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To the Committee on Graduate Study:

I am submitting to you a thesis written by William Harold Hunter entitled "Keats and the New Critics." I recommend that it be accepted for nine quarter hours of credit in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in English.

Robert Daniel
Major Professor

We have read this thesis
and recommend its acceptance:

Robert L. Hickey
Rain T. Stewart

Accepted for the Committee

E. G. Watson
Dean of the Graduate School

KEATS AND THE NEW CRITICS

A THESIS

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The pages which follow are not the fruit of my labor alone. Dr. Daniel has read and re-read the several drafts, and his prompt willingness in doing so has not only speeded my work, but has also encouraged me when encouragement was most needed. The interest shown by him and Dr. Bain T. Stewart has made me feel that there may be some things of value in the following pages. Thanks are due also to Dr. Stewart and Dr. Robert Hickey for reading the thesis in its final form.

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INTRODUCTION

The term "New Criticism" has been applied to the work of critics before our time, but in its current use it brings to mind a body of work that originated with T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards. John Crowe Ransom first employed the term in the present sense;¹ it now applies to such critics as Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, Kenneth Burke, R. P. Blackmur, and Ransom himself in America, and to William Empson, L. C. Knights, G. Wilson Knight, and F. R. Leavis in England.

Two elements distinguish the New Criticism from what preceded it. The New Critics in general have a high esteem for Metaphysical poetry, and, more than their predecessors, they emphasize close analysis of individual works of literature. They place Donne and other Metaphysicals above the poets of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and they are chary of making generalizations concerning the poets.

Eliot's first book of prose, The Sacred Wood (1920), is considered the first important work of New Criticism; first, because it displays a reverence for Donne and Metaphysical poetry; second, because the numerous quotations cited as proof contrast with the generalities of earlier criticism; and third, because the book shows a concern with the tradition of poetry, a concern which has become a characteristic of other New Critics,

¹John Crowe Ransom, The New Criticism (Norfolk, 1941).

including Tate, Brooks, and Leavis.

Although Eliot usually receives credit for writing the first New Criticism, I. A. Richards produced the fundamental theory in Principles of Literary Criticism (1924). He gave new critical meanings to such terms as experience and communication, meanings which have been assumed by subsequent New Critics. Two of Richards' students at Cambridge, F. R. Leavis and William Empson, have become important as New Critics themselves. Leavis, particularly, has led the Scrutiny group, which is the center of New Criticism in England. Eric Bentley gives us his estimate of Leavis' importance:

Scrutiny . . . has appeared continuously since 1932 and is still strong. Without any of the large-scale assistance that American critical journals get (Scrutiny has never paid a contributor one penny), it has survived the Depression and the Second World War. Moreover, though Mr. Leavis is still very much a prophet without honour in his own country (and in his own university), he has contrived to make Downing College a center of literary study in accordance with the principles of Scrutiny.²

In America, New Criticism at first developed chiefly in the South. In the late 'twenties and early 'thirties, John Crowe Ransom, while still at Vanderbilt University, was one of the most impressive spokesmen for the Southern group. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, through the Southern Review (1935-1942), and Allen Tate, through articles in such periodicals as the American Review, joined Ransom in leading

² Eric Bentley, ed., The Importance of Scrutiny (New York, 1948), p. xvii.

the early stages of the movement in the United States. After Ransom left Vanderbilt in 1937 to head the English Department at Kenyon College, he founded the Kenyon Review (1939) and gave the New Criticism a home and a voice.

Understanding Poetry and An Approach to Literature, two of the popular anthologies of poetry and literature by Brooks and Warren, have spread the New Criticism throughout the colleges and universities of the United States so that it is no longer confined to a few critics but has become a much more general movement.

New Criticism concerns itself with works of literature apart from the psychological, historical, biographical, and sociological factors which may have brought them into being. Thus, the New Critics examine a poem closely, but they do not reach beyond the poem for facts which may throw light upon motivations for the poem or upon its place in the history of ideas. Already the statement, severely applied, excludes Kenneth Burke, for he regards biographical knowledge as an important aid in the proper interpretation of a poem as the poet wrote it. He may be considered a New Critic, however, because he centers his attention upon the poem and brings in other facts only incidentally. Each New Critic has his own criteria for judging poetry, and we shall see some of the critics bringing their tools to bear on Keats's poetry in the chapters of this study.

The New Critics are not more brilliant than any other body of critics in preceding centuries, but their strict attention to the individual work gives them an approach which places them very high among the theoretical and practical critics in the history of literature. Tate, Ransom, Burke, and Richards are among the theorists, but occasionally they produce essays of the practical sort. Brooks, Warren, and Leavis have done much more, however, in the field of practical criticism than the others.

Raised as twins in the cradle of the twentieth century, modern poetry and the New Criticism have looked to the Metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century as the masters of the poetic art. Donne's work, particularly, tends to be used as the standard by which to measure all poetry, and the effects on English poetry have been tremendous. In their admiration for Metaphysical poetry, the New Critics have naturally made the poets of the Romantic period the targets of many attacks. This anti-Romantic bias is present, to varying degrees, in most of them; Burke has little if any of it, but Brooks is at the other extreme. Each chapter of this study will show how one of the New Critics estimates and evaluates one of the greatest poets of the Romantic period--John Keats.

A history of Keats's reputation is an interesting study in itself. Before 1848, thanks to the articles in the Quarterly Review and Blackwood's, Keats's poetry had achieved notoriety rather than fame, but in 1848, Lord Houghton's biography

and his edition of the poems prepared the way for a gradual rise in Keats's reputation.³ Keats greatly influenced the Victorian poets, particularly the pre-Raphaelite group, and for a decade or so this fact was a significant reason for his survival.⁴ H. Buxton Forman's edition (1883) of Keats's complete works and Arnold's essay⁵ of 1888 indicated that, among some men of letters, Keats's reputation approached the present estimate.⁶ Ernest de Selincourt's introduction to his edition of Keats's poems (1905) defined the influences on Keats's mind and art. With this introduction and Sir Sidney Colvin's biography of 1917, the poet's position as one of our great poets was firmly established. And the numerous critical works favorable to Keats which appeared in the 1920's indicated that his renown has become universal among English-speaking people.

By 1925, then, Keats's greatness and high position among the English poets had been recognized. There is little reason to believe that this estimate will change, but with the rise of New Criticism a revaluation of all our poets has come about, and Keats has been examined no less carefully than the rest. Since the theories of the New Critics have led them to a bias

³Sidney Colvin, John Keats (London, 1918), pp. 538-541 passim; also, vid. Raymond Macdonald Alden, ed., Critical Essays of the Early Nineteenth Century (New York, 1921), pp. 160-172.

⁴Colvin, John Keats, p. 540; also, vid. George H. Ford, Keats and the Victorians (New Haven, 1944).

⁵Matthew Arnold, "John Keats," in Essays in Criticism: Second Series (London, 1908), pp. 100-121.

⁶Colvin, John Keats, p. 544.

against Romanticism, it will be of great importance to note how Keats stands up under their close scrutiny, for the New Critics are the first significant non-Romantic critics in English literature since 1800, when the publication of Wordsworth's preface to the Lyrical Ballads gradually brought in an era of English criticism under the sway of Romantic ideals.

It is interesting to see the difference between the estimates that the New Critics make of Keats and Shelley, two of the great second-generation Romanticists. Shelley's reputation suffers considerably; his fault seems to be that he cannot be brought under the general principles of Metaphysical poetry. Yet Keats, despite his Romanticism, receives high praise from the New Critics.

Whether the opinions of the New Critics are right, wrong, or merely additions to ideas already held, the New Criticism has revolted with much success against the traditional approach to literature which was our inheritance from the Romantic period. The revaluations of the English poets have had a far-reaching effect upon our understanding of English literary history, and the theories of criticism which have appeared during the past two decades will continue to influence both our ideas of past literature and our modes of present and future literary creativity. The new interpretations given different works are and will continue to be responsible for our better understanding of them.

This study will show Keats's place in the scales of poetic

values set up by five New Critics and will examine the interpretations that they have given some of Keats's poems. The critics chosen have been selected partly because of their importance as New Critics and partly because of their articles on Keats's poetry which form the focal point for each chapter. Some of the best New Critics must, unfortunately, be omitted, either because they have not written critical essays on Keats or because their articles on Keats do not discuss the poetry in detail and are not relevant for this study. Ransom and Blackmur are among the first group, and Eliot, whose essay on Keats and Shelley treats Shelley's poetry and Keats's letters, falls into the second group. But the five New Critics who have been selected--Allen Tate, Kenneth Burke, Cleanth Brooks, William Empson, and F. R. Leavis--are adequately representative, and their discussions of Keats give a dramatic idea of the esteem in which Keats is held, at the middle of the twentieth century, even by this distinguished group of anti-Romantic critics.

CHAPTER I

ALLEN TATE

Allen Tate, born in Kentucky in 1899, graduated from Vanderbilt University in 1922. He was one of the founders and editor of The Fugitive (1922-1935), an advisory editor to Ransom's Kenyon Review (1939-1942), and editor of The Sewanee Review (1944-1946). He has taught at the University of North Carolina, at Princeton University, has lectured at several other schools, and is now a lecturer at New York University. His important criticism has been collected in Reactionary Essays (1936), Reason in Madness (1941), On the Limits of Poetry (1948), and The Hovering Fly (1948). Besides these critical works he has written two biographies, a novel, and several volumes of poetry.¹

Tate has concerned himself less with practical criticism than with aesthetic theory and has, therefore, much less to say about particular writers than has Brooks, for instance. However, Keats is one of the poets on whom Tate has commented at some length, and it is relatively easy to summarize his opinion of Keats. But in order to see how and why Tate judges Keats as he does, we must first see some of his principles of poetry. Although Tate says there are more than three kinds of

¹Robert Wooster Stallman, ed., Critiques and Essays in Criticism (New York, 1949), p. 514.

poetry, he discusses three at some length in his "Three Types of Poetry" (1934). The first kind is that which is motivated by the practical will; the second revolts against the domination of science; the third is the product of the imagination and is perfect. Leaning upon allegory and moral abstraction, most of the English poetry before the seventeenth century is included in the first, as is more modern poetry which deals with scientific, physical facts and thus relates action to knowledge.² Tate condemns poetry which is primarily allegorical as inferior when considered as science and inferior when considered as poetry, because it results from a tendency to oversimplify life and thus ignores the totality of human experience.³

Tate and other New Critics became impatient with the moralist in art. As early as 1927, Tate says:

The perfectly realized poem has no overflow of unrealized action. It does not say that men ought to be better or worse, or as they are; it has no ulterior motives.⁴

Romantic poetry, a reaction against science, is the second type of poetry discussed by Tate. To Tate as to T. S. Eliot, Romanticism is the confusion of reason and faith. Reason is intellectual and quantitative; faith, intuitive and

²Allen Tate, On the Limits of Poetry (New York, 1948), p. 91.

³Ibid., p. 96.

⁴Tate, "Poetry and the Absolute," Sewanee Review, XXXV (January, 1927), 44-45.

qualitative.⁵ Although poetry cannot be said to exclude the reasonable elements, Tate maintains that poetry should be dominantly the offspring of the intuitive faculty, the imagination. Literature is the complete knowledge of man's experience, and the intuitive imagination is responsible for man's knowledge of a higher reality than science can give; the facts and quantities of science are but incomplete results of man's groping reason.⁶ Tate is opposed to the pragmatic element in aesthetic theory; he is against the practical in art, for the practical is the result of the application of the scientific reason:

. . . poetry finds its true usefulness in its perfect inutility, a focus of repose for the will-driven intellect that constantly shakes the equilibrium of persons and societies with its unremitting imposition of partial formulas. When the will and its formulas are put back into an implicit relation with the whole of our experience, we get the true knowledge which is poetry.⁷

The third type of poetry discussed by Tate is the kind which Shakespeare produced. It is perfect, the fruit of creative spirit. Poetry of this kind, genuine poetry, has been produced in every age, but it is found most completely

⁵Robert Wooster Stallman, "The New Criticism and the Southern Critics," in A Southern Vanguard, ed. Allen Tate (New York, 1947), p. 35.

⁶Tate, On the Limits of Poetry, p. 15.

⁷Ibid., p. 113.

in the work of Shakespeare.⁸ It is not "useful" nor does it hold a moral for the reader: it is pure poetry, the product of the human imagination, the "complete knowledge of man's experience, . . . the unique and formed intelligence of the world of which man only is capable."⁹

To Tate, a poem is a configuration of meaning,¹⁰ which is produced by the poet's expression of his experience. This belief leads Tate to his discussion of "tension" in poetry, and tension is the key word to Tate's theory, as symbolic action is to Burke's and paradox to Brooks's. Tate says:

. . . the meaning of poetry is its "tension," the full organized body of all the extension and intension that we can find in it. The remotest figurative significance that we can derive does not invalidate the extensions of the literal statement. Or we may begin with the literal statement and by stages develop the complications of metaphor: at every stage we may pause to state the meaning so far apprehended, and at every stage the meaning will be coherent.¹¹

He finds that the Romanticists gave up to science the language of denotation and "kept for themselves a continually thinning flux of peripheral connotations";¹² in other words, they emphasized the use of intension in imagery. Great poetry cannot be intension only, nor can it be extension only; it

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 75.

¹¹Ibid., p. 83.

¹²Ibid., p. 82.

must employ both to achieve the fullest poetic meaning--to achieve tension.

