Keats in the Suburbs

ELIZABETH JONES

KEATS'S early poetry offers a literary structure for a rapidly changing British urban landscape, and allows us to see the criticism of his "vulgarity"—which marked him as a poetic upstart—in the light of a changing urban environment and cultural consciousness that threatened some of the more cherished values of Britain's established classes.[1] Besides the fact that Keats resided for the better part of his career at Hampstead, one of London's most popular suburbs, two aspects of Keats's poetry which led to his being branded as "suburban" were the marked artifice and domesticity of his natural descriptions, and the way his landscapes enclosed and sheltered rather than led to an enlargement of vision, or to the philosophical expansiveness associated with Wordsworth. Yet the mixing of artificial with natural objects that struck Keats's reviewers as vulgar when viewed beside Wordsworth's rural purity, became, in Victorian times, the ideal combination for suburban living.[2] The sub-

1. Keatsian vulgarity, in its many forms, has been ably documented and discussed in recent criticism. The present essay means to elucidate a cultural and geographic explanation for the force of contemporary critical reaction to the less traditional aspects of Keats's poetry. The place to begin studying the many aspects of what was seen in 1817 as Keats's vulgarity is with Lionel Trilling's "The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters," in *The Opposing Self: Nine Essays in Criticism* (New York: Harcourt, 1955), pp. 5–17, where Trilling discusses Keats's appetitive "geniality" (a term which also has implications for my focus on Keats's domesticated nature); and with John Bayley, who explores the intricacies of Keatsian "gemein" or commonness in *"Keats and Reality," Proceedings of the British Academy* (1962), 91–125. Bayley's study is followed closely by John Jones, in *John Keats's Dream of Truth* (London: Chatto, 1969), who is a champion for the poet's sensual "feel," and by Christopher Ricks, in *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974). Most recently, Marjorie Levinson has broken socio-political ground by connecting *Blackwood*'s charges of vulgarity to the social contexts from which they arose, in *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988). Levinson's argument that Keats's poetic ambitions were inseparable from his class-aspirations forms a crucial background to this essay, which sees Keats's suburbanism as a reflection of his desire for middle-class status.

2. On the ways in which a marriage of art and nature were advocated as a domestic ideal by Victorians like Ruskin, Morris, and Scott, see Ellen Frank, "The Domestication of Nature," in *Nature and the*

urban lifestyle was a bourgeois creation, marked by a carefully-constructed domesticity, cultivated in what was portrayed by Regency city planners as the unspoiled periphery of the urban centers. "The desire for a domestic life of privacy and seclusion" writes F.M.L. Thompson, "was a new experience for any sizeable section of the middle class, only gathering force for the first time around the beginning of the nineteenth century."[3] Thus, what was viewed as Keats's suburbanism reveals his association not with conventional Romanticism, but with an emerging Victorian and middle-class sensibility that sought domestic stability in the face of the political, social, and cultural upheavals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.[4] What Thompson calls a "new domestic ethos" was a process that stretched from the 1780s to its culmination in the 1850s and 1860s.[5] Keats's "suburban" poetic has a place, therefore, in the history of the cultural domestication of nature that attained mass popularity with suburbanization and culminated in the wallpaperings of William Morris.[6]

Victorian Imagination, ed. U. C. Knoepflmacher and G. B. Tennyson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 68–92.

3. F.M.L. Thompson, Introduction, *The Rise of Suburbia*, ed. F.M.L. Thompson (Leicester University Press, 1982), p. 12. Thompson's essay is particularly helpful in discussing the "cult of privacy and regulated domesticity" (p. 13) and its relationship to the rise of suburban housing which took hold in the years following 1815.

4. Alan Bewell deals in great detail with Keats's floral imagery and its connection, not to Wordsworthian nature, but to an "incipient Victorian culture" which commercialized and textualized nature, in "Keats's Realm of Flora," *Studies in Romanticism* 31.1 (Spring 1992), pp. 71–98. On the Victorian desire for suburban stability in the aftermath of Romanticism, see Walter L. Creese, "Imagination in the Suburb," and Andrew Griffin, "The Interior Garden and John Stuart Mill," in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, 49–67; 171–86.

5. F.M.L. Thompson, *Rise of Suburbia*, p. 14.

6. The changes in landscape design leading up to the aesthetic of suburbanism parallel the ornamented, intricate, and sensual descriptions of nature found in the poetry of the Cockney School; they are reflected in the architecture and landscape designs of Regency period "Men of Taste." The designers of this period aimed to reform the picturesque aesthetic of Uvedale Price and Richard Payne Knight—an aesthetic suited to the high-art tastes and pocketbooks of the gentry—and the uniform and barren clumps and belts of "Capability" Brown, by taking the ideals of the picturesque to practical conclusions which could not have been realized in the vast estate-gardens of the wealthy. The first designer to react to the fact that the "natural" garden had become as sterile as the formal garden the picturesque aesthetic had aimed to correct was Humphry Repton, in *Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1802), who aimed to return to the original picturesque ideals of intricacy and luxuriance, and put them to practical use in the smaller urban and suburban lots of the professional classes. One of the early followers of Repton's new style was Edmund Bartell, whose *Hints for Picturesque Improvements in Ornamental Cottages* (1804) emphasized luxuriance and profusion in smaller spaces over the vast, shaven lawns of the picturesque. See Donald Pilcher, *The Regency Style: 1800 to 1830* (London: Batsford, 1947), pp. 17–46.

