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## John Keats and his Letters

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**Abstract:** John Keats is recognized as a creative poet but his excellence is equally perceptible in the art of letter-writing. Keats occupies an important position in the domain of letter-writing during Romantic era. Unlike Wordsworth, Shelley, Coleridge, Arnold and T. S. Eliot, Keats never endeavoured to formulate a set of fixed theoretical tenets and principles governing the nature of his writings. His observations and insightful perceptions regarding poets, poetry and aesthetics are sprinkled here and there in his poems and letters, and therefore, these are not compact and well-knit as these are in case of other poet-critics.

My avowed aim in this article is to demonstrate Keats's conceptions about poetry and poetic composition and also to explore that Keats never strove to fix stipulated rules and regulations or has never tried to evolve a synthetic approach towards poetry as other poet-critics have systematically and coherently done in their writings. But Keats was undoubtedly a prolific letter-writer. When he wrote to his friends, relatives and correspondents, he often made illuminating and perceptive comments on the nature of poetry and poets. His letters are complementary and contrasting to his poems. His letters hold the keys to unlock his potentialities as a creative artist.

**Keywords:** Negative Capability, Pleasure Thermometer, Epistolary Form, Chameleon Poet.

John Keats is acclaimed as one of the greatest poets of English Literature primarily because of his creative talent. He shows an impeccable delicacy, subtlety and charm and letter-writing has become an art in his hands. We are able to appreciate the tenor of Keats's life through the letters and get some into the inner recesses of her mind. Whatever might be the theme of Keats's letters, they shed a new and unexpected light on some of the hitherto unknown and unexplored dark aspects of his life and art. Keats was a prolific letter-writer. When he wrote to his friends, relatives and correspondents, he often made illuminating and



perceptive comments on the nature of poetry and poets. Keats's letters are among the best produced by any literary figure. His major correspondents include his brothers Tom and George, his sister Fanny, his friend Benjamin Bailey, Fanny Brawne to whom the famous love letters have been addressed; the writer Charles Armitage Brown, Charles Cowden Clarke, an early friend and literary influence; Benjamin Hayden, a painter whom Keats profusely admired; and Joseph Severn, the impecunious artist who was with Keats at the time of death, John Taylor, his publisher and J. H. Reynolds, an eminent advocate. Keats's letters are always energetic and engaging and they are replete with spontaneity, humour and emotion. The letters are rarely dogmatic or conclusive but rather explorative and questioning. It is, as a result, dangerous to read these letters with the aim of determining what Keats believed; no matter what opinion is selected, it is likely that a quite different, even opposing, opinion will be entertained a few pages later. Nevertheless, the letters offer a great deal of insight into the personality of John Keats and, used judiciously, some help in understanding and appreciating his work.

Keats's letters are some of the most lively and creative in the English Language, and they deserve to have a larger audience. They are notable for their readability and accessibility. Keats has addressed these letters to his friends, brothers, sisters, beloved lady, correspondents, poets, critics, literary scholars, editors and others. They have involved people of cross-sections of society and community of Romantic era. This chorus of voices greatly enriched our sense of Keats's character and provides an illuminating contrast in epistolary styles. They also offer us a revealing glimpse of Keats's "Posthumous existence", the period of his illness in Italy. His letters are of different and varied natures. Some are intensely personal and private; others are purely impersonal and literary in value. Some letters have faithfully registered Keats's poetic aesthetics while others are deeply poignant, agonizing and riveting.

A close link between Keats's letters and poems may be traced. He wrote letters obviously with the purpose of being addressed for a private audience and not for a wider audience. There is no essential distinction between John Keats, the letter-writer and John Keats, the poet. Thoughts and ideas that have been revealed in the letters may also be felt in the poems. Comments and observations on his works may be gleaned from his letters. Keats in his letters tells us more about what it is like to be a poet, and more about his fundamental poetic thinking, than any other English poet has told us in such an informal and delightful



way. The letters, in spite of all the excellent subsequent work of many critics and biographers, remain the best companions to the poems. Politics and contemporary events have not directly intruded in Keats's poetic aesthetics though there are sporadic references in Keats's letters written to his correspondents, brothers, sisters, friends and others.

