

## REFLECTIVITY OF 'SELF' AS A POET- CRITIC: A CRITICAL STUDY OF KEATS' SELECTED LETTERS

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### Abstract

This paper is an attempt to focus on Keats' potentiality not as a great poet but as a poet-critic. The self of poet-critic is well manifested in his letters where he has scrutinized his own writings with a neutral voice as well as the writings of other writers. Not only in writing, but also in social reformation, Keats has contributed much through his establishment of views in poetry against the traditional notion.

**Keywords:** Potentiality, Neutral, Reformation, Traditional notion

John Keats, more pure and sensuous poet, is a bright star in the realm of Romanticism. His greatness not only lies in his hypnotized poetic creation, but also lies in his greatest and immortal creation of letters. The letters are envisaged as his speculative and artistic creation in the world of English literature.

Generally, Keats is called as great poet by the greatness of his poems which embody his superb and magnificent faculty of imagery, symbolism, style of language, pictorial quality and speciality his heart – touching sensuousness. But, if we make a subtle and minute study on his ever-remembered letters with our penetrating mind, we can, no doubt, consider him as a critic. Actually, he is not a professional critic, but he is called as a poet critic who scrutinizes his own drawbacks of works. Not only that, but also, as a critic he criticizes his contemporary circumstances and the others for their some faults. Apart from that, Keats also criticizes as critic towards the ruthless and despotic rulers who colonized the common people during his own era. Keats' poems and letters thus demonstrate a deepening; and the development that we trace in his thought is marked by shift from the vocabulary of assertion to the vocabulary of doubt and conflict.

John Keats is certainly not lacking respect for Wordsworth. All his comments upon him are based on the assumption that he is a great poet. But this does not preclude a lively awareness of Wordsworth's weak points, nor does it prevent Keats from making fun of his absurdities. In a letter, he gives a good example of this on the level of pure burlesque:-

“..... Wordsworth” sometimes thought in a fine way gives us sentence in the style of school exercise – for instance,  
The lake doth glitter Small bird twitter,  
Now, I think this is an excellent method  
of giving a very clear description of an

Interesting place such as Oxford is -”

He has left a great criticism upon Wordsworth in letter (21 February, 1818). In this letter, he draws an explicit distinction between Wordsworth, the poet and Wordsworth, the philosopher. He also displays that, at best, Wordsworth’s poems are marred by egotism, vanity and bigotry. This clear and fresh concept has been expressed excellently in the following lines quoted from the same letter (21 February, 1818) –

“I am sorry that Wordsworth has left a bad impression wherever he visited Town – by his egotism, vanity and bigotry – yet he is a great poet – if not a philosopher”, (Letters, Vol-1, P.237).

In a letter (29<sup>th</sup> October, 1817), if we make subtle analysis, we see that Keats has criticized Wordsworth for his writing of poetry in a comfortable manner. Of Wordsworth’s Gypsy he wrote in the same letter –

“It is a bold thing to say and I would not say it in print – but 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 have been written in one of the most comfortable moods of life – it is a kind of sketchy intellectual landscape – not a search after Truth”. (Vol-1, P.174)

This Passage seems of the highest order of criticism: a ‘placing’ of the poem which is judge without severity and implies standard and tolerant that reserves praise for the work of high aspiration and achievement.

Keats is just making a vivid description between the ‘reality’ of Wordsworth’s poetry and the “illusion of his philosophy”. In his letter (3<sup>rd</sup> May, 1818) to Reynolds, we find a deeper and complex response to Wordsworth which reveals a deepening response to life itself. Endeavouring to define the nature of Wordsworth’s genius, Keats proposes an analogy –

“I Compared 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 we call the infant of thought less chamber in which we remain as we do not think... 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 the Mystery... (Vol-1, P.280)

In the same letter, Keats shows Wordsworth’s greatness. He considers Wordsworth as greater than Milton. According to Keats, the poem of Wordsworth strikes human heart very much where as Milton’s spirituality that common man unable to attain, can not impress so much. In this letter (3<sup>rd</sup> May, 1818) Keats proceeds to show Wordsworth’s genius in the following lines –

“We feel ‘the burden of the Mystery, to this point was Wordsworth come, as for as I can perceive when he wrote “Tintern Abbey” and it seems to me that his genius is explorative of those dank passages. Now if we live and go on thinking, we too shall explore them – he is genius and superior to us, in so far as he can, more than we, make discoveries and shed a light in them – there I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton” (Vol-1, P. 281).

