

BLOOM'S  
MODERN  
CRITICAL  
VIEWS

U P D A T E D E D I T I O N

# JOHN KEATS

Edited and with an Introduction by  
HAROLD BLOOM



## *Bloom's Modern Critical Views*

African American	Anton Chekhov	Langston Hughes
Poets:	G.K. Chesterton	Zora Neale Hurston
Wheatley–Tolson	Kate Chopin	Aldous Huxley
African American	Agatha Christie	Henrik Ibsen
Poets:	Samuel Taylor	John Irving
Hayden–Dove	Coleridge	Henry James
Edward Albee	Joseph Conrad	James Joyce
Dante Alighieri	Contemporary Poets	Franz Kafka
Isabel Allende	Julio Cortázar	John Keats
American and	Stephen Crane	Jamaica Kincaid
Canadian Women	Daniel Defoe	Stephen King
Poets,	Don DeLillo	Rudyard Kipling
1930–present	Charles Dickens	Milan Kundera
American Women	Emily Dickinson	Tony Kushner
Poets, 1650–1950	E.L. Doctorow	Ursula K. Le Guin
Hans Christian	John Donne and the	Doris Lessing
Andersen	17th-Century Poets	C.S. Lewis
Maya Angelou	Fyodor Dostoevsky	Sinclair Lewis
Asian-American	W.E.B. DuBois	Norman Mailer
Writers	George Eliot	Bernard Malamud
Margaret Atwood	T.S. Eliot	David Mamet
Jane Austen	Ralph Ellison	Christopher Marlowe
Paul Auster	Ralph Waldo Emerson	Gabriel García
James Baldwin	William Faulkner	Márquez
Honoré de Balzac	F. Scott Fitzgerald	Cormac McCarthy
Samuel Beckett	Sigmund Freud	Carson McCullers
The Bible	Robert Frost	Herman Melville
William Blake	William Gaddis	Arthur Miller
Jorge Luis Borges	Johann Wolfgang	John Milton
Ray Bradbury	von Goethe	Molière
The Brontës	George Gordon,	Toni Morrison
Gwendolyn Brooks	Lord Byron	Native-American
Elizabeth Barrett	Graham Greene	Writers
Browning	Thomas Hardy	Joyce Carol Oates
Robert Browning	Nathaniel Hawthorne	Flannery O'Connor
Italo Calvino	Robert Hayden	George Orwell
Albert Camus	Ernest Hemingway	Octavio Paz
Truman Capote	Hermann Hesse	Sylvia Plath
Lewis Carroll	Hispanic-American	Edgar Allan Poe
Miguel de Cervantes	Writers	Katherine Anne
Geoffrey Chaucer	Homer	Porter

## *Bloom's Modern Critical Views*

Marcel Proust	John Steinbeck	H.G. Wells
Thomas Pynchon	Jonathan Swift	Eudora Welty
Philip Roth	Amy Tan	Edith Wharton
Salman Rushdie	Alfred, Lord Tennyson	Walt Whitman
J. D. Salinger	Henry David Thoreau	Oscar Wilde
José Saramago	J.R.R. Tolkien	Tennessee Williams
Jean-Paul Sartre	Leo Tolstoy	Tom Wolfe
William Shakespeare	Ivan Turgenev	Virginia Woolf
William Shakespeare's Romances	Mark Twain	William Wordsworth
George Bernard Shaw	John Updike	Jay Wright
Mary Wollstonecraft	Kurt Vonnegut	Richard Wright
Shelley	Derek Walcott	William Butler Yeats
Alexander Solzhenitsyn	Alice Walker	Émile Zola
	Robert Penn Warren	

---

*Bloom's Modern Critical Views*

---

**JOHN KEATS**  
*Updated Edition*

---

*Edited and with an introduction by*  
**Harold Bloom**  
Sterling Professor of the Humanities  
Yale University

 **CHELSEA HOUSE**  
P U B L I S H E R S  
An imprint of Infobase Publishing

**Bloom's Modern Critical Views: John Keats—Updated Edition**

©2007 Infobase Publishing

Introduction © 2007 by Harold Bloom

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. For more information contact:

Chelsea House  
An imprint of Infobase Publishing  
132 West 31st Street  
New York NY 10001

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

John Keats / Harold Bloom, editor. — Updated ed.

p. com — (Bloom's modern critical views)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-7910-9314-X

I. Keats, John, 1795–1821—Criticism and interpretation. I. Bloom Harold.

PR4837.J57 2006

821'.7—dc22

Chelsea House books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk quantities for businesses, associations, institutions, or sales promotions. Please call our Special Sales Department in New York at (212) 967-8800 or (800) 322-8755.

