

KEATS' LETTER TO P. B. SHELLEY, AUGUST 16, 1820

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The reason why I took up Keats' letter to P. B. Shelley, Aug. 16, 1820 as the title of this essay is that Keats may be thought to reveal himself in the letter more distinctly than in any other. What is revealed there can help to approach his figure as both the poet and the man. In this sense, the letter must be always taken up as one of the most important letters and with renewed interest. And the importance and the renewed interest mean nothing but the difficulty of the letter. As is often said, Keats' letters, in a sense, help more than his poems towards giving a clue to the secret of his art. No doubt, it can hardly need be said that we must be sure to go straight to the works of the poet so as to find a clue to an understanding of his art, but we must not neglect to make use of available side lights. The letter gives us much side light and leads us to a right starting point. My attempt in this essay is to give as close an examination as possible to what the starting point leads to.

Before pursuing the study, we must take account of the conditions under which the letter was addressed (more exactly, answered) to P. B. Shelley. On July 27, 1820, Shelley sent a letter to Keats from Pisa. It is quite necessary to read the letter through passage by passage. This way of reading requires considerable space, but we cannot help it, for the way shows us various aspects of the climate in which Keats lived then. Let us start from the beginning, dividing the letter¹ into four passages:

My dear Keats

I hear with great pain the dangerous accident that you have undergone, and Mr. Gisborne who gives me the account of it, adds, that you continue to wear a consumptive appearance. This consumption is a disease particularly fond of people who write such good verse as you have done, and with the assistance of an English winter it can often indulge its selection;—I do not think that young and amiable poets are at all bound to gratify its taste; they have entered into no bond with the Muses to that effect.

These first sentences indicate the physical conditions in which Keats was placed. 'The dangerous accident' must point to the 'fresh attack of blood-spitting'² which has happened to him on June 22. (His fatal illness had begun on February 3.³) And from the time of the event onwards, his very poor physical conditions—'a consumptive appearance'—are to continue to the last and to weaken both his body and his creative imagination. It is a remarkable fact that from about that time, his poetic activities come to decline and even his genius seems to have disappeared.

¹ The letter is included in M. B. Forman (ed.): *The Letters of John Keats* (Oxford, 1952).

² *Ib.*, p. xxxi.

³ *Ib.*, p. xxxi.

It is quite necessary to read the other sentences with much care, for there can be found various aspects explaining the relation between Shelley and Keats. When Shelley writes, "This consumption is a disease particularly fond of people who write *such good verse as you have done* (My italics)," here there is felt a rather humorous strain, which a condescending kind of attitude underlies. Let it be remembered now that from start to finish Shelley adopted a leading, though friendly, attitude towards Keats. But, on the contrary, Keats did not hold Shelley as the *artist* in high estimation, and this feeling is to be echoed in the letter to Shelley which is the object of this essay. Once he refused to visit Shelley that he might have his 'own unfettered scope', and this episode is often mentioned as showing his poetic independence. As Edmund Blunden says, Keats was 'ever a fighter'. In the next place, we must call special attention to the phrase 'such good verse as you have done'. It is a very perplexing thing to understand in what sense these words are written. Did Shelley write them in a laudatory or in a depreciatory sense? And must we be aware of his sincerity or his arrogance? To my feeling, the best way of grasping the meaning must be to be eclectic, though the way may appear to be a little too convenient. Accordingly, we may summarize rightly by saying that we must be sensible of both sincerity and arrogance. I will tell the reason at some length in the later part. As for the remaining passage, little need be said except that a humorous strain pervades, but we are vividly aware that the condescending way of saying shows itself again in the last two sentences. So much for the first division, and we will go to the second.

