The Critical Theory of John Keats

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THE CRITICAL THEORY OF JOHN KEATS

by

Rita Claire Callan

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

June
1960
LIFE

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Growing interest in Keats's philosophy of art—Disagreement among critics—Method of this study—Character of Keats's letters.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. THE POET</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keats differs from the other Romantics—His absorption in poetry—The imagination—The relationship of truth and beauty—Conflicting interpretations—Negative capability—Poetic identity—The place of learning—The importance of experience—The role of the poet in society.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE POEM</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The general nature of Keats's critical remarks—His interest in details of his own poetry—Suitable form—Precise language—Imagery—Proper subject matter.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. POETRY</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elements essential to poetry: intensity, contrast, beauty—The opposition of poetry and philosophy—The importance of poetry—The opposition of the ideal and the real worlds.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. AUDIENCE</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keats's unconcern for his audience—The proper effects of poetry—The way in which these effects are made.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. CONCLUSION</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary—Conclusions that can be drawn from the evidence presented in this study.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

When John Keats died in 1821 only a relatively small circle appreciated and enjoyed his poetry. However, his poetic reputation grew rapidly and, in 1880, Matthew Arnold was led to write enthusiastically, "He is, he is with Shakespeare." As the admiration for Keats's poetry increased, it was only natural that a corresponding curiosity about other aspects of his work should develop. At first, however, this interest in Keats was restricted primarily to more or less interesting details of biography until about thirty-five years ago, when an unprecedented concern for his philosophy and mental development sprang up. What type of man, it was asked, could write such remarkable poetry before the age of twenty-six? Must he not have had an equally remarkable mind, and would not his thoughts on life and art be worth investigation? The extent of the investigation provoked by this curiosity can be gauged by the great number of books and articles on Keats's philosophy of art and

life that have been published within the last thirty-five years.²

These recent studies depend primarily on two sources: Keats's poetry and his letters. There is, in fact, little else to depend upon except a few brief reviews that appeared in contemporary periodicals and some marginalia from his copies of the work of Milton and Shakespeare. It is fortunate, therefore, for the reader seeking to identify Keats's poetic principles and his views on the nature of art that so many of his letters have been preserved; and even more fortunate that in these letters Keats so often philosophizes about his art. It might be expected in view of this common source of information—restricted, yet highly informative—that critics who base their studies on the letters should agree in identifying the basic principles of Keats's poetic theory; but such is not the case. It seems significant that although almost all the recent studies based on Keats's letters agree in identifying certain statements to be found in the letters as "key" statements for Keats's theory of poetry, they frequently disagree quite widely in their interpretations of these statements. Keats's remarks may

be ambiguous, and their ambiguity may be the main source of disagreement among the critics; but it is also possible—and this supposition has relevance for the present study—that much of the disagreement among critics results from their diverse aesthetic theories and lack of common ground for interpretation.

This study is concerned with the theories that Keats developed about the art of poetry. It does not propose to offer new interpretations of his critical principles, but, rather, to provide a clear and organized framework for analysis of his statements. The method used will be similar to that of M.H. Abrams in The Mirror and the Lamp and to the implied method of the so-called "Chicago school" of critics.

The terms which most frequently appear in, or are implied by, any discussion of poetic art are poet, poem, poetry, and audience (which includes effect); and the direction in which a specific work of criticism is oriented can often be determined by the relative frequency with which these terms, or their synonyms, occur.

The term poet refers to the author of a given work and, particularly, to the qualities of his mind. In criticisms


4 See R.S. Crane, ed., Critics and Criticism (Chicago, 1952).
which stress the importance of the poet and his function, it is these qualities, not the eventual work of art, that are examined. In such criticisms, poetry is usually considered as "the language of the imagination and the passions"; and the poet is considered a special kind of person: "A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds." Elder Olson remarks that extreme criticisms of this order "reduce the art-product almost to a by-product of the artistic character." Although this type of criticism was used long ago by Longinus in the first half of his essay On the Sublime, it has been the critics of the last century and a half, writing in the romantic tradition, who have been its most consistent champions.

The term poem refers to the work of art, and criticisms of the poem consider the subject, the structure, and the language of a work. Treatment of the poem often forms part of a more comprehensive criticism, as, for example, in Aristotle's Poetics and Dryden's An Essay of Dramatic Poesy.


The term poetry refers to art itself, and criticism primarily concerned with this aspect usually directs the discussion to the philosophy or theory of art in general. An example of this approach to criticism can be found in Coleridge's Biographia Literaria and in the various criticisms distinguishing science and poetry, such as I.A. Richards' Science and Poetry.

The term audience refers to the reader and is associated with the effect of poetry. Criticism concerned primarily with this aspect usually considers art as a means to an end, and the discussion often revolves around the particular end desired and the effectiveness of poetry, or the poem, or the poet, in achieving it. This is the approach of Sir Philip Sidney in his An Apology for Poetry and of the writings of many of the neo-classical critics who held that the purpose of poetry was to instruct through pleasing.

This fourfold orientation of criticism is by no means absolute, and no one of the four aspects (or categories) can be isolated from the other three. It is nonetheless possible to note in any piece of criticism a preference for, or emphasis on, one of the four terms, whether or not this preference is made explicit.

The purpose of this thesis, then, is to organize Keats's statements about the nature of poetry into four major divisions analogous to the four designations just defined, and to discuss
the relationship of each to his poetic principles. The resulting study, it is hoped, will present an orderly analysis of Keats's aesthetic theory.

The primary source for this study will be The Letters of John Keats, but Keats's poetry will be cited occasionally to amplify some point; and the writings of Keats's critics will be used for corroboration and, occasionally, to illustrate the extent to which their interpretations vary. Some of these critics treat much of the material coming within the scope of this study, but none of them has attempted an organization based on the four categories. Frequently, as in The Evolution of Keats' Poetry and On the Poetry of Keats, the information found in the letters is used mainly to support an interpretation of the poetry; or, as in Keats and Shakespeare and The Mind of John Keats, the letters are used to supply evidence for

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8 John Keats, The Letters of John Keats, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1958). These volumes will henceforth be known as Letters. Quotations in this study include the editor's emendations.


tracing Keats's mental development, and, consequently, their chronology is the overriding consideration. Although some account of chronology and development may be desirable in this paper, these will always be subordinated to the main purpose of this research, which is to identify the character of Keats's criticism by gauging the relative significance to him of the four categories of poet, poem, poetry, and audience.

There exists a remarkable record of Keats's personality and of his more serious thoughts upon life and art in the letters that he wrote to his friends and relatives between 1814 and 1821. Without any consideration that these letters would one day be collected and published, Keats felt free to discuss his ideas on a variety of subjects in an uninhibited manner. Anyone who reads these letters soon becomes aware that he is reading very personal documents and that the ideas expressed in them were dear to the writer. However, the advantage that these letters offer of seeing into the heart and mind of a great poet is partially offset by their very informality. Theories are begun but not developed, statements are made but not clarified; words are never defined and, apparently, one word can have several meanings; and there is a frequent lack of continuity, not only from letter to letter, but also within individual letters. Sometimes, too, Keats's impetuosity led him to declare himself on a subject and, in subsequent letters, to express the
opposite point of view almost as ardently. Indeed, he refers to himself as the "camelion [sic] Poet," and states: "I have not one Idea of the truth of any of my speculations." In an article concerning these contradictions, R.D. Havens says that "it is essential for a sound understanding of Keats to realize that he passed rapidly from one position to another almost its opposite and then back again to the first, and that he felt and expressed the opinions of the moment as if they were the inalterable convictions of a lifetime." Keats admits his own inconsistencies when he writes: "If I scribble long letters I must play my vagaries. . . . I must play my draughts as I please, and for my advantage and your erudition, crown a white with a black, or a black with a white, and move into black or white, far and near as I please—I must go from Hazlitt to Patmore, and make Wordsworth and Coleman play at leap-frog." Despite these occasional "vagaries" and the fragmentary character of much of the criticism, some strongly held convictions persist throughout the letters, and it is possible to catalogue and

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13 Letters, I, 387.
14 Ibid., 243.
16 Letters, I, 279.
analyse Keats's references to the categories of poet, poem, poetry, and audience, and to determine their relative importance in his criticism.
CHAPTER II

THE POET

In his letters, and in his poetry, Keats frequently considers the nature of the poet. He concerns himself with the qualities of mind and feeling befitting a great poet, with the best way to secure such qualities, and with identifying the function of the poet. This concern for the nature of the poet is not surprising, for, as Abrams points out: "Almost all the major critics of the English romantic generation phrased definitions or key statements showing a parallel alignment from work to poet. Poetry is the overflow, utterance, or projection of the thoughts and feelings of the poet; or else (in the chief variant formulation) poetry is defined in terms of the imaginative process which modifies and synthesizes the images, thoughts, and feelings of the poet."¹

Although Keats's criticism best fits Abrams's "variant formulation" (he frequently defined poetry "in terms of the imaginative process"), he did not subscribe whole-heartedly to

the contemporary romantic notion of the poet. In spite of the undeniable influence of the other romantic poets and critics (especially Wordsworth and Hazlitt) on him, Keats was able to stand apart from them and censure their faults and excesses dispassionately. In February of 1818, Keats refers to Wordsworth as an egotist, and states: "Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them till he makes false coinage and deceives himself"; and seven months later, he again mentions "the wordsworthian [sic] or egotistical sublime" as opposed to his own poetic character. Such egotistical poets are "all mock lyrista, large self-worshippers" and are among the second worst of men: "The worst of men are those whose self interests are their passion—the next those whose passions are their self-interest."