You can find Chelsea House on the World Wide Web at <http://www.chelseahouse.com>

Contributing Editor: Camille-Yvette Welsch

Cover designed by Takeshi Takahashi

Cover photo © The Granger Collection, New York

Printed in the United States of America

Bang EJB 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

All links and web addresses were checked and verified to be correct at the time of publication. Because of the dynamic nature of the web, some addresses and links may have changed since publication and may no longer be valid.

## *Contents*

Editor's Note	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Harold Bloom</i>	
Tuneless Numbers: The Ode to Psyche	13
<i>Helen Vendler</i>	
Nightingale and Melancholy	37
<i>Jeffrey Baker</i>	
Poetics and the Politics of Reception: Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'	67
<i>Theresa M. Kelley</i>	
'Hyperion' and 'The Fall of Hyperion'	97
<i>Marjorie Levinson</i>	
'The Eve of St Agnes'	129
<i>Andrew Bennett</i>	
Keats and the Urn	149
<i>Grant F. Scott</i>	
Lisping Sedition: <i>Poems, Endymion,</i> and the Poetics of Dissent	185
<i>Nicholas Roe</i>	

The 'story' of Keats <i>Jack Stillinger</i>	211	
John Keats: Perfecting the Sonnet <i>Helen Vendler</i>		227
Afterthought <i>Harold Bloom</i>	249	
Chronology	251	
Contributors	253	
Bibliography	255	
Acknowledgments	259	
Index	261	

## *Editor's Note*

My introduction sketches something of Keats's agon with Milton and with Wordsworth.

Helen Vendler eloquently explores the "Ode to Psyche," while Jeffrey Baker brings together the "Ode to a Nightingale" and the "Ode on Melancholy," finding in them certain Biblical associations and echoes also of Robert Burton's magnificent *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.

"La Belle Dame Sans Merci" is read by Theresa M. Kelley as a fusion of Spenserian allegory and Romantic literary politics, after which Marjorie Levinson confronts the two great epic fragments, the Miltonic *Hyperion*, and the Dantesque—Wordsworthian *The Fall of Hyperion*.

Andrew Bennett emphasizes the hazardous magic presented to the reader's gaze by *The Eve of St Agnes*, while the well-read "Ode on a Grecian Urn" receives a fresh response from Grant F. Scott.

The romance *Endymion* is taken as a barely hidden politics of dissent by Nicholas Roe, after which Keats's textual scholar, Jack Stillinger, tells the narrative of the poet's career.

Helen Vendler, most formidable of close readers, concludes this volume with the "story" of Keats's sonnets, while my afterthought is an appreciation of Keats's artistry in the Great Odes.





HAROLD BLOOM

*Introduction*

One of the central themes in W. J. Bate's definitive *John Keats* is the "large, often paralyzing embarrassment ... that the rich accumulation of past poetry, as the eighteenth century had seen so realistically, can curse as well as bless." As Mr. Bate remarks, this embarrassment haunted Romantic and haunts post-Romantic poetry, and was felt by Keats with a particular intensity. Somewhere in the heart of each new poet there is hidden the dark wish that the libraries be burned in some new Alexandrian conflagration, that the imagination might be liberated from the greatness and oppressive power of its own dead champions.

