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The Eagle's Watch and The Social Smile: Interchange of Opposites in Keats's Poetics

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Abstract: *Keats wished to be, not just another poet to the world and to himself, but a poet, earning by strong yet graceful toil, an inward and outward completeness of being and becoming. To this end, which he clearly conceived pretty early in his life, he always had much to teach himself, much to strive against and much to unlearn from time to time.*

Poetry as enchantment, as luxury or intoxication, was from the beginning an overpowering idea for Keats. But the early Keats also had the idea of poetry as social thought, as expression of the human kind. The poet, on the general showing of many of his letters also, is wise to submit to being often a non-poet in order to ensure his being a better poet. Perhaps it is not quite off the mark to say that the surest mark of a toiling genius in Keats is that as he was getting his grip on the past, he was also growing not only into his present but also to the unreachable future of his life-time.

Key Words: : Crazy, Unnerving, negative capability, Subterranean, Combativeness, workmanship, epistle.

To be more than anything else, a poet, was the strong drive and the fine but stern destiny of John Keats. By a singular force of free will and self-education, Keats wished to be, not just another poet to the world and to himself, but a poet, earning by strong yet graceful toil, an inward and outward completeness of being and becoming. To this end, which he clearly conceived pretty early in his life, he always had much to teach himself, much to strive against and much to unlearn from time to time. The external and internal odds against Keats's inmost drive and unsteady destiny had throughout his short life been large, and often crazy and unnerving. Several accidents of birth, upbringing and education or its absence appear to have, first, concealed, even for himself, his genuine and instinctively boisterous creative energies, and then to have impeded the ripening of his bountiful gifts. The intimations of an active and unifying imagination, and the insistent urge for severe and creative workmanship may in Keats have suffered some initial impairment also from the excesses of his own unformed and unknowing energies. At any rate, they began to stir his consciousness rather late, partly because of the early distractions of a rather irrelevant professional training that was particularly unfit to bring off the poetic talents of a bright and overstrung nineteenth-century adolescent; and was very likely even to cause their utter loss by desiccation from an inimical profession.

That Keats had set himself to translate Virgil to English prose, when at school, may have been his earliest free-willed preparatory action in the wake of receiving his first vague intimations of a strong, though as yet only subterranean poetic impulse. But precisely about that time, Keats was warded off, from helpful and stimulating attention to his strong inner drive and his true creative powers, to train to be a surgeon. Thus, perhaps for his own good, he was to learn to be a poet in a singularly hard way, even though he was greatly gifted. When finally, the sure knowledge of his creative powers for poetry and his acute consciousness of inner and outer obstacles to overcome came to be traced in his mind, the increasingly clearer perceptions of the odds and of his early errors endowed him with a great and firmly resisting reserve of energy. On this reserve, this power for resisting the inimical, he applied himself to build his own enabling image of a poetic self and a fund of insights for his poetics and poetry. This he did by a deep and thoroughgoing commitment to continuing self-education as a poet. Firm in his drive to overcome initial disadvantages and early unsureness, Keats had his imagination continually impelled to meditate on poetry, and actually write much poetry about poetry. These meditations in Keats's poetry issue forth as more or less the same ideas and insights as those to be found in the poetics that can be constructed out of his letters and other assorted prose. Indeed, the poetic meditations and prose thoughts of Keats regarding the origins, the nature and the effects of



poetry are a measure of the unity and the enabling clarity and conviction that he continued to earn from his severe and endless self-education, until consumption and infatuation got together and broke him.

To single out the more significant poetic musings of Keats on poetry and to see here and there how the insights in them are corroborated by some of the ponderings on poetry in his prose, are the two simple aims in this essay. Underneath these two aims, there is a third; a wish to recreate an intimate sense, as far as possible, of a unique and sensitive mind active in discovering itself in and about poetry.

To ensure economy in quotation and in analytical comments, some of the functional ideas in Keats's poetry about poetry may be briefly recounted here. The general movement of Keats's somewhat antithetical ideas about poetry appears to be in the direction of a dialectical interfusion to the point of making them flexible and workable by intermingling their basic components. The ideas naturally arose in his mind as he was engaged, on the one hand, in working himself to the tradition or the heritage of English poetry; and on the other, in trying to ease the way to his own maturing idiom. The insights gained in this process have an air of coming in flashes, with their characteristic unexpectedness becoming a part of their value. In quality and in placement, they look firm but unpremeditated; they indeed are fascinatingly sudden, shooting and isolated; and yet, whether bearing upon the substance and skill of poetry or on the effects of responding to it, they are weighted by an awareness of the intricate relatedness of the issues. Not that there is any astounding originality, for the old yet ever new questions about poetry can only be rethought even in the most original mind; but to this mode of rethinking Keats brought a spirit of self-educative combativeness and a charming freshness of application in depth.

