John Keats, as a principal figure in the Romantic movement in Europe, reacted against the philosophy of the Enlightenment. His poetry and letters are testament to his distrust of, and resistance to, an ever increasingly clinical and "reasonable" society. Keats's poetic thought--imaginative, speculative, dialectic--is the antithesis of an Enlightenment philosophy which put its faith in science, objectivity, and logical deduction.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the letters and poems of Keats through the lens of Enlightenment philosophy; it will gauge Keats's theories of the imagination in terms of that philosophy. As I move through Keats's literary response to the enlightenment, I am also examining Keats's professional progression from surgeon's apprentice--a trade strongly associated with the Enlightenment--to a primary figure in the movement away from Enlightenment and toward Romantic philosophy.
This study focuses on the writings of Keats, both his letters and poetry, contextualizing his poetic thought and work while answering the critical question: How does Keats’s writing reveal his reaction to Enlightenment philosophy?
Visions Beyond Reality: Keats's Poetic Rejection of Enlightenment Philosophy

by

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Corey J. Plett, Author
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1. INTRODUCTION

Background

I found that I cannot exist without poetry--without eternal poetry--half the day will not do--. . . . (18 April, 1817, John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds)

The literary movement long referred to as Romanticism which took root in Germany and spread through Europe to France and England roughly between 1770 and 1848, can be characterized by its violent reaction to the Enlightenment, its assertion of the self, and its value of individual experience. As one of the principal figures in the Romantic movement, John Keats’s stature as a poet has continued to grow steadily since the 1848 publication of the first biography about him, Life, Letters and Literary Remains, by Richard Monckton Milnes. The biography made clear how extraordinarily rapid Keats’s development had been and what immense natural endowment he must have brought to bear. His contemporary, Alfred Lord Tennyson, considered Keats the greatest poet of the nineteenth century, and the twentieth-century poet T.S. Eliot found

'All quotations from Keats’s letters are taken from Hyder Edward Rollins', The Letters of John Keats. Page references will not be cited, rather all quotations will be identified with the date and recipient of the letter in parentheses.
Keats's work worth praising in his commentary. Keats's letters, published in 1848 and 1878, are now regarded with the same admiration given his poetry, with many of the letters themselves adding as valuable commentary to the poetry. Eliot describes the letters as "certainly the most notable and most important ever written by any English poet" (qtd. in Bate 11).

Keats's thinking about philosophical matters is perhaps as far from dogmatic as any of his contemporaries. As he speculates on any large question, such as the meaning of life and death, the answer he formulates is soon challenged by an opposite, but possibly equally compelling and true answer that he has also formulated. The struggle within him sometimes caries him to oxymoronic extremes in his poetry, as in these lines spoken by Apollo in "Hyperion":

Most like the struggle at the gate of death;
Or liker still to one who should take leave
Of pale immortal death, and with pang
As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse
Die into life. (lines 126-130)²

²All quotations from Keats's poems are taken from Jack Stillinger's, John Keats's Complete Poems. Page references will not be cited, rather all poems will be identified with the lines quoted in parentheses.
His apparent struggle between antithetical beliefs, or perhaps possibilities of belief, is due, in part, to his speculative nature. Keats reacts against the defining order of logic which pervaded the thought of the Enlightenment in eighteenth-century society. Instead of logically deducing, he prefers to delve into further experience, dialectically, speculatively.

Keats understands that ultimate answers regarding notions of truth and reality are unattainable, but a genuine increase in awareness, understanding and wisdom, as Keats shows through Oceanus in "Hyperion," remains open to us all:

So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,
A power more strong in beauty, born of us
And fated to excel us, as we pass
In glory that old Darkness: nor are we
Thereby more conquer’d, than by us the rule
Of shapeless Chaos. (212-217)

He understands too, that the adventure of intellectual growth and worldly experience is in itself deeply gratifying.

