Keats's Views on Imagination in Comparison with Wordsworthian, Coleridgean and Shelleyan Views

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ABSTRACT: Keats preferred to rely on imagination rather than on reason as imagination has stronger and more penetrative eyes. It is the supreme faculty that a poet possesses and because of it poetry has always been regarded as superior to philosophy and history. Keats believes that like a historian a poet is not confined to facts alone. Imagination is a supreme power and its canvass is so large that it can encompass even history and philosophy as it plays quite independently and transcends the facts of history to create poetry that is pure and original. An attempt has been made in the present paper to study Keats’s scattered remarks on aesthetics particularly on imagination and to see them in the light of Wordsworth’s, Coleridge’s and Shelley’s views on imagination as all the three poets belong to the same era and are the exponents of the same movement in English literature.

Keywords: Coleridge, Keats, Imagination, Wordsworth, Shelley.

INTRODUCTION

“If we wish to distinguish a single characteristic which differentiates the English Romantics from the poets of the eighteenth century, it is to be found in the importance which they attached to the imagination and in the special view which they held of it”, says Bowra (1956). Keats considered imagination to be a divine force and believed that it reveals truth as the mainstay of artistic beauty. Keats criticized the eighteenth century poetry mainly for its want of imaginative qualities. In September 1819, Keats distinguished himself from Byron by emphasizing his imaginative power: “There is this great difference between us. He describes what he sees—I describe what I imagine” (Gittings, 1970). Keats preferred to rely on imagination rather than on reason as imagination has stronger and more penetrative eyes.

It is the supreme faculty that a poet possesses and because of it poetry has always been regarded as superior to philosophy and history. Keats believes that like a historian a poet is not confined to facts alone. Imagination is a supreme power and its canvass is so large that it can encompass even history and philosophy as it plays quite independently and transcends the facts of history to create poetry that is pure and original. An attempt has been made in the present paper to study Keats’s scattered remarks on aesthetics particularly on imagination and to see them in the light of Wordsworth’s, Coleridge’s and Shelley’s views on imagination as all the three poets belong to the same era and are the exponents of the same movement in English literature.

DISCUSSION

Leaving apart Coleridge, Keats was the only critic of his age who had a comprehensive attitude and acumen to poetry. Due to his early demise, he was not able to give final shape and finish to his views in the form of a

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formal treatise as was done by Wordsworth and Coleridge. However, his scattered remarks pertaining to his aesthetics can be culled from the personal epistles written to the members of his family, friends, relatives, etc. In an informal manner, some of his remarks particularly on the cult of Beauty in all things and the role of imagination in poetic creation deserves special mention as they help us in evolving his full scale poetics that he not only advocated but also practiced in his own poetical works. Keats’s concept of Beauty is central to his theory of poetic creation because he firmly believes that “with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration” (Gittings, 1970). Keats was a pure poet who sought beauty in all things which are even antithetical ones like pleasure and pain, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated, Brooks (1975) rightly remarks that Keats “explores a particular experience not as a favorite generalization to be beautiful but as an object to be explored in its full ramifications”. Referring to negative capability, Keats very clearly stated that he is always haunted by “Uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Gittings, 1970). The negative capability quote refers to the objectivity, impartiality, indefiniteness and open-endedness advocated by Keats in the delineation of Beauty. Imagination, according to Keats, is an agent that perceives beauty and transfigures the subjective perception of beauty into the objective or the dispassionate one.

It works towards evaporating the irrelevant elements to transform the subjective Beauty into objective or ideal one that is universal and omnipresent. This type of Beauty, when all the irrelevant material present in the form of personal emotion, preconceived philosophical ideals is removed, culminated in Truth and becomes identical with it. It is the power of imagination that activates negative capability in poet. In November 1811, Keats wrote to Bailey, “I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of imagination-what the imaginations seizes as Beauty must be truth-whether it existed before or not” (Gittings, 1970). With the help of intensity of imagination, Keats aimed at the creation of Beauty that is Truth. He regards a poet an artist or a creator who by an active exercise of the imagination could create Truth. Keats outlines his concept of excellence in art in his letter of 21, 27 December 1817, written to his Brothers George and Tom Keats: “The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeable evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth” (Gittings). According to Ray (1997), “These Heart's affections”-are, then, man’s instinctive impulses and, touched by imagination, they form an instinctive spontaneous attitude of the Being which in its sublime is creative of essential beauty. So, beauty, to Keats, is not an external, sensuous entity, out there, but an act of the mind. And this ‘Beauty is Truth’, because intuitive perception is the only means of attaining the Truth in its wholeness”.