The implications of Keats's suburban status for the readers of his time are best revealed in the criticisms of John Gibson Lockhart, in his reviews of Hunt and Keats, and in several of Byron's letters to his publisher John Murray.[7] Lockhart's series "On the Cockney School of Poetry," published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, juxtaposes the "purity" of the Lake School with what he viewed as the degraded artificiality of the poetry of Leigh Hunt and his follower, Keats. Lockhart casts Hunt's poetry in no uncertain terms as suburban, in its display of a nature that had been cultivated in London by those who lacked the economic or social status that would have provided daily contact with nature, the kind of contact that produced the poetry of a Wordsworth. For Lockhart to criticize a poet as suburban was to make a direct attack on his social class, on poetry that "betray[s] the *Shibboleth* of low birth and low habits."[8] Speaking of Hunt, Lockhart continues,

> He is the ideal of a Cockney Poet. He raves perpetually about "green fields," "jaunty streams," and "o'er-arching leafiness," exactly as a Cheapside shop-keeper does about the beauties of his box on the Camberwell road. Mr Hunt is altogether unacquainted with the face of nature in her magnificent scenes; he has never seen any mountain higher than Highgate-hill, nor reclined by any stream more pastoral than the Serpentine River. (39)

The criticism that Hunt's nature is only seen in shop-window boxes, in the suburb of Highgate, or in Hyde Park is used by Lockhart to point a finger at the poet's suburban lifestyle, where nature is experienced "in the course of some Sunday dinner parties . . . in the neigh-

7. The social and political terms of Lockhart's critique of "The Cockney School" have been discussed by Nicholas Roe, in "Keats's Lisping Sedition," *Essays in Criticism*, 42.1 (January 1992), 36–55, who argues that Lockhart negatively politicized Keats in order to stifle his poetry's "disturbing potency for his first readers" (53). Roe notes that Lockhart used Keats's suburban status, in addition to his affiliation with Hunt's liberal politics, to place his poetry in a "cultural limbo," which had much to do with subsequent portrayals of the poet as removed from "the world" (42). Kim Wheatley, in "The *Blackwood*'s Attacks on Leigh Hunt," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 47.1 (June 1992), 1–31, presents a fascinating account of how the class-based attacks on Hunt may be read as the fiction-making of Lockhart, a would-be Victorian novelist, who turned the amiable Hunt into a Gothic threat to the chastity of women, an effeminate corrupter of lower-class boys, and his poetry into a prostitute threatening the literary morality of gentlemen everywhere, especially in the third of the "Cockney School" articles (cf. nn16, 20).

8. John Gibson Lockhart, "On the Cockney School of Poetry, no. 1," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (October 1817), 39; hereafter cited in the text.

bourhood of London" (39). Lockhart portrays Hunt's nature as one transplanted and cultivated, used for ornamentation and pleasure, rather than sought out in its natural habitat for the more lofty purpose of moral or philosophical instruction. In his fourth essay on The Cockney School, Lockhart labels this propensity "Metromanie," and centers his attention on Keats, who, with Hunt, writes "laborious affected descriptions of flowers seen in window-pots, or cascades heard at Vauxhall."[9]

Byron had a similar (and no less vitriolic) reaction to the geographic characteristics of Hunt's and Keats's verse, referring more precisely to the Cockney School as the "*Suburban School.*" In a letter to Murray on 26 April 1821, he writes, "I think [Keats] took the wrong line as a poet, and was spoilt by Cockneyfying, and suburbing, and versifying Tooke's Pantheon and Lemprière's Dictionary."[10] Byron makes his class bias clear in an earlier letter, sent to Murray in March 1821:

> The grand distinction of the Under forms of the New School of poets—is their *Vulgarity*.—By this I do not mean that they are *Coarse*—but "shabby-genteel"—as it is termed.—A man may be coarse & yet not *vulgar*. . . . —It is in their *finery* that the New-under School—are most vulgar;—and they may be known by this at once—as what we called at Harrow—"a Sunday Blood" might easily be distinguished from a Gentleman—[11]

Byron's attacks are consistent with the attitudes and prejudices of English conservative society, who equated the suburban lifestyle with class pretension. In order to shed some light on the connection between suburban living and "affected descriptions," and to clarify a culturally-biased criticism that stayed with Keats for the whole of his writing career, it is useful to review the social history of English suburbs and to document the rise of a suburban aesthetic that rapidly expanded in popularity in the first four decades of the nineteenth century. What we now refer to as Keats's marginality, a concept that has been applied to his social class, lack of education, ambiguity of gen-

9. John Gibson Lockhart, "On the Cockney School of Poetry, no. IV," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (August 1818), 521.

10. *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 12 vols. (London: John Murray, 1973–1982), VIII, 166, 102.

11. Lord Byron, *The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 159.

der, and economic insecurity, may also be applied geographically and culturally. Much of what Lockhart criticized about Keats and Hunt was their involvement—both in their poetry and their lives—in a newly-emerging aesthetic and lifestyle that threatened those with which Lockhart was allied. In fact, it can be argued that Hunt and Keats were partially responsible for "inventing" a poetic of suburbia that, for all Lockhart's attempts to stifle it, came to exert a powerful influence over Victorian literary culture.[12]

The suburb, as it was originally conceived, denoted inhabited land that lay below hilltop walled towns, beneath the ramparts and gates of classical and medieval cities. In his study of the history of the suburb, *Borderland*, John Stilgoe's comments help to explicate Byron's labeling of Hunt and his followers as belonging to an "Under" school of poetry:

> Always *suburban* connoted inferiority, for a suburb lay low, in the shadow of the municipality above it . . . Suburbanites envied the uphill security, the order implicit in corporate charters and mercantile effort. They wanted little else than to join the walled-in fortunates, to achieve citizenship.[13]