This understanding is evidenced specifically in two poetic concepts of imagination which have become synonymous with Keatsian poetry: the sympathetic and the visionary.
The sympathetic imagination can be directed to points of view or beliefs as well as to objects or persons, and often, for Keats, the vividness of conception merges into direct empathy or sympathetic participation with the imagined object as it does with the nightingale in "Ode to a Nightingale." The visionary imagination reveals truth which lies beyond ordinary sensory perception as evidenced in "Ode to a Indolence" as Keats is drawn into the world of the figures which "pass'd, like figures on a marble urn." For Keats, this truth is just as vivid as the reality those of the Enlightenment associated with sensory perception. His claims of poetic "visions," however, seemed suspect to those of Enlightenment inclination who preferred to think in terms of logic. The cool reception his poetry received by critics of his day is testament to this suspicion.

"Negative Capability," as Keats termed it in a letter to his brothers George and Tom, or the ability of being in "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason," is perhaps the key to acceptance of his poetic thought. In Keats we do not generally find a cautious analysis of a proposition. Rather, he is quick to enter into ideas, exploring them by adopting and believing in them. In other words, although he is dialectical and speculative, Keats is, at the same
time, quick to commit himself to an idea. Thus, his speculations are only so in light of the fact that commitments are not final, dialectical only in the sense that they can be opposed. Enlightenment thought, on the other hand, demands factual answers arrived at through observation and analysis, whether the questions be philosophical or scientific.

Critical Question

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"--that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.
"Ode On a Grecian Urn" (46-50)

Keats often leaves the reader of his poetry with many questions. David G. Reide, in Oracles and Hierophants: Constructions of Romantic Authority, agrees saying, "Many of Keats’s best known poems resist closure, insist on open-endedness of experience and on their own indeterminacy" (253). This ambiguity is attributable, in part, to a struggle in his own mind between critical judgment, an idea associated with Enlightenment thought, and imagination, generally associated with Romantic thought. After all, though Keats lends his loyalty to Romanticism, he was, for more than four years, a surgeon’s apprentice and avid
attender of scientific lectures, and must have developed to a great extent the scientific and philosophical skills he later rejects in his poetry.

Indeed, seemingly unanswerable philosophical questions related directly to the role of poetry in society and on the psyche pervade his work: Should poetry offer a dreamy escape from the reality associated with everyday happenings and be made up of a copious amount of delightful sensation? Or is poetry an instrument of social consciousness by which the poet should dwell on the truth of human suffering and the complexity of human experience, diversity and conflict? Is it enough to reflect the truth of human sensation and experience or should poetry be humankind’s and society’s greatest achievement? What is true, beautiful, real? These are just a few of the questions Keats raises in and through his poetry. They are important questions because they show Keats’s struggle with a changing society; a society wrestling with the opposing paradigms represented by Enlightenment and Romantic philosophies. Percy Bysshe Shelley, another of Keats’s great poetic contemporary, was also wrestling with these questions when he wrote in the preface to “A Defense of Poetry” (1821) that visionary verse can affect the future of society more powerfully than
political propaganda, by transforming our moral imagination. (Dickstein 181)

But even when Keats seems to answer great philosophical questions regarding the nature of things such as truth and beauty—"truth is beauty, beauty truth"—the reader may be left with feelings of ambiguity. This ambiguity is in part, due to the fact that Keats stands at a pivotal point in the social and psychological movement from Enlightenment to Romantic, and he, no doubt, felt ambiguity himself as he struggled against the paradigms of Enlightenment philosophy. Many of the later poems, and the odes in particular, may, for example, be viewed as exploring the Romantic hope to intuit and imaginatively participate in the natural process of the universe. In the culmination of his work, "To Autumn," Keats reveals this Romantic hope through a vivid description of the process of nature:

While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue,
Then in a willful choir the small nats mourn
Among the river sallows, born aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-cricketts sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

(25-33)

In "To Autumn" we see Keats's imaginative participation with nature but we also see his understanding and acceptance of the processes of the universe. The overriding question of this thesis then, is, with seemingly divided loyalties--on one hand to his place in history, the Enlightenment, and on the other to Romantic imaginative poetry--how is Keats's reaction to Enlightenment philosophy manifested in his writing?

