

John Keats, *Selected Letters*

Letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817

[...] *I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination*—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty—In a Word, you may know my favorite Speculation by my first Book and the little song I sent in my last—which is a representation from the fancy of the probable mode of operating in these Matters—*The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth.* [...] O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!

Letter to J. H. Reynolds, 3 February 1818

Hampstead Tuesday.

[. . .] *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 & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject.—How beautiful are the retired flowers! how would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway crying out, 'admire me I am a violet! dote upon me I am a primrose! Modern poets differ from the Elizabethans in this. [...] *I will have no more of Wordsworth* or Hunt in particular—Why should we be of the tribe of Manasseh when we can wander with Esau? why should we kick against the Pricks, when we can walk on Roses? Why should we be owls, when we can be Eagles?

Letter to John Taylor, 27 February 1818

Hampstead 27 Feby-

[. . .] In Poetry I have a few Axioms, and you will see how far I am from their Centre. 1st I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity—it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance—2nd Its touches of Beauty should never be half way thereby making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural natural too him—shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight—but it is easier to think what Poetry should be than to write it—and this leads me on to another axiom. That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.

Letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27th Oct. 1818

My dear Woodhouse,

[...] A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing 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. If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more? [...]

Letter to his brothers, George and Tom Keats, 22nd Dec. 1818

Hampstead Sunday
[Late] 22 December 1818

My dear Brothers

[...] I spent Friday evening with Wells & went the next morning to see *Death on the Pale Horse*. It is a wonderful picture, when West's age is considered; But there is nothing to be intense upon; no woman one feels mad to kiss; no face swelling into reality. The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth. Examine *King Lear* & you will find this exemplified throughout; but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness. [...] At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration. [...]

Joh[n]

Romantic Criticism of Shakespeare

During January 1818 Keats attended the public lecture on Shakespeare given by William Hazlitt at the Surrey Institute (London), in which the critic said:

"Shakespeare was the least of an egoist that it was possible to be. He was nothing in himself; but he was all that others were, or that they could become. When he conceived of a character, whether real or imaginary, he not only entered into all its thoughts and feelings, but seemed instantly, and as if by touching a secret spring, to be surrounded with all the same objects. Shakespeare had only to think of any thing in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it." (*Lectures on the English Poets*, 1818.)

The effect on Keats of these ideas about *empathy* is nowhere more evident than in "Ode to a Nightingale" where the poet *becomes* the bird in imagination. But Hazlitt's general theory of poetry also made an impact:

"The best general notion which I can give of poetry is, that it is the natural impression of any object or event, by its vividness exciting an involuntary movement of imagination and passion, and producing, by sympathy, a certain modulation of the voice, or sounds, expressing it." [My italics.]

Letters of John Keats to His Family and Friends, ed. Sidney Colvin [1891] (Macmillan 1925) - <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/35698/35698-h/35698-h.htm>. Selections at The Poetry Foundation <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/resources/learning/essays/detail/69384>.