

ON READING KEATS' LETTERS

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It can be said with certainty that Keats' letters offer keys to an understanding of his work, but it is a very hard task to search where the keys lie hidden. In other words, the letters have been a puzzle to the student of Keats, and probably they will continue to be. It is very easy to read the surface of them and to pretend to understand the deep layers hidden beneath, where the keys lie as if laughing at the vain efforts. Only when we read Keats' letters with the fact in mind, we can realize the difficulty of penetrating to the deep layers. Therefore, the student of Keats must face the twofold difficult problem of reading both the poems and the letters. The poems alone would not reveal the genuine aspect of Keats' genius, and the revelation must be aided by the understanding of the letters. A full understanding of Keats' art must start with the deliberate reading of letters. No frivolous kinds of attitudes mimicing that of the New Criticism can help. Nor may we say that apart from the poems, the letters alone could be regarded as a work of art, or rather a set of brilliant criticisms on various subjects—life, poetry, love, etc. Accordingly, we cannot separate the poems from the letters in any case. Furthermore we can completely agree to a statement of Sir B. Ifor Evans' that Keats' "verse is always several stages behind the letters and the letters are the truest criticism of the verse."¹ Out of the letters of such importance and meaning, we will pick and choose a few suggestive and revealing ones and examine them in the later sections. It is the aim of this brief essay to make clear the difficulty of the understanding of the letters by the choice.

I. *Keats and the Eighteenth Century*

In the following famous lines, Keats' repugnance to the eighteenth century attitude towards poetry is said to be perceptible:

Could all this be forgotten? Yes, a schism
Nurtured by foppery and barbarism,
Made great Apollo blush for this his land.
Men were thought wise who could not understand
His glories: with a puling infant's force
They sway'd about upon a rocking horse,
And thought it Pegasus. Ah dismal soul'd!

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. . .

¹ Ed. H. E. Rollins, *The Letters of John Keats*, Cambridge, 1958, I, p. 8.

A thousand handicraftsmen wore the mask
 Of poesy. Ill-fated, impious race!
 That blasphemed the bright Lyrist to his face,
 And did not know it,—no, they went about,
 Holding a poor, decrepid standard out
 Mark'd with most flimsy mottos, and in large
 The name of one Boileau!²

If we are to judge by coming across these lines, the figure of Keats will emerge who has a deep-rooted aversion to the poetic situation of the eighteenth century, and we do not hesitate to regard him as a revolutionary poet against the poetic tradition. But here we must make our steps more deliberate and be wary of reconsidering about the strength of tradition. In every case, especially in the case of literature, tradition cannot be cut off, for without the consciousness of tradition, any poet cannot succeed in his realm of activity. The most revolutionary poet cannot live without tradition, and for example, such a poet as appears to be trying to deny tradition will most often deny only convention, and there may be found poets so foolish as not to be able to distinguish tradition from convention. But we need not worry about such kinds of poets, for, time, the severest judge of every human act, will bury them in obscurity in our behalf. We have to stop the digression to enter into the examination of the genuine attitude of Keats. In this point, the letters, the best interpreter of Keats, will afford an unfolding help towards grasping the attitude. The following passage will give us much help. At a first reading, the passage will escape our notice without giving any suggestion of the important significance involved in it. (How much toil and labour it takes for us to read the letters into the hidden meanings!) The parts worthy of note are as follows:

In *Endymion* I have most likely but moved into the Go-cart from the leading strings. In Poetry I have a few Axioms, and you will see how far I am from their Centre. Ist. I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity—it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance.³

Though the phrase 'a fine excess' propounds a fairly important problem, it is not our present concern but a matter of second interest, so, for the time, we might be justified in passing it. The phrase which raises a more important question is 'not by Singularity'. The exact meaning of the phrase could not be appreciated with the famous verses above quoted in mind, for the perceptible tone in the verses is apparently much against the eighteenth century. And "in view of what Keats had to say about neo-classical poets in his 'Sleep and Poetry' it may seem rash to suggest that he had any sympathies with those who lined up behind that 'poor, decrepid standard' on which was inscribed 'the name of one Boileau'."⁴ Surely enough, everyone's feeling is that it would be impossible rather than rash to try to detect any sympathies of Keats' with the neo-classical poets, and there is not any doubt that perhaps Keats was not inclined to have any sympathies with them.