The letters encompass varied moods and temperaments of the writer as he undergoes different critical situations in his life. The October-November letters (1817) first indicated this change in Keats's attitude. A few weeks in December and January witnessed a sudden animation which finds release in just and jollity; but it was a brief interval, and the letters became increasingly serious and speculative. It is true that he still indulges in jokes, puns, and witticisms, trying to convert frustrations and doubts into mirth, but his laughter gradually loses its earlier spontaneity. The sharp tonal shifts in Keats's letters from the gay to the serious and from the serious to the gay clearly suggest an endeavour to communicate the contrary experiences, to unfold swift movements of thought. In tracing the varying moments, we are struck by the author's keen responsiveness and his candour; but we also recognize the separateness of each mood. The contrariness is not dissolved, and the thought-process resembles a flow rather than a cluster.

Written in a fraction over four years, the letters of Keats form the most comprehensive portrait the readers have of any English poet. With an extraordinarily mature candour, and the self-knowledge that scarcely ever deserted him, Keats gives us, first practically everything that can happen to a young man between the age of twenty-one and twenty-five; then, since his life was inextricably blended with his poetry, an almost day-by-day account of the working processes of a poet; and finally, some of the most profound comments on art, philosophy, and the human condition that any single person has produced. All this, it must be remembered, was dashed off to friends, publishers, and relations without the slightest premeditation, and often in condition of extreme fatigue, anxiety, and even of actual illness and the certain knowledge of letter writing can be clearly distinguished. From autumn 1817 to spring 1818, Keats's friendship with two minor poets, Benjamin Bailey and John Hamilton Reynolds, led him to discuss with them at great length and in many letters the principles of poetic composition and of aesthetic experience, and to formulate some of his most striking pronouncements about human nature and the development of personality. The second period is marked by the journal letters written to his friends and brothers and these are replete with vivid natural



description, personal oddities, chance observation, and a great deal of self-revealing introspection. The third stage characterizes the greatest year of Keats's creative writing, the autumn 1818 to autumn 1819, the death of his brother Tom and the absence of his other brother George in America produced for the letter a series of gigantic packets, in which Keats accumulated the diurnal record of both his outer and his inner life. The smallest trivialities, the wildest humour, despair, rage, gossip, resentment, enjoyment, generosity, forgiveness, and appreciation mingle with philosophy, religion, politics, criticism and social comment. Finally, Keats's agonized relationship with Fanny Brown in 1819 and 1820, intensified in one year by premonition of early death and in the other by the growing certainty of it, resulted in a series of letters and notes so painful to read that more than one later editor refused to print them.

The handwritten pages of these letters bring us closer to the nature of the poet and his times in a way that few other documents achieve. The pressure and energy of his mind are apparent in every stroke of the pen. The enormous speed and spontaneity with which he wrote are self-evident. Certain characteristics become as familiar as the facial and verbal mannerisms of a speaker. The wild gaps in the middle of words as his hands leap from left to right give an impression of breathless intensity.

Keats's letters have provided texts for innumerable essays in aesthetics and criticism. Phrases from them have become so familiar in this field, that they are often introduced into argument without mentioning their source, on the assumption that they are now commonplaces of poetic theory. The holiness of the heart's affections, the truth of imagination, the imagination compared with Adam's dream, the finer tone, negative capability, the pleasure thermometer, a fine excess, poetry that comes as naturally as the leaves to a tree, the Chamber of maiden thought, the Chameleon poet, and a myriad of pronouncements of the theme of beauty and truth, have passed into the general vocabulary of criticism and aesthetics, formed the titles of books and article, and acquired sometimes such a pontifical solemnity that it is as well to remind oneself, by looking at them in these letters, how they first came into being, and how much they represent the active searching of his youthful but even-developing mind. Keats's letters are profoundly characterized by frank and natural epistolary style. The letters amply demonstrate the full flavour of Keats's many-sided genius.