"From ancient times to the early eighteenth century," continues Stilgoe, "suburbs existed on the edge, in a marginal zone neither municipal nor rural."[14] Although living in the suburbs became associated with comfortable domesticity and financial security after the massive move to suburbanization around 1750, whereas previously it had been a repository for urban undesirables, it never lost its culturally marginal associations.[15] In Chaucer's day, the suburbs were urban dumping grounds; they were the locations for leper hospitals, noxious trades like butchering, tanning and dyeing, and for the activities of a criminal underworld, including, most lucratively, prostitution. In

12. Richard Cronin argues that Hunt's "invention of suburbia as the locus for a literary and aesthetic system of values" was "his most substantial achievement," in "Peter Bell, Peterloo, and the Politics of Cockney Poetry," *Essays and Studies 1992*, ed. Kelvin Everest (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1992), 63–87 (79).

13. John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland: Origins of the American Suburb, 1820–1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 1.

14. John R. Stilgoe, *Borderland*, p. 2.

15. For a clear account of the rise of suburbia in mid-eighteenth-century England, see Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

the early eighteenth century, both Daniel Defoe and John Macky were aware of the habit of London gentlemen to frequent suburban areas in order to take advantage of the wide variety of illicit services available there. Such a questionable cultural history may well have accounted for Lockhart's conflation, in the "Cockney School" articles, of the eroticism of Hunt's and Keats's verse with the vulgar heritage of suburban areas, and it explains the inability of Keats's more conservative critics to see the erotic content of his poetry as indicative of anything but the detestable suburban degradation that polite society had been battling against for centuries.[16] After the massive move to suburbanization around 1750, even though the efforts of city planners and land developers had transformed the suburbs into domestic havens, they never lost their culturally marginal associations.

Hampstead, where Keats lived from 1817 to 1820 (in between journeys away to write), was a fashionable resort and spa town as early as the late sixteenth century.[17] But by 1715, its reputation as a high-ranking destination for wealthy Londoners had declined, owing to its increasing popularity with visitors of questionable social status. This is Defoe in 1724, describing Hampstead in his *Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain*:

> But as there is (especially at the Wells) a Conflux of all Sorts of Company, even Hampstead itself has suffered in its good name; and you see sometimes more Gallantry than Modesty; so that the ladies who value their Reputation, have of late more avoided the Wells and Walks at Hampstead, than they formerly had done.[18]

John Macky, another critic of Hampstead, wrote in his 1709 *A Journey Through England* (published 1714), that "its nearness to London

16. John Scattergood gives the cultural contexts for Chaucer's suburban *loci* in the *Second Nun's Tale* and the *Canon Yeoman's Tale* in order to explain Chaucer's locating of radical religious activities and alchemy on the margins of the city, and to show how Chaucer used the geographic unorthodoxy of the suburban location to enrich the confrontation in the tales between an established urban order and a suburban culture in constant moral, social, and religious flux. The fact that suburban areas were commonly used as repositories for impoverished and diseased members of society gives an additional cultural significance to Lockhart's portrayal of Hunt, in the third "Cockney School" article in particular, as "leprous," "vermined,""polluted" (453), "pestilential," and "infect[ed]" (455). See Scattergood's "Chaucer in the Suburbs," in *Medieval Literature and Antiquities: Studies in Honour of Basil Cottle*, ed. Myra Stokes and T. L. Burton (Cambridge: Brewer, 1987), 145–62.

17. F.M.L. Thompson, *Hampstead: Building a Borough, 1650–1964* (London: Routledge, 1974), p. 20.

18. Qtd. in F.M.L. Thompson, *Hampstead: Building a Borough*, pp. 22–23.

brings so many loose women in vampt-up old clothes to catch the City apprentices, that modest company are ashamed to appear here."[19] Even Pope's Belinda could not escape the anti-suburban vitriol of John Dennis in 1728, who contrasts her earlier representation in *The Rape of the Lock* as "well-bred" and "virtuous" with her later condition as "an errant *Suburbian*," "an artificial *dawbing Jilt*; a *Tomrig*, a *Virago*, and a *Lady of the Lake*."[20] Yet the rapid rise in economic status of the urban middle class at the end of the eighteenth century, combined with urban crowding and a new domestic ethos, brought an interest in Hampstead and other suburban areas as permanent homes for London's wealthier professional and mercantile classes, a trend that provoked Byron in 1817 to include a "vulgar, dowdyish, and suburban" woman in the catalogue of fashionable artifice in *Beppo* (66.4). Hampstead had no resident nobility or landed gentry, and thus offered ample social opportunities for the *nouveaux riches*. As F.M.L. Thompson notes, "Hampstead's business community in the late eighteenth century has not been much noticed by the local chroniclers, since eminence in this line did not strike them as eminence at all"; Hampstead, at the turn of the nineteenth century, "was bourgeois through and through."[21]

While the middle classes were maintaining residences in London's suburbs, and experiencing the best of both rural and urban worlds, there was a large contingent of London's working classes who were also escaping the city's dirt and grime on Sundays to get as close to nature as they could afford. In his *Glances at Life in City and Suburb* (1836), Cornelius Webb writes (in an essay titled "A London Sunday"), that London's suburbs attracted worse characters thirty years ago (at the turn of the century) than in his day:

19. Qtd. in F.M.L. Thompson, *Hampstead: Building a Borough*, p. 22.

20. John Dennis, "Remarks on the Rape of the Lock," in *Critical Works*, ed. Edward Niles Hooker, 2 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1943), II, 335. The rhetoric of Defoe's, Macky's, and Dennis's references to suburbanism's low level of morality, as well as Chaucer's use of the location (cf. n16 above), provides a precedent for Lockhart's constant portrayal of Hunt's poetry as yet another facet of suburban degradation and immorality. The fact that the terms of a suburban critique were set out long before the "Cockney School" articles appeared in print gave Lockhart all the more power to damage Hunt's literary "reputation," to picture him as just another loose woman of the suburbs in "vampt-up old clothes," trying to tempt the "City apprentices" with the "unnatural harlotry of his polluted muse" (Lockhart, "The Cockney School of Poetry, no. III," 453).

