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"THE DREAMS OF GODS": THE IMPLICATIONS OF KEATS'S
THOUGHT ON MEN'S CIRCUMSTANCES, ON
IMAGINATION, AND ON POETRY

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A Thesis
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ABSTRACT

"THE DREAMS OF GODS": THE IMPLICATIONS OF KEATS'S THOUGHT ON MEN'S CIRCUMSTANCES, ON IMAGINATION, AND ON POETRY

Antonio Iacovino

Recently, the "realist" critics of Keats seem to be held in the greatest esteem. Less influential are the critics who view him as a visionary. As a result of this situation, Keats's vision of love, beauty, and harmony is often reduced from a prophecy of mankind's highest potential to a form of escapism. The present author, therefore, tries to achieve a more balanced view of Keats based on established critical positions together with a re-inspection of Keats's texts.

Briefly, the problem in question is that of how Keats's notion of poetic beauty forms a constructive response to his evaluation of men and their "harsh" circumstances. This problem involves the main terms of truth, poet, dream, beauty, and poetry. As this list suggests, the problem breaks down into five issues which the following thesis statement resolves: Keats's reaction to men and their circumstances is an aesthetic-moral one which makes him wish to benefit mankind by refining its vision and leaving mankind a legacy of poetic beauty.

Next, a comparison of Keats with other romantic writers reveals that he shares a number of important thoughts with them. Moreover, some of Keats's thoughts remain of value today, such as those on imaginative perception and on the poet's responsibility. Finally, these last two areas of Keats's thought, among others, are seen to furnish the subject matter for further study.

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PREFACE

About two hundred years after Keats's birth, despite the many transformations which critical opinion has undergone, critics are still justified in examining his work. Near the beginning of Keatsian studies, the Victorian critics, of course, view him as a sensual aesthete who loves physical beauty and not much else. Later, through the efforts of critics such as Thorpe, Keats's importance as a thinker receives due recognition both on the British and American sides of the Atlantic. Among the critics who recognize the importance of Keats's thought, at least two groups seem to emerge: the critics in one group view Keats as a down to earth "realist;" those in the other group view him more as a visionary.

Recently, the critics who view Keats as a "realist" seem to have gained the greatest esteem. Indeed, much justification exists for their doing so. These critics are the first to reveal how Keats boldly confronts the "harsh" circumstances of his life and how, subsequently, he develops a concept of beauty which allows him to write a poetry reflecting his sense of moral responsibility. The most convincing view of Keats as "realist" comes from Walter J. Bate. Among numerous additional contributions, Bate traces the sobering effect of "associationism" on Keats, elucidates the latter's notion of "intensity" by which beauty and truth "approximate" one another, and points

out Keats's concern about the welfare of mankind. Other important critics maintain similar views, but with less cogent results. As Perkins argues, perhaps at too great length, Keats becomes highly disillusioned with the ideal. Later Stillinger portrays a highly skeptical Keats and Dickstein a somewhat existential Keats. In their enthusiasm, however, these critics magnify a part of Keats's thought so that it appears to be the whole. This emphasis on a part of Keats's thought has the effect of distorting their interpretation of his poetry.

Opposed to the above critics are those who tend to stress the various aspects of Keats as visionary. Among the latter critics, Murry is one of the earliest and most respected. He views Keats's "prophetic element" as fundamental. A second critic Beyer has comparable views. He argues that Keats's imagination allows Keats to have important "transcendental visions" of love and beauty. The critic Wasserman holds a more moderate view. He skillfully traces Keats's imagination to "heaven's bourne," but concedes that this "bourne" corresponds only to a state of "Maiden-Thought." Even more moderate than Wasserman is Gérard. After managing to describe closely certain aspects of Keats's imagination, Gérard states that Keats eventually becomes reconciled to the "harsh" circumstances of life. Despite the overall lucidity and competence of these critics, they are not as influential as might be expected, especially in most recent times.

The more limited influence of the above critics is perhaps an

indication of their having the harder task, for unlike the familiar figure of the "realist," the visionary still retains an aura of mystery which makes him seem unknowable, unreliable, and irrelevant. The visionary may, consequently, be more difficult to present convincingly. In accord with the waning influence of the visionary viewpoint, recent critics tend to reduce Keats's vision of love, beauty, and harmony from an exemplary prophecy of the best qualities of mankind to a form of fanciful escapism. Hence, these critics underestimate not only Keats's censure of "harsh" circumstances but also his stress of the imagination. The present author, therefore, tries to modify what seem to be exaggerations about Keats as "realist," to shed light on the nature of Keats's imagination, and to show the valuable effects of Keats's imagination on his poetry. In this way, a more balanced organization of known material and a cogent recasting of viewpoint may result.

In a nutshell, the problem to be resolved is that of how Keats's view of "harsh" circumstances affects the development of his thought on poetry. The solution to this problem implies one all-inclusive question: how does Keats's notion of poetic beauty form a constructive response to his evaluation of men and their "harsh" circumstances? This question, in turn, involves the main terms of truth, poet, dream, beauty, and poetry. Since these terms do not have any peculiar or specified sense, and since a main purpose of this study is to find what these concepts mean for Keats,

giving arbitrary definitions of them at this point does not seem of much avail.

As the list of main concepts suggests, the above problem breaks down into five issues, each of which comprises a separate chapter. The first chapter deals with Keats's evaluation of men, their circumstances, and the resulting effect on his decision to keep writing poetry. The second chapter concerns the effect of this evaluation on Keats's view of the poet and of creativity. Similarly, the third chapter deals with the effect of this same evaluation on Keats's faith in dreaming. The fourth chapter considers how Keats deals with the conflicting aspects of beauty and the fifth considers the role which poetry itself plays for Keats. Finally, the thesis statement which resolves these issues is: Keats's reaction to men and their circumstances is an aesthetic-moral one which makes him wish to benefit mankind by refining its vision and leaving mankind a legacy of poetic beauty.

The method of investigation consists of examining inductively, thematically, and chronologically the poetry and letters of Keats. Firstly, this method entails the drawing of an inference only after an examination of as much evidence as possible. Of course, not all evidence but only the most illuminating finally enters the study. Secondly, the method involves looking into the parts of poems or letters that shed light on a specific theme rather than examining a few selected poems in their entirety. In this way, the study is

more thorough and accurate. Thirdly, the method entails examining the poems and letters according to the order of their composition so as to facilitate the tracing of any development in Keats's thought. Lastly, at pertinent points, the opinions of critics who have written on similar subjects are verified or disputed, as the case may be.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The present author wishes to acknowledge a large debt to earlier scholars of Keats who made the task of interpretation considerably easier for all who follow them. Secondly, thanks are due to Professor Auchinachie who has been a liberal minded advisor, a thorough critic of the present work, and a reliable aid in every situation which arose. Also, Professor Egan of the philosophy department at Concordia generously gave useful advice on aesthetics. Finally, Professor Pechter deserves thanks for having helped resolve a minor but urgent problem at the library.

CHAPTER I

MEN, THEIR "HARSH" EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES, AND KEATS'S DECISION TO WRITE POETRY

The writing of poetry is for Keats a moral and aesthetic reaction to his evaluation of men and the circumstances in which they live. Keats finds the generality of ordinary men to be immoral and vulgar and their circumstances incongruous with his ideals. The kind of aid that Keats knows himself able to give in order to ameliorate the situation is not that of the practical benefactor but that of the socially concerned poet. Keats's low opinion of ordinary men is seen in several of his letters dating from the years 1817 to 1820.

Two examples of Keats's opinion are in the statements he makes to his friends Bailey and Reynolds. In his letter to Reynolds of April 17 and 18, 1817, Keats makes one of his earliest, if not most telling statements. He censures the poor taste of the English government for allowing the debauchery of soldiers to take place within the natural scenery at Newport. Keats states, "I saw some extensive Barracks which disgusted me extremely with Government for placing such a Nest of Debauchery in so beautiful a place." Furthermore, Keats continues, "In the room where I slept at Newport I found this on the Window 'O Isle spoilt by the Military.'"¹ Later that same year, Keats expresses a more strictly moral censure which is accompanied

¹ Hyder E. Rollins, ed., The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1958), I.131-132. Subsequent references to the letters of Keats are from this edition.

by contempt. To Bailey on November 3, 1817, he characterizes men as a "parcel of knaves and fools."²

What is perhaps Keats's most comprehensive statement on this subject occurs in his letter to Haydon of December 22, 1818. "I admire Human Nature but I do not like Men--" emphasizes Keats. "I should like to compose things honourable to Man--" he continues, "but not fingerable over by Men."³ Keats's generalization implies that he admires the "Human Nature" embodied in a few great men and that he thinks average men too crude to appreciate his poetry.⁴

Keats's statement on the military raises two questions which are less directly related to the argument above. Firstly, his moral censure of the debauchery of the military seems to indicate on Keats's part a priggish attitude towards women. He, however, is no prig, at least as far as this letter is concerned, for immediately after this moral censure he declares that he does not at all mind if women are slightly "profligate." Secondly, Keats notices the despoiling effect of the military on the natural scenery. This observation by Keats is only one instance of the general concern with a serious and growing problem. At this time, the English countryside is beginning to show some of the devastating effects which a period of "unchecked" industrialization is to have. For further details on this matter, see George M. Trevelyan's English Social History: A Survey of Six Centuries, Chaucer to Queen Victoria (London: Longmans and Green, 1942), pp. 463-464.

² Rollins, I.179.

³ Rollins, I.415.

A further disparagement of average men by Keats may be found in his letter to Dilke of March 4, 1820 (Rollins, Letters, II.272).

⁴ On the other hand, the poet William Wordsworth in his "Preface to the Second Edition of Several of the Foregoing Poems, Published, with an Additional Volume, Under the Title of 'Lyrical Ballads,'" The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth, ed. Ernest De Selincourt and H[elen] Darbishire

Even Keats's admiration for great men, however, is not unqualified. Almost a year before his praise of "Human Nature," Keats states in a letter to Bailey of January 23, 1818, that "The best of Men have but a portion of good in them."⁵ Despite the misgivings which Keats continues to have, he shows a genuine admiration for great men, especially the two writers Shakespeare and Milton. Concerning the latter, he writes to Rice on March 24, 1818, and asks, "Did Milton do more good or ha[r]m to the world?"⁶ Keats then answers his own question by mentioning only the good Milton did:

He wrote let me inform you . . . Lycidas, Comus, Paradise Lost and other Poems, with much delectable prose--he was moreover an active friend to Man all his life and has been since his death.⁷

In fact, Keats's admiration for the great writers Milton and Shakespeare, as he tells Bailey on August 14, 1819, is second only to his admiration for "the human friend Philosopher" next to whom "a fine writer is the most genuine Being in the World."⁸ As seen above, although Keats censures average

2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), II, 386, asserts that his "principal object" in writing poetry is to portray "incidents and situations from common life," since "in that condition, the essential passions of the heart find a better soil, in which they can attain their maturity." Wordsworth's opinion of average men is in sharp contrast to Keats's.

⁵ Rollins, I.210.

⁶ Rollins, I.255.

⁷ Rollins, I.255.

⁸ Rollins, II.139.

men, he does admire great men. This admiration, moreover, makes him wish to help mankind through the writing of poetry.

Most critics agree that Keats wishes to help mankind, but they are not nearly so certain that he wishes to do so through poetry. Important critics see a mutually exclusive division, or dichotomy in Keats's thought between the alternatives of leading the active life of the benefactor to mankind or leading the detached life of the poet. These critics go on to say that Keats finally prefers the active life of the benefactor to that of the poet. To the mind of the present author, the opinion of these critics is mistaken. Therefore, after representing their opinion, the author will endeavour first to show why it is mistaken and then to put forth reasons for his own opinion that Keats is primarily dedicated to being a poet.

One of the most adamant of critics supporting the supposition that Keats wished to be an active benefactor is Bayley. This critic holds that "whatever may appear to the contrary his [Keats's] lack of belief in writing poetry, just because he had the genius to write it, was fundamental."⁹ More recently, the critic Stillinger has studied the question in Keats's mind of "whether he [Keats] should continue his efforts or give poetry over for some more active and socially

⁹ John Bayley, "Keats and Reality," Proceedings of the British Academy, 48 (1962), facsimile rpt. in Keats and Reality ([Folcroft, Pennsylvania]: Folcroft Press, 1969), p. 35.

useful career."¹⁰ Stillinger's argument on this issue is detailed and may be taken as representative.¹¹ He argues that near the end of his career Keats had grave doubts about the value of writing poetry and that in "The Fall of Hyperion" Keats states a preference for the active benefactor over the poet:

Keats wished to establish the categories of non-poet humanist (the highest), humanist poet (the next best), and dreamer-poet (the lowest), and to affirm that there is some use in poetry.¹²

Stillinger's conclusion, unfortunately, is finally based on a passage which Keats wished to have deleted because it runs contrary to the main thrust of the poem. Stillinger, while recognizing these two difficulties, fails to account

¹⁰ Jack Stillinger, The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 13.

¹¹ Two other critics make the same point, though to a lesser degree. Douglas Bush in "Keats," Keats: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Walter J. Bate (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1964), p. 39 mentions that Keats prefers doing to writing and cites lines from a letter to Reynolds of August 24, 1819, to support his belief. In this letter Keats states, "I am convinced more and more day by day that fine writing is next to fine doing" (Rollins, II.146). Bush, however, takes these lines out of their proper context in order to make his point. Besides, the lines are far from sufficient proof that Keats prefers the active benefactor over the poet and that the two are mutually exclusive. David Perkins too, in The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth Shelley and Keats (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 281 makes the point. After using part of the 'disputed passage' to document his belief, he affirms that Keats makes "an indiscriminating attack on all visionaries," though he quickly makes the qualification that this reaction is "temporary."

¹² Stillinger, p. 64.

for them properly and, therefore, fails to justify not only the use of the passage but also the conclusion he draws.

The first difficulty which Stillinger recognizes is that Keats wished to have lines 187-210 deleted from the first book of "The Fall of Hyperion." As both Murry¹³ and Bate¹⁴ point out, Woodhouse who is the sole authority on the matter states that "Keats seems to have intended to erase [emphasis mine] them," meaning lines 187-210.¹⁵ Stillinger's inadequate way of dealing with this fact is to try to show in a footnote that Woodhouse's statement is only a "critical conjecture" and a mistaken one at that.¹⁶ Stillinger's evidence for his belief that Woodhouse is mistaken, however, is too scanty and of too circumstantial a nature to be convincing. This fact all but removes entirely the ground of Stillinger's conclusion.

In addition, some of the internal evidence of "The Fall of Hyperion" is detrimental to his argument. Since the narrator-poet is saved from "rotting" on the steps of the temple prior to what transpires in the 'disputed passage,' as Murry points out,¹⁷ the further distinction between the

¹³ John M. Murry, Keats, 4th ed. (London, 1955; rpt. [New York]: Minerva Press, 1968), p. 239.

¹⁴ Walter J. Bate, John Keats (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), p. 599.

¹⁵ Murry, p. 239.

¹⁶ Stillinger, p. 63, n. 23.

¹⁷ Murry, p. 243

"poet" and the "dreamer" and the condemnation of the "dreamer," all of which occur in this passage, cannot very easily apply to the saved narrator-poet. Stillinger fails to deal with the facts which comprise this second difficulty. He merely begs the question by taking for granted that "the general drift [of Keats's argument] is unmistakable."¹⁸ In assessing the criticism of Stillinger and those Harvardian critics who hold similar views, Dickstein makes the valid remark that they are inclined "To reduce him to a realist and naturalist."¹⁹ Whether Stillinger is right or wrong on this particular passage is no great matter in itself, since no single passage usually clinches or falsifies a position maintained. A consideration, therefore, of what Keats says before and after "The Fall of Hyperion" on the dichotomy in his mind between the alternatives of benefactor or poet may help resolve the debate.

In the consideration or, more accurately, reevaluation of the importance of this dichotomy, perhaps the first task is to show that Keats does not admire the benefactors of mankind to the degree that is assumed by the critics mentioned above. The second task is to show that Keats does indeed know the value of writing poetry. With respect to the former task, it might be well to remind the reader that although Keats

¹⁸ Stillinger, p. 64.

¹⁹ Morris Dickstein, Keats and His Poetry: A Study in Development (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. xiv.

himself expresses the wish to do public good he suspects to some degree the motives of all great men. The great benefactors are no exception and Keats states his distrust of them in a letter to the George Keatses written from February 14, 1819, to May 3, 1819:

Very few [men] have been influenced by a pure desire of the benefit of others--in the greater part of the Benefactors (of) & to Humanity some meretricious motive has sullied their greatness--some melodramatic scenery has fascinated [sic] them.²⁰

Keats's distrust of great benefactors is coupled with the realization that he is unsuited to their life. Furthermore, the value of their life is less than what he might have sometime thought. In "Ode on Indolence," a poem written in the spring of the same year, Keats expresses his doubt:

O, for an age so shelter'd from annoy,
That I may never know how change the moons,
Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!²¹

In view of the contents of these lines, the critic Kroeber is correct to point out how easy it is to "overestimate Keats's praise of busy do-gooders."²²

²⁰ Rollins, II.79.

²¹ Stanza V. Subsequent references to the poetry of Keats are from The Poetical Works of John Keats, ed. Heathcote W. Garrod, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958).

²² Karl Kroeber, The Artifice of Reality: Poetic Style in Wordsworth, Foscolo, Keats and Leopardi (Madison and Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964), p. 150.

At this point, an important objection must be taken up, for the influence of renaissance ideals on Keats's notion of the active benefactor is plainly visible. Indeed, Keats has

Keats rejects not only the life of a politician or social reformer, as implied in "Ode on Indolence," but also the life of an adventurer abroad. In this regard he writes to Sarah Jeffrey on June 9, 1819, "For all this I will not go on board an Indiaman, nor for examples [sic] sake run my head into dark alleys."²³ Passages similar to this one have made the critic Gérard conclude that "Fortunately for English poetry, Keats was neither a politician nor a civil servant, nor a soldier."²⁴

Besides rejecting these active ways of helping men, Keats, had he the means of livelihood, would also reject a

plenty of opportunity to learn of renaissance ideals from such writers as Spenser and Shakespeare who are known to have influenced him. In this regard, the critic Lionel Trilling is helpful. In his essay "The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters," The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism (New York: Viking Press, 1955), Trilling shows a tacit knowledge of this influence and advantageously brings this knowledge to bear on Keats's thought and behaviour. Although the present author agrees that renaissance ideals of courtly behaviour, "honour," and active loyalty to friends may have been an influence on Keats's "geniality" (p. 6) and his "mature masculinity" (p. 24), these ideals do not turn Keats into a hero. Therefore, to the extent that Trilling's view of Keats is just, it does not contradict but merely expands on the view of Keats presented above.

²³ Rollins, II.116.

²⁴ Albert Gérard, "Romance and Reality: Continuity and Growth in Keats's View of Art," Keats-Shelley Journal, 11 (1962), 18.

A further support for the view that Keats does not wish to lead an "active" life is in his dislike of Byron who furnishes a conspicuous example of the active man and poet. So far as Keats is concerned, Byron sees life in too "literal" a fashion and is a man who "cuts a figure--but . . . is not figurative" (Rollins, Letters, II.67). Keats seems to consider the heroic life of Byron too shallow to provide spiritual fulfilment.

life of practically-oriented writing such as journalism. In a letter to Dilke of September 22, 1819, Keats uses extremely uncomplimentary language to describe his disapproval of journalism which he feels forced to take up. "Yea I will traffic [sic],"²⁵ he tells Dilke. Then to show what little talent the occupation requires Keats says, "You may be up to the slang of a cock pit in three battles."²⁶ Finally, in ironic reassurance to Dilke Keats asserts, "I shall be able to cheat as well as any literary Jew of the market."²⁷

For reasons similar to those which make him wish to avoid journalism, Keats knows himself to be unsuited to the life of a popular writer. He considers becoming one, but his moral and aesthetic viewpoint prevents him from doing so. He tells Haydon on March 8, 1819, "with respect to my livelihood I will not write for it, for I will not mix with that most vulgar of all crowds the literary."²⁸ In the same vein, Keats writes to Reynolds on August 24, 1819, "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."²⁹ Keats cannot bow to the coarse demands of a reading public.