² *Sleep and Poetry*, 11.181–206.

³ Letter to J. Taylor, Feb. 27, 1818.

⁴ James Sutherland, *A Preface to Eighteenth Century Poetry*, Oxford, 1958, p. 22.

But this is to the last a question of inclination, and the feeling of the age crept into the unconscious realm of Keats' mind. For all his disapproval, he could not help living in the weather of the age. "At least, he is nearer to the eighteenth century than to some of his contemporaries: and in his poetry he is sometimes doing completely and with far greater genius what many of the eighteenth-century poets were trying to do."⁵ And then, what were many of the eighteenth century poets trying to do? In the eighteenth century, the conception of uniformity or the natural state of things had a firm hold on many of the poets. If we put the conception in Mr. Sutherland's words, what the poets were aiming at is "to avoid whatever is particular or accidental or local or temporary."⁶ And most of the eighteenth century poets were inclining to the danger of going the length of arguing that "art and diligence have now done their best, and what shall be added will be the effort of tedious and needless curiosity."⁷ Such a strong hold to the present condition will bring about monotony and destroy art. It need hardly be said that Keats always placed himself on guard against the danger. Though he showed himself akin to the eighteenth century poets, what made Keats escape from falling into the dangerous pit was his strong individuality—his genius. Herein lies the difference between him and eighteenth century poets, and the point of importance is that a genuine poet, maintaining close relations with tradition, is always feeling further innovations and trying to carry them to realization. In the case of Keats, the avoidance of singularity takes the form of another axiom that "if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all."⁸ Only by the eighteenth century poetic attitude, we can grasp the real meaning of the following sentence: "[Poetry should] appear almost a Remembrance." Here emerges a most difficult question how poetry can appear 'almost a Remembrance.' Or, if we put in another way, we can ask why 'a Remembrance' is connected with the defensive attitude to 'Singularity.' In this respect, the remarks of Mr. George Whalley are very suggestive and helpful. "When we respond", he observes, "to primordial images and to symbols we have an incredulous sense of recognition—'almost', as Keats said, 'a Remembrance.' This recognition does not arise from the perspective element of time. Rather it is a way of interpreting to ourselves the remarkable sense of wholeness and inevitability when the poem 'enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself, but with its subject.' We are astonished at the unity of consciousness and at the unity of human experience, and find a body for that astonishment in a sense of recognition."⁹ It is a certain fact that poetry attains 'the remarkable sense of wholeness and inevitability' by entering into our soul and only after that, it can astonish us with 'the unity of consciousness and the unity of human experience', but the thing to note is why poetry can enter into our soul without startling or amazing it. If poetry should surprise us by singularity, it would be very doubtful that we can get poetic response. In order for poetry to enter into our soul, singularity must be avoided and spontaneity, or naturalness, if we will get nearer to the Keats' concept, will be required. In reading the passages just quoted above, it would be necessary to go through the interpretative process as respects Keats' attitude to singularity. (Here we must inquire into what Keats meant by 'subject' and 'Remem-

⁵ James Sutherland, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ib.*, p. 29.

⁷ *Ib.*, p. 36.

⁸ Letter to J. Taylor, Feb., 27, 1818.

⁹ George Whalley, *Poetic Process*, Routledge, 1953, p. 169.

brance', but as the inquiry is not within the scope of the present essay, we will try to take the meaning into consideration on another occasion.)

Now, we will pass to the examination of what may be taken as a similar example, or rather a companion one. Contrary to our expectation, much ink has not been spilt by the scholars of Keats on the similarity of Keats to the eighteenth century mind. In the eighteenth century, people valued most highly human nature, which in all probability they might accept as a harmony or a cosmos. (Or we might be allowed to argue that they grasped a human being as a harmonious one—a nature, but will it be blamed for an assertion which does not go beyond the scope of guesswork?) Mr. Sutherland explains about the circumstances, mentioning an apt quotation. "The eighteenth-century attitude to Nature is put clearly by James Beattie. Human nature must always come first: *that* never fails to arouse interest.