There are many shades of meaning in Tate's ideas, which have not been touched upon here, but the preceding summary should serve as a point of departure for an investigation of Tate's understanding of Keats's poetry and for the esteem he has for it. Before examining his essay on Keats, however, it is advisable to attempt a reconciliation between his theory and that of Keats. Especially is this necessary when we realize that Tate usually speaks slightingly of Romantic poets in general and yet very highly of Keats. As a matter of fact, the reconciliation between Tate's and Keats's theories is not difficult, for the poetic theory of the young Keats is similar at several important points to that of Tate and others of the New Critics.

Tate attacks the Romanticists for their confusion of reason and faith--in other words, for their lack of distinction between the intuitive imagination and the intellectual reason. Keats, himself a Romantic poet, would agree with Tate on this matter. Very early in his poetic career, Keats wrote in a letter to Benjamin Bailey:

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination--
What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth.
. . . The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream--he awoke and found it truth. I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning--and yet it

must be. Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections. However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!¹³

Thus, to Keats as to Tate, the imagination is not only a happier means of arriving at truth, but it is actually the only way by which truth can be grasped. Thorpe, in The Mind of John Keats, clarifies Keats's stand on the relationship of the logical and intuitive faculties:

It was not that Keats discarded knowledge; we have seen how earnestly he sought to know and understand; it was not that he despised conscious craftsmanship in verse building; . . . it was simply that he felt that without the operation of the imagination there could be no artistic perception or revelation. . . . It is cold "reason unmitigated by the warmth of intuitive imagination" that Keats condemns.¹⁴

In his analysis of tension in poetry, Tate makes the following remark:

The metaphysical poet as a rationalist begins at or near the extensive or denoting end of the line; the romantic or Symbolist poet at the other, intensive end; and each by a straining feat of the imagination tries to push his meanings as far as he can towards the opposite end, so as to occupy the entire scale [of meaning] It would be a hard task to choose between the two strategies, the Symbolist and the metaphysical; both at their best are great, and both are incomplete.¹⁵

The important factor is that the core of meaning should stretch

¹³Maurice Buxton Forman, ed., The Letters of John Keats (New York, 1947), No. 31, pp. 67-68.

¹⁴Clarence Dewitt Thorpe, The Mind of John Keats (New York, 1926), pp. 118-119.

¹⁵Tate, On the Limits of Poetry, p. 86.

over most of the scale of meaning and not in how it does so. The end in view for Tate is the fusion of an "intensely felt ordinary experience . . . into an intensely realized art."¹⁶ Keats, too, knew the necessity for intensity in art:

The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relation with Beauty and Truth.¹⁷

The manner in which Keats achieved intensity is best seen by an analysis of his revisions in the various drafts of his poetry. At the opening of the eighth stanza of the "Eve of St. Agnes" he changed

She danc'd along with vague uneager look
to

She danc'd along with vague regardless eyes.

Look is denotative but not so successfully so as eyes. Keats's preference for concrete terms makes his imagery fall near the denoting end of the scale of meaning and yet, because the terms do not lose their connotative values, stretch over to the intensive end. Although Keats certainly did not think of his technique in these terms, nevertheless the revisions can be so interpreted in Tate's terms; actually Tate's terminology is merely a different way of expressing what Keats consciously worked toward and, more often than not, achieved.

Tate names Shakespeare as the poet who most completely

¹⁶Tate, "Poetry and the Absolute," p. 45.

¹⁷Forman, The Letters of John Keats, No. 32, p. 71.

wrote the poetry he calls the perfect kind, and Shakespeare was Keats's great preceptor. Keats derived his theory from his reading of Shakespeare, and his theory was the basis of his practice. Thus, Keats and Tate would come very close to agreement on several of their principal attitudes toward poetry. This is a significant fact, for Keats's theory is behind the poetry he produced, particularly the more mature later poetry, poetry which Tate esteems highly in spite of his usual aversion to Romantic poetry. Wherever Tate mentions Keats in his writing, he speaks in commendation, not in censure. Tate's earliest significant references to Keats appeared in 1928. He gives a reason for considering Keats as a modern poet:

The idea of purposive change, which is distinctly modern, Keats superimposes upon the ancient world by statically aggregated organisms ruled by caprice. Thus the modern dilemma, Progress or Tradition, appears, and Keats is the first modern poet, in the contemporary sense of the term.¹⁸

Mentioning Arnold's statement that the Romanticists did not know enough, Tate defines the defect in Keats's knowledge as a

failure to sustain a rational indifference to the humanitarian ideas of the age. Far from knowing too little, he knew too much. The conflict between "sensation" and "thought," which racked him all through his brief career, turns out to be an instinctive and thus not wholly successful resistance against the implications of the Revolutionary Idea.¹⁹

¹⁸Tate, "Tradition or Progress," New Republic, LI (June, 1927), 154. ✓

¹⁹Ibid., p. 155.

Turning from a discussion of this defect, Tate praises the odes very highly:

If, since his time, no other English poet has smelted out again the form and quality of the great "Odes"--the most perfectly assembled representation of the English impulse after Shakespeare--the explanation may not be far to seek.²⁰

Tate finds the explanation in the fact that the poetic world of tradition is too far removed from the present sources of human interest to be available to poets. He concludes the article by saying:

Had Keats lived, he might have realized the claims of his posterity, not, perhaps, as his posterity seems to have wished, in an "interpretation" of the social opinion of his age, but in a return to the first "Hyperion" and, through it, as Mr. Murry would like to believe, to Shakespeare.²¹

Six years later, in 1934, Tate discusses decadent Romanticism and its evils for modern poetry, clarifying his position and, in so doing, giving us an idea of his regard for one of Keats's odes:

. . . I should like it to be plainly understood that I am not attacking the great Romantic poets. Romanticism gave us the "Ode to a Nightingale."²²

In 1940, while explaining denotation he points out that poetry is more than direct denotation, and his example is taken from a remark he heard a child once make about a poem

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

²²Tate, On the Limits of Poetry, p. 20.

by Keats--"It is something about a bird." This, Tate says, is about all that the poem does denote, but the connotations cannot be expressed in paraphrase.²³

Most of our concern in this chapter is with one of Tate's few articles of practical criticism.²⁴ It is mainly a study of the "Ode to a Nightingale" but contains evaluations of Keats's poetry other than this ode; it is, therefore, the best source for our analysis of Tate's criticism of Keats.

As will be seen in this study, the New Critics pay more attention to the odes than to Keats's other poems. This fact is understandable, since the New Critics study poems as complete units and, with the possible exception of "Lamia," "Isabella," and "The Eve of St. Agnes," the odes are the finest complete poems of Keats's performance.

Tate lists the best of Keats's poetry in pointing out why there has been less useless writing on Keats than on the other English Romanticists:

The reasons . . . are obvious if a little hard to state; the bulk of Keats's work is comparatively slight; at his best (the odes, "Lamia," "The Eve of St. Agnes," and parts of "Hyperion") he has a masterful simplicity of purpose and control.²⁵

Except for Hyperion, Tate says that the poems listed show

²³ Ibid., p. 12.

²⁴ Tate, "A Reading of Keats," American Scholar, XV (Winter, 1945; Spring, 1946), 55-63; 189-197.

²⁵ Tate, On the Limits of Poetry, p. 166.

such an assimilation of influences that "only the most trivial academic mind could suppose Keats's relation to the 'history of ideas' to have more than the value of a few monographs." It is in this sense that Tate interprets Arnold's reference to Keats as "with Shakespeare."²⁶

Tate regards "Lamia" very highly. He claims that the poem, with its flexible and speedy movement is the most original contribution of the nineteenth century to English narrative verse.²⁷ The success of the verse is that its pictorial method supports the main effect. Keats, according to Tate, found the perfect means to bring into form the material of the poem. "Lamia" is Keats's greatest achievement in the long poem.²⁸

The sonnets are not considered by Tate as among the poet's great work; he feels that without the rest of Keats's poetry, the sonnets would never have won their reputation.²⁹ The truly great poetry of Keats, according to Tate, deals with the same conflict of his experience,³⁰ the conflict which led him to connect love and death.³¹ The poetry of Keats, as defined by Bridges, who is quoted by Tate, is characterized by

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 169.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 170.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 174.

the fact that "Keats's art is primarily objective and pictorial, and whatever other qualities it has are as it were added on to things perceived"--the particular problem of Keats springs from the adding on to things perceived. Lessing censures the painting poet, but Tate defends Keats in this respect:

. . . Like every great artist he knew. . . that his problem was to work within his limitations, and to transcend them. He was a poet of space whose problem was to find a way of conveying what happens in time; for it is time in which dramatic conflict takes place; and it is only by conversion into dramatic actuality that the parts of the verbal painting achieve relation and significance. "The form of thought in Keats," says Mr. Kenneth Burke, "is mystical, in terms of an eternal present"--and, I should add, in terms of the arrested action of painting.³²

It is what Keats adds to the pictorial elements of the "Ode to a Nightingale" which causes Tate to claim it as greater than the more perfectly styled piece of poetry, "To Autumn." The "Ode to a Nightingale" tries to say everything that poetry can say.³³

Six of the eight stanzas of the Nightingale ode are pictorial; stanza three is a meditation upon the mutability and frustration of life, which grows out of the picture in stanza two. The seventh stanza treats the main problem of the poem and springs from the conflict in Keats's experience--

³² Ibid., p. 171.

³³ Ibid., p. 168.

a linking of death and the act of love--which Tate mentions as the source of Keats's greatest poetry. Keats's use of the nightingale as a symbol for something immortal is disturbing to Tate's sense of common reality. The statement, "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird," contains the symbol and is out of place because there is a disparity between the symbol and what it represents.³⁴ Tate states that, despite a certain difficulty presented by this statement, he thinks that the bestowing of immortality upon a mortal bird is almost carried by the imaginative insight of the poet; nevertheless, he is "nagged by a difficulty that will not down."³⁵ The use of the compasses in Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" is more implausible, but more convincing because of transitions in the structure of the poem which keep the reader with the poet throughout the poem. Keats says song equals immortality, and Tate feels that the mortal bird cannot carry connotations of immortal qualities.

Tate condemns the third stanza of the ode, asserting that the best to be said of it is that Shelley, Wordsworth, and Keats himself wrote worse poetry.³⁶ Tate says the stanza is bad because Keats is attempting to present the idea that life is mutability and frustration, and he "has no language

³⁴Ibid., p. 172.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid., p. 174.

of his own for this realm of experience."³⁷ Tate thinks that Keats deals in this and other poems with situations or ideas not familiar to him through his experienced world and uses the language of the preceding age or else commits errors of taste.

Tate remarks Keats's tendency in his poetry to link death and the act of love.³⁸ It is this conflict in the young poet's experience which Tate suggests is responsible for Keats's finest poems. Although it is one of his reasons for revering Keats's poetry as he does, Tate points out that this Romantic linking of death and love is one of the signs of a decline in insight and in imaginative and moral power.³⁹

"A Reading of Keats" includes, also, a discussion of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in which Tate sets forth the idea that this poem contains the same paradox found in the Nightingale ode. What Keats sees as eternal youth and eternal living on the urn is actually eternal death, since the figures on the urn have never had the attributes of life.⁴⁰ Like other critics, he condemns the final stanza, as something added on to a poem already complete. Although the urn is an object better suited to Keats's pictorial imagery than is the nightin-

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 175.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 176.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 178.

gale, it is the "Ode to a Nightingale" which Tate considers the greater poem, for in it, despite the faults, there is nowhere the violation of set limits which is found in the final stanza of the Grecian Urn. The greater dramatic credibility of the Nightingale ode is another factor, for Keats is not implicit in the structure of this poem as he is in the "Ode to a Nightingale" and, therefore, should not violate the unity by imposing his own comment on the reader.⁴¹

Tate closes his essay by saying that Keats seems to have been the master of the central experience of England during his age.⁴² Borrowing a few phrases from T. S. Eliot, Tate goes on to say that Keats's artistry and recognition of the place of the imagination in art "will keep him not only among the masters of English poetry but among the few heroes of literature. . . . He did not know, because he lacked the maturity to know, the boredom; he knew a little of the horror; but he knew much of the glory, of human life."⁴³

It is a dramatic fact that Tate and other New Critics have an anti-Romantic bias and yet praise the poetry of Keats. The reason is not difficult to see. What he condemns in Shelley, for example, is not present in Keats, and the elements in Keats's poetry which he finds praiseworthy are seldom present

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 179-180.

⁴² Ibid., p. 183.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 183-184.

in Shelley. Tate's usual lack of admiration for the English Romanticists does not apply to Keats. Keats's use of concrete imagery, his presentation and exploration of his own experiences, and his clear understanding of the imagination's function make Tate's apparent inconsistency not difficult to resolve. Keats, Tate says, "was in one of the great modes of poetry."⁴⁴ Throughout Tate's criticism Keats receives praise--certainly not the high praise given Shakespeare, but high praise nevertheless.

The letters of Keats have not been mentioned, because they are not our primary concern here, but Tate speaks of them as among the great letters of the world. The article entitled "A Reading of Keats" is one of Tate's rare ventures into practical criticism, and this fact in itself is an indication of his admiration for Keats's poetry.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 168.