Keats practiced pure poetry without coloring it with any ethical meaning. Keats felt that, “Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one’s soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject” (Gittings, 1970). It is the power of imagination that keeps a poet away from imposition of philosophy of any sort on his work. His conviction of pure poetry resulted in idealizing poetry with the help of imaginative faculty. In his letter to John Taylor, Keats says:

It touches of Beauty should never be half-way thereby making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural to him-shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight… and this leads me on to another axiom. That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all (Gittings, 1970).

Keats favors a poetic character that does not have any identity that leaves an impression on what the imagination conceives. He wrote to Bailey:

I must say of one thing that has pressed upon me lately and increased my Humility and capacity for submission and that is this truth-Men of genius are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect-but they have not any individuality, any determined Character (Gittings, 1970).

The true poet is one who has nothing to impart and gifted with the capacity to subdue his own personality. Imagination is an agent that makes a poet selfless by helping him participate impartially in the objects of perception and depersonalizing his personal emotions as was practiced by Keats in his “Ode to a Nightingale”. Regarding self-annihilation, Keats wrote to Richard Woodhouse on 27 October 1818:

When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of everyone in the room begins to (for so) press upon me that I am in a very little time an (ni) hilated (Gittings, 1970).

In his letter to Bailey written on 22 November 1817, while discussing ‘Men of Genius’, Keats says:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination-what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth ….. whether it existed before or not for I have the same idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty (Gittings, 1970). Imagination occupies central place in Keats’s aesthetics. When a poet intuitively perceives physical beauty, he is able to discover spiritual beauty which is only identical with Truth. Keats preferred intuition or imagination to logic and reason. He opines that one could not reach after Beauty and Truth through logic and reason only. Reason and logic stops at the finite physical world whereas a poet uses his intuition to explore Truth which represents the world of the infinite. Through reason and logic one can explore only mundane physical beauty.
which was not the goal of Keats. Ray (1997) refers to oft-quoted passages like-“The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one’s mind about nothing” (Gittings, 1970) and “Let us not therefore go hurrying about collecting honey… but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive” (Gittings, 1970) and “I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning…. Can it be that even the greatest philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting, aside numerous objections?” (Gittings, 1970) and calls the beauty way of attaining truth as the intuitive way (Ray, 1997). He writes, “It is clear by now that Keats pleads for an instinctive spontaneous attitude of the being and for the intuitive as opposed to rational knowledge. What is thus apprehended is Truth and the pleasurable of such apprehension is Beauty. Truth can be known only by its beauty, by the pleasure of ‘feeling one’s being deeply’ the sense of ‘fellowship divine’” (Ray, 1997). Keats’s letter written to Benjamin Bailey dated 22 November 1817 explains his attitude towards imagination vis-à-vis logic and reason:

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 anything can be known for truth by consecutive 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!… And yet such a fate [of having happiness on earth repeated in the life hereafter] can only befall those who delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after Truth (Gittings, 1970).

Keats’s poetics does not confine itself to mere physical sensations but goes beyond to include intuitions as only through intuitions a poet can transcend physical beauty and approach aesthetic beauty that is only identical with Truth. The aim of poetry is the creation of beauty and this beauty is a regular stepping of imagination towards Truth” (Gittings, 1970). Thorpe (1993) refers to the nature and function of imagination and writes in this regard, “An analysis of his utterances on the subject from the middle of 1817 on reveals that he has reached two significant conclusions as to the nature and function of the imagination. First, the imagination as an instrument of intuitive insight is the most authentic guide to ultimate truth; second, the imagination in its highest form is a generative force, in itself creative of essential reality”. This kind of imagination Keats has been attempting to have since the beginning of his career and, no doubt, he achieved it through the practice of the cult of negative capability. Keats elucidates this idea in the letter he wrote to Richards Woodhouse on 27 October 1818:

As to the poetical character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself-it has no self-it is everything and nothing-it has no character-it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated-It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion poet…. A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity-he is continually in for-and filling some other Body-The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute-the poet has none; no identity-he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God’s Creatures (Gittings, 1970). This statement points to the fact that Keats’s aestheticism was related to the composition of pure poetry in which any theme fitted well if not burdened by philosophical or didactic element of any sort and explored impartially by the power of imagination of the poet. Keats preferred to give objective coloring to the moral and religious faith and tried reaching after poetry in which beauty that expresses Truth which is not didactic but only visionary and purely imaginative.