Keats is always concerned about good kind of poetry. He dislikes the didactic poetry that gives the reader any kind of lesson. According to him poetry should be unobtrusive and great. To him, a good kind of poem is something that is closely related to life what it is. In the letter (3<sup>rd</sup>

February, 1818) to Reynolds, Keats' criticism on poetry has superbly and conspicuously vindicated in the following lines –

“We have poetry that has a palpable design upon us – and if we do not agree seems to put its comments in 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 flower! How they would 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.” (Vol-1, P.224)

Keats is not only a poet but also at the same time, is a critic. As a poet-critic he proposes some principles and aims of poetry. To him, poetry should surprise the reader by its fine expression, high and elevated thought and a sense of beauty and its setting of imageries. According to Keats, poetry comes as naturally as the leaves comes out of the tree. The principles and aim of poetry – what it should be – has been exhibited in the following – (21 February - 1818)

“In poetry, I have a few axioms, and you will see how far I am from their Centre.<sup>1<sup>st</sup></sup>, 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 thought and appear almost a remembrance-<sup>2<sup>nd</sup></sup> 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 self soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the luxury or twilight-but it is easier to think what poetry should be than to write it” (Vol-1, P.238)

Keats not only criticizes others but also he is a great critic for himself. He is very much aware about the shortcomings of his poem. His criticism for his own poem makes him a great poet critic and transcends him into the rank of greatness. When Keats is aware about the drawbacks of his poem Endymion, he clearly recognizes the value of having written it. We can not surprise at the severity of the preface, because Keats has left the Endymion phase of his development behind before the work is even finished. In his eyes, the poem is of little or no worth as an achievement; its value lies in what it has taught him about being a poet. Therefore he is far from the any kind of pain and shock when he reads a letters in the Morning Chronicle of 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 1818, signed ‘J.S.’ asserting that, in view of its weakness, ‘a real friend of the author world have dissuaded his from an immediate publication. Then, Keats is very much conscious about his work and has expressed his great argument in a letter J.A. Hussey (8 October, 1818)

“I begin to get a little acquainted with my own strength and weakness- Praise or blame has put a momentary effect on man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic on his own works... My own domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what Blackwood or the Quarterly could possibly inflict and also when I feel I am right, no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary re-perception and retification of what is fine. J.S. is perfectly right and regard to the slip-shod Endymion..... In Endymion, I leaped head long into the sea and thereby have become better acquainted with the sounding, the quick sands and the rocks than if I had stayed upon the green shore and piped and silly pipe and took tea and comfortable advice-I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail not be among the greatest.” (Vol-1, P.373)

Keats has shaped his criticism about Shelley, the great revolutionary poet, with a great reverence. His criticism of Shelley, which is absolutely central, is offered with a rare fact; but the tone and attitude of his criticism towards Shelley, the most celebrated figure of respectful, gentle and polite. Keats properly discards the vulgar and clumsy insistence that poetry must have a 'message', a set of absolutes which stand for the poets' god. The readers are not reading literature in order to remove and cherish 'the moral'. According to Keats, a poem is a part of moral experience and it teaches us anything in such a way that all experiences become part and partial of us. The pursuance of Ideals is not what the poet is about, rather, he must curb his magnanimity.

