties, of mind, heart, and senses.

142 _Ibid._, p. 53.
And when those eight golden months had run their course and Keats, all his great poetry written which time had permitted him to write, entered on the dark and painful last year of his life, still he clung to his faith in the principle of beauty and as it had sustained him in life so it consoled him in death. While convalescing at Wentworth Place in the first days of his illness, he wrote James Rice:

How astonishingly does the chance of leaving the world impress a sense of its natural beauties on us. Like poor Falstaff, though I do not babble, I think of green fields. I muse with the greatest affection on every flower I have known from my infancy—their shapes and colours are as new to me as if I had just created them with a superhuman fancy. It is because they are connected with the most thoughtless and happiest moments of our lives. I have seen foreign flowers in hothouses of the most beautiful nature, but I do not care a straw for them. The simple flowers of our spring are what I want to see again. 143

Much later in Rome, when England and all it held dear were irrevocably lost to him, he could still speak to Severn of the Religion of the Beautiful, calling it the Religion of Joy. 144 And even dying he found a quiet joy, a healing comfort in the thought of the beauty of his last resting place where violets

143 Letters, p. 465.
144 Frederick E. Pierce, Currents and Eddies in the English Romantic Generation, p. 178.
would overspread his grave, assuring his devoted friend "that he seemed already to feel the flowers growing over him."145

Thus, born in an age of poetry, in a period of literary as well as political and social emancipation, of a family in which the strains of sensitive imagination and intellectual strength mingled, reared in an atmosphere of love and sympathy, educated under a liberal system which permitted free and unrestricted development of his natural talents, thrown in with a group of congenial and art-loving friends, John Keats came into the maturity of his poetic powers and dying, when not yet twenty-six, left behind him the collection of imperishable poetry that long since unquestionably placed him among the great of England's poets. But--and this is a fact not always conceded--his genius was productive, too, of a body of critical dicta that not only explains his conception of his art and of his own poetry, refuting false notions as to its scope and intention, but that holds an important place in the philosophy of aesthetics and in the critical literature of our language. A consummate artist and finished craftsman, he thought deeply and earnestly about his art, and in his own writing strove to attain the ideal he perceived, at first dimly but with ever increasing clarity, behind all great poetry. Though he left no formal treatise on the creative or poetic imagination, no defense or analysis of its laws, as did Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, the isolated passages scattered

145 Colvin, op. cit., p. 510.
throughout his letters which have to do with his opinions on
go where are in themselves and taken as a whole an informal
treatise that, as one critic has said, "should give him rank
with Horace, Dante, Wordsworth, Goethe, Schiller and the rest
of that brilliant galaxy of geniuses who not only had ideas
of what poetry ought to be, but had the power and skill to
compose it in forms of truth and enduring beauty."\textsuperscript{146}

The essence of his creed, the belief to which he
held always, was "that the most real thing, and the stuff of
which great poetry is made, are the creations of the imagine-
ation working upon the things of sense."\textsuperscript{147} For him the im-
agination was the supreme faculty of man's being and, in his
own case, the crowning faculty of a uniquely sensitive physi-
cal organism. In so believing he was adhering to the liter-
ary philosophy of romanticism, was the true disciple of Words-
worth and Coleridge who had "laid the foundation in England
of the modern conception of the imagination as the supreme
faculty of the human mind."\textsuperscript{148}

Beauty, Keats believed further, was the prime ob-
ject of the imagination which recognized in it the truth that
was the very hub of creation and that man never ceased striv-
ing to attain. In this, too, he was the child of his age

\textsuperscript{146}Thorpe, op. cit., p. 26.
\textsuperscript{147}Ridley, op. cit., p. 10.
\textsuperscript{148}Margaret Sherwood, Undercurrents of Influence in English
"which recognized and stated, in Wordsworth, conviction of emotion as a factor in finding truth."\textsuperscript{149} With all his heart Keats believed in beauty and found in the beauty he perceived about him not only the inspiration for his poetry but the ultimate answer to the mystery of existence. For, as Mathew Arnold has said of him, "'the Yearning passion for the Beautiful,' which was with Keats, as he himself truly says, the master-passion, is not a passion of the sensuous or sentimental man, is not a passion of the sensuous or sentimental poet. It is an intellectual and spiritual passion."\textsuperscript{150}

But while beauty for Shelley was the "shadow of some unseen Power,"\textsuperscript{151} and his conception of it "began in the abstract and ended in the abstract,"\textsuperscript{152} for Keats it was a quality or principle inhering in an object. Preeminently he was the poet of the concrete, the particular, the sensuous poet whose intellectual processes even, nearly all his critics are agreed, were richly imaged rather than abstract in their expression, the poet in whom thought was wedded to intuition, knowledge founded on personal experience, and who identified his art with his own intensely lived existence. And here is his point of departure from the creed of his contemporaries. For Wordsworth and for Coleridge, even as for Shelley, beauty

\textsuperscript{149}Ibid., p. 6.
\textsuperscript{150}Essays in Criticism, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{151}Gingerich, op. cit., p. 185.
\textsuperscript{152}Ibid., p. 176.
is essence, a spirit that pervades the poet's universe, illuminating truth and giving a meaning to human and divine love, and their imaginative conception of it remains ever abstract. But Keats,

...more than any other man of genius...is endowed with and combines the two great modes of imagination: the concrete imagination and the abstract imagination...To Keats, things of beauty always appear in 'shapes' so concrete that they simultaneously fill the five senses to the brim, and at the same time things of beauty are the seat of 'essences,' every one of which is contained in a concrete shape that both screens and reveals it. Hereby Keats, and perhaps he only, eschews the two mistakes that beset almost all the thinkers who have approached the theme of beauty: the sacrifice of the concrete to the abstract or the sacrifice of the abstract to the concrete.153

Unlike Shelley too, Keats found beauty in all that was real, learning not to shrink even from pain but to yield to life, "to receive, to lie open, to grow; yet also to strive, to seek, to endure."154 That was, in the final analysis, the meaning at the heart of all his poetry—a yielding to life, and we "only read Keats aright when we learn from his own lips that he wrote, not for art's sake only, but for the sake of

153Du Bos, op. cit., p. 90.

truth and for the sake of life."  

John Keats is a great poet and that which he uttered in his poetry is profound truth because, as Mr. Murry has written, it is the utterance of his own soul. Keats had no religious teaching to guide him in his search for the meaning of existence, no divine faith on which to base his attempted interpretation of life and, therefore, his poetry could never have the absolute validity of a Christian poet like Dante; but in his understanding of his own soul he achieved that truest and deepest human interpretation of life that Mr. Du Bos speaks of, and therein lies the validity of his critical dicta. From out of himself he spun the magic of his poetry, from out of his own deeply and often bitterly felt experience, out of the dearly-won knowledge of his heart as well as his mind, and out of the harmony of his spirit, transcending all adversity, which he discovered, as had his own Endymion in his Cave of Quietude, in his complete submission to life whence flowed an understanding of the identity of truth and beauty. From out of himself he spun his poetry and at its best it was the natural and beautiful expression of his integral being, coming as he himself said poetry should, "as naturally as the Leaves to a tree."

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155 Keats and Shakespeare, pp. 2-3.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Frances Ann Sugrue has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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James J. Young
Signature of Adviser