The letters of Jane Austen have been very unfairly derided by critics and this is not to some extent



supportable. But the letters of John Keats, have, with some exceptions, been seen as almost the ideal literary letters. As far as we are aware, Keats kept no journal though he did write long journal letters. He published little in the way of essays and prefaces that explore and justify his mode of writing. Instead, almost all of his comments on this subject appear in letters to friends. Often the letters seem like a way of working out and testing ideas. This is perhaps the most famous and most anthologized example of Keats using the letter in this way. The fascination of the letters lies in the fact that in them we see Keats gathering strength and developing as a poet over a period of a few years. During this time, he builds up a complex epistolary mythology about himself.

Such letters about writing poetry are not the only means by which Keats creates a mythology about himself. Like a number of his contemporaries, he also chooses to send copies of his poems and letters, and, when he does so, the text of the letter acts as a prelude for, and context to, the poem. Keats is not merely grandiose in his letters, but that he has an instinctive understanding of how to use the letter form to create a dramatic, yet often self-deprecating, narrative is revelatory.

Keats's letters are a complex coming together of writer and readers in which the sense of audience is as acute as the self-conscious production of a body of writing. Keats's keen imagining of the moment of reception is matched by a sense of coherence which is at least psychological, if not literary. Keats's letters are heavily inflected with an awareness of gender difference. His letters adequately demonstrate the divergent ways in which his exploration of self-hood, particularly his idea of the self-hood of the poet, is intersected by a strong and often competing awareness of gender and the dictates of a powerful sexual desire. His letters reveal a passionate and fraught engagement with gender and sexuality as they are experienced as a part of an intense network of mail friendships, his location of the masculine self and sexual morality in the context of national identity, and his anxious encounters with women, including Fanny Brawne.

Letters, no less than conversation, are a form of social behaviour, in which self-presentation is an essential component. Keats's letters share Sterne's sense of the inadequacies of language to encompass lived experiences. Like Sterne's, his playfulness, his liberal use of dashes, his digressiveness, and his self-mockery constantly make his readers aware of the act of writing, with frequent references to his faulty or gouty "Ouill"



and “Vile Old Pen”. However intimate and exposing, the letters are a performance. The self-presented is a literary construct, but one which attempts through its own self-awareness to reach, genuinely, across time and space to his correspondents. We may see this double awareness—of performative self-consciousness and sincere communication—in Keats’s long journal letter, composed from 14th Feb to 3rd May, 1819.

Keats writes himself into his letter half-mockingly, half-seriously: the act of self-presentation is in part a late-night relaxation. Intimately domestic, the scene is that of the literary man as bachelor, posed for his correspondents and surrounded by recent books and older ones by writers he admires, one serving as a writing desk. Keats’s letters no less intently reach out towards their readers, imagine these readers as present, their own lives and concerns existing parallel to the writer’s own. Unlike “This living hand”, Keats’s letters depend upon and animate the fiction of a mutual reciprocity between writer and reader.

As long ago as 1951, Lionel Trilling accorded them a sensitive essay entitled “The Poet as Hero : Keats in his Letters” in which he presented a fine liberal humanist reading which took account of the literary identity of the letters but which, as the title indicates, centred its interest in a sustained process of ethical self-construction and self-revelation.<sup>1</sup> In *Keats and Embarrassment*, Christopher Ricks offered an original perspective which treated the letters as literary texts deserving the same kind of attention as the poetry: with characteristic attentiveness to local verbal textures, he noticed the diversity of voices, the wordplay, the domestic shaping and the energetic variety which had been ignored or minimized by most of Keats’s critics (Ricks, 1974)

