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21L.004 Reading Poetry

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## Keats' Negative Capability

Sunday [21 Dec. 1817]  
Hampstead Sunday  
MY DEAR BROTHERS,

I must crave your pardon for not having written ere this. \*\*\*

I saw Kean return to the public in 'Richard III.', and finely he did it, and, at the request of Reynolds, I went to criticize his Luke in Riches. The critique is in to-day's 'Champion', which I send you, with the Examiner, in which you will find very proper lamentation on the obsolescence of Christmas Gambols and pastimes: but it was mixed up with so much egotism of that drivelling nature that pleasure is entirely lost. Hone, the publisher's trial, you must find very amusing; and, as Englishmen, very encouraging-his *Not Guilty* is a thing, which not to have been, would have dulled still more Liberty's Emblazoning-Lord Ellenborough has been paid in his own coin-Wooler and Hone have done us an essential service-I have had two very pleasant evenings with Dilke, yesterday and to-day, and am at this moment just come from him, and feel in the humour to go on with this, began in the morning, and from which he came to fetch me. I spent Friday evening with Wells, and went next morning to see Death on the Pale Horse. It is a wonderful picture, when West's age is considered; But there is nothing to be intense upon; no woman one feels mad to kiss, no face swelling into reality-The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth. Examine 'King Lear', and you will find this exemplified throughout; but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness-The picture is larger than 'Christ rejected'.

I dined with Haydon the Sunday after you left, and had a very pleasant day, I dined too (for I have been out too much lately) with Horace Smith, and met his two Brothers, with Hill and Kingston, and one Du Bois. They only served to convince me, how superior humour is to wit in respect to enjoyment-These men say things which make one start, without making one feel; they are all alike; their manners are alike; they all know fashionables; they have a mannerism in their eating and drinking, in their mere handling a Decanter-They talked of Kean and his low company -Would I were with that Company instead of yours, said I to myself! I know such like acquaintance will never do for me and yet I am going to Reynolds on Wednesday. Brown and Dilke walked with me and back from the Christmas pantomime. **I had not a dispute but a disquisition, with Dilke on various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason-Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.**

Shelley's poem is out, and there are words about its being objected to as much as "Queen Mab" was. Poor Shelley, I think he has his Quota of good qualities, in sooth la!! Write soon to your most sincere friend and affectionate Brother  
John [Keats]