²⁵ Rollins, II.178.

²⁶ Rollins, II.179.

²⁷ Rollins, II.179.

²⁸ Rollins, II.43.

²⁹ Rollins, II.146.

As implied by Bush,³⁰ the delicacy of Keats's sensibility, given articulation in his moral and aesthetic viewpoint, is perhaps underestimated at the present time.

The second major task in the revaluation of the dichotomy seen in Keats's thought is that of showing, contrary to what the critics above think, that Keats fully appreciates the value of poetry. Admittedly, Keats periodically expresses grave doubts about poetry. For example, he writes to Brown about June 21, 1820 (Rollins says the date is only approximate), "This shall be my last trial; not succeeding, I shall try what I can do in the Apothecary line."³¹ Keats, however, continues to write poetry almost to the end of his life. These doubts, therefore, seem to be momentary ones rather than permanent ones effectively able to make him change careers.

Some of the most convincing evidence that Keats indeed wishes to be a poet is that he is well aware of the ill consequences which may ensue. In his letter to Sarah Jeffrey of June 9, 1819, Keats acknowledges the possible misery of being a poet and even accepts this misery as a precondition. Keats states, "One of the great reasons that the english have produced the finest writers in the world; is,

³⁰ Douglas Bush, "Keats and His Ideas," in The Major English Romantic Poets: A Symposium in Reappraisal, ed. Clarence D. Thorpe, Carlos Baker, and Bennett Weaver (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1957); p. 231.

³¹ Rollins, II.298.

that the English world has ill-treated them during their lives."³² After accepting the harshness of being "a miserable and mighty Poet of the human Heart,"³³ Keats takes a constructive view to the writing of poetry; consequently, among his main ambitions in life, two are concerned with the improvement of the literary field. He tells Bailey on August 14, 1819:

One of my Ambitions is to make as great a revolution in modern dramatic writing as Kean has done in acting-- another to upset the drawling of the blue stocking literary world--if in the course of a few years I do these two things I ought to die content.³⁴

These two ambitions indicate that Keats is well aware of the effect which poetry may possibly have on a significant number of people. Thus in this case, the notion which the critics mentioned above have, that Keats considers writing to be useless and the writer to be removed from society, is not able to stand up to the facts.³⁵

Finally, Keats's dedication to poetry may be seen in the fact that even when he fears himself to be dying prematurely,

³² Rollins, II.115.

³³ Rollins, II.115.

³⁴ Rollins, II.139.

³⁵ In connection with the same point, the reader may recall that Keats praises Milton as "an active friend" to men not only during Milton's life but also "since his death." From this statement, it may be inferred that the way Milton can be "an active friend" to men after his death is through the influence of his writing, important in this case, through his poetry. Once again, the notion that Keats considers writing useless and the writer too detached is inadequate to the facts.

he thinks only of the great poetry he might have written, not of the socially beneficial deeds he might have carried out. He states to Fanny Brawne (Rollins guesses) around February (?) 1820:

'I have left no immortal work behind me--nothing to make my friends proud of my memory but I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remember'd.³⁶

This wish to leave behind a great work of poetry, repeated more than once in different letters when Keats is weighing the value of his life's work against the possibility of death, seems to indicate beyond a reasonable doubt that Keats is dedicated to writing before anything else.

The same moral and aesthetic viewpoint which has resulted in Keats's low opinion of men results also in his profound disenchantment with the circumstances or prevailing conditions in which the events of their lives take place. Keats expresses his sense of disenchantment even in his earliest work. For example, in "To Chatterton" he compares the pathetic destiny of that poet to the destruction of a flower by the forces of its harsh environment:

Oh! how nigh
Was night to thy fair morning. Thou didst die
A half-blown flow'ret which cold blasts amate.

In fact, so aware is Keats of this hostile world that at this

³⁶ Rollins, II.263.

early stage he thinks poets should not indulge so much in depicting the darker side of life. Keats censures morbid poetry in "Sleep and Poetry," saying of it that

[T]rees uptorn
Darkness, and worms, and shrouds, and sepulchres
Delight it; for it feeds upon the burrs,
And thorns of life; forgetting the great end.

(242-245)

Further examples of Keats's disenchantment with the circumstances of life are in Endymion a poem of 1817. In one instance, upon awakening from sleep, the hero despairs at finding that the woman who is for him the paragon of beauty has disappeared. He cries, "Yes, thrice have I this fair enchantment seen;/ Once more been tortured with renewed life" (I.918-919).

These examples have been chosen from Keats's earlier works in order to bring to light his early disenchantment, which tends to be overlooked. Moreover, the examples need not be multiplied because most critics take Keats's disenchantment as a fact. Two critics who argue the point well are Havens and Gérard. The former notices "the impact of harsh experience" on Keats and the subsequent "disappointment with reality."³⁷ Similarly, Gérard notices in Keats's mind a sense of "the incongruity of the ideal and the actual."³⁸

³⁷ Raymond. D. Havens, "Of Beauty and Reality in Keats," Journal Of English Literary History, 17 (1950), 206. In addition to being well argued, this article is clearly written and fully documented.

³⁸ Gérard, p. 19. I am flattered to find myself so much in agreement with Gérard on this particular point that we have both independently used the same term of "incongruity" to elucidate Keats's view of the circumstances of life.

Keats finds that the circumstances in which men live are not only incongruous but also deceptive to the rational mind. As early as in the year 1816, Keats expresses in "Sleep and Poetry" a dissatisfaction when his imaginative poetic vision is replaced by a more earthly view:

The visions all are fled--the car is fled
Into the light of heaven, and in their stead
A sense of real things comes doubly strong,
And, like a muddy stream, would bear along
My soul to nothingness.

(155-159)

Important to note is the contrast between "light of heaven" and "a muddy stream." The former phrase suggests the clear-sighted serenity afforded by poetic vision and the latter suggests the troubled obscurity which a more earthly view yields.

Later, in a different context, Keats has the hero of Endymion express the same dissatisfaction with the earthly view of the circumstances of life. The hero finds

'That those deceptions which for pleasure go
'Mong men, are pleasures real as real my be:
But there are higher ones I may not see,
If impiously an earthly realm I take.'

(IV.851-854)

So far, Keats does not directly renounce the rational mind. He does renounce it, however, in his letter to Bailey of March 13, 1818. "I do not think myself more in the right than other people," Keats begins. He then adds, "Nothing in this world is proveable."³⁹ Furthermore, in this same letter

Keats reaffirms his renunciation of the rational mind in stating, "I shall never be a Reasoner, because I care not to be in the right."⁴⁰ Keats then playfully threatens to conjure up and prove, by means of logic, the existence of the type of circumstances understandable to the narrowly rational mind;

So you must not stare if in any future letter I endeavour to prove that Apollo as he had a cat gut string to his Lyre used a cats' [sic] paw as a Pecten-- and further from said Pecten's reiterated and continual teasing came the term Hen peck'd.⁴¹

By presenting Bailey with this little sketch of nonsensical circumstances, Keats is playfully mocking the perceiving power of the rational mind and is exposing the inadequacy of what is knowable through the rational mind.

As with Keats's disenchantment with the circumstances of life, his dislike of the rational mind is generally conceded to be a fact. The opinions of the critics Jones and Sperry are pertinent instances of the belief in this dislike. The former, in discussing Keats's use of the term 'intellect' remarks, "Nor is he setting out to promote the analytic function of mind."⁴² More recently, Sperry observes how "ingrained" was Keats's "antipathy for the abstractions of

³⁹ Rollins, I.242.

⁴⁰ Rollins, I.243.

⁴¹ Rollins, I.243-244.

⁴² John Jones, John Keats's Dream of Truth (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1969), p. 118.

systematic or 'consequitive' reasoning."⁴³ This dislike of Keats's, since taken for granted, probably does not require further stressing.

As implied above in Keats's dislike of the rational mind, he finds truth important, especially since his wish to help mankind requires that he know the truth about men and their circumstances. This truth is not always pleasant, with the result that Keats sees it from differing, even conflicting viewpoints. In this attempt to find a reason or justification for the suffering of men, Keats finally comes to an uneasy reconciliation with truth and manages to gain a limited measure of relief from his intellectual anguish.

Firstly, in the case that it happens to involve favourable circumstances, Keats has no difficulty in accepting truth. For example, even a simple act of friendship makes Keats highly appreciative, as a glance at his poem of 1816, "To a

⁴³ Stuart M. Sperry, Keats the Poet (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 9.

Keats's dislike of the rational mind does not imply a complete rejection of knowledge. In this respect, the critic Geoffrey H. Hartman provides some valuable commentary in his essay "Romanticism and 'Anti-Self-Consciousness,'" Romanticism and Consciousness: Essays in Criticism, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton, 1970), p. 48. Although Hartman utilizes the notion of "Anti-Self-Consciousness" beyond its explanatory capacity and perhaps overemphasizes its importance in an understanding of the romantics, he makes the valid observation that Keats, like other romantics, is attempting to effectively deal with intellectual "morbidity" and the fixation of "self-consciousness." Hartman goes on to say that Keats's way of doing so is not to "limit knowledge but to convert it into an energy finer than intellectual." He thereby achieves, Hartman thinks, an experience and "redemption" which are the opposite of naïveté.

Friend who Sent Me Some Roses," reveals:

But when, O Wells! thy roses came to me
My sense with their deliciousness was spell'd:
Soft voices had they, that with tender plea
Whisper'd of peace, and truth, and friendliness
unquell'd.

In these lines, sensuous "deliciousness" is effectively compared with a moral fulfilment in which a large part of humanity is implicated: the sense of "deliciousness" resulting from the beauty, softness, and scent of the roses is, through the instrument of the whispering roses, translated into the sense of moral fulfilment resulting from generalized "peace," "truth," and "friendliness."

Keats's favourable attitude towards truth cannot always stand the test of his experience and changes accordingly. In the early poem Endymion for example, though truth is praised several times, during one incident the character Glaucus refers to truth as if it were a weapon of vengeance for an evil agent:

'That curst magician's name fell icy numb
Upon my wild conjecturing: truth had come
Naked and sabre-like against my heart.

(III.555-557)

Glaucus attempts to run from the truth of his circumstances, but although Keats may temporarily sympathize with his character, he cannot do the same. As a result, Keats handles a somewhat parallel incident differently. During this next incident, the hero Endymion despairs of being able to cope with

a truth which is too overbearing. Here, however, the narrator has the last word:

Endymion! unhappy! it nigh grieves
Me to behold thee thus in last extreme:
Ensky'd ere this, but truly that I deem
Truth the best music in a first-born song.

(IV.770-773)

In contrast to the flight of Glaucus, Keats has the narrator face and exalt the truth.

This reconciliation with truth in the poem Endymion is temporary. A second example of Keats's conflicting attitudes to truth is in the poem "Hyperion." Here too, in one incident, the goddess Thea sees truth as something diseased and 'monstrous.' Later in the poem, however, in his address to his fellow gods, Oceanus calls this same truth a 'comfort':

'Yet listen, ye who will, whilst I bring proof
'How Ye, perforce, must be content to stoop:
'And in the proof much comfort will I give,
'If ye will take that comfort in its truth.'

(II.177-180)

After this preliminary step in reconciling the gods with truth, Oceanus praises it as 'eternal.' Furthermore, he considers foolish those gods who find truth to be painful:

'O folly! for to bear all naked truths,
'And to envisage circumstance, all calm,
'That is the top of sovereignty.'

(II.203-205)

Having praised truth in these various ways, Oceanus ends his speech with an exhortation to his fellow gods. 'Receive

the truth and let it be your balm' (II.243), he declares. This final praise of truth in medicinal terms is for Keats a praise of the highest order, as remains to be seen.

Keats expands on the idea of how men may be able to "bear" all truths in the journal letter he writes to the George Keatses during the early months of 1819. He first admits to himself that suffering is inevitable and then that men cannot improve themselves more than their "World of Pains and troubles"⁴⁴ permits. Next, instead of accepting the conclusion that the world is only "a vale of tears" and arriving at an impasse, Keats postulates that the world is 'The vale of Soul-making.'⁴⁵ In Keats's thought, pain is necessary because only from the experience of the suffering "heart" can the "Mind" draw its "identity" and become an individual soul. When it is seen in this light, Keats finds the truth about pain and suffering to be bearable and even to be a kind of religious comfort, though the lasting quality of Keats's comfort must not be overstressed.

Although Keats finds much to censure in men and the incongruous circumstances of their lives, he genuinely admires a few great men and wishes to help mankind by becoming a poet. Far from thinking this occupation useless, he actively plans to change the knowledge and practice of literary writing through some "immortal work" and thereby to

⁴⁴ Rollins, II.102.

⁴⁵ Rollins, II.102.

be a friend to mankind. In addition, Keats's moral and aesthetic viewpoint makes him dissatisfied with the rational mind and the perception of external circumstances which it achieves. Understandably, Keats puts a large importance on truth. By closely looking at the truth about the suffering of men, Keats finds some justification for suffering and obtains some relief from the intellectual anguish of being unable to explain suffering.

CHAPTER II

KEATS'S VIEW OF THE POET AND OF CREATIVITY

Keats's views on men and their circumstances naturally have an effect on his notion of what goes into the making of the poet and what the poet's purpose is. Although Keats has definite views, he holds no formal doctrine. This lack of formal doctrine renders the search for statements which define his views rather unprofitable. Thus, despite Keats's stressing of the poet's emotional qualities in naming him a "lover," and despite his emphasis on the poet's special powers¹ in mentioning his fine "ear" and "eye," the best way to know Keats's view of the poet is to look closely at what he sees as the poet's three main roles. These roles are the "friend," "sage," and spiritual healer to mankind.²

In regard to the poet's first role of "friend," the present author agrees more or less with what other critics say on the matter. The only disputable point, perhaps, is in the terminology critics use. On the one hand, critics such as Cornelius, Kroeber, and Dickstein, when referring to the poet in this role, speak of his "humanism." On the other

¹ David Perkins (Quest for Permanence, p. 277) partially agrees with this point. He states that although circumstances force Keats into contradictory solutions to his problems, one of these solutions is in the "notion that the poet has special powers of vision beyond those of other men."

² For some brief comments relating to Keats's technical abilities, see pp. 26, 102, and 110-112 which discuss symbolism, style, and personification respectively.

hand, the critics Perkins, Evert, and Sperry refer to him as a "humanitarian." Admittedly, both terms shed light on the matter, but both are too inclusive to be profitably applied to Keats's ideas.

Having no startling solution to this problem of terminology, the present author tentatively suggests the application of the more neutral term "friend," which Keats himself uses in reference to poetry and the poet. This term seems to incorporate the relevant senses of "humanism" and "humanitarianism" without implying the extra unKeatsian ideas. By the term "friend," Keats seems to mean, "One joined to another in mutual benevolence and intimacy" and also, "One who wishes (another, a cause, etc.) well; a sympathiser, favourer, helper, patron, or supporter."³ Now that the meaning of the term is clear, its applicability to the poet's role may be tested.

Both of the above senses of "friend" apply to the depiction of the poet in "To George Felton Mathew," an epistle composed in November, 1815. While praising the close cooperative efforts of two poets, Keats also suggests their role as "friend" to mankind:

The thought of this great partnership diffuses
Over the genius-loving heart, a feeling
Of all that's high, and great, and good, and healing.
(8-10).

³ The two definitions are taken from the entry for "friend" in the O.E.D. (1933).

The benevolent cooperation of two poets working together as favourers or supporters of mankind results in what is "great," "good," and "healing" for mankind.⁴

Later, in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" of May, 1819, Keats reaffirms his belief that the poet should, through poetry, be a "friend" to mankind:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man.

(46-48)

Although Keats is speaking in a broader sense, concerning art in general, his statement necessarily includes poetry. Hence, the poet like a true "friend," can offer through his poetry a support and consolation to mankind in times of "woe."

By the time of "The Fall of Hyperion," Keats feels even more strongly about the poet's social responsibility:

⁴ Although not touching directly upon the problem of the poet's role as "friend" to mankind, the critic Trilling suggests that Keats's "family" feeling is strongest, followed by his feelings for "the tribe" and for "the nation" ("The Poet as Hero," p. 13). At first glance, Trilling's suggestion seems to lend needed detail and accuracy to Keats's description of the poet's role as "friend" to mankind. Closer scrutiny of the suggestion, however, reveals it to be somewhat arbitrary, especially in view of Trilling's brief documentation and such contradictory evidence as the relatively short contact Keats has with the members of his family, Keats's early low opinion of marriage, and his great love of friends. In any event, Trilling's suggestion does not seem to add substantially to the solution of this problem, since Keats's love of the family, tribe, and nation does not affect much his view of the poet's role as "friend" to mankind.

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

(I.147-149)

In this passage, Keats almost defines the poet in terms of his responsible role to mankind. Among the critics who comment on the poet's role of "friend" to mankind (the reader recalls that in their terms the poet is a "humanist" or humanitarian⁵) Evert's observations are the most eloquent.⁵ He sees in the face of Moneta an expression of Keats's mature view of the poet:

In her whole character, then, she enlightens the conscience of those who look into her eyes (and these can be only the socially conscious visionaries) by drawing them into sympathetic remembrance of the whole history of sorrow and suffering in the world, so that the lessons of the past may not be lost to those living men to whom the poet will transmit his revelation.

Like a "friend," the poet must care about and act, through poetry, for the welfare of mankind.

Keats's friendly concern for mankind's welfare reinforces his second view that the poet should be a "sage," though

⁵ For similar remarks on Keats's concern, as poet, for the welfare of mankind, see the works of Meyer H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), p. 328; Roberta D. Cornelius, "Keats as a Humanist," Keats-Shelley Journal, 5 (1956), 87; David Perkins, Quest for Permanence, p. 193; and Karl Kroeber, Artifice of Reality, fn. 29, p. 225.

⁶ Walter H. Evert, Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 294-295.

Keats remains constant in his antipathy for strictly rational thought. In fact, since Keats speaks out early against rational thought, critics tend to overlook his contrary wish to be more knowledgeable. A first indication of this wish is in his epistle of September, 1816, "To Charles Cowden Clarke":

Thus have I thought; and days on days have flown
Slowly, or rapidly--unwilling still
For you to try my dull, unlearned quill.

(49-51)

Keats's hesitation occurs because he does not find himself intelligent or knowledgeable enough to be able to please Clarke with verse.

Another indication that Keats wishes the poet to be wise is in the poem "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill":

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

(125-126)

The "sage" and "poet" have a common muse, a fact which suggests the affinity of their geniuses and the common source of their knowledge.

Keats later becomes interested in the nature of the poet's wisdom. In a poem written in 1818, "'Tis the witching hour of night," Keats points out and dramatizes the innateness of the poet's wisdom by using the symbols of an infant, a flame, and a lyre. Keats portrays a child that

dares what no one dares!
It lifts its little hand into the flame

Unharm'd, and on the strings
Paddles a little tune, and sings,
With dumb endeavour sweetly--

(43-47)

Keats concludes this little scene in affirming to the infant, "Bard thou art completely" (48). This infant is, of course, the born poet. The flame and lyre, according to Cirlot, are sometimes seen as, "A symbol of the harmonious union of the cosmic forces."⁷ Keats seems to be aware of this symbolism, for it works well in the passage cited. The infant, in holding his hand over the flame unharmed and in playing the lyre without instruction, is shown to be in touch with the larger "cosmic forces" which govern life. Hence, in this scene, Keats demonstrates that the poet's wisdom rests in his innate harmony with the cosmos.