In the case of Shelley, this meant revolutionary fervour, a contempt for all human action which is not directed towards reforming zeal. Such single-mindedness, Keats declares, is not good to the poet. Shelly, for Keats, is too fervid-he should thicken the stuff of his verse so that "every rift is loaded with ore". Keats wants a poetry which is surcharged with wisdom and feeling which lodges in the spirit and grows to be a part of it. A poem is a lively thing, we do not merely taste it or admire it; rather, we are prepared to accept its mystery because a sense of mystery is essential to a delight in life. The poet is a monk in his monastery of imagination, he should embrace stern and ascetic discipline by a strange paradox, so that, he can fully comprehended the pain and the pleasure of actuality. Keats's polite criticism of Shelley and an artist is deeply persuaded in the following letter to Shelley (16 August, 1820) -

"A modern work it is said must have a purpose, which may be the God - an artist must serve mammon - he must have 'self-concentration' selfishness perhaps ... My imagination is a Monastery and I am its Monk - you must explain my mistap to yourself. I am in expectation of Prometheus every day" (Vol-2. P. 322)

Keats re-comments a poetry that provides an attitude to life, which embodies 'Negative Capability' which is "a capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries doubts, and does with out any irritable reaching out after fact and reason" In a letter of Keats to his brothers - George and Tom Keats (21,27December, 1817), we encounter his perhaps most critical and valuable pronouncement -

"I had not a dispute but a question, with Dilke various subjects; several things dore-tailed in my mind and at once it struck me what quality went 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." (Vol-1, P. 193).

Keats does not idealize youthful passions like Byron, or revolutionary fervour like Shelley; he aims at a rich comprehension of experience, a meditative composure of the soul. In this composure there is no place a room of egoistic self-assertion, nor is there the prim and efficient tidiness of small poetry. There is only largeness and compassion over all things, such as we find in Shakespeare, and the effect is "great and unobtrusive."

Keats was no man to advocate license but he recognized the necessary place taken by a delight in sensuous pleasure and the fact life can not go without it. We must take room for pleasure which is not licentious, otherwise, in our awful debasement of the puritan spirit, 'pleasure' because both alluring and contaminated. It is a harsh comment on our contemporary

attitudes that the word “pleasure” and “morals” have almost come to relate only to sexuality. Keats’ contribution to our literature is the fuller currency he gives to the word “pleasure”. The man who can write is qualified to write a passage which is serious, wise, truthful and courageous. This attitude has been expressed in a letter to Bailey in the following – (23 January, 1818)

“Man should bear with each other – there lives not the Man who may not be cut up, aye hashed to pieces on his weakest side. The best of Man have but a portion of good in them- a kind of spiritual yeast in their frames which creates the ferment to existence- by which a Man is propelled to act and strive and buffet with circumstance... “(Vol- 1, P. 210)

Keats makes a comment on ‘Beauty’ and ‘truth’. He wrote the Ode on a Grecian Urn in which the relations and difference between art and life are so subtly explored. The conclusion of the ode is so strikingly foreshadowed that one is justifiably tempted to take this passage as offering the most satisfying gloss on ‘Beauty is Truth’. The urn appears as both product and embodiment of the creative imagination. In other words, the exquisite work of Art stands for the essential beauty, brought by the imagination of the Artist. When Keats arrives at the stage of writing the odes, he can no longer accept his statement that “What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth.” For the Keats of the ode beauty and truth are more complicated matters than they are for the Keats of the letter which is delivered to Bailey (22 November, 1817)-

“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 the same Idea of all our passions of love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty.” (Vol-1, P.184)

Pessimism is one of the best colours of Keats. He gives forth his pessimistic attitude in this mutable and mundane world towards life that is transitory, full of fret, fever, toil, tribulation and weariness. He also displays that in this changeable world, nobody can fully enjoy the word “Pleasure.” He must be prayed by the worldly elements or hostility of nature. He has compared critically this world with a phrase “a vale of tears.” Both in his poems and letters, he demonstrates the process of “Soul-making,” that is, a gradual and continuing growth of the spirit towards maturity. The process is deliberate and self-conscious. This nation has been conspicuously delineated or portrayed in his letter to his brothers- George and Georgiana Keats (21 April, 1819)