In the search for his own mature poetics, Keats, to be sure, was embattled against the excesses and the initially intractable haphazard of his own unformed instincts and also against other odds that were external. The enemies within were undoubtedly the more hostile; the more difficult to curb, if not crush; for there was the danger that too much of weeding out could do damage to the indispensable and instinctive energies. Overzealous, overstrung and overlanguageed, Keats had to tame his instinctive energies into a fine coalescence with moral or interpretative energy by bringing a stream of intuitive if not strictly philosophic thought to bear upon them, and also achieve a severity of workmanship without in any way damaging or drying up the instincts themselves. No reader can be insensitive to the fact that Keats in his early poetry tended more often than not to make his objects and figures very shadowy, for he failed to give them a sharp, distinctive outline, thereby losing the grip on the reader's recreative imagination. What therefore be needed most was a finer spell of words, words with greater graphic power, free from adjectival excess and the artificial inflationary weight of Spencerisms and their likes.

The worst fixations that he had to get out of were related to the ornate and to the verbal decadence of enchantment, in short, to a recondite poeticality. With an imagination straying too often and too much to bygones and to the effervescent, Keats in the beginning could not bring to his poetry even anything like a romantic realism, let alone the weighty wholesomeness of a workaday self- which may be the name for the source of what constitutes for many the supreme and the most original strand in the complex organisms of Shakespeare's poetry. There was in Keats almost a total absence in the beginning of resistance to the vices of what could, when curbed by intermingling, be his virtues or the sources of his greatest creative strength. The trouble with any young poet is that his own virtues can often appear as vices of style and substance in the early poetry. What the early Keats needed most was an imagination that could restrain its heady flight, forget the marvelous to work upon the mundane-an imagination that could innately interpretative of realities, external and inward, by its wise power of creatively discriminating among the values of life and art in the very act of poetic composition. In short. He needed to educate his powerful imagination so that it could function, not with the consciousness of being impeded, but assured of its fullest freedom, even when restrained by a stream of intuitive thought or by a fusion of intellect and feelings, thus enabling it to partake of the many-sidedness of the human mind. Keats, severely self-taught in this way, was also developing fast to find a rhythm



of imagination which could be impelled by an active and unifying purposiveness ever capable of warding off mere moralistic platitudes. Keats was, in short, moving steadily into a creative rhythm that could erase all excrescence in the act of creation, and could generate, as were, its own mechanics for structuring the poetic utterance.

The mode of poetic speech that Keats was fashioning was one that could dialectically mediate between opposites such as sensation and thought, the positive and the negative capabilities, the accidental and the essential, the mundane and the marvelous, the joyful and the mournful and so on. Keats was in the process of perfecting his mind to be a resort, where opposites could interchange without an overbalance, and which could achieve an integrity of its resources, while remaining perfectly able to shift without disjunction from one resource to another. In poetry, the shifting from the poetic to the philosophic can at times be very aberrant and disjunctive indeed, and the maturity of Keats's finest poetry is to be measured in terms of the absence of such aberration, as in his most successful sonnets, which require all transitions to be smooth, almost invisible.

The yearning for sensation rather than thought is only a yearning—a youthful, but in poetry, an often-excremental hedonism, and Keats persuaded himself increasingly to make it submissive to the supportive and steadying power of thought. If enchantment is only a willed departure from the real not precluding a return to the real, intelligent sensations, when overpowering, themselves create a rhythm for intuitive thought, as Keats was getting to know well enough to be, for example, able to say in *Lamia* that the "treat" from "the sweets of tarries", with their strong appeal to "the mad poet", would in time wear themselves out and give way to the yearning for a "real woman".¹ By the same logic, there had to be considerable room in his poetics to the antithesis of delight, and accordingly Keats must be understood to have fashioned his poetics with the weft of suffering on the warp of delight. The poetics of sufferings, of which Eliot more recently has given us another version, was also deeply embedded in the mind of Keats, whose poetics of suffering seem, by implication, already to think even of romantic intensity as a compensatory gesture to the growing tiredness of Christian piety and a result of the reinvigoration of an outworn religiosity at the altar of poetic imagination.