Late in the year 1818, Keats next points out, in the ode "Bards of Passion and of Mirth," an aspect of the poet's wisdom which is more closely related to human affairs:

Here, your earth-born souls still speak
To mortals, of their little weck;
Of their sorrows and delights;
Of their passions and their spites;
Of their glory and their shame;
What does strengthen and what maim.
Thus ye teach us, every day,
Wisdom, though fled far away.

(29-36)

⁷ A Dictionary of Symbols, comp. Eduardo J. Cirlot, trans. Jack Sage, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971).

In this reference to the souls of dead poets, Keats praises the poet's understanding of a whole range of human responses to life, from feelings of "glory" to those of "shame." Thus, through poetry, the poet passes on his wisdom.⁸

Despite this affirmation of the poet's wisdom, in a chronologically parallel development of thought, Keats nevertheless takes for granted the limitation of the poet's vision. For example, as he did in the early epistle "To My Brother George" (43-44), Keats again acknowledges the poet's limitation in "Hyperion," a poem worked on from the fall of 1818 until April, 1819:

Meanwhile in other realms big tears were shed,
More sorrow like to this, and such like woe,
Too huge for mortal tongue or pen of scribe.

(I.158-160)

Unlike his previous affirmation of the poet's innate harmony with the cosmos, Keats now affirms that the poet's wisdom cannot penetrate much further than the human sphere. Keats must, therefore, qualify his beliefs in order to make sense of these two contradictory developments of thought. In the poem "Lamia" he does so with a vengeance, rejecting even the

⁸ The critic Albert S. Gérard, in English Romantic Poetry: Ethos, Structure, and Symbol in Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p. 236, agrees that Keats sees the poet as one who tries to pass on his wisdom. Gérard goes too far, however, in his belief that through "agonizing" experience Keats comes to "a satisfactory understanding of life" and finds "a worthy and useful place for himself as a poet."

attempt to speculate about godly realms:

Let the mad poets say whate'er they please
Of the sweets of Fairies, Peris, Goddesses.

(I.328-329)

Only the "mad" poets attempt to speculate about the realm of the gods, with the result that they become perplexed.

This severe censure of the poet's imagination is an extreme reaction. Keats must, consequently, again qualify his thought. Accordingly, in "The Fall of Hyperion," which is composed during the last half of 1819, Keats defends the poet and is reluctant to deprive him of his imagination. Despite the fact that "Fanatics" may have dreams, Keats thinks, poets too dream and they are the ones who

With the fine spell of words alone can save
Imagination from the sable charm
And dumb enchantment.

(I.9-11)

Since Keats holds mankind's imagination as extremely important, the poet, in turn, is important as the only person able to give voice to the imagination. With this justification in hand, Keats does not need to curtail the poet's speculative capacity. In sum, Keats identifies or locates wisdom between the extremes of strict rationality on one side and "mad" dreaming on the other side. Keats's view of wisdom includes: an awareness of the importance of intellect and learning; a moderate belief in the poet's innate harmony with the cosmos;

and an awareness that the poet must have first hand experience in order to understand human responses to matters of life and conduct. Finally, by passing on his wisdom and articulating the dreams of mankind, the poet helps mankind to deal with circumstances.

Closely related to his view that the poet must be wise is Keats's third view that the poet must also act as a spiritual healer, soothing the illness and allowing for the full development of mankind's spirit. According to Keats, circumstances have on mankind a sickening effect which ranges from spiritual enfeeblement to the opposite extreme of "sickly pride." Some of these effects are evident in the various epithets and phrases describing the hero of the poem Endymion. This hero is first compared to a "sick dove" (I.720), next has thoughts that are "so sick" (I.758), then is called "fancy sick" (I.853), and finally is called "Brain-sick" (II.43). Another instance of the sickening effect of circumstances occurs in "Isabella," a poem in which the heroine's loss of Lorenzo worked like a winter wind on her spirit until finally "she pined, and so she died forlorn" (LXIII.1). In the "Ode to a Nightingale," too, the poet has such an overbearing sense of "The weariness; the fever, and the fret" (22) that he no longer wishes to know the sorrows of mankind. A final example occurs in "Otho the Great." In this play, Ludolph's mind is so strained by adverse circumstances that he retreats into the sickness of insanity and "fills the arched rooms / With ghastly ravings"

(V.iii.15-16). Keats's view of these sickening effects on mankind's spirit results in his stressing of the role of spiritual healer for the poet.

Another factor which influences Keats's view of the poet as spiritual healer is his knowledge of Greek mythology, in particular, his knowledge of the god Apollo. A brief look at this god reveals that he plays several roles which are pertinent to the matter at hand. As commonly known, Apollo is the god of poetry. Perhaps less known in recent times are his roles as seer and healer:

Inasmuch as the oracle was most commonly consulted concerning the healing of disease, it was easy for Apollo to become a god of healing. If he was aboriginally a divinity of light, this function becomes more readily understood, for the ancients were well aware of the purifying nature of light, and moreover the physician has always been regarded as a sort of compound of seer and healer.⁹

The roles of Apollo as "seer and healer" influence Keats's view of the poet. The critic Evert, of course, has done a book length study of the influence.¹⁰ The observation, therefore, would be hardly worth making were it not for the fact that Evert underestimates the healing aspect of the

⁹ William S. Fox, Greek and Roman, Vol. I of The Mythology of all Races, ed. Louis H. Gray (New York: Cooper Square, 1964), I.179.

¹⁰ Walter H. Evert (Aesthetic and Myth, p. 96) convincingly demonstrates that Keats knew of Apollo's healing role "from Spenser and the classical dictionaries, as well as from the Hippocratic Oath."

Apollonian influence on Keats's view.¹¹

The development of Keats's notion of the poet as healer is evident in his poetry. As mentioned above, in the epistle "To George Felton Mathew" of November, 1815, Keats already refers to the poet in connection with "healing."¹² About a year later, in the poem "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," Keats continues to explore the relations between poetry, the poet, and healing. He first recounts how the love of Cynthia and Endymion results in a healing influence over the ill:

The breezes were ethereal, and pure,
And crept through half closed lattices to cure
The languid sick; it cool'd their fever'd sleep,
And soothed them into slumbers full and deep. (221-224)

Having described the influence of Cynthia's and Endymion's love on the ill, Keats goes on to describe its influence on the healthy young men and women who already have an inclination to love:

Young men, and maidens at each other gaz'd
With hands held back, and motionless, amaz'd

¹¹ Although not many critics seem concerned with Keats's view of the poet as spiritual healer, at least one critic mentions this role. James L. Jones, in Adam's Dream: Mythic Consciousness in Keats and Yeats (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 49, remarks that Keats wishes to use mythic poetry "to heal the strange disease of modern life."

¹² Hyder E. Rollins (The Letters, I.31) records that Keats enters into "Guy's Hospital" as a medical student on October 1, 1815. Keats's training as a professional healer adds a little weight to the view that he sees the poet as a healer and is, of course, a significant source of his figurative language.

To see the brightness in each other's eyes;
And so they stood, fill'd with a sweet surprise,
Until their tongues were loos'd in poesy.

(231-235)

The influence of this love on the healthy is to uplift them into a poetic frame of mind. In this example, the poet as yet remains in the background as a mere recorder of how love heals the sick and uplifts the healthy into a poetic state.

In the poem Endymion, Keats comes nearer to illustrating the poet's role as healer. He writes:

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

In this passage the poet, through poetry or "A thing of beauty," arouses in his readers feelings of quietude and delight. He does so by portraying a secluded "bower" in which the dwellers are physically at ease and spiritually serene. By providing such a setting, the poet creates for the reader an interior landscape in which the sheltered and calm imagination is free to pursue its capacity for delight.

In addition, the poet performs the more fundamental task of aiding the spiritually ill:

Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits.

(I.8-13)

Despite the profound dejection which may result from the continued observation of infective circumstances, some "shape of beauty" which as Keats quickly explains, includes poetry, can dispel the shroudlike gloominess of the spirit. After the dispelling of the gloominess, since poetry is also "An endless fountain of immortal drink" (I.23), the poet may through poetry revive and invigorate mankind's ailing spirit.

Besides the remedies of love and beauty, Keats also finds truth to be an important remedy. For example, in the poem "Hyperion," begun late 1818 and worked on until the spring of 1819, Keats has the Titan Oceanus address his defeated fellows in this way, "Receive the truth, and let it be your balm" (II.243). Thus, once again through poetry Keats attempts an act of healing. A further significance of the line cited above is that in finding a "balm" in truth, Keats manages to combine the poet's two roles of "sage" and healer. The combination of these two roles occurs again in "Bards of Passion and of Mirth." In this ode, the poet's soul, by speaking of "sorrows," "delights," and "passions," prepares the reader to know "What does strengthen and what maim"(34). The poet's curative wisdom, then, promotes what is good for and warns against what is injurious to the spirit of mankind.

Near the end of his career, Keats is still concerned with the poet's healing role, this time from the poet's point of view. Unlike the physician of the body, the poet can only gain the experience and knowledge he needs to carry

out his responsibilities by suffering the pains of mankind himself. Keats attempts to deal with the poet's terrible responsibility in "The Fall of Hyperion." Accordingly, the poet must first save himself from rotting on the temple steps, then look into Moneta's face "bright blanch'd / By an immortal sickness which kills not" (I.258), and finally look at the tragedy of the Titans. Only then does the poet feel growing "A power within me of enormous ken, / To see as a God sees" (I.303-304). Through his suffering the poet achieves a pinnacle of knowledge and experience which allows him to carry out the roles of "sage" and healer.

In sum, Keats's view of the sickening effects of circumstances on the spirit of mankind results in his view of the poet as a spiritual healer to mankind. Keats may also have gotten this role from his knowledge of the Greek god Apollo. Through the portrayal of love, beauty, and truth the poet consoles, shelters, tranquillizes, and revives the spirit of mankind. Having done so, the poet fulfills his role as spiritual healer for mankind.

After the above discussion concerning Keats's view of what the poet's roles are, the creative process by which the poet carries out his roles is seen more profitably. Keats's creative process begins as one of dreaming, later becoming more practical in order to accommodate a more responsible poetry. An early indication of the part dreaming plays in Keats's creative process occurs in "To my Brother George." In this epistle, Keats refers to the creating poet as being

in a "trance" or a "state of mental abstraction from external things."¹³ Next, in "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," Keats reveals more details of how dreaming functions in the creative process. The Moon, which is the muse or "Maker of sweet poets" (116), inspires the dreaming of the poet. She does so by being the

Closer of lovely eyes to lovely dreams,
Lover of loneliness, and wandering,
Of upcast eye, and tender pondering!

(120-122)

The poet, in turn, by concentrating on his "Maker" the Moon, is able to absorb some of her qualities. She, esteeming love and "loneliness," sends these down to the poet and fills him with a sense of love and solitude. In being so inspired, the poet's spirit is transported from a mundane to a world of solitude in which his spirit is free to move in whatever direction or into whatever state his "tender pondering" may lead.

Later, in the same poem, Keats again takes up the motif of the "wanderer by moonlight" (185). This time the Moon brings him:

Shapes from the invisible world, unearthly singing
From out the middle air, from flowery nests,
And from the pillow silkiness that rests
Full in the speculation of the stars.

(186-189)

¹³ This definition is taken from the appropriate entry in the O.E.D. (1933).

As the poet receives these "Shapes" and hears the "unearthly singing," a change takes place within him so that the narrator exclaims:

Ah! surely he had burst our mortal bars;
Into some wond'rous region he had gone,
To search for thee, divine Endymion!

(190-192)

The significance of such a change may be missed if not elucidated more minutely. As before, the poet first leaves behind his mundane circumstances. He also leaves behind the known legitimately recognized part of himself which properly dwells in these mundane circumstances. Then, the poet enters an interior world of solitude in which he is able to explore the unknown and outer boundaries of himself. Somewhat paradoxically, the poet flees himself in order to discover his greater self. Keats, moreover, is not content that the poet stay within himself. At this early stage, he seems to entertain the thought that through dreaming the poet can somehow "burst our mortal bars" (190) and become a kind of deity by penetrating into a heavenly world.

Keats's dreaming is inspired not only by the Moon but also by nature at large. Furthermore, the poet does not necessarily leave his external circumstances behind. In the same poem of "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," using the story of Narcissus and Echo as an illustration, Keats depicts the relation between nature and the poet's dreaming. The

illustration merits being cited in full:

In some delicious ramble, he had found
A little space, with boughs all woven round;
And in the midst of all, a clearer pool
Than e'er reflected in its pleasant cool
The blue sky here, and there, serenely peeping
Through tendril wreaths fantastically creeping.
And on the bank a lonely flower he spied,
.
Drooping its beauty o'er the watery clearness,
To woo its own sad image into nearness:
Deaf to light Zephyrus it would not move;
But still would seem to droop, to pine, to love
So while the Poet stood in this sweet spot,
Some fainter gleamings o'er his fancy shot.

(165-178)

In this passage, the relation between nature and the poet's dreaming seems to work in this way. Nature first provides or perhaps suggests a setting for the poet's tale, in this case, a clearing in the woods in which is a pool of water. Next, with its sheltering trees, "blue" sky, and clear "pool," nature affords the appropriate mood for the tale. Then, the progress of events in nature, such as the wind blowing on the strangely unaffected flower, suggest to the poet even the drama or movement of the tale's action. If the poet reflects upon and ponders over nature, Keats seems to say, he can unveil the larger configurations from which his drama derives.

Similar to Keats's view of the poet's dreaming is the notion he explains to his brothers George and Tom in a letter written from December 21 to 31, 1817:

At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which

Shakespeare possessed so enormously--I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.¹⁴

The famous notion of "Negative Capability" rephrases more succinctly what Keats suggests in "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," Keats again stressing the suspension of the self and the wish to know "Mysteries."

The notion of "Negative Capability" naturally leads Keats to a further discussion of the relation between the poet's character and the creative process. Accordingly, Keats writes a letter to Woodhouse on October 27, 1818, in which he asserts that the "poetical Character" of the poet

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 does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity--he is continually in for--and filling some other Body.¹⁵

In this passage, the poet's selfless character is seen to "relish" without prejudice both the "mean or elevated" in mankind and in nature. The exploratory "filling" of other things, moreover, ends in harmless "speculation."

Soon after receiving Keats's letter, around October 27, 1818, Woodhouse in turn writes a letter to Taylor. In this

¹⁴ Rollins, I.193.

¹⁵ Rollins, I.387.

letter, Woodhouse reiterates Keats's view of the poet's character:

He will be able to throw his own soul into any object he sees or imagines, so as to see feel be sensible of, & express, all that the object itself wo^d see feel be sensible of or express--& he will speak out of that object--so that his own self will with the Exception of the Mechanical part be "annihilated." --and it is the excess of this power that I suppose Keats to speak. [sic]¹⁶

Woodhouse represents the neutral poet as being able to enter anything and once having entered know all about that thing.

Although ~~it~~ is convincing at first sight, two objections apply to Woodhouse's explanation. Firstly, how is it possible for an object to "see feel be sensible of or express"?¹⁷ Secondly, if Keats is able arbitrarily to annihilate his self and be almost wholly disinterested, how is it that so much poetic relishing of objects exists in the poetry? To the mind of the present author, objects are neither "sensible" nor able to "express." Furthermore, Keats has a definite poetic character which eagerly relishes objects; that is, delights in "gusto" and from this relishing poetry results. Woodhouse is, of course, a discerning critic and to his remark that Keats's creative process resembles the common state in which "we fall into a reverie,"¹⁸ the

¹⁶ Rollins, I.389.

¹⁷ Rollins, I.389.

¹⁸ Rollins, I.389.

present author can only add that he agrees.¹⁹

In recent times, Woodhouse's line of thought is followed by Walter J. Bate, the most eminent commentator on "Negative Capability" and the "poetical Character." The essence of Bate's commentary on these two notions is perhaps summarized in the following statement:

For a 'great poet' especially, a sympathetic absorption in the essential significance of his object (caught and relished in that active cooperation of the mind in which the emerging 'Truth' is felt as 'Beauty,' and in which the harmony of the human imagination and its object is attained) 'overcomes every other consideration.'²⁰

For Keats, in other words, through the negating of the self and a "sympathetic absorption," the poet captures the object's "essential significance" and achieves a "harmony of the human imagination with its object."²¹ Bate finds a further support for this explanation in the influence on Keats of his "mentor" Hazlitt. The latter, in his lecture 'On Shakespeare and Milton' given January 27, 1818, affirms that Shakespeare,

¹⁹ Two eminent critics have taken up Woodhouse's notion of Keats as the poet whose poetic character is as much as possible 'annihilated' during the creative process. Meyer H. Abrams (The Mirror and the Lamp, p. 246) represents Keats as the poet without "Identity," whose talent resembles that of Shakespeare. Also, Douglas Bush (The Major English Romantic Poets, p. 238) stresses the notion of "Negative Capability" and describes Keats's imagination as being for a certain period at least "impersonal."

²⁰ Bate, John Keats, pp. 249-250.

²¹ Bate, p. 250.

of whom Keats was thinking when he wrote on "Negative Capability" and the "poetical Character," 'had only to think of anything in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it.'²² Although Bate's explanation of "Negative Capability" and the "poetical Character" is a refinement over Woodhouse's, several aspects of the explanation present difficulties for the reader. To begin with a less important objection, Bate perhaps does not properly verify the truth of Hazlitt's statement on Shakespeare's poetic neutrality. The next objection, of a more serious nature, is that Bate's explanation does not account for contrary statements of Keats's written before and around the same time as the "Negative Capability" and "poetical Character" letters.

Early in his career, in the sonnet "To My Brothers," Keats conveniently contrasts two aspects of the creative process. He states:

And while, for rhymes, I search around the poles,
Your eyes are fix'd, as in poetic sleep.

The phrase "poetic sleep" suggests a removed, somewhat passive wandering of mind reminiscent of the poet's dreaming. On the other hand, to "search around the poles" suggests an awareness of the immediate environment and an active inquiry with the definite even practical aim of discovering elements of poetry. The poet's character in this last aspect of the creative process makes itself extremely evident.

²² Bate, p. 260.

Moreover, approximately two months before the writing of the "Negative Capability" letter, in his letter to Bailey of October 8, 1817, Keats refers to the imagination as the "Rudder" which steers the ship of poetry. This metaphor of guiding implies a poet with a definite sense of self, steering his poetry toward the goal which he has in mind. In addition, a passage in Endymion extremely similar to what Keats says in the "Negative Capability" letter indicates that the creative act of dreaming does not consist of negating the ego, but only of leaving behind that known legitimately recognized self which properly inhabits the mundane world:

And long he travers'd to and fro, to acquaint
Himself with every mystery, and awe;
Till, weary, he sat down before the maw
Of a wide outlet, fathomless and dim,
To wild uncertainty and shadows grim.
There, when new wonders ceas'd to float before,
And thoughts of self came on, how crude and sore
The journey homeward to habitual self!

(II.269-276)

In this passage, after having explored the temple on foot, Endymion sits down before a deep "outlet" and begins to muse. Important to note is that in his musing or reverie Endymion does not try to negate the entire self as much as possible, but only to leave behind the "habitual self." These contrary statements of Keats's suggest that Bate's explanation depends on too close and too literal a reading of the letters on "Negative Capability" and on the "poetical Character." As a result, Bate overemphasizes the importance of these notions for Keats.

