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"Keats, the critic"

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Keats, the Critic

Keats is known to the world as a Romantic poet, and he justly deserves to be ranked with poets of the first magnitude, but, in addition to his poetic works, he has left many charming letters and four dramatic reviews[1] which give us an intimate acquaintance with him. It is my purpose to point out Keats's critical ability as shown by extracts principally from his letters. I shall endeavor to show Keats as a critic of poetry, as a critic of himself, and as a critic of others - both of his predecessors and contemporaries.

We shall, first of all, see what critical opinions Keats gives about poetry in general. He seems to have very definite views on the subject and writes them to his friends[2]. Perhaps his best known criticisms of poetry are the three axioms given in a letter[3] to John Taylor, February, 1818:

> "In poetry I have a few axioms, and you will see how far I am from their centre.
> 1st. 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.
> 2d. Its touches of beauty should never be half-way, thereby making the reader breathless, instead of content. The rise, the progress, the setting of Imagery should, like the sun, come natural to him, shine over him, and set soberly, although in magnificence, leaving him in the luxury of twilight. But it is easier to think what poetry should be, than to write it - And this leads me to

1. Amy Lowell: John Keats, I, pp 537, 540
   Boston and New York, Houghton Mifflin Company 1925
2. When quoting from Keats's letters, I shall use as the text, unless otherwise stated, Letters of John Keats to His Family and Friends, edited by Sidney Colvin, published by Macmillan and Co., Limited, London, 1925
3. Colvin: Letters p. 77

> Another axiom - That if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all."

All of us have experienced this first axiom while reading poetry. How many times we read something and realize that we have felt the same thing without the power to express it as the poet has done. The second axiom - that of beauty - is one of Keats's favorite subjects. It reminds us of the first line of Endymion, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever" and of two lines from the "Ode to a Grecian Urn",

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

His third axiom demands spontaneity and inspiration on the part of the poet.

Keats again gives his critical opinion on the subject of poetry in a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds:

> [1]"We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us, and, if we do not agree, seems to put its hand into its breeches pocket. 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 subject. How beautiful are the retired flowers! - how would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway, crying out, 'Admire me, I am a violet! Dote upon me, I am a primrose!' "

Keats certainly would not care for didactic poetry; neither would he care for poetry with little thought bedecked with gay words; for he says the subject should enter one's soul.

When Keats wrote to George and Georgiana Keats in January, 1819, he copied for them his poem on "Fancy." The comment that he added gives us another of his views on poetry:

1. Colvin: Letters p. 68

[1]"Here are the Poems - they will explain themselves - as all poems should do without any comment - "

Judged from this standard that he sets up, Browning would not rank very high as a poet, I dare say.

In another journal-letter[2] to his brother and sister-in-law, Keats gives his idea of the source of the beauty of poetry - "it makes everything in every place interesting. The palatine Venice and the abbotine Winchester are equally interesting."

When Keats was planning to write Endymion, Hunt wanted to know why he was endeavouring after a long poem. In his reply to this question he gives us some good criticism of poetry:

[3]".....Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little Region to wander in, where they may pick and choose, and in which they images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading: which may be food for a Week's stroll in the Summer? Do not they like this better than what they can read through before Mrs. Williams comes down stairs? a Morning work at most.

"Besides, a long poem is a test of invention, which I take to be the Polar star of Poetry, as Fancy is the Sails - and Imagination the rudder. Did our great Poets ever write short Pieces? I mean in the shape of Tales - this same invention seems indeed of late years to have been forgotten as a Poetical excellence - "

Here we have what Keats thinks essential to a poem, especially a long one - invention, fancy, and imagination. In a letter[4] to James Augustus Hessey he tells us that poetry is not something which can be worked out by law and precept but must create itself:

1. Colvin: Letters p. 203
2. Ibid p. 302
3. Ibid p. 34
4. Ibid pp. 167, 168

> "The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man. It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself- That which is creative must create itself- In Endymion I leaped headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice."

To sum up Keats's critical opinions on poetry we may say that poetry should surprise by a fine excess, striking the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts; its touches of beauty should never be half-way; it should be spontaneous and unobtrusive; it should be self-explanatory; it should make everything in every place interesting; it should show one's powers of invention and should be filled with fancy and imagination.

After considering Keats's ideas of poetry, I find it is interesting to read his letters and poems to discover what he thinks of his own works. Does he feel that he has been sufficiently able to follow the standards set down by himself so that his productions will live?

In the preface to Endymion, Keats criticizes his own work. He says it shows inexperience and immaturity, and denotes a "feverish attempt rather than a deed accomplished". He says he would delay the publication of Endymion for a "year's castigation", but he knows it would be useless, for the "foundations are too sandy".

Amy Lowell says [1] that Keats's best criticism of his work is found in the sonnet, "When I have fears that I may

1. Amy Lowell: John Keats, I, p. 559

cease to be." He there speaks of "huge cloudy symbols of a high romance" which is a summary of all his works.

"When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has glean'd my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charactery,
Hold like rich garners the full ripen'd grain;
When I behold, upon the night's starr'd face,
Hugh cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows, with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love; - then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink."

Apparently, at times, he felt that he was a great poet. In a letter[1] to Benjamin Robert Haydon, May, 1817, Keats says that at times he hates his lines, yet when he compares them with the works of others, his seem to tower above them:

"I have been in such a state of Mind as to read over my lines and hate them. I am one that gathers Samphire, dreadful trade - the Cliff of Poesy towers above me - yet when Tom who meets with some of Pope's Homer in Plutarch's Lives reads some of those to me they seem like mice to mine."