21. F.M.L. Thompson, *Hampstead: Building a Borough*, pp. 28–29, 51.

> low neighbourhoods disgorged their dirty and debauched, who carried their depravities out of town with them, instead of exhibiting them in the streets; and accordingly the roads and the fields in the suburbs were covered with born black-guards . . . all the lower and worst classes of London . . . The green suburbs were reached sooner in those days, before London had outgrown itself; and to these inviting spots accordingly such motley groups as we have named bent their steps, not always of the steadiest.[22]

Webb wrote this description almost twenty years after the first number of the "Cockney School" series, in which he was himself ridiculed for having called Keats "The Muses' son of promise" in lines of poetry used by Lockhart as an epigraph to that article; indeed, Lockhart would have included "Corny" Webb in the class of people described in the passage above. But the situation seemed to have improved by 1836, with the lower classes still escaping to the suburbs, but after having experienced a rise in status. Webb describes the working-class population who migrated to the suburbs on a Sunday—milliners, truck-drawers, tailor's apprentices, clerks, and maids—as looking "as handsome and high as their wealthy employers."[23]

The suburbs, then, were seen as places that attracted social climbers—what Byron called "Sunday Bloods"—those who aspired to living well in the country, but who had neither land nor the security of a landowner's rents. Suburban areas were, as Nicholas Taylor has noted, "a fulcrum for social mobility . . . an expression of the distinctly English tradition of liberalism or Whiggery."[24] The green spaces surrounding London and England's other large cities were spaces of possibility, as J. C. Loudon, the most widely-read proponent of suburban living, explained in 1838:

> We have long seen that the poor, by cooperation and *self-cultivation*, may insure to themselves all that is worth having of the enjoyments of the wealthier classes; and it has been our study, for many years past, to find out in what way all the improvements in architecture, gardening, husbandry, and domestic economy, may be brought to bear upon the residences of the working and middle classes of society. (italics mine)[25]

22. Cornelius Webb, *Glances at Life in City and Suburb* (London: Smith, Elder, 1836), pp. 73–74.
23. Cornelius Webb, *Glances at Life in City and Suburb*, p. 81.
24. Nicholas Taylor, *The Village in the City* (London: Temple Smith, 1973), p. 39.
25. J. C. Loudon, *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion*, ed. John Dixon Hunt (1838; New

Loudon's suburban propaganda gave the suburbs the power to turn a city-dwelling worker into an estate-owning member of the gentry: "All the necessities of life may be obtained in as great perfection by the occupier of a suburban residence in the neighbourhood of London . . . as by the greatest nobleman in England, and at a mere fraction of the expense."[26] Loudon's rhetoric gave a promise of social advancement through geographical location that flew in the face of long-established notions of property and birthright. And the idea of "self-cultivation" was perhaps the most potent attraction for city-dwellers seeking refuge from the incessant commercial flow of urban life. The suburban garden was not only a means of social advancement, but it became a metaphor for the nourishment of the soul alienated from the Romantic natural ideal. Andrew Griffin, discussing the image of the garden in Victorian literature, argues:

> Henceforth the self will be, when it is "most itself," not freely wandering but enclosed, shielded, withheld; not supported and nourished by the "God of Heaven" but self-cultivated, carefully tended, watered, and weeded; not guided or led by any twig on the river or cloud in the sky but rooted, protected, kept close. . . .[27]

The freely wandering Wordsworthian soul, fed by a nurturing and empathetic Nature, had to nourish itself in the aftermath of Romanticism—and the private villa garden offered a way for those seeking natural sustenance to bring Nature home.

The cultivation of the villa garden was one of the defining activities of the suburban resident. "The cult of gardens, which was spread-

---

York: Garland, 1982), p. 11. Loudon's text is a watershed for Regency landscape gardening, coming as it did after many design treatises which set the cultural stage for the suburban aesthetic. After 1838, the Victorian middle classes embraced suburbanism with gusto. The "study, for many years past," which Loudon mentions, refers to the long line of picturesque reformers, who were following the lead of Humphry Repton (cf. n6 above). Although Loudon, in *Country Residences* (1806), began by reproducing the picturesque designs of Price and Knight, he quickly adapted his aesthetic to follow that of Repton, Bartell, and many others who attempted to adapt the picturesque aesthetic to the practical and smaller-scale tastes of the burgeoning middle classes. Among the many works which contributed to the influence of the Regency garden aesthetic are W. Robertson's *Designs in Architecture* (1800); John Plaw's *Sketches for Country Houses, Villas and Rural Dwellings* (1800); W. F. Pocock's *Architectural Design for Rustic Cottages* . . . (1807); and J. B. Papworth's *Rural Residences* (1818) and *Ornamental Gardening* (1823).