But seriously (for I am joking on what I am very anxious about) I think you would do well to pass the winter after so tremendous an accident in Italy, and (if you think it as necessary as I do) so long as you could find Pisa or its neighbourhood agreeable to you, Mrs. Shelley unites with myself in urging the request, that you would take up your residence with us.—You might come by sea to Leghorn, (France is not worth seeing, and the sea air is particularly good for weak lungs) which is within a few miles of us. You ought at all events to see Italy, and your health which I suggest as a motive, might be an excuse to you.—I spare declamation about statues and paintings and the ruins—and what is a greater piece of forbearance—about the mountains the streams, and the fields, the colours of the sky, and the sky itself—

These parts are written in a sincere way, which betokens the generosity of Shelley. It is common knowledge that of the later Romantics, Shelley is said to be most generous and to be always ready to hold out a supporting hand to any poetic friends, if need be. In the passage above quoted, the genuine friendly feeling is perceptible and his disagreeable side disappears. A disinterested literary mind appeals to us with much intensity, suppressing his self-conceited inclination. It may be a superfluous thing, but only the fact is to be added that at that time, Italy was the very climate where consumptives can take care of themselves. And in the words 'You ought at all events to see Italy,' we must remind ourselves that we can perceive the worship of Italy which reigned in the literary circle of Europe. And again, it may be not going too far to say in addition that the last sentence tells the strong sense of beauty, artistic as well as natural, which the two most romantic poets have in common.

⁴ Letter to Benjamin Bailey, Oct., 8, 1817.

The following passage must be dealt with with as much caution:

I have lately read your *Endymion* again and ever with a new sense of the treasures of poetry it contains, though treasures poured forth with indistinct profusion. This, people in general will not endure, and that is the cause of the comparatively few copies which have been sold.—I feel persuaded that you are capable of the greatest things, so you but will.

In May 1818, *Endymion*, which has been called a sheer failure by critics, was published. It need not be added that almost all of criticisms of the poem were inclined towards blame, which Keats himself, an acute self-critic, had expected to incur. But the expectation could not make him indifferent to criticisms, some of which were given not from a literary point of view but from a political. Though it was a common phenomenon of the time that one-sided arguments prevailed among the literary circle without so much as doubt, a few could give criticism at once just and conscientious. Shelley was among the few. In the passage above quoted, Shelley, an eminent critic of poems figures. And his judgement on *Endymion* holds true without any revision up to this day. No doubt exists that he thought that in the poem Keats' imagination could not be said to fire to a creative glow, which could produce the masterpieces to come, but his critical attitude was not partial. In that passage, he gave frank criticism without taking into consideration any feeling of Keats': 'I have lately read your *Endymion* again and ever *with a new sense of the treasures of poetry it contains, though treasures poured forth with indistinct profusion*' (My italics). No more exact criticism could not be found, and especially, the italicized parts cut the work to the quick. Before passing on, we must return to the starting-point and think over Shelley's criticism at more length. Why could Shelley read 'with a new sense of the treasures of poetry it contains'? It was because 'in particular, the Hymn to Pan in the first Book "afforded the surest promise of of ultimate excellence."' ⁵ To put in conclusive terms, Shelley must have been acutely sensible of Keats' paganism in the new shape, which was created by a poet richly gifted in eye and ear. When Shelley says about the quality of *Endymion*, "...though treasures poured forth with indistinct profusion," his words can become a standard of criticism of the work. Recognizing its long-winded rambling, he remarked elsewhere that "it was full of some of the highest and finest gleams of poetry." ⁶ On May 14th, 1820, thinking again of *Endymion*, he summarizes his opinion about the genius of the younger poet by writing that "Keats, I hope, is going to show himself of a great poet: like the sun, to burst through the clouds, which, though dyed in the finest colours of the air, obscured his rising." ⁷ This summary opinion accords with the last sentence: "I feel persuaded that you are capable of the greatest things, so you but will." As Shelley says, Keats at that period was full of poetic possibility, though he did not get his feet on the ground yet. In spite of such sympathetic recognition, the fact still remains that, contrary to our expectation, Keats himself did not express so deep a feeling of appreciation, and we are tempted to trace the cause of ingratitude but this is not the place for that. For the time being, we must be content to be left in an inconclusive state and hasten to examine the last passage.

⁵ E. de Selincourt (ed.): *The Poems of Keats* (Methuen, 1954), p. 413.

⁶ *Ib.*, p. 413.

⁷ *Ib.*, p. 413.

I always tell Ollier to send you Copies of my books—"Prometheus Unbound" I imagine you will receive nearly at the same time with this letter. The *Cenci* I hope you have already received—it was studiously composed in a different style "below the *good* how far! but far above the *great*." *In poetry I have sought to avoid system and mannerism: I wish those who excel me in genius would pursue the same plan*—(My italics).

Whether you remain in England, or journey to Italy,—believe that you carry with you my anxious wishes for your health happiness and success, wherever you are or whatever you undertake—and that I am

Yours sincerely.