The Solution

For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,—
With the fine spell of words alone can save
Imagination from the sable chain
And dumb enchantment

("The Fall of Hyperion" 8-11)

Though Keats's poems often present contraries that are, for him, equally true and for the reader sometimes ambiguous, his understanding of Romantic ideals is unwavering. He uses the warmth of imaginative thought in sharp contrast to "cold philosophy" as he terms it in his poem, "Lamia." He finds in Negative Capability the ability to question for questioning's sake. He sees imaginative thought as the key to unbound eternity and scientific and
philosophical thought as the antithesis to poetic power. His poetry is his reaction to Enlightenment philosophy; his reaction to enlightenment philosophy is his poetry. And that reaction is further evidenced in his letters. My interests lie in outlining the major tenets of Enlightenment thought so that I can highlight those Keatsian writings that speak directly to it, both in opposition and distrust. In doing so, I will show Keats's steadfast loyalty to the poetic imagination and his distrust of its antithesis, Enlightenment philosophy.

Methodology

Keats is the embodiment of Romantic poetic thought and as a principal figure in the Romantic movement in Europe, he reacted against the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Rather than studying his poetic subjects in terms of Enlightenment philosophy, he begins most of his poetry with an earth-bound object or idea and seeks through it to find the key to eternity; he seeks both a fuller experience of concrete reality through the sympathetic imagination and escape from concrete reality through the visionary imagination. Keats's poetry and letters are testament to his distrust of, and resistance to, an increasingly clinical and and cynical society. His poetic thought is imaginative,
speculative, dialectic, the antithesis of Enlightenment philosophy which put its faith in science and logical deduction.

This study focuses on the writings of Keats, both his letters and poetry. It also contextualizes his poetic thought while answering the critical question: How does Keats's writing reveal his reaction to Enlightenment philosophy? The purpose of this thesis is to outline Enlightenment philosophy and examine the letters and poems of Keats to discover how exactly he reveals his own theories of the imagination and his responses to Enlightenment philosophy. In doing so, I am also examining Keats's progression from surgeon's apprentice, a trade strongly associated with the Enlightenment, to a primary figure in the movement away from Enlightenment philosophy and toward Romantic philosophy.
2. THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Romantic Reactions to the Enlightenment

Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine--
Unweave a rainbow, as it ere while made
("Lamia" 234-238)

The eighteenth century is generally characterized by a mechanistic world view and an emphasis on rationalism. These approaches to knowing affected far more than just scientific inquiry, reaching over into the area of aesthetic philosophy as well. Keats reacted against the mechanistic rationality of the eighteenth century. He wrote in an expression of new introspection, an inward-turning to consider the imagination and poetry. M. H. Abrams, in The Mirror and the Lamp, tells us that this philosophical and aesthetic development he reacted against was caused, at least in part, by an altered literary state in England and an acceleration in "the assimilation of Biblical and theological elements to secular or pagan frames of reference greatly accelerated from the Renaissance through the eighteenth-century" (Abrams 67). As the eighteenth century drew to a close, it brought with it a decline in the patron system and deterioration of the
relationship between poets and society. In his book, *Keats's Metaphors for the Poetic Imagination*, Mario D'Avanzo tells us that poets felt more of a responsibility to the imagination and its visions than to an audience: "The tendency was to turn his back to an often unsympathetic and even apathetic audience and sing to himself" (D'Avanzo 5). It was no longer enough to conceive of the imagination as a passive agent for the association of images; that activity is merely the work of what Samuel Coleridge terms the "mechanical fancy" (Abrams 168). In accord with their organic view of the universe, the Romantics depict the imagination as vital, living, intensely active and involved in the process of life. As noted above in "To Autumn," the imagination gives order to and shapes an apparently chaotic world by diffusing, dissolving, and dissipating in order to recreate, idealize, and unify (Abrams 169). In "Bright Star, Would I Were as Steadfast as Thou Art," a poem published after his death, Keats envisions himself one with nature and the process of the universe:

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Bright star, would I were as steadfast as thou art--
Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night,
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless eremite,
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The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors;
No--yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever in a sweet unrest,
Awake forever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever--or else swoon to death.