26. J. C. Loudon, *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion*, p. 9.

27. Andrew Griffin, "The Interior Garden and John Stuart Mill," in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, p. 173.

ing rapidly down the social scale in the years after 1815," explains Paul Johnson, "was one way of protesting against the modern world, holding it at bay."[28] During the Regency period, having a garden was within the means of the professional classes, and one did not have to possess a large estate in order to cultivate nature. Loudon advocated the garden as a defense against the moral degradation of cities, as a way for urbanites to ascend to the ethical heights of Horace's *beatus ille*. The limited grounds available for London and suburban gardens made them all the more desirable to Loudon, for, as he argued,

> The master of a suburban residence, however small may be his demesne, may thus procure health and enjoyment at the same time, with more certainty than the possessor of a large property; because his grounds lie more in his hands. . . .[29]

At a time when most people were toiling away in large industrial centers, such a promise of possession of property and mastery over nature gave the middle classes something in common with the privileged few who were landscaping large estates or traveling long distances to experience "the picturesque" firsthand. But it was the *act* of garden cultivation, more than the mere possession of a garden, that Loudon and his contemporaries had promoted. The association between self-cultivation and gardening was made more intimate by the suburbanite, whose grounds lay "more in his hands."

Following the aesthetic reforms of Humphry Repton, who, in *Sketches and Hints on Landscape Gardening*, had announced his departure from picturesque ideals in 1795, Loudon planned to replace the picturesque aesthetic, which required the possession of large tracts of land, with what he called the "gardenesque," a more private and personal aesthetic that was more appropriate to the suburban experience. As Ann Bermingham explains,

> Two striking characteristics of Loudon's gardenesque philosophy are its emphasis on practicality—its adaptability to the small suburban tract and to the pocket of the middle class—and (related to the first) its botanical interest. Lacking the huge tracts of land and extensive vistas that gave the land-

28. Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern: World Society, 1815–1830* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), p. 282.

29. J. C. Loudon, *The Suburban Gardener and Villa Companion*, p. 9.

scape garden its intrinsic value as a display of wealth and power, the suburban gardenesque gardener had to impress not with land but with plants.[30]

Thus, although the suburbanites' properties were small, they could compete with estate-owners in the arena of gardening, filling their small spaces with as many varieties of plants as could be fitted into their yards. Loudon's gardenesque, based on the ideals of individualism and privacy, made it possible for the middle classes to achieve a cultural (and aesthetic) status of their own, despite their lack of vast property. By the middle of the nineteenth century, owing largely to the work of Loudon and his wife, a garden had become an essential feature of middle-class culture.

Hunt and Keats represented this professional class to those who, like Byron and Lockhart, disparaged their "suburban" poetic. Identified with their readership, which was, as Lockhart sneered in the first "Cockney School" article, "confined to the young attorneys and embryo-barristers about town" (39), they were seen as so many villa owners, attempting to climb a cultural ladder by way of an aesthetic which the established classes refused to recognize. Writing natural descriptions which were virtually unintelligible to those whose tastes in literary nature had been formed by the traditionally Romantic aesthetics of the sublime and the picturesque, Hunt and Keats created a poetic which reflected the tastes of the cultured middle classes—a phrase Lockhart would have found oxymoronic—of Regency London. Keats's floral language, borrowed from Hunt, which seemed to his critics literally to cram as many flowers and plants as he could into the small spaces of his poems, seemed to imitate the gardening habits of suburbanites eager to keep up with the newest gardening trends: it shared the characteristics of what was to become the Victorian suburban garden, in its "variety and artificiality, its simultaneous reliance on improvisation and *ad hoc* features."[31]

30. Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740–1860* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 171.

31. Walter L. Creese, "Imagination in the Suburb," in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, 50. In *The Regency Style*, Donald Pilcher quotes Edmund Bartell, J. C. Loudon's contemporary, whose landscape designs followed the idea of "luxuriance" mentioned above (cf. n6). In his *Hints for Picturesque Improvements in Ornamental Cottages* (1804), Bartell writes, "Suffer the tendrils of the ivy to mantle luxuriantly over the windows," a direction which has been taken in many of Keats's landscape descriptions (qtd. in Pilcher, p. 23).

To Lockhart, Keats and Hunt betrayed their social and cultural aspirations in the artifice, luxuriance, and sheer abundance of their descriptions, in the same way a middle-class professional and his wife were aspiring to gentrification by reading the gardening manuals of Loudon and Hunt's sister-in-law, Elizabeth Kent, who, in her *Flora Domestica, or the Portable Flower-Garden*, proposed the "portable garden" as a way for urbanites to experience the beauties of nature without having to purchase land or travel.[32]

It is precisely this kind of domesticated nature that Lockhart used to denigrate Hunt and Keats; the liberalism inherent in the teachings of Loudon and Kent, the notion that nature's high morality could be taught even in the dirty confines of London or in the closeness of its suburbs, did not agree with his conservative notions of natural purity. To Lockhart, a domesticated nature was not nature at all, for

> One feels the same disgust at the idea of opening [Hunt's] Rimini, that impresses itself on the mind of a man of fashion, when he is invited to enter, for a second time, the gilded drawing-room of a little mincing boarding-school mistress, who would fain have an *At Home* in her house. ("On the Cockney School. no. 1," 39)

The verse of a suburban poet was domesticated, artificial ("gilded"), and, to those like Lockhart, presumptuous. It was, as was the suburban ideal itself, both social and private (as the social practice of "At Homes" illustrates), both rural and urban, and, like the popular pot-gardens which characterized suburban agriculture, both natural and artificial, a "middling" kind of poetry that prompted Byron, in one of his many rants about the "New-under School," to write that "The pity of these men is, that they never lived in *high life* nor in *solitude*."[33] The suburban ideal aimed to strike that delicate balance required for a successful experience of *rus in urbe*. "In its purest form," writes Ann Bermingham, it was "a utopian ideological construction that provided a refuge from the disappointing realities of both urban and rural life."[34]

32. Elizabeth Kent, *Flora Domestica, or the Portable Flower-Garden; with Directions for the Treatment of Plants in Pots* (London: Taylor & Hessey, 1823), p. xxxii.