To Keats Beauty and Truth are one and they are perceived by imagination and not by reason as facts and reason are essentially mundane and confined to only phenomenal world. According to Thorpe, “Imagination, with its springs in the heart rather than the head, though the head too has its place, becomes with Keats the highest and most authentic guide to truth. Not only is the imagination to be trusted more implicitly than reason in matters where both are operative, but there are even things clear to the imagination of which the reason knows nothing” (Thorpe, 1993). A mind biased with personal prejudices cannot be a fit receptacle to the ultimate truth. It is imagination that frees a poet from preconceived notions and aids him in participating in all types of experience-pain or pleasure, life or death, youth or old age, health or decay, eternity or evanescence, mortality or immortality, modernity or antiquity. This unbiased participation of the poet without leaning towards any dogma and philosophy makes him practice pure poetry devoid of any ethical implications. Imagination functions as a means to save poetry from philosophization and absolutism and keeps it pure and natural. Keats expresses his conviction of pure poetry in his letter to John Taylor in which he writes, “That if poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (Gittings, 1970). Keats’s letter written to Richard Woodhouse on 27 October 1818 also points towards his aestheticism of pure poetry devoid of any didactic element. He writes, “As to the poetical character it self…. A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity” (Gittings, 1970). What the letter points towards is the impartial
participation of the poet in all types of experience. Only when a poet allows his imagination a free play without restraining it with any type of reasoning and didacticism, then it creates Beauty that is Truth. According to C.R. Visweswara Reo, “For him imagination is the core of experience and a means of incorporating beauty with truth in a more inclusive reality. Imagination, while consecutive reasoning, as Keats called intellectual analysis, achieves a fusion of object and mind such that the irrelevant and the discordant evaporate. It paves the way for intensity and disinterestedness which combines the splendor of art and the magnificence of life” (Pathak, 1997).

Keats wrote in one of his letters, “I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning” (Gittings, 1970). On the contrary, Keats affirms his faith in imagination that obtains a poet from joining any philosophical fold and become indoctrinated. Imagination makes a poet open-ended and receptive to all kinds of experience whether joys or sorrows and in this way saves him from leaning towards any doctrine or dogma. He wrote in one of his letters, “Let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive” (Gittings, 1970). Imagination is the main agent in Keatsian poetics that aids the poet in achieving the state of negative capability through transcending worldly facts and reasons and soaring in the realm of mysteries, doubts and uncertainties. Keats was against the doctrine of human perfectibility. He saw creativity in human misfortunes, catastrophes and uncertainties which come in the way of man’s perfection and make his thinking independent and consequently led him towards the path of creativity. Imagination is the faculty on which one can rely to explore various aspects of a subject or even the beings which are beyond a man’s perceptive power. Keats, thus, regards imagination a modifying, sympathizing and identifying power. His phrase “whether it existed before or not” (Gittings, 1970) refers to the generative power of imagination. Imagination is a power that creates even those things which are airy nothings and non-existent in this world. The purely phenomenal world may deceive us. But Keats is confident of the generative and modifying power of imagination which is based on intuitive apprehension of the phenomenal world.

The intuitive apprehension of beauty is truthful as it is reached by imaginative power of the poet that transcends the phenomenal world and enters into the aesthetic world of art. When Keats declares to Bailey, “Nothing startles me beyond the Moment. The setting sun will always set me to rights or if a sparrow comes before my window, I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel” (Gittings, 1970), he is pointing towards the sympathizing and identifying power of the imagination. The power of imagination assists the poet in freezing his own identity and enables him to identify himself with the object of perception whether it is a setting sun or a sparrow. A poet possesses the capacity to participate in the existence of a bird or any other creature and at the same time keeps his own emotions under control without affecting the former with the latter. Keats believes that it is the power of imagination that not only aids a poet in identifying himself with the others but also forces the identity of the others on the poet to forget his own identity completely.

Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley not only contributed to the Romantic poetry but also were critical theorists who through their critical writings laid bare their designs behind their creative works. All the three of them, rejected the neo-classical tendency of mechanical application of rules and preferred the power of imagination in the composition of poetry. Wordsworth's statement in the Preface, “The principle object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life... and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect” (Chickera, 1962); Coleridge’s introductory statement in chapter XIV of “Biographia Literaria” in which, while referring to the cardinal principles of poetry, he writes, “the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by the modifying colors of imagination” (Chickera, 1962) and Shelley's statement in the “Defense of Poetry”, “Poetry, in the general sense, may be defined to be the expression of the imagination” (Chickera, 1962) are an announcement of a new type of writing that rejected reason and mechanical application of rules and preferred individuality and novelty, a result of “an extraordinary development of imaginative sensibility” (Herford, 2003). So much importance was given to imagination in this period that Coleridge even calls it the soul of poetry without which poetry remains confined to a chaotic state and merely a perception of worldly objects. In this section of the paper, therefore, views of Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley have been discussed in detail so that in the later section of the paper, they may be compared to Keats’s views on imagination which are scattered in his private correspondence but cannot be ignored altogether as he is also one of the chief contributors to the romantic school of poetry.

Wordsworth (1815) in the Preface, while talking about the powers essential for the production of poetry, regards Imagination and Fancy along with observation and description, sensibility, reflection, innovation and judgment as the powers required for the composition of poetry. According to him, Imagination and Fancy are the powers used in poetry “to modify, to create and to associate”. While talking about the subject-matter of poetry, Wordsworth (1815) writes in the Preface, “the principal object, then, proposed in these poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of a language really used by man, and at the same time to throw over them a certain coloring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect” (Chickera, 1962). Wordsworth (1815), in the above cited lines, refers to the modifying power of imagination.
that imparts its own colors to the ordinary perceptive things to make them appear novel. Later on in the Preface when he talks about the characteristics of a poet, Wordsworth echoes the same tone when he says that a poet possesses a “disposition to be affected more than other men by absent things as if they were present; an ability of conjuring up in himself passions” (Chickera, 1962). Through the power of imagination, a poet creates images of those things which are absent but through the same power of imagination, they are presented in such a manner as if they are present. What Wordsworth (1815) means is that the phenomenal world used as the raw material by a poet is transformed by the modifying power of imagination into an unusual world of poetry. However, the unusual world created by the imaginative power should resemble the natural world. In the Preface to 1815 edition, Wordsworth (1815) regards imagination as “the conferring, the abstracting, and the modifying power” that also “shapes and creates”. Wordsworth (1815) writes, Imagination confers “additional properties upon an object, or abstracting from it some of those which it actually possesses, and thus enabling it to react upon the mind which hath performed the process, like a new existence”).

Wordsworth makes a distinction between Fancy and Imagination with regard to the processes of their functioning and writes, “When the imagination frames a comparison, if it does not strike on the first presentation, a sense of the truth of the likeness, from the moment that it is perceived, grows and continues to grow-upon the mind; the resemblance depending less upon outline of form and features than upon expression and effect; less upon casual and outstanding, than upon inherent internal, properties: moreover, the images invariably modify each other-The law under which the processes of Fancy are carried on is as capricious as the accidents of things, and the effects are surprising, playful, ludicrous, amusing, tender or pathetic, as the objects happen to be oppositely produced or fortunately combined. Fancy depends upon the rapidity and profusion with which she scatters her thoughts and images; … she cares not how unstable or transitory may be her influence, knowing that it will not be out of her power to resume it upon an apt occasion. But the imagination is conscious of an indestructible dominion...” (Wordsworth, 1815).

Coleridge is one of the greatest critics of the nineteenth century and the first English critic who founded his literary criticism on philosophical basis. His study of imagination which is central to his theory of poetry added a new dimension to the English literary criticism. In the eighteenth century, Fancy and Imagination were considered synonymous terms and often confused with each other. It was Coleridge who made an “observable and definable difference between Fancy and Imagination” (Richards, 1968) and “investigated philosophically the “seminal principle of the imagination” (Scott-James, 1970). In the concluding part of Chapter XIII of ‘Biographia Literaria’, Coleridge not only differentiated between Fancy and Imagination but even categorized imagination into two forms-Primary and Secondary. He writes, “The imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary imagination I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead…. Fancy, on the contrary, has no other counters to play with but fixities and definitions. The fancy is indeed no other than a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space; and blended with, and modified by the empirical phenomenon of the will which we express by the word choice. But, equally with the ordinary memory, it must receive all its materials ready made from the law of association” (Shawcross, 1958).