The first line is a prayer, and the next seven lines describe Keats's vision of the star's steadfastness. Finally, the last two lines describe Keats's desire to be like the star for eternity or swoon to death. The imagination, as "Bright Star" suggests, is the "unifying power at the center and circumference of all artistic creation and metaphysical perception and has the ability to allow the poet to effect change and growth in the world" (D'Avanzo 9). Abrams notes, in Natural Supernaturalism, the change in Romantic poetic thought was in part due to socio-religious phenomenon, "conspicuous Romantic tendency, after the rationalism and decorum of the Enlightenment" toward:
the stark drama and supernatural mysteries of the Christian story and doctrines and to the violent conflicts and abrupt reversals of the Christian inner life, turning on the extremes of destruction and creation, heaven and hell, exile and reunion, death and rebirth, dejection and joy, paradise lost and regained. (66)

The Romantics revived these ideals, however, with a slightly different approach than had ever been conceived of previously:

They undertook to save the overview of human history and destiny, the experiential paradigms, and the cardinal values of their religious heritage, by reconstituting them in a way that would make them intellectually acceptable, as well as emotionally pertinent, for the time being. (Abrams 66)

Keats undertook to project his own system of salvation in the form of the modified classical myths of Hyperion and The Fall of Hyperion.

Although the eighteenth-century view of the imagination is not the absolutely antithesis of the Romantic, the differences between the two are enormous. Unlike Enlightenment thought, the Romantics generally thought that the imagination could permit a glimpse of a
reality that already exists beyond sensory perception, the physical world, and the limitations of time, or to act prefiguratively and yield visions that become such a higher reality by virtue of their being envisioned. The imagination becomes the poet’s key to transcendence of this world and knowledge of a realm beyond.

The Polarization of Science and Poetry

"I... long to be talking about the Imagination--. . . ." (22 November 1817, John Keats to Benjamin Bailey)

In the early decades of the eighteenth-century, On the Sublime, a work by the ancient Greek philosopher Longinus, was popularized in England by Nicolas Boileau (1636-1711). Longinus had described the immensity of objects in the natural world such as oceans, mountains, and the heavens, as a source of the sublime, an idea associated with religious awe, vastness, natural magnificence and strong emotion. Longinus' treatise became the source for the idea of subjective critical judgment popularized by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) in his Critique of Judgment. Kant’s work validated the artistic treatment of the sublime and the emotional impressions it prompted. In one of his early poems, “I Stood Tip-Toe” Keats makes use of the sublime in describing a magnificent natural scene:
There was wide wandering for the greediest eye,
To peer about upon variety;
Far round the horizon's crystal air to skim,
And trace the dwindled edgings of its brim;
To picture out the quaint and curious bending
of a fresh woodland alley, never ending;
Or by the bowery clefts of leafy shelves
Guess where the jaunty streams refresh themselves.
I gazed awhile and felt as light and free
As though the fanning wings of Mercury
Had played upon my heels. (15-25)

As this passage suggests, an emphasis on subjectivity and
the sublime is generally recognized as a tenet of Romantic
philosophy.

Prior to the eighteenth century, English literature
generally emphasized feeling and emotion rather than the
intellect, but John Locke's (1632-1704) "Essay on Human
Understanding" had initiated, a "sort of psychology, by
seeking to explore the mind by an analysis of experience"
(Monk 45). D'Avanzo summarizes Locke's cognitive theory
suggesting that:

According to Locke, knowledge comes only from sense
experience, the mind is a passive agent, a mere
receptacle receiving and recording impressions. By
association it forms ideas and is able to reason, but its capabilities to create knowledge are severally limited. (D'Avanzo 6)

It followed naturally for English philosophers to apply the empirical method to the study of the sublime and thus to seek to analyze the effect of the sublime on the minds and emotions of men (Monk 45).