CHAPTER II

KENNETH BURKE

Kenneth Burke, born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1897, received his education at Ohio State University and Columbia University. Unlike the four other New Critics examined in this study, Burke is not professionally associated with literature; he became a music critic for The Dial in 1927 and for The Nation in 1933. From time to time he has lectured on several aspects of culture, including literature, but never has the study or teaching of literature been his principal interest. His main critical works are Counter-Statement (1931), Attitudes Toward History (1937), The Philosophy of Literary Form (1941), and A Grammar of Motives (1945). Besides these works he has translated French and German writings and published a book of his own short stories.¹

In this chapter, we shall examine Burke's theory of poetry and his analysis of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." At one time or another, he has touched upon nearly every critical theory known to literary historians, and his work illustrates the practice of many of them. Indeed, he might be taken as a representative of every aspect of modern criticism.² He has, however, specialized in the area of symbolic expression, and, since he is the only critic who has worked in this field exten-

¹Stallman, Critiques and Essays in Criticism, pp. 509-510.

²Stanley Edgar Hyman, The Armed Vision (New York, 1948), p. 347.

sively and intensively, we must restrict him to it arbitrarily.

A question about Burke's being a New Critic arises from the fact that his concept of a poem as symbolic action is inextricably tied up with the poet's life and the cultural backgrounds of the age in which that poet lived. Burke says:

In any event, as regards the correlation between mind and body, we may note for future application in this essay, that the poet will naturally tend to write about that which must deeply engrosses him--and nothing more deeply engrosses a man than his burdens, including those of a physical nature, such as disease. . . . The poet may come to have a "vested interest" in his handicaps; these handicaps may become an integral part of his method; and in so far as his style grows out of a disease, his loyalty to it may reinforce the disease. . . . It bears again upon the subject of "symbolic action," with the poet's burden symbolic of his style, and his style symbolic of his burdens.³

These statements indicate that Burke advocates rather than repudiates the study of biography as a means of interpreting a given work. Another statement will clarify his position:

Please get me straight: I am not saying what we need know of Coleridge's marital troubles and sufferings from drug addiction in order to appreciate "The Ancient Mariner" and other poems wherein the same themes figure. I am saying that, in trying to understand the psychology of the poetic act, we may introduce such knowledge, where it is available, to give us material necessary for discussing the full nature of this act.

. . . if we try to discover ^{what} that the poem is doing for the poet, we may discover a set of generalizations as to what poems do for everybody.⁴

This attitude would justify, partially at least, historical

³Kenneth Burke, The Philosophy of Literary Form (Baton Rouge, 1941), p. 17.

⁴Ibid., p. 73.

scholarship, whereas Brooks, for instance, apparently utilizes the historical approach only in a study of word usage, in order to get the poet's surface meaning. In other words, Brooks would feel that Milton's blindness is completely irrelevant to the study of his poetry; to Burke, it is of the utmost importance. Despite tendencies not characteristic of New Criticism, Burke's concern with critical analysis of the text of a poem classifies him as a New Critic.

In this chapter, unlike the others, we shall be limited to a glance at the center of Burke's theory of symbolic action and at his study of a poem by Keats in which he uses this theory as the basis for his analysis. There will be little attempt made to see where Burke places Keats among the English poets, because he has not clearly indicated where he places him. In his article, "Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats," Burke interprets the poem as he sees it, but he does not judge it, except in a few comments which reflect a favorable attitude toward Keats's poetic techniques.

Perhaps the best brief statement of how symbolic action works is the following from The Philosophy of Literary Form:

The general approach to the poem might be called "pragmatic" in this sense: It assumes that a poem's structure is to be described most accurately by thinking always of the poem's function. It assumes that the poem is designed to "do something" for the poet and his readers, and that we can make the most relevant observations about its design by considering the poem as the embodiment of this act. In the poet, we might say, the poetizing existed as a physiological function. The poem is its corresponding anatomic structure. And the reader, in par-

icipating in the poem, breathes into this anatomic structure a new physiological vitality that resembles, though with a difference, the act of its maker, the resemblance being in the overlap between the writer's and the reader's situation, the difference being in the fact that these situations are far from identical.⁵

A similar statement occurs in the study of Keats, in which Burke says that "a poem is an act, the symbolic act of the poet who made it--an act of such a nature that in surviving as a structure or object, it enables us as readers to re-enact it."⁶ These statements do not give a complete picture of Burke's theory, but Burke himself has written several volumes which attempt to define his "symbolic action," and it is futile to attempt here a further summary of the term as he uses it.

The article interpreting the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is our main concern in this chapter, and perhaps the best way to escape entanglement in Burke's voluminous theorizing is to get into a review of his study of Keats.

Burke begins by differentiating between language as a means of information and language as action--the former is to be understood in terms of science and the latter in terms of poetry.⁷ He then takes the two terms from the crux of the poem and substitutes science for truth and poetry for beauty. The poem, then, asserts, "Poetry is science, science poetry."

⁵Ibid., pp. 89-90.

⁶Burke, "Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats," Accent, IV (Autumn, 1943), 30.

⁷Ibid.

Burke notes that this is a "counter-assertion," as the statement, "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world," is a counter-assertion to an accepted Victorian attitude that all is not right. The statement by the urn is a counter-assertion to a Romantic philosophy which denies any relationship between science and poetry. Burke goes on to say that the five stanzas of the poem were a necessary preliminary for the statement at the end; without them the poet would have been forced to say, "Beauty is not truth, truth not beauty." In other words, Burke is saying that Keats here transcends mere Romanticism by the use of his own inspired genius, working in the Romantic vein in the lines of the poem prior to the oracular "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"⁸

Burke then goes into the poem at the beginning. He suggests that there are two levels of action implied by the poet in the first stanza. The doubt raised as to whether the urn depicts gods or men, deities or mortals, is the indication of these levels. The second stanza continues this question, but the two levels are no longer implied; they are explicit. There is a specific contrast between heard melodies and unheard melodies, between the sensual ear and the spirit which responds to the ditties of no tone.⁹

The description of inaudible sounds suggests to Burke

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., p. 31

the matter of motives-behind-motives. The mystic oxymoron of the motionless prime mover is another, similar, paradox. At this point Burke makes a comment which places Keats at the top of English poets in the employment of one poetic technique and also explains why the inaudible sounds suggest motives-behind-motives:

Here the poet whose sounds are the richest in our language is meditating upon absolute sound, the essence of sound, which would be soundless as the prime mover is motionless, or as the "principle" of sweetness would not be sweet, having transcended sweetness, or as the sub-atomic particles of the sun are each, in their isolate purity, said to be devoid of temperature.¹⁰

A contrast between Keats's unheard melodies and those in Shelley's little poem beginning with the line, "Music, when soft voices die," is made by Burke:

Here the futuristic Shelley is anticipating retrospection; he is looking forward to looking back. The form of thought is naturalistic and temporalistic in terms of past and future. But the form of thought in Keats is mystical, in terms of an eternal present. The Ode is striving to move beyond the region of becoming into the realm of being. (This is another way of saying that we are here concerned with two levels of motivation.)¹¹

Burke also notes the suspension of erotic imagery in "an arrested pre-ecstasy."¹²

Next Burke discusses and analyzes the implication of a

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 32.

¹² Ibid.

variation of the love-death equation in stanza two. Not until he reaches stanza four in his analysis does Burke explain how the love-death equation is implied here. He finds strong suggestions of Romanticism in this, but he also detects political significance, since capitalistic individualism sharpens the consummation in love-death by heightening the individual identity and making the death more imperious.¹³ At this point Burke appears to be wandering from his purpose, but he connects it by tying in a passage from a letter by Keats to Fanny Brawne, in which the poet speaks more definitely of the consumption and consummation of love in fire.¹⁴ Here Burke admits that these speculations "interfere with the symmetry of criticism as a game," but he defends his introducing such background facts by saying that "these concerns have such important bearing upon matters of culture and conduct in general that no sheer conventions or ideals of criticism should be allowed to interfere with their development."¹⁵ Burke goes on to introduce Keats's illness into the study of the poem, showing that the state of agitation in this and other poems might be the result of the illness.¹⁶

Speaking of the separating of the two motives in stanza three, Burke says:

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

The poem as a whole makes permanent, or fixes in a state of arrest, a peculiar agitation. But within this fixity, by the nature of poetry as a progressive medium, there must be development. Hence, the agitation that is maintained throughout (as a mood absolutized so that it fills the entire universe of discourse) will at the same time undergo internal transformations. In the third stanza, these are manifested as a clear division into two distinct and contrasted realms. There is a transcendental fever, which is felicitous, divinely above "all breathing human passion." . . . From the bodily fever, which is a passion, and malign, there has split off a spiritual activity, a wholly benign aspect of the total agitation.¹⁷

At the close of the third stanza, a movement is finished.

The first stanza raises the question as to whether or not there are two motivational levels in the poem; the second stanza answers by showing that there are two levels; and the third stanza indicates the separation of these levels.¹⁸

Burke raises the question: In what direction will the poem move after this third stanza? He concludes that there must be a scene of the same quality as this transcendent spiritual activity.¹⁹ The scene which Keats pictures is, of course, the sacrifice scene. It is the inclusion of the sacrifice which Burke uses as his justification for discussing the love-death equation in stanza two. The scene is a vision of death, or immortality, and this "deathly-deathless scene" is "the corresponding ground of our transcendent act. The Urn itself,

¹⁷Ibid., pp. 34-35.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁹Ibid.

as with the scene upon it, is not merely an immortal act in our present mortal scene; it was originally an immortal act in a mortal scene quite different. The imagery, of sacrifice, piety, silence, desolation, is that of communication with the immortal or the dead."²⁰ This immortal act in mortal scene is fitting, also, in that it continues the separation of mortality and immortality, at the same time maintaining a bond of communication between them.²¹ The poem, through the urn, also is a bond between mortality and immortality, for the reader uses it to transport him into the scene.²²

The final stanza, in contrast to the warmth of imagery in the third, speaks of "Cold Pastoral!" We, through the poem, have now gone from transcendent fever to transcendent chill, from bodily passion to mental action. The chill is benign, for the benign aspects of the fever were all that remained after the split in stanza three.²³ In this connection, Burke suggests that Keats deliberately plays with double sounds and meanings in the words brede and overwrought. Both words, in the puns, would "merge notions of sexuality and craftsmanship, the erotic and the poetic."²⁴

²⁰Ibid., p. 37.

²¹Ibid., p. 38.

²²Ibid.

²³Ibid., p. 39.

²⁴Ibid.

Burke has now, with interruptions, traced the development of the poem up to the oracle. Without the introductory stanzas, truth and beauty are at odds, beauty having its fulfillment in Romantic poetry and truth in science. ". . . Without benefit of the rites which one enacts in a sympathetic reading of the Ode (rites that remove the discussion to a different level), the enjoyment of 'beauty' would involve an esthetic kind of awareness radically in conflict with the kind of awareness deriving from the practical 'truth.' And as regards the tactics of the poem, this conflict would seem to be solved by 'estheticizing' the true rather than by 'verifying' the beautiful."²⁵

The essay returns to the remark at the beginning in which Burke substitutes for Keats's phrasing of the oracle the statement, "Poetry is science, science poetry." Burke goes further and equates poetry and act, science and scene.²⁶ A slight change is all that is required to bring these equations about. This interpretation is in keeping with the rest of Burke's commentary on the lines preceding the oracle, for his entire interpretation turns about the act-scene ratio in stanza four.

Burke's analysis is extremely complex and reaches into such deep levels of meaning that this summary does not do

²⁵ Ibid., p. 40

²⁶ Ibid.

justice to his position. And yet it must stand. Except for the few statements which are to be mentioned in the paragraph following this one, the article has importance for us only in its unique interpretation of this one poem. Of all the analyses of the ode produced by New Criticism, this by Burke is the most thorough.

In keeping with the purpose of the other chapters, we should close this one by looking at one or two of Burke's comments in praise of Keats. One we have already seen--that about his poetry's having the richest sounds in English literature. Burke usually restricts himself to analysis and is constantly working over his theory, which is his main concern in writing books of criticism. However, he often implies approval of what he is discussing, and the entire essay on Keats shows that Burke's opinion of this particular poem is very high. In comparing a poem by Yeats to this ode by Keats, Burke says: "Both Yeats and Keats, of course, were much more 'dramatistic' in their thinking than romantic poets generally."²⁷ This statement is similar to that by Brooks that Keats, of the Romanticists, came closest to writing dramatic poems. The continuity of the ode, according to Burke, is achieved by the use of rhetorical questions. When Keats returns to the rhetorical questions in stanza four, "one even gets the impression that the form of the rhetorical question

²⁷ Ibid., p. 41.

had never been abandoned; that the poet's questings had been couched as questions throughout. This is tonal felicity at its best, and something much like unheard tonal felicity."²⁸ The very fact that Burke should write an essay on Keats--one of his very few articles of practical criticism--is a good indication of his respect for Keats's poetry.