P. B. Shelley.

The first half tells only that Shelley sent his works to Keats and we need not concern ourselves with it for the present. The only part which deserves our attention is the following sentence in the sense that it introduces the most important passage:

—it (= *The Cenci*) was studiously composed in a different style "below the *good* how far! but far above the *great*."

In *The Cenci*, Shelley confesses that he has attempted a poetic experiment 'in a different style.' He explains about the meaning of the experiment in his own terms in the following.

In poetry I have sought to avoid system and mannerism: I wish those who excel me in genius would pursue the same plan.

What Shelley has made an attempt at in poetry is to make a poem in a different way from a traditional one—to avoid system and mannerism. It is true that the attempt to avoid system and mannerism is a constant object of any arts but what is most essential and hard to put into practice is how to avoid. Keats was, past doubt, one of the poets who had been most aware of the difficulty, and it needs hardly saying that he tried very hard to find out what is a new kind of art. To Keats, Shelley's attempt at the avoidance might sound very empty. If I am allowed to hazard conjecture, it may be that Keats read these parts, smiling a complicated, though pitying, smile, which might have been otherwise thrown upon himself.

The next sentence is very full of significance, for we can be sensible of the difficulty of grasping the real intention of Shelley. The question is whether we should read the sentence into his arrogant attitude or into a modest one. Without doubt, Shelley wrote the words 'those who excel me in genius', counting Keats among them. But did Shelley regard Keats as one of those who excel in genius in the fullest sense? Almost everyone's feeling may be inclined towards the negative. If I am allowed to venture on a guess once more on this point, is it an exaggeration to say that the sentence might provoke fairly strong antipathy? In particular, Shelley's exhortative way of saying—"I wish those who...would pursue the same plan"—can do nothing but drive one away from the desired purpose. As we have noticed, when Shelley touches upon poetry, he becomes too full of confidence not to get beyond the limits of arrogance. But in the realms of other affairs, a generous Shelley presents

himself. The remaining parts of the letter strike us as an example of genuine friendship. On coming across them, we feel like being relieved. But whether Keats might not accept them as showing hearty cordiality is another question.

Though I have devoted a fairly much space to reading of Shelley's letter to Keats and I seem to have got outside my field by stepping aside, I can tell only something of the background against which Keats replied to Shelley's letter. Thus, I am ready to get nearer to my prime concern, and to face one of the letters most hard to treat.

About twenty days after Keats received Shelley's letter, he wrote back. This is Keats' only known letter to Shelley. We cannot find available evidence enough to decide whether Keats sent any other letters, but, though he was a good correspondent, it will not be denied that he did not keep up frequent correspondence with Shelley. Considering such a circumstance, the letter to be dealt with should be said to be written in an outspoken manner. As I have done before, it is convenient to give the letter as close an examination as possible, dividing into several parts.

My dear Shelley,

I am very much gratified that, you in a foreign country, and with a mind almost overoccupied, should write to me in the strain of the Letter beside me. If I do not take advantage of your invitation it will be prevented by a circumstance I have very much at heart to prophesy. There is no doubt that an english [*sic*] winter would put an end to me, and do so in a lingering hateful manner, therefore I must either voyage or journey to Italy as a soldier marches up to a battery. My nerves at present are the worst part of me, yet they feel soothed when I think that come what extreme may, I shall not be destined to remain in one spot long enough to take a hatred of any four particular bed-posts.

Though Keats expresses his gratitude, as Leigh Hunt wrote to Shelley, on the 23rd August: 'Keats, who is better, is sensible of your kindness,'⁸ is it a prejudiced feeling to say that Keats' words do not sound very hearty? The following sentence: 'If I do not take advantage of your invitation it will be prevented by a circumstance I have very much at heart to prophesy,' is very painful to read, for, at that time, his 'Chest is in so nervous a State, that any thing extra such as speaking to an unaccustomed Person or writing a Note half suffocates me'⁹ and he seemed to be very aware of the death which was approaching stealthily—'a circumstance I have very much at heart to prophesy.'¹⁰ On account of the obvious fact that the English winter will put an end to him in a lingering hateful manner, he reluctantly makes up his mind to travel across the Straits of Dover for Italy. When he wrote: 'therefore I must either voyage or journey to Italy as a soldier marches up to a battery,' what he means would be ambiguous but for the fact that he wrote another letter, using a similar phrase in it:

This Journey to Italy wakes me at daylight every morning and haunts me horribly.
I shall endeavour to go though it be with the sensation of marching up against a

⁸ M. B. Forman (ed.): *op. cit.*, p. 506 n. 2.