33. See John Lockhart, Review of Leigh Hunt's *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries*, *Quarterly Review* (March 1828), 419.

34. Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, p. 168.

The end of rural life that had begun with enclosure, and which was drawn out with the migration of rural dwellers to the urban centers in search of work, marked the birth of a process of objectifying nature, as it began to be seen less as a way of life, and more as a necessary enhancement of the urban experience. "One effect of urbanization," according to Ann Bermingham, "was to transform rural life from a common experience to a popular pastime."[35] In Keats's 1817 *Poems*, what passes for nature possesses distinctly social qualities; the natural world offers escape from urban pressures, and promises leisure, conviviality, and friendship, a perspective which offended the purist sensibilities of an *Edinburgh Magazine* reviewer who commented, in a review of Keats 1817 *Poems*, that "[Keats and Hunt are] too fond, even in their favourite descriptions of nature, of a reference to the factitious resemblances of society, ever to touch the heart."[36] The nature of Wordsworth, of high morality and sublime mystery, did not speak to Keats; he often heard a nature that was indistinguishable from its suburban location. For Keats, nature, like poetry, is an experience to be cultivated in the evenings, after working hours, when urban pressures are lifted.

Keats's first published poem, "O Solitude!," reveals a pre-Victorian experience of nature in its view of landscape as escape and as spectacle:

> O Solitude! if I must with thee dwell,
> Let it not be among the jumbled heap
> Of murky buildings; climb with me the steep,—
> Nature's observatory—whence the dell,
> Its flowery slopes, its river's crystal swell,
> May seem a span;[37]

In this poem, Keats announces his suburban status not only in his expressed desire to escape the "murky" city, but also in the phrase "Nature's observatory," a concept that Bermingham sees as specifically Victorian in its scientific objectification of landscape.[38] In an age that saw the burgeoning of the biological sciences, where even the mi-

35. Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, p. 161.

36. Anonymous reviewer, *Edinburgh [Scots] Magazine*, 2nd series, 1 (October 1817), 256.

37. John Keats, "O Solitude!," in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978); all references to Keats's poems are from this edition, hereafter cited in the text.

38. Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, pp. 174–84.

nutest natural phenomena were used to illustrate universal natural laws, Keats's phrase recalls such examples of the Victorian fascination with nature as spectacle as the terrarium, the vivarium, the Wardian case, and on a larger scale, the museum of natural history. His using a phrase like "Nature's observatory" places Keats in a pre-Victorian culture, where nature was viewed both as a subject of popular science and as a leisure pastime. Bermingham notes the suburban aspect of such a view:

> The experience of nature, whether as spectacle or as science, is decontextualized; the nature of this experience in turn suggests an important connection between the suburban attitude toward nature and the scientific one. In both the suburb and the laboratory, we experience the natural specimen, not nature; we observe the example of the larger phenomenon. (p. 182)

Nature as something to be observed, not only as a space to be experienced, appears throughout the 1817 volume.

An example of the priority given to domesticated over wild nature is found in the short poem "To a Friend Who Sent Me Some Roses," where Keats writes "I saw the sweetest flower wild nature yields, / A fresh-blown musk-rose" (lines 5–6), noting, "I thought the garden-rose it far excell'd" (line 10). The superiority of the wild musk-rose over the garden flower is short-lived, however, as Keats's friend Wells's cut roses triumph over nature's. The reason for this triumph is bound up in the social connection to "friendliness" (line 14), which the cut flowers have over the wild ones. Given the choice between favoring a natural flower in its habitat, and grown and cut ones given as an offering of friendship, Keats prefers those that speak of social affection "with tender plea" (line 13).

Not only the social aspect of nature, but also its connection to leisure figures largely in what Keats's detractors saw in his poetry as suburban. In "To one who has been long in city pent," Keats repeats the longing of the urban dweller, expressed in "O Solitude!," to escape into nature. What specifically marks this poem as suburban is the excursionary character of the escape. This is not a permanent retirement, a forsaking of worldly experience for the simplicity and moral superiority of rural life; it is the temporary escape of the harassed

Londoner who seeks no more from nature than a change of scenery and some leisure time:

> Who is more happy, when, with heart's content,
> Fatigued he sinks into some pleasant lair
> Of wavy grass, and reads a debonair
> And gentle tale of love and languishment?
> Returning home at evening . . . (lines 4–9)

Here, poetry and nature indistinguishably deliver the same goods: they are both sought out with a dilettante's desire for recreation, and neither is appreciated purely for its own sake. The labor involved in what Lockhart would view as a true poet's experience of either nature or poetry is conspicuously absent here, as Keats uses both to produce an atmosphere of leisure, with the "pleasant lair" of nature mirroring the "languishment" of the tale. But the phrase "Returning home at evening" would be the one to make Lockhart wince. In his mind, nature could be appreciated only by poets whose home was within it; to "return home" to the city from a day in the country would mark Keats as no better than Cornelius Webb's "dirty and debauched" working classes, who made an excursion to the suburbs part of their Sunday recreation.