[2]After the publication of Endymion in 1818, violent attacks on Keats appeared in The Quarterly Review and in Blackwood's Magazine. Keats had inscribed his first volume to Leigh Hunt, who had been thrown into prison on account of libel against the prince regent; it "was therefore assumed by the critics that Keats was not only a bad poet, but a bad citizen." Milnes tells us that at that time literary criticism

1. Colvin: Letters pp. 13, 14

2. Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats pp. 194-200
Edited by Richard Monckton Milnes
London: Edward Moxon
1848

had assumed an unusually political complexion. He says the article in the Quarterly was dull as well as ungenerous and that the notice in Blackwood was still more scurrilous. Keats writes to [1]James Augustus Hessey, his publisher, and tells him that these articles of criticism have not hurt him as much as Keats's criticism of his own works:

> "Praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic of hiw own Works. My own domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what Blackwood or the Quarterly could possible inflict - and also when I feel I am right, no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary reperception and ratification of what is fine. J. S. is perfectly right in regard to the slip-shod Endymion. That it is so is no fault of mine. No! - though it may sound a little paradoxical. It is as good as I had power to make it - by myself - Had I been nervous about its being a perfect piece, and with view asked advice, and trembled over every page, it would not have been written; for it is not in my nature to fumble - I will write independently - I have written independently without Judgment. I may write independently, and with Judgment hereafter..... In Endymion, I leaped headlong into the sea, and thereby have become better acquainted with the Soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed upon the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice. I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest - "

Even when the public does not accept his work, Keats does not despair but believes he will eventually be a success if he continues to write. Concerning this matter he writes to George and Georgiana Keats:

> [2]"I have not said in any Letter yet a word about my affairs- in a word I am in no despair about them- my poem has not at all succeeded; in the course of a year or so I hink I shall try the public again - in a selfish point of view I should suffer my pride and my contempt of public opinion to hold me silent - but for yours and Fanny's sake I will

1. Colvin: Letters pp. 167, 168

2. Ibid p. 223

> pluck up a spirit and try again. I have no doubt of success in a course of years if I persevere-but it must be patience, for the Reviews have enervated and made indolent men's minds - few think for themselves."

Should the world fail to recognize him,[1] Keats says he will be content, yet he tells John Hamilton Reynolds in July, 1819, "I have great hopes of success, because I make use of my Judgment more deliberately than I have yet done."

Again we get a glimpse of Keats's critical ability of his own works when he writes a journal-letter[2] to his brother and sister-in-law:

> "I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death. Even as a matter of present interest the attempt to crush me in the Quarterly has only brought me more into notice, and it is a common expression among book men, I wonder the Quarterly should cut its own throat.' "

Now that I have considered Keats's critical ideas about poetry and have noted his criticism of his own work, I shall gather excerpts from his letters and poems which show his opinion of other people. First, I shall give some quotations concerning people whom Keats knew personally, and later I shall give excerpts which show his opinion of writers before his time. Of his contemporaries I shall consider Wordsworth, Scott, Kean, Hunt, Haydon and Byron; and of his predecessors I shall consider Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Chatterton.

One of the first times that we find Wordsworth mentioned is in a letter[3] written from Oxford to John Hamilton Reynolds: "There is one particularly nice neat, which we have christened

1. Colvin: Letters p. 277
2. Ibid p. 171
3. Ibid p. 28

'Reynolds's Cove', in which we have read Wordsworth and talked as may be." Although Keats could detect Wordsworth's faults, he admired him as a poet; for he writes to his brothers[1], " I am sorry that Wordsworth has left a bad impression wherever he visited in town by his egotism, Vanity, and Bigotry. Yet he is a great poet if not a philosopher."

When Haydon and Hunt were quarreling with one another,[2] Keats lost all patience with such conduct and wrote to Benjamin Bailey, "I am quite disgusted with literary men and will never know another except Wordsworth - no not even Byron." From this we can see that Keats at that time admired to a great extent Wordsworth.

We find a good criticism of Wordsworth's poem the Gipsies in a letter[3] Keats wrote to Benjamin Bailey:

> "You remember in Hazlitt's essay on commonplace people he says, 'they read the Edinburgh and Quarterly, and think as they do'. Now with respect to Wordsworth's 'Gipsy', I think he is right, and yet I think Hazlitt is right, and yet I think Wordsworth is rightest. If Wordsworth had not been idle, he had been without his task; nor had the 'Gipsies' - they in the visible world had been as picturesque an object as he in the invisible. The smoke of their fire, their attitudes, their voices, were all in harmony with the evenings. It is a cold thing to say -and I would not say it in point - but it seems to me that if Wordsworth had thought a little deeper at that moment, he would not have written the poem at all. I should judge it to have been written in one of the most

1. Colvin: Letters p. 76
2. Ibid p. 33
3. Ibid p. 37

> comfortable moods of his life - it is a kind of sketchy intellectual landscape, not a search after truth, nor is it fair to attack him on such a subject; for it is with the critic as with the poet; had Hazlitt thought a little deeper, and been in a good temper, he would never have spied out imaginary faults there."

[1]John Middleton Murry in commenting on this letter says, "The criticism flies like an arrow to the heart of the poems: a harsher critic and a more unjust, would say it was written in one of the most condescending moods of Wordsworth's life; but 'comfortable' - that is the word." There is one particularly interesting statement in the letter quoted above - "it is a kind of intellectual landscape, not a search after truth." That reminds us of Keats's idea of truth as given in the last two lines of "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

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

Therefore when Keats says that Wordsworth's "Gipsies" is not a search after truth, he also means it is not a search after beauty.