Readers need to remind themselves that letters are driven by their own literary and generic requirements even when they seem to be recording the facts of life with vivid and unstructured immediacy. Keats’s epistolary self-consciousness alerted him to the possibility that he might construct his style and the persona of his correspondence according to a fictional model like Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett. The letters can be exploited as keys to unlock the poetry. The letters have been employed not so much in their own right but for what they can tell us about Keats the man or Keats the poet. Little effort has been made to acknowledge their autonomy as literary texts or the significance of their generic identity. As several critics have recently pointed out that one possible strategy for reading the letters would be to address them



as narrative. For example, Andrew Bennett incorporated them, specifically and suggestively, into a larger engagement with Keats's narrative structures and the shaping of his poetic career, (Bennet, 1994) while Cedric Watts has adduced the model of fiction. He states that the letters of John Keats could be read as in some ways analogous to the structures of an epistolary novel. Certainly, it includes the classic fictional ingredients: family, class, sex, money and death. (Watts, 1985)

Like all letters, Keats's letters involve self-representation, including even those addressed to the editors and the publishers. These simultaneously involve the social positioning of the writer and the recipient. Keats's marvellously alive letters are always alert to their recipients' interests and their relationship to him. For critics, Keats's letters are an invaluable supplement to the poetry, providing variant drafts, comments on the origins and development of certain poems, and eloquent 'speculations' on the nature of poetry or the achievements of predecessors of and contemporaries. For biographers, the letters give insight into Keats's mind at work and play, and a record of his experiences, often on a daily basis. Both the enterprises tend to treat the letters as transparent documents of fact. This is the method of Lionel Trilling's fine essay, "The Poet as Hero: Keats in his Letters," which calls on the letters, predominantly to document Keats's moral and aesthetic self-discovery. But Keats's letters are also performances. The first to focus on the importance of Keats's self-representation in the letters is Christopher Ricks, in his brilliant study: "Keats and Embarrassment". Ricks has read the letters as literary texts — ones, moreover, that illuminated the particularities and peculiarities of Keats's poetic language and sensibility. Keats's letters cannot be read in isolation from his poetry and as an autonomous body of writing.

Setting the letters of Keats as a whole against the entire corpus of his poetry, there is a case for believing them to be the greater literary achievement. The letters give a remarkably full narrative of Keats's major creative periods, of his swift self-making, and of the development of the intellectual life and mind of a quintessential "Romantic Poet" "Our slowness in evolving a poetics of the letter," notes Timothy Webb, has presented full recognition of the free-standing literary achievement and others have begun to develop such an account. (Webb, 1997)

Lawrence Lipking has alerted us to some of the ways in which Keats charted the crucial and





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archetypal phases of a poetic career in his poetry; although the letters necessarily broaden the focus and readers are involved in the stages of a life lived, felt and recorded with unrivalled intensity, that life is consistently based on and related to Keats's continuing need to define himself as a poet and to be confirmed in his search for poetic identity by public recognition. (Lipking, 195) This might be seen as a Bildungsroman; as John Barnard notes, "It is quite possible to read the letters in their own right, as the autobiography of Keats's imaginative quest, as his prelude, but a prelude unmediated by memory" (Barnard, 1987). The comparison is suggestive but the letters read very differently from the prelude because they were not written as a whole or as a portrait of the artist; their very heterogeneity is part of their attraction but challenges readers who are comfortable with greater unity.

An astounding capacity to exploit, explore and develop their own verbal and syntactical potential is one of the most striking features of Keats' letters. This attentiveness to the verbal medium is closely related to a high level of epistolary self-consciousness. Some letters permit themselves to create a densely allusive texture which is appropriate to the needs of the letter-writer as well as of the recipient. Others offer a space for verbal inventiveness where the emphasis is on performance, both self-delighting and calculated to please, amuse or enliven the reader. Some letters allow Keats to assume a variety of literary styles and voices, including those of Sterne, Swift, Smollett, Radcliffe, the picturesque and the legal petition.