The recreational and particularly social value that was attached to the experience of nature during the Regency period was also an important part of the suburban lifestyle, based as it was upon a paradoxical combination of privacy and society. On an individual scale, suburban life offered domestic stability, privacy, and the satisfaction of possessing one's own bit of property; yet on a social scale, the city planners aimed to reconnect thousands of dispossessed people, both rural and urban, to their social roots, and anticipated a renewed sense of community to arise from the garden-city model, as noted by Bermingham (pp. 167–68). Both impulses—"the one, emotional and esthetic, retained the Romantic wish to flee into woodland alleys and places of nestling green; the other, communal in emphasis, stressed the values of social cohesion and interdependence"[39]—are found throughout the 1817 *Poems*. Keats's bowers, intensely private spaces that he cultivated to reveal his own personal iconography in the same

39. Walter L. Creese, "Imagination in the Suburb," in *Nature and the Victorian Imagination*, 52.

way suburban houses and gardens were carefully constructed to reflect their owners' tastes and habits, had as much to do with the suburban aesthetic as did the social tendency of these poems, where Keats balanced his private impulses with his need to see himself as part of the cultural and social revolution that was transforming domestic life.[40]

In much of the poetry in the 1817 volume, Keats instinctively associates the writing of poetry with close friendship and domestic ease, perhaps because much of his early associations with poetry came from the domestic-literary circles into which he was welcomed. His friendship with George Felton Mathew, a middle-class poet and leader of his own poetic circle, represented Keats's association with Hunt and his circle in embryo; eager to escape his working-class roots, Keats depended on the society of his professional friends. Mathew's large family provided an atmosphere of middle-class gentility, with their "little domestic concerts and dances," offering Keats a glimpse into a life that combined artistic pursuits with domestic stability in a way he had never known.[41] The verse epistle to Mathew is particularly suburban in its odd combination of privacy and society, and in its seemingly unconscious association of poetry and poetic images with domestic and social convention. Keats's announces his suburban desires from the start:

> But might I now each passing moment give
> To the coy muse, with me she would not live
> In this dark city . . .
> Should e'er the fine-eyed maid to me be kind,
> Ah! surely it must be whene'er I find
> Some flowery spot, sequester'd, wild, romantic,
> That often must have seen a poet frantic; (lines 31–38)

After expressing his need to leave the "dark city" in order to court the muse, Keats describes one of his first poetic bowers, the kind of

40. Robert Fishman, in *Bourgeois Utopias*, documents the rise of the cult of domesticity, seeing it as resulting from a combination of urban overcrowding and decay, the subsequent separation of work and home in the decentralization of the middle-class residence, and the Evangelical movement—which emphasized the sanctity of home and family as a moral antidote to the rampant consumerism taking hold of pre-Victorian lives (pp. 20–38).

41. See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 67.

private, erotically-charged space that announced Keats's Cockney status immediately to his critics (lines 39–52). Yet not only the eroticism of this bower would have brought the charge of Cockneyism; there is also the sense that this place has been cultivated, designed with the eye of a landscape architect, in lines like "Where on one side are covert branches hung" (line 44), and "There must be too a ruin dark, and gloomy" (line 51). But what would have branded him as specifically suburban are the lines that follow:

> Yet this is vain—O Mathew, lend thy aid
> To find a place where I may greet the maid—
> Where we may soft humanity put on,
> And sit, and rhyme and think on Chatterton; (lines 53-56)

The "place" conceived of is oddly domestic: the muse must be "greeted" as if she were a house-guest; humanitarian sentiments are "put on" like dinner jackets; and the stated desire to "sit, and rhyme and think on Chatterton" reduces the poetic effort and the tragedy of Chatterton's life to the easy pleasure of a parlor game. Here, Keats imagines a place similar to those in which he must have spent countless hours with Mathew and his domestic-literary coterie. In Mathew's circle, poetry was soothing, recreational; under its influence, Keats reduces the potency of Shakespeare and Milton to a rather pathetic portrayal of each as "warm-hearted" and "blind," their poetry used "to flap away each sting / Thrown by the pitiless world" (lines 64–65).

As in *Sleep and Poetry*, "they shall be accounted poet kings / Who simply tell the most heart-easing things" (lines 267–68), so is Keats relieved from the intensity of ambitious longing in the easeful suburban atmosphere of Leigh Hunt's study at this poem's end. The "desperate turmoil" (line 308) of the poem's climactic, Daedalian suicide-fantasy is eased by a vision of a domesticated poetry:

> For sweet relief I'll dwell
> On humbler thoughts, and let this strange assay
> Begun in gentleness die so away.
> E'en now all tumult from my bosom fades:
> I turn full hearted to the friendly aids
> That smooth the path of honour; brotherhood,
> And friendliness, the nurse of mutual good;

> The hearty grasp that sends a pleasant sonnet
> Into the brain ere one can think upon it;
> The silence when some rhymes are coming out;
> And when they're come, the very pleasant rout:
> The message certain to be done to-morrow—
> 'Tis perhaps as well that it should be to borrow
> Some precious book from out its snug retreat,
> To cluster round it when we next shall meet.
> (lines 313–27)

As Keats is comforted in the sonnet "To My Brother George" by "the social thought" (line 13) in the face of natural sublimity, so is he relieved here by poetry's capacity to forge social bonds. Here, poetry is one with the "friendly aids" of "brotherhood" and "friendliness," existing in a social and domestic sphere of sonnet-writing contests and book-borrowing. A book of poetry is a social facilitator, bringing friends together "To cluster round it when we next shall meet."