Something of this must be involved in the Romantics' loving struggle with their ghostly father, Milton. The role of wrestling Jacob is taken on by Blake in his "brief epic" *Milton*, by Wordsworth in *The Recluse* fragment, and in more concealed form by Shelley in *Prometheus Unbound* and Keats in the first *Hyperion*. The strength of poetical life in Milton seems always to have appalled as much as it delighted; in the fearful vigor of his unmatched exuberance the English master of the sublime has threatened not only poets, but the values once held to transcend poetry:

... the Argument

Held me a while misdoubting his Intent,

That he would ruin (for I saw him strong)  
 The sacred Truths to Fable and old Song  
 (So Sampson grop'd the Temple's Posts in spite)  
 The World O'erwhelming to revenge his sight.

The older Romantics at least thought that the struggle with Milton had bestowed a blessing without a crippling; to the younger ones a consciousness of gain and loss came together. Blake's audacity gave him a Milton altogether fitted to his great need, a visionary prototype who could be dramatized as rising up, "unhappy tho' in heav'n," taking off the robe of the promise, and ungirding himself from the oath of God, and then descending into Blake's world to save the later poet and every man "from his Chain of Jealousy." Wordsworth's equal audacity allowed him, after praising Milton's invocatory power, to call on a greater Muse than Urania, to assist him in exploring regions more awful than Milton ever visited. The prophetic Spirit called down in *The Recluse* is itself a child of Milton's Spirit that preferred, before all temples, the upright and pure heart of the Protestant poet. But the child is greater than the father, and inspires, in a fine Shakespearean reminiscence:

The human Soul of universal earth,  
 Dreaming on things to come.

Out of that capable dreaming came the poetic aspirations of Shelley and of Keats, who inherited the embarrassment of Wordsworth's greatness to add to the burden of Milton's. Yielding to few in my admiration for Shelley's blank verse in *Prometheus*, I am still made uneasy by Milton's ghost hovering in it. At times Shelley's power of irony rescues him from Milton's presence by the argument's dissonance with the steady Miltonic music of the lyrical drama, but the ironies pass and the Miltonic sublime remains, testifying to the unyielding strength of an order Shelley hoped to overturn. In the lyrics of *Prometheus* Shelley is free, and they rather than the speeches foretold his own poetic future, the sequence of *The Witch of Atlas*, *Epipsychidion* and *Adonais*. Perhaps the turn to Dante, hinted in *Epipsychidion* and emergent in *The Triumph of Life*, was in part caused by the necessity of finding a sublime antithesis to Milton.

With Keats, we need not surmise. The poet himself claimed to have abandoned the first *Hyperion* because it was too Miltonic, and his critics have agreed in not wanting him to have made a poem "that might have been written by John Milton, but one that was unmistakably by no other than John Keats." In the Great Odes and *The Fall of Hyperion* Keats was to write poems unmistakably his own, as *Endymion* in another way had been his own.

Individuality of style, and still more of conception, no critic would now deny to the odes, Keats's supreme poems, or to *The Fall of Hyperion*, which was his testament, and is the work future poets may use as Tennyson, Arnold and Yeats used the odes in the past.

That Keats, in his handful of great poems, surpassed the Milton-haunted poets of the second half of the eighteenth century is obvious to a critical age like our own, which tends to prefer Keats, in those poems, to even the best work of Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley, and indeed to most if not all poetry in the language since the mid-seventeenth century. Perhaps the basis for that preference can be explored afresh through a consideration of precisely how Keats's freedom of the negative weight of poetic tradition is manifested in some of his central poems. Keats lost and gained, as each of the major Romantics did, in the struggle with the greatness of Milton. Keats was perhaps too generous and perceptive a critic, too wonderfully balanced a humanist, not to have lost some values of a cultural legacy that both stimulated and inhibited the nurture of fresh values.

Mr. Bate finely says, commenting on Keats's dedication sonnet to Leigh Hunt, that "when the imagination looks to any past, of course, including one's own individual past, it blends memories and images into a denser, more massive unit than ever existed in actuality." Keats's confrontation with this idealized past is most direct from the *Ode to Psyche* on, as Mr. Bate emphasizes. Without repeating him on that ode, or what I myself have written elsewhere, I want to examine it again in the specific context of Keats's fight against the too-satisfying enrichments with which tradition threatens the poet who seeks his own self-recognition and expressive fulfillment.