In both his letters and poems, Keats has enunciated critical pronouncements on the role of imagination in the creative process. He always viewed it to be the supreme active principle in poetic composition. A careful analysis of his utterances from the middle of 1817 onwards shows that Keats has arrived at two significant conclusions as to the nature and function of imagination. First, the imagination as an instrument of intuitive insight is the most authentic guide to ultimate truth and second, the imagination in its highest form is a generative force, in itself creative of essential reality. In a letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22nd November 1817, Keats has spoken volumes of Imagination, "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination — What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth — Whether it existed before or not — for I have some Idea of all our passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty" (Gittings, 37). He has further stated, "The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream — he awoke and found it truth" (37). Keats's concept of imagination is



inextricably bound up with the concept of beauty and truth. Like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, Keats has looked upon imagination as a creative faculty of the poet which plays a pivotal role in synthesizing and unifying disparate elements in order to generate a new reality. Like other romantic theorists and critics, he has claimed a much more exalted position for imagination which has the shaping, ordering and modifying power. In the same letter mentioned before, Keats has further clarified his stand on the position of imagination in the creative process by saying: “if a sparrow come before my window, I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel” (Gittings, 38). His propensity to ‘take part in the existence of a sparrow and pick about the Gravel’ has all too easily been read as a sign of his empathetic, protean creativity in which the chameleon nature of the poet takes on the identity of other things. Keats is in complete agreement with Plato’s assertion, ‘not by wisdom do poets write, but by a sort of genius and inspiration’ (Hill, 1977). Like Plato, Keats has no faith in mere cold knowledge and reason. To him, poetry of any sort has its genesis in imagination, and feeling is both its rudder and its sails. In a letter written to Benjamin Bailey, 22<sup>nd</sup> November, 1817; Keats addresses himself directly to the subject of the nature, function, and importance of imaginative activity and his observations are of all the worth that a real thinker’s unpremeditated, spontaneous utterance on any subject close to his heart always is: “O I wish I was as certain of the end of all your troubles as that of your momentary start about the authenticity of the Imagination” (Gitting, 36). Here Keats has proclaimed his complete faith in the authenticity of the imagination. He perceives that the final way to great poetry is through the imagination.

Keats’s letters adequately demonstrate his poetic aesthetics such as his idea of the role of imagination in the creative procedure, poetic mode and the poetical character. Similarly, his letters are fraught with critical assume and sensibilities. As a critic, Keats is fairly impartial in his treatment of divergent subjects and things. His critical observations and comments are deeply imbued with the concept of disinterestedness. An instance of his critical objectivity has been evidenced in his celebrated formulation of ‘Negative Capability’. Keats was always intensely conscious of a poet’s creed and he never regarded poetic process and creativity as trivial. Rather sometimes he was desperately restless with his imperfection as a poet. He was not unaware of the truth that to be a poet and to write poetry is to live precariously. That is why, echoing Shakespeare’s Edgar, he has written in a letter to George and Tom Keats, 21<sup>st</sup> December, 1817: “I am one



that gathers Samphire, dreadful trade; The Cliff of Poesy Towers above me” (Gittings, 12). Keats has strongly asserted that a perpetual dilemma persists between the human self and the creative self of a poet. He has clearly stated that the poet or the artist who can completely negate his private self or entity while writing a literary work is capable of identifying himself with any person or object easily and unconditionally. In a letter written to George and Tom Keats, 21<sup>st</sup> December, 1817, his statement is worth-remembering: “..... Several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously — I mean Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (43). The artist who has attained this state is branded a great artist. Further in a letter written to Richard Woodhouse, 27<sup>th</sup> October, 1818. Keats points out that an ideal artist “as distinguished from the egotistical sublime like Wordsworth, has no self — it is everything and nothing — it has no character, it enjoys light and shade, it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated — it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the Chameleon poet” (157). This is one of Keats’s most daring explorations of self-hood, particularly of the strange self-hood of which a poet like himself is possessed.