Keats did not approve of Wordsworth's "Matthew", for he felt Wordsworth was trying to thrust his philosophy upon others. He gives his views in a letter[1] to John Hamilton Reynolds:

> "It may be said that we ought to read our contemporaries, that Wordsworth, etc., should have their due from us - But, for the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist? Every man has his speculations, but every man does not brood and peacock over them till he makes a false coinage and deceives himself. Many a man can travel to the very bourne of Heaven,

1. John Middleton Murry: Keats and Shakespeare p. 39
   Oxford University Press
   London, 1926
2. Colvin: Letters pp. 67, 68

and yet want confidence to put down his half-seeing .... Old Matthew spoke to him some years ago on some nothing, and because he happens in an Evening Walk to imagine the figure of the old Man, he must stamp it down in black and white, and it is henceforth sacred. I don't mean to deny Wordsworth's grandeur and Hunt's merit, but I mean to say we need not be teased with grandeur and merit when we can have them uncontaminated and unobtrusive."

One of the best pieces of Keats's criticism of Wordsworth is found in a letter[1] to John Hamilton Reynolds in which Keats compares human life to a large mansion of many apartments. I like what he has to say concerning our ability to judge the genius of others - that our ability to judge is measured by the amount and kind of experience we have had. I shall quote at length from the letter mentioned above, because it contains many of his critical ideas:

"You say, 'I fear there is little chance of anything else in this life' - you seem by that to have been going through with a more painful and acute zest the same labyrinth that I have - I have come to the same conclusion thus far. My Branchings out therefrom have been numerous: One of them is the consideration of Wordsworth's genius.....And whether Wordsworth has in true epic passion, and martyrs himself to the human heart, the main region of his song. In regard to his genius alone - we find what he says true as far as we have experienced, and we can judge no further but by larger experience - for axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses. We read fine things, but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the author.....

"....I will return to Wordsworth - whether or no he has an extended vision or a circumscribed grandeur - whether he is an eagle in his nest or on the wing - And to be more explicit and to show you how tall I stand by the giant, I will put down a simile of human life as far as I now perceive it; that is, to the point to which I say we both have arrived at - Well - I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me - The first we step into

1. Colfin: Letters pp. 105, 107, 108

we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think- We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle within us- we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight; However among the effects this breathing is father of is that the heart and nature of Man- of convincing one's nerves that the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression- whereby this Chamber of M Maiden thought becomes gradually darkened, and at the same time, on all sides of it, many doors are set open- but all dark- all leading to dark passages- We see not the balance of good and evil- we are in a mist- we are now in that state- We feel the 'burden of Mystery.' To this point was Wordsworth come, as seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark Passages. Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them- He is a genius and superior to us, in so far as he can, more than we, make discoveries and shed a light in them-"

The next one of Keat's contemporaries that I shall consider is Sir Walter Scott, who, as Keats tells us, was one of the three literary Kings of his day. Keats in speaking of the fickleness of the public says:

[1]"I think there will soon be perceptible a change in the

1. Colvin: Letters p. 198

> fashionable slang literature of the day- it seems to me that Reviews have had their day- that the public ha e been surfeited- there will soon be some new folly to keep the Parlours in talk- What it is I care not. We hage seen three literary Kings in our time- Scott, Byron, and then the Scotch novels. All now appears to be dead- or I may mistake, literary Bodies may still keep up the Bustle which I do not hear."

The best criticism that keats gives us of scott is the contrast he drawe between the [1]novels of Scott and those of Smollett. According to Keats, Scott's aim is to deal with characters in the lower walks of life but to handle them in such a way that they appear sublime:

> "You ask me what degrees there are between Scott's novels and those of Smollett. They appear to me to be quite distinct in every particular, more especially in their aims. Scott endeavours to throw so interesting and romantic a colouring into common and low characters as to give them a touch of the sublime. Smollett on the contrary pulls down and levels what with other men would continue romance. The grand parts of Scott are within the reach of more minds than the finest humours in Humphrey Clinker."

Keats had the highest regard for Kean, a famous actor of the day. On one occasion [2]Keats expressed the desire to make as great a revolution in dramatic writing as Kean had done in acting. After Keats had seen this actor in Brutus, he wrote to [3]his brother and sister-in-law that the play was very bad but Kean was excellent. Otho the Great, a tragedy jointly composed by Brown and Keats, was written with the hope that Kean would take the leading part in the play when it should be presented. [4] When Keats learned that Kean was going to America, he was sorely disappointed.---"I fear all my labout will be thrown away for the present, as I hear Mr. Kean is going to America.---I had hoped to give Kean another opportunity to shine. What can we do now, There is not anothe actor of Tragedy in all London or Europe." He also writes to his brother

1. Colvin: Letters, pp.51.52
2 Ibid. p. 280
3.Ibid. p. 191
4.Ibid. p.284
5. Ibid p.291

and sister-in-law: "I had not heard of Kean's resolution to go to America. That was the worst news I could have had. There is no actor can do the principal character besides Kean." Later in the same letter Keats feels better, for he had heard the report that Kean may stop in England and if he should, [1] "I have great hopes of our tragedy. If he invokes the hot-blooded character of Ludolph,- and he is the only actor that can do it,- he will add to his own fame and improve my fortune."