One difference between Burke and other New Critics is that Burke has very little anti-Romantic bias. His master in criticism is Coleridge, and he admires Coleridge's poetry greatly. Therefore, there being no reason for presupposing that Keats will be treated unfavorably by Burke, it is unnecessary to explain why Keats is treated favorably in spite of his being a Romanticist. With this in mind, and since there is no disparagement of Keats in Burke's writing and some high praise for him in the one article devoted to his "Ode on a Grecian Urn," there is every indication that, with another New Critic (as Burke is considered to be), Keats is one of our greatest literary craftsmen.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

CHAPTER III

CLEANTH BROOKS

The main purpose of this chapter is to point out how Cleanth Brooks judges Keats's poetry and, with his theory in mind, to see why he rates him as he does. Brooks was born in Kentucky in 1906 and received his advanced education at Vanderbilt, Tulane, and Exeter College of Oxford University. With a Southern education and a position on the faculty at Louisiana State University, Brooks became a leader among the group known as the Southern poet-critics. At Louisiana State, Brooks and Robert Penn Warren edited one of the significant periodicals of New Criticism, The Southern Review. Three analytical anthologies--Understanding Poetry (1938), An Approach to Literature (1941), and Understanding Fiction (1943)--are the results of further collaboration by Brooks and Warren. These, with Understanding Drama (1945, 1948) edited by Brooks and Robert B. Heilman, have been influential in spreading New Criticism throughout the colleges and universities of the United States. Modern Poetry and the Tradition (1939), Brooks's first book of criticism, contains the main elements of his theory. The Well Wrought Urn (1947) shows an advance in his theory, but mainly it is an application of his previously expressed ideas to practical analysis. Brooks now holds a professorship at Yale University.¹

¹Stallman, Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 509.

In this chapter we shall examine two of the books on which Brooks and Warren collaborated; but presumably they represent Brooks's opinions and for convenience can be treated so. The purpose in so doing is not to slight Warren at all, but Brooks is the more voluminous critic of the two. His Modern Poetry and the Tradition and the article on the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" give a clearer idea of his regard for Keats than do the analyses in the anthologies.

Brooks, like Tate and other New Critics, is representative of a strong reaction against Romanticism, but without contradicting himself, he also reacts against neoclassicism. While speaking of the history of modern English poetry in 1935, he wrote of the Romantic Revolt:

The second major critical revolution, the Romantic Revolt, had as its ostensible objective, the liberation of the imagination. Unfortunately it failed to be revolutionary enough. As we have seen, the Romantic poets, in attacking the neoclassic conception of the poetic, tended to offer new poetic objects rather than to discard altogether the conception of a special poetic material. Even Coleridge himself, with all his critical acumen, did not completely free himself from the didactic conception.²

Brooks directs his attack, therefore, against the idea of didacticism, an element present in neoclassicism, and the concept of a special poetic material both of which occur in nineteenth-century English Romanticism. But a later statement further reveals his attitudes toward these periods of English poetry.

²Cleanth Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition (Chapel Hill, 1939), p. 52.

He says in 1947:

It is true that in Modern Poetry and the Tradition I suggested the need for a radical revision of the history of English literature, and that I there criticized certain aspects of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poetry. I hope that the treatment accorded to particular eighteenth- and nineteenth-century poems in this book, will perhaps put that criticism in better perspective. I should certainly dislike to be thought to maintain that English poetry ceased with the death of Donne, to be resumed only in our own time.³

We are, then, not to assume that Brooks rejects the poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but, as has already been seen, he does exhibit an antipathy to the poetry of these periods. Of particular interest for this study are the reasons for his lack of esteem for most Romantic poetry.

These reasons are easily seen in Brooks's early essays of 1935. One of his aversions is a Romantic sentimentality which results from an attempt to oversimplify experience:

The sentimentalist takes a short cut to intensity by removing all the elements of the experience which might conceivably militate against the intensity. Every poet, of course, makes a selection, but the sentimentalist, we feel, selects on too narrow a basis. . . . The sentimental poet makes us feel that he is sacrificing the totality of his vision in favor of a particular interpretation.⁴

Brooks points out that the Romanticist does this in order to achieve sincerity, but he goes on to show that true sincerity is that which will not ignore the complexity of experience.⁵

³ Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn (New York, 1947), p. 204.

⁴ Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition, p. 37.

⁵ Ibid.

Another shortcoming of the Romantic poet is that, like the neoclassicist, he maintains the existence of a special poetic material. To both the neoclassicist and the Romanticist, some things are intrinsically poetic. Brooks takes issue with this idea; he points out Donne's use of the compasses in "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" and says:

. . . the compasses are poetic in the only sense in which objects can ever be legitimately poetic--they function integrally in a poem.⁶

Brooks assails the didacticism in the poetry of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

For poetic symbols are not true. The statement that they are true is in itself a metaphor. The didactic view of poetry, with its emphasis on the illustrative function of the metaphor, assumes that poetic symbols are to stand for ideas, and naturally true ideas are to be preferred to false. Under such a theory the goodness of a poem is to a great extent determined by its truth. This, however, is to bring poetry into a competition with science, which falsifies their relationship.⁷

These, then, we may consider as the targets of Brooks's main criticisms of the Romanticists: their sentimentality, their notion of a "poetic material," and their didacticism. Elsewhere, while mentioning sentimentality as one of the weaknesses of Romanticism, Brooks names two other factors which are characteristically Romantic faults: escapism and a vulnerability to irony.⁸ This examination of Brooks's anti-Romanticism

⁶Ibid., p. 12.

⁷Ibid., p. 45.

⁸Ibid., p. 61.

is merely a negative approach to his theory of poetry, but it serves a purpose here, for it throws into relief his understanding and admiration of Keats's poetry. Before we turn to that study, however, we should have in mind the main tenets of Brooks's theory.

With a knowledge of what Brooks wishes to keep out of poetry, we must look for elements which he considers conducive to great poetry. He finds in the Metaphysical poets, Donne particularly, the best exploitation of poetic technique, and his judgments of other poets are colored by his esteem for the Metaphysical. Brooks himself realized the unjustness of such a prejudice, for he says:

. . . to propose to find in the poem ambiguities, ironies, and paradoxes will seem to many a reader an attempt to fit the poem to a Procrustean bed--in fine, the bed in which John Donne slept comfortably enough but in which a Romantic poet can hardly be supposed to find any ease.⁹

Nevertheless, he does attempt to judge the Romanticists by the standards with which he judges Donne--standards derived with a preconceived regard for Donne. This fact is the main reason that the Romanticists in general receive such rough treatment at the hands of Cleanth Brooks.

In looking at a poem, Brooks, like Tate, insists upon the poem as a unit. In 1937, in one of his early collaborations with Robert Penn Warren, Brooks mentions this matter and at the same time distinguishes between two sorts of unity:

⁹Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn, p. 116.

. . . a poem, in so far as it is successful, is a unified construct, a psychological whole; and since a poem is an organism it is not on y greater than, but different from, the sum of its parts.¹⁰

The problem which the reader with a Romantic background faces in reading a modern poem is to realize that the totality of the poem and its effect are more important than the isolated items which make up the poem:

. . . Every successful poem creates a psychological unity, and not even the simplest metaphor fails to violate a logical unity. The distinction between the two kinds of unity is extremely important: psychological unity is the aim of every poem; logical unity is a device to achieve this aim, and may or may not be used.¹¹

Brooks says that the poet "explores, consolidates, and 'forms' the total experience that is the poem."¹² However, although he is a maker instead of a communicator, ultimately "a poem must communicate poetry. A poem may be read in a number of ways--as a sociological, or a historical, or a philological, or a philosophical, or a metrical document. Such types of reading, though invaluable in preparing for the proper reading of a poem, do not constitute that reading." The reader who in studying a poem looks for a stereotyped poetical feeling is not giving the poem the reading it should have.¹³

¹⁰Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, "The Reading of Modern Poetry," American Review, VIII (February, 1937), p. 439.

¹¹Ibid., p. 442.

¹²Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn, p. 69.

¹³Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition, p. 238.

Because the oversimplification of experience may result in sentimentality, Brooks proclaims one of the poet's tasks to be a reconciling of the irrelevant or seemingly varying elements of experience. In praising Keats's as opposed to Shelley's approach to poetry, Brooks says that "Keats . . . explores a particular experience--not as a favorite generalization to be beautified--but as an object to be explored in its full ramifications."¹⁴ In this connection, Brooks says with T. S. Eliot, "When a poet's mind is perfectly equipped for its work, it is constantly amalgamating disparate experience."¹⁵ This idea is also the result of Richards' influence on Brooks, an influence greater than that of Eliot.

At the center of Brooks's theory lies his idea of irony in poetry. In 1936 he writes:

In the all-important chapter of his Principles of Literary Criticism, that which treats "The Imagination," Richards distinguishes between two general types of poetry: first, poetry which leaves out the opposite and discordant qualities of an experience, excluding them from the poem; and second, poetry in which the imagination includes them, resolving the apparent discords, and thus gaining a larger unity.¹⁶

He then quotes from Richards, agreeing with him in his statements:¹⁷

¹⁴ Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition, p. 238.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 33.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

¹⁷ Ibid.

"The difference comes out clearly if we consider how comparatively unstable poems of the first kind are. They will not bear an ironical contemplation. . . . Irony in this sense consists in the bringing in of the opposite, the complementary impulses; that is why poetry which is exposed to it is not of the highest order, and why irony itself is so constantly a characteristic of poetry which is."

In 1942, Brooks contributed a chapter to The Language of Poetry, edited by Allen Tate. The chapter, entitled "The Language of Paradox," became the first chapter in The Well Wrought Urn. An advance upon his earlier statements regarding irony, it reflects the core of his theory of poetry. There are several statements which deserve being quoted here:

. . . there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox.¹⁸

. . . the paradoxes spring from the very nature of the poet's language: it is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations.¹⁹

The method of art can, I believe, never be direct--is always indirect.²⁰

Almost any insight important enough to warrant a great poem apparently has to be stated in such /paradoxical/ terms.²¹

¹⁸Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn, p. 3.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 8.

²⁰Ibid., p. 16.

²¹Ibid.

statement of a great deal more accuracy than is ordinarily obtained.²⁴

A similar reference to Keats is made in a later part of the same essay:

But one is not forced to rely on the metaphysical poets or on the moderns for illustration. One may find, to cite an instance from the Romantic poets, a very brilliant case of qualifying irony as used by Keats.²⁵

Brooks then analyzes a part of the "Ode to a Nightingale" and remarks that the entire poem is paradoxical in theme.

In 1939, Brooks published Modern Poetry and the Tradition. The later chapters of this book contain more of these laudatory references to Keats. In condemning Romantic subjectivism and neoclassic objectivism as isolated techniques, Brooks praises the dramatic fusion of the two which was achieved by the Elizabethans. He also discusses the Romantics on this score:

Wordsworth has as little of the dramatic as does Shelley, and where we find an overt attempt at the dramatic, it is the personal self-dramatization of Byron--the self-conscious actor, not the objectifying dramatist. Keats, oddly enough, comes closest to giving us dramatic poems--in the great odes; and Keats himself had recognized before his death the need for a stiffening and toughening of his poetry.²⁶

This is not, of course, unqualified praise of Keats, but Brooks

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ibid., p. 31.

²⁶Ibid., p. 217.

does place him above the other Romanticists and credits Keats with an awareness of his weaknesses.

In the same book, Brooks, while discussing form in poetry, says:

If we mean by form the arrangement of the various elements of the poem in order to further the poet's total intention, then Keats's "Ode to Autumn" has perfection of form quite as much as does Pope's Rape of the Lock.²⁷

Brooks's most interesting early discussion of Keats is found in chapter ten of Modern Poetry and the Tradition. Brooks makes a contrast between Shelley and Keats which shows him to regard Keats very highly. In the first place, a new estimate of the two is necessary:

One of the most striking evidences of the inaccuracy of the traditional account of English poetry is seen in the ease with which Shelley and Keats are paired. I do not mean to say that critics have not always been aware of differences of method and effect between the two poets; I have in mind differences of poetic caliber. The traditional historian hardly sees Shelley as a very unsatisfactory poet greatly inferior to Keats. A more considered view must surely hold him so.

Shelley is not merely guilty of poor craftsmanship--slovenly riming, loosely decorative and sometimes too gaudy metaphor. Consideration of the two on the basis of tone and attitude will reveal more important differences. Keats is rarely sentimental, Shelley frequently so. Keats is too much the artist to risk Shelley's sometimes embarrassing declarations--"I die, I faint, I fail," or "I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!" Keats, even in his apprentice stage, attempts to give his lyricism a restraining form; he maintains his objectivity as in "To Autumn"; he attempts a qualifying self-irony as in the "Ode to a Nightingale."²⁸

²⁷ Ibid., p. 237.

²⁸ Ibid.

With his partiality for the Metaphysicals, Brooks insists upon judging Keats and Shelley by Metaphysical standards:

There is surely no attempt to turn Keats into a Donne, or, for that matter, into a Shakespeare or Milton, if one observes that his most mature poetry can be brought under the general principles of symbolist-metaphysical poetry. And if Shelley, measured by these principles, comes off rather badly, the issue may be more important than some readers will at first be willing to allow. For the charges of sentimentality, lack of proportion, confusion of abstract generalization with symbol, and confusion of propaganda with imaginative insight are not charges to be dismissed lightly.²⁹

Probing more deeply after the reasons for the difference in quality of the two poets, Brooks finds that Keats does not tend to oversimplify experience, but explores a particular experience to the greatest extent:

Does it add any clarification to say with one of the popular histories of English poetry that Keats "worships beauty for beauty's sake, with none of the secondary moral intentions of . . . Shelley"? Cannot the essential distinction between them be stated somewhat as follows: Shelley tends to make a point, to state a dogma, decking it with the beautiful and the ethereal. When his poetry fails, it fails through oversimplification or cloying floweriness. Keats, on the other hand, explores a particular experience--not as a favorite generalization to be beautified--but as an object to be explored in its full ramifications. Even the abstract statement, "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty, that is all/Ye know on earth," cannot be removed from the poem without violence. It is defined and given meaning only in terms of the context, and is taken legitimately only as a statement elicited by the preceding lines of the poem, and as one element in the whole experience. It is not intended to be a generalization which can march out of the poem and take its place alongside the scientific and practical generali-

²⁹Ibid.

zations of the workaday world.³⁰

This tendency to explore an experience prevents Keats's allowing didacticism to enter his poetry at the expense of higher poetic values:

Both Keats and Coleridge, indeed, are separated from their contemporaries by a reluctance to force didacticism. They respect the complexity of experience too much to violate it by oversimplification; the concrete, too much to indulge in easy abstractions. They think through their images. Instead of the formula employed by Shelley in his "Ode to a Skylark"--lush imagery followed by the abstract

Our sweetest songs are those that tell
of saddest thought. . .