The dialectical interfusion of antithetical ideas in Keats grew into a genuinely complex organism subsuming varieties of sensation—of joy, of suffering and of joy and suffering blended; and at least two varieties of thought—the thought of ideality or of cold inhuman abstraction, and that of actual human frailty and strength, of morality and its imaginative transformation. The interfusion, in other words, is creative of poetic thought, but thought not strained for as in philosophy, but intuited in such a way as to be comprehensive and to keep all partisanship in suspension. The interfusion of opposites in Keats's mind led to the poetics that inspired and steadied his best poetry—a poetics of an integrated selfhood, of intensity and vitalistic fervour sobered by thought, and partaking, without disjunctive shifts, of agreeables and disagreeables. Toughness and tenderness, romance and realism, enchantment and actualities, diligence and passivity, and the sombre and the light-hearted. To attain to the truest poetic self, to the fullest freedom of an interpretative imagination—was for Keats the loftiest and the deepest moment of achieved integrity for the poet; but he also knew that this could not be an abiding state of mind and there must be a shift from the poetic self to non-poetic self, for the poetic itself could be nourished and replenished only by the non-poetic, and intuition itself could come to its full strength only out of a habit of watchfulness upon the mind. When the poet's mind grows by such intuition and interfusion, the vices of abstract thought or cold philosophy do not visit upon the poetry and the poet's poetics; and a poet so equipped is never to be pinned down to a rigid theory constructed in the abstract to be consistent and complete, for his poetics leave scope for the haphazards of imagination while implicitly putting a value on order lines too. It is poetics made more out of afterthought than forethought, and unlike Shelly's poetics in his *Defence of Poetry*, concentrates more on the making and the objectivity of the end-product than on its affective powers. Thus in the poetics of Keats, emerging from his poetry and his prose, there is an internal validation and an inclusiveness in which the dread of science was a singular negation, perhaps because the smell and the scalpel of surgery haunted him too much.



That poetry itself, its mystery, power and workmanship, is very often a subject which the poetry of Keats turns upon, cannot for long remain unnoticed to any reader. But for the poetics of Keats to be seen as built on an ongoing interchange of opposites, such as the "eagle's watch" and the "social smile"², it requires some patient and elaborate unburying. Our focus for that end is to be on how contrary ideas interfuse to give Keats his enabling insight, his actual modes of imagining and making. Keats for example, all through implies the dichotomy of the poetry of sensation and the poetry of thought; but it may be said that the interfusion of these two components increasingly constitutes the principle actually functioning in his composition. In the same manner, other opposites may be seen as actively blending in the imagination to sustain the poetic utterance. The ideas in Keats's poetics thus often appear to be paired, first in a state of active resistance to each other and then coalescing or folding in to generate the insight into his actual working principle.

Poetry as enchantment, as luxury or intoxication, was from the beginning an overpowering idea for Keats. But the early Keats also had the idea of poetry as social thought, as expression of the human kind. The ideas look to me to have been paired or made to fold in upon each other, thereby clearing the way to some of his best verse and to his incremental poetics. In the very first poem of his poems 1817, Keats uses a phrase- "interchange of favours"³ in a context remote from our present concern, but we may say that interchange of favours among the many discrete powers of the mind is what Keats increasingly sees poetry to be turning upon on the evidence of his own poetry. It is this evidence that we must now look for.

True to his romantic heritage, the earliest Keats names nature, or the delight in nature, as the great source of poetry. Nature, for him the "Maker of sweet poets", is thus eulogized by him in the first poem of his first volume-

For what has made the sage or poet write

But the fair paradise of Nature's light?

In the calm grandeur of a sober line,

We the waving of a mountain pine;⁴

Nature as the animating source of poetry, basics and creedal to romanticism is also the springboard for Keats into his abode of enchantment, which transports the poet, as it were to unearthly imaginings, and fills his mind with-

Shapes from the invisible world, unearthly singing,

From out the middle air, from flowery nests,

And from the pillowy silkiness that rests,

Full in the speculation of the star.⁵

Neither nature nor enchantment can however be an unallowed source for Keats's kind of poetry, for they are shot through with each other, and each is also dressed out for the new poet in the specifics of heritage or tradition. By his conjuration of the "gentle spirit" of poets such as Spenser, Keats really calls upon tradition perhaps as a secondary source of poetry. To the world of flowers and wonders costumed by distinguishable poetic traditions, the poet needs to bring his instinctive energies which in truly mature poetry mean also the power of interpretative imagination, capable of telling one reality from another or of finely discriminating between the fair and the foul. The first visitations of reality on Keats's poetry were very fitful, and they appear only as the idealistic aspirations of a rather outworn chivalry, which in a way, impeded Keats's imagination from coming to its fullest freedom, and which characteristically expressed itself as the self-gratifying wish to be protective to women as in his poem, "Imitation of Spenser"⁶

The idea of heritage or tradition is extended in Keats in the first of his poetic "Epistle"⁷ [To George Felton Mathew], where he affirms his sense of "brotherhood in song", and this now includes fellowship with the living poets too. The need for imagination to be interpretative is here clearly underlined, for Keats goes on to dwell on the necessity to put on a "soft humanity" and to "moralize", "to mourn the fearful death of human kindness" and to rely on these "incitements" so that the poet can "tease" the "niggard Muse". In the second "Epistle"⁸ [To My Brother