Human affairs and human feelings are universally interesting. There are many who have no great relish for the poetry that delineates only irrational or inanimate beings; but to that which exhibits the fortunes, the characters, and the conduct of men, there is hardly any person who does not listen with sympathy and delight.... Mere descriptions, however beautiful, and moral reflections, however just, become tiresome where our passions are not occasionally awakened by some event that concerns our fellow-men."¹⁰

These are just remarks worth of note. The fact that 'the poetry that delineates only irrational or inanimate beings' was not welcomed, and that only things human could be the object of interest was perhaps derived from such an attitude as would admit of no singularity and love nature as a harmony. Accordingly, it is in so far as a harmony of human being is not broken that 'human affairs and human feelings are universally interesting.' If we allow ourselves to digress furthermore, that way lie the difficulties which faced Wordsworth the new poet, for his purpose was to establish his own "moral reflections" through "mere descriptions" by restraining the "passions" as much as possible. In this point, Wordsworth may be said to be most revolutionary of all the Romantics. As compared with him, Keats was less revolutionary in point of poetic practice save at his creative best. For an adequate example showing Keats' conservatism holding by the eighteenth century trend, we have two letters of his own, occupying a key position. (Conservatism may be the nearest we can get to defining Keats' whole poetic attitude.):

I admire Human Nature but I do not like *Men*—I should like to compose things honourable to Man—but not fingerable over by *Men*. So I am anxious to exist without troubling the printer's devil or drawing upon Men's and Women's admiration—in which great solitude I hope God will give me strength to rejoice.¹¹

This is the passage where Keats expressed his attitude of free independence, for which his yearning was very strong. And it would be necessary to read deliberately. The significance of the first line, 'I admire Human Nature but I do not like *Men*', could not

¹⁰ James Sutherland, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

¹¹ Letter to B. R. Haydon, Dec. 22, 1818.

be grasped with accuracy, unless it were read keeping the eighteenth century trend in mind. To Keats also, a human being as an aspect of nature was admirable, but the men who live in the world of real activities were hateful. (The reason for the men's being hateful hardly need be pointed out.) Therefore, there is recognized no irrelevance between the former sentence and the latter in the first line. We could interpret the following line in a similar way. It must be but a repetition of the preceding. There is hardly any doubt that Keats used 'Man' as equivalent to 'Human Nature' and as opposite to 'Men'. And the following sentences arise from only the feeling of hate towards *Men*, so we need not go further in search of any more interpretation about them. The same eighteenth century strain is perceptibly displayed in another letter:

Give me a barren mould so I may meet with some Shadowing of Alfred in the Shape of a Gipsy, a Huntsman or a Shepherd. Scenery is fine—but human nature is finer. The Sward is richer for the tread of a real, nervous, english [*sic.*] foot—the eagle nest is finer for the Mountaineer has look'd into it—Are these facts or prejudices?¹²

As this letter was written only nine months before the preceding one, it would not be inadequate to quote it as an example giving evidence of the strain. Without doubt, the chief purport of the passage is Keats' assertion of realistic attitude of a poet, but the purport falls outside the scope of this paper and may not need to be touched upon. What implies the point at issue which we must touch on is the sentences: 'Scenery is fine—but human nature is finer.' 'Scenery' is rather more concrete than the word, nature, but probably it is treated as significant of nature, and the meaning of the following sentence is self-evident. As we have seen, Keats could not help being a child of the age, whether he liked it or not. So it is very dangerous that we should regard the Romantic Revival as only a literary movement revolting against the Neo-classicism and rashly include Keats in the movement. As we have already stated, Wordsworth may appear most revolutionary, but on the other hand the fact is not to be denied that he has the closest affinities with the eighteenth century and can be said even an eighteenth century poet. Here are precise and apt remarks: "There is at the heart of Wordsworth's attitude to the world a distrust of the human imagination, a fear of it even, which binds him as decisively to the eighteenth century as Coleridge's faith in the imagination points him forward into the nineteenth."¹³ In Keats' letters, the afterglow of the eighteenth century can be perceived, but we cannot be content with it. We must search for some actual examples evident of the afterglow in his work. If, though we can feel for it in the letters, we cannot do so in the work, we cannot make the evidence satisfactory. In the nature of this essay, the letters have been dealt with before the work, but in truth, the procedure must be reversed.