These objections above are highlighted and complemented by those of the critic Bayley who observes:

Keats is not really rejecting the usual Romantic emphasis on the poet's ego, but offering a different version of it. Shakespeare, the diffident and neutral-minded genius, is no more credible or necessary a hypothesis than Shakespeare the authoritative sage, for in both versions the dramatic point is missed. Even when he is stressing its 'camelion' nature, Keats cannot help but emphasize the poetic personality. . . . His uncertainties are as characteristic and in their way as obtrusive in his poetry as are Wordsworth's certainties in his.²³

Bayley's rejection of the view of Shakespeare as the "neutral-minded genius" and his emphasis of Keats's "poetic personality" are worthy of notice. Another critic who is dissatisfied with Bate's explanation is Sperry.²⁴ The latter's somewhat less effective objection is that "Negative Capability" is only "a way of outlining a position with the end of clarifying it,"²⁵ since the notion is conceived of in "a period of crisis."²⁶ In most recent times (if for the sake of humour a pun is permitted) Bate's explanation is not seen by some critics as sympathetically as it once was.

²³ Bayley, Keats and Reality, p. 6.

²⁴ A third critic whose views are uncongenial to Bate's is John Jones who (John Keats's Dream of Truth, p. 151) distinguishes between Shakespeare's genius and Keats's genius of "feel." Although Jones is probably correct to distinguish between Shakespeare's and Keats's genius, his own explanation which depends on the "snailhorn" metaphor results in the overemphasis of Keats's sensuality and the underestimation of Keats's thought.

²⁵ Sperry, Keats the Poet, p. 62.

²⁶ Sperry, p. 131.

In a more serious vein, what are the qualifying effects of the objections to Bate's explanation regarding Keats's creative process? To the mind of the present author, when the creative process begins in the poet, he does not leave behind his entire self, but only what Keats calls the "habitual self." Furthermore, the principle of "gusto" reveals a poetic characteristic of the poet. No matter in what direction or into what object Keats's creative process takes him, only Keats's particular character, and no other poet's, allows him to "relish" all things in so poetic a manner. These views are, perhaps, a refinement of Bate's explanation.

The dreaming aspect of the creative process continues to occupy Keats's thought until a late stage in his career. In the poem "The Fall of Hyperion," although he condemns the "dreamer" who uses his power irresponsibly, Keats still defends the poet's dreaming:

Who alive can say
'Thou art no Poet; mayst not tell thy dreams'?
Since every man whose soul is not a clod
Hath visions, and would speak, if he had lov'd
And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.

(I.11-15)

The poet's dreaming allows the articulation of mankind's vision to take place.

Keats's thought is not wholly occupied with the poet's dreaming, which is only one aspect of the creative process. As mentioned above (p. 42), by 1816 in "To My Brothers," Keats already begins to differentiate between "poetic sleep" and

the poet's poetic "search." On a later occasion, in his letter to Bailey of October 8, 1817, Keats definitely includes aspects other than dreaming in his discussion of the creative process. Keats uses the metaphors of the polar star and sailing ship to discuss the creative process:

"Besides a long Poem is a test of Invention which I take to be the Polar Star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails, and Imagination the Rudder.²⁷

The reason that "Invention" is the goal or "Polar Star" of the "long Poem" is that Keats sees the "long Poem" as a luscious world of itself in which the reader may "wander" about, picking and choosing what he or she likes. The poet's "Fancy" is the driving force behind the poet's creation of poetry and in this way the "Fancy" is broadly comparable to the "Sails" by which the ship of poetry is driven along. Keats expresses a similar view of the poet's "Fancy" as a driving force in his poem of the same name:

Quickly break her prison-string
And such joys as these she'll bring.--
Let the winged Fancy roam
Pleasure never is at home.

(91-94)

In this depiction, the "Fancy" has the force to fly away literally, if unrestrained. In the last part of the metaphor, the poet's "Imagination" guides his "Fancy" toward the desired goal, thereby resembling the "Rudder" of the ship. Through the metaphors of the star and ship, Keats again

²⁷ Rollins, I.170.

indicates that in addition to his dreaming power, the poet's self awareness and intellect play a part in the creative process.

One year later, in his letter to Hessey of October 8, 1818, Keats remarks that the poet must be a "severe critic on his own Works."²⁸ He then observes about himself, "I have written independently without Judgement--I may write independently & with judgement hereafter."²⁹ By "Judgement" Keats of course means the application of "sensation and watchfulness" not "law & precept."³⁰ Nonetheless, Keats's creative process has come a long way from mere dreaming.

Besides acknowledging the desirability of judgement, Keats expresses the wish to develop a creative process which includes at least some "knowledge" and "experience." He explains to Haydon on March 8, 1819:

I have come to the resolution never to write for the sake of writing, or making a poem, but from running over with any little knowledge and experience which many years of reflection may perhaps give me.³¹

Keats stresses that the creative process leads toward a responsible end to which years of thought may bring him.

A final piece of evidence must not be disregarded. This

²⁸ Rollins, I.373.

²⁹ Rollins, I.374.

³⁰ Rollins, I.374.

³¹ Rollins, II.43.

evidence is found in the only fragment remaining of Woodhouse's criticism, written in July(?) 1820, of Keats's sonnet, "When I have fears that I may cease to be." In this fragment, Woodhouse records Keats as stating:

'My judgement, (he says,) is as active while I am actually writing as my imaginⁿ. In fact all my faculties are strongly excited, & in their full play --And shall I afterwards, when my imagination is idle, & the heat in which I wrote, has gone off, sit down coldly to criticise when in Poss^{on} of only one faculty, what I have written, when almost inspired.'³²

This statement of Keats's perhaps best expresses in one place his modified maturer view of the creative process. The poet's imagination, judgement, and experience work together in one combined effort to achieve the desired effect.

Evidence shows that Keats is not satisfied with a creative process which consists of mere dreaming. Through his friendship, wisdom, and healing capacity the poet revives and invigorates mankind's own emotional capacity. In sum, Keats modifies his creative process to include judgement and experience for the sake of truth, sanity, and responsibility.

³² Hyder E. Rollins, ed., The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers and More Letters and Poems of the Keats Circle, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1965), I.128-129.

CHAPTER III

KEATS'S HOPE FOR, DISILLUSIONMENT WITH, AND RENEWED FAITH IN DREAMING

In the first chapter above, as the reader recalls, Keats finds men vulgar and the circumstances of their lives incongruous. One of his subsequent reactions is to seek a solution in poetic dreaming which has a significance perhaps no longer fully appreciated by critics. Although Keats sometimes expresses disillusionment with dreaming he never completely loses faith in its power. Through this dreaming which is sometimes prophetic, Keats explores a highly refined world, an enchanted world, and finally seems to get a glimpse of godhead.

Keats realizes, of course, that dreaming may at times be only a form of wishful thinking. This wishful thinking seems to be of two kinds: first, a compensation for the inability to deal with the external circumstances of life, and secondly, a desire to know a finer world than the one in existence. A comparatively early example of the former kind of dreaming is in "Isabella," written in the spring of 1818. The hero of this poem, out of a sense of modesty, does not declare his love for the heroine with the result that

They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep,
But to each other dream, and nightly weep.

(I.7-8)

In the absence of other alternatives, the lovers "dream" of

being together and regret that they are still separated.

This same kind of dreaming still occurs near the end of Keats's poetic career, late in 1819, in "The Cap and Bells." The heroine of this satirical poem has fallen "asleep, and, in her dream, / Talk'd of one Master Hubert, deep in her esteem" (LXXIX.8-9). Since the heroine does not dare to make her love for "Hubert" known, she dreams about him. These two examples of dreaming as compensation, chosen from the early and late parts of Keats's poetic career, indicate his extended awareness of this kind of wishful thinking. Keats, however, moves on to explore other kinds of dreaming and finds in them much more than illusory compensation for the inability to deal with life.

A second, more significant kind of dreaming is in the desire to know an imaginary, inexpressibly refined, perhaps finally unknowable world. The sonnet "On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt"¹ contains an early expression of this desire:

Still time is fleeting, and no dream arises
Gorgeous as I would have it.

Keats admits that his dream is not equal to the desired imaginary world of which he still has only a vague awareness. Keats, therefore, contents himself with knowing that a more

¹ Keats composes this sonnet around April 18, 1817. The sonnet is a result of a poetic competition between Keats and Hunt and is written in a given period of time probably lasting fifteen minutes. Considering the adverse situation in which Keats is writing, his failure to imagine the desired world is not surprising. For further details on this matter, see Garrod's Poetical Works, p. 529.

"Gorgeous" or more colourful dream may arise, giving him a fuller perception of this world.

A later example of Keats's attempt to know the "refined" world of dreams occurs in "To J. H. Reynolds, Esq.," a poem composed in March 1818:

O that our dreamings all of sleep or wake
Would all their colours from the Sunset take:
From something of material sublime.

(67-69)

Keats again turns to a metaphor of colour for help in his attempt to recreate this imaginary world.² In comparing its qualities to the colours of the sunset, Keats manages to give a momentary glimpse of this imaginary world.

A last example of dreaming as an attempt to know the "refined" world occurs as late as in "Lamia," a poem composed in the summer of 1819. Although the heroine possesses magical powers, when she cannot escape her body, she too lets her spirit roam:

But first 'tis fit to tell how she could muse
And dream, when in the serpent prison-house,
Of all she list, strange or magnificent:
How, ever, where she will'd, her spirit went.

(I.202-205)

The heroine, being dissatisfied with her confinement in the serpent's body, achieves some measure of spiritual freedom through dreaming of what she desires. At times her desire

² This poem, being written in a time of crisis for Keats, often serves to illustrate his sense of deception with dreams. For the moment, at least, this problem is not of concern here.

takes the form of what is new, unknown or "strange." At other times her desire takes the form of what is beautiful, stately or "magnificent."³

In view of the above example, it is difficult to understand the opinion of the critic Jones who in his comparison of Endymion and "Hyperion" makes the generalization that Keats's imagination has no "curiosity" about an inexpressibly refined world:

Most particularly, we ask the deathly question, what happens on the other side of ripeness? The genius of end-stopped feel knows no such curiosity. The intense haven, the spatial fancy's capacious solipsism, enfolds no such abstract moment. Keats had nothing to say about the other side of ripeness.⁴

Contrary to Jones's conclusion, Keats is indeed curious about this imaginary world. Moreover, Keats's way of perceiving this world cannot be understood adequately in terms of "end-stopped feel." This metaphor compares Keats's poetic vision to the type of perception achievable through the tactile use which a snail makes of its "snailhorn." Although

³ Lamia's dreaming, of course, is not as simple as suggested above, for it can acquaint her with and affect external circumstances. The critic Northrop Frye expresses a noteworthy opinion on this power of dreaming in his "Forward" to Romanticism Reconsidered, English Institute Essays (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 9. For Frye, this dreaming seems to be a part of what he identifies as the stress of romantic poets on "the purely formalizing or constructive aspect of the mind, where reality is something brought into being by the act of construction." Hence, Lamia's dreaming brings the reader back to a fundamentally romantic way of perceiving or rather experiencing "reality." For a further discussion of Lamia's dreaming see p. 70 below.

⁴ Jones, Dream of Truth, p. 213.

this metaphor may perhaps explain the sensual aspect of Keats's poetic vision, it cannot explain the imaginative-explorative aspect.

In contrast to Jones's opinion is that of the critic Gérard who gives a fuller understanding of Keats's desire to know this imaginary world. Gérard likens Keats's dreaming to the German "Sehnsucht, the yearning toward the absolute, the aspiration to oneness and wholeness and organic unity, the dream of perfection."⁵ Gérard further characterizes this Sehnsucht in describing it as, "The youthful dream of happiness, the enthusiastic rejection of the limitations of human nature, the eager expectation of mystical bliss."⁶ Gérard is perhaps the critic who best appreciates this kind of dreaming in Keats's poetry.

The examples given thus far do not reveal a very profound penetration into the nature of the dream. In his further explorations, Keats finds dreaming valuable for the access it gives to an enchanted world. An example of a dream in which enchantment occurs is in Endymion,⁷ written during much of the year of 1817. In the beginning of the poem, after one of the hero's early disappointments, he feels that his life is more of a "curse" than anything else and his sister Peona tries to

⁵ Gérard, English Romantic Poetry, p. 3.

⁶ Gérard, p. 200.

⁷ Of course, the theme of a dream leading to reality is important in Endymion. For a discussion of this theme see p. 62 below.

help him with advice:

Her eloquence did breathe away the curse:
She led him, like some midnight spirit nurse
Of happy changes in emphatic dreams.

(I.412-414)

The efficacy of Peona's power of guidance is compared to the supernatural power of a dreamed spirit which can change a "curse" to a reason for happiness. This comparison suggests that certain dreams have an element of magic or enchantment in them.

The connection between dreams and enchantment is more evident slightly later in "To J. H. Reynolds, Esq." In this poem, Keats tries to cheer up his friend by presenting him with the verse picture of a marvellous castle:

You know the Enchanted Castle it doth stand
Upon a Rock on the Border of a Lake
Nested in Trees, which all do seem to shake
From some old Magic like Urganda's sword.
O Phoebus that I had thy sacred word
To shew this Castle in fair dreaming wise
Unto my friend.

(26-32)

Keats wishes he had the "sacred word" of Phoebus in order to show through dreaming the secluded castle which seems to bear the influence of the enchantress Urganda. The magical character of this setting is another indication of how dreaming leads to an enchanted world.

A last example of this type of dreaming is in "The Eve of St. Agnes," written in the beginning of 1819. As the heroine Madeline goes to bed, she has a vision:

Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,
In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,
But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.
(232-234)

In her dream, Madeline sees the martyred virgin St. Agnes and comes to an awareness of a supernatural purity and faith. Once again, dreaming is seen to lead to an enchanted world in which the dream provides gratification.

Much of the enchantment in Keats's dreams has less to do with magic than with the power of love to charm. An early example of such love occurs in Keats's poem of 1817,

Endymion. During the hero's recounting for his sister of a marvellous dream in which the goddess Cynthia appears to him, he tells of how the approaching goddess

Came blushing, waning, willing, and afraid,
And press'd me by the hand: Ah! 'twas too much;
Methought I fainted at the charmed touch.'
(I.635-637)

Great as the hero's expectation is, it does not prepare him for the touch of Cynthia's hand. The goddess's personal traits fill and gratify the hero's senses to such an extent that he becomes completely enthralled by these "entrancements."

In the year of 1819; in an example from "The Eve of St. Agnes," dreaming is again seen to take its power of enchantment from love. After the heroine retires to her bedchamber, she falls asleep and begins to dream. In this dream, she sees Porphyro who is singing and making vows of love, all of which highly gratify her. Meanwhile, Madeline's dream is disrupted by the true Porphyro who is approaching

her bed and singing "La belle dame sans mercy" (292). This song, which warns of the dangers of love, jolts Madeline into a greater awareness of her surroundings. In a frightened state of semi-awareness, Madeline recalls her vision of love:

'but even now
'Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear,
'Made tuneable with every sweetest vow;
'And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear.'
(307-310)

Despite Madeline's being jolted into awareness, it is evidently love which makes up the charm of her dream. As the Porphyro of Madeline's dream sings of his love for the heroine, he has a feeling of oneness with her and with the world. As Madeline looks into Porphyro's eyes which are "spiritual and clear," she receives the impression of a personal nature so refined as to be "immortal." Hence, the love of Porphyro and Madeline seems to charm them by putting them into contact with larger harmonizing forces.⁸

Still later in the same year, Keats is once more concerned with the power of love in dreams. In the poem "Lamia," after the heroine first appears to Lycius, the latter becomes more and more enamoured of her until, going from one trance into another, he is completely won over:

And as he from one trance was wakening
Into another, she began to sing,
Happy in beauty, life, and love, and every thing,

⁸ For a detailed discussion of whether Madeline's dream is an illusion which can only result in disappointment or a vision which can be actualized, see p. 65 below.

A song of love, too sweet for earthly lyres,
While, like held breath, the stars drew in their panting
fires.
(I.296-300)

The heroine, now certain of having captured Lycius's love, begins to rejoice. Although her song is one "of love," it expresses in addition her deep sense of unity with "every thing" and with all the enjoyable conditions in life such as "beauty." The heroine's song, which is far "too sweet for earthly lyres" (I.299), seems to animate and draw within its harmonizing sphere even the elemental objects of the universe such as the "panting" stars. Besides magic, love is a second factor in the enchanting power of dreams.

On the other hand, this scene also suggests that love can manifest itself too intensely and too greatly enthrall mortals. The too great love of Lycius robs him of his identity; consequently, Lamia must hide her godhead. Nevertheless, Keats's testing of the nature and intensity of love in an imaginary situation comprises an interesting and important speculation about mankind's emotional possibilities.

Keats's continued exploration of dreams leads him to investigate their prophetic powers. Among the dreams which may be called prophetic, two main kinds seem to emerge. The first kind concerns the prediction and actualization of desired situations. The second kind is concerned with the nature of a divine world and the state of godhead. Before proceeding further, since the opinions expressed in the present study may differ from the current trend of thought on the matter,

it may be helpful to give a reevaluation of the opinions of some recent critics. The latter, accepting fully the dichotomy between the escapist dreamer and responsible realist, opt for Keats the realist. Their doing so, however, results in the underestimation of Keats's dreaming.

Among the critics who see Keats's dreaming as escapism, Perkins is perhaps the only one who explains what he means by this term. Perkins suggests that Keats's escapism ranges from the attempt at impossible vision to the consequent wish to die:

A persistent habit of envisioning happy situations remote from present, actual circumstances naturally indicates a radical dissatisfaction with things as they are. If the dream or vision grounds itself in impossibility, fact will intrude, spoiling the satisfactions of the dream. In such a case, the alternative to an acceptance of things as they are would be an unconscious endeavor not to perceive or experience, a deadening of sensibility and awareness.⁹

For Perkins, such dreaming does not constitute a 'criticism of life,'¹⁰ but demonstrates only how Keats "crumbles at the impact"¹¹ of reality.¹²

⁹ Perkins, Quest for Permanence, p. 285.

¹⁰ Perkins, p. 191.

¹¹ Perkins, p. 275.

¹² The view of Northrop Frye on this matter is more convincing than that of Perkins. The former thinks ("Forward" to Romanticism Reconsidered, p. 10) that for romantic writers the "internal" world of the mind is the "only known model" of civilization. This "internal" world is more important than the 'outside' world and gives the latter its "poetic significance." Hence, in Frye's estimation dreaming is highly important.

This attack on Keats's dreaming seems to be based on Freudian assumptions. Perkins assumes Keats to be a kind of Freudian patient in need of psychoanalytical treatment in order to be able to face the events of his life. In an attempt to answer this line of thought the critic Dickstein explains that

Keats's escapism is validated by the nature of the world which he seeks to flee, and his quest for unconsciousness is made meaningful by the intensity and pain with which he experiences consciousness itself. The death wish becomes significant when it . . . becomes a passionate witness to the life it negates, the world it accuses, the self it can no longer bear.¹³

Dickstein's reply is valid, but not entirely satisfactory because he seems to accept the Freudian assumptions of Perkins. A more satisfactory answer may emerge after two other opinions similar to that of Perkins are examined.

A second critic whose view of Keats's dreaming is based on Freudian assumptions is Sperry. The latter, trying to circumvent the conclusion that dreaming is mere wish fulfilment and escapism, in his study of "The Eve of St. Agnes," argues as follows:

The poem, that is, achieves its magic, but only in such a way as to dramatize the particular tensions that oppose it and the kinds of device it must employ in overcoming them--repression, anxiety, disguise, censorship, sublimation.¹⁴

¹³ Dickstein, Keats and His Poetry, p. 25.

¹⁴ Sperry, Keats the Poet, p. 205.

Sperry's appreciation of "The Eve of St. Agnes" is, of course, richly complex. In this passage, however, like Perkins before him, Sperry tries to explain Keats's dreaming on Freudian assumptions. Unlike Perkins, however, Sperry considers Keats to be a kind of Freudian psychologist, trying to prove the truth of his Freudian analysis through his own poetry.