Keats gives us the "Ode to a Nightingale."³¹

What Brooks says here is high praise from anyone, but it is extremely high praise when one remembers that it is an anti-Romantic critic speaking of a Romantic poet. Of course, Brooks praises Keats for the non-Romantic elements in his poetry, but he finds that Keats's most mature poetry can be brought under the principles of symbolist-metaphysical poetry.

In An Approach to Literature, Brooks and Warren and John Thibaut Purser analyzed two of Keats's poems, "Ode on Melancholy" and the sonnet "Bright Star." In these analyses, as in the one of the "Ode to a Nightingale" in Understanding Poetry, there is much interpretation included for the benefit of beginning students which can be ignored by the present study. In general, Brooks likes the "Ode on Melancholy"

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 237-238.

³¹ Ibid., p. 238.

despite the weakness of the second stanza. He commends the opening of the poem because the abrupt beginning creates suspense, giving a "dramatic effect to a poem which might seem at first glance largely embroidery work."³² The sacrificed clarity is excusable because it is not serious. Brooks notes the dangerous proximity to sentimentality at the close of the first stanza, but he goes on to indicate that melancholy becomes separated from sentimentality in the second stanza. He praises the "weeping cloud" image and that of the "April shroud" very highly, saying that "The mood may help us to see more clearly into the meaning of life--to see the close connection of joy and sorrow, a paradoxical unity in their contrast."³³ He condemns the digression on "the lady" in stanza two on the grounds that Keats has presented a scene which does not relate to the theme or total effect of the poem.³⁴ He says the digression "tends to make the experience seem unreal and to make the melancholy seem trivial and self-centered."³⁵

However, Brooks points out that the return to the central theme in the last stanza recovers the lost effect remarkably well. The paradox of Melancholy's being worshipped in

³²Brooks, Warren, and John Thibaut Purser, An Approach to Literature (New York, 1942), p. 480.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., pp. 480-481.

³⁵Ibid., p. 481.

the temple of Delight naturally strikes Brooks's love of paradox.³⁶ The finest image in the poem, Brooks says, occurs in lines seven and eight of stanza three:

Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine.

To justify his praise, Brooks notes that the image of taste has been prepared for throughout the poem and that the poem has been built around this image of taste and that of the temple rites.³⁷

In his concluding comment on the poem, Brooks says:

The poem, as has already been indicated, is not altogether successful, though parts of it are very fine. Despite individual passages of fineness, one must still ask the question: Why cannot we put it beside the greatest poems? Individual faults have already been commented upon. . . . There are in general two approaches to the theme: (1) a rather straightforward, direct approach, or (2) an ironical approach. Keat's sic poem falls somewhere between the two. He is really using an indirect ironical approach: Don't look there for melancholy; if you want something really to be sad about find the most beautiful thing that you can, for the loveliest things must perish. His poem requires irony, therefore. But the poem does not have enough irony. It depends too much on the embroidery work of the decorative imagery. The most successful passages which we have found are ironical or tend to irony. But the poem does not have enough to be entirely successful.³⁸

And yet, despite this, Brooks finds it far more successful than the sonnet "Bright Star." He notes the similarity of theme between the two and says that the sonnet fails where the

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸Ibid.

the ode does not because it is completely devoid of irony.³⁹ Like other critics, Brooks gives praise to the first eight lines, although his "fine" is qualified by "rather." The rest of the poem he condemns for "childishness" and "sentimentality" at which the reader is tempted to laugh.⁴⁰ This is a criticism offered not by Brooks alone, for many writers on this poem have expressed similar opinions. As Brooks says, "Few poems begin so auspiciously as this one, to crumble at the end."⁴¹

The analysis of the "Ode to a Nightingale" in Understanding Poetry is a fuller analysis than either of those discussed in the paragraphs preceding. In the first paragraph, Brooks sums up the theme of the poem without comment, but he deals more extensively with the imagery:

The images are elaborate and decorative and the poet dwells upon them lovingly and leisurely, developing them in some detail as pictures.⁴²

He calls the imagery well-suited to the general character of the poem, and this is all that he requires of any element in a poem. Later in the analysis, he speaks at more length of the imagery:

The poem as a whole lives obviously in terms of its imagery, but the emphasis on the imagery is on

³⁹ Ibid., p. 482.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Brooks and Warren, Understanding Poetry (New York, 1938), p. 410.

the decorative side. The imagery is not welded sufficiently to the theme; the ironical effect of the experience as a whole is not achieved through the imagery. Indeed, this imagery, superb as it is, lies closer to surface description than does, for example, the highly functional imagery of, say, Shakespeare. But admitting this defect, we can consider the imagery of this ode as carrying almost as far as is humanly possible beautiful description rich in association.⁴³

Brooks discusses the essential weakness of the poem, saying that "it is a higher compliment to Keats to examine his poetry closely enough to find such a weakness than to rest our praise on those parts which are completely praiseworthy, the elaboration of the particular details."⁴⁴ This weakness is that Keats has not enforced the irony of the total situation of the poem; that is, he has not kept the reader alert to the contrast between the world as it is and the ideal world of beauty.⁴⁵ Brooks finds a use of irony in Keats's play on the word forlorn, but he blames Keats for not taking advantage of it.⁴⁶

The keenness of Keats's perception which results from the careful exploration of an experience comes in for praise from Brooks:

We feel that he knows what he is talking about. A poorer poet would try only for the decorative effect

⁴³ Ibid., p. 413.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 412.

⁴⁵ Ibid., pp. 412-413.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 413.

and would fail. Moreover, much of the suggestiveness resides also in the choice of precise details. . . . The force of association is greatest when it is aroused by precise detail.⁴⁷

In conclusion, Brooks refers again to the excellence of the imagery and says that the isolated images are not closely enough knit together. He speaks of the ode as a fine poem, and he closes on the note we have already heard--that Keats himself realized his weaknesses, which "lay in the general structure and in the occasional lack of positive relation between meaning and imagery in his work."⁴⁸

Strangely enough, Brooks does not condemn the third stanza as does Tate, and, of course, the paradox in stanza seven is as delightful to Brooks's critical impulses as it is self-contradictory to Tate, who desires a logical statement. Both critics find the poem excellent despite obvious faults, and both seem to praise Keats rather more highly than their anti-Romanticism would lead one to expect.

The last article to be treated here provides even more interest than those discussed on the pages preceding. It is the chapter on Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" which was reprinted in The Well Wrought Urn from The Sewanee Review.⁴⁹ The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" has received much attention because of the well-known statement, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 414.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 415.

⁴⁹ Brooks, "History Without Footnotes: an Account of Keats's Urn," Sewanee Review, LII (Winter, 1944), 80-101.

and Brooks opens his commentary by noting this apparently didactic element in a poem by a poet whose poetry generally would lead one to believe he would have approved MacLeish's dictum, "A poem should not mean/ But be."⁵⁰ The poem, Brooks says, raises a question regarding the relationship of belief and art and raises it in its sharpest form by equating Beauty and Truth.⁵¹ The ultimate question to be answered in this matter is whether or not Keats the poet was able to exemplify the relation of beauty and truth in this particular poem.⁵² In attempting his answer to the question, Brooks examines the poem to see if the statement at the end is dramatically prepared for. To examine the ode successfully with this end in view, Brooks tells the reader that he must not dismiss as mere description the early characterizations of the urn. What appears to be mere decoration might prove to be meaningful symbolism.⁵³

A preoccupation with the paradoxical tone of the ode is evident in Brooks's analysis. The paradoxes in the imagery are emphasized--the urn's being a "bride of quietness," a "foster-child of silence and slow time," a "sylvan historian," etc. The second stanza tells of the first scene on the urn,

⁵⁰ Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn, p. 139.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p. 140.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 142.

and the paradox is ever present:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter.

Action is vibrant on the urn, although the figures are in actuality motionless.⁵⁴

In the third stanza, Brooks finds the real blemish of the ode, the sentimental repetition of happy. And yet even here there is a defense, because the whole situation is paradoxical.⁵⁵ Brooks does not believe that these paradoxes are unintentional, and thus he defends Keats against Garrod's charge that here the ironic undercurrent of the poem is uncontrolled. Brooks says:

The undertone is there, but Keats has not been taken "farther than he meant to go." Keats's attitude, even in the early stanzas, is more complex than Garrod would allow: it is more complex and more ironic, and a recognition of this is important if we are to be able to relate the last stanza to the rest of the "Ode." Keats is perfectly aware that the frozen moment of loveliness is more dynamic than is the fluid world of reality only because it is frozen.⁵⁶

It is this constant enforcing of irony that Brooks expects in great poetry, and the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" has it in abundance.

Brooks defends Keats's fanciful contemplation of the empty town in stanza four by indicating that this town has a richer history than real cities, because it is known imagina-

⁵⁴Ibid., pp. 142-143.

⁵⁵Ibid., p. 145.

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 146-147.

tively; this is paradoxical, and thus the tone of the poem is maintained. The final stanza restates the paradox, that the urn and its figures, although they are marble, have a life above life itself.⁵⁷ The urn which Keats's imagination has created "is cold, and the life beyond life which it expresses is life which has been formed, arranged. The urn itself is a silent form, and it speaks, not by means of statement, but by 'teasing us out of thought.' It is enigmatic as eternity is, for, like eternity, its history is beyond time, outside time, and for this reason bewilders our time-ridden minds: it teases us."⁵⁸ The urn will tell its story to all generations. And what will it say to them? Presumably it will say

that "formed experience," imaginative insight, embodies the basic and fundamental perception of man and nature. The urn is beautiful, and yet its beauty is based--what else is the poem concerned with?--on an imaginative perception of essentials. Such a vision is beautiful but it is also true. The sylvan historian presents us with beautiful histories, and it is a good historian.

Moreover, the "truth" which the sylvan historian gives is the only kind of truth which we are likely to get on this earth, and, furthermore, it is the only kind that we have to have. The names, dates, and special circumstances, the wealth of data--these the sylvan historian quietly ignores. But we shall never get all the facts anyway--there is no end to the accumulation of facts. Moreover, mere accumulations of facts--a point our own generation is only beginning to realize--are meaningless. The sylvan historian does better than that: it takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty but insight into essential truth. Its "history," in short, is a history without footnotes. It has the validity of myth--not myth as a pretty

⁵⁷Ibid., p. 149.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 150.

but irrelevant make-belief, an idle fancy, but myth as a valid perception into reality.⁵⁹

Thus Brooks explains the crux of the poem, and thus it is that he justifies it, for it is dramatically prepared for. He closes by condemning paraphrase once more. The condemnation fits into the chapter because Keats's poem says what only poetry can say; paraphrase is only a literal explanation of surface meaning.

Brooks does not regard Keats so highly as he does the Metaphysical or modern poets, but he certainly places Keats above the other Romanticists, with the possible exception of Coleridge. Throughout Brooks's career as a critic, he shows a high regard for the odes. Evidence of his regard is found in many places; in 1939 he made a contrast between Keats and Shelley which indicates why he can praise the former and not the latter. Keats constantly explored unique experiences and thus avoided a cloying sentimentality which found its way into Shelley's style. Keats did not force didacticism, and when he appeared to do so in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," he did so in keeping with the dramatic unity of the poem. Irony and paradox are present throughout the odes, and these elements are, to Brooks, the stuff of which poetry is made. And finally, he claims that Keats can be brought under the general principles of symbolist-metaphysical poetry; in words that he uses elsewhere, Keats can sleep in Donne's Procrustean bed with some degree of comfort at least.

⁵⁹Ibid., pp. 150-151.

CHAPTER IV

WILLIAM EMPSON

William Empson and F. R. Leavis are the two representatives of English New Criticism to be examined in this study. Empson was born in Yorkshire, England, in 1906; he took a degree in mathematics at Cambridge University and then studied under I. A. Richards for four years, during which time he edited Experiment (November, 1928-May, 1929), a magazine containing verse and criticism by Cambridge students and professors. In 1937 Empson became Lecturer in English literature at Peking National University in Peiping and remained in China during the Japanese invasion until the European War. He then returned to London and served as Chinese Editor for the British Broadcasting Company. After the war he returned to Peking National University and is there now. Besides two books of poetry, he has published two books of criticism--Seven Types of Ambiguity (1930) and Some Versions of Pastoral (1935).¹

Empson announced his theory of criticism in Seven Types of Ambiguity; his later writing, though more polished and mature, is supplementary to it. Empson uses the word ambiguity in an extended sense; it is "any verbal nuance, however slight which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."²

¹Stallman, Critiques and Essays in Criticism, pp. 510-511.

