

KAREL ŠTĚPANÍK

THE REFLECTION OF SOCIAL  
REALITY IN KEATS'S POEMS  
AND LETTERS

1.

THE ENGLISH ROMANTIC MOVEMENT

The historical epoch of the English Romantic Movement — of which John Keats was an outstanding and typical representative — is a period of great and revolutionary changes in the social evolution of the English people. They might be roughly summed up as a qualitative transformation of Britain from an essentially agricultural country into an industrial and commercial world power, a transformation — in the political sphere — of an aristocratic-bourgeois constitutional monarchy, established by the “glorious revolution” of 1688, into a bourgeois-democratic empire.

The gradual change from feudal agricultural economy to capitalist methods of production and distribution had, of course, begun several hundreds of years before Keats's time and was not completed until long after his death. But in his age its last phase, generally called the Industrial Revolution, was rapidly nearing its culmination and England, as the first European nation to free herself from the shackles of medieval guild regulations, and possessed, moreover, of a thriving commerce, accumulated capital and rich natural resources (not to speak of its freedom from the internal devastation of the European wars), was well on the road towards material and cultural advance.

The industrial revolution, which was the result of thousands of experimenters, began in the technical improvement of textile machinery. Almost simultaneously came the practical steam engine which emancipated industry from water power and facilitated the mining of coal and iron. Factories now sprang up in the large cities; and the newly built artificial waterways connecting most of the principal rivers and centres in England, later the steamboat, and eventually the steam engine, were striking advances in the methods of transport and distribution.

Introduction of machinery produced an immense increase in production, with a corresponding increase in wealth, power and numbers of the rising middle class. At the same time it brought into being a new class — the proletariat. Whereas most of the new wealth produced by factory workers was absorbed by the bourgeois capitalists, the industrial wage-earners, separated from the land and concentrated in the slums of the new cities which sprang up round mills and mines, were reduced to extremes of poverty and degradation.

While the inventions of Hargreaves, Arkwright, Crompton, Watt and others were transforming the methods of industry, other pioneers made equally revolutionary changes and innovations in the routine work of the farmer. Discoveries in agriculture and cattle-breeding doomed the ancient “three-field” system of co-operative farming

which still prevailed over more than half England, and the enclosure movement broke out afresh between 1760 and 1840, depriving small landowners of their only means of living. The result was an improvement in productivity, but the small farmers were ruined; they had to sell their few strips of land and become wage-labourers in whose fate no one seemed to be interested.

Thomas Love Peacock depicted the pitiful condition of the small farmers (in his novel *Melincourt*, published in 1817) as follows:

“The palaces that everywhere rise around them to shame the meanness of their humble dwellings, the great roads that everywhere intersect their valleys, and bring them continually in contact with the overflowing corruption of the cities, the devastating monopoly of large farms, that has almost swept the race of cottagers from the face of the earth, sending the parents to the workhouse or the army, and the children to perish like untimely blossoms in the blighting imprisonment of manufactories, have combined to diminish the numbers and deteriorate the character of the inhabitants of the country.”

The sharp distinction in wealth and opportunity between the “have-gots” and the “have-nots” was soon felt in politics. The bourgeoisie relying on the laissez-faire policy of their own economists, Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Jeremy Bentham, etc., demanded, and won, a commanding position in the government. To the proletarian the displacement of landed aristocracy by capitalist bourgeoisie brought no advantage. So the workers, stirred to wrath by legislation discriminating against their interests, followed the example of their masters (the owners of factories) and agitated for political rights. This agitation commenced with the Chartist movement and has continued to the present day.

Chartism, as a class-conscious and organised political movement of the working class, does not appear, however, until some time after the death of the most progressive writers of the romantic movement (Keats, Shelley, Byron, Hazlitt). During their lives they could witness the numerous and often sanguinary manifestations of the dissatisfaction of the wide masses of the people with unendurable living conditions, taking the form of strikes, rebellions, demonstrations, frame-breaking (the so-called “Luddite” riots), rickburning and general unrest. They sympathised with the oppressed and protested against the savage measures taken by the reactionary government of such ministers as Castlereagh, Lord Liverpool, Lord Eldon etc., who tried to suppress unrest by force, hanging, shooting, deporting and imprisoning all who dared raise their hands or voices against the official decrees.

Exploitation of workers by capitalists was at its height, worse than ever before or after, during the last years of the Napoleonic wars and in the hard times following the victory of the Allies over Napoleon, i. e. just in those years when Keats wrote nearly all his poems, and Shelley and Byron gave to the world their poetic masterpieces. No wonder that the labouring masses revolted, for, as Byron sarcastically put it in the *Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill* (1812):

“Those villains, the Weavers, are all grown refractory,  
.....  
The rascals, perhaps, may betake them to robbing,  
The dogs to be sure have got nothing to eat —.”

The “Luddite” riots, starting at Nottingham about the year 1812, spread rapidly to other counties and continued for many years. The Government suppressed them by drastic measures and in 1819 the militia attacked a peaceful gathering of many thousand men, women and children near Manchester, killing a few and wounding

many more, though the crowd was unarmed and gave no cause for such brutal massacre. (This event has entered history under the ironic appellation of *Peterloo*.)

The Manchester Massacre raised the hopes of the English Radicals in their struggle against the Tories, as is demonstrated by Keats's account of the "triumphal entry" of Henry Hunt returning from Manchester into London where "30,000 people were in the streets waiting for him". (1) Simultaneously it increased the fear of the ruling classes and led to the passing of Six Acts forbidding under heavy penalties the printing of "seditious" books and holding of public meetings. Under these Acts one of the leading Radicals, Arthur Thistlewood, was beheaded in 1820. Only in 1824 Parliament was induced to repeal the laws forbidding Trade Unions (which was passed in 1799), and in 1832 a small step was made towards universal suffrage by the "Great Reform Bill" establishing the New Whigs, i. e. the Liberals, in power, but doing practically nothing for the oppressed working classes.

\* \* \*

The stormy and contradictory historical development of England in the period between the French Revolution and the Reform Bill of 1832 conditions, and finds its reflection in, the ideological sphere, including literature. Literary history traditionally uses for this period the name of Romanticism, which, though unduly simplifying the complex character of the entire literary production of the time, has two unquestionable advantages: it emphasizes the unity and relative independence of the time as a distinct stage in the literary development,; it also expresses the dominant characteristic method of creation employed by the majority of literary artists, certainly (with very few exceptions) by those among them who are generally acknowledged as the greatest (Burns, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Shelley, Keats, Hazlitt, Lamb). If we then keep in mind that in this period there lived also writers who were only slightly influenced by romanticism, such as Jane Austen or George Crabbe, we can use the term without worrying too much as to its exact validity. We have to use it anyway until a more adequate or precise term is discovered.

As Shelley justly recognized in the Preface to his *Revolt of Islam* (1817), "there must be a resemblance, which does not depend upon their own will, between all the writers of any particular age. They cannot escape from subjection to a common influence which arises out of an infinite combination of circumstances belonging to the times in which they live; though each is in a degree the author of the very influence by which his being is thus pervaded... and this is an influence which neither the meanest scribbler nor the sublimest genius of any era can escape". But, in the same passage, Shelley did not overlook the differences between individual writers of the same era when he wrote: "Thus, ... those mighty intellects of our own country, that succeeded the Reformation, the translators of the Bible, Shakespeare, Spenser, the dramatists of the reign of Elizabeth, and Lord Bacon... all resemble each other, and differ from every other in their several classes".

This observation applies equally to Shelley himself and his contemporaries Blake, Wordsworth, Scott, Byron, Keats etc., which proves that in spite of their resemblance, justifying our calling them all "romanticists", the English romantic movement was no literary "school", but part of the European ideological and artistic movement which had arisen as "the first reaction to the French Revolution and the Enlightenment connected with it" (2). That is the "common influence" uniting all English ro-

manticists as men belonging to the same historical epoch, and as artists employing essentially the same, romantic method of representation.

Though I should like to avoid the vexatious, and still unsolved question of defining the romantic method of representing reality, I have at least to explain the meaning in which I use the terms "romanticism" and "romantic" in their most general application. I believe that the first empirical, and still largely applicable definition of the romantic method is that of Aristotle who, in Chapter xxv of his *Poetics*, made the following distinction between three different artistic methods of creation: "Since the poet, like a painter of animals or any other maker of likenesses, is an imitator, he must always imitate some one of the three aspects of things: either as they were or are, or as men say they are and they seem to be, or as they ought to be" (3). Those artists who represent things "as they were or are" are realistic, those who describe them "as they ought to be" are romantic, while the second class of poets or artists who according to Aristotle "imitate things as men say they are and they seem to be" are those who use either the romantic or the realistic method, but whose approach to reality is naively conventional or uncritically subjective.

Adopting Aristotle's classification and adapting Engels's definition of the realistic method, professor L. I. Timofeev defined the romantic method as one "for which it is characteristic that the artist, issuing from the opposition of dream and reality, creates exceptional characters under exceptional circumstances and employs subjectivity in presentation" (4).

On the basis of the above definitions we may arrive at the following conclusions referring to English romantic poets in general and to Keats in particular. Firstly, their method of representing reality is not new, but has existed since ancient times side by side with the realistic method. As Aristotle observes, Homer and Sophocles already represented men as better than they were, i. e. as they ought to be, while Euripides depicted them as they were. Secondly, the realistic and the romantic methods are distinct, but they are not contradictory, because both attempt to give a truthful picture of reality. This theoretical conclusion is confirmed by the poetic practice of all the great romanticists who represent faithfully not only what ought to be, but also what is or was.

Of course it cannot be denied that the romantic approach to reality is liable to lead the artist astray more easily than conscious realism. It is the more dangerous since it very often implies idealistic philosophy, and also because subjective treatment of the theme, which is characteristic for the romantic method, as pointed out by Timofeev, tends to lead the artist to overestimate his private impressions, feelings and moods and to underestimate the social and humanistic responsibility of art.

The principal conclusion, however, that can be drawn from the fact that the romantic and the realistic method are not mutually exclusive but rather may unite and complement each other, thus heightening the truthfulness and effectiveness of artistic representation of reality, is that the successes or failures of the English romantic poets are not inherent in their romanticism but are due to the concrete historical conditions of their creative work, which either furthered or hindered the development of their individual talents.

With due regard to the historical situation in which the Romantic Movement was rooted and with reference to the rôle it played in the ideological and cultural development of the close of the eighteenth and the first two or three decades of the nineteenth century, we have to recognize its highly progressive significance and importance. This is to be seen especially in its critical attitude to capitalism and its revolt against

economic, national and cultural oppression. But even its criticism of classicist rationalism, as well as its revolt against the barren rules and conventions of eighteenth century classicist poetry and art, were essentially progressive as is fairly acknowledged by Marxian literary historians and critics of our own day. (Cf. the article on Romanticism in *The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*.)