Closely related to this concept is Keats’s formulation and employment of the expression ‘the poetical character’. Keats has alluded to the idea of the poetical character in a letter to Woodhouse on 27<sup>th</sup> October, 1818 (157). The poetical character, as differentiated from the Wordsworthian or egotistical self, only delights in ‘gusto’—active participation in all forms of life, fair or foul — and this participation entails an elimination or erasure of the ego, of the self that evaluates experience with the yardstick of morality. Only through this ability to enter into other identities can the artist re-create unique characters — an Iago or an Imogen — and here the readers have an echo of Hazlitt’s exposition of Shakespeare’s genius. Hazlitt states, “Shakespeare was the least of an egotist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself, but he was all that others were or that they could become. He not only had in himself the germs of every faculty and feeling, but he could follow them by anticipation, intuitively, into all their conceivable ramifications, through every change of fortune or conflict of passion, or turn of thought.... He had only to think of anything in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it”. (Hazlitt)



The separation of the human self and the creative self, of the beautiful and the good, of art and life is implicit in many of Keats's pronouncements and in this respect, he is chiefly influenced by William Hazlitt. According to Keats, an ideal poet is a Chameleon, assuming each and every mood and attitude, and the distinctive mark of a many-sided genius is its elusiveness and impersonality, its disinterested perception of good and evil. The ideal poet is looked upon as a Protean personality taking on every possible shape and attitude, or as a superior being looking upon the manifold aspects of life as beautiful forms. According to Keats, negative capability in another aspect can be interpreted as a unique potentiality of the artist which also involves the ideal poetical attitude to see life as a mystery, to submit to experience without reason or dogma, to remain content with half-knowledge without looking for any comfortable assurance in faith and certitude.

Keats is primarily concerned with poetry and its aesthetic quality. He strongly endorsed the thesis of art for art's sake and not for societal reformation as Shelley has vociferously enunciated in his *Defence of Poetry*: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world", nor did he assert like Wordsworth in a *Preface to Lyrical Ballads*, 1800: "A poet is a man, speaking to men". Matthew Arnold thought that poetry could be a substitute for religion and be the mainstay of a race that had lost faith. Unlike other poet, Keats did not explicitly express a doctrine about poetry. He believed in the autonomy of poetry and this is tangible in his poems and letters. He was one of the foremost exponents of aestheticism which was initiated in England in the late nineteenth century. He was an aesthete, a fond lover of beauty and he never deemed art useful to human society and morality. To him, art has an independent existence, devoid of practical concerns of life and devotion to beauty is above all considerations, rather it makes other factors subservient. In a letter to George and Tom Keats 21st December, 1817; Keats wrote: "With a great, poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration".

Keats thinks that art should be completely divorced from all external purpose — social, political, ethical, ideological and others. Like Walter Pater, he has strongly recommended the pursuit of art as a means of enriching and elevating our moments. A work of art is to be valued purely for the immediate aesthetic pleasure it imparts and not by any reference to social, moral and ethical concerns of human life. Repudiating the ethical ingredient in poetry in a letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3rd Feb, 1818, he says: "We hate poetry that has