Discussion of the sublime led to theorizing on the imagination, for it was encounter with the sublime that was observed to activate the imagination. Archibald Alison (1757-1839) says of this process in his "Essay on the Nature of Taste," "the object itself, appears only to serve as a hint, to awaken the imagination, and to lead it through every analogous idea that has place in the memory" (qtd. in Monk 149). Thus, the imagination is the faculty by which association of sensory images occurs. It has no transcendent powers, but is merely an "image maker," hence its name (D'Avanzo 6). Poetry, the product of the imagination, according to Enlightenment philosophy, can therefore be little more than wit, a display of talent for combining ideas by association. Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) philosophy, which is largely "a synthesis, a reinterpretation, and a deepening of the kaleidoscope aesthetic of the eighteenth century," holds that the
imagination must suffer a preordained failure, for the object it seeks to grasp is limitless and thus cannot be represented (Monk 5). This futile effort is the source of those emotions which accompany an aesthetic experience.

Thus, Enlightenment philosophers did not overlook the imagination but gave no room for a real faith in its powers as did Keats. David Hartley (1705-1757) expresses this distrust, saying:

It is evident that the pleasures of the imagination were not intended for our primary pursuit, because they are, in general, the first of our intellectual pleasures, which are generated from the sensible ones by association, come to their height early in life, and decline in old age. (qtd. in Caldwell 62)

Abrams, compiles a number of interesting postulations by influential thinkers of the eighteenth century. They describe a theory of cultural history, the stasis of which lies in the struggle between poetry and science, imagination and reason. Abrams cites Thomas Warton, who maintained that the improvement of society in general is at the expense of poetry. For ignorance and superstition . . . are the parents of imagination; and by the force of reason and inquiry, poetry gained much good sense, good taste, and good criticism, but at the
cost of parting with incredibilities that are more acceptable than truth, and with fictions that are more valuable than reality. (Mirror 305)

The general consensus of those sympathetic to the poet and poetry, says Abrams, regarded science as describing objects as they are in reality, not as they appear. Thus the ornithologist disregards a bird's beauty in flight in favor of dissecting it to discover its internal structure. This theory of cultural history was further bolstered by Utilitarian thought which described some kinds of pleasure more desirable than others, and based morality on the greatest happiness for the greatest number. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, Utilitarianism suggested that poetry and science necessarily be polarized. Science, it was believed, had the potential to do more good for more people than did poetry. Abrams cites social thinkers who drew a direct correlation between the state of society and poetry:

One man who was both historian and poet put this theory of cultural history in its most unqualified form, and explicitly on the grounds that the scientific and poetic descriptions of the sensible world are not reconcilable. "We think," wrote Mcaulay in 1825, "that, as civilization advances, poetry almost
necessarily declines." The progress of knowledge is from "particular images to general terms," and from concrete perception to generalization, but "analysis is not the business of the poet. His office is to portray, not dissect." (Mirror 306)

It is in light of this socio-historic context that we can better understand Keats's treatment of science in "Lamia:"

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven:
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine--
Unweave a rainbow, as it ere while made. . . .
(229-238)

Terrence Hoagwood says that Lamia "expresses social and political conflicts, not because it is a political or topical poem, but because large-scale social realities affect the way the poem presents its story" (677). It seems in accordance with Hoagwood's statement, that even if Keats did not intend to make a blatant social statement in "Lamia," these lines summarize his rejection of the
Enlightenment. That which is charming, beautiful, mysterious, sublime is for Keats made common, even cheapened, by its dissection. Just as it might be argued that Adam and Eve's acquisition of knowledge destroyed their innocence, Keats would argue that Enlightenment thought destroys the mysteries of the poetic imagination. Although most of his poetry does not as directly attack Enlightenment philosophy as these lines from "Lamia," it is no less poignantly opposed to its basic tenets. Everything that Keats's poetry is--imaginative, sympathetic, empathetic, visionary--opposes Enlightenment philosophy.
Visionary Imagination

Ripe was the drowsy hour;
The blissful cloud of summer-indolence
Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower:
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
Unhaunted quite of all but-nothingness?