The English romantic poets have had no small share in the positive contribution of European romanticism to the treasury of world literature and art. Of course, even among them there appeared very early two contradictory camps in the relation to the ideology of the Enlightenment and the French bourgeois democratic revolution: the conservative or reactionary camp and the camp of progressive or revolutionary romanticists. The abyss dividing the two opposite camps was moreover deepened by generational differences, the main representatives of the conservative camp (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey, Walter Scott) having been born in the 1770s, the three greatest progressive romantic poets (Byron, Shelley and Keats) about twenty years later.

The principal criterion for the distinction between the two camps and generations is political, but it is not the only one. Conservative and reactionary romanticists "refused bourgeois civilisation and called for a return to obsolete forms of the patriarchal way of life, to the Middle Ages which they idealised. They joined the feudal reaction which supported the so-called Holy Alliance of European monarchs", while the revolutionary romanticists also sided with "those social classes that had been disappointed with the consequences of bourgeois progress, but in their criticism did not proclaim a return to the patriarchal ideals of the past. They adhered to the ideals of eighteenth-century Enlightenment and wished for a continuation of the revolutionary process beginning with the French revolution. They reflected the strife of the progressive layers of bourgeois democracy and in their best works expressed the dreams of the masses of the people about social justice." (5).

Thus the progressive ideological content of the English romantic movement, both passive and active — to use Gorki's terms —, is determined by their common protest and revolt against unsatisfactory capitalist conditions. Apart from other things, the two opposing camps are distinguished by the fact that Scott and the Lakists sought for the picture of things "as they ought to be" in the idealised pre-capitalist past, while the younger, progressive poets preferred to look forward into distant future and dreamed, with Utopian socialists and reformers of the type of Godwin or Owen, of a better to-morrow. When, as they sometimes did, they chose their themes from the past, they preferred drawing them from ancient Greece, or classical mythology, or the Renaissance.

It would be unjust, however, to explain this preference for pre-capitalistic epochs merely as a means of escape from unpleasant reality in the present. None of the great English romantic writers, whether conservative or progressive, tried consciously to avoid the burning problems of their day or the social responsibility of their art in the interest of personal happiness, or even the so-called "pure poetry" — a term and conception which the romanticists neither invented nor acknowledged. Poetry, to them, was preeminently knowledge, as Wordsworth wrote, or a chronicle of the best and happiest moments of the happiest and best minds, as Shelley said. And a poet they regarded with Keats as a sage, humanist and physician of all men.

"*Where's the Poet,*" asks Keats in one of his unfinished poems; and in the humanistic spirit, which is the sincere conviction of all English romantic poets, he answers his own question:

'Tis the man who with a man  
 Is an equal, be he King,  
 Or poorest of the beggar-clan,  
 Or any other wondrous thing  
 A man may be 'twixt ape and Plato;  
 'Tis the man who with a bird,  
 Wren or eagle, finds his way to  
 All its instincts; he hath heard  
 The lion's roaring, and can tell  
 What his horny throat expresseth,  
 And to him the tiger's yell  
 Comes articulate and presseth  
 On his ear like mother-tongue.

Love of nature, man and life inspired all great romantics to serve the highest ideals of humanism with all their might and without reserve. Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey were ardently devoted to the French Revolution and its ideals at the beginning of their literary careers and wanted to found in America a communistic "pantisocracy", where they intended to live in accordance with their Utopian dreams. In later years, it is true, they turned traitors to the ideas of liberty, fraternity and equality, and became political defenders of reaction, but they never completely abandoned their former belief in the possibility of a juster and happier society than the one in which they lived and with which they found it convenient to reconcile themselves. From an objective point of view they cannot be summarily condemned as thoroughgoing reactionaries at any period of their long lives.

In the views and opinions of Blake, Shelley, Byron, Keats, Hazlitt and the other friends of progress and liberty, on the other hand, we discover many idealistic, not to say reactionary, conceptions and illusions which give rise to serious ideological and emotional conflicts and crises. Even in the life and work of Walter Scott, who was the most well-balanced and consistent of the great English romanticists, there are numerous irreconciled contradictions.

The presence of materialistic and idealistic views, progressive and reactionary moods, romantic and realistic images side by side in the work of romantic writers helps us to comprehend why the representatives of the two ideologically and politically opposed camps could live on mutually friendly terms and influence each other in artistic creation as well as in philosophical speculations, as in the case of Wordsworth and Keats, Byron and Scott, Coleridge and Hazlitt, Lamb and Leigh Hunt. These contradictions, naturally, make it very difficult to arrive at a final objective appreciation and evaluation of the whole English romantic movement as well as its individual members. (For a more detailed discussion of this question I refer the reader to my lectures *English Literature from the American Revolution to Chartism*, SPN, Prague, 1957.)

## 2.

### THE REFLECTION OF SOCIAL REALITY IN KEATS'S JUVENILIA

In Keats's poetry there are not so many direct and clear allusions to contemporary social conditions and political events as in Byron's or Shelley's poetical works, and that is perhaps the reason why he is rarely considered as a tendentious, not to say

political, poet. But in his letters are found numerous topical remarks and observations, and occasionally even lengthy discussions of such questions which show that Keats never walked through life with closed eyes, was not constantly immersed in his private world and poetic dreams but, on the contrary, eagerly absorbed and deeply lived through everything that was going on around him. This picture of his public character and interests is fully confirmed by the records and accounts of his life and personality preserved by his early biographers and personal friends or acquaintances.

In the external world Keats looked for and took in all that his "imagination seized as Beauty" and that, consequently, "must be truth" (6). But he was not blind to the existence of negative phenomena in nature or society; and he did not hesitate to give expression also to his knowledge of ugliness and evil, defects and wrongs, nor did he fail to give vent to his dissatisfaction with, and protest against, their occurrence. Always full of admiration for "great men", the fighters for the freedom and happiness of mankind, he longed to do some public good himself and was willing to "jump down Aetna for any great Public Good" (7). In moments of physical weakness and spiritual depression, of course, he was apt to lose his "confidence in human nature" because "the world was too brutal for him" (8); but it was only owing to unfavourable circumstances, especially the fatal disease which undermined his health, that he did not take a more active part in public life, though his art was always at the service of democratic humanism.

For a just valuation of Keats's ideology and poetry the fact that one of his earliest poems — the sonnet *On Peace* — has a clearly political content and message is eminently significant. On the very threshold of his poetic career the young author welcomes peace not only because it means the end of long and bloody wars and gives his country the chance of peaceful and free advance, but because he hopes that the defeat of Napoleon will bring liberty to all European nations still governed by crowned despotic tyrants. That is why he implores Europe in the last tercet of his sonnet:

*Keep thy chains burst, and boldly say thou art free.  
Give thy kings law — leave not uncurbed the great;  
So with the horrors past thou'lt win thy happier fate!*

Having lived until his nineteenth year, when he wrote this poem, in a time of England's wars with revolutionary, later imperial France, he naturally welcomed the Peace of Paris (March 31, 1814) as a security of the liberation of the whole mankind from the thralldom of absolutism.

But the most progressive idea of the sonnet is Keats's hope in the liberation of the oppressed peoples of the world from "the great", i. e. the feudal lords who still ruled them but shall not much longer be left "uncurbed". Full political liberty shall win a "happier fate" for the people. Thus this early poem, inspired by the most progressive ideals of the French bourgeois revolution as well as by the revolutionary tradition of the English people (as is clearly indicated by Keats's allusion to Milton from whose *L'Allegro* he borrowed the image of liberty as the "mountain nymph"), is the first, almost programmatic manifestation of Keats's revolutionary democracy.

Before discussing the later expressions of this belief in Keats's work we shall have to trace its origins and development. The seed of Keats's patrioti m and democratic persuasion was sown in his consciousness when he attended the Enfield grammar school (1803—1811). Our main, though not always quite reliable source of information

for this period in Keats's life, are the literary reminiscences of Charles Cowden Clarke, son of the headmaster of Enfield school, and the first intimate friend of Keats. According to Clarke's *Recollections of Writers* (and also Edward Holmes's memoir, both quoted at length by Colvin) Keats did not manifest any strong attachment to books and did not show any signs of particularly intellectual inclinations until 1810 when his mother died and he was left an orphan (his father having been accidentally killed as early as 1804). He did not differ greatly from his school-fellows in his likes and dislikes, unless we may regard his "penchant for fighting" anyone on slight provocation — but without malice — as a distinguishing feature of his own. He admired physical courage and his hero was Captain Jennings, his maternal uncle, who distinguished himself in the naval battle of Camperdown. In those early school-days Keats was neither a pacifist nor an antimilitarist. Yet he was generally liked by boys and masters and "his generosity of disposition" as well as other, often contradictory, qualities "captivated the boys, and no one was more popular" (9).

During the last two years at Enfield, however, Keats suddenly developed a strong interest in study and books to which he devoted nearly all his leisure, neglecting both games and meals. "He was at work before the first school-hour began, and that was at seven o'clock; almost all the intervening times of recreation were so devoted; and during the afternoon holidays, when all were at play, he would be in the school... at his Latin or French translation; ... he occupied the hours during meals in reading. Thus, his *whole* time was engrossed. He had a tolerably retentive memory, and the quantity that he read was surprising... I now see him at supper... sitting back on the form, from the table, holding the folio volume of Burnet's *History of his Own Time* between himself and the table, eating his meal from beyond it. This work, and Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* — which my father took in, and I used to lend to Keats — no doubt laid the foundation of his love of civil and religious liberty" (10).

Though Keats's sudden intellectual awakening coincides with the death of his mother, I am not convinced that it was the immediate consequence of that painful experience. The real cause was Keats's physical and mental evolution from a boy to a youth.

It is, however, important for our inquiry into the origin of Keats's ideological, and especially political views that many books he read at Enfield were of historical and political character (such as Mavor's *Universal History*, Robertson's *History of Scotland, America and Charles V*, etc.), mostly progressive from the point of view of bourgeois progress, i. e. from the position of revolt against feudalism. That applies especially to *The Examiner*, a literary and political Radical journal. It was the merit of John Clarke and his son C. C. Clarke, both convinced radical liberals, that the atmosphere at Enfield school was more enlightened than at most other schools of the type in Keats's life-time.