Undoubtedly, the eighteenth century mode of feeling in Keats' poems takes a different shape from that of his letters. It would be fruitless efforts to try to find out quite the same kind of tone in the letters. Keats is not so simple a poet. It has been already seen that the main target of bitter criticism was the neo-classical poets, and it is certain that Keats took Pope as a spokesman of them. But it is quite a matter of doubt whether the arrow of abuse could hit a target. When we turn our eyes from *Sleep and Poetry* towards

¹² Letter to B. Bailey, Mar., 1818.

¹³ J. B. Beer, *Coleridge the Visionary*, Chatto and Windus, 1959, p. 280.

'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill', the arrow, in a sense, results in being shot at Keats himself inversely. (In passing, let it be noticed that 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill' was written just shortly before, or almost in parallel with, *Sleep and Poetry*. Though we cannot be certain about the date of the one's being written, any abrupt change of poetic contemplation will not be admitted, therefore it may be safe to treat the two poems at the same time.) Also in this place, we can be aware of his unconscious way of clinging to tradition or it may be better to say in another way that Keats brought an unconscious retribution from tradition, but it is a good luck of Keats' that he was not fatally wounded but he could take advantage of the retribution in order to step forward. We may fairly call such a way of stepping forward sensuous vitality. Mr. Tillotson, giving an illustrative explanation to the matters, observes in these terms: "The similarity of Pope to Keats may be pursued further. As country poets they are nearer together because they prefer similar country. Readers of Keats's poetry do not always notice how near he came to being a country poet as Pope, Thomson, Cowper, and Crabbe were country poets.... Few of our poets have liked country in all its wilderness. Even Wordsworth seldom left sheeptrack and shepherd. Keats stood tip-toe upon a little hill: no countrymen would lift his heels in such a place, but Keats was only able to do so because heavy-footed farmers have cleared little hills of forest tress and brushwood. Keats was at his happiest in such a garden as that at Hampstead where in springtime he heard the nightingale. In his ode, even when the bird flew to wilder places, they were places not uncivilized."¹⁴ An eighteenth century feeling of love for the state of being 'not uncivilized', *i.e.* civilization, lurked in the heart of Keats' poetic attitude, but, as we have seen, the feeling did not mar his poetry at all. We need not linger with the explanation any further. Let us quote a few lines from the earlier part in order to testify to the terms of Mr. Tillotson:

I stood tip-toe upon a little hill.
 The air was cooling, and so very still,
 That the sweet buds which with a modest pride
 Pull droopingly, in slanting curve aside,
 Their scantily leav'd, and finely tapering stems,
 Had not yet lost those starry diadems
 Caught from the early sobbing of the morn.

. . .

Here is another remark which agrees to Mr. Tillotson's. According to Lord Houghton's statement, the poem "was suggested to Keats by a delightful summer's day, as he stood beside the gate that leads from the battery on Hampstead Heath into a field by Caen Wood."¹⁵ And though the poem "shows the influence of Hunt at its height both in subject, treatment and versification,"¹⁶ a fresh tone of Keats' own can be heard, which is to be more refined and genuine after he detaches himself from the influence of Hunt, and it is to be noticed that the fresh tone is already different from that of the eighteenth century. Try to compare the poem with any other one of the eighteenth century and you will perceive the difference, though it is minor. It is an obvious fact that after many strenuous struggles.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Tillotson, *Pope and Human Nature*, Oxford, 1958, p. 102.

¹⁵ ¹⁶ Ed. Ernest de Sélincourt, *The Poems of John Keats*, Methuen, 1954, p. 388.