²William Empson, Seven Types of Ambiguity (London, 1930), p. 1.

The first and simplest type of ambiguity is that in which a detail is effective in several ways at once.³ Empson gives us as an example the line,

Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.

Of it he writes:

There is no pun, double syntax, or dubiety of feeling, . . . but the comparison holds for many reasons; because ruined monastery choirs are places in which to sing, because they involve sitting in a row, because they are made of wood, are carved into knots and so forth, because they used to be surrounded by a sheltering building crystallised out of the likeness of a forest, and coloured with stained glass and painting like flowers and leaves, because they are now abandoned by all but the grey walls coloured like the skies of winter. . . ; these reasons, and many more relating the simile to its place in the Sonnet, must all combine to give the line its beauty, and there is a sort of ambiguity in not knowing which of them to hold most clearly in mind.⁴

Empson allows that with this definition the first type of ambiguity covers almost everything of importance in literature.

The second type of ambiguity occurs when two or more meanings are resolved into one. With the exception of the first, this is the most common of the seven types. It is achieved by using several different metaphors to signify one central meaning; it is an ambiguity, not of word, but of grammar.⁵

Type three occurs when one word can give two apparently

³ Ibid., p. 2.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 2-3.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 40-50.

unconnected meanings--meanings which can be connected only in the context of the poem.⁶ The pun is an obvious example of this type, but a more subtle use is found in drama when a word can be received in two or more different ways by two or more people. The irony of Othello's calling the villain "Honest Iago" is just such an ironic subtlety. Although the ironic situation which allows the word honest to be understood in different meanings by the speaker and the hearers results in the third type of ambiguity, usually dramatic irony belongs under the first type. The third type is like the first except that one word produces the result in type three and thus makes for a higher art.

The fourth type of ambiguity occurs when the alternative meanings of a statement do not agree among themselves but combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author. At times, type four includes type three, but there are differences.⁷ In the third type, two different moods are made relevant by the context; in type four, however, their reaction to produce something different from each other is an explosion.⁸

The fifth type is found when, by a fortunate confusion, the author discovers his idea in the act of writing, so that a simile may not apply to anything exactly, but lies half-way

⁶ Ibid., p. 102.

⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

⁸ Ibid., p. 150.

between two things when the author is moving from one to the other.

When a statement, by needless repetition, by contradiction, or by irrelevant statements, says nothing so that the reader must offer his own interpretative statements, which may conflict with one another, the sixth type of ambiguity is present. An example is found in the description of Zuleika Dobson:

Zuleika was not strictly beautiful at all.⁹

And, to continue,

Her eyes were a trifle large, and the lashes larger than they need have been.

Neither sentence clarifies an image for the reader, and yet there is no apparent conflict in the mind of the author.¹⁰

The explanations given here of the first six types of ambiguity are not thorough, but the six do not concern us so much as the seventh. Before getting into a discussion of the seventh type, which we shall define, by example, from Empson's analysis of the "Ode on Melancholy," let us glance briefly at a few isolated references to Keats in the preceding chapters of the book. The references are either uncomplimentary or just indifferent. Empson is an anti-Romanticist, like Tate and Brooks; he says that the nineteenth-century poets "exploited a sort of tap-root into the world of their childhood," from

⁹ Ibid., p. 176.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 176-177.

which "they would suck up . . . an unvarying sap which was their poetical inspiration."¹¹ Among the poets specifically listed is Keats, whose "desire for death and his mother . . . has become a byword among the learned."¹² Empson later refers to Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" as a probable influence on Shelley's "To a Skylark."¹³ The first of these references shows an apparent lack of respect for Keats, but the second is a matter-of-fact statement and hence not remarkable.

The seventh type of ambiguity occurs when the two meanings of the word are the two opposite meanings defined by the context. The total effect of its use shows a fundamental division in the poet's mind. One of the significant examples offered by Empson is taken from Keats's poetry. He says that Keats often uses this type of ambiguity "to convey a dissolution of normal experience into intensity of sensation."¹⁴ However, this need not be an ambiguity. Empson cites the rich wine which can "boil cold as a bubbling well" and the contrast between the "bitter chill" and the warm passion in "The Eve of St. Agnes" as examples of what he means. He finds the same method employed in the "Ode on Melancholy" and quotes the first stanza to show that sensations of joy and sorrow combine into sexuality.¹⁵

¹¹Ibid., p. 20.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid., p. 158.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 214.

For the purpose of showing how the "Ode on Melancholy" is a parody by contradiction of "the wise advice of uncles," Empson paraphrases it, not only for his own pleasure, but also for our interest:

'Of course, pain is what we all desire, and I am sure I hope you will be very unhappy. But if you go snatching at it before your time, my boy, you must expect the consequences; you will hardly get hurt at all.'

'Do not abandon yourself to melancholy, delightful as that would be, or you will lose the sensations of incipient melancholia. Do not think always about forgetting, or you will forget its pain. Do not achieve death, or you can no longer live in its shadow. Taste rather at their most sharp the full sensations of death, of melancholy and of oblivion.'¹⁶

He then lists the opposite notions which appear in the poem and show the division in the poet's mind:

Opposite notions combined in this poem include death and the sexual act, a pair of which I must produce further examples; pain and pleasure, perhaps as a milder version of this; the conception of the woman as at once mistress and mother, at once soothing and exciting, whom one must master, to whom one must yield; a desire at once for the eternity of fame and for the irresponsibility of oblivion; an apprehension of ideal beauty as sensual; and an apprehension of eternal beauty as fleeting.

And he says that "the perfection of form, the immediacy of the statement, of the Ode, lie in the fact that these are all collected into the single antithesis which unites Melancholy to Joy."¹⁷

Although biographers have attempted to show how Keats came by these notions, Empson insists, in keeping with New

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 215.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Criticism, that they are not needed to explain why the poem is universally intelligible and admired. The "Pairs of opposites, stated in the right way, make a direct appeal to the normal habits of the mind."¹⁸ Empson launches into an examination of the imagery and points out how each word contributes to the total effect. He concludes by saying:

No doubt most people would admit that this is how Keats gets his effects, but the words are not obviously ambiguous because, in the general wealth of the writing, it is possible to spread out to each word the meanings which are actually diffused into all of them.¹⁹

For Empson to state these things is for him to say that the "Ode on Melancholy" is excellent poetry. We must infer that Empson uses the poem as a good example of the seventh type of ambiguity--he does not so state; but his summary comments and particularly those that refer to Keats's imagery indicate his respect for the poem.

In The Sewanee Review for 1947, Empson published a letter under the title of "Thy Darling in an Urn," which was an answer to Brooks's interpretation of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which appeared in The Well Wrought Urn and which we have already examined. Following Empson's essay, Brooks has added a postscript, in which he makes light of the differences between his own and Empson's interpretations--differences played up by Empson. In his letter, Empson says that he, too, can enjoy the "Beauty

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 217.

is truth" passage, but of Brooks's explanation he says:

I find his explanation of it rather fuzzy writing,
and I suspect the weakness here is due to a certain
anti-emotionalism in his own whole mode of approach.²⁰

Empson suggests that the anti-emotionalism results in Brooks's impatience with the author's expression of personal feelings--here Keats's in the ode. Keats's purpose in stanza three, Empson tells us, was to describe his feelings. The poet is "unhappy; especially about his love affair, but also from the tedium of the pursuit of beauty or pleasure and from the expectation of death."²¹ The juxtaposition of this stanza and the next creates a very dramatic effect which Empson believes Brooks overlooks. He says:

. . . the poet has just told us he is desolate too (if the critic will condescend to notice anything so sentimental); there is a comparison. . . . Here in fact is the crisis of the poem--in the sudden exertion of muscle by which Keats skids round the corner from self-pity to an imaginative view of the world.²²

Empson thinks that the line beginning "Oh Attic shape!" is the blemish of the ode, because he believes Attic is an unintentional and bad pun suggesting a false Greek derivation, the type of thing for which Keats's contemporaries called him a Cockney.²³

²⁰Empson, "Thy Darling in an Urn," Sewanee Review LV, (Winter, 1947), p. 693.

²¹Ibid., pp. 693-694.

²²Ibid., p. 694.

²³Ibid., p. 695. The word Attic is the adjective from Attica and is, therefore, not a false derivation.

His explanation of "Beauty is truth" is somewhat more thorough than Brooks's. Before commenting at length on it, however, he enlarges upon the transition between the fourth and final stanzas:

None of these people can get anything permanent out of the world except beauty, and at once we turn back to the pot with a painful ecstasy in the final stanza; there is nothing left. This is the force behind the cry "Beauty is Truth" (obviously, I think) however the terms of it are to be interpreted.²⁴

Empson agrees with Murry that the philosophy in the last three lines may be all right in itself, but he remarks that what is puzzling about "Beauty is truth" is that there have been no questions raised about truth before. However, he indicates his willingness to permit their existence in the poem by saying that Keats,

like his readers, was puzzled by the remarks of the poet, and yet felt that they were very nearly intelligible and relevant. The words sacrifice and eternity have made us expect a divine sort of truth, a revelation, and revelations are expected to be puzzling. In short, if we recognize the stress of feeling in the rest of the poem, I do not think a reasonable man should withhold his sympathy from the end of it.²⁵

This idea Empson believes was Keats's; however, he offers another possible explanation:

The essential dramatic process is that by feeling the beauty of the pot Keats is led to make reflections on human life. Its beauty can be said to be

²⁴Ibid., p. 694.

²⁵Ibid., p. 696.

"true" as a sound guide to human life, able to tell the artist how to digest his sufferings and turn them into beauty.²⁶

Empson has given indications that for him the poem's machinery succeeds; he says, however, that "the question whether it does work is surely a matter of 'taste'; it can only be left to the reader to try for himself."²⁷ Brooks says in his postscript to Empson's article that he would be willing to append this last statement to every discussion of poetry he has written.²⁸

Because the Seven Types of Ambiguity and "Thy Darling in an Urn" contain Empson's only significant references to Keats and because they contain little which informs us of his estimate of Keats, Empson is of less interest for this study than the others. Some Versions of Pastoral (1935) contains only one, insignificant, reference to Keats. Nevertheless, Empson deserves a chapter in this thesis because his interpretations contribute new ideas to our understanding of the "Ode on Melancholy" and the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." But even in these essays his evaluation of Keats is not clearly set forth, for his criticism contains both hostile and friendly generalizations about Keats's poetic achievement. He is not so avowed an anti-Romanticist as are Brooks and Tate, and yet his opinion of Keats does not appear to be so high as theirs.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 697.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 699.

CHAPTER V

F. R. LEAVIS

F. R. Leavis is one of the most important New Critics of England. He was born in Cambridge, England, in 1895, received his education at the University there, and is now a Fellow of Downing College at Cambridge. His most influential books of criticism are New Bearings in English Poetry (1932), For Continuity (1933), and Revaluation (1936). The titles of the books indicate Leavis' desire for a revised estimate of the traditional account of the English poets, a desire which connects him with T. S. Eliot. His extensive contributions to Scrutiny, both as a contributing critic and in his capacity as an editor, justify his important place in the world of criticism.¹ When Eliot and Murry began to expand their interests so as to exclude themselves from practical criticism, Leavis took up the task of criticism, and, as Bentley rightly says, he has given England some of its finest critical analyses.² In his criticism, he is a follower of I. A. Richards, who is often given credit for founding the New Criticism and was Leavis' teacher at Cambridge.

Brooks's interest in the exploration of a unique experience we have already noticed. This interest is one of Leavis' principal attributes, too. But Leavis follows Richards more

¹Stallman, Critiques and Essays in Criticism, p. 512.

²Bentley, The Importance of Scrutiny, p. xvi.

closely than does Brooks, for, to Leavis, a poem is the communication of an experience and not merely the formation of experience. The difference is not great enough to pause upon, but Leavis finds the poet's response to an experience and his communication of the response "indistinguishable." He speaks, in New Bearings in English Poetry, regarding the notion of a poetic material to which Brooks was opposed:

Poetry tends in every age to confine itself by ideas of the essentially poetical which, when the conditions which gave rise to them have changed, bar the poet from his most valuable material, the material that is most significant to sensitive and adequate minds in his own day.³

There is a difference, however, between the thought of Leavis and that of Brooks on this matter. Brooks condemned the notion of a poetic material, and his general dislike for the Romantics was increased; Leavis, on the other hand, does not discredit the Romanticism of the early nineteenth century. It is the Romanticism of subsequent poetry, that of the Victorian period, which Leavis condemns--the Romanticism which attempted to use the "poetic material" of a preceding age for its own poetry. He says, in 1932, that it is highly unlikely that "the number of potential poets born varies as much from age to age" as is often believed.⁴ He goes on to say:

Every age, then, has its preconceptions and assumptions regarding poetry: these are the essentially poetical subjects, these the poetical materials, these the poetical modes.⁵

³F. R. Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry (London, 1942), p. 12.

⁴Ibid., p. 7.

⁵Ibid.

The difference between the Romanticists and their successors is clear:

It was possible for the poets of the Romantic period to believe that the interests animating their poetry were the forces moving the world, or that might move it. But Victorian poetry admits implicitly that the actual world is alien, recalcitrant and unpoetical.⁶

The Victorians, in other words, were not the poets of their own age. "Poetry matters," Leavis says, "because of the kind of poet who is more alive than other people, more alive in his own age. He is, as it were, at the most conscious point of the race in his time."⁷ The Victorian poets were not at the most conscious point of their age; their poetry, therefore, is not the poetry which matters.