“In truth I do not at all believe in this sort of perfectibility-the nature of the world will not admit of it-the inevitants of the world will correspond to itself. Let the philosophies the ice away from the river in winter time and they shall be at continual play in the tepid delight of summer... - they are as native as he worldly elements will pray upon his nature the common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitions is “a vale of tears” from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven- what a little circumscribe straightened nation! Call the world if you please ‘the vale of soul-making.’” (Vol-2, Pp.101-102)

Keats as a critic displays his theory of impersonality of poetry. According to him, when a poet writes a poem, he should make a detachment from his work. He should not add in his work his personal emotions and feelings. In the poem, there is no identity of the poet or an artist. During

his work he still remains unpoetical. This concept is exposed in a letter to Wordsworth on 27 October, 1818:

“A poet is most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity- he is continually in for- and filling some other body- the sun, the moon, the sea and Men and Women who are about them an unchangeable attribute- the poet has none; no identity- he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God’s creatures.” (Vol- 1, P. 387)

In a letter which is delivered to Haydon (10, 11 may, 1817), Keats criticizes himself as a poet-critic. In this letter, he tells Benjamin Haydon,-

“I have been in such a state of mind as to read my lines and hate them. I am one who gathers samphire dreadful trade.” (Vol- 1, P.141)

As a poet critic, Keats has a great respect for Shakespeare, but his remarks on Shakespeare are also beset with a marvellous energy and vividness; such passages fairly bubble with Keats’ delight in Shakespeare’s vast resources and his capacity to partake of every kind of experience. He saw in Shakespeare the ‘Negative capability’, he wished to cultivate in himself and he recognized that this upright spontaneity was a mark of the highest genius and could not be arrived at without very arduous training. It is this inclusiveness, described in the long letter to Wordsworth which is so compelling in Shakespeare and which wished to intimate in a letter to Reynolds, 22 November, 1817:

“One of the three Books I have with me in Shakespeare’s poem: I neer found so many beauties in the sonnets- they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally- in the intensity of working our conceits (poetic devices). In this to be borne? Hark ye...” (Vol- 1, 188)

In another letter to Haydon, (10, 11 May, 1817) Keats makes a remarkable comment on Shakespeare that “Shakespeare is enough for us.” This comment represents that Keats is very much influenced by Shakespeare who is just like a ‘demi- god’ to him.

Keats is very much clear that wisdom is untouchable but desirable and care free ignorance is well left behind. As a critic, he admits that he is more less poet to Wordsworth. He knows that he will follow Wordsworth (for, ‘here I must think Wordsworth is deeper than Milton) and mount steadfastly towards a comprehension of “the balance of good and evil.” He would not follow Wordsworth without any discrimination. “Life must be undergone” is his characteristic remark. But, scrutinizing himself, he remarks about himself in a letter to Reynolds (19<sup>th</sup> February, 1818):

“...Let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey, bee- like buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be aimed at; but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive.....” (Vol- 1, P. 232)

Keats as a poet critic, not only criticizes the poets, poetic theory and also himself, but also, as a social reformer he criticizes the tyrannical politicians and despotic rulers for the sake of good through his letters and poems. In his one sonnet “To hope”, Keats severely attacks against the despotic rulers and expresses and desires in the following lines-

“In the long vista of the year to roll  
Let me not see our country’s honour fade:  
O, let me see our land retain her soul,  
Her pride, her freedom; and not freedom’s shade.” (Garrod, P. 24, Li. 31 - 34)

According to Keats, the true ruler in this universe is the power of Nature or natural laws to which men are always subject. This view or idea serves to illustrate and support one of the particular ideas of Keats' philosophical and social speculation: the idea which found its most pregnant expression in "Hyperion" that "the first in beauty should be first in might."

Thus, we no doubt, can consider Keats as poet-critic who has left his remarkable and glorious impression in the realm of criticism. His consciousness and awareness about himself and his works make him a critic that, can hardly be found in the other poets who are belonged to Romantic era. Last but not the least, Keats was unquestionably a 'first- rate- mind as well as much more: his letters take on this universality with out any degree of self- consciousness.

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