⁹ Letter to John Taylor, Aug. 14, 1820.

¹⁰ Cf. H. E. Rollins (ed.): *The Letters of John Keats*, II, p. 322 n. 2.

Battery.¹¹

Accordingly, in the Italian journey which haunts him horribly, he can only find the least consolation that he will not be destined to remain in one spot long enough to take a hatred of any four particular bed-posts. The passage quoted above does not concern itself with my central theme. It only provides a brief explanation about the background of the letter.

As the passage that follows offers a most important clue for the understanding of Keats' art, we must turn the critical scrutiny upon it, devoting unproportionately much space to it. Let me be allowed to take a lingering step towards the mysterious gate of Keats' art, for the opening of which I am not sure that I am very much qualified. And in order to reach a deeper stratum of mystery, we must examine the passage in all its varieties and from various points of view.

I am glad you take any pleasure in my poor Poem;—which I would willingly take the trouble to unwrite, if possible, did I care so much as I have done about Reputation. I received a copy of the Cenci, as from yourself from Hunt. There is one part of it I am judge of; the Poetry, and dramatic effect, which by many spirits now a day is considered the mammon. 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.

In the passage, ‘my poor Poem’ must mean *Endymion*, as editors of Keats' letters have pointed out. It would not a very gross mistake to take the epithet ‘poor’ as what it means. It may be that Keats himself did not use it in a modest manner. Therefore, the following passage may be interpreted as both a frank confession of failure and a result of self-criticism. It may be certain that he must have felt glad at a sympathetic praise of Shelley's, which we have touched on already, but the joy is to be suppressed soon after. By what? It is by the self-criticisms given upon himself in the Preface to the poem and in a letter of his, written five months after it was published and criticized by critics having neither authority nor responsibility. For the time being, it is quite unnecessary to step aside to refer to the irresponsible topic. Suffice it to say that at that time, literary criticism was in the habit of being put under the control of politics. From the present viewpoint, it will be laughed off as a sheer nonsense, but it was a great pity for the poet of genius that his poem, though it might be a failure from a literary viewpoint, was trampled down under the feet of critics who were not appreciative of literature, especially poetry. So much for the criticisms given from without. To return to the self-criticism, we must go first to the Preface added to *Endymion*. Anyone who reads through the Preface does not fail to perceive that it is also a fine piece of criticism about poetry. In the Preface, we could find an aspect of Keats' view of poetry, if we want.

Knowing within myself the manner in which this Poem has been produced, it is without a feeling of regret that I make it public.

What manner I mean, will be quite clear to the reader, who must soon perceive

¹¹ Letter to John Taylor, Aug. 14, 1820.

great inexperience, immaturity, and every error denoting a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished. The two first books, and indeed the two last, I feel sensible are not of such completion as to warrant their passing the press; nor should they if I thought a year's castigation would do them any good;—it will not: the foundations are too sandy.

It is more touching than masculine for the man who takes the production of poems as his special province to make such a kind of self-confession as this. And nothing does touch our heart more than the following lines:

It is just that this youngster should die away: a sad thought for me, if I had not some hope that while it is dwindling I may be plotting, and fitting myself for verses fit to live.

'It is just that this youngster should die away.' Who but an acute self-critic has charged his production with 'the failure in a great object'? And the only thing that he desires by adding the Preface is 'to conciliate men who are competent to look, and who do look with a zealous eye, to the honour of English literature.' And in summing up the Preface, he tries to promise himself to exclude 'mawkishness' and 'all the thousand bitters' from his own realm of art. We can find no parallel to Keats in healthiness of attitude among the contemporary poets. Probably we cannot pick up any other poet who continued to afflict himself all his life. And his strenuous effort which resembles even a kind of masochism will never cease to leave its substantial mark on our mind.

In the next place, we must turn our eyes to the letter just referred to. As has been noted before, the letter including his own criticisms upon himself was written five months after *Endymion* saw the light. As this letter¹² has been often quoted as showing his self-criticism, it will do well to extract the essential parts adding only a brief note to it.