Here it is, then, that the poet's experience must be considered the vital element of his art, and it is his power of communication which makes the "experienter" into a poet:

The potentialities of human experience in any age are realized only by a tiny minority, and the important poet is important because he belongs to this (and has also, of course, the power of communication). Indeed, his capacity for experiencing and his power of communicating are indistinguishable; not merely because we should not know of the one without the other, but because his power of making words express what he feels is indistinguishable from his awareness of what he feels. He is unusually sensitive, unusually aware, more sincere and more himself than the ordinary man can be. He knows what he feels and knows what he is interested in. He is a poet because his interest in his experience is not separable from his interest in words. . . . Poetry can communicate the actual

⁶Ibid., p. 15.

⁷Ibid., p. 13.

quality of experience with a subtlety and precision unapproachable by any other means. But if the poetry and the intelligence of the age lose touch with each other, poetry will cease to matter much, and the age will be lacking in finer awareness.⁸

The poetry of the Victorian period was not in touch with the intelligence of the age; Tennyson, for example, wrote poetry quite apart, in subject matter and tone, from his experience and knowledge.⁹ The undoubted successes of the Romantic period were taken as a precedent by the later nineteenth-century poets, but poetry of the type written by Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, and Shelley was not to be produced successfully in an age so different from the Romantic as was the Victorian.¹⁰

This differentiation may seem pointless here, but it is valuable to see that Leavis does not condemn the Romantic period. Brooks attacked Romantic elements as such, no matter where or when they existed, but Leavis, like Tate, speaks of the great English Romanticists on the one hand and of decadent Romanticism on the other.

The center of Leavis' poetic theory is in his conception of the indistinguishable nature of the poet's sensitivity to experience and his power of communication. Richards' influence is seen here, in Leavis' early criticism. An added element

⁸ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 14.

creeps into his later ideas on this matter. In 1945, Leavis wrote in Scrutiny of the poetical re-creation of emotion. A comparison of Wordsworth's "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal" and Tennyson's "Break, Break, Break" serves to show the right and wrong way to present feeling in poetry. He says that Wordsworth wrote his poem "because of something profoundly and involuntarily suffered--suffered as a personal calamity, but the experience has been so impersonalized that the effect . . . is one of bare and disinterested presentment. . . . The statement is concrete, and . . . the whole poem is seen to be a complex organization, charged with subtle life."¹¹ Leavis is praising Wordsworth's objectivity--his ability to keep the emotion in the poem but not on paper. Tennyson's poem furnishes an example of the sentimental in poetry:

In Break, break, break we . . . have the poem that offers emotion directly--the poem in which the emotion seems to be 'out there' on the page.¹²

And Leavis concludes that "Wordsworth's poem is a securer kind of achievement."¹³

In giving two other poems as examples, Leavis says that the better poem "is a complex whole, and its distinction, plainly, is bound up with its complexity. This complexity . . . involves the presence of something, a specific situation, con-

¹¹Leavis, "'Thought' and Emotional Quality," Scrutiny XIII, (Spring, 1945), p. 54.

¹²Ibid., p. 55.

¹³Ibid.

cretely grasped."¹⁴ And so it is that Leavis emphasizes the nature of the poet's relationship to an experience; in doing so, he seems to agree with Cleanth Brooks.

If Leavis sounds like Brooks here, in "Imagery and Movement" (1945) he echoes Burke. While considering the effects of poetry, the reader, Leavis says, can "find 'imagery' giving place to 'movement' as the appropriate term for calling attention to what has been analysed. . . . The important thing is to be as aware as possible of the ways in which life in verse may manifest itself."¹⁵ Burke, too, is interested in the movement which reflects life in poetry, the movement which transcends imagery, the movement which Burke calls "symbolic action."

Before getting into the article devoted to Keats's poetry, let us look at the significant references to Keats in the other articles by Leavis. In New Bearings in English Poetry, Leavis speaks of the Romanticists who could believe that their poetry was composed of interests which move the world while the Victorians thought of the world as alien to poetry. He then says:

A comparison between any comparable passages of Tennyson and Keats will suggest readily how even Keats, who might at first seem to resist this generalized distinction, may be reconciled with it.¹⁶

¹⁴Ibid., p. 58.

¹⁵Leavis, "Imagery and Movement," Scrutiny, XIII (September, 1945), p. 124.

¹⁶Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry, pp. 15-16.

Leavis then continues by discussing Tennyson, but he never returns to Keats. The part of the statement which holds interest for us occurs as a parenthetical remark--that Keats would at first appear to resist a generalized distinction. By this Leavis means that at first glance Keats's poetry would apparently not be concerned with moving the world, since there are few references to contemporary events or places. However, Keats does fit the generality if we probe the deeper significance of his thought.

A more specific reference to Keats's poetry is found in "Imagery and Movement." Leavis says:

. . . whatever tip the analyst may propose to himself for a local focussing of attention, the signs of vitality he is looking for are matters of organization among words, and mustn't be thought of in the naive terms that the word 'image' too readily encourages. Even where it appears that some of the simpler local effects can be picked like plums out of their surroundings, it will usually turn out that more of the virtue depends on an extended context than was obvious at first sight. Consider, for instance, this characteristic piece of Keatsian tactual imagery:

Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globèd peonies . . .

The 'globèd' gives the sensation of the hand voluptuously cupping a peony, and it might be argued that this effect can be explained in terms of the isolated word. But actually it will be found that 'globèd' seems to be with so rich a palpability what it says, to enact in the pronouncing so gloating a self-enclosure, because of the general co-operation of the context. . . .

The palpability of 'globèd'--the word doesn't merely describe, or refer to, the sensation, but gives a tactual image. It is as if one were actually cupping the peony with one's hand. So elsewhere, in reading poetry, one responds as if one were making a given kind of movement or a given kind of effort: the

imagery the analyst is concerned with isn't . . . merely, or even mainly, visual. As if--the difference between image and full actuality is recognized here; a difference, or a distance, that varies from image to image, just as, where poems as wholes are concerned, the analogous difference varies from poem to poem.¹⁷

Leavis uses Keats's poem as an example, but at the same time he praises the poet very highly.

He notes Keats's influence on the subsequent poetry of England in New Bearings in English Poetry. Discussing a sonnet by Andrew Lang, Leavis shows the various influences present and says that in the sonnet there is "yet another presence, that of Keats--the Keats of La Belle Dame Sans Merci . . . which counts for so much in 'the poetical' of the nineteenth century."¹⁸ Again, in Revaluation, Leavis refers to Keats's powerful influence upon Victorian and pre-Raphaelite poetry.¹⁹

The chapter on Keats in Revaluation (1936) is more extensive than any other discussion of Keats's poetry examined in this study. Leavis begins and ends by considering Keats's poetry in relation to that which he might later have written had he lived. He says:

For Keats has become a symbolic figure, the type of poetic genius, a hero and martyr of poetry, with claims to a greatness such as can hardly at any time have, for the devout, invested the symbolic Chatterton; and there

¹⁷Leavis, "Imagery and Movement," p. 122.

¹⁸Leavis, New Bearings in English Poetry, p. 12.

¹⁹Leavis, Revaluation (New York, 1947), p. 241.

is a general consensus that the greatness is a matter of promise and potentiality rather than achievement. The stress falls on the poetry that Keats might have written and the Letters. It is salutary then, to remind ourselves, not only that Keats's poetry, the poetry he actually wrote, was a major influence in the nineteenth century, but that in its qualities, in what it actually is, must reside the chief grounds for a high estimate of his potentialities.²⁰

This is an approach to Keats we have not seen before--an approach which looks at the poetry actually written to see indications of what might have been produced. It is significant that though Leavis attempts to restrict himself to this approach, he praises Keats's poetry so highly at times that he seems to have been unable to keep his admiration within the bounds he set. Of course, he does emphasize the qualities of Keats which, in maturity, would have allowed him to achieve greatness, but it appears that Leavis vastly admires the poetry which Keats actually wrote.

The method by which Leavis evaluates Keats's poems is familiar--it is the method of New Criticism: "To try and enforce this judgment with some particularity would seem to be a promising approach to Keats."²¹

The first poem analyzed by Leavis is the "Ode to a Nightingale," which Leavis mentions as "commonly placed highest among the Odes."²² In comparing this ode to Shelley's "To a Skylark," Leavis says:

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., p. 244.

²² Ibid.

If intellectual structure is what Shelley characteristically exhibits, the Ode to a Nightingale may freely be allowed to lack it. But the superiority of the Ode over To a Skylark, which beside it appears a nullity, is not merely a superiority of details ('words' and 'images' seen and felt 'one at a time'). The rich local concreteness is the local manifestation of an inclusive sureness of grasp in the whole.²³

And, as Leavis says elsewhere, Shelley could not grasp an experience.²⁴ The ode has a fine and complex structure, realized in parts and in the whole; "To a Skylark" does not.²⁵

He discusses the movement of the poem, pointing out that in the first stanza it starts Lethe-wards until the fifth line, when the direction changes towards life. "The common medium . . . in which the shift of direction takes place with such unobtrusive effectiveness, the pervasive sense of luxury, is given explicitly in the closing phrase of the stanza, 'full-throated ease.'"²⁶ The second stanza, Leavis says, reverses the movement, changing direction from the movement toward life to a movement toward a world unseen, the poet desiring to "fade away into the forest dim" with the bird.²⁷

The third stanza is "the only one in the poem to be completely disintoxicated and disenchanted."²⁸ This is

²³ Ibid., p. 245.

²⁴ Leavis, "'Thought' and Emotional Quality," p. 60.

²⁵ Leavis, Revaluation, p. 245.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 246.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 247.

²⁸ Ibid.

the stanza which Tate condemns as out of place, but Leavis has no such comment to make. He praises the image produced by "spectre-thin," for to him it suggests the unreality of the lackluster moments dreaded by the drug addict or the manic depressive, who, like the poet, live for the high points of life.²⁹ The fourth stanza returns to the idea of escape, but the fifth moves from an attitude of negative dissolution to one of positive satisfaction:

We have now the rich evocation of enchantment and delighted senses, and here again the touch of the consummate artist manifests itself; in the very piling up of luxuries a sure delicacy presides.³⁰

The reference to "the consummate artist" certainly seems a strong one to make about a poet whose greatness the critic considers more potential than real.

The sixth stanza Leavis mentions as that which is made too prominent by the simplifying memory. He reinforces the poem's statement that Keats is only half in love with death, and he cites the word rich in "rich to die" as evidence of the positive motion of the poem. The desire not to die appears in the closing lines of the stanza, and a complete revulsion against death is seen in the line opening the seventh stanza:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird.

Leavis mentions Bridges' statement that the line is a fallacy,

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 247-248.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 248.

and we have seen Tate's similar remark. The line receives kinder treatment at Leavis' hands:

That the thought is fallacious witnesses, of course, to the intensity of the wish that fathered it. Keats entertains at one and the same time the desire to escape into easeful death from 'the weariness, the fever and the fret' . . . and the complementary desire for a full life unattended by these disadvantages. And the inappropriateness of the nightingale's song as a symbol of enduring satisfaction . . . manifests locally the complexity of the impulses behind the poem. The regressive desire to 'cease' upon the mid-night' slips, it will be noticed, into the positive nostalgia represented by Ruth.³¹

Leavis also defends the poem against Bridges' attack on the last stanza. Bridges says that Keats repeats forlorn because he can think of no better way of carrying on. Leavis finds a peculiar and appropriate force in the repetition. And he, too, marks the difference in the two uses of the word--but, unlike Brooks, he describes the shift as one of point-of-view and not an ironical shift of meaning.³²

In summing up his estimate of the poem, Leavis says that it is out of the question to compare the ode to the work of Shakespeare's maturity:

It is as if Keats were making major poetry out of minor--as if, that is, the genius of a major poet were working in the material of minor poetry. . . . The pain with which his heart aches is not that of a moral maturity, of a disenchanted wisdom . . . The disintoxicated third stanza represents the actual upon which the poem turns its back, seeking deception. Though 'the fancy cannot cheat so well as she is famed to do,' the 'sole self,' plaintively yearning, can make of its very regret a sweet anodyne.³³

³¹Ibid., pp. 249-250.

³²Ibid., pp. 250-251.

³³Ibid., pp. 251-252.

Moving to another poem, Leavis says that the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" exhibits more simply the same impulsion as the "Ode to a Nightingale":

The urn, with its 'leaf-fringed legend,' gives a firmer stay to fancy than Keats could make of his imagined light-winged Dryad of the trees in its melodious plot of beechen green.³⁴

The movement of the Nightingale ode is from the actual to the ideal, from the ideal to the actual--back and forth several times. The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" has the same movement. Burke, too, remarked the presence of both mortal and divine elements in the poem. Leavis' interpretation of the poem is not singular, but his explanation of the final lines is worth citing. He says that his observations on the final lines

are not offered as proof of any remarkable percipience. The excuse for them is the puzzled, awed or Delphic attention that, in spite of their obviousness has been paid to the famous concluding pronouncement of the Ode--the subtleties and profundities it still provides occasion for.