In spite of these rejections, Keats does not deny Wordsworth's poetic ability and writes that "he is a great Poet if not a Philosopher"; and Keats's disclaimers of the romantic

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2 Letters, I, 223.
3 Ibid., 387.
6 Ibid., I, 237.
egotism do not keep him from a typically romantic absorption in poetry: "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." He later refers to poetry as "those abstractions which are my only life," and a month after this, remarks: "The only thing that can ever affect me personally for more than one short passing day, is any doubt about my powers for poetry." In noting this fervor, E.C. Pettet makes the following comment: "To all of them [the romantic poets], except Byron, poetry was the new religion and all true poets its high dedicated priests." Keats was seriously concerned with the nature of this "true poet"; for, more than any other one subject, he considered the poetic character in his letters.

To a very large extent Keats's remarks on his art are concerned with what Abrams describes as "the imaginative process which modifies and synthesizes the images, thoughts, and feelings of the poet." In consequence, approximately half of this

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7 Letters, I, 133.
8 Ibid., 370.
9 Ibid., 404.
10 Pettet, On the Poetry of Keats, p. 293.
11 Abrams, p. 22.
Chapter will be devoted to Keats's views on the poetic imagination, and, particularly, to his overriding concern with the manner in which the imagination perceives truth. The remainder of the chapter will treat, in turn, Keats's theories on "negative capability," the identification of the poet with his poetic object, the place of learning in the formation of the poet, the value of experience to the poet, and the place of the poet in society.

The characteristic of the nature of the poet that Keats mentions most frequently is the imagination. This is not surprising, for, a belief in the importance of the imagination was, perhaps, the most common characteristic of the poets of the romantic age. They frequently theorized upon the operation of the imagination; and in the *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge explains its mode of operation: "It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify."12 Shelley, too, attributes a creative activity to the imagination and he defines it as "mind acting upon . . . thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each

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containing within itself the principle of its own integrity.¹³

Keats believed in the imagination as the prime agent of perception. In 1819, he enthusiastically quoted William Hazlitt's assertion that the imagination is superior to pure reason and the moral sense.¹⁴ In an early poem, Keats considered this imaginative power to be something akin to simple inspiration. On certain propitious occasions, the poet would be stimulated into a state of ecstasy and, while in this trance-like state, certain beauties would be revealed to him. In 1816 he wrote:

But there are times when those that love the bay,
Fly from all sorrowing far, far away;
A sudden glow comes on them, naught they see
In water, earth, or air, but poesy.

... when a Poet is in such a trance
In air he sees white coursers paw and prance.¹⁵

However, the imagination soon became, for Keats, more than a simple image-making faculty aroused by a sudden inspiration. It became a special insight of the artist: one which enabled him "to see beyond" his "bourne":¹⁶

¹⁴Letters, II, 74-75.
¹⁶"To J.H. Reynolds, Esq.," Poetical Works, p. 383.
To his sight
The husk of natural objects opens quite
To the core; and every secret essence there
Reveals the elements of good and fair;
Making him see, where Learning hath no light. 17

A similar revelation occurs to the poet in The Fall of Hyperion,
where he receives a visionary reward:

\[ \text{... whereon there grew} \]
\[ \text{A power within me of enormous ken} \]
\[ \text{To see as a god sees, and take the depth} \]
\[ \text{Of things as nimbly as the outward eye} \]
\[ \text{Can size and shape pervade.} \]

In Keats's view the poetic imagination is, at times, a source of joy to the poet. It enables him to see beauty in all things; in the "alertness of a Stoat or the anxiety of a Deer." 19

It also allies him with the imaginative world of great literature: "I feel more and more every day, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds—No sooner am I alone than shapes of epic greatness are stationed around me, and serve my Spirit the office (of) which is equivalent to a king's body guard—then 'Tragedy, with a scepter'd pall, comes sweeping by':" 20 (At other times, the imagination can show the poet the ugliness in nature:

17 "The Poet," Poetical Works, p. 419.
18 Poetical Works, p. 410.
19 Letters, II, 80.
20 Ibid., I, 403. Editor's emendation.
... but I saw
Too far into the sea, where every maw
The greater on the less feeds evermore.--
But I saw too distant into the core
Of an eternal fierce destruction, 21
And so from happiness I was far gone.

Keats once referred to the imagination as the rudder of poetry; 22 and, except for occasional periods of doubt, he believed that this rudder would guide the poet toward truth. Whether he seeks it or not, truth is revealed to the poet through the imaginative experience. Keats has pointed out at least one passage in his poetry which he considered to be a truth perceived by the imagination. In a letter to his publisher, Keats asks that several lines of Endymion be altered. 23 These are the lines which introduce a famous passage on the gradations of happiness. They appear in the letter as follows:

Wherein lies Happiness? In that which beck
Our ready Minds to fellowship divine;
A fellowship with essence, till we shine
Full alchymized and free of space. Behold
The clear Religion of heaven--fold &c-- 24

The passage in Endymion presents a hierarchy of pleasures: a "Pleasure Thermometer" Keats calls it; and he refers to this

22 Letters, I, 170.
23 Ibid., 218.
24 In Poetical Works, p. 74, the capitalization in the lines is modernized and the punctuation slightly altered.
passage as "a regular stepping of the Imagination towards a Truth." The "truth" is, apparently, the nature of the greatest happiness—"the chief intensity"—which is nothing more than love:

... but at the tip-top,
There hangs by unseen film, an orbed drop
Of light, and that is love...  

Keats wrote this letter about *Endymion* to his publisher in January, 1818, only seventeen months after he had described the imagination as a simple, ecstatic agent of revelation in the "Epistle to George Keats"; and his reference to the "stepping of the Imagination towards a Truth" indicates the rapid development of his concept of the imagination.

What is, perhaps, Keats's most significant statement about the imagination was made about two months earlier in a letter to Benjamin Bailey dated November 22, 1817. This letter includes a passage which begins: "O 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." In the passage that follows, Keats examines the relation of the imagination to truth and to beauty; and this passage, together with the final lines of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," has caused possibly more

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26 *Poetical Works*, p. 75.
speculation and disputation among critics than any other single remark of Keats's. This passage is very important, and, in spite of its length, must be quoted in its entirety.

O 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—In a Word, you may know my favorite Speculation by my first Book and the little song I sent in my last—which is a representation from the fancy of the probable mode of operating in these Matters—The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth. I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning—and yet it must be—Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections—However it may be, O for a Life of sensations rather than of Thoughts! It is 'a Vision in the form of Youth' a Shadow of reality to come—and this consideration has further convinced me for it has come as auxiliary to another favorite Speculation of mine, that we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated—And yet such a fate can only befall those who delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after Truth—Adam's dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that Imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as human Life and its spiritual repetition. But as I was saying—the simple imaginative Mind may have its rewards in the repetition of its own silent Working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness—to compare great things with small—have you never by being surprised with an old Melody—in a delicious place—by a delicious voice, felt over again your very speculations and surmises at the time it first operated on your soul—do you not remember forming to yourself the singer's face more beautiful than it was possible and yet with the elevation of the Moment you did not think so—even then you were mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high—
that the Prototype must be here after—that delicious face you will see.27

There are three distinct ideas interwoven throughout this passage: (1) the superiority of the imagination as a perceptive faculty—the "authenticity of the Imagination," (2) the imagination as a faculty which perceives truth through an apprehension of beauty: "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth," and (3) the imagination as a presage of a later life—a conviction that "we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated." The first idea—that of the superiority of the imagination over reason—is the most clearly presented and, therefore, the most easily understood. Here Keats affirms the notion that knowledge obtained through imagination is more reliable than that obtained through reason. He proclaims his indifference to reason—"O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts"; and he claims that the imaginative man, rather than the reasonable man, will be rewarded "here after": "And yet such a fate can only befall those who delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after Truth."

It is the interpretation of the second speculation—that the imagination is a faculty which perceives truth through an

27 Letters, I, 184-185.
apprehension of beauty—that has caused so much disagreement among critics. To illustrate the varying explanations of this passage, the interpretations of John Middleton Murry and Newell F. Ford might be noted here. In a discussion of Endymion, Murry considers the following excerpt from the letter quoted above: "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. In a Word, you may know my favorite speculation by my first Book [i.e., of Endymion]. . . " In his interpretation of Endymion, Murry places great weight upon the concepts "the Heart's affections" and "Love" found in the letter. He identifies Endymion's passion for the Indian Maid as the "Heart's affection" and his passion for the Moon-Goddess as a seizing of beauty by the imagination. Murry notes the metamorphosis of the

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28 One reason for this lack of agreement is that certain critics consider only a portion of the passage. See, for example, Werner W. Beyer, Keats and the Daemon King (New York, 1947), p. 124 and Amy Lowell, John Keats (Boston, 1925), I, 360. Miss Lowell, however, does quote some of the remainder of the passage, in another context, later in her book.