Clarke educated his younger friend and pupil in the spirit of contemporary radicalism, the most progressive political movement within the bourgeois Liberal party, because closely connected with the political interests and material needs of the working class. In his *Epistle to Charles Cowden Clarke* (September 1816), Keats gratefully acknowledged his indebtedness to Clarke in the following lines:

*You first taught me all the sweets of song  
The grand, the sweet, the terse, the free, the fine;  
.....  
You too upheld the veil from Clio's beauty,  
And pointed out the patriot's stern duty;*



*The might of Alfred, and the shaft of Tell;  
The hand of Brutus, that so grandly fell  
Upon a tyrant's head...*

To the progressive convictions which he had acquired even before he was apprenticed to Hammond, the apothecary, Keats remained faithful until his untimely death, ten years after he left school. He was and remained "of the sceptical and republican school. An advocate for the innovations which were making progress in his time. A faultfinder with everything established", as witnessed by George Felton Mathew, nearly 30 years after Keats's death; though Mathew at the time when he was intimately acquainted with Keats would not have been quite as conservative as he became when he grew old; otherwise Keats would not have written in his *Epistle to Felton Mathew* (November, 1815) that they loved the same poets and admired the same heroes,

*those who in the cause of freedom fell;  
Of our own Alfred, of Helvetian Tell;  
Of him whose name to ev'ry heart's a solace,  
High-minded and unbending William Wallace.*

An interesting poem among Keats's juvenile pieces is the sonnet entitled *Written on the day that Mr Leigh Hunt left prison* (giving the date of composition more definitely than is usual with Keats, February 2, 1815). It is the earliest of several poems in which Keats celebrates the popular progressive poet, critic and essayist whose *Examiner* was the main ideological source of Keats's radical liberalism. At the time he did not know Hunt personally, but the concrete details embodied in the sonnet could have been imparted to him by Clarke who was a good friend of Hunt's. Some allusions are not intelligible without explanatory notes, but the leading idea is sufficiently clear. Keats protests against the brutal persecution of all who dared to express by act or word their dissatisfaction with the prevailing conditions in the country governed by Tories and ruled by the rich. Simultaneously, Keats declares his firm belief in the final victory of progress and liberty in spite of all attempts to suppress them. Though

*Kind Hunt was shut in prison, yet has he,  
In his immortal spirit, been as free  
As the sky-searching lark, and as elate!*

Hunt's fame — and the ideas he suffered for — will live when their enemies, "Minion of grandeur... and all his wretched crew", are dead.

Besides the sonnet *On Peace*, the *Epistle to Mathew*, and the sonnet inspired by Hunt's imprisonment for his attack on the Prince Regent, only four pieces out of 29 written before the middle of 1816 reflect Keats's political convictions and his reaction to contemporary events. They are the lines entitled *To Hope* (Feb. 1815), the epigram on the anniversary of Charles the Second's Restoration (May 29, 1815), *Specimen of an Induction to a poem* (Spring, 1816) and the sonnet *Oh! How I love, on a fair summer's eve* (Summer, 1816).

*To Hope* expresses the idea contained in the sonnet *On Peace* (which was written about a year earlier), as one of the most fervent hopes and desires of the poet, in the lines:

*In the long vista of the years 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.*

But there is a significant change in the mood of the author. His confidence in the victory of liberty after the abdication of Napoleon in 1814 is now, in 1815, only a pious wish because the development of history since the Peace of Paris had not liberated the world from tyrants and oppressors, but on the contrary only strengthened the enslavement of the people in all European countries. This must have been a great disappointment for Keats's sanguine hopes, and if he did not lose his belief in the victory of liberty won for his people by the great heroes of old, it is only because he is now better aware that the real fighters for real freedom are the common people. That is, I believe, the correct interpretation of the lines:

*Let me not see the patriot's high bequest,  
Great Liberty! how great in plain attire!  
With the base purple of a court oppress'd,  
Bowing her head, and ready to expire:  
But let me see thee stoop from heaven on wings  
That fill the skies with silver glitterings!*

The sharp contrast between the "plain attire" of Liberty and the "base purple of a court" oppressing the people again demonstrates the young poet's republican and democratic persuasion. To a man of such progressive convictions it could not but be highly painful and discouraging that a great part of his own countrymen still honoured the infamous memory of the defeat of the English bourgeois democratic revolution in the seventeenth century and the restoration of the Stuarts in 1660. This feeling inspired him to write the following lines:

*Infatuate Britons, will you still proclaim  
His memory, your direst, foulest shame,  
Nor patriots revere?  
Ah! while I hear each traitorous lying bell,  
'Tis gallant Sydney's, Russell's, Vane's sad knell,  
That pains my wounded ear. (11)*

Two of the heroes and martyrs of the time, Algernon Sydney and the poet Milton, are mentioned by Keats also in the sonnet *Oh! how I love*:

*Oh! how I love, on a fair summer's eve,  
.....  
.....far away to leave  
All meaner thoughts, and .....  
... warm my breast with patriotic lore,  
Musing on Milton's fate — on Sydney's bier —  
Till their stern forms before my mind arise:*

The whole sonnet is a striking example of the natural manner in which political and social ideas blended in Keats's mind and poetry with his sensuous delight in the

beauty of nature. He did not enjoy the pleasures of the senses with abandonment that would make him forget anything else, but in the very heart of nature was led to think of his country's historical struggle for freedom, and yearned to follow the example of those who fought for the "good old cause" of liberty.

In Keats's patriotism and humanism the emotional and, to some extent, passively contemplative side of his character prevails over his reasoning and actively militant propensities. That is a serious flaw in his thought which cannot but find unfavourable reflection in his art. The cause of this defect was partly Keats's natural disposition, partly his youth. But Keats became great because he was also endowed with a strong capacity of self-criticism and an even stronger will to learn and improve. Beginning to write rather late for such a typically lyric poet as he was, he grew and developed the more rapidly, achieving intellectual and artistic maturity in a surprisingly short time.

Aware as he soon became of the most serious imperfections of his thought and work, he deliberately resolved to overcome them by the only way he instinctively found to be the right way, namely by study and experience, as well as taking a more active part in public life. Being still very young, he decided to devote all his talents and energies to learning and study first; experience would come with years — and participation in the life of society as a useful member of his nation and country could not be thought of until he had finished his studies. In *Sleep and Poetry* he expressed his hope that destiny would grant him at least ten years in which to work for, and achieve, his poetic aims. As it chanced he was not destined to live for more than five years; and his last months (1820—1821) were but a kind of "posthumous existence".

### 3.

#### KEATS'S CRITICISM OF SOCIETY

The reflection of contemporary public, particularly political life in Keats's early poems fully testifies to the truth of Keats's friends' accounts regarding his character, interests and views in the period between 1810 and 1816, i. e. approximately in the final stages of the Napoleonic wars and the early phase of political reaction in all European countries after Waterloo. The remaining years of Keats's life and work (1817—1821) are not marked by any radical change in his relation and attitude to public events, only his hostility to all forms of economic, political and cultural oppression grew deeper. The material for the study of Keats's social activities and views in those years is augmented by his private letters which, since 1816, form a valuable complement of his poetic creation.

The first preserved letter happens to be written almost entirely in verse. It is the *Epistle to my Brother George*, written at Margate where Keats spent a holiday in August 1816, after he had passed examination before the Court of Apothecaries and obtained their licence to practise as apothecary and surgeon. He continued his medical studies in London, intending to become a physician, until perhaps the beginning of 1817 when he decided to devote himself fully to literature as a professional writer. Successful and skilful as he was in the medical profession (or rather studies), poetry proved a much stronger attraction, and Keats knew well that his greatest talent lay in that direction. For a few years he had sufficient capital inherited from his parents and grandmother, and if the literary profession failed to earn him a living, he could always rely on his knowledge of medicine. What, of course,

he did not take into account was the fatal disease which killed him when he was only 26 years old.

When he wrote the *Epistle to my Brother George Keats* admitted that he was often tortured by doubts about his poetic future — “his mind o’ercast with heaviness” and his brain bewildered —

*But, there are times, when those who love the Bay,  
Glide from all sorrowing, far, far away:  
A sudden glow comes on them; nought they see  
In Water, Earth, or Air, but Poesy.*

And such moments of creative inspiration are the greatest reward, though even Keats, like every poet, longs for immortal fame and the recognition of posterity:

*What, though I leave this dull, and earthly mould,  
Yet shall my spirit lofty converse hold  
With after times — the Patriot shall feel  
My stern alarm, and unsheath his steel:  
Or in the senate, thunder out my Numbers,  
To startle Princes from their easy slumbers.*

Keats unfortunately never wrote lines of so weighty and rousing patriotic or political character; nor were ever fulfilled some of his humbler plans and hopes of domestic happiness of which he also dreamed in his *Epistle*. He himself regarded them as dreams of his “mad ambition” and, which is more significant, was conscious that his absorbing passion for poetry may be the very obstacle which hinders his becoming “dearer to society”. Thus, the most important idea of the poem is not Keats’s dream of fame, but his awareness of the need for a poet to be useful to society:

*Ah, my dear friend and brother,  
Could I, at once, my mad ambition smother,  
For tasting joys like these, sure should I be  
Happier, and dearer to society.*

Though when writing the *Epistle* Keats felt acutely the contradiction between his desire to write poems that would “charm thy daughters fair, And warm thy sons”, and the no less strong desire to do good to society, the contradiction was only subjective and not irresoluble. As soon as he reached the conclusion that “the great end of poesy” was “that it should be a friend to sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man” (*Sleep and Poetry*), he knew that the function of art is a social function and could, after a time, find a resolution of his personal conflict (between his tendency to purely personal poetry and the need to write poetry of social significance) in composing poems truthful in content and beautiful in form. These poems have gained him that immortality for which his “mad ambition” longed, as well as that recognition of posterity which is granted to those writers only who have served the good of their own people and mankind.

The reason why Keats’s vivid and, as time went on, steadily increasing interest in actual political conditions is more often expressed in his letters than poems is to be sought in his aversion to didacticism in art, which he shared with Shelley. “We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us — and if we do not agree, seems to

put its hand 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". Such was his reaction to Wordsworth's tendentiousness (12). Yet he did not avoid unobtrusive expression of his patriotic and humane feelings in his own poems; and the motives of protest against tyranny, or of love of freedom and its heroic defenders, for instance, are very frequent, especially after his arrival in London and acquaintance with progressive writers and artists, such as Hunt.