Most recently, concerning the same problem, the critic Fass reaffirms the existence of escapism in Keats's poetry:

There is a generally recognized and persistent dichotomy in Keats's poetry between the impulse to escape from earthly ties and a commitment to the world.¹⁵

The conclusions of Fass, Sperry, and Perkins reveal that these critics too readily accept Freudian assumptions about dreaming. Freud's explanation of dreaming seems to have a difficulty for literary critics which is conveniently summarized by Morrison:

The implications of the Freudian view of the psyche were distinctly unpalatable, for if art were no more than a sublimated form of erotic desires, a fantasy of an unbalanced mind designed to protect itself from pain through the creation of an imaginary world where one's unconscious "wishes" were satisfied, it was not only unhealthy but childish, something which the adult mind should not properly concern itself with.¹⁶

¹⁵Barbara Fass, "La Belle Dame sans Merci" & the Aesthetics of Romanticism (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), p. 78.

¹⁶Claudia C. Morrison, Freud and the Critic: The Early Use of Depth Psychology in Literary Criticism (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 227.

Freud's explanation does not seem to do justice to what Keats is trying to accomplish through dreaming. Despite the difficulty in Freud's explanation, the above critics are mainly responsible for their own misconceptions. In their eagerness to prove their point, they simplify Freud's explanation to suit whatever purpose they have in mind. Keats's dreaming seems to represent, in fact, an attempt to find a medium or vehicle which unlike the discordant events of life are conducive to the full expression of his creativity. The idea of dreaming as a medium leads to the more suggestive view of Keats as a prophetic poet. This view of the poet is also maintained by the critic Prescott who is largely ignored by students of Keats.¹⁷ Although Prescott's ideas admittedly have their limitations as an overall explanation of poetry, some of his ideas are admirably suited to explaining certain aspects of Keats's dreaming.

In order to show how a poet's dreaming may be prophetic, Prescott compares the poet with the prophet Ezekiel. "If

¹⁷Since a large number of fine works relate to Keatsian studies, the critic in need of a supporting viewpoint may sometimes seek abroad what he or she might have found closer to home. Having cited the critic Prescott before the more obvious choice of Northrop Frye, the present author finds himself precisely in this situation. Frye summarizes his view on the above matter in the "Forward" to Romanticism Reconsidered, p. vi. This critic comes surprisingly close to Prescott's view in stating that during the romantic period, "The fact of revolution was linked in many poetic minds with the imminence of apocalypse." Finally, though Frye is aware that "disillusionment" came after, he sees the "theme of revolution fulfilling itself in apocalypse" not as being abandoned by romantic writers, but as being "transferred from the social to the mental world."

the poet, like Ezekiel, longs for his people's liberation, his song, which may help to bring it about, is seen to be prophetic when the liberation is accomplished."¹⁸ The poet's desire, Prescott goes on to say, far from being "divorced from nature,"¹⁹ grows out of external circumstances and "looks toward that universal or purified or perfected nature"²⁰ Prescott then concludes that the poet, by giving mankind the knowledge of its finest desires, allows mankind to actualize these desires. In other words, "The poet, through his high desire and vision, sees the future in the present."²¹

Prescott's view of poetic dreaming explains the facts of Keats's dreaming better than the escapist notions of Fass, Sperry, and Perkins. For Keats, dreaming reveals the highest potential of mankind and his poetry, with its many actualizations of dreams, comprises an exploration of this idea. In Endymion is an early example of "high desire" which turns out to be a prediction of external circumstances. After the hero and the Indian maid fall asleep on the winged steed provided for them by Mercury, the hero finds "His very goddess" (IV.431), Cynthia, in a dream. This dreaming proves to be a prediction because almost immediately the hero's

¹⁸ Frederick C. Prescott, The Poetic Mind (1922; rpt. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1959), p. 284.

¹⁹ Prescott, p. 285.

²⁰ Prescott, p. 285.

²¹ Prescott, p. 286.

desires become actualized:

Then doth he spring
Towards her, and awakes--and, strange, o'erhead,
Of those same fragrant exhalations bred,
Beheld awake his very dream.

(IV.433-436)

As the hero awakens, he continues to behold the goddess of his dream. The dream then becomes a clear perception of the actual circumstances it predicts.

In a second example, the prophetic and actualizing power of dreams is again evident. This example occurs in a poem probably written in December, 1818, "Hush, hush! tread softly! hush, hush, my dear!" In this poem, a personified rose dreams of the "loves" of two human beings:

The shut rose shall dream of our loves and awake
Full-blown, and such warmth for the morning's take.

(III.5-6)

The rose's dreaming, of course, turns out to be prophetic, with the rose itself marvellously undergoing the ripening effects of love-making. Once again, dreaming is seen to have the power of actualization.

The next and perhaps most significant example in which the actualization of a dream occurs is in "The Eve of St. Agnes," written in the beginning of 1819. Before discussing the dream or vision, the reader may wish to examine some of the stanzas prior to the one in question, since these stanzas may leave doubt as to whether Madeline's actualized dream is anything more than a disappointing illusion planned by a

crafty and heartless Porphyro. In stanza XXXIII, just before the actualization of Madeline's dream, Porphyro begins to sing for the sleeping Heroine. The song he chooses to sing, "La belle dame sans mercy," (292) has important implications for what goes on between the hero and heroine. This song, portraying the dangers of love, appropriately introduces the critical situation in which Porphyro reveals himself to Madeline for the first time.

Upon hearing the song in her sleep, Madeline understandably begins to wake up, for the song not only suggests the dangers of love but must also inevitably remind her of the added dangers of acting against social sanctions. Although Madeline is now scarcely awake, she is no fool and the fact that she still beholds "the vision of her sleep" (299) in the form of Porphyro only adds to her confusion and distress. At this unexplainable event, just as anyone might, she suspects a plot or at least some danger.

Porphyro's physical appearance, at this delicate and critical stage of their meeting, can only reflect the highest apprehension, for he is now entirely at Madeline's mercy. Porphyro looks "pallid, chill, and drear," (311) because as he faces Madeline, his potential 'belle dame sans mercy' (292), he faces not only the possible rejection of his love, in which case the wide world would be rendered a useless desert to him, but over and above, he faces the unjust punishment of death which one cry from her would bring.

Madeline has the choice of either acting according to social sanctions by punishing the intrusion and consenting to live in a world of lust or defying the gross world below by forgiving the intrusion and placing her hopes for love on Porphyro. The important implications of the situation must be flashing across Madeline's mind, for she fully realizes that her choice is between the possibility of actualizing her dream or that of living in "eternal woe" (314). Being young and optimistic, Madeline chooses to save Porphyro from a fate he does not deserve and to keep alive the hope of actualizing her dream. In a culminating act of faith and love she declares her feelings for Porphyro. This declaration has the following result:

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far
At these voluptuous accents he arose,
Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star
Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose
Into her dream he melted, as the rose
Blendeth its odour with the violet,--
Solution sweet.

(316-322)

Upon hearing Madeline's declaration of love, the hero, "Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far" (316), moves toward the heroine. His purifying flush of passion seems to activate and refine his best qualities until he becomes "Ethereal." Then, almost glowing with intensifying passion, the hero reaches the height of his ecstasy and his being "like a throbbing star" (318) attains the point in which man and god seem to meet. The hero's state of being is now a much

higher one and the world he inhabits is also higher, consisting of a "sapphire" beauty, perfection, and coolness. As the hero's passion subsides, he gains entry to Madeline's dream. After having "melted" or merged into her dream, the strength and intensity of the hero's previously cosmic passion undergoes a further distillation which renders it as minutely rich and pleasing as the scent of a "rose." Finally, like the blending of two odours each sweeter than the other, with all the completeness of a "solution," the two lovers achieve a spiritual union and a deep sense of oneness.²²

This passage demonstrates the complex significance of Keats's poetic dreaming which acts as the best medium for the expression of his passion, his idealism, and his vision of a humanity in the process of becoming perfected. Through dreaming Keats expresses the most refined desires of mankind and contributes to their eventual actualization.

This concern with the power of dreams leads Keats to investigate the possibility of their being able to give insight to a divine world and to the state of godhead. First, however, it may be helpful to look at some current critical opinions on the relationship between dreaming and divinity.

²² A critic such as Stillinger may plausibly object to this interpretation on the ground that Madeline's disappointment in Porphyro's 'painful change' (The Hoodwinking of Madeline, p. 80) is the result of her momentarily seeing Porphyro as his truly evil self. Stillinger's interpretation, however, reduces Madeline to a "dumb broad," fails to account properly for the fact that Porphyro finally melts into Madeline's dream, and disregards the overall tone of the poem. These considerations seem to outweigh Stillinger's objections.

The critic Ford approaches this relationship from the point of view of the "prefigurative" imagination. He asserts that Keats's imagination is able to bring into being a hereafter "modelled on the best of earthly experience."²³ Ford then goes on to explain Keats's insight that "Heaven will be better than earth in that it will have a 'finer tone,' but except for this refinement or intensification, and of course the endless prolongation, it will be an extension or 'repetition' of earthly happiness."²⁴ To the extent that Ford suggests Keats's dreaming is prophetic of a hereafter, his explanation is valuable. This explanation, however, is finally inadequate, for if life in the hereafter is eternally prolonged, how can it still be modelled on "the best of earthly experience"²⁵ which is inherently temporal? In a similar way, further in this explanation, how can the "sensuous" earthly nature of this imagined hereafter be "enhanced immeasurably,"²⁶ and still retain its earthly nature? Ford's explanation reveals his awareness of but inability to account for the divine aspects of Keats's dreaming.

On the other hand, in discussing the same relationship between dreaming and divinity, the critic Beyer characterizes

²³ Newell F. Ford, The Prefigurative Imagination of John Keats: A Study of the Beauty-Truth Identification and Its Implications (1951; rpt. Hamden, Connecticut: Archon, 1966), p. 27.

²⁴ Ford, p. 27.

²⁵ Ford, p. 27.

²⁶ Ford, p. 32.

Keats's poetic imagination as:

... daemonic and intuitive and unconfined by time or space, or as transcendental power of dreamlike vision of a beauty that is divine and that exalts spiritually. It shows that Keats' frequent use of the imagery of sleep and dreams is a manifestation of his intense interest in the phenomena of intuition and the transcendent creative vision which revealed to him ultimate truths of life as in a dream.²⁷

Although Beyer's explanation seems to violate the conventional image of Keats as realist, to the extent that he recognizes Keats's concern with divinity, Beyer's explanation is more satisfactory than Ford's notion of the "prefigurative" imagination.

The opinion of Wasserman on this matter is interesting and important. To explain Keats's concern with divinity Wasserman uses the borrowed notion of the "'mystic oxymoron' in order to designate not merely the paradoxical collocation of contraries (e.g., freezing heat) but the mystic interfusion of these contraries."²⁸ Wasserman goes on to explain that "this area where mortal and immortal become one without destroying each other is the goal that almost everywhere conditions Keats's values and poetic perceptions."²⁹ What is preferable in Wasserman's explanation is that while keeping intact the image of Keats as realist, he still manages not

²⁷ Werner W. Beyer, Keats and the Daemon King (New York: Oxford University Press, 1947), p. 287.

²⁸ Earl R. Wasserman, The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems (1953; rpt. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1967), p. 15.

²⁹ Wasserman, p. 16.

to confuse the distinction Keats makes between mortality and immortality and man and god.

Although Wasserman's explanation may at first seem preferable to Beyer's, Wasserman himself perhaps does not say enough about Keats's interest in the state of divinity. A look at Keats's poetry reveals that he is indeed interested in what goes on beyond the 'bourne' of heaven. For example, in Endymion, soon before marrying the goddess Cynthia, the hero has a dream which prophesies his own prospective deification:

There came a dream, shewing how a young man,
.....
Would at high Jove's empyreal footstool win
An immortality, and how espouse
Jove's daughter, and be reckon'd of his house.
(IV.375-380)

The mortal king Endymion is to be changed to a god and be related by marriage to the king of the universe. This scene concerns what takes place inside heaven not on the 'bourne' of heaven.

A later example, in "Hyperion,"³⁰ gives a glimpse of how godhead is achieved. As the young Apollo is deified he cries:

'Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.
'Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions,
'Majesties, sovran voices, agonies,
'Creations and destroyings, all at once
'Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,
'And delfy me.'
(III.113-118)

³⁰ Keats's attempt to complete this fragment lasts from the autumn of 1818 to the spring of 1819.

Apollo gains the state of godhead not by knowing mortal affairs, but by filling his mind with the mightiest and most tragic events of the gods.

At a still later point in his exploration of dreaming and divinity, Keats seems to synthesize all his thoughts on the power of dreaming. This synthesis occurs in the poem "Lamia" in which the heroine, by breathing on Hermes' eyes, makes him dream:

'Stoop, Hermes, let me breathe upon thy brow,
'And thou shalt see thy sweet nymph even now.'
The God on half-shut feathers sank serene,
She breath'd upon his eyes, and swift was seen
Of both the guarded nymph near-smiling on the green.
It was no dream; or say a dream it was,
Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass
Their pleasures in a long immortal dream.

(I.121-128)

Hermes' desire to see and possess the invisible nymph is fulfilled through Lamia's power to create enchanted dreams. Next, the enchantment of Hermes' dream is enhanced by the love which he feels for the nymph. Then, the nymph who exists purportedly only in a dream is found to be real. Finally, Hermes' godhead is defined by the fact that his dreams are "Real." Indeed, a life filled with the actualization of all imaginable desires perhaps does come close to being godlike. Hence, Keats's dreaming culminates in a limited understanding of the state of godhead.

Just as Keats is eventually disillusioned with his external circumstances, while exploring the possibilities of dreaming, he also becomes disillusioned with dreaming.

Examples of this disillusionment are numerous in Keats's poetry. In Endymion, a poem of 1817, after the hero suffers an early disappointment, his sister Peona advises him to disregard his seemingly marvellous dream which she characterizes as insignificant:

[How light
Must dreams themselves be; seeing they're more slight
Than the mere nothing that engenders them!
Then wherefore sully the entrusted gem
Of high and noble life with thoughts so sick?
(I.754-758)

Dreams are less than "nothing" and just interfere with the glorious life of a king.

As the narrative of Endymion continues, dreams are seen even less favourably, this time as a pernicious temptation:

'If thou art ripe to taste a long love dream;
'If smiles, if dimples, tongues for ardour mute,
'Hang in thy vision like a tempting fruit,
'O let me pluck it for thee.'
(III.440-443)

Such temptations, as the character Glaucus finds out, lead merely to a "specious heaven" (III.476) which is inevitably changed to a "real hell" (III.476).

A further example of Keats's disillusionment with dreams occurs in the poem "To J. H. Reynolds, Esq." After wishing that all dreams would be made of "material sublime," Keats wonders:

Or is it that Imagination brought
Beyond its proper bound, yet still confined,--
Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind,

Cannot refer to any standard law
Of either earth or heaven?

(78-82)

If the imagination soars beyond the limits of mankind's understanding, it becomes "Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind" (80) and cannot enlighten mankind's understanding.

This disenchanted view of dreaming and of the dreamer is again expressed in "The Fall of Hyperion," written in the middle of 1819. In this poem, Keats condemns the kind of dreamers whom he feels to be unjustified:

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave
A paradise for a sect.

(I.1-2)

Dreaming can easily become the work of "Fanatics" who in their zeal mislead their followers into thinking they will be shown the way to a heavenly existence. This dream world can only be satisfying at the expense of blindness.

Although Keats's disillusionment with dreaming is perhaps undeniable, he does not completely lose faith in dreaming and completely reconcile himself with external circumstances. One important document which seems to support the idea of reconciliation is "The vale of Soul-making,"³¹ letter. In this letter written to the George Keatses from February to May, 1819, he explains:

³¹ Rollins, II.102.

That you may judge the more clearly I will put it in the most homely form possible--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?³²

In this passage, Keats abandons for the moment the idea of the dream as medium for the human spirit and substitutes instead the "circumstances" of the world as this medium. Through the heart's suffering, mankind's intelligence gains a soul and an identity. At first glance, the ideas of this letter seem to form an admirable alternative to the ideas Keats has on dreaming. A closer look at the letter, however, reveals that its ideas function, perhaps necessarily, at an extremely fundamental level; that is, important questions remain to be answered.

Two such questions immediately come to mind. Firstly, can identity be gained only through bad experiences or "proovings" of the heart? Secondly, is gaining an identity all there is to self-fulfilment? The fact that these questions remain unanswered suggests that the ideas of the letter do not constitute a final reconciliation with external circumstances. The further suggestion is that the ideas of this letter do not contradict, but merely add to or complete Keats's thought on how the human spirit achieves its full potential through dreaming.

³² Rollins, II.102.

In order for the reader to preserve a sense of the significance of dreaming for Keats, the opinion of certain critics needs to be qualified. An example of a critic who underestimates the importance of dreaming in Keats's poetry is Stillinger. In regard to dreaming, the latter describes the poem "Lamia" as the "fullest and most pessimistic exposition of the dangers of dreaming, of overinvestment in illusion, and the impossibility of escape from the realities of the human condition."³³ In respect to a rather extreme skepticism which this passage indicates, the historian Barzun, though speaking to historians, comes to the applicable conclusion that "On the scale of exact ideas, automatic skepticism is as bad as automatic belief."³⁴

Next, Stillinger's positivistic assumption that dreams are necessarily an illusion needs consideration. In fact, years before Stillinger even revives the assumption, the critic Abrams convincingly shows why this assumption is false. To make his point, Abrams places Keats in a tradition of writers wishing to defend poetry against utilitarians who maintain that poetry is a useless illusion whereas science is a useful instrument of truth. The fallacy which Stillinger and the positivists fall a victim to is

that, when a perceptual phenomenon is explained by correlating it with something more elementary than

³³ Stillinger, The Hoodwinking of Madeline, p. 53.

³⁴ Jaques Barzun, and Henry F. Graff, The Modern Researcher (1957; rev. ed. New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1970), p. 144.

itself, the explanation discredits and replaces the perception--that only the explanation is real, and the perception illusory.³⁵

Stillinger's use of "Lamia" for the purpose of dismissing dreams as an illusion is a plain example of the fallacy which Abrams points out.

Paradoxically, this view of dreams as an illusion is conceded by some of the critics who are most aware of the importance of dreams. A notable example is the critic Gérard who too readily accepts the inadequate if not false dichotomy between the escapist dreamer and the responsible realist. Gérard states that Keats rejects the "poetry of escape"³⁶ and learns a "Christian-Stoic ethos of acceptance and responsibility,"³⁷ perhaps wishing to save Keats from repeating the mistakes of the German Romantic idealists who according to Gérard end up in a "masochistic contemplation" of incongruity and in the "denial of the impossibility of gratifying the Sehnsucht."³⁸

The opinion of the critic Fass is similar to Gérard's, but has an important difference. Although the former also states that Keats learns a stoic acceptance of adverse circumstances, she quickly points out that Keats can never be entirely reconciled with them:

³⁵ Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp, p. 307.

³⁶ Gérard, "Romance and Reality," p. 21.

³⁷ Gérard, English Romantic Poetry, p. 257.

³⁸ Gérard, p. 248.

Just as it is true that the hero usually wearies of his supernatural abode, it is also true that he cannot readjust to the world. . . . This cycle of escape, return, and disillusionment could symbolize for the romantic artist his alienation from a world from which subjectivist theories of art and an increasingly Philistine reading public, helped sever his ties, forcing him to live an imaginative if sometimes guilt-ridden existence.³⁹

Fass's conclusion that Keats does not reconcile himself to adverse circumstances is more accurate than Gérard's and far more so than Stillinger's who greatly overstresses Keats's supposed worldly "realism."