29 Murry, Keats, pp. 166-198.

Indian Maid into the Moon-Goddess and explains that "the sacred affections of the Heart, loyally obeyed, lead to the same ultimate truth which is prefigured to the imagination as Beauty." 31  Murry believes that the imagination is a passion—like Love—and that it creates beauty by discovering it: "What the passion of Imagination apprehends as Beauty must be real; because like all the other passions it conforms to the type of Love, and discovers (and so creates) qualities which were hidden." 32  At this point, Murry does not explain the exact relationship between the "passion of Imagination" and the passion of love; but he later states that "Imagination is the Love of the Mind. To say that what the Mind can love must be True is for some a meaningless statement, for others a secret 'caught from the very penetralium of mystery.'" 33  Murry also explains the final lines of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in the light of the importance of love. A mere fact, he says, becomes a truth only when it awakens love because it can only be fully understood by love: "Nothing could be true unless it could be loved; and nothing could be loved unless it could be seen as

31 Murry, Keats, p. 171.
32 Ibid., p. 186.
33 Ibid., pp. 197-198.
beautiful. Without Beauty, therefore, no Truth."\(^{34}\)

Another interpretation is given by Newell Ford, who seizes upon the latter part of the passage—"a Shadow of reality to come"—to explain the sentence, "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth."\(^{35}\) Ford declares that Keats's idea was not the usual one that the imagination would receive impressions and illuminations from a supersensuous realm, but, rather, that the imagination projects its own images into time and space and that these images will become immortal reality for the one who imagines. This, says Ford, explains the baffling phrase, "whether it existed before or not" in the second sentence of the extended quotation above; and he adds the explanation: "That is to say, the imagination creates not merely in a mental but also in an extensional, apocalyptic sense. What it envisions will be, postmortally and eternally";\(^{36}\) and, he completes this thought later, "as Keats specifically states, beauty becomes 'truth' exactly because, and when, mortal imagination is creative of essential beauty. . . . the beauty of 'essences' in heaven seems not to be different in kind, but only in degree of pleasurableness and in eternality, from the

\(^{34}\)Murry, p. 198.

\(^{35}\)Ford, pp. 98–116.

\(^{36}\)Ibid., p. 31.
beauty of mortal "essences." 37

Whether or not Keats had evolved such an elaborate scheme of metaphysics as that with which Ford credits him is not certain, but it is evident that in any attempt to interpret it, the entire passage must be considered. This passage is the only expression of such a Platonic belief to be found in Keats's writings; and there are only three other expressions of the relationship of beauty and truth; one is the famous line "Beauty is truth, truth beauty"; the second, a statement in a letter written in 1817, "the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth"; 38 and the third, in a letter of 1818, "I never can feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its Beauty." 39 An obvious affinity suggests that for this concept of the relationship of truth and beauty, Keats may be indebted to William Hazlitt, who wrote that "truth is to a certain degree beauty and grandeur; since all things are connected, and all things modify one another in nature." 40 In noting this affinity, J.R. Caldwell quotes

37 Ford, p. 34.

38 Letters, I, 192.

39 Ibid., II, 19.

40 Hazlitt, "On the Elgin Marbles, Complete Works, XVIII, 150
Hazlitt: "to the genuine artist truth, nature, beauty are almost
different names for the same thing." 41

It seems likely that throughout most of his life Keats held
to the idea that the imagination intuits truth in the form of
beauty, but that at other times, particularly in the last two
years of his life, he became more and more uncertain of the
reliability of the poetic vision. He was separating truth from
beauty when he wrote in 1819 that his reasonings were fine and
could be enjoyed aesthetically whether they were true or not. 42
Edward Bostetter notes that Keats found it increasingly diffi­
cult to accept the consolation of the urn and that in Lamia he
rejected his former notion that the poetic vision was a true
vision. Bostetter adds that the poet in Lamia asks only to be
allowed to believe in his illusion (i.e., in Lamia). 43 Ford
observes this same tendency in Keats's later years, and he
reminds that the dreaming lover is rewarded in Endymion and "The
Eve of St. Agnes," but in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and Lamia.

41 James Ralston Caldwell, John Keats' Fancy: The Effect on
42 Letters., II, 80-81.
43 Edward E. Bostetter, "The Eagle and the Truth: Keats and
the Problem of Belief," Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism,
XVI (March, 1958), 369.
he is deluded; and that in the later poems imagination becomes a mirage likely to betray the poet. Although Ford may be burdening the simple fact of chronology with a weightier argument than it can support—he ignores, for example, Keats's revision of "The Eve of St. Agnes" for publication with Lamia in 1820—there is some justice in his claim; for Keats's belief in the power of the imagination seems to have slowly, and irregularly, drifted from an early faith in the imagination as a faculty, closely allied to divine inspiration, which enabled the poet to find truth through a clear perception of its beauty to periods of doubt when he questioned the reliability of the imagination as a guide. To a certain extent, a new confidence in learning replaced his early belief in imagination, and this budding confidence in learning will be discussed later in this chapter.

It is not surprising that the imaginative capacity is the characteristic of the "true poet" which Keats mentions most frequently in his letters; for, the idea that the imagination is the primary agent of perception was a commonplace of the poetic theory of his contemporaries. However, another characteristic of the "true poet" frequently mentioned by Keats may well be regarded as an original and significant contribution to the

44 Ford, p. 141.
theory of poetry. This characteristic is a quality which Keats called "negative capability." Early in his poetic career he defined "negative capability" as an ability to be "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." This quality is one that Keats considered essential to a great writer and which he found best exemplified in the work of Shakespeare. Keats believed that he, too, possessed "negative capability." Unlike Coleridge, who was "incapable of remaining content with half knowledge," Keats writes of himself as having "not one Idea of the truth of any of my speculations— I shall never be a Reasoner because I care not to be in the right, when retired from bickering and in a proper philosophical temper"; and, in the margin of his copy of Milton's Paradise Lost, he remarks on "the intense pleasure of not knowing."

There is implicit in these statements, not a disinterest in knowledge, but rather a desire to be content with impressions

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45 Letters, I, 193.
46 Ibid., 194.
47 Ibid., 243.
49 Letters, I, 194.
and half-knowledge—with an "isolated verisimilitude caught from
the Penetralium of mystery" as Keats called it—and a wish to
let the imagination apprehend and assemble the impressions as
it will. In a letter to Reynolds, Keats suggests that they "not
therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like,
buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is
to be arrived at," but, rather, "let us open our leaves like a
flower and be passive and receptive." Like all of his other theories, Keats's conception of
"negative capability" was subject to change and modification.
In March of 1818, he seemed to long for something more tangible
and more comforting. He wrote to Rice: "What a happy thing it
would be if we could settle our thoughts, make our minds up on
any matter in five Minutes and remain content." Claude Lee
Finney states that by the end of 1818, Keats was less whole-
hearted about his philosophy of "negative capability," and that
he allowed that knowledge could be used by the imagination in
the apprehension of truth. And R.T. Davies remarks that, as

49 Letters, I, 194.
50 Ibid., 232.
51 Ibid., 254.
he matured, Keats inclined more and more to reach "after fact & reason." 53

This "negative capability," this capacity for "remaining content with half knowledge," which Keats so desired, required a yielding up of identity on the part of the poet in order to assume the identity of the poetic object. Regarding this submerging of self-identity, Keats states that "Men of Genius . . . have not any individuality, any determined character." 54 In a revealing passage from a letter to Richard Woodhouse, Keats discusses the poet's identity and he notes how the poet differs from the poetical creature:

As to the poetical Character itself, . . . 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 unpooetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other 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

unpoetical of all God's Creatures.\textsuperscript{55}

Commenting upon this passage, Clarence D. Thorpe compares the 

mind of the poet to a filter which, without any prejudices, 

clarifies and organizes the great truths of the universe.\textsuperscript{56}

It is this surrender of his own identity that allows the 

poet, through his imagination, to assume the identity of the 

poetic object. In 1817, Keats expressed the completeness of 

this identity when he said that "if a Sparrow come before my 

Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel."\textsuperscript{57}

He strives for a similar identification in the "Ode to a Night-
ingale":

\begin{quote}
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen, 
And with thee fade away into the forest dim.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

He does, indeed, achieve a momentary union, and it is the very 
evanescence of the experience that gives the poem its poignancy. 

Another indication of the importance to Keats of this idea that 
the poet assumes the identity of his poetic object is the fact 
that he used it as the theme of a poem entitled "The Poet":

\textsuperscript{55} Letters, I, 386-387.

\textsuperscript{56} Clarence D. Thorpe, The Mind of John Keats (New York, 

\textsuperscript{57} Letters, I, 186.

\textsuperscript{58} Poetical Works, p. 207.
WHERE's the Poet? show him! show him, Muses nine! that I may know him!
'Tis the man who with a man
Is an equal, be he King,
Or poorest of the beggar-clan,
Or any other wondrous thing
A man may be 'twixt ape and Plato;
'Tis the man who with a bird,
Wren or Eagle, finds his way to
All its instincts; he hath heard
The Lion's roaring, and can tell
What his horny throat expresseth,
And to him the Tiger's yell
Comes articulate and presseth
On his ear like mother-tongue.59

Keats was acquainted with William Hazlitt and attended Hazlitt's lectures in the early part of 1818. It seems likely that this principle of the Poet's identity with his object was suggested by Hazlitt, possibly by the lecture On Shakespeare and Milton. In this lecture, Hazlitt makes the following statement:

The striking peculiarity of Shakespeare's mind was its generic quality, its power of communion with all other minds. . . . He was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become. He had only to think of anything in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it. When he conceived of a character, whether real or imaginary, he not only entered into its thoughts and feelings, but seemed instantly and as if by touching a secret spring, to be surrounded with all the same objects, "subject to the same skye influences," the same local, outward, and unforeseen accidents which would occur in reality.60

59 Poetical Works, pp. 393-394.
60 Hazlitt, Complete Works, V, 47.
Coleridge expresses a similar idea, using Shakespeare and Milton as types of objective and subjective poets: "While the former [Shakespeare] darts himself forth, and passes into all the forms of human character and passion, the one Proteus of the fire and the flood; the other [Milton] attracts all forms and things to himself, into the unity of his own ideal. All things and modes of action shape themselves anew in the being of Milton; while Shakespeare becomes all things, yet forever remaining himself." 61

The foregoing discussion reveals a certain consistency in the changes in Keats's theories about the imagination and "negative capability"; for it is clear that his modifications hinge on his gradual admission of the importance of reason and knowledge. Keats came to realize more and more that the poet could not isolate himself completely from "fact & reason," and that the poetic vision was not an entirely reliable guide toward truth. However, quite frequently, these growing convictions were added to his earlier ideas rather than substituted for them, and are, perhaps, an indication of development rather than of change. There would seem to be a significant relationship between Keats's growing convictions and his plan for his own poetic career. At an early date, he determined that, if he could devote ten years to sensuous poetry, he would then turn

61 Coleridge, III, 381-382.
to poetry of a more serious nature:

And can I ever bid these joys farewell?
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,
Where I may find the agonies, the strife
Of human hearts: . . . 62

Keats's anticipation of the "nobler life" is evident in
his famous "Mansion of Life" letter of 1818, in which he de-
scribes himself in a gradually darkening "Chamber of Maiden
Thought," not seeing "the ballance [sic] of good and evil," but
contemplating the "dark Passages" beyond; 63 but, as he had
written in a poem he sent to Reynolds only little more than a
month before, he is not quite ready to explore these passages:

. . . but my flag is not unfurl'd
On the Admiral staff—and to philosophize
I dare not yet!—Oh never will the prize
High reason, and the lore of good and ill
Be my award. 64

Unlike Shelley, who studied Hume and Godwin, Keats gives
no evidence of having been influenced by any technical or
systematic philosophy. It is most likely that his repeated use
of the term philosophy refers to a general knowledge and to an
understanding of human nature and of life, rather than to any
systematic philosophy.