In his improvised sonnet *On receiving a laurel crown from Leigh Hunt* (Autumn, 1816) we read the following prophecy of the fall of despotic tyrants and the coming of a glorious future for mankind:

*I see*

*A trampling down of what the world most prizes,  
Turbans and crowns, and blank regality;  
And then I run into most wild surmises  
Of all the many glories that may be.*

A critical portrait of these despotic rulers who must be destroyed before mankind can obtain freedom and happiness is drawn by the poet in the first 14 lines of the third book of *Endymion* about six months later:

*There are who lord it o'er their fellow-men  
With most prevailing tinsel: who unpen  
Their baaing vanities, to browse away  
The comfortable green and juicy hay  
From human pastures; or, O torturing fact!  
Who, through an idiot blink, will see unpack'd  
Fire-branded foxes to sear up and singe  
Our gold and ripe-ear'd hopes. With not one tinge  
Of sanctuary splendour, not a sight  
Able to face an owl's, they still are dight  
By the blear-eyed nations in empurpled vests,  
And crowns and turbans.*

In these lines Keats heaps contempt and hatred not only on the monarch, but also on their zealous servants and supporters. They all rob the people of the fruit of its toil and deny its fundamental right of happy life. What saddens and angers Keats most, however, is that the nations themselves — the people — in their ignorance and blindness have given these rulers their privileged position and power in the state, glorifying them as if they were superhuman beings, not the very opposite of deities. These tyrannical rulers are only "gilded masks"; the true rulers of the world, however, are the Powers of nature and universe, the natural laws to which men are subject, the "gentlier-mightiest" of which is Moon-Cynthia, Keats's symbol of ideal beauty.

The opening lines of the third book of *Endymion* prove that Keats did not lose from sight actual political themes and problems even when his professed subject — as in *Endymion* — seemed to have little to do with contemporary events and objective reality.

Keats's friend Woodhouse tells us that the passage quoted above expresses

Keats's opinion of the ministers of the Tory Cabinet — an explanation given to him by Keats himself. The marked contrast between the despotic government of worldly monarchs and the beneficent rule of natural laws — on which the whole introduction to the third book of *Endymion* is based — sufficiently refutes the view of those critics who (like Amy Lowell etc.) regarded it as unwarranted intrusion of actuality into the poet's mythological story, and therefore as a structural and artistic defect. Not only is the connection between Keats's attack on oppressors and tyrants on the one hand, and his story of the love of Cynthia and Endymion on the other, convincingly justified by the logical and aesthetic contrast between evil and good rulers of the world, but it serves to illustrate and support one of the principal ideas of Keats's philosophical and social speculation: the idea which found its most pregnant expression in *Hyperion* that "the first in beauty should be first in might".

Woodhouse's testimony that the passage refers to contemporary Tory ministers may be verified from numerous passages in Keats's letters. In verse Keats almost never mentioned enemies of liberty and representatives of reaction by name. Not from fear of persecution, but because he could express his contempt of such persons more effectively. He indicates that he does not regard them worthy of naming, perhaps not even worthy of ranking as human beings. In the passage from *Endymion* he called the kings and ministers and royal servants "baaing vanities" who "browse away the green and juicy hay from human pastures" and "fire-branded foxes searing up and singing our gold and ripe-ear'd hopes". Thus he underlined their inhuman, bestial character. In *Isabella* he similarly gave no names to the heroine's cruel brothers. In *Otho the Great* the "kings and princes of this fev'rous world" are even called "abject things" (13).

In his private letters, on the contrary, Keats had no cause to introduce these negative characters without their historical names. In the past, he regarded as typical enemies of mankind and liberty the "great" conquerors Alexander and Caesar, the despotic kings of the Stuart dynasty, Charles I and Charles II, and the Bourbons. In his own time, Napoleon, Louis XVIII ("Fat Louis"), George III, the English Prince Regent, and the European monarchs in general, particularly those who formed the Holy Alliance. As to other typical reactionaries in the past and present, Keats alludes — generally contemptuously — to "old Lord Burleigh, the high-priest of economy", the statesmen Canning, Wellington, Castlereagh, Lord Chesterfield (with whom he "would not bathe in the same river though he had the upper hand of the stream"), the "nuisances" John Knox, George Fox or William Gifford, the German dramatist and renegade Kotzebue, the English writers who had betrayed their better political past, such as Southey or Wordsworth, and many others.

Quite different is Keats's practice concerning the naming, in his poetry, of historical and contemporary representatives of the progressive camp whose lives, deeds, views and example strengthened his own confidence in the power of the human intellect and the triumph of the struggle for the liberation of mankind from oppression by privileged individuals and classes. These enlightened rulers, leaders, fighters and thinkers he cites as models to follow both in his private correspondence and his published poems. We find among them the names of Francis Bacon, Oliver Cromwell, Benjamin Franklin, Jesus, Kosciuszko, Nelson, Newton, Plato, Robin Hood, Socrates, William Tell, William Wallace, George Washington etc.

To four of his favourite heroic patriots, Leigh Hunt, Milton, Robin Hood and Kosciuszko, Keats addressed particular poems, of which the most important are the sonnet *To Kosciuszko* and the lines entitled *Robin Hood*.

To *Kosciusko* (published in Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* in February, 1817, two months before Kosciuszko's death) is not among the best sonnets of Keats because the ideas and their verbal expression are too vague and fail to give a concrete portrait of the great Polish patriot, who had fought for the cause of liberty both in America and his own country and after the third division of Poland refused to serve Napoleon as well as his enemies, spending the rest of his days in exile. It is interesting to note that in this sonnet (as in *Sleep and Poetry* composed approximately in the same season of 1816) Keats joins Kosciuszko's name with that of King Alfred ("thy name with Alfred's, and the great of yore gently commingling, gives tremendous birth to a loud hymn..."). The resemblance between the Anglosaxon King and the Polish patriot, who was a contemporary of Keats, seems to have been, in the poet's mind, their brave opposition to their countries' enemies in wars of liberation in which Alfred had been victorious, while Kosciuszko had suffered defeat. In *Sleep and Poetry* Keats cites these two heroes as examples of men who loved "the goaded world" and pitied the suffering people — this love and pity were the cause of their own "horrid suffrance", and in Kosciuszko's case also of his being "mightily forlorn", an allusion to his exile after the division of Poland. Otherwise, the joint allusion to Alfred and Kosciuszko in Keats's poems may be regarded as proof that Keats saw the struggle of oppressed or threatened nations for liberty as a single age-long process in the history of mankind. His idea is that the war between the forces of freedom and the forces of oppression still continues, but in spite of temporary setbacks there will come the "happy day" of the final triumph of liberty.

A similar glorification of the heroes who had fought for the cause of freedom against great odds and thus had set example for the future fighters is Keats's *Robin Hood* (sent by Keats to Reynolds in a letter dated 3rd February, 1818). In spite of the prevailing melancholy tone of most of its lines, the poem was written, as Keats says, "in the spirit of outlawry", i. e. as a protest against the existing economic, social and political conditions, and in its energetic close it is a challenge to reaction and an enthusiastic appeal to the friends of the people to continue in their struggle. By making Robin Hood, the legendary heroic defender of the liberties and rights of the English peasant against secular and religious feudal lords, the hero of his poem, Keats consciously continues in the popular revolutionary tradition of the English people; and by writing in the metre and spirit of Elizabethan poets (Ben Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher etc.) he follows the English progressive literary tradition.

The striking contrast between the good old times of Robin Hood and his merry companions — though romantically idealised — and the time in which Keats lived implies, and in part explicitly expresses, a sharp condemnation of the capitalist order and bourgeois society:

*And if Robin should be cast  
Sudden from his turfed grave,  
And if Marian should have  
Once again her forest days,  
She would weep, and he would craze:  
He would swear, for all his oaks,  
Fall'n beneath the dockyard strokes,  
Have rotted on the briny seas;  
She would weep that her wild bees  
Sang not to her — strange that honey  
Can't be got without hard money!*

There is no doubt that Keats's conception of Robin Hood is in general agreement with the popular legendary tradition of this outlaw as defender of the rights of English free yeomanry and the whole peasant class — but Keats surpasses this rather narrow conception by showing Robin also as protagonist of the people's struggle against injustice and oppression in general. The real militant, revolutionary meaning of the final lines of Keats's poem — as justly observed by Samarin (14) — is in that the daring challenge of the close of the poem to revolt against existing conditions brings the content of the whole poem up to date and corresponds to the real needs of the people in the epoch of great hardship for the labouring masses not only in the country, but also in the towns and industrial centres. With the words

*Honour to the old bow-string!*  
*Honour to the archer keen!*

Keats actually gives his support and sanction to the armed revolution of the working class against oppression and exploitation.

#### 4.

#### KEATS'S HUMANISM

*Robin Hood* is a characteristic example of Keats's consciously militant humanism. It illustrates the poet's constant interest in contemporary public events as well as his ability to draw from them correct general conclusions which enabled him to find a correct relation to social reality in his own creation. In the legendary character of Robin Hood he discovered and stressed the very features — struggle against oppression, love of men and defence of life worthy of man — which are most closely tied up with the actual social situation and can be of use to the English people as well as the whole humanity in their struggle for a better present and future. As long as the struggle of Robin Hood against feudal exploitation and oppression, or the struggle of Keats's contemporaries against absolutism and capitalist reaction, are not brought to victorious conclusion, it will be necessary for us to incite the oppressed people to fight for liberation and to help them in their struggle with all our might.

Of this issue Keats was fully aware and in his poems and letters he unambiguously proclaimed his identity with the people against its enemies. As we can read in his letters, he found there "is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good for the world" and he "would jump down Aetna for any great Public Good". He "placed his ultimate in the glory of dying for a great human purpose", being firmly convinced that mankind shall reach a happy future. Though humanity, for the time being, is only "a wide heath of Furze and Briars with here and there a remote Oak or Pine," it will "become a grand democracy of Forest Trees" because "there is really a grand march of intellect" (15).

Belief in a real progress of intellect did not blind Keats to serious impediments which hindered any improvement of the living conditions of most people in Britain. He knew "what a tremendous difficulty is the improvement of the conditions of such people" (i. e. of the poor Irish peasants); yet he was certain that there was no glory like "the glory of Patriotism, the glory of making by any means a country happier". It may have been due to his awareness of the difficulty of improving the



living conditions of the whole people (without a radical change of the ruling social order) that he wrote in another context: "Now the first political duty a Man ought to have a Mind to is the happiness of his friends", which is but a variation on the proverb that "Charity begins at home". Keats himself followed this precept as faithfully as few professed philanthropists, risking often both his own material security and his health. The best evidence of his readiness to personal sacrifice is his loan of money to Haydon and his care of his brother Tom, who was dying of consumption.

An interesting document of Keats's selfless love of people is found in his letter to George and his wife written between February and April, 1819. The extract quoted below is dated March 19th:

"Very few men have ever arrived at a complete disinterestedness of Mind: few have been influenced by a pure desire of the benefit of others — in the greater part of the Benefactors to Humanity some meretricious motive has sullied their greatness — some melodramatic scenery has fascinated them — From the manner in which I feel Haslam's misfortune" [i. e. the disease of Haslam's father] "I perceive how far I am from any humble standard of disinterestedness — Yet this feeling ought to be carried to the highest pitch as there is no fear of its ever injuring Society — which it would do I fear pushed to an extremity — For in wild nature the Hawk would lose his Breakfast of Robins and the Robin his of Worms — the Lion must starve as well as the swallow etc. . . . But then, as Wordsworth says, "we have all one human heart" — there is an electric fire in human nature tending to purify — so that among these human creatures there is continually some birth of new heroism. The pity is that we must wonder at it: as we should at finding a pearl in rubbish. I have no doubt thousands of people never heard of have had hearts completely disinterested: I can remember but two — Socrates and Jesus — their Histories evince it. . . . Jesus was so great a man that though he transmitted no writing of his own to posterity, we have his Mind and his sayings and his greatness handed to us by others. It is to be lamented that the history of Jesus was written and revised by Men interested in the pious frauds of religion. Yet through all this I see his splendour."