...I cannot but feel indebted to those Gentlemen who have taken my part—As for the rest, I begin to get a little acquainted with my own strength and weakness—Praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose *love of beauty in the abstract* (My italics) makes him a severe critic on his own Works. My own domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what Blackwood or the Quarterly could possibly inflict, and also when I feel I am right, no external praise can give me such a glow as *my own solitary re-perception and ratification of what is fine* (My italics).

What is to be noticed here is that as five months passed since the time of publishing, Keats came to have a stability of mind which enabled him to look upon his own work with fair objectivity and this composure began to suggest even a kind of confidence in his own poetic stature. And, more than anything else, this confidence shows that he is well on the way to forming his own aesthetics, based on 'love of beauty in the abstract' and his 'own solitary re-perception and ratification of what is fine'. Keats proceeds to criticize his own work.

¹² Letter to J. A. Hessey, Oct. 9, 1818.

I will write independently—I have written independently *without Judgment*—I may write independently, and *with Judgment* hereafter....In *Endymion*, I leaped head-long into the Sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice.

He who collided with ‘the rocks’ determines on adhering fast to his own ‘unfettered scope’ without giving ear to any ‘comfortable advice’. When we read the concluding remarks: ‘I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest,’ we feel relieved that a valuable genius was not nipped in the bud. The joy, thus suppressed, seems to have remained a bitter experience until he wrote the letter used as the title of this essay. In the letter which was written about two years after the one dealt with just above, when he says about the failure of the past, “I would willingly take the trouble to unwrite, if possible,” the joy which changed into a bitter experience may have been felt with increased intensity. To be sure, that may be the reflective Keats speaking, but in the following, suddenly he changes into a severe critic upon art, refusing to follow the lead of a contemporary poet of his. When we become aware of the sudden refusal, we find ourselves confronted with one of the most important questions. The acute remarks which he makes upon a copy of *The Cenci* are worth considering with serious attention:

There is only one part of it I am judge of; the Poetry, and dramatic effect, which by many spirits now a day is considered the mammon.

In reading the short passage, what matters most is how to read the ‘and’ in the phrase ‘the Poetry, and dramatic effect’. None will doubt that judging from the existence of the following clause ‘which...is considered the mammon’, the ‘and’ must be in appositive use. Therefore, we cannot separate ‘the Poetry’ from ‘dramatic effect’, and it is proper to take ‘the Poetry’ as having an immediate connection with ‘dramatic effect’. Another question which is not to be avoided is the word ‘the mammon’. In general, we think of it in a biblical sense, but in the short passage, Keats seems to use it in a more literary one. What it signifies seems to present a striking similarity to what is found in Spenser or Milton. The illustrations are as follows:

God of the world and worldlings I me call,
Great Mammon, greatest god below the skye,
That of my plenty poure out vnto all,
And vnto none my graces do enuye:

—Spenser: *Faerie Queene*, II. vii. 8.

Mammon led them on—
Mammon, the least erected Spirit that fell
From Heaven:

—Milton: *Paradise Lost*, I. 678—9.

If we interpret the word 'Mammon' in a biblical sense, we must stand in the midst of a labyrinth and we cannot find any way out in spite of much groping in the dark. To say the least of it, almost half of the critical force included in the passage would be lost. But that is not all: in another letter he says what is nearly equivalent to the passage.

The little dramatic skill I may as yet have however badly it might show in a Drama would I think be sufficient for a Poem.¹³

Here, for the moment, our probing must cease, but we cannot be prepared to pass further before we call so much attention to the passage. At any rate, there is no doubt that Keats was thinking of the dramatic skill or the dramatic effect in close connection with a poem. What the dramatic effect takes the concrete shape of with most success is a group of perfect odes which always rank as masterpieces.

In this sense, it can be said with certainty that he lived up to his aesthetic principles. The passage which follows is concerned with a more important and central question, and the interpretation of it is the more difficult.

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.