63 Letters, I, 281.
64 Ibid., 262.
In "Sleep and Poetry," Keats introduced the idea that he must eventually forswear luxurious poetry for a nobler poetry; and he enlarged upon this idea in The Fall of Hyperion, the last serious poem he wrote. "Thou art a dreaming thing; / A fever of thyself," says Moneta; and, with these words, Keats apparently condemns much of his previous sensational poetry. The poet must know and understand the human heart, particularly its suffering; and he must be able to identify himself with these painful experiences:

'None can usurp this height,' return'd that shade,
'But those to whom the miseries of the world
'Are misery, and will not let them rest.'

The entire Induction to The Fall of Hyperion expresses the view, says C.D. Thorpe, that the visionary who responds only to the simple beauties of nature with aimless projections of his own imagination is not a true poet. The real poet has enriched his insight with knowledge, thought, experience, and a genuine kinship with suffering humanity.

As Keats speculated upon this ideal of the "nobler life" and as he looked deeper into the "dark Passages," he became convinced that knowledge and learning were necessary to attain

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65 Poetical Works, p. 407.
67 Thorpe, p. 196.
his goal: to be a "philosopher" with a sympathetic understanding of humanity and life. Keats understood that his goal would not be achieved easily. Although one of his famous "axioms" is that "if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all," he realized that great poetry resulted, not only from poetic intuition, but also from hard work.

"I have ever been too sensible," he writes in 1818, "of the labyrinthian path to eminence in Art"; and "Nothing is finer for the purpose of great productions, than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers." In a poem about Spenser, Keats expresses the idea that poetry cannot spring from barren ground:

It is impossible to escape from toil
O' the sudden and receive thy spiriting:
The flower must drink the nature of the soil
Before it can put forth its blossoming.

In June of 1819, Keats commented upon his own progress: "I hope I am a little more of a Philosopher than I was, consequently a little less of a versifying Pet-lamb."

68 Letters, I, 238.
69 Ibid., 264.
70 Ibid., 214.
71 Poetical Works, p. 375.
In discussing the question of Keats’s development, C.D. Thorpe writes: "At first, he appears to have felt that it was only necessary to give the imagination free rein, especially when under the influence of nature, and poetic vision would result." However, Thorpe continues, "he came to see that no matter how necessary it may be for the poet to enter it in his periods of artistic creation, this dream-world itself must be built upon the foundations of the real." 73

Keats's increasing interest in knowledge becomes evident in the Spring of 1818. In April he writes: "I know nothing I have read nothing and I mean to follow Solomon's directions of 'get Wisdom--get understanding'--I find cavalier days are gone by. I find that I can have no enjoyment in the world but continual drinking of Knowledge"; 74 and several days later he discusses with Reynolds the languages and authors he intends to study. He wants to prepare himself, he says, to ask Hazlitt "the best metaphysical road" he can take. 75 In May, he writes that he is glad that he has kept his medical books for "every department of knowledge we see excellent and calculated towards

73 Thorpe, pp. 186-187 and 196.
74 Letters, I, 271.
75 Ibid., 274.
a great whole. ... An extensive knowledge is needful for thinking people." Indeed, it is evident from his letters that Keats was reading extensively during 1818 and 1819. The many direct and indirect references to Shakespeare's works show a thorough familiarity with that author, and the notes in his copy of *Paradise Lost* indicate a similar knowledge and understanding of Milton. He also mentions reading Spenser, Chaucer, Boccaccio, and Ariosto, among others.

This interest in knowledge, however, never replaced his early faith in poetic intuition; and Keats's tendency to hold opposing views simultaneously is evident in some lines he wrote at almost the same time he declared that he could have "no enjoyment in the world but continual drinking of Knowledge":

0 fret not after knowledge--I have none,
And yet my song comes native with the warmth.
0 fret not after knowledge--I have none,
And yet the Evening listens.

Keats seems to have reconciled the conflict between knowledge and intuition by suggesting that they be combined. He notes the difference between the poet who possesses knowledge and the poet who does not: "The difference of high Sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this--in the latter case we are

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76 *Letters*, I, 271.

77 *Poetical Works*, p. 380.
falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings . . . in the former case, our shoulders are fledge (d), and we go thro' the same (air) and space without fear. 78 Keats thought that knowledge might control his imagination and he intended them to work together. He wanted his intellect united with his passion for beauty. 79 Keats would probably not have written "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts" after the Spring of 1818; yet he would never have asked for a life of thought alone.

It is probably because Apollonius represents reason only that Keats portrays the philosopher so unsympathetically in Lamia:

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?

Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line, 80
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine.

Nevertheless, Apollonius survives and Lycius is destroyed. It is likely that the reason lies in Newell Ford's explanation that Lycius represents, not the true poet, but the dream poet. This is the same type who, according to Moneta in The Fall of

78 Letters, I, 277. Editor's emendations.

79 Ibid., 404.

80 Poetical Works, p. 177.
Hyperion, vexes, rather than comforts, the world. "A poet who aspires to be great dares not feed exclusively upon illusion," explains Ford, "he had better, as Keats told himself, strive like Shakespeare to be 'a miserable and mighty poet of the human heart.'"  

Finally, as might be expected, Keats never considered that knowledge could be gained through books alone. It must be gradually refined by experience and, if The Fall of Hyperion is to be taken literally, through suffering. In this poem, Keats describes the poet's struggle to reach the altar of Moneta:

Prodigious seem'd the toil; the leaves were yet Burning—when suddenly a palsied chill Struck from the paved level up my limbs, And was ascending quick to put cold grasp Upon those streams that pulse beside the throat: I shriek'd, and the sharp anguish of my shriek Stung my own ears—I strove hard to escape The numbness; strove to gain the lowest step. Slow, heavy, deadly was my pace; the cold Grew stifling, suffocating, at the heart; And when I clasp'd my hands I felt them not. One minute before death, my foot touch'd The lowest stair; and as it touch'd, life seem'd To pour in at the toes: . . ."  

This conviction that knowledge cannot be gained through books alone is epitomized in the epigrammatic statement: "Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our

81 Ford, p. 144.

J.R. Caldwell notes this difference between Keats and the other poets of his generation: Keats "proved the experience in his own blood, familiarized it, fortified it with knowledge of the mind, and extended its modes to new and daring use." Keats again remarks on the importance of experience to the poet during his walking tour of Northern England and Scotland: "I should not have consented to myself these four Months tramping in the highlands but that I thought it would give me more experience, rub off more Prejudice, use [me] to more hardship, identify finer scenes [sic] load me with grander Mountains, and strengthen more my reach in Poetry, than would stopping at home among Books even though I should reach Homer." In the sonnet "On sitting down to read King Lear once again," Keats expresses his hope that these experiences will enable him to produce greater poetry:

Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,  
Begetters of our deep eternal theme,  
When through the old oak forest I am gone,  
Let me not wander in a barren dream,  
But when I am consumed in the fire,  
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.  

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83 Letters, I, 279.
84 Caldwell, pp. 32-33.
85 Letters, I, 342. Editor's emendation.
86 Poetical Works, p. 380.
This idea that experience is necessary to knowledge is best expressed in a letter which Keats wrote to George and Georgianna Keats in 1818. Here he describes how he believes a sense of identity, or a "soul," is achieved: "I will call the world a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read—I will call the human heart the horn Book used in that School—and I will call the Child able to read, the Soul made from that school and its hornbook. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!" 87

Keats's final attitude toward the poetic character, then, would seem to be that the poet must possess an unusually sensitive and impressionable nature combined with a perceptive insight; and that he must develop and strengthen these qualities through a knowledge refined by experience, until he attains a calm sympathetic understanding of human nature and life.

Lastly, there are scattered remarks in the letters which reveal Keats's conception of the place of the poet in society. He sometimes refers to reviews of his poetry, but, for the most part, he appears to be only impersonally concerned with them;

87Letters, II, 102.
and seems less concerned with the attacks of his critics than the sentiments expressed in Shelley's *Adonais* would indicate. In October of 1818 he states: "Praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic of his own works"; and nearly a year later he comments: "I feel it in my power to become a popular writer—I feel it in my strength to refuse the poisonous suffrage of a public." However, although in the Spring of 1819 Keats refused to write for his livelihood, by the Fall of the same year financial difficulties had forced him to change his mind temporarily; and he believed that he could "shine up an article on any thing without much knowledge of the subject."  