George], Keats again values poetry as creative of enchantment and its dreamlike beauty as reductive of earthly beauty, and indeed, he thinks of the proper "poetic lore" as full of wonders which would "make the poet quarrel with the rose". The poet's joy, he appears to say, in creating these marvels would however be exceeded by "posterity's award" to him, which is conceived as poetry's continuing power to bewitch readers of all ages. There obviously is an excess in the language of these commitments, even in the light of the nature Keats himself. What should be emphasized at this point is that Keats came to be uneasy about this excess perhaps added solely by the wisdom of his self-education, for in another verse "Epistle"⁹ [To Charles Cowden Clarke] only a month later, he imagines a ride in a "shatter'd boat" in the "stream of rhyme", and confesses of "Scarce knowing my intent" and also that-
.....my thoughts were never free, and clear, And little fit to please a classic ear, However, as the poem advances, he gathers courage to resolve to go forward to a "consummation", and is thankful to his addressee, a non-poet, for making him aware of the great varieties of poetry and its interfusion of contrary virtues such as "the grand, the torse, the free, the fine"¹⁰ and so on.

In the sonnets of the 1817 volume, Keats admits into his poetics a movement away from enchantment and reveals his fascination with the rudiments of the idea of the poetry of "social thought". In the first sonnet [To My Brother George] he rhetorically asks-

**But what, without the social thought of thee,
Would be the wonders of the sky and sea?**

In the seventh sonnet, that on solitude, the poet accepts solitude to be a bliss only when "two kindered spirits" retire into it. In the thirteenth sonnet, Keats admits into his verse his direct social and moral criticism- a criticism that proposes to "frighten"- "A money- mong'ring, pitiable brood" into "hooded shame". The poet here reminds himself of the need for "Highmindedness", for a "jealousy of good", and urge upon himself and the world the "affection for the cause/ of steadfast genius, toiling gallantly." In the explicit terms of this poem, to toil now is not merely to toil for the poem, but to engage the imagination to portion out shame, and therefore also glory, for modes of social thought and social action. The imagination is thus to be interpretative and is not to be neutral in the choice because of the money-mongering and the high-mindedness. To be noticed in this sonnet is also the emphasis on the diligence of genius and not on the passivity of one transported into luxurious enchantment. In the sonnet numbered 12, what strikes one on the surface, is the commitment to the "wonders of the spheres", but in sonnet 14, again, the decisive shift from flowers and wonders to "The Social Smile, the chain for freedom's sake" makes Keats go on to affirm that "the hum/of mighty workings" will give the world "another heart/And other pulses". In the next sonnet, Keats rejoices that "The poetry of earth is never dead". This poetry of the earth and of social thought appears about this time to have been set in his mind against the poetry from patriotic theme, which, Keats says, can give 'tremendous birth/ To a loud hymn". Very interestingly, as if to fix limits on patriotism and to keep it within the bounds of humanity or not to let it degenerate into xenophobia, Keats expresses a yearning for skies and greenery other than those of happy England.

"Sleep and Poetry",¹¹ the longish last poem in Keats's first volume, comes close to being a manifesto poem, in which, in an "ardent prayer", Keats asks to be blessed with great gifts for poetry. The appeal to "Strange Influence" lingers on, but the poet's "imaginings" also domesticated, made to hover round the fire-side. Not to remain unnoticed is the fact that the poet's aspirations are, among other things, now to be focused on the events of the world. Very centrally placed in this poem is Keats's wish to-

**Write on my tablets all that was permitted,
All that was for our human senses fitted,
Then the events of this wide world I'd seize,
Like a strong giant, and my spirit tease,**



**Till at its shoulders it should proudly see,
Wings to find out an immortality.**

A little later in the poem, Keats firmly states that enchantment is not for ever to enslave his imagination, and as he bids farewell to mere fancies, he is dismissive of a never never romanticism in his emphatic "yes" in the following lines-

**Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,
Where I may find the agencies, the strife of human hearts:**

But Keats will not part with one, to be all for the other, for even the pursuit of reality along the narrow lane like the pursuit of mere fancies has its own hazards, and though he is glad when a sense of reality dawns on him in the walk of a spell of fancies, the poet is to be cautioned against the negative powers of mere reality, when pursued without aspirations, to drive the soul into nothingness. And so Keats seems to resolve to retain both the speels of fancies and of reality-upon his poetic mind, as he says-

**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 sudden stream, would bear along
My soul to nothingness: but I will strive
Against all doubting's, and will keep alive
The thought of the same chariot, and the strange journey it went.**