For convenience, we will deal with the passage, sentence by sentence. Our start must be from the first sentence. The first difficulty arises over the question of what 'the God' means. Judging from the definite article added to 'God' and the capital letter of the word, it may be said without almost any reservations that 'the God' means 'Mammon' which soon appears in the following sentence. If so, how should we properly interpret the sentence: 'A modern work it is said must have a purpose, which may be the God'? Where should we seek for a modern work which has a purpose, i.e. the God? We are still left in doubt about which answer is in the right, but, for instance, if we think of *Paradise Lost* as identical to the work which Keats considers to be modern, are we a long way from a right conjecture? To our thinking, our answer will not be a mere guess. If we assume that Keats thought about a modern work having a purpose with Milton's masterpiece in mind, must we be accused of sentimentalizing our judgment into a false appraisal of Keats' critical capability? The reason why we attempt to hazard such a conjecture is that it is an undeniable fact that Milton, the poet of *Paradise Lost*, continued to haunt Keats all his life.¹⁴

The sentence which follows: 'an artist must serve Mammon' must be our next concern. What deserves much heed here is the word 'artist'. As I have already discussed about its meaning¹⁵, I must avoid the repetition of the question. But we must remind ourselves that what the word stands for is nearly equivalent to the French word 'artiste' or 'artisan'. (We shall face the same word in the passage which is to be dealt with very soon.) So far as the sentence is concerned, we need not add any more explanation to it, if we are al-

¹³ Letter to John Taylor, Nov. 17, 1819.

¹⁴ See my essay: "Notes on Keats' Attitude towards Milton" (*The Annals of the Hitotsubashi Academy*, Vol. IX, No. 1.)

¹⁵ See my essay: "On Reading Keats' Letters" (*Hitotsubashi Journal of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. I, No. 1, pp. 35—7.)

lowed to amplify the meaning. The amplification is that the poet being an artist must try hard to produce a modern work in the fullest sense of the term. Summarizing the foregoing two sentences, Keats says:

He (=an artist) must have "self-concentration" selfishness perhaps.

As for the punctuation, it must be correct grammatically that a comma is placed before the word 'selfishness', but the lack of comma sounds natural, for the omission, whether it is conscious or unconscious, gives us a kind of tense emotion. The only subject on which we are compelled to focus our attention is the word 'self-concentration' or 'selfishness'. As for the poetic style, Keats says the same thing elsewhere with a slight difference¹⁶— 'the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime.' Though, in that case, he makes the remarks with a contemptuous feeling, what they really mean is nothing other than what the 'self-concentration' or 'selfishness' does. At least, we can discover some points of similarity between the former expression and the latter. In order for us to understand what the latter signifies, it is necessary to add a brief comment. As the truest expression in verse of the whole personality of a poet is worth a poem in the full sense of the word, the concentration of the poet's self, which can be 'selfishness', put in another way, is one of the requisites for the production of a poem. When we take the 'self-concentration' as signifying the concentration of the poet's self, what is it that the poet's self or whole person is concentrated on? Considered in close connection with Keats' own notion that, first of all, a poet should be an artist, opinion will not differ about the question—the poet's self must be concentrated on 'the effect of the single line and phrase.'¹⁷ And this artistic attitude will be soon concerned with the next main subject in the later passage. As I have just suggested, the next main concern presents itself in the shape of a baffling matter of controversy.

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.

The words 'you might curb your magnanimity and be more of an artist' will speak for themselves, as we have already dealt with the question of 'an artist,' and the significance of 'your magnanimity' will need no comment. The essential part which baffles us is the last sentence '(you might) "load every rift" of your subject with ore.' As critics have pointed out several times, the part comes straight out of Spenser:

...
Emboist with massy gold of glorious gift,
And with rich metall loaded every rift,

—*Faerie Queene*, II. vii. 28, 11. 4—5.

The question of when the lines of Spenser impressed themselves forcibly upon Keats' mind has not been touched upon by any critics yet, but an expression not unlike that

¹⁶ Letter to Richard Woodhouse, Oct. 21, 1818.