In spite of the fact that Keats wanted to refuse the "suffrage of a public," he still felt responsible to them; for, he believed that the poet could and should be valuable to society. In 1818 he wrote that he "would jump down Ætna for any great Public good"; two weeks later he wrote again in the same vein: "I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some

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88 Letters, I, 373.
89 Ibid., II, 146.
90 Ibid., 43.
91 Ibid., 179.
92 Ibid., I, 267.
good for the world."Apparently, Keats's way of "doing some
good for the world" was to be through the composition of poetry.
In "Sleep and Poetry" he defines the end of poetry: "that it
should be a friend / To soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts
of man." In The Fall of Hyperion he assigns the same role to
the poet as one who "pours out a balm upon the world." A
similar conception of the poet's purpose was expressed by
Wordsworth. In The Prelude, he mentions the soothing power of
poetry:

Mighty is the charm
Of those abstractions to a mind beset
With images and haunted by herself,

and in the "Preface to the Second Edition of the Lyrical Ballad," he describes an effect of poetry which would seem to be
akin to Keats's idea that poetry should "lift the thoughts of
man." Wordsworth says that "we [poets] shall describe objects,
and utter sentiments, of such a nature, and in such connection
with each other, that the understanding of the Reader must nec-
essarily be in some degree enlightened, and his affections

93 Letters, I, 271.
94 Poetical Works, p. 48.
95 Ibid., p. 408.
96 William Wordsworth, The Prelude, in The Complete Poetical
Works of William Wordsworth (Boston and New York, 1911), III, 12.
strengthened and purified.  

However, while Wordsworth boasted that each of his poems in the *Lyrical Ballads* "has a worthy purpose"; Keats did not approve of poetry with a purpose: "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us"; and he wrote to Shelley that if poetry "must have a purpose, which may be the God—an artist must serve Mammon." Keats prefers that the poet have less of a "palpable design" and suggests to Shelley that he be more selfish; that is to say, that Shelley have more concern for his art than for the uplift of mankind. Commenting upon this conflicting concern, M.H. Abrams notes that this opposition between beauty and utility was resolved only by Keats's early death, and states that Keats exhibited "that peculiarly modern malady—a conscious and persistent conflict between the requirements of social responsibility and of aesthetic detachment."

It is evident from the material in this chapter that this conflict between beauty and utility was not the only conflict in

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98 Ibid., 9.

99 *Letters*, I, 224.

100 Ibid., II, 322-323.

101 Abrams, p. 328.
Keats's conception of the function of the poet. He was constantly trying to identify, in his own mind, the qualities that a great poet should possess. The first of these, he decided, was the poetic imagination: a capacity, unknown to ordinary men, which allowed the poet, who appreciates beauty, to catch glimpses of an absolute reality. This absolute reality, Keats called truth. As C.M. Bowra puts it: "Through the imagination Keats sought an absolute reality to which a door was opened by his appreciation of beauty through the senses." However, although Keats never entirely abandoned his early faith in the imagination, as he matured he began to believe that the imagination alone was not the best guide to truth. He began to believe that it would be a far more reliable guide when strengthened by knowledge and experience. A similar struggle can be seen in his attempts to express his philosophy of "negative capability."

When he first mentioned "negative capability" in December of 1817, he described it as an ability to remain "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." Yet, at the same time Keats could not be

103 Letters, I, 193.
satisfied with such passivity and he began more and more to search actively for knowledge: "An extensive knowledge is needful for thinking people." Because of his early death, there can be no conclusive proof that he eventually would have forsaken his early doctrines on the importance to the poet of imagination and "negative capability" in favor of a wholly new attitude requiring from the poet learning and wisdom gained through experience. Nevertheless, a process of development may be discerned; and, although Keats could undoubtedly synthesize some of his earlier and later insights, his theory of "negative capability" would seem to be the least compatible with his new interest in learning.

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104 *Letters*, I, 277.
CHAPTER III

THE POEM

It is not surprising that Keats, like the other romantic poets, was less interested in the poem as an artifact than he was in the nature of the poet or even—as the next chapter will show—in the general characteristics of poetry. When he writes about Shakespeare and Milton, both of whom he admired greatly, he writes of general qualities which they or their poetry possess; but, for the most part, he does not analyse the content, or form, or imagery which they employ in a given poem. The following remark about Henry VI is an example of his very broad criticism: "The poetry is for the most part ironed and manacled with a chain of facts, and cannot get free; it cannot escape from the present house of history, nor often move without our being disturbed with the clanking of its fetters. The poetry of Shakespeare is generally free as is the wind—a perfect thing of the elements, winged and sweetly coloured." ¹

However, in spite of the general nature of his critical remarks, Keats was not unconcerned with detail in his own poetry. He was a careful craftsman and revised his poetry deliberately. After looking at an advance copy of *Endymion*, Keats wrote to his publisher that they should "divide the speeches into *identical* and *related*; and to the former put merely one comma at the beginning and another at the end; and to the latter inverted commas before every line..."; and he included a list of detailed corrections (e.g., "Page 4 line 4 place the comma after old.").

Keats realized that great poetry could not be written quickly and effortlessly and he wrote to his brother that the "Ode to Psyche" read more richly than his other poetry because he wrote it leisurely and with care.

Scattered throughout Keats's letters there are occasional remarks showing concern with the elements of the poem itself. Most of these remarks are related to the form of the poem. They indicate that Keats was constantly searching for the form which would best suit his works. He was not satisfied with *Endymion*, and he sought a more suitable form for *Hyperion*. In January of 1818 he wrote that in *Endymion* there were "many bits of the deep and sentimental cast—the nature of *Hyperion* will lead me to

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treat it in a more naked and grecian Manner. . . . "4 To achieve this "naked and grecian Manner" in Hyperion, Keats forsook the elaborate and lush Spenserian diction and the couplet rhyme of Endymion for a Miltonic imitation. In Hyperion, Keats imitated, not only the blank verse, but also the diction and syntax of Paradise Lost.

The search for the most fitting form continued and, a year later, Keats sent a copy of his poem "Bards of Passion and of Mirth" to his brother and commented that it was a sort of rondel which he was beginning to favor because, in it, one idea could be "amplified with greater ease and more delight and freedom than in the sonnet."5

Keats's interest in finding the form best suited to a particular poem is revealed by his experimentation with the sonnet form. Finney notes that Keats wrote sixty-six sonnets in all. The first sonnet was irregular; the next forty were Petrarchan. Then Keats wrote his first Shakespearean sonnet, "When I have fears." Of his last twenty-five sonnets, seventeen were Shakespearean, four were Petrarchan, two were irregular Shakespearean, one was absolutely irregular, and one was

4 Letters, I, 207.
5 Ibid., II, 26.
Although Keats's growing maturity may account for the superiority of most of the sonnets in this last group, it is possible, also, that their superiority stems, in great measure, from his choice of a more appropriate form. Finney's conclusion seems to support this: "The best sonnets of this final period, those in which Keats expressed his deepest feelings, are Shakespearean."  

The "absolutely irregular" sonnet which Finney mentions is one which Keats included in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats. In this letter Keats remarks that he has been "endeavouring to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have," and he copies out a poem, "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd," with a rhyme scheme of \textit{abcabdcabencede}. W.J. Bate writes that this sonnet "has neither the couplets of the Petrarchan octave, the concluding couplet of the Shakespearean form, nor the continued alternate-rhyming of the three successive Shakespearean quatrains." However, Keats was not

\begin{footnotes}
\item[7] \textit{Ibid.}
\item[8] Letters, II, 108. In the published version of the poem, the quoted line is corrected to "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd."
\end{footnotes}
satisfied with this solution, and he wrote only three sonnets after this one. H.W. Garrod remarks that the great odes of 1819 probably were developed from the sonnet, and he makes the very interesting suggestion that the form of these odes was Keats's solution to the more satisfactory sonnet form which he was seeking: "Out of the sonnet, Keats builds in the Odes a stanza of which the repetition furnishes a metrical system more perfectly adjusted, I think, than any other in English poetry to elegiac reflection."¹⁰ This theory is elaborated upon by T.E. Connolly who makes a detailed examination of the rhyme scheme of the odes. Connolly notes that after writing the "Ode to Psyche," Keats developed a uniform ode stanza: "The four odes, Ode to a Nightingale, Ode on Indolence, Ode on Melancholy, and Ode on a Grecian Urn, are all based on a stanza of ten lines. This stanza is composed of a Shakespearean quatrain followed by a Petrarchan sestet. The quatrains are uniformly regular; what variations exist are found in the last three lines of the sestet."¹¹ In Connolly's opinion, Keats has developed the perfect ode stanza in To Autumn, where a septet is formed by the


addition of one line to the Petrarchan sestet. 12

In addition to his remarks about the proper form of a poem, Keats made a few comments upon the proper language of a poem. The concern that Keats displayed for finding the precise word or phrase to express his meaning exactly can be seen by a glance at his poetry and is especially evident in his corrected manuscripts. In July of 1819 he wrote that he was searching for *"a brighter word than bright, a fairer word than fair,"* 13 and a month later he wrote: *"I look upon fine Phrases like a Lover."* 14 According to C.D. Thorpe, two examples from the "Ode to a Nightingale" show how Keats did find the perfect phrases to express his meaning most perfectly. In the first draft of the poem, the phrase *"a drowsy numbness pains"* read *"a painful numbness falls"* and the phrase *"Cool'd a long age"* read *"Cooling an age."* Thorpe says that, in each case, the change reflects a closer union between the words and the meaning. 15 It is evident, too, that these changes produced a more effective rhythm; the three slow stresses of *"Cool'd a long age,"* for example, evoke the effect Keats sought better than the almost tripping rhythm of *"Cooling

13 Letters, II, 123.
14 Ibid., 139.
15 Thorpe, The Mind of John Keats, p. 163.
This example is a reminder that another concern of Keats's was the melody of poetry. In his memoranda, Benjamin Bailey says that one of Keats's "favorite topics of discourse was the principle of melody in verse, upon which he had his own notions, particularly in the management of open and close vowels"; and Bailey goes on to show that one of Keats's considerations in the choice of words for his poetry was that "the vowels should be so managed as not to clash with one another, so as to hear the melody,—and yet that they should be interchanged, like differing notes of music to prevent monotony." Keats himself remarked upon melody in verse when he wrote that a "melodious passage in poetry is full of pleasures both sensual and spiritual," and, in a letter to Woodhouse, he has given an example of what he considers a "fine sound." It is the term legend-laden in the line from Hyperion: "Though it blows legend-laden through the trees." On the question of the language best suited to poetry Keats agreed with Wordsworth that the English idiom was the

16 Quoted in Thorpe, p. 163.

17 "On Edmund Kean as a Shakespearian Actor," The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats, V, 229.