The above quoted lines from Chapter XIII of Biographia Literaria which designate different forms and stages of creative process to primary and secondary imagination and distinguish between Fancy and Imagination are vital to Coleridge’s theory and further extend the discussion on the poetical process initiated by Wordsworth. Coleridge restricts the functioning of primary imagination to only perception of objects of sense. Imagination in the primary stage is an involuntary act of the mind that aids a poet in forming a picture of the objects of sense which capture a poet’s attention when he suddenly encounters them. According to Habib (2006), primary imagination “helps us to form an intelligible perspective of the world; this understanding however, is fragmentary; we do indeed perceive God’s creation but in a piecemeal, cumulative fashion”. After the perceptive stage, primary imagination gives way to secondary imagination which is “a shaping and modifying power” that “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates” (Shawcross, 1958) the raw material of sense organs supplied by the primary imagination in order to render it into pleasing shape and forms. Secondary imagination is a voluntary and conscious exercise that “breaks down the customary order and pattern in which our senses present the world to us, recreating these into new combinations that follow its own rules, rather than the usual laws of association (Habib, 2006). Secondary imagination transcends the finite world of perception to discover the infinite, the ideal and the divine world of poetry where disparate and chaotic material is unified and fixed into an organic whole by its esemplastic power.

The first clause of the definition of Fancy that it has “no other counters to play with, but fixities and definite” when contrasted with the definition of secondary imagination, a power that “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create” makes it clear that the material used for composition both by Fancy and Imagination is the
same, whereas the former combines the things and the disparate material employed by it retain their distinct identity, the latter which is a modifying power that “dissolves, diffuses and dissipates” the heterogeneous material into a new shape and order. Fancy for Coleridge is not a creative power as it does not modify and only combines the material of perception that does not undergo any change. Coleridge calls Fancy “a mode of memory emancipated from the order of time and space” (Shawcross, 1958) but critics do not rule out the use of memory in imagination. Rajnath (2004) rightly says, “Memory acts as the supplier of material to both Imagination and Fancy; that is to say, the material the two powers work on is the same. What distinguishes Imagination from Fancy is not the material worked on but the result produced. And the results produced by the two faculties are different. As said above, imagination transmutes the material it operates upon, while Fancy only combines them mechanically”. Fancy, thus, is a combinatory, associationist power that mechanically juxtaposes the disparate material whereas Imagination unifies, reconciles and reshapes the heterogeneous material into an organic unity. Coleridge writes in Chapter XIV of Biographia Literaria, “Good sense is the body of poetic genius, Fancy its drapery, motion its life, and Imagination the soul that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole” (Chickera, 1962). Wellek (1955) makes Coleridge’s distinction between Fancy and Imagination more clear when he identifies Fancy with talent and Imagination with genius. He writes, “Genius and Imagination are unifying, reconciling: they belong to the level of Coleridge's holistic and dialectical thought, while talent and fancy are only combinatory and thus mechanistic, associationist. Genius is a gift, talent is manufactured; genius is creative, talent mechanical”.

According to Wordsworth (1815), both Fancy and Imagination are “characterized as the power of evoking and combining” or as Coleridge regards them “the aggregative and associative power”. But the difference between Fancy and Imagination according to Wordsworth can be seen in “either the materials evoked and combined are different; or they are brought together under a different law, and for a different purpose. Fancy does not require that the materials which she makes use of should be susceptible of change in their constitution, from her touch; and, where they admit of modification, it is enough for her purpose if it be slight, limited, and evanescent. Directly the reverse of these, are the desires and demands of the Imagination. She recoils from everything but the plastic, the pliant, and the indefinite. Both Wordsworth and Coleridge regard Fancy a combinatory power and Imagination a modifying power. The difference between them is that the materials used and combined in every work of Fancy retain their original identities whereas in a work of imagination, they are “dissolved, diffused, and dissipated”, to form a new composition altogether different from the material used in the making. Though Wordsworth regards Fancy as a creative power, Coleridge confines it to only a combinatory power that combines the disparate material that retains its originality. Comparing Wordsworth’s and Coleridge’s views on Imagination and Fancy, Wellek (1955) aptly writes, “Both Wordsworth and Coleridge make the distinction between Fancy, a faculty which handles ‘fixities and definite’, and Imagination, a faculty which deals with the ‘plastic, the pliant and the indefinite’. The only important difference between Wordsworth and Coleridge is that Wordsworth does not clearly see Coleridge’s distinction between Imagination as a ‘holistic’ and Fancy as an associative power and does not draw the sharp distinction between transcendentalism and associationism which Coleridge wanted to establish” (Wellek, 1955).