This resolution to keep on with the flight of fancies and to alternate them with returns to reality is Keats's way of making both reality and fancy, in isolation and in interfusion, abiding sources for his poetry. Thus being born with or inheriting the romantic love of enchantment, Keats works himself into a romantic's commitment to social awareness, to interpretative imagination, to be switched on, as we will find more, by a sense of fellowship in suffering. In "Sleep and Poetry", as also again and again in his letters, Keats appears to be aware of history streaming in upon his enlarging and deepening consciousness and upon the substance of his poetry. On the evidence of this manifesto poem, there is, in Keats's poetry itself, a developing view of poetry as now favoured and now disfavoured by contemporary history. What should be noticed in the lines below is the emphasis on the word "present" as Keats begins to voice his reaction against the desiccation of high imagination-

**.....Is there so small a range
In the present strength of manhood, -that the high
Imagination cannot freely fly
As she was wont of old? Prepare her steeds,
Paw up against the light, and do strange deeds
Upon the clouds?**

There is thus much scope in the poetics of Keats for a licensing of the imagination to counter the drabness that kills the creative zest. Imagination, as it turns out, is also to effect, first, a release from the "musty laws" of the neo-classic poetic lore, and then a renewal of the "potency of song" and an increase in power "To soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man". Bidding adieu to "Despondence", Keats assures himself that-

**.....there ever rolls
A vast idea before me, and I glean
Therefore, my liberty; thence too I've seen
The end and aim of Poesy.**

Ready to be martyred to poetry, Keats, however, finally affirms not so much the luxury and intoxication as



the "toil" and the "turmoil"- the now nervous and now relaxed but finally the heart-easing aim to work out a poet's salvation by the altering and interfusing passivity of the flights of fancy and the diligence of a piquantly interpretative imagination.

There is a sure realization in Keats by 1818 there is to be no great poetry out of enchantment alone. Keats, indeed, says that to be too much "beyond the sweet and bitter world" might mean insanity, and that a long stay there might "bar return".¹² So the poet resolves not to lose the sight of the "remember'd face" and not to "lose his mind on mountains black and bare", for he must keep "his vision clear from speck, his inward sight unblind". This, if, anything, is an initially overfanciful poet's hard-earned wisdom, a sublimation out of a disadvantaged poet's combative self-education. The poetics of Keats in this way marks out two great moments in his imagination-first, the departure from the real to the unreal and then a return to the here and now of the workaday self. Poetry seems to result from a blending of those two movements. Significantly, in "The Ode To A Nightingale",¹³ Keats thinks of imagination [called "fancy" in the poem] as a "deceiving elf", creative of illusions both sedative and intoxicant, but he clearly disfavours their prolonged effects in as much as they fall short of real fulfilment and only leave us at the end to unbearable forlornness. In this great ode, he is thankful to the real world, for it tolls him back into it and also to his "sole self", where, by implication the poetic is not to obliterate the non-poetic. The poet, on the general showing of many of his letters also, is wise to submit to being often a non-poet in order to ensure his being a better poet. In other words, It is self-defeating for poetry to seek to deal with the intrinsically poetic in isolation and that for its very substance and appeal it must traffic with and turn the non-poetic itself into poetry. The intriguing distinction between the poet on the one hand and the fanatic and the savage on the other in "The Fall of Hyperion"¹⁴ gives Keats's internalized image of the poet greater perspicacity. The fanatic and the savage also imagine and dream, but the poet alone is able to give his visions an embodiment that endures, for as he says-

**.....the fine spell of words alone can save
Imagination from the sable chain
And dumb enchantment**

The crucial requirement for the poet is therefore to be "nurtured in his mother tongue", which in itself is not an ivory-tower but a socializing commitment. Imagination must also be at once free and not free; it must accept the subjection to actualities and to languages, and also effect its release from them. It must be both toil and cessation of toil with numberless departures from one to the other. Some of the dangers that beset the poet's search for poetry appear to find symbolic representation in "The Fall of Hyperion". As one point, the poet-narrator, begs of Moneta, the High Priestess, to purge off his "mind's film", that is, to purify his vision and to give it clarity, and Moneta then insists that to be able to reach the height, presumably of imagination he must learn to be one of those-

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

What Moneta further says may be thus summed up:- Those who sleep away their days thoughtlessly without attain the height, the supreme powers of imagination, indeed, one never will get to the temple, will merely rot on the pavement nearby, unless one is able to "feel the giant agency of the world" and to "Labour for moral good like slave to poor humanity". To be a poet in the best sense one must not be a mere weak visionary, but must learn to "seek no wonder but the human face". By Moneta, the poet-narrator is also thus accused and advised-