Keats writes to his [2] brothers that he has seen Kean in Richard III, and "finely he did it." He then adds that, at the request of Reynolds, he went to criticise his [3] Duke in Rich[d]. - "the critique is in to-day's Champion (December 22, 1817.)" [4] Amy Lowell quotes parts of an article by him entitled "On Edmund Kean as a Shakesperian Actor" which she says was published as current theatrical criticism in the "Champion" newspaper for Sunday, December twenty-first, 1817:

> "'In our unimaginative days'- Habeas Corpus'd as we are out of all wonder, curiosity, and fear;- in these fireside, delicate, gilded days,- in these days of sickly safety and comfort, we feel very grateful to Mr. Kean for giving us some excitement by his old passion in one of the old plays. He is a relict of romance; a posthumous ray of chivalry, and always seems just arrived from the camp of Charlemagne.---"The sensual life of verse springs warm from the lips of Kean, and to one learned in Shakesperean hieroglyphics- learned in the spiritual portion of these lines to which Kean adds a sensual grandeur; his tongue must seem to have robbed the Hybla bees and left them honeyless! There is an indescribable gusto in his voice, by which we feel that the utterer is thinking of the past and future while speaking of the instant.
>
> ...-"Other actors are continually thinking of their sum-total effect throughout a play. Kean delivers himself up to the instant feeling, without a shadow of a thought about anything else."

As the official reviewer of the Champion newspaper, [5] Keats wrote another article for Sunday, December twenty-eighth, 1817, in which he criticized a telescoped adaptation of Shakespeare's three

1. Colvin: Letters, p.319
2. Ibid. p.46
3. Amy Lowell: John Keats, I, 537 says..."Keats again saw Kean as Luke in the tragedy of Riches, a modern bowderlization of Massinger's City Madam."
4. Amy Lowell: John Keats, I, 382, 535, 538
5. Amy Lowell: John Keats, I, 539, 540

King Henry plays. Of Kean's part in the play he says:

> "His death was very great. But Kean always 'dies as erring men do.' The bodily functions wither up, and the mental faculties hold out till they crack. It is an extinguishment, not a decay. The hand is agonized with death; the lip trembles with the last breath, as we see the autumn leaf thrill in the cold of evening. The very eye-lid dies."

We get a slight criticism of Leigh Hunt, poet and critic, in several of Keats's letters and also in several poems. In a[1] letter to Haydon, Keats laments Hunt's self-delusions:

> "I wrote to Hunt yesterday- scarcely know what I said in it. I could not talk about Poetry in the way I should have liked for I was not in humor with either his or mine. His self-delusions are very lamentable- they have enticed him into a Situation which I should be less eager after than that of a galley slave-what you observe thereon is very true must be in time.
>
> "Perhaps it is a self-delusion to say so- but I think I could not be deceived in the manner that Hunt is- may I die tomorrow if I am to be. There is no greater sin after the seven deadly than to flatter oneself into an idea of being a great Poet-"

I have pregiously referred to the fact that Hunt had been imprisoned because of an article he wrote against the Prince Regent. Keats commemorated his release with the following lines[2]:

Written on the Day That Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison

> "What though, for showi g truth to flatter'd state,
> Kind Hunt was shut in prison, yet has he,
> In his immortal spirit, been as free
> As the sky-searching lark and as elate.
> Minion of grandeur! think you he did wait?
> Think you he naught but prison walls did see
> Till, so unwilling, thou unturn'dst the key?
> Ah, no! far happier, nobler was his fate!
> In Spenser's halls he stray'd, and bowers fair,
> Culling enchanted flower; and he flew
> With daring Milton through the fields of air:
> To regions of his own his genius true
> Took happy flights. Who shall his fame impair
> When thou art dead, and all thy wretched crew?"

Keats rather rejoices at Hunt's failings. He says that they bring them to a level:[3]

1. Colvin: Letters p. 15
2. The Poetical Works of John Keats, edited by Buxton Forman p.35
3. Colvin: Letters p. 28

"I think I see you and Hunt meeting in the Pit - What a very pleasant fellow he is, if he would give up the sovereignty of a room pro bono...Failings I am rather rejoiced to find in a man than sorry for; they bring us to a Level. He has them, but then his makes-up are very good. He agrees with the Northern Poet (Wordsworth) in this, 'He is not one of those who much delight to season their fireside with personal talk'-"

After Hunt published his Literary Pocket- Book, Keats wrote to[1] his brother and sister-in-law, "Hunt keeps on in his old way - I am completely tired of it all. He has lately publish'd a Pocket Book called the Literary Pocket- Book - full of the most sickening stuff you can imagine."

However, in 1817 Keats had thought enough of Leigh Hunt to dedicate his Poems to him with these lines:

To Leigh Hunt, Esquire.

"Glory and loveliness have pass'd away;
For if we wander out in early morn,
No wreathed incense do we see upborne
Into the east, to meet the smiling day:
No crowd of nymphs soft voic'd and young, and gay,
In woven baskets bringing ears of corn,
Roses, and pinks, and violets, to adorn
The shrine of Flora in her early May.
But there are left delights as high as these,
And I shall ever bless my destiny,
That in a time, when under pleasant trees
Man is no longer sought, I feel as free,
A leafy luxury, seeing I could please
With these poor offerings, a man like thee."

Keats also gives us some bits of criticism of Haydon, a contemporary artist of that day. We see Keats rather enthusiastic about Haydon as early as 1816, in a[2] letter to Charles Cowden Clarke in which he says, "Very glad am I at the thought of seeing so soon this glorious Haydon and all his creation".

1. Ibid P. 190.

2. Colvin: Letters P. 1.

In April of the next year Keats writes to [1] Reynolds that he is about to become settled in Carisbrooke; he has unpacked his books, and has pinned in a row Haydon, Mary Queen of Scots, and Milton with his daughter. The following extract of a[2] letter from Keats to Haydon shows the fondness they had for one another:

> "I am very sure you do love me as your very Brother- I have seen it in your continual anxiety for me- and I assure you that your welfare and fame is and will be a chief pleasure to me all my Life. I know no one but you who can be fully sensible of the turmoil and anxiety, the sacrifice of all what is called comfort, the readiness to measure time by what is done and to die in six hours could plans be brought to conclusions - the looking upon the Sun, the Moon, the Stars, the Earth and its contents, as materials to form greater things- but here I am talking like a Madman,- greater things than our Creator himself made! !"