Keats professed a visionary imagination in which the visionary, or poet, is able to sense what lies beyond the bounds of ordinary sensory perception. For Keats, the division between reality and imagination becomes the key to the world that lies just behind reality: The world of the poetic imagination which Keats often parallels with dreams and sleep.

An interest in the imagination is central to the verse of the Romantic poets, and their thoughts on it move through their writing in a variety of forms. Coleridge deals with it extensively in his system of aesthetics. In keeping with William Wordsworth's injunction that the self and the poetic imagination are essential topics for the poet, Keats's Endymion, Shelley's youthful poet in "Alastor," and even Coleridge's Ancient Mariner are characters dramatizing their creators' journeys of imagination (D'Avanzo 3). John Keats's interest in the
subject goes beyond that of all his contemporaries. The other Romantic poets see the being of a poem as the reconciliation of the real and ideal worlds (D'Avanzo 12). For them the imagination functions primarily as a means to an end. Keats, however, is preoccupied with the workings of the imagination rather than its product. "The reconciling force of the imagination and its vital process is . . . Keats's main interest in most of his poems" (D'Avanzo 12). Jack Stillinger agrees, saying:

His significant works all center on a single basic problem, the mutability inherent in nature and human life, and openly or in disguise they debate the pros and cons of a single hypothetical solution, transcendence of earthly limitations by means of the visionary imagination. (2)

Enlightenment philosophers also debated the mutability in nature and human life, but instead of transcending earthly limits through the imagination, they found the answer in their "objective" scientific inquiry and clinical diagnosis.

Keats does not communicate his thoughts about the imagination in his poetry alone. His poetic and aesthetic musings continually find their way into his correspondence with friends and relatives, not dogmatically or
systematically, but as truths incidentally happened upon. T.S. Eliot says of them:

His letters are what letters ought to be; the fine things come in unexpectedly, neither introducing nor shown out, but between trifle and trifle . . . . Wordsworth and Shelley both theorize. Keats has no theory, and to have formed one was irrelevant to his interests, and alien to his mind (qtd. in Bate 11-12). Keats recognizes his own special interests in the imagination and its product, poetry, repeatedly in his letters. To John Hamilton Reynolds, close friend and correspondent of Keats, he writes of his need, perhaps even addiction, for poetry:

I found that I cannot exist without poetry--without eternal poetry--half the day will not do--. . . . (18 April, 1817)

In another letter to Reynolds, he reiterates his seemingly religious fervor for poetic imaginings:

If you should have any reason to regret this state of excitement in me, I will turn the tide of your feelings in the right channel by mentioning that it is the only state for the best sort of Poetry--that is all I care for, all I live for. (24 August 1819)

To Leigh Hunt, whom helped guide Keats in his formidable
days as a poet, he wrote, "I went to the Isle of Wight—thought so much about poetry so long together that I could not get to sleep at night—. . . ." (10 May 1817)

And in one of the most quoted of Keats's letters to Benjamin Bailey, he writes, "I . . . long to be talking about the Imagination—. . . ." (22 November 1817)

Keats explains the "truth" of the imagination in these lines in a letter to Benjamin Bailey:

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—For I have the same Idea of all our passions as of love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty—. . . .

The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth—. . . . It is "a vision in the form of Youth" a shadow of reality to come—. . . .

Adam's dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as human Life and its spiritual repetition. (22 Nov. 1817)

The parallel drawn here between Adam's dream and imagination is the sort of relationship which pervades
Keats’s writing; that of dreams and sleep which are the imagination, and are thus truth or eternity.