The extract is interesting, apart from the light it throws on Keats's philosophical, religious, social and political opinions, as illustration of the concrete presentation of abstract speculations. The very impulse to the general meditation was a concrete event, the news of Haslam's father's illness which — because of his friendship with Haslam — touched Keats very deeply and made him think of the transitoriness of pleasure and happiness: "This is the world — thus we cannot expect to give way many hours to pleasure — Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting — While we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of events — while we are laughing it sprouts it grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck — Even so we have leisure to reason on the misfortunes of our friends; our own touch us too nearly for words."

Keats's discourse is poetically vivid and full of concrete images. It is no specimen of dry philosophical speculation and might be quoted as evidence for the theory of poetry as thinking in images. The reason is that its root as well as its driving force are emotional, not abstractly rational. The content and the expression show that Keats had not been meditating on similar problems for the first time. And we notice that the image of the hawk eating robins and the robin eating worms occurs in nearly the same words in the *Epistle to Reynolds* where we read:

*Still do I that most fierce destruction see,  
The shark at savage prey — the hawk at pounce,—  
The gentle robin, like a pard or ounce,  
Ravens a worm—*

And its purpose in the *Epistle* was the same as in the letter to George, namely to illustrate Keats's idea of the struggle for life in nature which he calls "the eternal fierce destruction".

The central idea of Keats's speculation about disinterestedness is, of course, not the cruel law of nature (justified much later by Charles Darwin) but the humane ethical commandment of unselfishness and neighbourly love. It is clear that Keats believed with Rousseau (and Hazlitt whose *Principles of Human Action* he owned and studied) in the innate goodness and unselfishness of human nature. Or, to be more precise, he believed in the innate human possession of a "purifying electric fire" of heroic selflessness which urges men to become completely disinterested, perfect, as were Socrates and Jesus.

Believing though he did in the inherent goodness of human nature, Keats did not profess to love all people without exception. In this, again, he resembled Hazlitt, whom he once calls "your only good damner". His attitude to people is best summed up in his own words (in his letters). In December 1818, for instance, he wrote to Haydon: "I admire human nature but I do not like *men* — I should like to compose things honourable to man — but not fingerable over by *men*." And he put human nature above natural scenery: "Scenery is fine — but human nature is finer"; a similar thought is expressed in another letter from about the same time (1818) when he writes: "There was as fine a row of boys and girls as you ever saw; some beautiful faces and one exquisite mouth. I never felt so near the glory of Patriotism, the glory of making by any means a country happier. This is what I like better than scenery."

Against such expressions of Keats's admiration for human nature (but discriminating as regards individual men and women) — from the time when the poet was healthy and happy — we might quote his much rarer expressions condemning men and human nature (which all date from the last years of his life when he was unhappy and ill). Thus, in a letter to George (January, 1820) he declared: "Upon the whole I dislike Mankind: whatever people on the other side of the question may advance they cannot deny that they are always surprised at hearing of a good action and never of a bad one." And the most hopeless opinion of man is expressed in his letter to Fanny Brawne (August, 1820) when he knew that his case was desperate: "I should like to die. I am sickened at the brute world which you are smiling with. I hate men and women more. I see nothing but thorns for the future... I wish you could infuse a little confidence in human nature into my heart. I cannot muster any — the world is too brutal for me — I am glad that there is such a thing as the grave — I am sure I shall never have any rest till I get there." Things like that, naturally, cannot be regarded as objectively convincing because they were dictated by pathological hypersensitiveness, not by deliberate healthy judgment.

Keats's convinced views regarding society and social development are expressed much more faithfully in a lengthy discussion of historical progress and of contemporary social situation in England (in the journal letter to George and Georgiana Keats in America in September, 1819). The following is an extract from the passage in question:

"In every age there have been in England for some two or three centuries subjects of great popular interest on the carpet: so that however great the uproar one can scarcely prophesy any material change in the government, for as loud disturbances have agitated this country many times. All civilized countries become gradually more enlightened and there should be a continual change for the better. Look at this Country at present and remember it when it was even thought impious to doubt the justice of a trial by Combat. From that time there has been a gradual change. Three great changes have been in progress — First for the better, next

for the worse, and a third time for the better once more. The first was the gradual annihilation of the tyranny of the nobles, when Kings found it their interest to conciliate the common people, elevate them and be just to them. Just when baronial Power ceased and before standing armies were so dangerous, Taxes were few, Kings were lifted by the people over the heads of their nobles, and those people held a rod over Kings. The change for the worse in Europe was again this. The obligation of Kings to the Multitude began to be forgotten. Custom had made noblemen the humble servants of Kings. Then Kings turned to the Nobles as the adorners of their power, the slaves of it, and from the people as creatures continually endeavouring to check them. Then in every Kingdom there was a long struggle of Kings to destroy all popular privileges. The English were the only people in Europe who made a grand kick at this. They were slaves to Henry 8th but were freemen under William 3rd at the time the French were abject slaves under Lewis 14th. The example of England, and the liberal writers of France and England sowed the seed of opposition to this Tyranny — and it was swelling in the ground till it burst out in the French Revolution. That has had an unlucky termination. It put a stop to the rapid progress of free sentiments in England; and gave our Court hopes of turning back to the despotism of the 16th century. They have made a handle of this event in every way to undermine our freedom. They spread a horrid superstition against all innovation and improvement. The present struggle in England of the people is to destroy this superstition. What has roused them to do it is their distresses — Perhaps on this account the present distresses of this nation are a fortunate thing — though so horrid in their experience. You will see I mean that the French Revolution put a temporary stop to this third change, the change for the better. Now it is in progress again and I think it an effectual one. This is no contest between whig and tory — but between right and wrong. ... I am convinced... that apparently small causes make great alterations. There are little signs whereby we may know how matters are going on. This makes the business of Carlyle the bookseller of great moment in my mind. He has been selling distasteful pamphlets, republished Tom Payne and many other works held in superstitious horror. ... For this conduct he I think has had above a dozen inditements issued against him; for which he has found bail to the amount of many thousand pounds. After all they are afraid to prosecute: they are afraid of his defence: it would be published in all the papers all over the Empire: they shudder at this: the Trials would light a flame they could not extinguish. Do you not think this of great import? You will hear by the papers of the proceedings at Manchester and Hunt's triumphal entry into London. It would take me a whole day and a quire of paper to give you any thing like detail. I will merely mention that it is calculated that 30,000 people were in the streets waiting for him — The whole distance from the Angel Islington to the Crown and Anchor was lined with Multitudes." (16).

Though very simplified from the point of view of exact historiography, Keats's survey of English and European political evolution delineates correctly its upward progressive line from feudalism to capitalism; it also rightly observes that the evolutionary process is not smooth and straightforward and, moreover, that its motive force is the class-struggle. As the discourse is very brief and general, it is not quite clear which historical events are regarded by Keats as the starting-points of the three great changes he speaks of as having occurred during the last two or three centuries before his time. I should think that, in English history at least, the first change, "a change for the better", begins with the feudal wars between the Houses of Lancaster and York (the so-called Wars of the Roses) from which Henry Tudor had come out victoriously, founding a new royal dynasty as Henry VII. The Tudors broke the power of the barons and in their struggle were strongly supported by the rising burgher class. The second change (for the worse) is probably the consolidation of absolutism under James and Charles I against which the English people "made a grand kick" in the Revolution of 1640 so that (in spite of the restoration of Stuarts which Keats seems to leave out of account) "they were freemen under William 3rd".

In their Revolution the English people had broken the power of kings and feudals and installed the rule of the bourgeoisie much earlier than the other European nations. Their example was then followed by the French bourgeois democratic revolution of 1789, which (apart from the previous English revolution) may be regarded as the beginning of the third and last change, "a change for the better" again, though the

immediate consequences of the French Revolution for the English were bad because the English governing classes, afraid of a democratic revolution at home, declared war against all progressive ideas and actions, especially against any attempts "of innovation and improvement". The most progressive idea of Keats's discourse is contained in the last sentences, estimating correctly the power of reactionary forces in his time, but also the importance and growing power of the forces of progress. There is no doubt in Keats's mind that the struggle of the people against the Tory government and the reactionary ruling class is just and will triumph. The last change for the better is, in Keats's eyes, a lasting phase in the historical evolution of society; no persecution can turn the tide of progress back. By 1819 Keats was already able to deduce from the stirring political events (particularly the Manchester Massacre, 16th August, 1819) historically correct conclusions concerning the real situation of the struggle between the masses of the people and the reactionary government. The great revolutionary "alterations" resulting from "apparently small causes" did not take place during Keats's life, but they did occur just as Keats foresaw them.

The Peterloo Massacre and other public events of the stormy year 1819 removed many doubts which Keats had about the outcome of the great struggle between the forces of progress and reaction as late as the autumn of 1818, as can be seen from his earlier letter to George and Georgiana Keats in America (written in October, 1818) in the passage where he analyses the situation in contemporary England, Europe and America. As the ideas expressed in this passage are very helpful to anyone who wants to understand Keats's social views, I will quote it in full:

"As for Politics they are in my opinion only sleepy because they will soon be too wide awake — Perhaps not — for the long and continued Peace of England itself has given us notions of personal safety which are likely to prevent the re-establishment of our national Honesty — There is of a truth nothing manly or sterling in any part of the Government. There are many Madmen in the Country, I have no doubt, who would like to be beheaded on Tower Hill merely for the sake of éclat, there are many Men like Hunt who from a principle of taste would like to see things go on better, there are many like Sir F. Burdett who like to sit at the head of political dinners — but there are none prepared to suffer in obscurity for their Country — the motives of our worst Men are interest and of our best Vanity — We have no Milton, no Algernon Sidney — Governors in these days lose the title of Man in exchange for that of Diplomat and Minister. We breathe in a sort of official atmosphere — All the departments of Government have strayed far from Simplicity which is the greatest of Strength — there is as much difference in this respect between the present Government and Oliver Cromwell's, as there is between the 12 Tables of Rome and the volumes of Civil Law which were digested by Justinian. A Man now entitled Chancellor has the same honour paid to him whether he be a Hog or a Lord Bacon... No sensation is created by Greatness but by the number of orders a Man has at his button holes. Notwithstanding the part which the Liberals take in the cause of Napoleon I cannot but think he has done more harm to the life of Liberty than any one else could have done: not that the divine right Gentlemen have done or intend to do any good... The worst thing he has done is, that he has taught them how to organize their monstrous armies. The Emperor Alexander it is said intends to divide his Empire as did Diocletian — creating two Czars besides himself, and continuing the supreme Monarch of the whole — Should he do this and they for a series of years keep peaceable among themselves Russia may spread her conquest even to China — I think it very likely that China itself may fall, Turkey certainly will... Dilke, whom you know to be a Godwin perfectibility man, pleases himself with the idea that America will be the country to take up the human intellect where England leaves off — I differ there with him greatly — A country like the United States whose greatest men are Franklins and Washingtons will never do that — They are great Men doubtless but how are they to be compared to those of our countrymen, Milton and the two Sidneys — The one is a philosophical Quaker full of mean and thrifty maxims, the other sold the very charger who had taken him through all his battles. Those Americans are great but they are not sublime Men — the humanity of the United States can never reach the sublime..."