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'--that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

This surely, in the context just examined, should cause no metaphysical tremors of excitement or illumination, and need no great profundity or ingenuity of any kind to elucidate it. The proposition is strictly in keeping with the attitude concretely embodied in the poem. The use of the word 'truth' corresponds strictly to the attitude towards reality analysed above. Life, alas! is not as we would have it; but it ought to be, and, with the aid of the Grecian urn, can be felt for a moment to be: imagination, concentrating on the

³⁴ Ibid., p. 252.

beauty of the urn and ignoring the discordant and indocile facts, attains a higher reality, compared with which actual life seems thin and unreal.³⁵

Leavis continues by discussing the influence on the pre-Raphaelites of Keats's ideas on beauty. He contrasts the splendor of Keats's poetry with the shallow aestheticism of the later poets. In one sentence he speaks of Rossetti, who had none of "Keats's magnificent vital energy,"³⁶ thus showing his admiration for Keats, and he later remarks that Keats's aestheticism was not a cutting off of a special valued order of experience from the rest of life:

Actually, we feel . . . that there is in the poetry of this Keats, in the very richness and vitality with which he renders his 'exquisite sense of the luxurious,' an inherent contradiction: so strong a grasping at fulness of life implies a constitution, a being, that could not permanently refuse completeness of living.³⁷

. . . we can ourselves see in Keats (if we can see more too) the great Aesthete--the one Aesthete of genius. . . . The effect of this insisting on the Aesthete in Keats is merely to bring out still more the extraordinary force of his genius.³⁸

In discussing the "Ode on Melancholy," Leavis speaks of the paradoxical force in the presence of "perverse and debilitating indulgences."³⁹ Leavis refers to the voluptuous-

³⁵ Ibid., p. 254.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 256.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 257.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 259-260.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 260.

ness of the poem in a half-censorious tone, but he modifies the censure by saying, "In the strength that makes the luxury of this more than merely voluptuous we have that which makes Keats so much more than a mere aesthete."⁴⁰ Leavis speaks again, in explaining this strength, of the use of globèd in the characteristic Keatsian tactual imagery. He says that such tactual effects "express, not merely the voluptuary's itch to be fingering, but that strong grasp upon actualities-- upon things outside himself, that firm sense of the solid world, which makes Keats so different from Shelley."⁴¹ But, to return to the strength of which he spoke earlier, Leavis quotes from Arthur Symons:

'Keats has a firm common sense of the imagination, seeming to be at home in it, as if it were literally of this world, and not of another.'⁴²

To this, Leavis adds that, "by virtue of this strength, which is at once intelligence and character, . . . Keats never takes his dreams for reality or . . . remains lost in them."⁴³

Turning to the ode "To Autumn," Leavis says that it illustrates most clearly the relation between Keats's firm grasp of the outer world and firmness of his art.⁴⁴ The poem

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 261.

⁴¹Ibid., pp. 261-262.

⁴²Ibid., p. 262.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid.

does not say, however, what Middleton Murry believed it to say--that "Ripeness is all." Only the physical ripeness of autumn is Keats's concern, "and his genius manifests itself in the sensuous richness with which he renders this in poetry, without the least touch of artistic over-ripeness."⁴⁵

From time to time in the chapter on Keats, Leavis refers to the more mature Keats of the Letters. He concludes, that Keats, by the time of writing "To Autumn," had begun to manifest this maturity in his poetry.⁴⁶ The abandonment of Hyperion is mentioned, and Leavis treats the poem as "verse of art," saying that it is ironical that such should result from the poet's first attempt at bringing profounder and more philosophical concerns into his poetry.⁴⁷ The vigor of Keats's poetry Leavis does not find in Hyperion, and he dispraises the poem. But the revised Hyperion receives different evaluation. The suffering in the poem is so completely impersonalized that Leavis says:

. . . this personal urgency is completely impersonalized; it has become the life, the informing spirit, of the profoundest kind of impersonality. There is no element of self-pity--nothing at all of the obliquely self-regarding--about the attitude of the famous lines:

'None can usurp this height,' returned that shade,

'But those to whom the miseries of the world

Are misery, and will not let them rest.'

It was, in the Romantic period, the aesthete who

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 263.

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 266.

⁴⁷Ibid.

achieved so un-Byronic and so un-Shelleyan a note in the contemplation of human suffering--the aesthete no longer an aesthete. There is no afflatus here, no generous emotionality. The facts, the objects of contemplation, absorb the poet's attention completely; he has none left for his feelings as such. As a result, his response, his attitude, seems to us to inhere in the facts, and to have itself the authenticity of fact. The strength that makes the sensuous Keats's Ode to a Nightingale so different from the spiritual Shelley's To a Skylark--the grasp of the object, the firm sense of actuality, the character and critical intelligence implied. . . in the artist's touch and his related command of total effect--now manifests itself in the field of tragic experience. His own acute and inescapable distresses, including the pain of watching helplessly the suffering of persons dear to him, he can without feeling them the less, contemplate at the same time from . . . the outside, as objects, as facts; and the contemplation of the inevitable and endless human suffering to which his more immediately personal experience leads him has a like impersonal strength.⁴⁸

Leavis concludes his chapter by returning to a consideration of Keats's potentialities. The high estimate generally held of these potentialities is justified, Leavis feels, by the induction to the revised Hyperion.⁴⁹ The completed lines of this poem show that Keats the poet and Keats the letter-writer were the same by the time of his writing the Fall of Hyperion.⁵⁰ Although there is no indication that Keats might have written great poetic plays, he was "beyond any doubt gifted to become a very great poet."⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 270-271.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 272.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 273.

Of course, Leavis discusses Keats's work as a sign of what was to follow, but in doing so he remarks some excellent things in the poetry actually written. Keats's concern with experience, his usual emotional objectivity, his expressive vitality of communication naturally receive commendation from Leavis, whose theory of poetry evolves from these elements. The restraint of Leavis from complete acceptance of Keats as a truly great poet is to be explained by references to Keats's youthful and immature failings to come up to Leavis' standards all the time. Leavis does not place Keats highest among the Romantics (although he does place him at the top of the second generation), but he indicates that Keats would have been, not only one of the very great Romantics, but also one of the greatest poets of our literature.

CONCLUSION

The danger of pre-suppositions becomes evident in this study; since it is fairly well known that the Romanticists of early-nineteenth-century England do not receive much praise from the New Critics, one might assume that Keats is not popular among them. However, as we have seen in the preceding pages, the assumption would be a false one.

Two extremely important results are emerging and will continue to emerge from the examinations of Keats's poetry by the New Critics: Keats's place in the revised estimate of English literature and the various interesting interpretations of his poetry, particularly the odes. Keats, paired with Shelley by nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholars and critics, has been divorced from him by the New Critics, who have striven to relegate Shelley to the lower levels of poets and found Keats worthy of the position given him by previous critics. The separation of the two poets is not the important fact, however; that Shelley and other Romanticists have suffered rather seriously from the critical examinations of the New Critics is of great significance. Of equal importance is the fact that Keats has come through the anti-Romantic assaults of the New Critics relatively unscathed, for the recognition of his greatness from all sides is an indication that his poetry is truly of the greatest. Although it is doubtful that the New Critics have struck death-blows at Shelley and other English Romanticists, it is evident that these Romanticists

have suffered a loss in prestige--for the present at least. The reader must not assume that Keats receives no adverse criticism from the New Critics; indeed, these critics are very quick to find fault when fault is to be found. Usually, however, Keats's concrete imagery, his attention to particular experience, his use of paradox and irony, his love of fine phrases, and his objectivity receive the approval of the New Critics. The New Critics do not make extravagant claims for Keats's work, but a few statements already quoted will bear repeating in order to show the nature and scope of the New Critics' estimate of Keats. Allen Tate is responsible for several of the most laudatory:

The idea of purposive change, which is distinctly modern, Keats superimposes upon the ancient world by statically aggregated organism ruled by caprice. Thus the modern dilemma, Progress or Tradition, appears, and Keats is the first modern poet, in the contemporary sense of the term.¹

. . . no other English poet has smelted out again the form and quality of the great "Odes"--the most perfectly assembled representation of the English impulse after Shakespeare. . . .²

I am not attacking the great Romantic poets. Romanticism gave us the "Ode to a Nightingale."³

Keats was in one of the great modes of poetry.⁴

Burke says that Keats is

The poet whose sounds are the richest in our language.⁵

¹Tate, "Tradition or Progress," p. 154.

²Ibid., p. 155.

³Tate, On the Limits of Poetry, p. 120.

⁴Ibid., p. 168.

⁵Burke, "Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats," p. 31.

Brooks also praises Keats:

Keats explores a particular experience--not as a favorite generalization to be beautified--but as an object to be explored in its full ramifications.⁶

Keats . . . comes closest to giving us dramatic poems.⁷

The traditional historian hardly sees Shelley as a very unsatisfactory poet greatly inferior to Keats. A more considered view must surely hold him so.⁸

Keats is too much the artist to risk Shelley's sometimes embarrassing declarations . . .⁹

Both Keats and Coleridge indeed, are separated from their contemporaries by a reluctance to force didacticism. They respect the complexity of experience too much to violate it by oversimplification.¹⁰

Although their importance is not so obvious as the importance of the New Critics' estimate of Keats, the interesting interpretations given some of Keats's poems by the New Critics are of more significance in the long run because of their lasting contributions to the understanding of Keats's poetry. All five critics treated in this study have analyzed the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," three have treated the "Ode on Melancholy," and three have discussed the "Ode to a Nightingale."

The most significant variations in interpretation occur in the analyses of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The urn's

⁶Brooks, Modern Poetry and the Tradition, p. 238.

⁷Ibid., p. 217.

⁸Ibid., p. 237.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 238.

statement at the close of the ode has disturbed critics of all sorts, and the explanations offered by the New Critics are valuable. They will serve to show, in summary form, the importance which new ideas have for the interpretation of poetry. F. R. Leavis, whose explanation (1936) of the Urn appeared earlier than the other four given in this study, says that the statement, "Beauty is truth, truth Beauty," in context,

. . . should cause no metaphysical tremors of excitement or illumination, and need no great profundity or ingenuity to elucidate it. The proposition is strictly in keeping with the attitude concretely embodied in the poem. . . . Life, alas! is not as we would have it; but it ought to be, and, with the aid of the Grecian urn, can be felt for a moment to be: imagination, concentrating on the beauty of the urn and ignoring the discordant and indocile facts, attains a higher reality, compared with which actual life seems thin and unreal.¹¹

Burke's analysis (1943) is second in order of appearance. He believes that the poem is equating beauty and poetry, truth and science, and thus says that "Poetry is science, science poetry." Burke's thorough analysis of the poem makes it hard to see how he could be wrong; Allen Tate says, however, that the interpretation is probably Burke's and not Keats's. Undoubtedly Tate has in mind the statements in Keats's letters in which he refers to the imagination as the real source of Truth, and perhaps the passage in "Lamia" in which he says:

. . . Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?

¹¹Leavis, Revaluation, p. 254.

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 iterswhile made
 The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade.¹²

Though Tate's essay was the next of the five to appear after Burke's, in its republication in On the Limits of Poetry (1948) he makes mention of Brooks's essay; and thus we may consider that Tate's is last, chronologically, in the group. Brooks's interpretation of the last lines is as follows:

The urn is beautiful, and yet its beauty is based--what else is the poem concerned with?--on an imaginative perception of the essentials. Such a vision is beautiful but it is also true. The sylvan historian presents us with beautiful histories, and it is a good historian.

Moreover, the "truth" which the sylvan historian gives is the only kind of truth which we are likely to get on this earth, and, furthermore, it is the only kind that we have to have. . . . [the Urn's] "history," in short, is a history without footnotes. It has the validity of myth--not myth as a pretty but irrelevant make-belief, an idle fancy, but myth as a valid perception into reality.¹³

Brooks's contribution is not so much in his explanation as in his justification of the urn's statement in the poem. He justifies its presence on the basis of dramatic credibility, somewhat as Burke does, though for different reasons.

Empson, whose analysis of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" was produced as a reply to Brooks's article, finds that the final lines hinge upon the transition between the fourth and fifth

¹² John Keats, "Lamia," Part II, ll. 229-238.

¹³ Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn, pp. 150-151.

stanzas:

None of these people can get anything permanent out of the world except beauty, and at once we turn back to the pot with a painful ecstasy in the final stanza; there is nothing left. This is the force behind the cry "Beauty is Truth" (obviously, I think) however the terms of it are to be interpreted.¹⁴

Empson does not believe that the final lines have a place in the poem, however. The philosophy in the lines may be correct or not, but the lines do not belong. Tate agrees with Empson; he says that Keats is not implicit as a character in the structure of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as he is in the Nightingale ode, and that therefore the final statement is out of place.

The application of the new critical approach and methods to the poetry of Keats has resulted in more thorough explanations and interpretations of the great odes than had previously been made. The analyses by the New Critics are interesting and valuable by themselves, but the laurels which Keats's poetry has retained throughout the examination indicates that the New Critics place him very high among the Romanticists and high in English poetry. His greatness, which was generally realized near the beginning of the twentieth century, has been accepted by the anti-Romantic New Critics, a fact which bears out Arnold's claim that Keats's poetry places him with Shakespeare. Finally, whatever the reasons for Keats's greatness, we must agree with Allen Tate that he knew much of the glory of human life and was

¹⁴ Empson, "Thy Darling in an Urn," p. 694.

in one of the great modes of poetry. At the same time, Tate, Brooks, and Leavis are certainly right in believing that the great poetry he did produce was but the product of an immature genius which, if it had reached the maturity it was surely approaching, would have carried Keats to the highest levels of the poetic art.

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