Keats realized that Haydon had weaknesses but liked him in spite of them. In a [3] letter to Bailey Keats explains the cause of quarrels and tells us his opinion of Haydon:

> "What occasions the greater part of the World's Quarrels, simply this - two Minds meet, and do not understand each other time enough to prevent any shock of surprise at the conduct of either party- As soon as I had known Haydon three days, I had got enough of his Character not to have been surprised at such a Letter as he has hurt you with. Nor, when I knew it, was it a principle with me to drop his acquaintance; although with you it would have been an imperious feeling."

Haydon's pictures are ranked by Keats as one of the three outstanding things of his age. He writes to[4] Haydon:

> "Your friendship for me is now getting into the teens- and I feel the past. Also every day older I get- the greater is my idea of your achievements in Art; and I am convinced that there are three things to rejoice at in this Age-

1. Colvin: Letters P. 6
2. Ibid. p. 15
3. Ibid. pp. 40, 41
4. Ibid. p. 53

The Excursion, Your Pictures, and Hazlitt's depth of Taste."

The next of Keat's contemporaries for our consideration is Lord Byron. When Haydon and Hunt were at odds, Keats was quite disgusted with literary men and declared he would never know another except Wordsworth and then added, "No not even Byron."[1]

In one of his[2] journal-letters to George and Georgiana Keats we get a bit of criticism of Byron:

> ------"there are two distinct tempers of mind in which we judge things- the worldly, theatrical and pantomimical; and the unearthly, spiritual and ethereal - in the former Buonaparte, Lord Byron and Rhis Chatmian hold the first place in our Minds; in the latter, John Howard, Bishop Hooker rocking the child's cradle and you my dear Sister are the conquering feelings."

The sweet sadness of Byron's works appealed to Keats who liked Byron's "enchanting tale, the tale of pleasing woe". The following is a "Sonnet to Byron " by Keats:

> "Byron! How sweetly sad thy melody!
> Attuning still the soul to tenderness,
> As if soft Pity, with unusual stress,
> Had touch'd her plaintive lute, and thou, being by,
> Hadst caught the tones, nor suffer'd them to die.
> Overshadowing sorrow doth not make thee less
> Delightful: thou thy griefs dost dress
> With a bright halo, shining beamily,
> As when a cloud the golden moon doth veil,
> Its sides are ting'd with a resplendent glow,
> Through the dark robe off amber rays prevail,
> And like fair vein in sable marble flow,
> Still warble, dying swan! still tell the tale,
> The enchanting tale, the tale of pleasing woe."

We recall that Keats had placed Byron as one of the three literary kings of the time. One of the best criticisms that Keats makes of Byron is in a[3] letter to his brother and sister in Americanwhen he explains the difference between his own work and that of Byron.

1. Ibid: Letters P.33.
2. Colvin: Letters P. 173.
3. Colvin: Letters P. 301.

"he (Byron) describes what he sees- I describe what I imagine- Mine is the hardest task; now see the immense difference." That is a very brief statement, and yet it is filledwith meaning.

I have considered Keat's critical ideas of poetry, his judgement of his own works, his judgment of some of his contemporaries, and now I shall gather exceppts concerning a few of his predecessors.

I find Keats's opinion of Spenser from one reference in a letter and from scattered lines in his poems. Keats writes to[1] Reynolds that he finds he cannot exist without poetry and copies for him four lines from Spenser:

"The noble heart that harbours virtuous thought,
And is with child of glorious great intent,
Can never rest until it forth have brought
Th' eternal brood of glory excellent-"

We know that Keats liked Spenser because he marked many passages that appealed to him.[2] Amy Lowell tells us that she had in her collection volume one of a set of Spenser in which Keats had heavily underlined passages that he liked. She inserts in her book a photograph of two pages of Faerie Queene which shows that he not only underlined passages but also annoted.

Another bit of evidence which shows that Keats liked[3] Spenser is the motto from Spenser's "Fate of the Butterfly" which appeared on the title page of the Poems of 1817:

"What more felicity can fall to creature,
Than to enjoy delight with liberty."

In the Epistle to Charles Cowden Clarke we see that Spenser's vowels had a certain charm for Keats:

1.Colvin: Letters, P. 9.
2. Amy Lowell: John Keats, I, P. 100.
3. The Political Works of John Keats P. Llx.

"Spenserian vowels that elope with ease,
And float along like birds o'er summer sea."

1. In a "specimen of an Induction to a Poem"[1] Keats calls upon Spenser, the "great bard", to hover near him while he writes, Spencer's arched, open, kind brows cause Keats to think withe pleasure«on thy noble countenance".

"Spenser! thy brows are arched, open, kind,
And come like a clear sun-rise to my mind;
And always does my heart with pleasure dance,
When I think on thy noble countenance:
Where neverryet was aught more earthly seen
Than the pure freshness of thy laurels green.
Therefore, great bard, I do not so fearfully
Call on thy gentle spirit to hover nigh
My daring steps:

Keats writes a "Sonnet to Spenger" in which he says that a forester has requestedhim to refine some English which would be an effort to please Spenser's ear. Keats says that since "The Flower must drink the nature of the soil.

Before it can put forth its blossoming", that he mmust know Spenser thoroughly before he tries to "pleasure" him.