The final kind of dream to be discussed, which is perhaps a further indication that Keats does not become reconciled with his circumstances, is in the nightmares which occur to Keats's characters as a result of their reactions to the events of their lives. In such dreams, the psychological fears and frustrations of the characters manifest themselves. For example, in "Isabella," written in the spring of 1818, this kind of dream occurs to the brothers of the heroine:

Their crimes
Came on them, like a smoke from Hinnom's vale;
And every night in dreams they groan'd aloud,
To see their sister in her snowy shroud.

(261-264)

The crimes of the murderous brothers haunt them in dreams. As the comparison with "Hinnom's vale" suggests,⁴⁰ these

³⁹ Fass, La Belle Dame, p. 39.

⁴⁰ Herbert Lockyer, in "Hinnom," All the Men of the Bible (1958; rpt. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1962), makes the observation that "The valley of Hinnom was the place where human sacrifice and filth were burned."

dreams are filled with a deep sense of guilt.

A later example of a dream which manifests fears and frustrations is in the poem "Hyperion." After learning of Saturn's fall, the Titan Hyperion has horrible visions:

'O dreams of day and night!
'O monstrous forms! O effigies of pain!
'O spectres busy in a cold, cold gloom!
'O lank-eared Phantoms of black-weeded pools!
'Why do I know ye? why have I seen ye?'

(I.227-231)

The 'monstrous forms' and 'effigies' which Hyperion sees are manifestations of his fear, pain, and frustration resulting from the knowledge of his own impending deposition. Next, the 'spectres' and 'lank-eared Phantoms' (I.230) suggest the intangible, unknown nature of the problems which confront him. Finally, the 'gloom' and 'black-weeded pools' (I.230) suggest his forebodings of death.

A last example of a nightmarish dream occurs in a poetic fragment of late 1819. In order to punish an evil lover, the narrator of the fragment threatens to

So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd.

(4-7)

The narrator's revenge is to fill the evil lover's dreams with such a sense of guilt that the lover would wish to die.

In sum, Keats's disillusionment with dreams emphasizes the important fact that dreams are not after all a substitute

for life. In such moments of disillusionment, Keats finds dreams to be less than nothing and not a fit medium for self-expression. External circumstances then seem the best medium and a fortifier of the self. Keats's esteem of external circumstances does not, however, remain constant. The rudimentary nature of such letters as 'The vale of Soul-making'⁴¹ one and the nightmarish quality of some dreams indicate that Keats is less of a "realist" than he is made out to be.

What is the importance or significance of dreaming in Keats's poetry? As Dickstein suggests, dreaming is an indirect criticism of the oppression and ensuing frustration which the human spirit or soul encounters in the world of external circumstances. By implication, these circumstances do not form the best environment in which the human spirit may express itself. In contrast, the harmonious world of dreams is a more appropriate environment. Firstly, if the imagination is given free play, the human spirit gains self-knowledge about the most secret, strange, and magnificent desires. In further following its instincts, the human spirit creates a drama in which is acted out a vast number of emotional responses ranging from the most heroic to the most minutely delicate acts of love. In this way, dreaming is an environment in which the human spirit works out whatever element of godhead it possesses. Dreaming then becomes a

⁴¹ Rollins, II.102.

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self-fulfilling prophecy about the state of a more emotionally capable, more perfected mankind.

CHAPTER IV

KEATS'S HANDLING OF THE CONFLICTING ASPECTS OF BEAUTY

One of the reasons for Keats's rejection of earthly circumstances is in his dissatisfaction with certain limitations and conflicting aspects of beauty. Keats, therefore, spends much of his career trying to deal with these difficulties. Among the latter is the deceptive or elusive quality of beauty. At times this deceptive quality seems to be an inherent part of beauty, but at other times it seems to result from the incapacity of men to grasp or understand beauty. For example, in the epistle of 1816, "To my Brother George," Keats expresses the pessimistic thought

That the bright glance from beauty's eyelids slanting
Would never make a lay of mine enchanting.

(15-16)

Keats feels himself unable to grasp fully and to articulate in poetry the "enchanting" nature of beauty which still eludes him.

Similarly, in the poem "On Visiting the Tomb of Burns," Keats regrets that men, through their own fault, do not see "The real of Beauty" (10) because their "Sickly imagination and sick pride" (11) throw a "dead hue" on beauty.¹ In a

¹ Despite Jack Stillinger's stand in his scholarly work, The Texts of Keats's Poems (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 189, concerning the reading of "Fickly" for "Sickly," the present author's own modest knowledge of the poem corroborates the reading of Allott's and Garrod's editions.

further example from the more mature "Ode to a Nightingale,"
Keats deplores that

Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

(29-30)

The whimsical curiosity of men makes them wrongly search for
novelty rather than quality in beauty.

A late example of the deceptive quality of beauty
occurs in the poem "Lamia," written around the middle of
1819. The reaction of Lycius, upon seeing the heroine,
gives an indication of the difficulty men have in grasping
beauty:

And soon his eyes had drunk her beauty up,
Leaving no drop in the bewildering cup,
And still the cup was full.

(I.251-253)

Even when men are ready to appreciate it, without allowing a
full experiencing of itself, beauty fills the senses of men
and leaves them amazed.

Besides the deceptiveness of beauty, Keats is also
dissatisfied with the lack of wholeness or completeness in
the beauty he knows. An early instance of Keats's sense of
incompleteness occurs in "Happy is England! I could be content."
After finding the young women of his own country "artless"
and "simple," Keats wishes to know "Beauties of [a] deeper
glance." Although Keats is referring to women, the contrast
between "simple" and "deeper" suggests that the inadequacy of

this beauty is more serious than a physical imperfection might be.

In a second example, Keats's dissatisfaction is more generalized, including not only the beauty of women, but also the conditions of "domestic" life. Concerning this matter, he writes to the George Keatses on October 24, 1818:

The mighty abstract Idea I have of Beauty in all things stifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness-- an amiable wife and sweet Children I contemplate as a part of that Bea(u)ty. but [sic] I must have a thousand of those beautiful particles to fill up my heart. I feel . . . as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds.²

Whatever beauty is found in the "domestic" life of an average man is only a small part of the beauty Keats can imagine. He is not content with this partial knowledge, but wishes to know the beauty of "a thousand worlds."³

In the play "Otho the Great," which Keats writes in the summer of 1819, is a final example of incomplete beauty. The deluded prince Ludolph, believing the wicked Auranthe to be sick in bed, describes her as "the pillow'd beauty of that fair / Completion of all delicate nature's wit!" (IV.11.36-37). Furthermore, Auranthe's beauty, supposedly the best which nature can devise, comprises "personal" fairness as well as an "untainted soul." Eventually, Ludolph finds himself mistaken in his opinion of Auranthe and in his tragic fate is

² Rollins, I.403.

³ Rollins, I.403.

an indication that, for Keats, this perfect complete beauty does not exist on earth.

Keats is additionally dissatisfied with beauty in persons and things because it occurs together with frailty and consequent vulnerability. In "Isabella" for example, a poem of 1818, the "Fair" but frail heroine, believing her love unrequited, falls "sick within the rose's just domain" (34) and later dies. A second example of frailty and vulnerability occurring together with beauty is in "Hyperion." After the catastrophic war between the Titans and gods, the comparatively weak and grief-stricken Mnemosyne is seen as rendering "Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty's self" (l.36).

Keats's preoccupation with the problem of frailty and vulnerability in beauty continues into his mature poems of 1819. In the "Ode to a Nightingale," he wishes to "forget" this earth

Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes. (26-29)

Keats describes what happens to beauty by personifying the concept and representing it in the form of a young woman. The nature of this young woman is not made to withstand the evil effects of time and circumstance. As a result, her beauty shares the fate of her youth: just as her youth is followed by enfeeblement and death, her beauty is followed by diminishment and extinction. What spiritual beauty this

young woman may be said to have is also greatly diminished if not entirely ended by "sorrow" and "leaden-eyed despairs" (29). In this passage, beauty in its physical and spiritual forms comes to a slow death or death-like state.

Keats returns to the problem in the "Ode on Melancholy," dealing with this problem in somewhat allegorical terms:

She dwells with Beauty--Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips.

(21-24)

The relationships between these personified concepts are analogous to relationships which occur in actual life. The fact of being beautiful implies "Melancholy" or sadness because beauty eventually diminishes and ends. Like "Beauty," "Joy" and "Pleasure" are also transitory and also imply pensive sadness.

Keats finds a further difficulty with beauty in the strong alluring power which it holds over men. This irresistible power is evident even in such early sonnets as "On a Leander Gem Which Miss Reynolds, My Kind Friend, Gave Me," in which Keats tells his audience of "sweet maidens" that Leander is "a victim of your beauty bright-- / Sinking away to his young spirit's night." This same alluring power of "beauty bright" occurs again in Endymion. The river god Alpheus in this poem finds himself 'snared' (II.952) by the beauty of Arethusa who once swam in his waters. He must, consequently, pursue her until he gains her love. A further

example occurs in the later poem of 1819, "Lamia." Once the amorous god Hermes is "Dash'd by the wood-nymph's beauty" (I.130), he is willing to carry out slavishly all the heroine's wishes in order to be able to possess the nymph.

Two examples from the poet's own life show Keats to be no less free from this alluring beauty. He expresses amazement, in a letter to Fanny Brawne of July 8, 1819, that even in her absence she can have such a "luxurious power over my senses."⁴ Later, in February 1820 (Rollins guesses), Keats writes another letter to Fanny and avows that from "the ecstasies in which I have pass'd some days and the miseries in their turn, I wonder the more at the Beauty which has kept up the spell so fervently."⁵ No matter what miseries ensue, Keats must be possessed of Fanny's beauty.

In sum, Keats's view of the limitations and conflicting aspects of beauty is difficult to reconcile with his sense of right and wrong. The elusiveness of beauty makes it difficult to grasp and ultimately unfulfilling. Similarly, the incompleteness of beauty and the fact that it occurs along with weakness and vulnerability often result in unhappiness and even tragedy for those involved. On the other hand, the alluring nature of beauty gives its possessor a destructive power. Since beauty occurs in both victims and those who victimize, Keats cannot reconcile it with his moral sense.

⁴ Rollins, II.126.

⁵ Rollins, II.263.

Despite Keats's censure of the limitations and conflicting aspects of beauty, he fully appreciates its desirable effects and gradually discovers a number of solutions for these difficulties. In fact, Keats's life is dedicated to poetry and beauty. A brief examination of some of Keats's statements on his dedication to poetry and beauty may re-establish and make explicit what is said on the matter above. The poet's letter of December 27 (?), 1817, to his brothers George and Tom reminds the reader of the importance of beauty in his poetry:

This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.⁶

This passage leaves no doubt that Keats at this time wishes to write poetry in order to create beauty.

A further reminder of Keats's dedication to beauty is in his letter to Reynolds of April 9, 1818, in which Keats states that he is loyal only to "the eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty,--and the Memory of great Men."⁷ A final example of Keats's dedication, this time to poetry, is in his statement of August 24, 1819, that he lives only for "the best sort of Poetry."⁸ Since Keats's dedication to poetry and beauty is re-established and explicit, his thought on the enjoyable

⁶ Rollins, I.194.

⁷ Rollins, I.266.

⁸ Rollins, II.147.

aspects of beauty and some of his solutions to the problems with beauty may now be examined.

Keats records the desirable effect of natural beauty on the human spirit in much of his early poetry. An example of this effect occurs in "Oh! how I love, on a fair summer's eve," written in the summer of 1816. After describing the colours of the sunset, the "balmy zephyrs," the "silver clouds," and all "Nature's beauty," Keats states that this beauty frees him from "meaner thoughts" and inspires the "soul" with "delight."

In the epistle "To my Brother George," Keats is struck by the natural beauty of the moon, thereby furnishing a second example of nature's desirable effect on the human spirit. The following description of the moon is part of a rhetorical question in which Keats asks himself what he might see on an evening stroll:

Or the coy moon, when in the waviness
Of whitest clouds she does her beauty dress,
And staidly paces higher up, and higher,
Like a sweet nun in holy-day attire?

(59-62)

Keats's perception of the moon and its activity in the sky inspire him to meditate on the best elements of human nature. Hence, when the beautiful moon appears behind "whitest clouds" (60), Keats immediately personifies the moon, imagining her to possess a feminine modesty balanced with the innocent wish to display her beauty. Then, as the personified Moon "staidly paces higher up" (61), she takes on a more serious dignified aura. Finally, the comparison to a "sweet nun" (62) leaves no

doubt as to her freedom from moral taint and tranquil sense of purpose.

Keats gives a last example of nature's desirable effect on the human spirit in January, 1817, in the sonnet which begins:

After dark vapours have oppress'd our plains
For a long dreary season, comes a day
Born of the gentle South, and clears away
From the sick heavens all unseemly stains.

In this passage, the landscape serves a double purpose, being internal and external in relation to the poet. The landscape actually observed by the poet consists of winter clouds or "dark vapours" which the sun of a certain spring day "clears away," leaving behind a bright sky. This clearing away of the clouds gives the poet a sense of being emotionally uplifted.

At this point, the landscape serves the second purpose of acting as the vehicle for the expression of the poet's mood. In the now internalized and personified landscape, the "dark vapours" become a metaphor for the poet's emotional dejection which eventually turns to elation. This personification is again evident in terms such as "gentle," "sick," and "unseemly." Hence, the double landscape is both the source and expression of the poet's elation.

The sense of vitality, delight, tranquility, and purity with which natural beauty inspires Keats continues to develop until it accords with the greater purpose which Keats has in

mind for his poetry. In the letter to his brothers George and Tom of December 21, 1817, Keats writes concerning beauty and art:

The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth.⁹

Since Keats requires of his art the same power to move the human spirit as he observes in nature, the statement above must be understood in the context of Keats's relationship to natural beauty. The underlying metaphor of this statement is in the word "evaporate."¹⁰ This metaphor which recalls to mind the effect Keats describes in "After dark vapours have oppress'd our plains," makes an implicit comparison between earth, mist, and sun on the one hand and circumstance, spirit, and beauty on the other hand.

In the first part of the comparison, the earth sometimes cools air to produce mist and the sun disperses or evaporates the mist with the intensity of its warm rays. In a similar way, the "disagreeables," the "unintelligible" events of life (as Wordsworth calls them), and the discordance of men interact with the human spirit to produce intellectual confusion and emotional depression. Just as the sun's

⁹ Rollins, I.192.

¹⁰ Walter J. Bate (John Keats, p. 243) in his discussion of "intensity," seems to ignore the underlying metaphor of Keats's statement, implicit in the term "evaporate." He does not, consequently, do justice to this important term.

intense power evaporates mist, so the "intensity" of art evaporates intellectual confusion and emotional depression. Art performs this double act of evaporation through its truth and beauty.

To understand exactly how truth and beauty evaporate intellectual and emotional "disagreeables," the reader bears in mind Keats's assumption that art, being unified and self-contained, has its own truth. Hence, with its carefully wrought and closely related truth, art penetrates the confusion which hinders the perception of the intellect. Secondly, with the arousing power of its attractive beauty, art draws the human spirit to admiration or love. This admiration or love revives the human spirit, makes it emerge from itself, and realize again its kinship with other human spirits.¹¹

As seen above, Keats expresses the idea of artistic "intensity" overcoming "disagreeables" several times in his earlier poems, though not always in the same terms. A

¹¹ The opinions of two other critics on the notion of "intensity" are pertinent. Gérard, the first of these, maintains ("Romance and Reality," p. 23) that Keats's account of how 'disagreeables evaporate' is "a remnant of the somewhat sybaritic theory of poetry which Keats had been upholding." Gérard seems to underestimate what maturity exists in the earlier poetry of Keats and overstates their "luxurious" aspect. The opinion of the critic Bush justly qualifies Gérard's on this matter. Bush observes (Major English Romantic Poets, p. 239), "Yet Keats had quite early evolved the larger and deeper conception of beauty created by all our passions in their sublime, that is, a vision, refined by intense apprehension, of all the varied and painful stuff of actual life." This opinion accords more than Gérard's with that of the present author.

final example occurs in the beginning of Endymion, written in 1817. Here, Keats is concerned with the effect of beauty on an emotionally depressed human spirit. He comes to this conclusion:

[Y]es, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits.

(I.11-13)

Beauty has the power to move away the cloud of gloominess which results from the knowledge of human suffering.¹² Hence, the intensities of art and nature are analogous in that they evaporate "disagreeables" by giving truth to the intellect and beauty to the emotional side of the human spirit.

Keats is often concerned, especially in his poetry, with beauty and love. When he is optimistic, Keats sees a close relationship between the two, with beauty sometimes being able to engender love and sometimes acting as the physical equivalent of love. A comparatively early example of this close relationship is found in Endymion. The hero of this poem, after his goddess disappears for yet another time, turns to Cynthia for help. Although Cynthia is the goddess of chastity and not ordinarily the proper goddess to invoke

¹² In the opinion of the present author, the critic Perkins (Quest for Permanence, p. 242) wrongly believes that the above lines from Endymion indicate only Keats's wish for "an escape" into a simplistic pastoral world. On the contrary, for Keats, the observation of beauty in nature implies a consequent vision of the true harmony between nature and men.

in such a situation, the hero reasons in the following way:

Though the playful rout
Of Cupids shun thee, too divine art thou,
Too keen in beauty, for thy silver prow
Not to have dipp'd in love's most gentle stream.
(II.179-182)

Since the "Cupids" who "shun" the hero also "shun" Cynthia, he feels an affinity to her. Furthermore, having assumed that beauty and love are closely connected, the hero thinks that Cynthia, being beautiful, must know love and must be able to sympathize with him.

In this same poem, a second example of this close relationship between beauty and love occurs. During the hero's travels on the sea floor, he visits the palace of the sea god and finds

[L]arge Neptune on his throne
Of emerald deep: yet not exalt alone;
At his right hand stood winged Love, and on
His left sat smiling Beauty's paragon.
(III.862-865)

This scene is symbolic of how beauty and love interact in human nature. "Neptune," whom Keats calls "subdued majesty" (III.964), has Cupid or "Love" at his right hand and Venus or "Beauty's paragon" at his left hand, both of whom are supporters of his authority. Keats's stressing of Venus's beauty rather than her role as goddess of love suggests that Keats not only sees a close relationship between the two but perhaps even entertains the thought of their being identical. The added presence of Cupid leaves no doubt that, for Keats,

beauty and love go hand in hand with a noble nature.

Keats's own life yields examples which shed further light on how he associates beauty with love. In his letter to Fanny Brawne of July 8, 1819, Keats frankly tells her, "I cannot conceive any beginning of such love as I have for you but Beauty."¹³ For Keats, beauty seems to engender or be the source from which love originates. In the same letter, Keats goes on to say:

There may be a sort of love for which, without the least sneer at it, I have the highest respect, and can admire it in others: but it has not the richness, the bloom, the full form, the enchantment of love after my own heart.¹⁴

Keats goes beyond his former statement. More than being the mere source of love, beauty seems to be the body or physical equivalent of love. Furthermore, the two of them together seem to form the ideal synthesis which Keats sees in Venus and Cynthia and which he finds in Fanny Brawne.

The discussion of beauty and love automatically leads to the discussion of a third related term, truth. In his letter to Bailey of November 22, 1817, Keats gives an early indication of how he thinks truth is related to beauty and love:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination--What

¹³ Rollins, II.127.

¹⁴ Rollins, II.127.

the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth--15

In trying to understand this statement, the reader must keep in mind that Keats is seeking an alternative to knowing "truth by consequitive reasoning."¹⁶ He seems to have two basic assumptions: firstly, that the heart cannot lie in its responses to beauty; secondly, that through the imagination mankind has access to the responses of the heart. From these two assumptions follows that when the heart is pleased by beauty, its responses or "affections" are both reliable and untainted by intervening ulterior motives. From this pure response to external circumstances, only a true perception of these external circumstances can result.¹⁷

For Keats, moreover, even when the "simple" mind observes beauty, the consequent "speculations and surmises"¹⁸ perfect this beauty until a greater beauty forms. The resultant beauty, however, can hardly be compared with that which results from the "speculations and surmises" of the "complex" mind which, working partly through "sensation" and

¹⁵ Rollins, I.184.