18 Letters, II, 171.
proper language for English poetry, and he admired the language of Chatterton. In September, 1819 he wrote to Reynolds: "I always somehow associate Chatterton with autumn. He is the purest writer in the English Language. He has no French idiom, or particles like Chaucer's — 'tis genuine English Idiom in English words. I have given up Hyperion — there were too many Miltonic inversions in it — Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or rather artist's humour." Three days later, Keats wrote to his brother and sister-in-law that the Paradise Lost is a corruption of English, and he again compared the language of Chatterton with that of Milton: "The purest English I think — or what ought to be the purest — is Chatterton's — The Language had existed long enough to be entirely uncorrupted of Chaucer's gallicisms and still the old words are used — Chatterton's music is entirely northern — I prefer the native music of it to Milton's cut by feet [sic] I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me."20

Practically all of Keats's remarks about the poem are concerned with either its form or its language; for, besides these, he treats imagery at length only once, and devotes only slightly more space to subject matter. The one statement he made about

20 Ibid., 212.
the imagery concerns the effect of imagery on the reader: "Its [poetry's] 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 [sic] too [sic] him—shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight."21

This is one of Keats's three "axioms" for poetry (which will be treated more fully in the next chapter), and J.M. Murry notes the similarity between this "axiom" and the statement Coleridge makes in Chapter XV of the *Biographia Literaria*. Murry quotes Coleridge:

Images, however faithfully copied from Nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only so far as they are modified by a predominant passion, or by associated thoughts and images awakened by that passion;

and then comments as follows:

That is to say, imagery must not assume a *raison d'être* of its own; it must exist, not for its own sake, but as subordinated to the predominant emotion, which it has at once to obey, to express and to communicate. Only in so far as it does this will it, in Keats's words, 'come natural to the reader': otherwise it will merely distract him.22

21 *Letters*, I, 238.

22 Murry, *Keats*, p. 149. Murry's quotation is slightly inaccurate. In Coleridge, *Complete Works*, III, 378, the passage reads as follows: "It has been before observed that images, however, beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves
Just as Keats searched for the proper form and proper language for poetry, so he also searched for subject matter proper to poetry. His delight in external nature is obvious in such poems as "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill" (1816) and Endymion (1818). However, his letters betray an interest in poetry of human affections and passions: the anticipated "agonies, the strife / Of human hearts." 23 In March of 1818, Keats wrote that "scenery is fine--but human nature is finer," 24 and two months later he wrote to Reynolds that the quality which made Wordsworth a greater poet than Milton was that Wordsworth thought deeper into the human heart. 25 Accordingly, in his own poetry, Keats turned from themes of love and delight in physical nature (both of which can be found in Endymion and "The Eve of St. Agnes") to themes of evanescence ("Ode to Melancholy"), permanency ("Ode to a Nightingale" and "Ode on a Grecian Urn"), and self-realization (The Fall of Hyperion)—themes, in fact, which rest on a relationship between real and ideal worlds akin to those of platonic philosophy.

characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion. . . ." 26

25 Ibid., 282.
CHAPTER IV

POETRY

In any consideration of the relative importance of the categories of poet, poem, poetry, and audience in Keats's criticism, it soon becomes clear that Keats regarded poetry primarily through its agent, the poet; and, also, that of his critical remarks, the greater proportion concern the nature of the poet. In addition, however, he did make a significant number of enlightening comments on the nature of poetry as an art form.

Keats's remarks about the nature of poetry do not yield a coherent pattern as easily as his remarks about the nature of the poet, which were dealt with in the second chapter of this study. Nonetheless, his remarks about the nature of poetry can be broadly classified. In this chapter they will be dealt with under three heads: first, the elements Keats believed essential to poetry: intensity, contrast, and beauty; second, Keats's consideration of the relative merits of poetry and philosophy; and third, Keats's conception of the power of poetry and of its superiority over reality.

Throughout his letters Keats made a number of statements
about the three elements he considered essential to poetry: intensity, contrast, and beauty. He first mentioned intensity in December of 1817, and he related it to his concept of beauty and truth. He remarks, in regard to Benjamin West's picture "Death on the Pale Horse," that "there is nothing to be intense upon; no woman one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. The [sic] excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth—Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout; but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness." 1 It is interesting to observe that this intensity is both objective and subjective. The art object displays intensity, by which Keats seems to mean a unity or wholeness to which all elements contribute; and it also excites intensity in the beholder—something, it seems, which is in part kinesthetic: "no woman one feels mad to kiss"; and in part contemplative: "any momentous depth of speculation."

What Keats called his "Axioms" for poetry give, perhaps, a clearer account of the nature of this intensity. Two of these three "axioms" concern the category poetry. The third "axiom"

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1Letters, I, 192.
refers to composition, and, consequently, to the poet; but the first two "axioms" describe the manner in which poetry should make its effect: "1st I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity—it should strike 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 [sic] too [sic] him—shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight." The phrase fine excess in the first "axiom" would seem to parallel the term intensity which Keats uses with regard to West's picture; and the meaning of the term singularity in the same "axiom" appears to have a similar affinity with what Keats calls repulsiveness when he speaks of the feeling generated by the picture. Art achieves its effect by stimulating the thought of the reader (or viewer) and by offering a blend of elements that is exciting, but not so exciting as to become "unpleasant." A kind of unity is established in the work of art through "the rise, the progress, the setting of the imagery" or through a "close relationship with Beauty & Truth," and this unity allows the reader to become intense—in Keats's phrase "to

2Letters, I, 238.
be intense upon"—without becoming uncomfortable. Keats expressed a similar idea much more simply when he wrote to Reynolds: "Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject." M.H. Abrams states that this interest in intensity was inherited from Longinus and had come to Keats through William Hazlitt; and Abrams notes, too, the similarity between Keats's three "axioms" and Peri Hypsous (On the Sublime), although, he says Keats probably never read Longinus first hand.

A second quality which Keats considered important to poetry is one which he called contrast. In the margin of his personal copy of Paradise Lost, he wrote: "There is a greatness which the Paradise Lost possesses over every other Poem—the Magnitude of Contrast, and that is softened by the contrast being ungrotesque to a degree." Keats regarded the description of Satan and his hosts in Book I (ll. 527-567) of Paradise Lost as a significant example of contrast. In a marginal note on these lines, he remarked on the elements of contrast contained in them: "The light and shade—the sort of black brightness—the ebon diamonding—the

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3 Letters, I, 224.
5 Keats, The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats, Hampstead ed., V, 293.
ethiop Immortality—the sorrow, the pain, the sad-sweet Melody—the P(h)alanges of Spirits so depressed as to be 'uplifted beyond hope'—the short mitigation of Misery—the thousand Melancholies and Magnificences of this Page—leaves no room for anything to be said thereon but 'so it is.'

In Hyperion, this element of contrast is included among the Miltonic devices imitated:

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Above her, on a crag's uneasy shelve,
Upon his elbow rais'd, all prostrate else,
Shadow'd Enceladus; once tame and mild
As grazing ox unworried in the meads;
Now tiger-passion'd, lion-thoughted, wroth,
He meditated, plotted, and even now
Was hurling mountains in that second war,
Not long delay'd, that scar'd the younger Gods
To hide themselves in forms of beast and bird.
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Elsewhere in his poetry, Keats's feeling for contrast seems to have reached a high point in "The Eve of St. Agnes" where the contrast between heat and cold, age and youth, and hate and love heighten the appeal of the imagery to all of the senses. Keats's interest in contrast never flagged. In his last extant letter, written to Brown, he speaks about "the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem."

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6 Keats, *The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats*, V, 293.