Keats is to acquire the capability of concentrating himself or his poetic contemplation on his work, yet it may sound very strange, but the eighteenth century mode of feeling continues to persist almost to the last. Without any doubt, we estimate most highly the Keatsian odes, and we think that they are the summit of his art. In one of them, *Ode on Melancholy*, Professor Josephine Miles tries to perceive the eighteenth century mode. Concerning the ode, she observes that "here in the combination of extremely sensuous particularity with emotional forms and personifications, the varied and interior odal structure, the full vowel harmony, the language of anatomy and ceremony, we read an essence of the poetry which Hobbes early blessed, which Milton and Thomson and Collins forwarded, which was the eighteenth century's own; in the sublime poetic scene of the universe, the enduring passionate figures, larger than life."¹⁷ It is needless to quote the ode here. It will suffice to notice the fact that even one of the masterpieces still retains the poetic mood of the preceding century. We may be justified in taking the fact as telling that Keats brought the poetic tradition into new and lofty existence. The further we go on to examine more closely his work, the more similar instances may be got, but space forbids and the next problem is waiting.

II. *Keats the Artist*

Before proceeding to examine the problem of Keats' being an artist, we must return to the same letter already quoted, and start from the axiom; "If Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all." Besides the interpretation which we have placed in the preceding section, this simple (or it may be nearer to the truth to say, "seeming simple") line implies still more implications. If we take the axiom as implying a free attitude of the poet, the interpretation will be accepted as showing the mind of Keats. And if the interpretation is taken as possible, it comes to mean that Keats the poet enjoyed himself in the world of art. It would be unnecessary to say that the enjoyment is one of the requisite components of the making of art. So, such an interpretation cannot be accused of too much liberty. The cases of the two poets—Milton and Spenser—will serve as a concrete illustration of the interpretation. For the purpose of the illustration, we cannot do better than go to Sir H.J. C. Grierson for help. According to the exposition of Sir Grierson, the two poets have this in common: that they enjoyed making a poem. (It must be admitted that such a way of saying is rather inclined to a rash assertion, but here we must economize exposition.) First, Sir Grierson observes as for the attitude of Milton: "The love of pleasure springs for ever in the human breast, and from it have flowed some of the loveliest manifestations of the human spirit. The Muses are the ministers of man's pleasure. In the arts the spirit of man is at play even as the spirit of God, Milton tells us, was at play when he built the universe:

Thou with Eternal Wisdom didst converse,
Wisdom thy sister, and with her didst play
In presence of the Almighty Father, pleas'd
With thy celestial song."¹⁸

¹⁷ Josephine Miles, *Eras & Modes in English Poetry*, Univ. of California Pr., 1957, pp. 76-7.

¹⁸ H.J.C. Grierson, *Cross Currents in English Literature of the XVIIth Century*, Chatto and Windus, 1958, pp. 12-23.

Secondly, he mentions the easy and free attitude of Spenser, which springs, we need not tell, from "the eager study of his art."¹⁹ "Once set in motion, Spenser's fluency never failed. No poet is so copious. 'He brought into the world with him,' says Legouis, 'the gift of a sovereign ease. It seems indeed that his thought flows into verse in perfect order and without the least effort. Always clear, always ample, indefatigable, it follows its course like a river whatever be the subject, whatever the form adopted. It never checks, never grows obscure, and never is the harmony interrupted'."²⁰ Perhaps few will doubt that in laying down the axiom, Keats might be taking it for granted that 'the human spirit at play' or 'a sovereign ease' was one of the fundamental factors of writing a poem. And he himself put the same matter in another way. In this respect, a well-known fact needs to be remembered. About April in 1819, he left off the work of writing *Hyperion*. He put forth a plausible reason for the discontinuance in his letters. (Why I should use the word 'plausible' has been already told.²¹ His apologies are made as follows: "I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written but in the vein of *art*—I wish to devote myself to another sensation."²² (Italics mine.) And in the same desperate tone he tells in another letter of the same date: "I have given up *Hyperion*—there were too many Miltonic inversions in it—Miltonic verse can not be written but in an *artful* or rather *artist's humour*. I wish to give myself up to other sensation."²³ (Italics mine.) The notion of Keats that poetry must not be written 'in the vein of art,' or 'in an artful or rather artist's humour' has quite the same affinity with the attitude of Milton or Spenser. At least, what Keats means by 'the vein of art' or 'an artful or rather artist's humour,' sounds quite negative, and must be opposite to the notion of naturalness. If Keats had been very careful of his phraseology, a perplexing question would not be raised. When we reread through his letters, as ill luck would have it, we come across another puzzling passage in one of them. And the letter is a well-known one which comprises a famous advice to Shelley. Keats' advice is offered in these terms: "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 artist, and 'load every rift' of your subject with ore. 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."²⁴ In the passage, the word 'artist' is used twice, meaning as its attributes self-concentration (or selfishness) and discipline. Would it be an exaggeration to say that 'artist' means almost artisan? At least, the word 'artist' used in reference to Milton seems opposed to the same word in the passage just quoted above. We are obliged to face the difficult question of how the contradiction should be solved. The answer to it is not so difficult as it may appear. In the above cases, the manner in which Keats used the word 'the artist' is not changed at all. Only his conception of the meaning of it made a slight change, for, shift the sense of the word in the former