¹⁶ Rollins, I.185.

¹⁷ The critic Murry describes Keats's view of this relationship between heart and mind (Major English Romantic Poets, n. 1, p. 258) as one in which the heart dominates. He states, "Only . . . when the mind comes instinctively to reject conclusions which do violence to primary emotional experience, does it, in union with the heart, become a soul: the vehicle of Truth, which is at the same time Beauty-- though, alas, a tragic Beauty." Murry's explanation is close to that of the present author.

¹⁸ Rollins, I.185.

partly through "thought," is more "careful of its fruits."¹⁹
Hence, love may be said to be "creative of essential Beauty."²⁰
This unusual idea of Keats's remains of interest today.

About a year later, Keats says much the same thing to the George Keatses as he previously says to Bailey. To the former on December 31, 1818, he writes, "I can never feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its Beauty."²¹ Important to note is that, for Keats, beauty and truth are distinguished but inseparable.²²

This last statement by Keats leads to an examination of the way he identifies beauty with truth in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a poem of 1819. To understand what Keats wishes to express, the reader needs to briefly consider the whole poem. In the first stanza, Keats is concerned with the urn or "Sylvan historian" and the beauty of the "flowery tale" to be told. The urn, however, cannot reveal any details of the "struggle" and "ecstasy" apparent in its story. The observer is, consequently, left to relish only a sense of wonder. This sense of wonder leads Keats in the second stanza to consider the "spirit ditties of no tone" (14) which exist in an ideal realm. The musician in this realm does not

¹⁹ Rollins, I.186.

²⁰ Rollins, I.184.

²¹ Rollins, II.19.

²² In view of this statement by Keats in the above letter, the critic Walter J. Bate (John Keats, p. 517) justly points out that the identification of beauty with truth which occurs later, in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," cannot be a simplistic or "bald" declaration.

cease his "song" and the "Bold Lover" cannot become disenchanted with his beloved who is always "fair."²³

In the third stanza, Keats is able to elaborate on and further actualize this ideal realm. Just as the "Spring" cannot "shed" the foliage which is indispensable to the purpose of its existence, so the "melodist" cannot grow weary of playing new "songs" which are indispensable to his existence. The lovers, in turn, are "for ever young" and vital and their inexhaustible love is "For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd" (26). Finally, the passions of the lovers leave no unwanted effects such as earthly passions do. In the fourth stanza is a return to earth: to the "sacrifice," the "desolate" town, and to the limitations of the urn itself which remains unable to recreate the still mysterious events of the town.

In stanza five, though bearing in mind the limitations of the beauty which the urn represents, Keats affirms that

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The present author cannot agree with the critic Perkins (Quest for Permanence, p. 235) who concludes from the second stanza that Keats's attempt to actualize the ideal is "largely a mockery of the permanence he seeks." Perkins goes so far as to say the problem "is not that the ideal exists only as an illusion, but that it cannot be imagined even as an illusion." Perkins bases this surprising conclusion on his observation that the figures on the urn are made of "marble," a fact not mentioned in the second stanza. Despite the reservations which Keats certainly has about the ideal realm, neither the second nor third stanzas may accurately be called "a mockery" of permanence. Moreover, nowhere in the poem does Keats perceive such an absolutely unbridgeable gap between the ideal realm and the imagination as Perkins claims he does.

this urn is nevertheless a "friend" and has the urn speak the final two lines:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, --that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

(49-50)

What is said in the rest of the poem and in previous letters excludes the possibility of Keats's simplistically making a false equation. He seems to be hinting at several related ideas of his. Firstly, Keats seems to stress his belief that since men recognize truth through its beauty, to all intents and purposes "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (49). One justification for this belief, in Keats's own terms, may be that since beauty results from "sensation" and "thought," the truth which comes out of "thought" must be a vital part of beauty. Keats, moreover, is not denying the fact of human misery. He is merely suggesting that despite human misery, the beauty of earthly existence such as embodied in youth and love cannot be denied. Art, though unable to explain the ultimate purpose of beauty, captures the beauty of life and renders it permanent. Finally, even in the case that beauty and truth are not one, this fact does not prevent men from knowing or at least trusting that in an ideal realm beauty and truth may indeed be one.²⁴ This knowledge and this faith are

²⁴ Regarding this matter, Earl Wasserman asserts (The Finer Tone, pp. 61-62) that for Keats art "allows a glimpse into that region which shows the full meaning of those experiences which now produce only mortal suffering." Furthermore, states Wasserman, "The knowledge that in art this insight is forever available is the height of earthly wisdom;

a consolation for men.

Despite Keats's dissatisfaction with beauty or perhaps as a result of it, he expresses comparatively early a belief in the principle of development. The latter is a double principle including process, the operation of natural laws without regard to what intelligent beings consider right or wrong, and progress, the operation of these laws in accordance with what intelligent beings consider advancement or improvement.

Regarding progress, Keats already affirms in his letter to Reynolds of May 3, 1818, that "there is really a grand march of intellect."²⁵ A few months later, though referring to human development in this case, Keats extends this principle to include beauty, as may be seen in his "free" translation of a sonnet by Ronsard which begins:

Nature withheld Cassandra in the skies,
For more adornment, a full thousand years;
She took their cream of Beauty's fairest dyes,
And shap'd and tinted her above all Peers.

In this passage, the principle of progress is implicit. To

and it is all man needs to know, for it endows his earthly existence with a meaning and a purpose." Wasserman's ideas seem to agree with those of the present author. On this same matter, the critic Murry (Major English Romantic Poets, p. 258) stresses the moral aspect. He states that Keats's identification of beauty with truth is an attempt at reconciling his moral sense with his knowledge of beauty. Keats, asserts Murry, "became an example to us that the pinnacle of poetry is inaccessible save by the poet who pursues moral beauty as well." Without generalizing the statement to include all poets, the present author agrees with Murry.

²⁵ Rollins, I.282.

prevent Cassandra from being born in a premature state of beauty, "Nature" withholds her in order to complete the adornment of her beauty. Then, for "a full thousand years," "Nature" shapes Cassandra and devises better tints for her complexion. Only after Nature's work is complete and Cassandra's beauty is "above" that of "all Peers" does "Nature" allow her to be seen.

Keats's most elaborate discussion of progress in beauty occurs in "Hyperion," written during late 1818 and early 1819. In this narrative poem, the progress of beauty takes place over an enormous length of time in which gods as well as mortals are succeeded by more beautiful generations. The principle of progress in beauty is stated by the Titan Oceanus:

'As Heaven and Earth are fairer, fairer far
'Than Chaos and blank Darkness, though once chiefs;
'And as we show beyond that Heaven and Earth
'In form and shape compact and beautiful,
'In will, in action free, companionship,
'And thousand other signs of purer life;
'So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,
'A power more strong in beauty, born of us
'And fated to excel us.'

(II.206-214)

According to this principle, just as 'Heaven and Earth' are more beautiful than 'Chaos' and 'Darkness,' just as the Titans in turn show 'signs of purer life' (II.211), the beauty of the younger gods is more perfect than that of the Titans.

This beauty, moreover, is closely linked to a principle

of vitality. Hence, beauty implies might and the only alternative left the Titans is to accept the fact, for as Oceanus explains to his fellows, the younger gods are

'eagles golden-feather'd, who do tower
'Above us in their beauty, and must reign
'In right thereof; for 'tis the eternal law
'That first in beauty should be first in might.
(II.226-229)

Keats goes out of his way to stress that the Titans' fall is in accordance with universal laws. Since the younger gods are more beautiful and vital than the Titans, they 'must reign / In right thereof' (II.227-228). In addition, the progress of beauty justifies the coming of new generations to replace the old, 'for 'tis the eternal law / That first in beauty should be first in might' (II.228-229).

Although the principle of progress is stressed in "Hyperion," that of process is also implied. The latter, not operating according to the Titans' sense of right or wrong, presents a serious problem for them. The Titans must now deal with all the implications of knowing that they themselves do not represent the process of beauty in its completion. Accordingly, Keats has the wisest of them, Oceanus, declare from the point of view of a limited being that

'[T]o bear all naked truths,
'And to envisage circumstance, all calm,
'That is the top of sovereignty.'
(II.203-205)

Just as Oceanus accepts his limitations and his part in the

overall principle of process, so Keats seems to accept his limitations and his part, all the while retaining an internal or intellectual sense of sovereignty over the realm of beauty.

A further indication that Keats accepts the principle of process is in the ode "To Autumn," written in September, 1819. As Perkins points out, Keats suggests in this ode "that life in all its stages has a certain identity and beauty which man can appreciate by disengaging his own ego. Thus the symbol permits, and the poem as a whole expresses, an emotional reconciliation to the human experience of process."²⁶ Hence, Keats is seen to accept both the principles of progress and process.

After accepting the double principle of development in beauty, Keats hopes, by further aiding this development, to "reconcile his hankering after ideal beauty, his clear-sighted perception of actual misery, and his impatient craving to help mankind."²⁷ As the poem "Hyperion" indicates, Keats wishes to do so by illustrating through poetry how mankind might appear on a higher scale of beauty.

A further result of accepting the principle of development is that Keats feels he must become more poetically practical. One sign of a shift in Keats's poetic practice occurs in the summer of 1819, in "Lamia." Here, concerning

²⁶ Perkins, Quest for Permanence, p. 294.

²⁷ Gérard, "Romance and Reality," p. 18.

the representation of beautiful goddesses, the reader recalls that Keats writes:

Let the mad poets say whate'er they please
Of the sweets of Fairies, Peris, Goddesses,
There is not such a treat among them all,
.
As a real woman.

(I.328-332)

Although this passage, with its jaunty style and worldly cynicism, is not typical of Keats, it does reveal a shift in his thought and practice. He thinks that the "sweets" of goddesses are extremely difficult for men's power of knowledge to grasp. In contrast, the sweets of "real" women are more knowable; consequently, they are more enjoyable than those of goddesses. For this reason, a few lines on, Keats has the heroine Lamia appear to Lycius no longer as a goddess but as a woman "With no more awe than what her [earthly] beauty gave" (I.338).

A last instance in which Keats shows concern for poetic practicality occurs in a slightly later poem of 1819, "The Fall of Hyperion--A Dream." With the full awareness that his dream of beauty may be not a "Poet's" but a "Fanatic's" and leaving the final judgement for when the "scribe" of his hand is in "the grave," Keats goes on to recount this dream. The term practicality, therefore, suggests not that Keats has abandoned ideal beauty, but that he wishes to close the gap between the ideal and actual worlds by writing a poetry which acts as a medium between the two: the ideal world must be transformed into more accessible terms or symbols and the

existing harmony of the actual world must be more fully appreciated.

In this regard, the opinion of the critic Gérard is close to that of the present author. With the qualification that Keats sees in art more than a mere "analogue" of eternity, the present author agrees that for Keats art "is man's highest endeavor in this world because it actualizes the ideal and it makes perceptible the presence of the ideal in the actual."²⁸

This poetic practicality clears the way for an artistic reconciliation with external circumstances on the part of Keats. The artist does have a role and his art can be related to external circumstances. In this regard, one of Keats's later statements on the poet's relation to beauty is again pertinent. Keats writes to Fanny Brawne on (Rollins guesses) February (?) 1820:

"I have left no immortal work behind me--nothing to make my friends proud of my memory--but I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remembered."²⁹

Keats, of course, feels that he cannot accomplish the task he has set out for himself, but his purpose in wishing to do so is evident. For Keats, the artist who brings into being even some of the conditions of ideal beauty has the satisfaction

²⁸ Gérard, "Romance and Reality," pp. 28-29.

²⁹ Rollins, II.263.

of knowing that at least these conditions are available on earth in a limited form through art. In addition, this art remains permanently behind for the continued enjoyment of the rest of mankind. In this way, the artist helps along the development of beauty. Finally, as a result of his work, the artist can look forward to the admiration and love of his friends.

In sum, Keats remains dedicated to poetry and beauty because he finds some limited solutions to the difficulties with beauty. One important factor in Keats's ability to find these solutions is in his comparison of the effects of nature on the human spirit with the effects of art. These solutions fall roughly under the heading of poetic practicality. Firstly, the problem of the deceptiveness of beauty is by-passed to a certain extent by Keats's being content with the more knowable aspects of beauty. Next, the effects of incompleteness, frailty, and vulnerability in beauty are mitigated by Keats's acceptance of the double principle of development. Then, Keats deals with the alluring effect of beauty by stressing love and truth. Finally, Keats's poetic practicality does not mean a dismissal of ideal beauty, but the achievement of a limited measure of beauty on earth.

CHAPTER V

THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF POETRY FOR KEATS

Keats rarely makes statements, formal or otherwise, on the nature of poetry. Although evidence on this matter is scarce, the ideas that Keats does have are apparent in these few formal statements and in the figurative language he uses when speaking of poetry. The figurative language in question consists of the symbol of the wing, the metaphors of a religious nature, and the metaphors of a feminine nature. The study of Keats's thought on poetry reveals that he finds in poetry a high idealistic endeavour which requires much artistic labour and which helps mankind through its emphasis of spiritual well-being, love, and beauty.

Keats uses the symbol of the wing to represent poetry because he sees in one part of poetry the expression of his aspiration toward a more exalted realm or state of being, though Keats also states this idea directly without the use of a symbol. A first example is in "Oh! how I love, on a fair summer's eve," written in 1816. Here, Keats recounts the pleasure of being in "A fragrant wild" in which he may "Perhaps on the wing of Poesy upsoar." Keats delights in the sense of freedom, adventure, and energy which the thought of poetry gives him.

Much later, in May, 1819, this same symbol of poetry as imaginative flight occurs in the more mature "Ode to a Nightingale." Upon hearing the beautiful and vital song of

the nightingale, the narrator wishes to ascend to the realm in which it is. His ascent, however, is to be of a specific kind:

[F]or I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy.

(31-33)

Keats's ascent is not to be on the chariot of "Bacchus," the "god of wine and of ecstatic liberation,"¹ but on the "viewless wings" of poetry's mysterious power.

In an example from one of his last poems, "The Fall of Hyperion," Keats states outright that poetry is the expression not only of his but also of mankind's aspiration:

For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,
With the fine spell of words alone can save
Imagination from the sable charm.

(I.8-10)

Throughout his career, then, Keats sees as part of poetry the expression of mankind's aspirations.²

In view of Keats's use of the wing to symbolize poetry,

¹ "Dionysus or Bacchus," Who's Who in Classical Mythology, comp. Michael Grant and John Hazel (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973).

² In a comment related to Keats's discussion of the subject of poetry in his poems, the critic Perkins (Quest for Permanence, p. 221), makes the point that "Because of the uncertainties clustered about the visionary imagination, Keats's poems often become reflections about art or poetry, critical exercises in which a young poet meditates his task, seeking to resolve perplexities and find a path for his talent."

his further speaking of poetry in an idealistic way suggests that for him, in the early part of his career, poetry is linked to what may be broadly termed philosophic concerns. Some of these concerns are evident in "To George Felton Mathew," an epistle of November, 1815. Here, Keats praises Mathew as a poetic guide, wishing to follow him "Past each horizon of fine poesy" (12). This reference to the horizons or the different spheres of experience in poetry gives some indication of the idealistic or "philosophic" concerns Keats sees in poetry.

The letter to Bailey of October 8, 1817, gives a further indication of the "philosophic" concerns of poetry. Here, Keats refers to poetry as "a little Region . . . which may be food for a Week's stroll in the Summer."³ In other words, poetry forms a bountiful world for the reader to explore through meditation and musing. More revealing of Keats's thought than this early idealistic or "philosophic" way of speaking about poetry are the religious metaphors he uses. An early example of these religious metaphors is in "Sleep and Poetry," written around October 9, 1816. In this poem which is to a large extent concerned with the subject of poetry, Keats makes several attempts at describing or defining poetry. Perhaps the most revealing attempt is the following:

A drainless shower
Of light is poesy; 'tis the supreme of power;

³ Rollins, I.170.

'Tis might half slumb'ring on its own right arm.
(235-237)

Poetry is "A drainless shower / Of light" (235-236), or an inexhaustible bestowment from the heavens. As such, poetry retains the qualities or conditions symbolized by "light" which in this case seem to be the power to enlighten, affect, and move the spirit in the absence of any exertion. For this reason, poetry is the "supreme of power"⁴ (236).

As Keats's career progresses, he does not always praise the virtues of poetry. Yet, even when Keats is censuring poetry, an example may be found of his doing so in a way suggestive of poetry's religious concerns. Such an example is in the "Ode on Indolence" of May, 1819. Contrary to his previous hint that poetry is a deity which governs with the "mildest sway," Keats now sees poetry as his "demon" (40). Although by this metaphor Keats may perhaps mean only a psychological obsession, the fact that he personifies poetry as a definite and animate "demon" seems to make the

⁴ Two further comments in "Sleep and Poetry" describe the nature of poetry, reaffirming what is said above. In the first of these comments, Keats refers to "the very fane, the light of Poesy" (276), again stressing its divine enlightening nature. Then, he refers to poetry as "Pleasure's temple" (355), this time stressing the purity or holiness of poetry even if it happens to house "Pleasure."

The present author does not agree with Robert M. Ryan who in his finely composed work, Keats: The Religious Sense (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 102, states that the religious imagery in "Sleep and Poetry" is not necessarily "evidence that Keats looked on poetry in a religious light." In fact, the poem "Sleep and Poetry" gives a clear indication of Keats's devout attitude, in the early part of his career, toward the pure or rather holy beauty which he sees as a part of poetry.

anti-religious implications of the metaphor difficult to escape. In addition, if these anti-religious implications are accepted, the personified "demon" makes a sharp and logical ~~contrast~~ to the deities of light with which Keats represents the pure, inviolate, holy qualities of poetry.

Finally, a letter written to Shelley on August 16, 1820, reveals the further use of religious metaphors in Keats's attempts to describe the nature of poetry:

A modern work it is said must have a purpose, which may be the God--an artist must serve Mammon--he must have "self concentration" selfishness, perhaps. You I am sure will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity and be more of an artist, and 'load every rift' of your subject with ore.⁵

This last statement by Keats goes a long way toward summing up the discussion of religious aspects in his poetry. Firstly, the rather objective comparison between "God" and "Mammon" makes clear that Keats does not see poetry as a type of orthodox Christian devotion. Yet, as his prior associations of poetry with deities, light, and temples indicate, poetry holds a serious, high, even holy place in Keats's scheme of things. The poet, however, cannot too much dwell on or revere poetry because doing so may lead him either to go beyond the sphere of poetry or to neglect poetic art. Keats feels, therefore, that the poet must do as much justice as possible to this high, benevolent, holy end of

⁵ Rollins, II.322-323.

poetry by balancing this end with his richly concrete, graspable, fully developed artistry.

Keats gives further indications of his thought on the nature of poetry through his personifications of it in the forms of a woman or feminine creature. For example, in "Sleep and Poetry," when the poet sees the lovers Petrarch and Laura in a vision, the shape of poetry personified appears above them:

Most happy they!
For over them was seen a free display
Of out-spread wings, and from between them shone
The face of Poesy: from off her throne
She overlook'd things that I scarce could tell.
(391-395)

Poetry is seen as a winged creature that is feminine, resplendent, and that oversees matters of love.⁶ To Keats's usual associations of poetry with freedom, enlightenment, and sovereignty is added that of feminine attentiveness.