Shelley is one of the chief exponents of romantic criticism. His "Defense of Poetry" is an important document that provides a profound philosophical insight into the origin, scope and function of poetry. Like the rest of the romantics, Shelley too believes in the primacy of emotion and regards poetry as “the expression of the imagination” (Chickera, 1962). Imagination which is an indispensable agency of poetic creation is different from reason. He regards reason as “mind contemplating the relations borne by one thought to another, however produced” (Chickera, 1962), and the imagination “as mind acting upon those thoughts so as to colour them with its own light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of its own integrity” (Chickera, 1962). Reason is the “principle of Analysis” whereas Imagination is the “principle of Synthesis” (Chickera, 1962). “Reason respects the differences and imagination the similitude of things” (Chickera, 1962). The above remarks of Shelley recognize the modifying and unifying power of imagination and run parallel to Coleridge’s concept of secondary imagination. But Shelley does not stop only with aesthetic function of imagination when he says, “Poets, or those who imagine and express this indestructible order, are not only the authors of language and of music, of the dance, and architecture, and statuary, and painting; they are the institutors of laws, and the founders of civil society, and the inventors of the arts of life, and the teachers…. A poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one; as far as relates to his conceptions time and place and numbers are not” (Chickera, 1962).

The purpose of poetry is to reform mankind and to spread the ideals of love and liberty. The poet, therefore, is an inspired man. Inspiration provides necessary background to the faculty of imagination. “Poetry is not like reasoning”, says Shelley, “a power to be exerted according to the determination of the will. A man cannot say, ‘I will compose poetry’. The greatest poet even cannot say it: for the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakes to transitory brightness; this power arises from within, like the color of a flower which fades and changes as it is developed, and the conscious portions of our natures are un-prophetic either of its approach or its departure. Could this influence be durable in its original purity and
force, it is impossible to predict the greatness of the results; but when composition begins, inspiration is already on the decline, and the most glorious poetry that has ever been communicated to the world is probably a feeble shadow of the original conceptions of the poet” (Chickera, 1962). Barring Coleridge, perhaps no other Romantic critic has exposed so philosophically the role of imagination in a creative act as done by Shelley.

Like Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, Keats also attaches great importance to imagination and held that imagination plays a key-role in the poetic process and without it the poetic process remains incomplete. Keats agrees with Coleridge that imagination helps a poet in achieving complete objectivity. He thinks that when an artist is endowed with negative capability, he needs nothing except perfect passivity for allowing his imagination free play in the field of creative activity without impediment put up by the prepossessed dogmas and knowledge. Keats like Hazlitt believes that a poet must be open to all types of experiences alike and remain alive to the truth of nature expressed in a work of art regardless of its kind or degree. An artist who is receptive to all types of experiences—even the opposite ones, has this capacity and it is the power of imagination which aids him in completely identifying himself with the object of perception keeping him aloof from his prepossessed choices. The power of imagination facilitates a poet in observing impersonality, overcoming rigidity by letting him participate in all types of experiences even the contrary ones like joys and sorrows, life and death, heaven and hell. Keats wrote to Bailey, “Nothing startles me beyond the moment. The setting sun will always set me to rights—or if a Sparrow comes before my window, I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel” (Gittings, 1970). This process in which a poet loses his identity and identifies himself with the object of perception which leaves its impression on the poet to make him forget his own identity is akin to Coleridge's concept of secondary imagination in which mind colored by the object of perception becomes one with the object of perception and object of perception colored by the mind becomes one with the mind for the truth lies neither in the mind of the poet nor in the object of perception but in the identification of both.

Imagination for Keats is a generative power that creates something new or different from the original sensory material. Keats believes with Coleridge that imagination does not stop at the perception only. Like Coleridge who regards secondary imagination a power that “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create” (Shawcross, 1958), Keats too accepts the modifying and transfiguring power of imagination. However, Keats does not distinguish between primary and secondary imagination as Coleridge does when he assigns different functions to the two types. While primary imagination for Coleridge is only a perceptive power that works only on sense impressions and constructs a poetic world through them whereas secondary imagination is a more powerful agent that consciously employs all the faculties of the soul together in the process of composition. When Coleridge says that secondary imagination “dissolves, diffuses, dissipates in order to re-create” (Shawcross, 1958), what he means is Rajnath (2004) has rightly said, “Primary imagination only constructs, whereas secondary imagination both destroys and constructs, destroys the world of primary imagination to construct the world of poetry”.