8 *Letters*, II, 360.
The third element which Keats considered to be an integral part of poetry—an element much more frequently associated with him than his "intensity"—is beauty, and, once at least, he equated beauty with poetry. While still composing Endymion, he wrote to comfort Bailey, whose ordination to the ministry had been delayed. In this letter, in which he sympathizes with the harsh treatment Bailey has received, Keats wishes for a recourse to "the Beautiful. the [sic] poetical in all things." This letter to Bailey has special significance not only because of this parallel between beauty and poetry, but also because Keats at the same time develops a parallel between the world of harsh reality and the ideal world of poetry similar to the parallel developed almost two years later in the "Ode to a Nightingale." In this letter to Bailey, Keats contrasts the far-from-ideal, arbitrary rule of the Bishop of Lincoln with the ideal consolations possible in art. After considering the "impertinent" treatment which Bailey has received, Keats cries out for a recourse—a "somewhat human" recourse— independent of what he refers to, presumably ironically, as "the great Consolations of Religion" or of "undepraved Sensations." This recourse is "the Beautiful" and "the poetical in all things" which might provide

9Letters, I, 179.
a remedy for the "wrongs within the pale of the World." 10

This synonymous use of beauty and poetry by Keats is not surprising. In his early life, especially, love of beauty predominated and he wanted "a thousand of those beautiful particles to fill up my heart." 11 F.R. Leavis notes that Keats's "concern for beauty meant, at any rate in the first place, a concentration upon the purely delightful in experience to the exclusion of 'disagreeables.'" 12

However, that Keats's concern for beauty transcended the merely negative aspect of excluding "disagreeables" can be gauged from his exclamation, "I never can feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its Beauty"; 13 and from the message of the urn, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." These sentiments of Keats's corroborate W.J. Bate's view that, for the Romantic, truth is grasped in or through the particular and that this truth is recognized by an imaginative and emotional capacity rather than by a rational one. 14 Keats's belief that truth can

10 Letters, I, 179.

11 Ibid., 403.


be found through the perception of beauty is a typically romantic rejection of the classical conviction that ethical reason is the guide to truth. However, Keats was able to admit new concepts and to develop his views to a maturity far in advance of simple romantic commonplaces. In a letter of 1819, Keats admits that, although a superior being may recognize man's reasonings as erroneous, these reasonings still may be enjoyed aesthetically as the result of man's instinct: "May there not be superior beings amused with any graceful, though instinctive attitude my mind may fall into, as I am entertained with the alertness of a Stoat or the anxiety of a Deer? 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." 15 Likewise, poetry may be the finest achievement which man, following his instincts, can achieve; and if poetry is not so fine as philosophy it is because poetry is bounded by the real world of man, whereas philosophy deals with the ideal sphere of truth: "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." 16

15 Letters, II, 80-81. Editor's emendation.
16 Ibid.
Keats continues to say that truth is abstract and that man cannot know it, for he can only come in contact with it through objective experience. In this passage, Keats seems to have distinguished between three worlds: the animal, the human, and the ideal. The eagle is the finest creature of the animal world, and truth is the finest quality of the ideal world. In the human world, man can only follow his instinct, but this instinct leads to a grace and a fine human energy. Poetry is a product of the human world, and, like it, "though erroneous" it "may be fine"—at least as fine at the human level, as is the analogous "alertness of a Stoat" on the lower, animal level.

Edward Bostetter uses this letter, together with Lamia, as support for his view that Keats eventually separated beauty from truth and found it increasingly difficult to accept the consolation of the urn. Bostetter states that in Lamia, Keats abandoned "all effort to defend poetry or the poetic vision as truth." However, Bostetter continues, Keats retains his respect for philosophy in spite of his bitterness, and, in Lamia he becomes Apollonius and regards his own poetry as beautiful but useless. 17

This letter is interpreted differently by C.D. Thorpe, who writes that philosophy considers the facts and then judges on the basis of intrinsic and moral worth; but poetry merely

delights in interpreting life as it is without considering ultimate values. Philosophy may be finer, but poetry can best illuminate life. Philosophy is a means, not an end; it prepares the mind of the poet for an interpretation of life and enriches his poetry.

Unfortunately, no definitive interpretation of this passage is possible because, as is so often the case in Keats's letters, there is no logical syntactical relation among the significant parts. For example, in the all-important phrase This is the very thing in which consists poetry, there is no clear antecedent for the word This, which may explain the lack of agreement among interpreters. However, although a logical interpretation is not possible, the examples and images through which Keats expresses his thought permit a general interpretation concerning the analogous worlds—animal, human, and ideal—each of which is capable of some special "fineness" or "beauty" which is its own "poetry."

This letter contains one of the longest expressions of the conflict which Keats felt existed between poetry and philosophy. Besides the concern that he felt for the opposition between the poet and philosopher, discussed in the second chapter, he was concerned with the relative value of poetry and philosophy; and

it is really impossible to separate these two aspects of the same problem.

Generally, as he matured, Keats became more and more tolerant of philosophy, which as mentioned in Chapter II, he seems to conceive of as a general knowledge and understanding of human nature and of life, rather than any systematic philosophy. In his early poetic life he strongly preferred the "authenticity of the imagination" to "consecutive reasoning." Later, however, he admitted the value of philosophy when he said: "This is the very thing in which consists poetry; and if so it is not so fine a thing as philosophy." Keats realized that philosophy could be of some use to the poet when he wrote to Reynolds that the poet who writes without knowledge and understanding is "falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings," while the poet who writes with knowledge and understanding has wings and need not fear. When he eventually came to question the value of poetry (e.g., in Lamia), he decided that poetry built solely upon a love of beauty could lead only to mere illusion, while poetry strengthened by philosophy and experience (e.g., in The Fall of Hyperion) could enable the

poet to pour "out a balm upon the World.""^{22}

There remain only Keats's remarks upon the power of poetry and on the relative spheres of poetry and reality. There is one statement in Keats's letters which appears to run counter to his more frequently expressed conviction that poetry held the superior place. He writes to Reynolds in August, 1819: "... all my thoughts and feelings which are of the selfish nature, home speculations every day continue to make me more Iron—I am convinced more and more day by day that fine writing is next to fine doing the top thing in the world; ... I feel it in my power to become a popular writer—I feel it in my strength to refuse the poisonous suffrage of a public."^{23} Taken by itself, the statement "fine writing is next to fine doing the top thing in the world" might possibly imply that Keats was placing statesmanship, military prowess, or other field of endeavor above poetry. However, the context, with its references to "iron" and "strength to refuse," supports the view that by "fine doing" Keats means maintaining his poetic integrity without yielding to popular demand. Such an interpretation reconciles this statement with Keats's usual view. That Keats accords the superior place to poetry is evident in such a comment as "[I

^{22} Poetical Works, p. 408.

^{23} Letters, II, 146.
shall] 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, there is something also wanting to one who passes his life among Books. The poem "Fancy" upholds his view of the superiority of the world of the imagination over that of reality. The joys of nature decay; fancy can restore them:

Summer's joys are spoilt by use,
And the enjoying of the Spring
Fades as does its blossoming;
Autumn's red-lipp'd fruitage too,
Blushing through the mist and dew,
Cloys with tasting: . . .
Fancy, high-commission'di—send her!
She has vassals to attend her;
She will bring, in spite of frost,
Beauties that the earth hath lost;
She will bring thee, all together,
All delights of summer weather,

And it is a commonplace of literary criticism that a refinement of this idea is presented in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" where both the supremacy of art over nature and the timelessness of art are expressed:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu.

24 Letters, I, 274. Editor's emendation.
25 Poetical Works, p. 213.
Keats's occasional misgivings about the ultimate value of poetry have already been mentioned. In an early letter to Bailey, Keats remarks that he is "sometimes so very sceptical as to think Poetry itself a mere Jack a lanthern to amuse whoever may chance to be struck with its brilliance." Keats feared, at times, that poetry was based, not on truth, but on illusion. Even the vision in the "Ode to a Nightingale" is soon over and the poet is left alone with his "sole self." Again, the basic theme of Lamia is that the artist who gives himself wholly to the dream world of illusion cannot survive an encounter with reality. It reflects, says M.H. Abrams, Keats's "recurrent fear that the subject matter of his poetry is the vestige of a magical view of the world, vulnerable to the cold stare of reason." In view of Keats's early death it is impossible to determine whether the distinction which Moneta makes in The Fall of Hyperion between two kinds of poetry, dream poetry and true poetry, is the answer to his dilemma or whether he would continue to be uncertain of the ultimate value of poetry.

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28 Abrams, p. 308.
CHAPTER V

AUDIENCE

In this study the classification designated by the term audience includes Keats's consideration of the effect of poetry on the reader and his views on the way in which this effect is achieved. Of the four categories of poet, poem, poetry, and audience, Keats has least to say about the audience. Such neglect is not unexpected; for, a characteristic of the romantic age was a shift in emphasis, away from the eighteenth century's concern with what M.H. Abrams refers to as "ordering the aim of the artist and the character of the work to the nature, the needs, and the springs of pleasure in the audience."¹ For the most part, Keats appears to be unconcerned with his audience or with their reaction to his poetry. In 1818, he wrote to his publisher: "Praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic of his own works."² He expresses a similar disinterest

² Letters, I, 373.
when he writes to Reynolds nearly a year later: "I feel it in my power to become a popular writer—I feel it in my strength to refuse the poisonous suffrage of a public." 3

It would be unjust to say without qualification that Keats showed no interest in the public, for he sometimes speaks of service to a "public." In April, 1818 he writes that he "would jump down Ætna for any great Public good"; 4 and two weeks later he says: "I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good for the world." 5 However, the tenor of these remarks suggests that by public Keats means mankind, or his fellow men, rather than the readers of his own works; for, in the same letter that he mentions jumping down Aetna, he also says: "I never wrote one single Line of Poetry with the least Shadow of public thought." 6

Whatever Keats had in mind by "doing some good for the world," it is clear that he did not mean the use of poetry as a possible instrument for teaching, nor even as a persuasive device. In fact, as was pointed out earlier in this study, he

3Letters, II, 146.
4Ibid., I, 267.
5Ibid., 271.
6Ibid., 267.
disapproved of poetry intended for propaganda purposes: "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us";7 and, as he wrote to Shelley in 1820, if poetry "must have a purpose, which may be the God—an artist must serve Mammon."8

What, then, did Keats consider to be the proper effect of poetry? At most, he expected that poetry would have either a comforting influence, or an intellectually elevating effect, or both, on the reader. He first indicated his conception of the effect of poetry in "Sleep and Poetry" (1817) where both the comforting and the intellectually stimulating effects of poetry are mentioned:

... the great end
Of poesy, that it should be a friend
To soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man.9