A second example of poetry personified, this time as a woman, occurs in "If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd," written in the spring of 1819. Keats first compares

⁶ The close connection in Keats's mind between poetry and love is affirmed in his early thought, with several pertinent comments on the matter occurring in Endymion. Once again, Keats sees poetry as a guardian of love, a fact which his comparison of poetry with a "lark" flying "Over his nested young" (II.721) indicates. In a second example, Keats sees poetry as a recording of a story of love or as that which results when a poet steps "A quill immortal in their [the lovers'] joyous tears" (II.732). Keats's early thought on this close connection between poetry and love is confirmed in his other discussions of the relationships between love and the poet, love and beauty, and on the power of love to charm.

the sonnet to Andromeda, a woman renowned for beauty in Greek mythology. Then, in turn, he compares the rhythm and rime of the sonnet to the kind of sandal appropriate for a woman such as Andromeda:

Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,
Sandals more interwoven and complete
To fit the naked foot of poesy.

Keats seems to be saying that like a sandal is to a woman's foot, rhythm must function as closely and unobstructively to the sonnet form as possible. The rime of the sonnet, represented by the way in which the fabric of the sandal is "interwoven," must be so intricately intertwined that together with rhythm it effects a graceful and effortless movement such as might be comparable to the dignified walk of a beautiful woman.

A final example of poetry personified, again as a woman, shows Keats's disenchantment with poetry. In the "Ode on Indolence," written in May, 1819, Keats describes an urn on which he sees personified not only poetry, but also ambition and love. Here is Keats's description of personified poetry:

The last, whom I love more, the more of blame
Is heap'd upon her, maiden most unmeek,--
I knew to be my . . . Poesy.

(38-40)

Even when, like an "unmeek" woman, poetry is blameable, Keats cannot help being dedicated to poetry. From this censure and other observations made by Keats it is evident that he ideally

expects poetry to reflect a feminine modesty, kindness, grace, and beauty.

Having examined the figurative language by which Keats attempts to describe and define the nature of poetry, the reader may more profitably examine some of Keats's formal statements on what poetry ideally does. Keats explains his view in a letter written to Taylor on February 27, 1818. He writes down three axioms to which he thinks the poet ideally adheres. The first of these axioms is that

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.⁷

According to this axiom, the poet does not strike the reader harshly with poetry that contains eccentric or whimsical thoughts. Rather, the poet induces wonder in the reader by presenting him with poetry which contains a "fine" overabundance of "highest thoughts." These thoughts are, moreover, so self-evident that they seem to be not the poet's but a "Remembrance" of the reader's own thoughts.⁸

Before the reader moves on to a consideration of Keats's second axiom, a previous comment of his which foreshadows this axiom must be examined. In a letter to Reynolds of

⁷ Rollins, I.238.

⁸ This first axiom brings to mind Keats's assertion, written on January 2, 1819, in his journal letter to the George Keatses, that poems ideally "explain themselves." (Rollins, Letters, II.21).

February 3, 1818, Keats censures the "speculations" of Wordsworth's poetry:

Sancho will invent a Journey heavenward as well as any body. We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us--and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject.--How beautiful are the retired flowers! how would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway crying out, "admire me I am a violet!"⁹

Wordsworth's poetry is too "domestic" and didactic. The philosophy in it, moreover, is too "palpable" and Wordsworth's ego is too obtrusively apparent. Poetry, instead, "enters" the soul inconspicuously without seeming to intrude.

This censure of didactic, obtrusive, egotistic poetry has a strong bearing on Keats's second axiom which concerns the desirable effect of beauty in poetry. He explains this effect by comparing it to that of the sun as during the course of the day the latter rises, moves across the sky, and finally sets. Keats writes this second axiom immediately after the first in the same letter of February 27, 1818:

Its touches of Beauty should never be half way therby [sic] making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural natural too [sic] him-- shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight.¹⁰

⁹ Rollins, I.224.

¹⁰ Rollins, I.238.

As in his censure of Wordsworth's poetry, Keats again assumes that the beauty in poetry must appear "natural." This "natural" effect is achieved by the poet's perfecting his "touches of Beauty"¹¹ to the utmost degree. Poetry that is finished to this degree leaves the reader "content," rather than "breathless" and in expectation. For this reason, Keats seems to suggest, not only the imagery but the whole narrative structure of poetry begins naturally, rises to a climax, and ends in a subdued splendour.¹² Keats's formal statements on poetry, then, stress its high thought, its unobtrusiveness, and its luxuriously complete beauty.

After an examination of the figurative language and axioms by which Keats attempts to understand the role of poetry, it may be desirable to leave the reader with a summary statement by Keats on the final end or purpose of poetry. Ironically, the search for this summary statement leads back to one of Keats's earliest poems, "Sleep and Poetry," in which he states that

[T]he great end
Of poesy, [is] that it should be a friend
To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man.
(245-247)

This early assumption that poetry consoles and elevates

¹¹ Rollins, I.238.

¹² Keats's third axiom, which is concerned more with the poet's creative process than with poetry itself, need not be taken up here.

mankind is the seed from which Keats's more mature thought on the matter develops. As seen in previous chapters, Keats goes on to specify that poetry ideally reflects truth, sanity, and responsibility,¹³ and that it elevates mankind through the high dreaming, love, and beauty which it enacts.

At this late stage, the only matter that needs consideration is the conclusion. The latter begins with an outline of Keats's ideas and a comparison of them to the ideas of other romantic writers. Next, a discussion of the current value of Keats's ideas follows. Lastly, some suggestions for the further investigation of related subjects round out the study.

The problem originally set out is that of how Keats's evaluation of men and their circumstances affects the development of his thought on poetry. The outline of the ideas which constitute Keats's response to this problem entails a discussion of such important terms as truth, poet, dream, beauty, and poetry. As the reader recalls, Keats judges common men to be vulgar, but admires great men. He therefore wishes to help mankind through his role as poet, though only after making up his mind about the worth of

¹³ In a manner similar to that of the present author, the critic Sperry ends his study of Keats by referring to an early poem. Sperry's conclusion concerning Keats's poetry (Keats the Poet, p. 342) is that "It preserves decorum by remaining to the last a poetry of sensation; yet it leaves us with a full sense of the ultimate values. It takes us as far as we have any right to require toward a poetry of thought." This conclusion seems to agree to a large extent with that of the present author.

poetry. Since external circumstances are incongruous for Keats, especially when perceived through the inadequate rational mind, his way of perceiving them is "imaginative and often emotional rather than 'rational.'"¹⁴ This response of Keats's according to the critic Bate, is common not only to English but to European romantic writers as well. In a similar vein, the critic Gérard reaffirms that the "ontological intuition of cosmic oneness"¹⁵ is the "foundation of romanticism."¹⁶ Hence, Keats's response of perceiving external circumstances through the imagination seems to be well within the general assumptions of romantic thought on this matter.

In addition to affecting the way he perceives, the incongruity and severity of men's circumstances affect Keats's view of the poet. Keats stresses three main roles for the poet. Firstly, the poet is a "friend" who participates in the joy and sorrow of mankind. Secondly, he is a sage who is aware of the importance of intellect and learning and who nevertheless has a first-hand understanding of human conduct. Lastly, in response to the sickening effect of external circumstances on the human spirit, Keats views the poet as a spiritual healer who portrays love, beauty, and truth. Keats's

¹⁴ Walter J. Bate, From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1946), p. 94.

¹⁵ Gérard, English Romantic Poetry, p. 239.

¹⁶ Gérard, p. 239.

overall view of the poet leaves no doubt as to the sense of responsibility which he feels the poet must have. In this regard, the critic Gérard is justified when describing the "ethical" attitude of the romantics, in stating that "Their youthful dream of perfection coalesced with their experience of evil and grief to provide new meaning and new vitality for the traditional, Christian-Stoic ethos of acceptance and responsibility."¹⁷ Although Keats does not accept external circumstances as much as Gérard thinks, he does share his view of the poet's responsibility with the other major romantic writers.

Keats's view of the poet extends to the area of the creative process. In keeping with his reaction against strictly rational perception, Keats at first places an overly large importance on the poet's dreaming or imagination. He gradually thinks, however, that imagination must work together with judgement and experience. This finding on Keats does not accord well with the statement by Abrams that for the English romantic writers "the stress was shifted more and more to the poet's natural genius, creative imagination, and emotional spontaneity, at the expense of the opposing attributes of judgement, learning, and artful restraints."¹⁸ For Keats, on the contrary, the creative process gradually includes more and more judgement and experience.

¹⁷ Gérard, p. 257.

¹⁸ Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp, p. 21.

Although Keats stresses the poet's responsibility and judgement, he is not, therefore, entirely against dreaming. Furthermore, Keats finds in dreaming much more than mere wishful thinking. He yearns for and expects to find through dreaming an imaginary highly refined world. In this respect, Gérard's use of the term "Sehnsucht" to describe the overall romantic view of the imagination yields a more accurate insight than Bate's use of "sympathy" does. Moreover, so far as Keats is concerned, Gérard's description of the English romantic poets as "self-centered" in the sense that they are "purposive" and that they grow morally¹⁹ is more accurate than Bate's description which stresses their sympathetic selflessness.²⁰ Keats is also aware of the prophetic possibility of dreaming. The poet, in dreaming of the actualization of the most heroic to the most tender situations, discovers more of himself and works out whatever elements of godhead he possesses. Through this dreaming, the poet creates the possibility for the actual fulfilment of mankind's highest potentials. Regarding this matter, the critic Murry appropriately compares Keats to Blake. Although the Biblical thought of Blake is in certain important respects different from Keats's, and even if in the view of the present author Keats does not stress selflessness as much as Murry thinks,

¹⁹ Gérard, English Romantic Poetry, p. 251.

²⁰ Walter J. Bate (From Classic to Romantic, p. 143) cites Keats, Hazlitt, and other writers of the time to show that the notion of sympathy was influential then.

both poets' imaginations are prophetic in the sense that both give them a glimpse of mankind's highest potential, which comes close to godhead. As Murry puts the matter,

Only in pure Imagination are we completely Human, for by it alone we behold, and are one with the beauty of the things that are. . . . Therefore, for Blake, to be a Man is to be Eternal Man; Keats believed the same; nor will anyone ever convince me that the belief of Jesus of Nazareth was essentially other.²¹

Keats is not alone among the English romantics in having a prophetic imagination. Although he is eventually disillusioned with poetic dreaming, Keats is not completely so and is not completely reconciled to external circumstances.

Keats's view of beauty or rather his dissatisfaction with it is one important reason for his initial rejection of men's circumstances. This dissatisfaction arises from Keats's observation of the limitations and conflicting aspects of beauty, though the admirable aspects gradually predominate in his mind. Some of the limitations of beauty are in its deceptive quality and lack of completeness or wholeness which make it incomprehensible and ungratifying to the senses. Keats's response to this incompleteness is to try to conceive of a fuller and riper beauty. This response, as Perkins points out, is the same as that of "the nineteenth . . . century defence of poetry [which] has stressed synthesis and totality of impression."²² For Keats, another

²¹ John M. Murry, Keats, p. 303.

²² Perkins, Quest for Permanence, p. 9.

source of dissatisfaction with beauty is that the latter occurs along with frailty and vulnerability. Again, Keats's dissatisfaction with the incompatibility between beauty and frailty is part of an overall romantic problem. As the critic Gérard affirms, "The romantics were caught between these great expectations [of ideal happiness] and the experiential evidence of human frailty, of evil and suffering."²³ The final source of dissatisfaction for Keats is in the alluring destructive power which beauty holds over men.

Despite its limitations and conflicting aspects, Keats remains dedicated to beauty. A highly admirable aspect of beauty, from Keats's point of view, is that the perception of beauty disperses intellectual confusion and counteracts emotional depression in men. Beauty does so in two ways: firstly, by being the means which allows the "heart" to recognize truth; secondly, by inspiring love which in turn elevates the spirit. Another factor which aids Keats in seeing the admirable qualities of beauty is his acceptance of the principles of process and progress. As a result of this acceptance, Keats wishes to assist in the development of these two principles. He, therefore, becomes more poetically practical, hoping to achieve a limited kind of beauty on earth. Hence, Keats achieves an uneasy artistic reconciliation with beauty.

The scanty evidence available on Keats's thought concerning

²³ Gérard, English Romantic Poetry, p. 247.

the nature of poetry reveals that on this matter he often reaffirms or suggests what he has early held, especially about the poet. For Keats, poetry unobtrusively and undidactically expresses the high self-evident thoughts and aspirations of mankind. In this regard, the critic Goldberg agrees with the present author that Keats and Wordsworth offer a contrast. Keats's relatively unobtrusive undidactic poetry differs significantly from Wordsworth's which "is intrinsically bound up with a search for epistemological truths."²⁴ Returning to Keats's view, the reader remembers that for Keats poetry consists of a pure or holy beauty which is complete and which can only result from graspable careful artistry. The critic Bate finds that Keats shares his concern for the "concrete particular" with other major romantic writers.²⁵ Lastly, Keats sees the main purpose of poetry in its capability of allowing the poet to be a "friend" who cares for and lifts the thoughts of mankind. Ultimately, external circumstances create a moral-aesthetic reaction in Keats which makes him wish to benefit mankind by refining its vision and leaving it a legacy of poetic beauty. With this last observation, the outline of Keats's ideas and their comparison to the ideas of other romantic writers is complete.

Several of Keats's thoughts and opinions are of value in a consideration of the literary problems of today. Among

²⁴ Michael A. Goldberg, The Poetics of Romanticism: Toward a Reading of John Keats (Yellow Springs, Ohio: Antioch Press, 1969), p. 130.

²⁵ Bate, From Classic to Romantic, p. 65.

these thoughts and opinions are Keats's censure of rationality, his insistence on the poet's responsibility, his recognition of the importance of the imagination, his conceiving of the notion of "intensity," and his disapproval of a dogmatic approach to literature. Firstly, Keats's censure of rationality is an opinion which remains of value. As the critic Perkins explains, "romantic and later poets have lived in obvious competition with analytic thought and science; and the prestige of science has, of course, sharpened the need that poetry should arrogate to itself functions that science cannot fulfill."²⁶ Keats's opinion that poetic imaginative perception is as valid as strictly rational perception and his consequent stress on achieving a "synthesis and totality of impression,"²⁷ must continue to be heeded.

A second major aspect of Keats's thought which remains of value today is his notion that in an imperfect society composed of imperfect men, the poet must act with a friendly, wise, and spiritual sense of responsibility. The continued vitality of this opinion rests in the fact that outside of literary studies the public and even the highly educated remain uninformed or hostile to poetry. Keats's concern that the poet and poetry have the capability of benefitting mankind reminds critics, popular as well as theoretic, of the important duty of bringing back poetry to the rest of society.

²⁶ Perkins, Quest for Permanence, p. 9.

²⁷ Perkins, p. 9.

The popular critic must continue to deal with the public's lack of knowledge concerning poetry and the theoretic critic, other than theorizing without a firm sense of purpose, must deal with the intellectual and cultural factors which prevent even the highly educated from appreciating the important role of poetry. A notable example of a Keatsian academic critic already performing such a task is Stillinger. Although the criticism of the latter often takes the view of Keats as a "realist" to extremes, yet his analysis has at times a subtle validity which has the potentiality of opening up Keats's poetry to even the most rational, skeptical, scientifically minded members of society.

Critics of Keats's work and of literature in general have much to learn from his thought on the imagination. In this regard, the present author agrees with Sperry, though for contrary reasons, that Keats's thought on "the imagination and the role it plays in human awareness explains a major part of the fascination his career holds for us today."²⁸ Firstly, Keats's view that the imagination can liberate mankind from the deadening effects of "harsh" external circumstances is extremely important in dealing with the similar problem of current societies which breed overly rational, overly pragmatic, and philistine attitudes. Furthermore, in what is perhaps one of Keats's most valuable thoughts; he shows how the imagination, through its wide

²⁸ Sperry, Keats the Poet, p. 50.

and magnificent potentiality, allows mankind to discover itself, to fulfil this self in actuality, and to work out whatever elements of godhead mankind possesses. When the imagination is viewed in this light, even Keats's restful indolence in a realm of love, beauty, and leisure takes on new significance. This indolent attitude may be seen as an early attempt to deal with the problem of how mankind is to give meaning to the increasing leisure time available.

In addition to his thought on imagination, Keats's thought on beauty is still of value today. His notion of "intensity" which concerns beauty and truth remains, as Douglas Bush affirms, "an informal and incomplete but incontrovertible statement of aesthetic theory."²⁹ This notion, as Bate points out, resembles the notion of "unity," a fundamental requirement of all poetry.³⁰

In contrast to the notion of "intensity," some of Keats's thoughts on poetry, especially his three axioms, seem in the words of Douglas Bush "more or less alien from those of most modern poets."³¹ These axioms are nonetheless important statements about poetry, since they apply closely to Keats's own great work.³² As these three axioms suggest, Keats's approach to literature is comparatively informal, intuitive,

²⁹ Bush, Major English Romantic Poets, p. 236.

³⁰ Bate, John Keats, p. 244.

³¹ Bush, Major English Romantic Poets, p. 236.

³² Bush, p. 236.

or as he himself puts it, "natural." This approach to literature serves as an indirect warning to recent critics who perhaps unwittingly slip into dogmatic attitudes. As Goldberg points out,

Increasingly, poetry has been dehumanized by critics; as it has been transformed into a structure, a pattern of images, an arrangement of symbols. Increasingly, the better poem is the more complex, the most susceptible to analysis.³³

Keats's implied warning against the self-deception of a too easy conquest over poetic material must be heeded more than ever by recent critics. On this sobering note, the discussion of the current value of Keats's thoughts ends.

The present study raises several problems which might be the subject matter for further investigation. These problems fall under the two major headings of the responsibility of literary writers and the role of the imagination in literature. Although most critics agree with Keats that literary writers must be responsible, the manner in which they must be so remains to be answered. One approach to the solution of this large problem is to try to understand better the kinds of viewpoints which emerge from a social situation in which individuals receive a relatively undiversified exposure to a single discipline or type of employment. Then, by more adequately anticipating the objections and hostility to poetry which emerge from these viewpoints, the theoretic

³³ Goldberg, The Poetics of Romanticism, p. 175.

critic may gradually help to effect a humanization and spiritual vitalization of mankind.

The problem of what role the imagination plays in literature raises some highly interesting questions. First, the nature of the imagination needs to be better understood. In the past, the popularity of Freud the psychologist among critics of literature and the unfamiliarity of the latter with the field of psychology resulted in misconception and hostility regarding the imagination. Therefore, a reevaluation of the current understanding of the imagination needs to be done and a means devised for the application of this knowledge to literary studies.

After a reexamination of the nature of the imagination, a look at its role seems in order. One important question in this regard arises out of Keats's stressing of concreteness in literature. Recently, so great has the stressing of concreteness become that critics at times seem to wish to completely exclude the abstract from literature. What critics do not realize is that Keats's stressing of concreteness is a response to some extremely abstract or intangible problems he sets out for himself such as trying to know gods, their dreams, and their realms. Furthermore, recent critics seem to forget what Keats, does not, that "an overconcern with the concrete particular, when once admitted, does not easily stop, and that it may quickly become indiscriminate."³⁴ Hence, the

³⁴ Bate, From Classic to Romantic, p. 65.

following question or similar ones might be investigated. How desirable is concreteness in literature? Does this concreteness, when carried to its conclusion, lead backward to mere naturalistic description? On the other hand, how desirable is the abstract in literature? How far can the imagination go in its challenges to external circumstances? The investigation of such questions might prevent critics from too rigidly insisting on concreteness today.

The final suggestion for further study, to end on a somewhat lighter note, concerns the examination from a literary point of view, of the relation between leisure and imagination in mankind's life. Firstly, the nature or meaning of leisure may be looked at. Next, the role of leisure in imaginative discovery and self fulfilment may be examined. Then, the importance of leisure may be evaluated. In this way, the study of literature may contribute to the understanding of this underestimated and growing problem.

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