Sonnet To Spenser

Spenser! a jealous honourer of thine,
A forester deep in thy midmost trees,
Did last eve ask my promise to refine
Some English that might strive thine ear to please.
But Elfin Poet 'tis impossible
For an inhabitant of wintry earth
To rise like Phoebus with a golden quell
Fire-wing'd and make a morning in his mirth.
It is impossible to escape from toil
O the sudden and receive that spiriting:
The flower must drink the nature of the soil
Before it can put forth its blossoming:
Be with me in the summer days and I
Will for thine honour and his pleasure try.

1. The Poetical Works of John Keats P. 10

The next of Keats's predecessors that I shall consider is Shakespeare, who, according to[1] John Middleton Murry, exerted a powerful influence upon Keats.[2] He tells us that of all the letters written by Keats from April 1817 to December 1817 there are only three which do not contain evidence of saturation of Shapespeare.

Endymion was begun in 1817 and in order to be undisturbed, Keats left London for the Isle of Wight.[3] We can tell Keats's fondness for Shakespeare, for upon his arrival in Southampton he wrote to his brothers that he had felt lonely at breakfast; so he unbox'd Shakespeare and added, "There's my comfort". A few days later he was a Carisbrooke in a house where there was a portrait of Shakespeare in the hall. Concerning this picture Keats wrote to Reynolds:

> "In the passage I found a head of Shakespeare which I had not before seen. It is most likely the same that George spoke so well of, for I like it extremely. Well- this head I have hung over my books, just above the three in a row, having first discarded a French Ambassador - now this alone is a good morning's work."

Keats so much admired this picture of Shakespeare that when he left this house a week later, the landlady gave it to him. He wrote to[5] Haydon that he felt that some good genius presided over him and wondered if it could be Shakespeare:

> "I remember your saying that you had notions of a good genius presiding over you. I have of late had the same thought, for things which I do half at Random are afterwards confirmed by my judgment in a dozen features of Propriety. Is it too daring to fancy Shakespeare this Presider?

1. John Middleton Murry: Keats and Shakespeare Chapt V
2. Ibid P. 33
3. Colvin: Letters, VIII, P. 5.
4. Ibid, VIII P. 6
5 Ibid, X, P. 14

When innthe Isle of Wight I met with a Shakespeare in the Passage of the House at which I lodged - it comes nearer to my idea of him than any I have seen- I was but there a Week, yet the old woman made me take it with me thought I went off in a hurry. Do you not think this in ominous of good,

It was evidently for this same picture that Keats's sister-in-law made silk tassels, for Keats writes to her:[1] "I am sitting opposite the Shakespeare I brought from the Isle of Wight - and I never look at him but the silk tassels on it give me as much pleasure as the face of the poet."

Keats writes to[2] Jane Reynolds to ask which of Shakespeare's plays she likes best, and in what mood and with what accompaniment she likes the sea best. He then gives his opinion of the sea, "It is very fine in the morning, when the sun,

"Opening on the Neptune with fair blessed beams,
Turns into yellow gold his salt sea streams,

and superb when

'The sun from meridian height
Illumines the depth of the sea,
And fishes, beginning to sweat,
Cry d--- it! how hot we shall be,'

and gorgeous, when the fair planet hastens
2
'To his home
Within the Western Foam.'"

Keats thought[1] King Lear and excellent piece of art because of its intensity, because it is "capable of making all disagreements evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth." Shakespeare's sonnets[3] seemed more beautiful to Keats in 1817 than they had ever before. Keats says they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally! He writes to John Hamilton Reynolds concerning them:

1. Colvin: Letters, [illegible].
2. Ibid, P. 25.
3. Colvin: Letters P. 47.
4. Ibid, P. 45.

"One of the three books I have with me is Shakespeare's Poems: I never found so many beauties in the sonnets- they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally- in the intensity of working out conceits. Is this to be borne, Hark Ye!

'When lofty trees I see barren of leaves,
Which erst from heat did canopy the head,
And Summer's green all girded up in sheaves,
Borne on the bier with white and bristly head.'

He has left nothing to say about nothing or anything: for look at snails- you know what he says about Snails---

'As the snail, whose tender horns being hit,
Shrinks back into his shelly cave with pain,
And there all smothered up in shade doth sit,
Long after fearing to put forth again;
So at his bloody view her eyes are fled,
Into the deep dark Cabins of her head'.

He overwhelms a genuine Lover of poesy with all manner of abuse, talking about a poet's rage

And stretched metre of an antique song.'

Which by the bye, will be a capital motto for my poem, won't , He speaks too of 'Time's antique pen' - and 'April's first-born flowers'- and'Death's eternal cold.'"

In a [1]letter to Miss Jeffrey Keats says that one of the reasons England has produced the finest writers in the world is because the English world has ill treated them during their lives and has fostered them after their deaths. He attributes Shakespeare's success partly to this and compares Shakespeare to Hamlet:

"The middle age of Shakespeare was all clouded over; his days were not more happy than Hamlet's who is perhaps more like Shakespeare himself in his common everyday Life than any other of his Characters-"

Perhaps the most famous of Keats's criticisms of Shakespeare is found in a [2]letter to George and Thomas Keats in which the author says that Shakespeare was great because he possessed Negative Capabilities:

1. Keats's Complete Poetical Works and Letters P. 337. Edited by Horace E. Scudder Cambridge Edition Houghton Mifflin Cambridge, 1899.
2. Colvin: Letters, xxiv P. 48.

"---at once it struck me that quality went t. from a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously- I mean Negative Capabilities, that iswhen a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.--- With a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration."