Keats too recognizes the two functions of imagination-perceptive and transfiguring or modifying. Imagination for Keats is an agent that perceives Beauty and works on it to remove the irrelevant, mundane, subjective and temporary elements from it to transform it into objective and ideal one. Thus, for Keats, imagination not only perceives through sense organs but also modifies the world of perception, which has so many irrelevant and discordant elements in it in the form of personal emotions and preconceived ideas, into the world of Truth which according to him cannot be reached by only perception. Keats wrote to Bailey in November 1817, “I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affection and the truth of imagination-What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not” (Gittings, 1970).

Although Keats agrees with Coleridge in regarding imagination as a modifying power, he does not believe imagination as a modifying power that contributes to organic wholeness. Imagination for Coleridge unites discordant or disparate material into an organic whole. According to Coleridge, “The poet, described in ideal perfection, brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity. He diffuses a tone and spirit of unity, that blends, and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination” (Chickera, 1962). Keats, on the other hand, is against all types of fixities and definite. Imagination for him is an agent that contributes to negative capability, i.e. the frame of mind which enables an artist to remain in the state of “uncertainties, doubts, mysteries without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” ((Gittings, 1970). For him imagination extends the finites and absolutes into infinity and indefiniteness and contributes to open-endedness, multiplicity and impersonality which are the hall marks of a genius. Imagination abstains a poet from taking any fixed and final stand and aids him in exploring all the aspects of a subject-positive as well as negative without siding with either of them. Referring to this all inclusive, all embracing capacity of imagination, Bate (1967) rightly says, “Third, the door is further opened to the perception—which he was to develop within the next few months—of the sympathetic potentialities of the imagination”. The sympathetic potentiality of imagination makes a poet participate in all types of experience even the opposite ones and makes him forget his own personality. Only when a poet sympathetically identifies himself with the object of perception, he is able to explore all the aspects of the subject keeping the irrelevant material away from
the main one. While for Coleridge, imagination unites the opposites into a unified whole, for Keats it separates
the irrelevant material from the main one and in this way moves towards creating Beauty and Truth which
should be the ultimate aim of a poet. Negative Capability letter also refers to the problem of intensity in poetic
creation. The intensifying power of the imagination grasps only those features of the objects which are relevant
to the central conception. Under the working of the intensity of imagination the disagreeable evaporate and what
remains is only beautiful and truthful.

Both Wordsworth and Coleridge regard imagination a transforming and modifying power that presents the
usual in an unusual light. The poet does not merely stop at the raw material provided by the sense impressions
but through the working of imagination shapes, modifies and transfigures the raw material into a final entity of
eternal and universal significance. Coleridge while distinguishing between primary and secondary imagination
regards primary imagination a weaker power which stops only at the act of perception while secondary
imagination is a modifying power which recreates what is perceived by the primary imagination. Keats, like
Wordsworth, favors spontaneity in poetic creation. He writes, “I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess
and not by Singularity… the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural to him—
That if poetry comes not as naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all” (Gittings, 1970). We can
infer from the above letter that Keats advocated spontaneous and natural expression that takes place under
intensity of imagination. Imagination for Keats is an involuntary, unconscious and spontaneous activity that
functions under the intensity of feelings. In this respect, Keats meets Coleridge’s conception of primary
imagination as an agent that uses the faculty of perception involuntarily and unconsciously when it encounters
an object or a phenomenon. However, Keats in spite of regarding imagination as a creative and modifying
power like Coleridge does not agree with him in respect to its functioning under duress, force or at conscious
will. Keats’s exclamation, “Oh, for a life of Sensation rather than of Thoughts” (Gittings, 1970), in which by
sensations he means intuition, provides us a clue to his theory of poetry. Unlike Coleridge who regards
secondary imagination a deliberate working together of all the faculties of the soul in the process of creation,
Keats regards imagination as an involuntary, unconscious and spontaneous act involved in the process of
creation.

When Shelley defines imagination as “mind acting upon those thoughts so as to color them with its own
light, and composing from them, as from elements, other thoughts, each containing within itself the principle of
its own integrity” (Chickera, 1962), he is voicing Wordsworth’s, Coleridge’s and Keats’s views on imagination
as a modifying and transforming power. Whereas Wordsworth, Coleridge and Keats think of imagination as
power that transforms the worldly objects of perception into a higher, universal and an ideal world that provides
pleasure, Shelley in the aforesaid lines apart from transforming objects of perception also includes thoughts—
which are also modified by the power of imagination when mind acts upon them to provide its own color to
them so that thoughts of higher type which approximate “the eternal, the infinite and the one, as far as relates to
his conceptions, time and place and member are not” (Chickera, 1962) can be conceived. Shelley assigns
philosophical function to imagination that through its transfiguring power aids a poet in approximating Platonic
world of ideal reality. Imagination is a faculty that through its own coloring recreates knowledge of the material
world to elevate it to the ideal world for moral purpose to reform mankind. Professor Daiches (1956) says in this
regard, “For Shelley an exercise of the imagination which brought one into contact with the Platonic idea
underlying the ordinary phenomena of experience was, in the larger sense, poetry”.