**Thou art a dreaming thing
A fever of thyself-think of the Earth;**

Moneta's command to think of the earth is in truth a command to tame the feverish, sensationmongering, enchantment loving, and self-gratifying imagination by intuiting one's way into the reality of suffering, and this alone can prelude the realization of the poet's greatest powers. The mere dreamer venoms his dreams, but the poet who



feels a fellowship with suffering humanity can paradoxically create a happiness and so Moneta's advice in the lines seems in truth to be persuaded by Keats to himself-

**Every sole man hath days of joy & pain,
Whether his labours be sublime or low:
The pain alone; the joy alone; distinct:
Only the dreamer venoms all his days,
Bearing mere woe than all his sins deserve.
Therefore, that happiness be somewhat shar'd,
Such things as thou art are admitted of,
Into like gardens, thou didst pass erewhile,
And suffer'd in these temples: for that cause
Thou standest safe beneath this statue's kness.**

The emphasis here must be seen as falling on the fact that the poet has suffered, and only in its wake he now stands safe in the temple of imagination, for by his suffering he has ensured his humanity, his fellowship with his own kind in woe and in joy. To Moneta, the poet-narrator now answers that he rejoices in his "sickness", for the sickness is not "ignoble", and also because it is "medicin'd". Further, he asks to be assured that poetry is not "useless", that the poet is also "a sage:/A humanist, physician to all men". Moneta assures him that the poet does palliate sufferings and that while the mere dreamer only vexes the world, the poet, being "sheer opposite", is creative of anodyne. True poetry depends on a poet who strives and searches for it and derides "mock lyrists", who are only "large self-worshippers" and "careless Hectorers in proud bad verse". Later, the poet-narrator receives the boon of being able to "see as a god sees" and to take in "the depth of thinks" with his mere mortal senses, by setting up, as it were, what he calls an "eagle's watch". The poet in consequence finds the power that "marries sweet sound with the grace of form", which sounds like a phrase towards a definition of poetry. So understood, the fragment of this poem is a dramatization of a poet's search for the true poet in himself, and this true poet is dependent not only on the findings of his eagle's watch, but also on his ability to smile the social smile. Thus enabled, the poet in Keats's poem "Welcome Joy"¹⁵ wishes to write of the day and of the night and of the fair and the foul together, and to "Laugh and Sigh, and Laugh again."

In the 15-lined poem of 1818 called "The Poet",¹⁶ Keats very significantly defines the poet's distinctiveness in terms of the social aspects of his humanity-his ability to get out of himself and be the poorest with the poor and be a king with the king. He is also to be the finest ventriloquist for all things animate and by implication also of all things inanimate, and is further to have mastery over his mother tongue, which is a social instrument of fellowship. By this definition of poet, poetry is a form of ventriloquism, an art where the real identity is suspended to achieve the reality of an imagined identity. In this poem, Keats also seems to be to put more substance on his originally skeletal idea of the interchange of opposites in and for poetry, for the poet here finds his way, among other things, to the high-flying eagle's instincts as to the perching wren's and also extends the benefit of the mastery over his mother tongue to one and all. The scope of the creative interchange of opposites is increasingly widened in Keats's poetics to include that between sensation and thought and between poetry and philosophy. By Keats philosophy is here and there thought of as destructive of poetic imagination, for as in Lamia,¹⁷

"all charms" seem to vanish "At the mere touch of cold philosophy". But this is only the philosopher's cold and abstract philosophy, not philosophy in poetry's own terms, and this cold and abstract variety can "clip an Angel's Wings", and-

**Conquer all mysteries by rule and line
Empty the haunted air and gnomed mine-
Unweave a rainbow.....**



**But in the poem on "Milton's Hair", 18 Keats, desiring that his "rhymes" would be free from
"childish fashion", looks forward to growing "high-rife"-**

With old philosophy

And mad with glimpses of futurity!

These two views of philosophy- philosophy as cold and philosophy as aid for glimpses of futurity, seem to give the poet the necessary resistance to the distinctive modes of philosophy and at the same time a relaxed openness of his modes of poetic imagination to the content of philosophy. When poetry is not dislocated from its own modes of intuition and utterance, it can absorb the context of anything, though for Keats not that of science, but certainly that of philosophy, into its texture. Poetry in other words does not philosophize by cold and consecutive reasoning; it either takes philosophy to give it a poetic texture or creates a poetic texture that can suggest a philosophy without arguing it with philosophy's tools and methods.