Though Keats believed that the imagination and dreams were pleasant in nature, some of his statements and poetry about the imagination are ambiguous. In an excerpt from a letter to George, his brother, Keats tells of the wonders of his imaginative experiences:

I feel more and more every day, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds—No sooner am I alone than shapes of epic greatness are stationed around me, and serve my Spirit the office which is equivalent to a King’s body guard. (27 December 1817)

This vision seems grand and pleasant enough, but then Keats’s imaginings take a turn and seem to be more nightmarish than dreamlike:

Then “Tragedy, with scepter’d pall, comes sweeping by’ According to my state of mind I am with Achilles shouting in the trenches or with Theocritus in the Vales of Sicily. Or I throw my whole being into Triolus and repeating those lines, I wander, like a lost soul upon the stygian Banks staying for waftage,” I melt into the air with a voluptuousness so delicate that I am content to be alone. (27 December 1817)
Thus, depending on the state of the imaginative mind, the visionary may either see things of beauty or things disturbing.

In Keats’s poetic work, "Dear Reynolds, as Last Night I Lay in Bed," he laments that all dreams are not things of beauty:

O that our dreamings all of sleep or wake
Would all their colours from the sunset take:
From something of material sublime,
Rather than shadow our own souls daytime
In the dark void of night. (67-71)

Keats continues and contradicts his earlier assertion that the imagination and dreams are glimpses into eternity and truth:

. . . . Things cannot to the will
Be settled, but they tease us out of thought.
Or is it that imagination brought
Beyond its proper bound, yet still confined,--
Lost in a sort of purgatory blind,
Cannot refer to any standard law
Of either earth or heaven?--It is a flaw
In happiness to see beyond our bourn--
It forces us in summer skies to mourn
It spoils the singing of the nightingale. (76-85)
Here Keats's ambiguity about the imaginative power is evident, for he seems to fear that which he holds as the truth and eternity. He states that the unbound imagination is a dangerous thing that leads to unhappiness, and yet, he holds imagination as the key to unbound eternity. John Barnard, in analyzing Keats's poetic tendencies agrees that:

Keats entertains a peculiarly modern fear that the secrecy and inviolability of the products of the imagination may offer false consolation, may be, in the end, illusory. (qtd. in de Almeida 62)

Barnard goes on to say that Keats finds truth in sensation and that the desire for a life of sensations rather than thoughts is central to Keats's empathetic experience:

This gives the basis for the characteristic tactile, visual and auditory effects in the poetry, and the preference for metaphors of fullness, of a selfhood bursting with its own identity. Sensation then is linked with Keatsian empathy. (qtd. in de Almeida 63)

Sensation is the basis for Keats's imaginative process, a thought process made up of images rather than merely sensory experience. This thought process, says Barnard, is the reason the visionary imagination takes Keats beyond simple sense experience:
Being taken up into sensation, into something deeply other to the self, takes Keats a long way from simple sense experience. For him, sensations are internal as well as external. "My sensations are sometimes deadened for weeks together," or again, writing to Reynolds, "I was to give you a history of [my] sensations, and day-nightmares" (Letters, ii. 146). Keats imagined in sensory terms: the imaginative experience therefore started from direct experience, but its meaning went beyond mere day-dreaming. It was in fact a kind of thinking through images. (qtd. in de Almeida 63)

Thinking through images, a foreign and useless notion for Enlightenment philosophy, is for Keats, the poetic imagination, and the key to unbound eternity.

Sympathetic Imagination

For I have learned
To look on nature, not as in the hour of thoughtless youth; but hearing oftentimes the still sad music of humanity.
(“Tintern Abbey” 88-91)

It is the sympathetic imagination that leads Keats to assert, "If a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its Existence and pick about the Gravel" (22 Nov. 1817, to
Benjamin Bailey). And it is the sympathetic imagination that contributes to his positing of Negative Capability in a letter to his brothers George and Tom:

... that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. (27 Dec. 1817)

Negative Capability is what allows Keats to remain in the imaginative moment. He is able to unquestioningly follow his imagination where it leads and learn from his imaginative experience. This ability moved Keats toward a more realistic understanding of the world and poetry.