In the same poem he describes the great poets as those who "tell the most heart-easing things."10 Another expression of this power to comfort that poetry possesses can be found in the famous opening lines of Endymion:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep

7Letters, I, 224.
8Ibid., II, 322.
9Poetical Works, p. 48.
10Ibid.
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

Keats also hints at this effect of poetry in a letter of 1818. Here he implies that poetry can comfort during times of grief, whereas knowledge, probably, cannot. He writes to Reynolds that "it is impossible to know how far knowledge will console 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." 12

Both "Sleep and Poetry" and Endymion were written at the beginning of Keats's poetic career. Yet, in his last major poem, The Fall of Hyperion, his conception of the effect of poetry remains the same. Poetry is a comforter of mankind and the true poet is one who "pours out a balm upon the World." 13

In Keats's poetry, then, the effect of poetry most often mentioned is that of comfort. In his letters, however, the more intellectual effect is described. Although Keats did not consider poetry to be an instrument of learning, he did recognize that poetry could stimulate the reader's thought and, perhaps, lead to profound meditation or noble aspirations. Early in his

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11 Poetical Works, p. 55.
12 Letters, I, 277-278. Editor's emendations.
13 Poetical Works, p. 408.
poetic career he expressed this idea in a letter to Reynolds:

"I have an idea that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner—let him on any certain day read a certain Page of full Poesy or distilled Prose and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect from it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it—until it becomes stale—but when will it do so? Never—When Man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting post towards all 'the two-and thirty Pallaces [sic]' 14 This idea—that poetry excites the mind to contemplation—is evident both in Keats's first "axiom" for poetry, where poetry "should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts"; 15 and in his remark upon "intensity," where, in great art, a "momentous depth of speculation" is "excited." 16 Both of these statements imply that the "depth of speculation excited" is at least a partial criterion of great art. If this effect is not produced upon the reader, then, in Keats's view, the work of art is not a success.

With regard to Keats's views on the way in which poetry

14 Letters, I, 231.
15 Ibid., 238.
16 Ibid., 192.
makes its effect, his only significant remarks occur in the "axioms" and the statement about "intensity," quoted at length in Chapter IV of this study. 17 In this connection it was pointed out that, according to Keats, art achieves its effect by stimulating the thought of the reader (or viewer) and by offering a blend of elements that is "exciting," but not so exciting as to become "unpleasant."

17 See pp. 57-59 above.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

It was stated in the introduction that the primary purpose of this study would be, not to interpret Keats's poetic principles anew, but, rather, to provide a clear and organized framework for an analysis of his critical remarks about his art. It was suggested that an organization of Keats's critical statements into four major divisions corresponding to the four key terms of poet, poem, poetry, and audience would present a pattern from which the principles of his aesthetic theory would emerge.

It is clear, in review, that of the four categories, Keats had the most to say about the poet. He was concerned with the characteristics of a great poet, with discovering the best way to secure such characteristics for himself, and with identifying the function of the poet. The characteristic that he mentions most frequently is the poetic imagination: a creative power through which the mind gains insight into reality not perceived by ordinary men. For Keats, until the end of 1818 at least, the imagination perceived this reality—or truth—by an
apprehension of its beauty. However, he frequently considered the possibility that the imagination might not be as reliable a guide to truth as reason; for, as early as May of 1818, he wrote that imagination supported by knowledge was more reliable than imagination alone. Generally, Keats became more and more tolerant of reason and knowledge as he matured. This same tendency to become more tolerant of reason and knowledge pertains also to his doctrine of negative capability. In December, 1817 he wrote of the desirability of being "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason"; yet in April, 1818, he wrote that he "can have no enjoyment in the World but continual drinking of Knowledge." There is one characteristic which Keats considered essential to the great poet and which, so far as can be determined from the evidence in his poetry and letters, he did not modify: the ability of the poet to lose his own identity and to assume the identity of the poetic object. In November of 1817 he wrote that "if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its

existence and pick about the Gravel"; and a similar sentiment is expressed by Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion*, which was written at the end of 1819:

'None can usurp this height,' return'd that shade, 
'But those to whom the miseries of the world 
'Are misery, and will not let them rest.'

These lines are a reminder of another of Keats's thoughts upon the nature of the poet. As he became convinced of the necessity for obtaining knowledge, he also realized that experience was important for the poet; and, he hoped that this experience combined with his native imagination and his acquired knowledge would eventually lead him to the understanding of nature which he so earnestly sought.

Although it was third in the order in which the categories were discussed in this study, Keats's discussion of poetry—the nature of the art itself—comes next to his discussion of the poet in order of magnitude. In his discussion of poetry, Keats mentioned three elements which he considered essential to great poetry: intensity, contrast, and beauty. Intensity is a quality which is both objective and subjective. While the art object displays intensity—a unity or wholeness to which all elements contribute—it also excites intensity in the beholder—it allows

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5 *Letters*, I, 186.

him to become intense without becoming uncomfortable. Contrast is a union of opposites: an effective linking of contrary qualities; and it serves the poet as light and shade serve the painter.

Early in his poetic career at least, Keats looked upon beauty—the characteristic most frequently associated with his poetic theory—as a guide to truth. Later, when he admitted a possible separation of the two, he remained steadfast in his love for beauty and he implied that, even if false, beauty could still be enjoyed aesthetically. Probably, the fluctuation in his belief in beauty as a guide to truth was due to a growing concern for what he referred to as "philosophy" (knowledge and understanding). Judging from the evidence in his letters and in his poetry, it seems likely that, during his last creative period (April through September of 1819), Keats decided that poetry built solely upon a love of beauty would lead to mere illusion, whereas poetry strengthened by philosophy and experience could give genuine comfort to the world. Although he most often preferred the ideal world of poetry to the real world of existence, he occasionally felt uncertain of the ultimate value of poetry and feared that it would have little or no worth in an encounter with reality.

He devoted comparatively little attention to two of the categories: those of poem and audience. His criticism of the

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7 See pp. 63-65 above.
poem was more often general than specific. He preferred to discuss his impressions rather than to analyse details. However, he was concerned with detail in his own poems and he revised them carefully. In his letters, remarks about the poem refer primarily to three elements: form, language, and subject matter. He frequently remarks on his search for the most suitable form, the most precise language, and the most proper subject matter.

Keats had the least to say about the audience, the final category treated in this study; and, for the most part, he was unconcerned with the pleasure or displeasure of his personal audience. His few statements about the audience concern the proper effect of poetry: that is, that it should comfort man, or intellectually stimulate him, or, better yet, do both.

It is evident from this study, and, indeed, from most other studies of Keats's thought, that, of the four categories, the one dealing with the concept of the poet was the most important to him. Indeed, very few of his longer letters are without some reference to the nature of the poet. In view of the time in which he lived, this concern is, of course, not unexpected; for, to repeat M.H. Abrams: "Almost all the major critics of the English romantic generation phrased definitions or key statements showing a parallel alignment from work to poet. Poetry is the overflow, utterance, or projection of the thoughts and feelings of the poet; or else (in the chief variant formulation) poetry
is defined in terms of the imaginative process which modifies and synthesizes the images, thoughts, and feelings of the poet.²

In addition to according first importance to the poet, Keats had certain other characteristics in common with his fellow Romantics: a lesser interest in both the elements involved in the composition of the artifact (the poem) and in the effect of the work of art (the audience); an emphasis on the imagination as a perceptive faculty; an almost total absorption of the poet in his work; and a preference for the ideal rather than the real. Besides providing evidence for the characteristics Keats had in common with other Romantics, this study shows that there are several characteristics which distinguish Keats from them: his doctrines of negative capability and intensity; his denunciation of the use of poetry for the purposes of self-analysis and exhibitionism; the number of observations found in his letters on the art of poetry; and the patient consideration and revisions of his own poetry evident in the manuscripts of his work.

There has been a great deal of discussion in recent critical works (and in this study also) of the conflict of ideas which can be found in Keats's letters—the conflict between such pairs of opposites as imagination and reason, negative capability and knowledge, poetry and philosophy, and the ideal and the real;

and much of the discussion has been devoted to Keats's gradual acceptance of the latter quality in each pair. However, considering the fragmentary character of the letters, the untrustworthiness of Keats's syntax, and those "vagaries" which he attributed to his own "camelion" [sic] nature, it is sometimes dangerous to attempt to demonstrate a consistent development. Keats's tendency to be at times inconsistent can be illustrated by a selection of remarks on a single theme taken consecutively. On November 22, 1817, he said: I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning. Then, on March 25, 1818, in an apparent change of heart, he wrote:

Oh never will the prize
High reason, and the lore of good and ill
Be my award;

and he continued this thought in a letter written on April 24, 1818: "I know nothing I have read nothing and I mean to follow Solomon's directions of 'get Wisdom--get understanding'--I find cavalier days are gone by. I find that I can have no enjoyment in the World but continual drinking of Knowledge." Yet, on

9*Letters*, I, 185.
10Ibid., 262.
11Ibid., 271.
December 31, 1818, he apparently reverted to the sentiments expressed nearly a year before: "I can never feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its beauty." Perhaps the safest course in tracing Keats's development would be one similar to that followed by Claude Lee Finney, who writes that it is impossible "to formulate a consistent philosophy of poetry which applies to all of his poems. In no two of his long poems, and in very few of his short poems, did he express the same ideal of life and poetry. In each one of his poems, however, he expressed the ideas which he held on the day or days on which he composed it." Despite the inconsistencies in the letters, there is clear evidence of a struggle toward a position opposite to his starting point; and it is hoped that this study indicates such a trend, as well as fulfilling its more important purpose of providing a methodical organization of Keats's critical principles.

12 Letters, II, 19.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Rita Claire Callan 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.

May 20, 1960
Date

Signature of Adviser