The poet in other words philosophizes as, or in so far as, the sea-bird in the following passage of Keats philosophizes-

.....what sea-bird o'er the sea

Is a philosopher the while he goes

Winging along where the sea water thores?¹⁹

In the 1818 "Epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds",²⁰ Keats returns to the theme of philosophy and says regretfully-"and so philosophize /I dare not yet". He despairs of ever attaining to "High reason, and the lore of good and ill" and questions if imagination cannot escape being "Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind". Keats appears here to regret the inability of poetry to symbolize and dramatize, but ever the systems and dogmatism of philosophy cannot silence challenges from other systems and other dogmatic philosophies. And as T.S. Eliot reminds us-"Metaphysical systems are condemned to go up like a rocket and come down like stick"²¹ when philosophy itself cannot guarantee the infallibility to its findings, it cannot but accept that it must not be allowed to shut up the poet's shop after admitting the ultimate impenetrability of some of the mysteries that it raids. In the "Epistle" to Reynolds, Keats does what precisely the philosopher must not appear to do: he admits that there is no ultimate answer to the question as to why man never attains full happiness. The poet in Keats thus refuses to stop being a poet in order to be a philosopher, and as a poet, at least in the "Epistle" we are considering, he allows his search for the truest poetic self to rest upon the poet's version of the philosophy of the tragic reality of existence by saying that he has seen "too distinct into an external fierce destruction". At the end there is a paradox by which Keats, poetically formulates to say that even on the day he gathers "young spring-leaves", he must-

.....that most fierce destruction see,-

The shark at savage prey, the hawk at pounce,

The gentle robin, like a pard or ounce,

Ravening a worm.....

And if this is the philosophic poetry that Keats secures from his eagle's watch the very idea of epistle in verse is a gesture towards what he calls the social smile. The poetry of social smile is diffused throughout Keats and is rather subdued, but about its presence there is no doubt, for it can be sighted and felt in some of the sonnets, even in a good deal of his minor verse such as the satire of the poem called "Oxford"²² Keats's theory of "negative capability" too well known to need quotation. But his prose statement about negative capability has also a poetic version which is worthy of quotation from the poem-"The Thrush Said....."²³

Fret not after knowledge-I have none,

And yet my song comes native with the warmth.

Fret not after knowledge-I have none,



**And yet the evening listens. He who saddens
At thought of idleness cannot be idle,
And he's awake who thinks himself asleep.**

The idea that one cannot be truly idle when distressed by the consciousness of idleness is not at all a mild Oscar Wildean firework, for it implies that to think in the wrong way and at the wrong time is to unsettle or to disable an innate or positive capability. The way that Keats benefits in his poetry and in his poetics from an interchange of opposites intimates to us that this negative capability too does have an opposite, and it is possible that somewhere he gives this opposite just as good and striking a name. This name for Keats's positive capability seems to be rewarded by the phrase-"innate universality", which occurs, significantly, in a remark on Shakespeare, who also figures in the statement on negative capability. In the marginal note in the folio copy of the plays of Shakespeare, Keats is known to have written these words "The genius of Shakespeare was an innate universality; wherefore he laid the achievements of human intellect prostrate beneath his indolent and kingly gaze: he could do easily men's utmost; his plan of tasks to come was not of this world. If what he proposed to do hereafter would not in the idea answer the aim; how tremendous must have been his conception of ultimates!"²⁴

Negative Capability may be understood as a relaxed and unbegrudged state of readiness of a creative mind to be in a state of half-knowledge, a mist; a state in which it is not irritated by any yearning for the unknown or perhaps unknowable half of knowledge. Keats seems to me here to be silent on whether and how the known half of knowledge is of use in creation, for his concern is to insist that not to care for or be in irritable yearning for the unknown half of knowledge is a capability-an absence of mind that becomes a presence in the work created. It is the infusion of this absence that becomes a presence into the work of art itself that Keats calls a negative capability and thinks that it is precisely this that distinguishes a Shakespeare, who is negatively capable, from a Coleridge, who is not. But from the way we have seen Keats's mind to be at work with ideas, it may be reasonably expected that he would naturally not stop at negative capability, a presence in the mind that is active without any irritation or application in the sense of mechanics, but a presence all the same in the mind of the creator that by its innate power eases its way to the verbal utterance. It is this that stands in Keats in opposition to negative capability and very appropriately he calls it an innate universality. This power of the mind as he says is given; it is in some sense in opposition to intellect, which is not indolent; but innate universality, though said to be indolent, is also a "kingly gaze", and a gaze is an intent look, not without purposiveness, and Keats believes that this kingly gaze receives from or reaches out to "ultimate" in their wholeness without the application of intellect, as Shakespeare to him seems to have done. It might be suggested here by juxtaposing innate universality and negative capability that there was in Keats an acuteness of mind in perceiving the creative mind's operations-an acuteness more free and penetrating than that of Coleridge in his celebrated distinction of imagination and fancy.