¹⁷ Oliver Elton: *The English Muse* (G. Bells and Sons, 1933), p. 343.

quoted can be discovered in another letter. Concerning the attempt at *Endymion*, he says,

...I must make 4000 Lines of one bare circumstance and *fill them with Poetry* (My italics);¹⁸

On one occasion or another, this expression might be replaced by the words of Spenser. At any rate, we must avoid here to expand beyond the limits of conjecture. Now, what becomes a central concern to us is the full implication of the "ore". As for the implication, a great diversity of comments or opinions are possible. Let us begin with listening to as many critical voices as we can. One critic explains about the words 'to load every rift with ore' that they must be taken as 'making every phrase a concrete image.'¹⁹ Considered along the line, the explanatory comments which follow emerge as a natural result: Keats 'was undoubtedly thinking chiefly of sensuous imagery in poetry.'²⁰ If we pass on further along the two lines, we will find ourselves driven in an unexpected direction. When the 'ore' is interpreted mainly as signifying 'image' or 'imagery', Keats begins to incline towards being a kind of imagist. In point of fact, such a critic as T. E. Hulme, for example, accepts Keats as one of his allies, i.e. imagists. It is not to be denied that T. E. Hulme's opinion should be respectable as telling something peculiar to Keats. But, at this point, we must take a cautious step so as to press the argument with effect. If we spare any pains to take the trouble, the most important question of the highest artistic creativity in Keats will slip through our hands. In order that we may not get into this danger, it is necessary to look at the words from a more general and artistic angle and to put some other interpretation. If we agree with the opinion that the words should be taken as 'filling every line of poetry with richness and beauty',²¹ we can get a little nearer to our desired object, which is to make much effort to do justice to them. Here there is a critic who returns to Keats' own letter and wants the poet himself to make accurate remarks. Miss Bernice Slote's way of grasping the meaning may look very commonplace, but perhaps she is the first to venture to apply the simple method with fine success. Her interpretation is that the 'ore' means 'poetry, dramatic effect',²² which has been just used by the poet himself in the preceding lines. To be sure, that is like taking us by surprise, but her way should be said to be very much to the point. But we must go to another critic for a subtler perception. He allows the 'ore' to admit of a variety of interpretations: the 'ore' can be taken as 'full poetry' or 'organic texture', and, to use more explanatory terms, as 'richness, complexity and depth' or 'a matter of life's texture'.²³ To these interpretations not more need be added, and we must hasten to give a summary. What Keats wants to attain by this artistic method of his own making is the 'intensity' in art. It is on this ground that Keats' poetry is criticized as 'dense'.²⁴ And the 'intensity' becomes one of the most important questions, when we start a discussion about Keats' view of art, but as it does not come within the ambit of the

¹⁸ Letter to Benjamin Bailey, Oct. 8, 1817.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Bullough: *The Trend of Modern Poetry* (Oliver and Boyd, 1949), p. 81.

²⁰ E. C. Pettet: *On the Poetry of Keats* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 81.

²¹ John Mulgan and D. M. Davin: *An Introduction to English Literature* (Oxford, 1952), p. 103.

²² Bernice Slote: *Keats and the Dramatic Principle* (Univ. of Nebraska Pr., 1958), p. 125.

²³ Bernard Blackstone: *The Consecrated Urn* (Longmans, 1959), p. 273.

²⁴ Cf. G. W. Knight: *Laureate of Peace* (Kegan Paul, 1955), p. 24.

present essay, we must wait another opportunity. By the artistic method of attaining intensity, Keats could avoid the tragedy that he was also a 'beautiful and ineffectual angel,' or 'an inspired child crying for the moon.'²⁵ This advice of Keats' which is full of much confidence shows the poet who has assumed a stature worthy of the artist and is sharply conscious of the artistic sincerity. Now, one word needs to be added, for the question of when this confident attitude came to be assumed towards Shelley still remains. This attitude not without a contemptuous feeling to Shelley was already perceptible at the period when he was not yet grown to maturity as a poet. Accordingly, his critical attitude towards Shelley must be said to strike its roots deeper than we infer:

Does Shelley go on telling strange Stories of the Death of Kings?²⁶

Shelley's poem is out and there are words about its being objected too, as much as Queen Mab was. Poor Shelley I think he has Quota of good qualities, in sooth la!!²⁷

This attitude must be taken into consideration as telling something of the background.

(We have been so much on the side of Keats that we will be accused of denying Shelly ample justice. Though it seems that Shelley's work stands at the opposite pole from Keats', among his poems we can point out some of which every rift is loaded with ore—for example, *The Witch of Atlas*²⁸. About this piece, we have heard nothing from Keats. But be it always remembered that Keats' severe and uncompromising attitude towards his own realm, perhaps surpassing all the contemporary poets within their own province, has prevented himself from enjoying a vogue with the general public.)