¹⁹ *Ib.*, p. 39.

²⁰ *Ib.*, pp. 39–40.

²¹ See my essay: *Notes on Keats' Attitude towards Milton* (The Annals of The Hitotsubashi Academy, Vol. IX, No. 1), pp. 155–61.

²² Letter to George & Georgiana Keats, Sept, 21. 1819.

²³ Letter to J. H. Reynolds, Sept. 21, 1819.

²⁴ Letter to P. B. Shelley, Aug. 16, 1820.

case only a little, and the sense will be equal to that of the same word in the latter. On closer consideration, Keats seems to use the word as having the same meaning in essence. Denying the contradiction between Keats' rejection of Miltonic verse and his advice to Shelley, Mr. Pettet observes that the rejection was that "of a poetry that (so he[=Keats] believed) was entirely of artistic 'making'. He wanted to devote himself to the sort of poetry that was *expression*—a working out through poetry of his individual experience."²⁵ We have a commentary of the poet's own on the statement of Mr. Pettet. "I have," Keats says, "no trust whatever on Poetry. I do wonder at it—the marvel is to me how people read so much of it."²⁶ Without doubt, 'poetry' in the passage may mean 'a poetry entirely of artistic 'making', but in a stricter sense, it, having no article, must mean "sentimentalism," or "too much of lyricism". Keats was well aware that lyricism at one remove from sentimentalism is a dangerous enemy to art. This shows that he was an acute critic of both art and himself. Surely enough, it must be said that his consciousness of art was much far ahead of the time. There are the observations of our two famous contemporary poets. Valéry observes, "Enthusiasm is not the writer's state of mind. However powerful the passion may be it only becomes active and useful when it is utilized upon a subject where art can direct it. There must be well-placed checks to prevent it from being dissipated, and a delay must be adroitly imposed on the invincible movement back to equilibrium so that something may be abstracted before the ardour diminishes,"²⁷ and T. S. Eliot observes, "Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion."²⁸ These similar remarks look like only the restatement of Keats' own words. Already Keats had thought what our contemporary poets thought, and a careful reader of Keats' letters will not be startled or fascinated by the modern way of stating. His conviction, recognized in the advice to Shelley, that a poet must be an artist before all, sounds rather even like the attitude of a classicist. And it can be said with safety that "Keats is too much the artist to risk Shelley's sometimes embarrassing declarations—'I die, I faint, I fail,' or 'I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!' Keats, even in his apprentice stage, attempts to give his lyricism a restraining form."²⁹ It follows naturally enough that the poetic fabric built by the artist of acute perception comes to be always a central part of modern research. Here we are faced by the next important problem as for how to illustrate the way in which the artist's experience crystallizes into the work, but this is no place for it, for it is our task to make some suggestions on a clue to an understanding of the work. If we put the matter in conclusive terms, paradoxical as it may sound, Keats may be the most classical of all the Romantics. Changing the angle and looking at the work from the viewpoint suggested above, could not we get a nearer approach to the secret of Keats' art? The examination along the line will become a matter for profitable inquiry, but we must close this section, making use of the suggestive remarks: Keats "maintains his objectivity as in 'To Autumn'; he attempts a qualifying self-irony as in the 'Ode to a Nightingale.'"³⁰

²⁵ E. C. Pettet, *On the Poetry of Keats*, Cambridge, 1957, p. 83 footnote.