While Keats regards imagination as an agent that explores the “uncertainties, mysteries and doubts”
(Gittings, 1970) which constitute imperfectability of human world, Shelley regards imagination a power that
assists a poet in transcending sorrows, sufferings, injustices and discriminations prevailing in the human world
through the colors of imagination to create an ideal world free from any type of inconsistencies and frailties.
Shelley believes in the perfectibility of human life, whereas Keats celebrates imperfectabilities. Keats opposes
any attempt at sermonizing and moralizing as was attempted and advocated by Wordsworth and Shelley and
regards poetry as an expression of one’s emotions and feelings. According to him, “The poetry of ‘Lear’,
‘Othello’, ‘Cymbeline’, etc., is the poetry of passions and affections made almost ethereal by the power of the
poet” (Thorpe, 1993). He again writes in “Sleep and Poetry”:

“They shall be accounted poet kings
Who simply tell the heart-easing things”.

Keats wanted to “carve out a separate kingdom for arts” (Hough, 1953), whereas Shelley wanted to extend the
services of art for social welfare. In his letter written to Shelley on 16 August 1820, Keats condemns Shelley for
his social and political leanings which he thinks are obstacles in the way of the achievement of the state of
necessary capability so necessary for a pure poet:

I received a copy of the Cenci, as from you from Hunt. There is only one part of it I am judge of; the
Poetry, and dramatic effect, which by many spirits now a days is considered the mammon. A modern work, it is
said, must have a purpose, which may be God-An artist must serve Mammon; he must have ‘self-concentration’
selfishness perhaps. You, I am sure will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your
magnanimity, and be more of an artist, and ‘load every rift’ of your subject with ore. (Gittings, 1970)
In the above quoted letter Keats admires Shelley for “poetry and dramatic effect” but shows his displeasure against Shelley’s involvement in other subjects like progress of humanity and social welfare. His advice to Shelley “to be more of an artist” and “load every rift of his subject with ore” expresses his faith in pure poetry uncontaminated by moral and social causes. Keats, thus, regards imagination a power that transfigures the phenomenal world of perception into an aesthetic world of beauty, whereas Shelley regards it a power that modifies imperfect phenomenal world of perception and thoughts into an ideal Platonic world of perfection.

CONCLUSION

Thus, all the romantics—Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley and Keats attached great importance to imagination and deviated from neo-classicism that preferred reason over it. All of them recognize the perceptive and modifying power of imagination; however, they differ from each other in some respects. Coleridge’s concept of secondary imagination that recommends a synthesis of opposite or discordant elements like subject and object, mind and matter, finite and infinite is seen as parallel to Keats’s concept of intensity of imagination that aids a poet in sympathetic identification with the object perception. While for Coleridge, secondary imagination is a deliberate and conscious power that works under duress, Keats here parts ways from him when he regards poetry solely a natural and spontaneous activity. Unlike Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, Keats was a romantic to the core. He regards poetry a result of “a life of sensations rather than of thoughts” and rejects reason as a vehicle of reaching after beauty and truth when he writes, “I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequent reasoning” (Gittings, 1970). Keats has not distinguishes between Fancy and Imagination as done by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Similarly, he has also not categorized different functions and stages of imagination into primary and secondary as Coleridge does. But he indirectly refers to the functions of primary and secondary imagination as perceptive and modifying respectively in the course of his private correspondence. Besides perceptive and modifying powers of imagination as recognized by Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, Keats also recognized the sympathizing, identifying, intensifying and impersonalizing powers of imagination that assist a poet in the act of creation by “making all disagreeable evaporate” (Gittings, 1970) under intensity to reach the state of negative capability so necessary for pure poetry detached from moral and social leanings. According to Pathak (1998), “In fact, the ability of poetic imagination to concentrate on a segment of truth and explore it intimately without confusing it with the sole truth or other segments of reality is what Keats calls “negative capability”-the capability “of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”. By referring to the intensifying, identifying, sympathizing and impersonalizing powers of imagination, Keats enlarged its scope from perceptive and modifying power as assigned by Wordsworth and Coleridge and moralizing power as by Shelley.

REFERENCES