Most readers recalling the *Ode to Psyche* think of the last stanza, which is the poem's glory, and indeed its sole but sufficient claim to stand near the poet's four principal odes. The stanza expresses a wary confidence that the true poet's imagination cannot be impoverished. More wonderfully, the poet ends the stanza by opening the hard-won consciousness of his own creative powers to a visitation of love. The paradise within is barely formed, but the poet does not hesitate to make it vulnerable, though he may be condemned in consequence to the fate of the famished knight of his own faery ballad. There is triumph in the closing tone of *To Psyche*, but a consciousness also I think of the danger that is being courted. The poet has given Psyche the enclosed bower nature no longer affords her, but he does not pause to be content in that poet's paradise. It is not Byzantium which Keats has built in the heretofore untrodden regions of his mind but rather a realm that is precisely not far above all breathing human passion. He has not assumed the responsibility of an expanded consciousness for the rewards of self-

communing and solitary musing, in the manner of the poet-hero of *Alastor*, and of Prince Athanase in his lonely tower. He seeks “love” rather than “wisdom,” distrusting a reality that must be approached apart from men. And he has written his poem, in however light a spirit, as an act of self-dedication and of freedom from the wealth of the past. He will be Psyche’s priest and rhapsode in the proud conviction that she has had no others before him, or none at least so naked of external pieties.

The wealth of tradition is great not only in its fused massiveness, but in its own subtleties of internalization. One does poor service by sandbagging this profoundly moving poem, yet even the heroic innovators but tread the shadowy ground their ancestors found before them. Wordsworth had stood on that ground, as Keats well knew, and perhaps had chosen a different opening from it, neither toward love nor toward wisdom, but toward a plain recognition of natural reality and a more sublime recognition-by-starts of a final reality that seemed to contain nature. Wordsworth never quite named that finality as imagination, though Blake had done so and the young Coleridge felt (and resisted) the demonic temptation to do so. Behind all these were the fine collapses of the Age of Sensibility, the raptures of *Jubilate Agno* and the *Ode on the Poetical Character*, and the more forced but highly impressive tumults of *The Bard* and *The Progress of Poesy*. Farther back was the ancestor of all such moments of poetic incarnation, the Milton of the great invocations, whose spirit I think haunts the *Ode to Psyche* and the *Ode to a Nightingale*, and does not vanish until *The Fall of Hyperion* and *To Autumn*.

Hazlitt, with his usual penetration, praises Milton for his power to absorb vast poetic traditions with no embarrassment whatsoever: “In reading his works, we feel ourselves under the influence of a mighty intellect, that the nearer it approaches to others, becomes more distinct from them.” This observation, which comes in a lecture Keats heard, is soon joined by the excellent remark that “Milton’s learning has the effect of intuition.” The same lecture, in its treatment of Shakespeare, influenced Keats’s conception of the Poetical Character, as Mr. Bate notes. Whether Keats speculated sadly on the inimitable power of Milton’s positive capability for converting the splendor of the past into a private expressiveness we do not know. But the literary archetype of Psyche’s rosy sanctuary is the poet’s paradise, strikingly developed by Spenser and Drayton, and brought to a perfection by Milton. I am not suggesting Milton as a “source” for Keats’s *Ode to Psyche*. Poets influence poets in ways more profound than verbal echoings. The paradise of poets is a recurrent element in English mythopoeic poetry, and it is perhaps part of the critic’s burden never to allow himself to yield to embarrassment when the riches of poetic tradition come crowding in upon him. Poets need to be selective; critics need the humility of a bad conscience when they

exclude any part of the poetic past from “tradition,” though humility is never much in critical fashion. Rimbaud put these matters right in one outburst: “On n’a jamais bien jugé le romantisme. Qui l’aurait jugé? Les Critiques!!”