²⁶ Letter to C. W. Dilke, Sept. 22, 1819.

²⁷ Quoted by George Whalley. (*op. cit.*, p. 88.)

²⁸ "Tradition and the Individual Talent."

²⁹ ³⁰ Cleanth Brooks, *Modern Poetry and the Tradition*, Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1939, p. 237.

III. Keats' Romanticism

It may be folly to repeat the question what Keats' romanticism is, but it is a very hard and delicate business to discover an appropriate answer to the question. To begin with, in striving to discover the answer, where should a start be made? Let us begin with a repeated inquiry into the general assumption of romanticism. It is almost impossible to give an exact and comprehensive definition to the conception of romanticism. The implication, it is obvious, differs from age to age, but we must find something common among a variety of conceptions. If we go to various kinds of poets or critics for opinion about romanticism, we will come to be drawn into the vortex and it will take too much labour to get out of it without being wounded. So we must confine the scope of inquiry as narrowly as possible that we may escape from the danger. For this reason, we are compelled to be content to make the inquiry focus upon the narrowest sphere, and we must be prepared to deal with the matter in a seemingly easy way. At all events, let us pass by critics acute but very difficult to please, and try to get the nearest to the quality of romanticism. In this respect, reliance can be placed on an explanation which is very much to the point. Making an apology for oversimplification, Abercrombie observes, "Romanticism is a withdrawal from outer experience in order to concentrate on inner experience. It is a rough and ready distinction, not at all well adapted for metaphysical discussion; but it is familiar and pretty intelligible, and we shall find it convenient,"³¹ and he adds further exposition to the romantic way of mind, saying that "in all respects life in this world is likely to be most satisfactory when the mind withdraws from outer things and turns in upon itself."³² In the case of the Romantics, the necessity of the withdrawal of the mind from outer world and of the concentration of interest on itself provides a stronghold where they can exert all their poetic power. The reason why they should get firm ground there is due to the fact that the stable or self-complacent world of the eighteenth century collapsed and they had to establish a substitute of the world for themselves—the realm where they could live a safe poetical life and bring their dream into being. It was their hard task to re-establish a new world by any other means than that of the eighteenth century. The re-establishment will not be achieved by means of the senses which are the common attribute of the human being. "The senses can but deal with what they know; if something is felt beyond what they know, it can only be drawn from the life within."³³ The means of drawing something beyond sense-perception from the life within was imagination, which was the only weapon of the Romantics. But this is a too comprehensive way of definition, and it is not to be denied that on closer inquiry, each Romantic poet claims his individual voice in the matter of the conception of romanticism. Apart from the others, we must concentrate the focus of inquiry on Keats and make our concern his romanticism. In his case, what continued to interest him throughout his lifetime was imagination. If we are asked to give the most appropriate instance standing for an unqualified trust in imagination, it would be safest to mention Keats. Let

³¹ Lascelles Abercrombie, *Romanticism*, Martin Secker, 1927, pp. 51-2.

³² *Ib.*, p. 50.

³³ *Ib.*, pp. 63-4.