What strikes us most in the above extract is Keats's uncompromising criticism and condemnation of the English reactionary government and of European despotic monarchs who have created the Holy Alliance to keep their own peoples in subjection and spread their dominion over other parts of the world. Unlike Byron and Hazlitt, Keats does not think much of Napoleon because he hated all military dictators and conquerors without exception; still he saw in Napoleon less harm than in the monarchs who learnt from his example, and less danger for progress and liberty than in them. Keats's doubts of inevitable continuous progress of society — expressed in his criticism of his friend Dilke and of Dilke's master Godwin — result from his expectation of human salvation from "sublime" individuals, such as he did not find anywhere around him. His idealistic conception of greatness could not find its realisation either in the leading politicians of the bourgeois liberal opposition (such as Francis Burdett or Leigh Hunt), or in the leading fighters for the independence of America (Franklin, Washington). Though he does not say so, Keats seems to have vaguely apprehended that social salvation can be expected from the masses of the people when conscious of their historical mission. Evidence of this apprehension is, for instance, Keats's explicit emphasis on "simplicity" as one of the typical qualities of real greatness and sublimity, or his regarding as true patriots men who are humble and unselfish, prepared to suffer for their country "in obscurity" with no other motive than the good of their fellow-men and their country. This apprehension of the essential importance of the people in the struggle for liberty changed in course of time into deeper comprehension and conviction. This was due chiefly to the influence of the working-class movement, e. g. the great strike of Manchester weavers, in 1818, with whom Keats identifies himself when he writes (in a letter to George on September 24th, 1819): "We struck for wages like the Manchester weavers — but to no purpose — so we are all out of employ"; or in the same letter, but about a week earlier, when he says: "My name with the literary fashionables is vulgar — I am a weaver boy to them"; and, of course, the Manchester Massacre in August, 1819 (17).

In the struggle of the people for liberty from oppression and exploitation Keats attributed great importance to education and knowledge in which a writer must play a weighty part. Therefore he held in great esteem those men of letters, journalists and publishers who fought in their books and articles on the side of progress and liberty. Apart from his letters, he gave expression to the idea of the importance of educating the people in a Spenserian stanza which he inserted into his copy of Spenser's *Fairy Queen*, very likely in 1818, and which was first printed by Lord Houghton in 1848 with the following note: "The copy of Spenser which Keats had in daily use, contains the following stanza, inserted at the close of canto ii. book v. His sympathies were very much on the side of the revolutionary "Gyant", who "undertook for to repair" the "realms and nations run awry", and to "suppress tyrants that make men subject to their law", "and lordings curb that commons over-awe", while he grudged the legitimate victory, as he rejected the conservative philosophy, of the "righteous Artegall" and his comrade, the fierce defender of privilege and order. And he expressed, in this *ex post facto* prophecy, his conviction of the ultimate triumph of freedom and equality by the power of transmitted knowledge" (18).

The stanza runs as follows:

*In after time a sage of mickle lore,  
Yclep'd Typographus, the Giant took,*

*And did refit his limbs as heretofore,  
 And made him read in many a learned book,  
 And into many a lively legend look;  
 Thereby in goodly themes so training him,  
 That all his brutishness he quite forsook,  
 When, meeting Artegall and Talus grim,  
 The one he struck stone blind, the other's eyes wax dim.*

Keats was a great admirer of Spenser's poetry, but he did not agree with Spenser's conservative social and political creed. Particularly, Spenser's haughty and hostile relation to the people and his approval of the brutal oppression of the Irish population by their British enslavers called forth Keats's bitter indignation. Keats's stanza, therefore, criticises Spenser's attitude by making the Giant (who in Spenser's *Fairy Queen* is the personification of unlawful rebellion against legitimate government) a symbol of the spontaneous and just struggle of the enslaved people for liberty. The Giant's defeat by Artegall and his "iron man" Talus cannot be final. The sage Typographer (representing knowledge and education) resurrects him and arms him with a weapon that shall overcome the enemies of the people, knowledge.

\* Keats made an attempt to justify philosophically his belief in the power of knowledge and education in his well-known discourse on "soul-making", i. e. formation of character and personality, in a letter to George written in April, 1819. This speculation is characteristic of Keats's instinctive inclination towards materialism and his conscious tendency towards idealism, the result being an irreconcilable contradiction which he never succeeded to resolve. The passage being too long for full quotation, I will cite only the most important parts:

"I have been reading lately two very different books, Robertson's *America* and Voltaire's *Siècle de Louis XIV.* It is like walking arm and arm between Pizarro and the great-little Monarch. In how lamentable a case do we see the great body of the people in both instances: in the first, where Men might seem to inherit quiet of mind from unsophisticated senses; from uncontamination of civilisation; and especially from their being as it were estranged from the mutual helps of Society and its mutual injuries — and thereby more immediately under the protection of Providence — even there they had mortal pains to bear as bad, or even worse than bailiffs, debts and poverties of civilised life. The whole appears to resolve into this — that Man is originally "a poor forked creature" subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardships and inquietude of some kind or other... How far by the persevering endeavours of a seldom appearing Socrates Mankind may be made happy — I can imagine such happiness carried to an extreme — but what must it end with? — Death... But in truth I do not at all believe in this sort of perfectibility — the nature of the world will not admit of it — the inhabitants of the world will correspond to itself... The common cognomen 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! Call the world, if you please, "The vale of Soul-making". Then you will find out the use of the world... I say "Soul-making", Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence — There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions — but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. Intelligences are atoms of perception — they know, and they see, and they are pure, in short they are God — How then are Souls to be made?... How, but by the medium of a world like this?... This is effected by three grand materials acting the one upon the other for a series of years. These three Materials are the *Intelligence* — the *human heart* (as distinguished from intelligence or mind) and the *World* or *Elemental space* suited for the proper action of *Mind* and *Heart* on each other for the purpose of forming the *Soul* or *Intelligence* destined to possess the sense of *Identity*... I will put it in the most homely form possible — I will call the world a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read — I will call the *human heart* the *horn Book* used in that School — and I will call the *Child* able to read, the *Soul* made from that *School* and its *hornbook*. Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is

to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! Not merely is the heart a hornbook, it is the Mind's Bible, it is the mind's experience, it is the seat from which the mind or intelligence sucks its identity. As various as the lives of men are — so various become their souls, and thus does God make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the Sparks of his own essence... This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity ... If what I have said should not be plain enough, as I fear it may not be, I will put you in the place where I began in this series of thoughts — I mean, I began by seeing how man was formed by circumstances — And what are circumstances... but fortifiers or alterers of his nature?"

In his "series of thoughts" Keats asks and answers two main questions: the question of the progress of human society, and that of the formation of individual consciousness. Of course, he touches upon many other philosophical and psychological problems, connected more or less closely with his main inquiry. The problems themselves, as well as the content and form of Keats's answers, are not determined solely by his personal interest and private experience, though the rôle these factors play in the process of his speculation is very great; they are rather dictated by objective social conditions and relations. Keats must have been aware of this wider scope of his discussion, for he himself calls attention to the fact that the starting-point of his chain of thoughts was the notion that man is formed by circumstances, and for, in a different connection, he says that "axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses".

One of the positive traits of Keats's speculation is his firm recognition of the real existence of the material world and its determining influence upon human consciousness and character. But his idealistic (Platonic, though probably not drawn direct from Plato) view that intelligences are sparks of the divinity and that the creative principle is God prevents Keats to infer from his right notion of the dependence of consciousness on objective reality the only logical conclusion that consciousness is determined by being, that it is only a form of the existence of matter.

In his attempt to solve the problem of the progress of man and society in the course of evolution Keats arrived, in that phase of his own intellectual development at least, at an unwarranted refusal of the idea of perfectibility implying a steady improvement of human nature and the material and cultural standard of mankind because he overrated natural obstacles that may hinder such progress and that, in his opinion, make it impossible. The cause of this pessimistic view may be seen in Keats's limited knowledge of the real historical process and of the advance science had made up to his time. It is certainly strange that — living as he did in a period of revolutionary scientific and technical advance in agricultural and industrial production — he failed to notice that though men cannot act against natural laws, they can learn to know them, make use of them and, to a large extent, even to alter nature, in accordance with her laws, so as to avail themselves of her infinite resources.

\* \* \*

Though Keats refused to call the world in which we live "a vale of tears" and regarded this orthodox Christian conception as a silly superstition, he was not blind to the existence of pain, trouble, ugliness, injustice and other evil things in our lives. He was by no means satisfied with the objective social realities of his age and country. On the contrary, as we have shown in the preceding pages, he often expressed his dissatisfaction and protest against these social evils. From his poems and letters we may collect a large number of quotations to this effect, even if we limit ourselves to those expressions which have a general character. Thus he speaks of

"the hard world", of "the tempest-cares of life", of "the world" which is "full of troubles", of "this fev'rous world", "where there is no quiet, nothing but teasing and snubbing and vexation", where "there is nothing stable" and "uproar's your only music". Thus, especially later in life, he learnt to hate it, and its "brutality" evoked at times a yearning for the grave where he would find rest at last (15).

But Keats was also aware that his occasional desire to escape from this world, of whose real existence he had no doubts, to a happier world of his dreams was not worthy of man. And so he wrote, for instance, in his letter to Taylor (April, 1818): "I shall be more bent to all sort of troubles and disagreeables — young Men for some time have an idea that such a thing as happiness is to be had and therefore are extremely impatient under any unpleasant restraining — in time however, of such stuff is the world about them, they know better and instead of striving from Uneasiness greet it as an habitual sensation, a pannier which is to weigh upon them through life." Similarly, in a letter to Reynolds (May, 1818), he declared his faith in the reality of this world and of progress when he wrote: "...there is really a grand march of intellect —, It proves that a mighty providence subdues the mightiest minds [Keats alludes to Milton and Wordsworth — K. Š.] to the service of the time being, whether it be in human Knowledge or Religion... After all there is certainly something real in the World... the truth is there is something real in the World."