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a palpable design upon us". Keats never wrote one single line of poetry with the least shadow of public thought. According to him, art or poetry is a thing of supreme value and this is a recurrent motif in Keats's earlier verses and letters. He has further written in a letter to J. H. Reynolds, 17<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup> April, 1818: "I find that I cannot exist without poetry—without eternal poetry". He has once again stated in a letter written to Leigh Hunt 10<sup>th</sup> May, 1817: "I went to the Isle of Wight — thought so much about poetry so long together that I could not get to sleep at night—and moreover, I know not how it was, I could not get wholesome food". Keats has opined that a poet is always deeply engrossed in his imaginative contemplation, which is why, he is not at all dependent on society and association of others. Here he has rightly observed in a letter to J. H. Reynolds on 24<sup>th</sup> August, 1819: "I think if I had a free and healthy and lasting organization of heart and lungs as strong as an ox's-- so as to be able [to bear] unhurt the shock of extreme thought and sensation without weariness, I could pass my life very nearly alone, though it should last eighty years". Keats later criticized Shelley for favouring art which had an overt didactic 'purpose' — always trying to support a cause or prove a case. In a letter to Shelley on 16<sup>th</sup> August, 1820, Keats wrote: "an artist must serve Mammon — he must have "self-concentration", selfishness perhaps. You I am sure will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity and be more of an artist, and 'load every rift' of your subject with ore". Keats's poetic aesthetics was characterized by the conflict or dilemma between social conscience or commitment and artistic conscience as it is also envisaged in his letters.

Paradoxically enough, Keats felt at the same time that he could achieve his self-realization and perform his role properly in society only by writing poetry, but the thought of doing good to the world by dedicating himself to some more public cause always preoccupied him. Though Keats was averse to 'Mawkish Popularity', he was simultaneously acutely conscious of his commitment to society and its betterment. In a letter to J.H. Reynolds on 9<sup>th</sup> April, 1818, he told: "I could not live without the love of my friends—I would jump down Aetna for any great public good" and in a letter to Bailey 10<sup>th</sup> June, 1818, he wrote how he welcomed the 'glory of dying for a great human purpose'. In a letter to Richard Woodhouse 27<sup>th</sup> October, 1818; Keats further told: "I am ambitious of doing the world some good". The dilemma in Keats's poetic aesthetics has been sharply and pointedly expressed in the observation mentioned in a letter to John Taylor 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1818: "I have been hovering for some time between an exquisite sense of the



luxurious and a love for Philosophy—were I calculated for the former I should be glad — but as I am not I shall turn all my soul to the latter”. Therefore, there is no denying the fact that Keats as a theorist of poetic aesthetics was oscillating between art for art’s sake and art for society’s sake in an unpredictable manner.

Keats was always baffled by the demarcation between poetry and philosophy. He never held that poetry would mesmerize by propagating theory and concept. Rather it will elevate and enrich our minds by sheer magic of emotional spontaneity. Poets will never experiment with theoretical tenets and principles, rather imagination will be his primary tool to conquer the hearts of the readers. Poetry will be necessarily spontaneous and natural. In a letter to John Taylor, 27<sup>th</sup> February, 1818; Keats has written: “That if poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all”. Further in a letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3rd February 1818; he has categorically stated: “Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul and does not startle it or amaze it with itself, but with its subjects”. He has also opined that spontaneous and imaginative outpouring of the heart are always sacred and we can easily lift ourselves to the height of truth through imagination and beauty perceived in this way is inseparable from truth.

Keats has made a clear difference between ethics and aesthetics and he has a firm conviction that the yardstick for the one is not applicable in case of the other. In this context, he has substantiated that “though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine”. From the ethical perspective, “A quarrel in the streets” is a thing to be despised or condemned but when it is considered purely from the aesthetic point of view, “the energies displayed in it are fine” and it is fairly supportable. This isolation of ethics from aesthetics has positively contributed to Keats’s growing aestheticism which has been manifested in his poems and letters.

One of the significant aspects of Keats’s poetic aesthetics is the ‘pleasure Thermometer’ which measures heat and it has provided Keats with a metaphor to describe the various levels of pleasure. As the degree of heat intensifies, the amount of ‘self’ destroyed increases and the more ‘disagreeable’—in this context selfish propensities—are evaporated. Art, like heat, is capable of evaporating disagreeable, and beauty and truth, as the letter to West suggests, act as catalysts, until only the essence of the object remains.