us listen to his passionate voice for the present: "My Imagination is a Monastery and I am its monk."³⁴ And there can be little doubt that Keats always took his work as the test of imagination. For illustration, the composition of *Endymion* will suffice: "At any rate I have no right to talk until *Endymion* is finished—it will be a test, a trial of my Powers of Imagination and chiefly of my invention which is a rare thing indeed."³⁵ It would be very easy to seek for more instances of Keats' placing absolute reliance upon imagination, and the reliance will make an important object worth careful research, which will deserve a volume of book. Further mention of instances must cease and we must be more aware of the illuminating fact that Keats was the only poet whose passion for imagination did not show even any hint of change. In addition to the attachment of much importance on inner experience, another requisite factor is needed, without which the conception of romanticism cannot be made perfect. It is a passionate yearning for something beyond the actual world where the perception of the senses plays a main role. The words of Abercrombie who explains about the essence of romanticism will help us to understand the matter more clearly: "It is in painting and sculpture, that *form* can image the life which finds itself in the thing desired rather than in the thing known."³⁶ In the case of Keats, it is quite needless to say that 'the thing desired' is beauty. Now, all the constituents have been ready to establish his romantic world. It is generally assumed that equipped with the imagination as his only weapon, he indulged himself in pursuit of beauty. But we could not be content with the general assumption and we must take our departure from it, for we who have tried to trespass beyond the bounds of common project are confronted by the two questions of primary importance. That is to say, the questions which we must deal with are those of imagination and yearning for beauty. In the first place, we must ask, "How must what the imagination seizes as Beauty be truth?" It is quite meaningless to take imagination as means through which Beauty can be closely connected with Truth. A more precise interpretation of how imagination works is required. What serves our present purpose will be Yeats' assertion of "the primacy of the imagination as having 'some way of lighting on the truth that the reason has not',"³⁷ but what makes the exposition more intelligible is Mr. Willey's lucid observations: "One can only reply in such terms as Wordsworth's, that when the mind of man is 'wedded to the universe', and works 'subservient strictly to external things', the creation 'which they with blended might accomplish' does, in fact and in experience, produce a sense of something seen, something truly realized."³⁸ The scope of the inquiry into the imagination will widen more and more, but let us stop here and be content with the interpretation, by which the quality of the imagination can be taken as grasped exactly. In the next place, how can Beauty seized through the imagination having such a function be called the object of Keats' yearning? Certainly enough, Keats' yearning for beauty frequently shows itself in such passages as follow:

I feel I should write from the mere yearning and fondness I have for the Beautiful even if my night's labours should be burnt every morning....³⁹

³⁴ Letter to P. B. Shelley, Aug. 16, 1820.

³⁵ Letter to B. Bailey, Oct. 8, 1817.

³⁶ Lascelles Abercrombie, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

³⁷ George Whalley, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

³⁸ Basil Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies*, Chatto & Windus, 1950, p. 25.

³⁹ Letter to R. Woodhouse, Oct. 27, 1818.

...and I knew you were passing pleasant days—Then I should be most enviable—with the yearning Passion I have for the beautiful, connected and made one with the ambition of my intellect.⁴⁰

All my thoughts, my unhappiest days and nights have I find not at all cured me of my love of Beauty,...⁴¹

But the reason why the yearning for beauty can be accepted as Keats' hearty one does not depend upon the number of examples. A clue for solving the delicate problem will be provided through a deliberate and wary reading of the passage that precedes immediately that referred to concerning the function of the imagination: "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination."⁴² Our central concern is with the phrase 'the Heart's affections.' What the term 'affections' implies has been taken as identical with human feelings or love, but if the term is taken so, 'the holiness of affections' cannot be well associated with 'the truth of Imagination.' As for the implication of the term, Mr. Berry's interpretation is very suggestive: "Confessedly," he observes, "the term 'affections' can refer as much to the desire itself as to the objects of desire," and "that which is desired, and, therefore, because 'desired' not yet possessed, is holy."⁴³ (He regards the imagination as "the organ, which transmutes what is desired into truth," but the interpretation is rather too simple.) 'That which is desired' is nothing but beauty, in Keats' case, and beauty, only when it is desired, and therefore entitled to holiness, can be transmuted into the object of yearning. Only such a reading seems to be able to give inner coherence to the above passage and to offer a new clue to the explanation of Keats' romanticism.

I have referred to only a few letters, but I must be content if I can suggest the extreme difficulty of reading Keats' letters. I close this essay by repeating that they are still full of clues to the mystery of Keats' mind and art, and must continue to be read with a renewed interest.

⁴⁰ Letter to G. & G. Keats, Oct. 14-31, 1818.

⁴¹ Letter to F. Brawne, July 8, 1819.

⁴² Letter to B. Bailey, Nov. 22, 1817.

⁴³ Francis Berry, *Poets' Grammar*, Routledge, 1958, p. 132.