By the "something real in the world" Keats often meant the unpleasant and painful realities which men have to bear patiently; he himself felt that he could bear real troubles more patiently than imaginary ones. Allow me to quote the passage from a letter to Charles Brown (23 Sept., 1819) which expresses this feeling most adequately: "I assure you I am as far from being unhappy as possible. Imaginary grievances have always been more my torment than real ones. You know this well. Real ones will never have any other effect upon me than to stimulate me to get out of or avoid them. This is easily accounted for. Our imaginary woes are conjured up by our passions, and are fostered by passionate feeling; our real ones come of themselves, and are opposed by an abstract exertion of mind. Real grievances are displacers of passion. The imaginary nail a man down for a sufferer, as on a cross; the real spur him up into an agent."

The generalised criticism of the world and society, quoted above, may, however, be more than balanced by other utterances in which Keats demonstrates his love of nature, men, the human nature, the great individuals who have done good to humanity as artists, thinkers, patriots etc., as well as his deep sympathies with the common people suffering unjustly in the cruel social conditions. Indeed the whole of Keats's poetry, from the sonnet *On Peace* down to the *Bright Star* sonnet (which is conventionally regarded as his "last" poem), is imbued with the author's love of nature, men and life.

Therefore Keats's occasional expressions condemning the world and life cannot be cited as evidence of his pessimism. If we examine carefully the circumstances in which this or that generalised condemnation of "the world" was uttered, we find that its generalised character expresses a subjective, personal notion or experience, which has no general, objective validity. It is more and more clear that in each concrete case which led Keats to pass unfavourable criticism on the world, what he really condemned was not the whole world but only the world of capitalist oppression and exploitation.

With such a world Keats could not come to friendly terms, though he was forced to bear its wrongs and brutality because, as he wrote to Fanny Brawne (in July, 1819), he hated it; "it battered too much the wings of his self-will." When the spectacle



or personal experience of the cruelty of this world — we should remember that nearly always, when using this term, Keats meant human society — became unbearable, Keats found comfort in writing or reading poetry. In such moments he longed with his nightingale to

*Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs,  
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.*

(*Ode to a Nightingale*, stanza 3.)

Thus expressed, the desire to escape is no escape at all, but rather accusation and condemnation of the order of society that allows such sorrows and wrongs to happen to people, or even causes them to happen. It shows, moreover, that Keats also belonged to those poets "to whom the miseries of the world are misery, and will not let them rest", though, in his modesty, he did not regard himself in this light, but rather thought of his own poetry as the work of "a dreaming thing, a fever of himself", "a weak dreamer" etc., as Moneta calls him in *The Fall of Hyperion*.

There is plentiful evidence in Keats's poems and letters that his heart was always full of sympathy with the wronged and suffering, his hand always ready to help them. Though unmoved by the brutal and unjust attack on his own poetry and character in the Tory press, he strongly resented similar attacks on his friends Hunt and Hazlitt, or the insolent conduct of superiors to their inferiors. A typical instance of indignation at such conduct is the following passage from the letter to Benjamin Bailey, whose rightful promotion was unjustly delayed by the Bishop of Lincoln:

"Before I received your Letter I had heard of your disappointment — an unlook'd for piece of villainy... it must be shocking to find in sacred Profession such barefaced oppression and impertinence — The Stations and Grandeurs of the World have taken it into their heads that they cannot commit themselves towards an inferior in rank — but is not the impertinence from one above to one below more wretchedly mean than from the low to the high? There is something so nauseous in self-willed yawning impudence in the shape of conscience — it sinks the Bishop of Lincoln into a smashed frog putrefying: that a rebel against common decency should escape the Pillory! That a mitre should cover a Man guilty of the most cock-omical, tyrannical and indolent impertinence!... — Yet doth he sit in his Palace. Such is this World — and we live — you have surely — in a continual struggle against the suffocation of accidents — we must bear... the Proud Mans Contumely."

This letter, written in November 1817, shows that Keats's hostile attitude to the Court, the aristocracy, the government and the representatives of power in the State because all belonged to political reaction, included — and quite justly — the representatives of the Church, especially its hierarchy. Keats was not hostile to religion on principle — and many of his intimate friends (e. g. Haydon, Severn, Taylor, Bailey etc.) were orthodox Anglicans (while some were deists or atheists), but he inclined more and more strongly, as time went on, to purely ethical deism, so that in the eye of any Christian church he would be an atheist. His attitude to official churches was almost uniformly hostile, particularly in the last years of his

life. As evidence we might quote his criticism of parsons in the letter to George (March, 1819):

"Parsons will always keep up their character, but as it is said there are some animals the ancients knew which we do not, let us hope our posterity will miss the black badger with tri-cornered hat; Who knows but some Reviewer or Buffon or Pliny may put an account of the parson in the Appendix; no one will then believe it any more than we believe in the Phoenix." In the same letter (but some weeks earlier) he wrote: "I begin to hate Parsons... A Parson is a Lamb in a drawing room and a lion in the Vestry. The notions of Society will not permit a Parson to give way to his temper in any shape — so he festers in himself — his features get a peculiar diabolical self sufficient iron stupid expression, He is continually acting. His mind is against every Man and every Mans mind is against him. He is an Hypocrite to the Believer and a Coward to the unbeliever. He must be either a Knave or an Idiot. And there is no Man so much to be pitied as an idiot parson. The soldier who is cheated into an esprit du corps by a red coat, a Band and Colours for the purpose of nothing — is not half so pitiable as the Parson who is led by the nose by the Bench of Bishops — and is smothered in absurdities — a poor necessary subaltern of the Church..."

Keats, as can be seen from the above utterances as well as from his sonnet *Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition* (Dec. 22, 1816) reproaches the Anglican clergy with hypocrisy, and the churches with their negative or hostile attitude to human joys and pleasures. Instead of "fireside joys, and Lydian airs, and converse high of those with glory crowned", the church offers the believers only "gloominess", "dreadful cares", "the sermon's horrid sound" which affect the poet with "a damp, and a chill as from a tomb". Fortunately, the power of religious superstition is weakening and soon will be a thing of the past:

*I should feel a damp  
A chill as from a tomb, did I not know  
That they are dying like an outburnt lamp, —  
That 'tis their sighing, wailing ere they go  
Into oblivion — that fresh flowers will grow,  
And many glories of immortal stamp.*

Keats's anti-clerical attitude is reflected not only in his condemnation of the evil influence of the Anglican church on the minds and lives of the people, but also in his criticism of the Scottish Presbyterian church (in his letter to Tom written from Scotland between the 3rd and 9th July, 1818):

"A Scotch Girl stands in terrible awe of the Elders — poor little Susannas — They will scarcely laugh — they are greatly to be pitied and the Kirk is greatly to be damned. These Kirkmen have done Scotland good (Query?) they have made Men, Women, Old Men, Young Men, old Women, young women, boys, girls and infants all careful — so that they are formed into regular Phalanges of savers and gainers — such a thrifty army cannot fail to enrich their Country and give it a greater appearance of comfort than that of their poor Irish neighbours — These Kirkmen have done Scotland harm — they have banished puns and laughing and Kissing (except in cases where the very danger and crime must make it very fine and gustful)... I would sooner be a wild deer than a Girl under the dominion of the Kirk, and I would sooner be a wild hog than be the occasion of a Poor Creatures pennance before those execrable elders."

From a letter to Leigh Hunt (10th May, 1817) it seems that Haydon was right when he attributed Keats's abandonment of his former orthodox religious belief to the influence of the atheistic Hunt. In this letter namely Keats fully agrees with Hunt's attack in *The Examiner* of May 4, 1817, upon religious intolerance and sectarian fanaticism and he writes: "The last Examiner was a battering Ram against Christianity — Blasphemy — Tertullian — Erasmus — Sir Philip Sidney — And then the dreadful Petzelians and their expiation by blood — and do Christians

shudder at the same thing in a Newspaper which they attribute to their God in its most aggravated form?"(19)

A radical change in Keats's attitude to religious superstition and clericalism is to be dated, at the latest, since his closer acquaintance with Leigh Hunt; a similarly radical change in his boyish regard for military valour and his worship of soldiers as heroes probably occurred even earlier. We certainly do not find any traces of it in either his letters or poems, whereas his religious education has left more permanent impressions and is reflected in his earlier poems (e. g. in the sonnet *As from the darkening gloom*, inspired most probably by the death of his maternal grandmother, Alice Jennings, in 1814), and in some of his letters, especially those to his sister Fanny.

With regard to war and military valour, his professed opinions throughout the years of his literary activities are those of a convinced pacifist and anti-militarist who hates wars because they cause unnecessary bloodshed and devastation, and who detests conquerors, generals and professional soldiers because they are the instrument of oppression and subjugation of the people and nations. It is clear, though, that he approved of defensive and liberation wars and highly honoured fighters for liberty (see his tribute to Alfred, Tell, Kosciuszko, Cromwell, Washington, etc.). His anti-militarist attitude is reflected besides the early sonnet *On Peace* also in the *Epistle to my brother George*, where we read the following lines describing the place in the fields where he was writing the poem:

*The Stalks, and Blades*  
*Chequer my Tablet with their quivering shades.*  
*On one side, is a field of drooping Oats;*  
*Through which the Poppies show their scarlet Coats;*  
*So pert, and useless, that they bring to Mind*  
*The scarlet Coats, that pester human kind.*

In a letter to Reynolds (written in the Isle of Wight, in April, 1817) Keats gives vent to similar feelings:

"On the road from Cowes to Newport I saw some extensive Barracks which disgusted me extremely with Government for placing such a nest of Debauchery in so beautiful a place — I asked a man on the coach about this — and he said that the people had been spoiled — In the room where I slept at Newport I found this on the window "O Isle spoil'd by the Military!"

Even when he was writing in a light, humorous manner, as for instance in the letter to the Misses M. and S. Jeffrey (4 June, 1818), he took the opportunity of jibing maliciously at the reactionary government and the burden of maintaining a large army at the cost of the people, when he said:

"...by the bye talking of everlasting Knapsack I intend to make my fortune by them in case of a War (which you must consequently pray for) for contracting with Government for said materials to the economy of one branch of the Revenue. At all events a Tax which is taken from the people and shoulder'd upon the Military ought not to be snubb'd at."