In the Ode on Melancholy, it is intensity, the gluttony of sorrow on a rose, the contemplation of beauty that must die, which turns melancholy into an aesthetic experience.

The proximity of the mundane and the profound leads to another salient feature of Keats's letters: their seamless integration of everyday life with the life of the mind. Such a letter makes Keats's letters all the more astonishing for their insistence that there need be no distinction between living and thinking; that thinking is living and in fact works best when it takes its measure directly from life. The happy marriage of poetry and prose in the letters tells us that for Keats, poetry was not a job or a career but a necessity, like breathing: "I find that I cannot exist without poetry, without eternal poetry". He admits to J. H. Reynolds, "Half the day will not do, the whole of it". Poetry becomes a physical appetite, almost an addiction: "I began with a little, but habit has made me a Leviathan". If he cannot get his fix, then by reading or writing it, he becomes "all in a Tremble". To Keats, poetry is a luxury, to be classed with opera or haute cuisine. Keats's poetry — serious poetry — is not a part of most people's work a day lives. This is a sign of his complexity that Keats too could share this belief in poetry as an elite club; indeed, he once signed one of his poems and was fond of playing the connoisseur, even the collector, of the beautiful.

The letters also adequately demonstrate Keats's astonishing capacity for role-playing and the ease with which he assumed a variety of social and psychological identities. In his letters he is finely attuned to his different audiences. By turns he is reflective and philosophical with Bailey and Reynolds, ambitious with Haydon, gossipy and colloquial with George and Georgiana, and paternal with his sister, Fanny. He plays the beleaguered poet with Taylor, the knowing rake with Dilke and Rice, the martyred lover with Fanny Brawne, and the solicitous older brother with Tom. To the Jeffery sisters, he shows off, lacing his letters with puns, and to his close friend Charles Brown he reveals his deepest anxieties about writing, about money, and about death.

Keats's relativism is allied to his concept of Chameleon poet or Negative Capability. He exclaimed, "O! For a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts". In other words, he thought he was more likely to arrive at Truth by feeling than by thinking, because thought, in its necessary process of selection and ordering, omitted some of the richness and complexity of experience: "Axioms in philosophy are not axioms



until they are proved upon our pulses”. Keats firmly believes that the excellence of every art is its intensity. In the other passage in a letter Keats speaks of being ‘self-spiritualized into a kind of sublime Misery’. Keats contends that poetry “Cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself”. This is paralleled by the saying that “Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced”. In the famous exclamation, quoted earlier, “O for a life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts”. Keats meant by sensations, not intuitions, but sense-experience and feelings about them, or perhaps just feelings. He refers to ‘high sensations’ in one of his letters.

Keats is concerned with the nature of aesthetic truth in his letters. He has clearly demonstrated that truth in life and truth in Art are two absolutely different things. He means to tell that the question of truth in a work of art is dependent on something within itself, and so preserves the absolute autonomy of art. This is the correct approach to the vexed question of truth in Art. Like Oscar Wilde, Keats believes that the content will be convincing if the form is convincing. Therefore, a poetic statement or any work of art as a whole in order to be convincing must contain within itself, in the words of Shelley, ‘the principle of its own integrity’ — the integrity that results from the perfect correspondence of form to content (Defence of Poetry, first paragraph). The criterion of judgement about truth must be something that is within itself. When a poetic statement is taken and its ‘truth’ is examined, it is examined whether it says exactly what it means or means exactly what it says. Of course, it will be doing so only if its form is the exact counterpart of its content. Truth is encapsulated and realized through Form. The truth of a poem or a work of art lies, not in its conformity to the language or matter of real life, but in the conformity to each other of its content and its language or form. If the language spells its content precisely, if the form and the content are so integral to each other as to be inseparable, the poem or the work of art is real and true, however, remote from real life its language or content. A line in a work of art could claim its own organic truth, ‘the truth that is its own testimony’, only if what it speaks of was immediately experienced within itself.

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