In the minor odes of Keats also, the critical consideration of poetry keeps flashing in, in some of them to be the sole theme, and in others a less considerable presence. "Ode to Ap", "Hymn to Apollo" and "Ode to May 25" deal directly with problems of poetry. "Ode on indolence"²⁶ can be read as a poem effecting a willed abnegation of the poet's poetic self, but the shift made here is not to be the wakeful non-poetic self by "busy commonsense", but to state of indolence in which love, poetry and ambition are reduced to phantoms which the poet thinks can spare him annoyance by vanishing. In "Ode to Fanny"²⁷, where Keats confesses of a tormenting jealousy, continues the theme of the desire for indolence when the poet cries out: O ease my heart of verse and let me rest." Keats in this poem categorically wishes the "stifling numbers" to ebb from his "full breast", but he intriguingly accepts that he must be, as it were, leeched to relieve himself of his jealousy, and so contradicting his initial withdrawal from poetry, he cries out again, "A theme! a theme! great Nature! Give a theme". this cry for a theme, and that too the theme of the self-torments of jealousy perhaps gives us some of the saddest words ever uttered by a young poet in the surest knowledge



of his great but hopeless love, an advanced state of consumption and impending death. The wish to be near Fanny and the wisdom of keeping away from her seem to be parallel to the wish to continue to be a poet and the wisdom of ceasing to be one. The two odes on the slowly but surely failing powers as man and poet seem to be at the farthest remove from the mood in "Imitation of Spenser"²⁸ where Keats confidently thought that by poetry he would "beguile" even "Dido of her grief" and "rob from aged Lear his better teen". The irony is that his own grief, his tormenting jealousy and the slow dying, robbed him of those powers by which he thought of relieving the sufferings of all men and women, living as well as fictional. To the last sonnets²⁹ one must not turn to see how poetry figures in them. In the sonnet on reading King Lear, it is made explicit that Keats, an avid and tireless reader of Shakespeare values in him the supreme interpretative gift that went with the imagination; and Keats for sure has this in mind when he asks this "chief poet" for "new Phoenix wings to fly at his desire". In the sonnet called "To Spenser", Spenser is the "Elfin Poet", and here Keats expresses the hard-earned wisdom that the poet, like the -

.....**must drink the nature of the soil**
Before it can put forth its blossoming:

In the sonnet "On Visiting the Tomb of Burns", the caution against "sickly imagination" is sounded loud and clear. A more interesting variation of this theme is in "Read Me A Lesson, Music", where Keats characteristically wishes to limit men's and therefore also the poet's knowledge of heaven and hell and also of "man's sight of himself". Here he seems to be rejoicing at his own negative capability in the sense that what his eyes see-

Is mist and crag, not only on this height,
But in the world of thought and mental might.

There is a third variation of this theme in "Why did I Laugh?", where Keats is pleased that there is no answer to the question implied in the title from "Heaven and Hell and Heart". And finally, "To Sleep" is an expression of the desire to be saved from "Curious Conscience" which burrows like a mole. And perhaps the poet's call to sleep is a variation of T. S. Eliot's theme of the human kind unable to bear very much reality.³⁰

This essay on Keats might be concluded with speculations about the many lines of probable developments, of which he by choice and temperament would have taken one. It might be assumed that had Keats lived to a ripe age, he would probably have written a poetry giving in substance and style some aftertastes of the English seventeenth century imagination on the one hand and on the other, some foretastes of a poet like W.B. Yeats, liberated from his early impulse to embroideries. Reading for ourselves, we find the basis for our first speculation more specifically in some of the later sonnets, and the one that we choose to mention is called "On Fame",³¹ where Rame is a wayward gipsy girl, and "will not speak to those/who have not learnt to be content without her". The poetry of Keats, on the showing of this poem as well as scattered lines and stanzas here and there, appear in the seventeenth century way to be capable of thinking sombre thoughts by inventing situational and somewhat dramatized levity. But the aftertastes of the easily identifiable seventeenth century would in our judgement have been blended in Keats with Keatsian foretastes of the mature Yeats. Reading again for ourselves, we found the first Yeatsian foretaste as early as "Sleep and Poetry", in such lines as these -

.....**and my spirit tease**
Till at its shoulders it should proudly see
Wings to find out an immorality.³²

The foreshadowed Yeats strikes us again in such lines in "The Fall of Hyperion"-

.....**pity these have not**
Trac'd upon vellum or wild Indian leaf
The shadows of melodious utterance.³³

Indeed, it can be said that we keep hearing the Yeatsian Keats time and again, but we must end with one last



question-

**O that our dreamings all, of sleep or wake,
Would all their colours from the sunset take!
From something of material sublime
Rather than shadows our own soul's day-time.**

Perhaps it is not quite off the mark to say that the surest mark of a toiling genius in Keats is that as he was getting his grip on the past, he was also growing not only into his present but also to the unreachable future of his life-time.

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