Keats' beliefs

The mystical insight of the poet

***Epistle to My Brother George***

Keats’ verse letter to his brother (1816) contains many of his beliefs about his vocation as a poet, in particular what it would mean for him to ‘strive to think divinely’, to have a poet’s imaginative vision whilst at the same time absorbing the sights and sounds of the natural world. Keats complains that he lacks the sort of poetic vision that he craves but at the same time describes what he *might* see if he were a true poet:

*And should I ever see [visions], I will tell you  
Such tales as must with amazement spell you.*

Clearly Keats sees the role of the poet in almost religious terms: the true poet has rare insight and his role is to share it with those who lack it.

The ‘truth’ of beauty

In 1817 Keats wrote a series of letters to his friends and brothers about his theories about art, aesthetics, the social role of poetry and his own sense of poetic vocation. Keats felt that his whole life was a quest for transcendent truth; for him, this truth could be expressed only in terms of an intense, imaginative engagement with sensuous beauty. He wrote:

*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 as of Love: they are all in their sublime, creative of essential beauty.*

Two years later, in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats was to write:

*‘Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty’, - that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

**Negative capability**

At the end of December 1817 Keats commented to his brothers about a painting by Benjamin West:

*There is nothing to be intense upon; no women one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth – Examine*[*King Lear*](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/King-Lear)*& you will find this exemplified throughout.*

Keats emphasised that the artist had to avoid looking at life from a single perspective. He was acutely aware that to capture the intensity of life, the artist had to reveal life’s dual nature and the futility of any attempt to fix or rationalise it. For Keats, what [Shakespeare](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Shakespeare) possessed so enormously was

*Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.*

**William Hazlitt**

Keats was much influenced by the teachings of [William Hazlitt](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/William-Hazlitt), whose lectures he attended in the winter of 1817-18. When writing about Shakespeare, Hazlitt said that a great poet:

*was nothing in himself: but he was all that others were, or that they could become … When he conceived of a character, whether real or imaginary, he not only entered into all its thoughts and feelings, but seemed instantly, and as if by touching a secret spring, to be surrounded by all the same objects.*

Keats and Christianity

In a letter to his brother George, Keats wrote that

*man is originally a ‘poor forked creature’ subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardships and disquietude of some kind or other.*

For Keats, man was no more able to will away suffering than ‘a rose can avoid a blighting wind’. This meant inevitable and uncomfortable questions about religious belief: where in such a world lay the balance of good and [evil](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/evil)? And how was it possible to believe in a benevolent Supreme Being who cared for his creation, i.e. the prevailing [Christian](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christian) belief of early nineteenth century Britain?

Keats rejected the Christian idea that [Jesus](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Jesus) alone could offer [salvation](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/salvation) to human beings beset by suffering. Indeed he found the church’s explanation of suffering increasingly repellent:

*The common cognomen [an epithet or descriptive phrase] of this world among the misguided and superstitious 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 circumscribed straightened notion!*

What Keats could not accept was that, according to such a view, suffering had no meaning and could not be invested with any human purpose or dignity.

The attraction of pagan myth

In addition, Keats also felt that [Christianity](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Christianity) had destroyed the visionary power of myth when it came to interpreting the natural world and man’s relationship to it. As an alternative, he was attracted to the [pagan](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/pagan) world of the classical past.

***The Ode to Psyche***

In the Ode to Psyche, the human [soul](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/soul) is [deified](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/deified). [Psyche](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Psyche) and [Cupid](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/Cupid)’s acceptance into [heaven](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/heaven) after a painful period of search and separation in this world, had obvious similarities to Keats’ idea of how suffering in the ‘vale of Soul-making’ prepares man for [eternal life](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/eternal-life). Keats believed that the human spirit creates the truths by which it understands the world. It creates fictions, things ‘semi-real’, through which it can understand life’s truths. In the worship of the goddess of the soul, the world of nature and the world of the mind are joined together by the imagination, just as desire and the spirit are fused in the union of Cupid and Psyche.

Keats believed that openness to nature and erotic love - together with an awareness of the value of ‘the spirit’ – was essential to produce mature art. As he wrote in a letter to his brother in April 1819 (in which he enclosed the *Ode to Psyche*):

*Do you see not how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?*

Life as a ‘mansion of many apartments’

Although Keats rejected what he regarded as the constraints of conventional Christianity, he still had recourse to Christian [imagery](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/imagery) when explaining how human beings developed as they progressed through life. In a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds in May 1818, he wrote:

*Well, I can compare human life to a large*[*Mansion of Many Apartments*](http://crossref-it.info/repository/sayings/Many-mansions?p=4&q_repository=)*, 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 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 open wide, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but at length are imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of this thinking principle – within us – we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I will call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated from 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 tremendous one of sharpening one’s vision into 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 Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken’d 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.*

Immortality

Keats’ illness and impending death did nothing to change his mind about Christianity. He firmly rejected it. His friend Haydon said that he found Keats:

*to be going out of the world with a contempt for this and no hopes of the other.*

When Haydon tried to persuade Keats to become a Christian, Keats’ response was to say that if he did not get better he would cut his throat. He refused to submit to what he saw as a false belief.

However, Keats still believed in the immortality of the soul. Until his final, fatal illness he believed that suffering would prepare him for an afterlife in which he would live with those closest to him in the joy of perfect understanding. He saw this life as ‘the vale of soul-making’ and as a preparation for the next.

Despite this, as his health deteriorated and death grew closer he began to have doubts. This immortality which he had taken ‘for granted’ became a more difficult concept for Keats. He began to lose his confidence and consequently the belief by which he had been able to dignify human suffering.

Keats’ death

Keats’ lack of religious faith caused him much anguish in his final few days of life. He realised how much easier dying would be if he shared the Christian faith of his friends. He even asked his friend Severn to read to him some of the devotional works of the seventeenth century [theologian](http://crossref-it.info/repository/atoz/theologian) Jeremy Taylor as ‘consolation’. Although passages from *Holy Living*and *Holy Dying* brought moments of calmness and relief, they did not dispel Keats’ state of spiritual horror as he faced his own extinction. He believed that he was denied what he called ‘this last cheap comfort’ and was therefore dying a ‘miserable wretch’.