Practically all of Keats's critical opinions which I have quoted have been obtained from his letters or poems, but we also have a few[1] dramatic criticisms which he wrote for the Champion newspaper. [2]Amy Lowell quotes at length an article which appeared on Sunday, December twenty-eigth, 1817, which she says is his criticism of a telescoped adaptation of Shakespeare's three King Henry plays. In this article Keats gives good criticism of the various kinds of poetry used by shakespeare in his very different types of plays. The poetry of Romeo and Juliet, of Hamlet, and of Macbeth, he tells us, is the poetry of Shakespeare's soul full of love and divine romance; that of Lear, Othello, and Cymbelini is the poetry of human passions and affections; while the poetry of Richard, John, and the Henrigs as the blending of the imaginative with the historical. This criticism is worth quoting:

"The Three Kings Plays are written with infinite vigour, but their retularity tied the hand of Shakespeare. Particular facts kept him in the high road, and would not suffer him to turn down leafy and winding leaves, or to break wildly at once into the breathing fields. The poetry is for the most partitioned and manacled with a chain of facts and can not get free; it cannot escape from the prison house of history, nor often move without our being disturbed with the clanking of its fetters.

The poetry of Shakespeare is generally free as is the wind- a perfect thing the elements, winged and sweetly coloured. Poetry must be free! It is of the air not of the earth; and the higher it soars the nearer it gets to its home. The poetry of 'Romeo and Juliet' of 'Hamlet' of 'Macbeth', is the poetry of Shakespeare's soul-full of love and divine romance.

1. Colvin: Letters p46
2. Amy Lowell: John Keats 539-540

It knows no stop in its delight, but 'goeth where it listeth'- remaining, however, in all men's hearts a perpetual and golden dream. The poetry of 'Lear', 'Othello', 'Cymbeline', etc., is the poetry of human Passions and affections, made almost ethereal by the power of the poet. Again the poetry of 'Richard', 'John', and the Henries is the blending of the imaginative with the historical: it is poetry!- but often times poetry wandering on the London Road."

Amy Lowell speaks highly of this article by Keats. She says it is "written with seriousness and restraint and is full of knowledge of his subject and wise criticism of the feeble compilation he had witnessed."

I find many references to Shakespeare in Keat's letters which are not strictly criticisms but which give us an insight into the warm place that he held in Keats&s heart. He writes to his brother and sister-in-law that he will read a passage of Shakespeare[1] every Sunday at ten O'clock and requests them to do the same thing. Keats tells[2] Reynolds that he longs "to feast upon old Homer as we have upon Shakespeare." He writes to his sister, Fanny Keats,[3] to know what kind of seal she would like, and later tells her[4] that a letter from George "was in his best hand writing with a good Pen and sealed with a Tassie's Shakespeare[5] such as I gave you-" In another[6] letter to his brother and sister-in-law he longs "to know in what position Shakespeare sat when he began to be or not to be." Again he[7] writes that once he was delighted by Mrs. Gighe and Beattie but that he can now see throughthem and can find in them nothing but weakness.

1. Colvin: Letters Lxxx, p. 189
2. Ibid Ll, p. 101.
3. Ibid, xciv p. 263.
4. Ibid, cxxix.
5. Amy Lowell says that the seals on the letter of Keats that she owns show five different designs, one of which is a head of Shakespeare John Keats, 1, 490, 491.
6. Colvin: Letters xcii, p.228
7. Ibid lxxx, p. 201.

He then asks if a superior being will ever look upon Shakespeare in the same light, and he hastens to add an emphatic "No" to his own question. At another time he [1]writes them that Shakespeare led a life of allegory, that his works are the comments on it. Keats writes to [2]Haydon that he thinks he will never read much of any author other than Shakespeare, and he agrees with Hazlett who said, "Shakespeare, is enough for us." Keats tells Reynolds that he would consider it a good thing if he should receive a letter from him and another from his Brother on the twenty-third because that was Shakespeare's birthday. He requests Reynolds to comment on some passages of Shakespeare which may come rather new to him although he has probably read the same thing forty times before. Keats then writes some lines from the Tempestwhich have recently struck him forcibly:

> "Shall for the vast of night that they may work
> All exercise on thee-"

and he adds, "How can I help bringing to your mind the line

> 'In the dark backward and abysm of time'."

Milton was another of Keats's favorites. We noted before that when [3]Keats reached Carisbrooke, he pinned on the wall three pictures, one of which was that of Milton. One day while Keats was visiting Leigh Hunt, he saw a lock of Milton's hair, whereupon he wrote the famous lines "On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair".[4]

1. Ibid, p. 225
2. Ibid p.16
3. Ibid pp.8,9
4. Colvin: Letters p.6.

"Chief of organic numbers!
Old Scholar of the Spheres!
Thy spirit never slumbers,
But rolls about our ears,
For ever, and for ever!
O what a mad endeavour
Worketh he,
Who to thy sacred and ennobled hearse
Would offer a burnt sacrifice of verse
And Melody.

"How heavenward thou soundest,
Live Temple of swee noise,
And Discord unconfoundest,
Giving Delight new joys,
And Pleasure nobler pinions!
O, where are thy dominions?
Lend thine ear
To a young Delian oath,-aye, by thy soul,
By all that from thy mortal lips did roll,
And by the kernel of thine earthly love,
Beauty, in things on earth, and things above
I swear!

"When every childish fashion
Has vanish'd from my rhyme,
Will I, grey-gone in passion,
Leave to an after-time,
Hymning and harmony
Of thee, and of thy works and of thy life;
But vain is now the burning and the strife,
Pangs are in vain, until I grow high-rife,
With old Philosophy
And mad with glimpses of futurity!

For many years my offering must be hush'd
When I do speak, I'll think upon this hour,
Because I feel my forehead hot and flush'd,
Even at the simplest vassal of thy power,-
A lock of thy bright hair,-
Sudden it came,
And I was startled, when I caught thy name
Coupled so unaware;
Yet, at the moment, temperate was my blood.
I thought I had beheld it from the flood."