Among the fullest and most explicit expressions of Keats's revolt against wars and conquerors who are celebrated by history ("the gilded cheat", as Keats calls her) are the introductory lines to the second book of *Endymion* on the theme of "sovereign power of love" and its "grief and balm." "All records", says Keats, "saving thine", i. e. love's, leave us indifferent and cold.

*The woes of Troy, towers smothering o'er their blaze,  
Stiff-holden shields, far-piercing spears, keen blades,  
Struggling, and blood, and shrieks — all dimly fades  
Into some backward corner of the brain;  
Yet, in our very souls, we feel amain  
The close of Troilus and Cressid sweet.*

Keats rightly condemns history as it was taught and studied in his age because it neglected the human element, everyday life and interests of the people, and enhanced conquerors and wars, rulers and the ruling classes. True history, however, is the record of human hearts, of love (which is to be understood in the broadest sense, not merely the strictly sensuous love between man and woman) in particular, for it is love which is the constructive, life-giving principle tending towards happiness. The man who, like Keats, loves his fellow-men and human nature is deeply moved and encouraged to do good only by the records of loving human hearts, not by those of war and destruction. That is Keats's deepest humanistic conviction.

Keats was resolved to fight for this idea of human love, brotherhood and true friendship with the best weapon he had at his disposal, poetry. He could not rest in inactivity, though he felt that his powers were still weak to rouse and persuade others that the road to happiness was the road of mutual love and assistance.

*Fearfully  
Must such conviction come upon his head,  
Who, thus far, discontent, has dared to tread,  
Without one muse's smile, or kind behest,  
The path of love and poesy. But rest,  
In chafing restlessness, is yet more drear  
Than to be crush'd, in striving to uprear  
Love's standard on the battlements of song.*

## NOTES

(1) *The Letters of John Keats*. Edited by Maurice Buxton Forman. Third Edition. Oxford University Press. 1948, p. 407.

(2) Marx—Engels: *On Art and Literature* (Czech edition, Praha 1951, p. 223).

(3) Gilbert, Allan H.: *Literary Criticism: Plato to Dryden*. 1940, p. 108.

(4) Timofeev, L. I.: *Theory of Literature* (Czech edition, Praha 1953, p. 352).

(5) Anikst, A.: *Istoriya angliyskoy literatury*. Moscow, 1956, p. 207.

(6) Op. cit. under (1), p. 67.

(7) Op. cit. under (1), p. 131.

(8) Op. cit. under (1), p. 503.

(9) Colvin, Sidney: *John Keats*. London 1920, p. 12.

(10) *Ib.*, p. 14.

(11) Algernon Sidney (1622—1683), Sir Henry Vane (1613—1662) and Lord William Russell (1633—1683) were all beheaded under Charles II for their active resistance to the Restoration of the Stuarts. Keats learned about their fate from Burnet's *History of my Own Time*.

(12) Op. cit. under (1), p. 96.

(13) *The Poems and Verses of John Keats*. Edited by John Middleton Murry. London 1949, p. 463.

(14) *History of English Literature. The Romantic Period*. (Czech edition. Praha 1955, p. 136).

(15) The quotations from Keats's *Letters* are given approximately in the chronological order of their occurrences.

(16) Op. cit. under (1), pp. 406—408. Keats's account of Henry Hunt's return to London was written before Hunt's trial. According to *The Gentleman's Magazine* (September, 1819) more than 200,000 people were in the streets and in Hunt's cortege accompanying the popular radical leader from Islington to the Strand.

(17) As early as December 1817 Keats wrote in a letter to his brothers George and Tom: "Hone, the publisher's trial, you must find very amusing; and, as Englishmen, very encouraging — his *Not Guilty* is a thing, which not to have been, would have dulled still more Liberty's Emblazoning — Lord Ellenborough has been paid in his own coin — Wooler and Hone have done us an essential service." (*Letters*, p. 70—71.)

William Hone (1780—1842) stood on trial three times (on the 18th, 19th, and 20th of December, 1817, respectively) for publishing "impious, profane and scandalous libels", but was found not guilty by the jury. Thomas Wooler, another progressive writer, and editor of the Radical journal *The Black Dwarf*, was also found not guilty and both had to be set free. The third progressive publisher and bookseller, Richard Carlile, whom Keats speaks about in his letters, was summoned before the court of law in February, 1819, for publishing Paine's *Age of Reason* and Palmer's *Principles of Nature*, and after a trial lasting three days was found guilty and sentenced to two years' imprisonment for the publication of Paine, one year for publishing Palmer's book, and to a fine of 1500 pounds. Moreover until the fine was paid and security obtained that Carlile would behave well for the rest of his life, he was to remain in prison indefinitely. The condemnation of Carlile and the liberation of Wooler and Hone sufficiently demonstrate how reactionary persecution had intensified between 1817 and 1819 owing to the growth of unrest among the people. This persecution of progressive writers and publishers increased even more after Peterloo; in 1820 journalists Wroe, Wooler, Edmonds and Lewis, as well as a number of their employees

were imprisoned and even two Radical baronets (Francis Burdett and Charles Wolseley) were sentenced to imprisonment. More details about these events are found in Maccoby's *English Radicalism 1786-1832*, p. 361.

(18) Houghton, Lord: *The Life and Letters of John Keats*, London 1946, p. 166.

(19) Keats learned about the *Petzelians* from *The Examiner*, which on the 4th of May, 1817 brought out the following paragraph:

*Vienna, April 16.* — Letters from Upper Austria speak of a sect formed there, called Petzelians, from the name of the founder, Petzel, a Priest of Branau. Atrocious accounts are related of this sect. In imitation of the Spenceans of England, they preach the equality and community of property, and they sacrifice (I dare scarcely touch upon these horrors) men, to purify others from their sins. It is added, that this Sect sacrificed, during Passion Week, several men, who died in the most horrible torments. A girl of 13 was put to death in the village of Afflewang, on Good Friday. Seven men have been the victims of this abominable faith. The author of the Sect, Petzel, with 86 followers, are arrested: military detachments have been quartered in the villages, and tranquillity has been restored to the hearts of the wretched inhabitants. Petzel has been sent to the fortress of Spielberg, where he will soon be brought to trial." [Op. cit. under (1), p. 23, Note 2]. — I have attempted to verify this account in the Archives of Brno, but have found no trace of the name of Petzel in the official record of the prisoners at Spielberg. Nor is there any record of the priest and his sect in the official German gazettes of Vienna or Brno referring to the alleged events.

## V Ý T A H

### Odras společenské skutečnosti v básních a dopisech Johna Keatse

Úvaha je rozvržena do čtyř kapitol, z nichž první nazvaná „Anglické romantické hnutí“ načrtává obraz historické epochy, která dala vznik romantismu v evropských zemích, s hlavním zřetelem k poměrům v Británii, jejichž odrazem a zobrazením v Keatsově poesii a soukromé korespondenci se autor zabývá. Dobu, v níž Keats žil a tvořil, charakterizuje úhrnně jako období bouřlivých a převratných změn v hospodářském, politickém i kulturním životě anglického lidu, jejichž výsledkem byla kvalitativní přeměna Británie ze země v podstatě zemědělské v průmyslovou a obchodní velmoc a z aristokraticko-buržoasní monarchie, nastolené revolucí r. 1688, v buržoasné demokratické koloniální imperium. V této kapitole také pojednává o charakteru anglického romantismu v celku i o společných a rozdílných znacích jeho největších představitelů, a to jak konservativních, tak pokrokových či revolučních, mezi které je třeba zařadit i Keatse.

Toto zařazení Keatse k romantikům jako Byron, Shelley, Leigh Hunt, Hazlitt aj. se podrobněji zdůvodňuje v dalších třech kapitolách, které jsou jádrem pojednání. Druhá kapitola „Odras společenské skutečnosti v raných básních Keatsových“ dokumentuje, že už od zahájení literární činnosti byl Keats básník, který se živě zajímal o veřejné společenské, hlavně politické a kulturní dění, a svému pokrokovému smýšlení dal také jednoznačně jasný výraz v svých nejstarších skladbách. Je nespravedlivé a nepravdivé vidět v něm básníka apolitického nebo únikového. Vinnu na tom, že se nezapojil do veřejného života aktivněji, má to, že byl ještě mlád a nezkušený, a že se musil pilně připravovat na své budoucí povolání lékařské, později literární. Když pak fyzicky a duševně dospěl, znemožnila mu aktivní činnost pro obecné blaho, po které vždy toužil, nemoc, která také předčasně ukončila jeho básnickou kariéru. Ale i jako básník vědomě sloužil věci pokroku, míru a svobody proti útlaču a vykořisťování širokých mas pracujících.

Třetí kapitola „Keatsova kritika společnosti“ dokládá Keatsovo demokratické přesvědčení a jeho nepřátelský postoj k soudobé politické reakci, ke kapitalismu a k buržoasní společnosti. V básni „Robin Hood“ např. se Keatsův kritický odsudek vládařů a vládnoucích tříd dokonce mění ve výzvu k ozbrojenému odboji lidu proti nim.

Poslední kapitola „Keatsův humanismus“ podrobně dokládá a osvětluje Keatsovu lásku k prostému lidu a k člověku vůbec, ukazuje však zároveň, že Keats dobře rozlišoval mezi lidmi dobrými a pokrokovými, které miloval a hájil, a nepřáteli lidu, které nemilosrdně odsuzoval a nenáviděl. Ačkoliv se u něho ozývaly projevy nedůvěry v neustálý buržoasní pokrok, nikdy neztratil hlubokou víru v příchod šťastnější budoucnosti pro celé lidstvo; tato víra se zakládala na jeho přesvědčení o vrozené dobré a nesebeckosti lidské povahy. Zkušenost ho ovšem poučila, že překážky, které bude nutno překonat na cestě k svobodě a spravedlivějšímu řádu, tj. kořistnické sobectví, tyranie, kapitalistické vykořisťování, militarismus, pověra, klerikalismus atd. (proti všem těmto záporným jevům Keats nesmloouvavě vystupoval a bojoval v básních i dopisech), jsou mocné, třebaš nikoli nezdolné. Za nejvýznamnějšího činitele v boji ponižovaných a utiskovaných tříd a národů pokládal vzdělání a výchovu. V uvědomování a vzdělávání širokých lidových vrstev mohl, jak si přál, i on — básník a spisovatel stojící na straně svobody, demokracie a pokroku — přispět k vítězství jejich boje a uskutečnění jejich tužeb a snů. Není sporu, že se Keats sám toužil stát básníkem svého lidu, neboť v tom právem viděl svou nejjistější naději na uměleckou nesmrtelnost. A té dosáhl v svých nejlepších skladbách, v ódách, nedokončeném eposu o Hyperionovi a básnických povídkách, v nichž se mu podařilo dokázat jednotu „pravdy a krásy“, tj. jednotu pravdivého ideového obsahu s krásnou uměleckou formou.