At the poem's end, only a domestic fantasy—"a poet's house"—has the power to soothe Keats's ambitious ardor. It is Leigh Hunt, the art collector in his Hampstead villa, "who keeps the keys / Of pleasure's temple" (lines 354–55). The library and the garden, integral parts of any suburban residence, were the suburban substitutes for the cultural activities of the metropolis.[42] As families moved away from the city, they began cultivating the pleasures of nature and art entirely within the confines of their own homes, aided by gardening manuals like those of Loudon and Kent, and by the rapidly expanding market for affordable reproductions of painting and sculpture. Hunt's study, as Ian Jack has documented, represented only one of many middle-class parlors that were being outfitted in the manner of domestic art galleries and libraries.[43] Finding ultimate solace in such a place would have seemed to Lockhart the essence of suburbanism: in Hampstead, "upon a couch at ease" (line 353), surrounded by plaster reproductions of classical sculpture and prints of Titian's paintings, Keats portrayed himself as a true suburbanite, aspiring to the ease and culture of English gentrified society.

42. Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias*, p. 56.

43. Ian Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 130–35.

While the lines at the end of *Sleep and Poetry* offer only the most explicit portrayal of suburban domestic life, there remain Keats's poetic bowers, which, in their abundance and variety displayed in highly circumscribed spaces, anticipate the gardenesque aesthetic of Loudon that was soon to usurp the panoramic estate-scapes of the picturesque. Keats landscapes the bowers of *Sleep and Poetry*, "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," and *Endymion* in the same spirit that caused him to imagine a "ruin" as forming a part of his "flowery spot" in the epistle "To George Felton Mathew." If the diminutive luxuriance of Keats's landscapes caused problems for his critics, whose topographical models were built upon the ideals of the sublime and the picturesque, it is because his landscapes follow more closely the garden aesthetic of Regency culture and anticipate Loudon's gardenesque—where the object was to fit as much greenery and ornament as one could into the small spaces allowed on a suburban property. Ann Bermingham notes how the suburban garden reflected a kind of "domestic narcissism," where it "became the repository of the owner's personal iconography" (pp. 168–69).[44] This description suits Keats's bowers well; the number and variety of objects, both domestic and natural, that Keats can fit into what he describes as a "nest" or a "nook" is, at times, remarkable.

The well-known passage in "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill," which so clearly displays the artifice of Keats's nature with its cut flowers that "spring from diamond vases" (line 134), also reveals a closeness, where flowers "brush against our faces," where "O'er head we see the jasmine and sweet briar, / And bloomy grapes laughing from green attire; / While at our feet, the voice of crystal bubbles / Charms us . . ." (lines 135–38). This is a place where the abundance and variety of nature can be taken in without climbing a hill and surveying a large tract of land; it reflects, as many of Keats's bowers do, the domestic economy that characterized the suburban ideal. Similarly, his description of Adonis's bower in book II of *Endymion* reveals a profusion of natural variety, all contained within "A chamber, myrtle wall'd, embowered high" (line 389):

44. Donald Pilcher also notes: "What the Regency asked of the garden was that it should provide a setting for themselves, for their own particular possessions and eccentricities; not one for St. Ursula's virgins or the herds of Battus" (*The Regency Style*, pp. 34–35).

> Above his head
> Four lily stalks did their white honours wed
> To make a coronal; and round him grew
> All tendrils green, of every bloom and hue,
> Together intertwin'd and trammel'd fresh:
> The vine of glossy sprout; the ivy mesh,
> Shaping its Ethiop berries; and woodbine,
> Of velvet leaves and bugle-blooms divine;
> Convolvulus in streaked vases flush;
> The creeper, mellowing for an autumn blush;
> And virgin's bower, trailing airily; (lines 407–17)

Using the florist's name for bindweed, Keats invokes *Convolvulus*, a well-known garden annual, places them "in streaked vases," and creates a literary garden that would suit perfectly any suburban villa, complete with "serene Cupids, watching silently" (line 419).

In another bower later in book II, this time one made entirely of water, he conflates house and garden imagery in a potent example of this period's domestication of nature:

> The streams with changed magic interlace:
> Sometimes like delicatest lattices,
> Cover'd with crystal vines; then weeping trees,
> Moving about as in a gentle wind,
> Which, in a wink, to watery gauze refin'd,
> Pour'd into shapes of curtain'd canopies,
> Spangled, and rich with liquid broideries
> Of flowers, peacocks, swans, and naiads fair.
> Swifter than lightning went these wonders rare;
> And then the water, into stubborn streams
> Collecting, mimick'd the wrought oaken beams,
> Pillars, and frieze, and high fantastic roof,
> Of those dusk places in times far aloof
> Cathedrals call'd. (lines 613–26)

This remarkable passage combines nature, horticulture, domestic textiles, and architecture in a paradigm for the suburban ideal of *rus in urbe*, for the desire of the Regency bourgeoisie to have it all, within a carefully constructed domestic environment. It is also a potent re-

minder of Keats's contemporaneity; descriptions that appeared anachronistic, which jarred with a Romantic sensibility, were in fact reflecting a new cultural ethos that critics like Lockhart were unable to reconcile with their traditional—that is, Romantic—notions of the separation of nature and culture. "To get as close as they could to nature," writes Donald Pilcher, "was, in one sense or another, the consistent ambition of Regency architects. They had started by carrying the house into the landscape. They finished by bringing the garden into the house."[45] The criticism of vulgarity that Keats's critics attached to his "suburbanism" appears now to thinly veil a deeply-rooted fear of the passing of an age when clear delineations between nature and culture, between the country and the city, and ultimately, between classes, were becoming thoroughly blurred in the cultural environment of a post-Romantic era.

Ottawa, Ontario

45. Donald Pilcher, *The Regency Style*, p. 43.