In this poem we see that Keats feels he is not worthy even to sing the praises of one who is as great as Milton but hopes to do so when he becomes older and knows philosophy and is "mad with glimpses of futurity."

In a letter[1] to James Rice, Keats asks him whether Milton did more harm or good in the world, and, after naming some of Milton's works- "Lycidas," "Comus," "Paradise Lost", and "much delectable prose[2] Keats adds, "He was moreover an active friend to man all his life, and has been since his death."

In answer to a letter from Reynolds, Keats comments on this sentence "I fear there is little chance of anything else in this life" He proceeds to contrast the views of Milton and those of Wordsworth, and he seems to think Milton sees farther than Wordsworth:

> [2]"My Branchings out therefrom have been numerous: One of them is the consideration of Wordsworth's genius and as a help, in the manner of gold being the meridian line of worldly wealth, how he differs from Milton and here I have nothing but surmises, from an uncertainty whether Milton's apparently less anxiety for Humanity proceeds from his seeing further or not than Wordsworth."

Keats thinks the philosophy of Milton very simple, for he states that it can be understood by one not advanced in years:

> [3]"From the Paradise Lost and the other Works of Milton, I hope it is not too presuming, even between ourselves, to say, that his philosophy, human and divine, may be tolerably understood by one not much advanced in years.... He did not think into the human heart as Wordsworth has done- yet Milton as a Philosopher had sure as great powers as Wordsworth- "

The next year Keats writes to [4]John Hamilton Reynolds and tells him that he is convinced that fivepwriting, next to five doing, is the top thing in the world and that Milton's Paradise Lost constantly becomes a greater wonder to him. Keats thinks Milton's work is a work of art which cannot be imitated [5]. He says he gave up "Hyperion" because it had too many Miltonic inversions in it and adds, "Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful, or rather, artist's humour."

1. Colvin: Letters p. 89
2 Colvin : " p.105
3. Colvin: " p .108
4, Ibid p. 321.
5. Colvin p.108

humour.*

We may be sure that Keats admired Chatterton, for, in 1818 he dedicated [1]Endymion to him. The dedication that he first planned was "inscribed with every feeling of pride and regret and with a bowed mind, to the memory of the most English of poets except Shakespeare, Thomas Chatterton," but he rejected this for the more simple dedication "inscribed to the memory of Thomas Chatterton."

We find Keats writing two letters in which he tells us that he considers Chatterton the purest writer in the English language. In a [2]letter to John Hamilton Reynolds he says:

> "I always somehow associate Chatterton with Autumn. He is the purest writer in the English Language. He has no French idioms or particles, like Chaucer- 'tis genuine English idiom in English words."

Keats expresses practically the same views in a [3]letter to George and Georgianna Keats:

> "The purest English, I think- or what ought to be purest is Chatterton's. The language had existed long enough to be entirely uncorrupted of Chaucer's language is entirely northern. I prefer the native music of it to Milton's, cut by feet."

From the quotations given we have seen that Keats, the Poet, is also Keats, the critic: the critic of poetry, the the critic of himself, the critic of his contemporaries, and the critic of his predecessors. However, we must not think of him as we would of Francis Jeffrey, one of the professional critics of the peroid.

1. Keats's Poetical Works p.26
2. Colvin: Letters p. 321
3. Ibid, p. 313.

Jeffrey wrote criticisms with the idea of swaying the public, Keats wrote not for the public, with the exception of his poems and his four dramatic reviews, but for his personal friends, and he had no idea these letters would ever be published. Jeffrey is the judicial critic while Keats is the inspirational critic. Jeffrey used the yard stick to measure works to see how far they measured up to definite standards. It is true that Keats had certain poetic principles which he set up, but his criticisms are based largely on his own feelings. He grows enthusiastic about Wordsworth and later give gives him up. This change of feeling, however, probably indicates that Keats is most sincere at the time he makes the criticism, but he later changes his opinion. If either of these two critics may be considered more sincere than the other, I think Keats would be that one.

In the beginning of this paper I collected the various pronouncements which Keats made concerning poetry, and now I should like to apply these standards to Keats's poems to see if he follows his own critical doctrines. We recall that one of the first standards for a good poem which he set up was that a poem should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts and appear almost as a remembrance. This principle is true of many of his poems, but particularly so of his numerous poems that deal with nature. Another of his poetic doctrines was that poetry should not have a palpable design upon us; it should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters one's soul and does not startle or amaze with itself but with its subject. Not one of Keats's poems has a tinge of didacticism; there is no effort to thrust his opinions on us. If there is any one of his principles that he follows more closely than he does the others, it is the principle of beauty. We find the word <u>beauty</u>

and its derivatives[1] used one hundred nine times in his poems. Another of his axioms is that a poem should be spontaneous. This spontaneity in his work is one of his chief charms. His very best work was composed when he was under the inspiration of the muses. As an illustration of his we may note "On looking into Chapman's Homer." Keats and Clarke read Chapman's translation of Homer[2] until nearly dawn, and at ten o'clock the next morning Clarke received this sonnet from Keats. This poem is recognized as one of the poet's best productions. Keats has said that poetry should be self-explanatory. His poems are easily understood and we need no handbook to interpret his meaning. As for his principle of invention, he reminds us of Shakespeare's method. He never hesitates to use a theme which poets have used before, yet he shows remarkable power of invention in his method of handling this theme. As for imagination and fancy which he declares essential to poetry, he gives us abundant evidence, particularly in Endymion. We do find then that Keats, the critic, follows in his own poetry his critical opinions on the subject.

1. A Concordance to the Poems of John Keats
The Carnegie Institution of Washington
Washington, 1917.
2. Amy Lowell: John Keats, 1, 179