Sleep and dreams are appropriate metaphors for the spontaneous shaping spirit of the sympathetic imagination awakened and given release without the restraints of sensory experience. In one of Keats's most poignant poems on the nature of sleep, "Sleep and Poetry" he states:

... yet I must not forget
Sleep, quiet with his poppy coronet:
For what there may be worthy in these rhymes
I partly owe to him ... (347-350)

In these lines Keats implies that, because the sleeping mind has the ability to create spontaneously and effortlessly, sleep is poetry. Thus, Keats longs: "...
for ten years, that I may overwhelm/Myself in poesy; so I
to do the deed/that my own soul has yet decreed" (96-99).
And in his sleep of poetry he is surrounded by the worlds
of "Flora" and "old Pan" where "A lovely tale of human life
we'll read." Yet despite Keats's longing for such a poetic
eternity, he realizes that he cannot totally divorce
himself from reality:

And can I ever bid these joys farewell?
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,
Where I may find the agonies, the strife
Of human hearts. (122-125)

Despite Keats's longing for fulfilling visions, he realizes
that he cannot bring it to pass. As in "Endymion" where
the dream is consumed by "stupid sleep," so too is the
vision of "Sleep and Poetry" lost:

The visions are all fled--the car is fled
into the light of heaven, and in their stead
A sense of real things comes doubly strong
And, like a muddy stream would bear
My soul along to nothingness. . . . (155-159)

And yet, the poet wishes to: "Against all doubtings, and
will keep alive/The thought of that same chariot,
and the strange/Journey it went" (160-162).
These lines from "Sleep and Poetry" are the makings of Keats's sympathetic imagination which involves the poet's intense experience of the concrete world in an empathetic manner. Keats realizes a sense of need to experience the agonies and strife of human life. He understands that beyond his imaginative dreams are people and things he must be and know empathetically.

The sympathetic imagination is triggered by an encounter with an object which possesses beauty in some degree. The object may be inanimate, such as the urn in "Ode on a Grecian Urn," or alive, as the bird in "Ode to a Nightingale." According to Keats's thought, once the object is grasped in the imagination the poet becomes a "chameleon poet," and divests himself of his own identity to take on that of the object. Keats explains the concept of chameleon poet in a letter to Richard Woodhouse:

As to the poetical Character itself, . . . it is not itself--it is everything and nothing--It has no character--. . . . A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity--he is continually in for--and filling some other Body--The Sun, The Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute--the poet has none; no
identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's creatures. (27 Oct. 1818)

While Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke doubted the usefulness of Keats's imaginative poetic thought, he proves through his poetry that the sympathetic imagination is of value. It, like the visionary imagination, opens the door to a new understanding of the human experience.
4. CONCLUSION

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination (22 Nov. 1817, to Benjamin Bailey)

Rather than studying his poetic subjects in terms of Enlightenment philosophy, Keats begins most of his poetry with an earth-bound object or idea and seeks through it to burst his mortal bars; he seeks both a fuller experience of concrete reality through the sympathetic imagination and escape from concrete reality through the visionary imagination. Barnard cites "Lamia," "Endymion," and "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as the poet's attempt to create "a world of romance, beauty and sensuous life separate from the poor, harsh, real world of everyday life" (108). Keats aims at immutability through the mutable, immortality through the mortal, ethereality through the concrete. Keats in imaginative flight finds his point of departure in the things of this world, then seeks to soar above them while maintaining his grasp on the object of his fancy. Leon Waldoff summarizes Keats essential poetic quality saying:

Imagination, more than any other critical issue, defines the essential quality of Keats as a Romantic
poet. Its central role in his poetry and in every aspect of his life and thought, even in his representation of his doubts about it, and his repeated and irrepressible return to the quest for an affirming vision, make him a more complex adherent of the Romantic principle (or trust) that imagination can reconcile human nature to external reality than has been generally recognized. (qtd. in de Almeida 202) Imaginative poetry is Keats’s reaction to Enlightenment philosophy and with it he brought imaginative thought to an increasingly clinical society.
REFERENCES