Now we must turn away our eyes to the remaining part. It involves a few points of relative importance. For the sake of convenience again, let us begin with making a twofold division.

The thought of such discipline must fall like cold chains upon you, who perhaps never sat with your wings furl'd for six Months together. And is not this extraordinary talk for the writer of *Endymion*! whose mind was like a pack of scattered cards—I am pick'd up and sorted to a pip. My Imagination is a Monastery and I am its Monk—you must explain my metaphes to yourself.

Keats continues to write in a confident tone without changing his attitude. There you have the Keats who has put into practice 'the thought of discipline.' 'The thought of discipline' is asserted to be essential to the poet as an artist. Undoubtedly, these words indicate that Keats has recognized fully the lack of discipline on the part of Shelley and has sensed the danger that the lack will not fail to make Shelley long survive his genius. The introduction of 'the thought of discipline' into the production of a poem is to be said very peculiar. Keats' 'metaphysics'²⁹ supported by the notion of discipline and artist is worth

²⁵ D.C. Somervell: *English Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (Methuen, 1957), p. 71.

²⁶ Letter to Leigh Hunt, May 10, 1817.

²⁷ Letter to George and Thomas Keats, Dec. 21, 1817.

²⁸ Cf. G.W. Knight: *The Starlit Dome* (Methuen, 1959), p. 226.

²⁹ For the reading, see below.

occupying a new place in the history of English poetry and will always awaken us to a renewed interest in his art. But, with all his confidence, again, the Keats of *Endymion* begins to reflect on himself. And again, if the metaphor may, with apologies, be allowed, the waves of confidence swash against the reflective poet: 'I am pick'd up and sorted to a pip.'

My Imagination is a Monastery and I am its Monk—you must explain my metaphes to yourself.

Before passing to the examination of the passage quoted above, we must here pause to pay a little heed to the word written in a curious hand—'metaphes'. M. B. Forman does not give any note to the word, but H. E. Rollins adopts a new style of writing: 'metaphes,' and he reads it for 'metaphysics'.³⁰ The question of how the word should be properly read is beyond our power, and for the present, we will do well humbly to obey H. E. Rollins.

To revert to our prime concern: 'My Imagination is a Monastery and I am its Monk'. These words ring with something like a revolutionary tone, for the conviction that the poet must devote himself to nothing but imagination leads to a new attitude representative of the Romantic Revival. Keats seems to maintain that the artist who gives up himself to unremitting discipline, regarding imagination as the only weapon to rely upon, is worthy of being called a poet in the real sense of the word. He seems to make self-assertion to Shelley—'you must explain my metaphes to yourself.'

To the last remaining passage, we have almost nothing to add except a brief comment about a fact.

I am in expectation of Prometheus every day. Could I have my own wish for its interest effected you would have it still in manuscript—or be but now putting an end to the second act. I remember you advising me not to publish my first-blights, on Hampstead heath—I am returning advice on your hands. Most of the Poems in the volume I send you have been written above two years, and would never have been publish'd but from a hope of gain; so you see I am inclined enough to take your advice now. I must express once more my deep sense of your Kindness, adding my sincere thanks and respects for Mrs. Shelley. In the hope of soon seeing you I remain

most sincerely yours,
John Keats—

What is concerned with the main line of our subject is the passage which is found in the former part: 'I remember you advising me not to publish my first-blights, on Hampstead heath—I am returning advice on your hands,' and we may as well ignore the rest. It is very doubtful whether we should accept the words of Keats as he says them, for the fact is made clear that 'Shelley gave this advice in 1817 but "helped him print his volume after advising against it"'.³¹ As the fact had taken place only a few years before the letter of Keats was written, we cannot avoid wondering very much why Keats said such an ungrateful thing. As for the question, we have not yet got decisive remarks from any critics.

³⁰ Lionel Trilling has "metaprs". (*The Selected Letters of John Keats* (Farrar, Straus and Young, Inc., 1951), p. 272.)

³¹ H. E. Rollins (ed.): *op. cit.*, p. 323 n. 1.

Is his ingratitude due to the fact that he held a too strong prejudice against Shelley, or to the fact that he knew actually nothing about the kindness? For the moment, we cannot think of any other means than to leave the question in suspense.