Milton, “escap’t the *Stygian* pool,” hails the light he cannot see, and reaffirms his ceaseless wanderings “where the Muses haunt / clear Spring, or shady Grove,” and his nightly visits to “*Sion* and the flow’ry Brooks beneath.” Like Keats’s nightingale, he “sings darkling,” but invokes a light that can “shine inward, and the mind through all her powers / Irradiate.” The light shone inward, the mind’s powers were triumphant, and all the sanctities of heaven yielded to Milton’s vision. For the sanctuary of Milton’s psyche is his vast heterocosm, the worlds he makes and ruins. His shrine is built, not to the human soul in love, but to the human soul glorious in its solitude, sufficient, with God’s aid, to seek and find its own salvation. If Keats had closed the casement, and turned inward, seeking the principle that could sustain his own soul in the darkness, perhaps he could have gone on with the first *Hyperion*, and become a very different kind of poet. He would then have courted the fate of Collins, and pursued the guiding steps of Milton only to discover the quest was:

In vain—such bliss to one alone  
Of all the sons of soul was known,  
And Heav’n and Fancy, kindred pow’rs,  
Have now o’returned th’inspiring bow’rs,  
Or curtain’d close such scene from ev’ry future view.

Yeats, in the eloquent simplicities of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, saw Keats as having “been born with that thirst for luxury common to many at the outset of the Romantic Movement,” and thought therefore that the poet of *To Autumn* “but gave us his dream of luxury.” Yeats’s poets were Blake and Shelley; Keats and Wordsworth he refused to understand, for their way was not his own. His art, from *The Wanderings of Oisín* through the *Last Poems and Plays*, is founded on a rage against growing old, and a rejection of nature. The poet, he thought, could find his art only by giving way to an anti-self, which “comes but to those who are no longer deceived, whose passion is reality.” Yeats was repelled by Milton, and found no place for him in *A Vision*, and certainly no poet cared so little as Milton to express himself through an anti-self. In Blake’s strife of spectre and emanation, in Shelley’s sense of being shadowed by the *alastor* while seeking the epipsyche, Yeats found precedent for his own quest towards Unity of Being, the poet as daimonic man taking his mask from a phase opposite to that of his own will. Like Blake and Shelley, Yeats sought certainty, but being of Shelley’s phase rather than

Blake's, he did not find it. The way of Negative Capability, as an answer to Milton, Yeats did not take into account; he did not conceive of a poet "certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination." (There is, of course, no irritable reaching after mere fact and reason in Yeats: he reached instead for everything the occult sub-imagination had knocked together in place of fact and reason. But his motive was his incapability "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts," and the results are more mixed than most recent criticism will admit.)

Keats followed Wordsworth by internalizing the quest toward finding a world that answered the poet's desires, and he hoped to follow Shakespeare by making that world more than a sublime projection of his own ego. Shakespeare's greatness was not an embarrassment to Keats, but the hard victories of poetry had to be won against the more menacing values of poetic tradition. The advance beyond the *Ode to Psyche* was taken in the *Ode to a Nightingale*, where the high world within the bird's song is an expansion of the rosy sanctuary of Psyche. In this world our sense of actuality is heightened simultaneously with the widening of what Mr. Bate terms "the realm of possibility." The fear of losing actuality does not encourage the dull soil of mundane experience to quarrel with the proud forests it has fed, the nightingale's high requiem. But to be the breathing garden in which Fancy breeds his flowers is a delightful fate; to become a sod is to suffer what Belial dreaded in that moving speech Milton himself and the late C. S. Lewis have taught too many to despise.

Milton, invoking the light, made himself at one with the nightingale; Keats is deliberate in knowing constantly his own separation from the bird. What is fresh in this ode is not I think a sense of the poet's dialogue with himself; it is surprising how often the English lyric has provided such an undersong, from Spenser's *Prothalamion* to Wordsworth's *Resolution and Independence*. Keats wins freedom from tradition here by claiming so very little for the imagination in its intoxicating but harsh encounter with the reality of natural song. The poet does not accept what is as good, and he does not exile desire for what is not. Yet, for him, what is possible replaces what is not. There is no earthly paradise for poets, but there is a time of all-but-final satisfaction, the fullness of lines 35 to 58 of this ode.

I do not think that there is, before Keats, so individual a setting-forth of such a time, anywhere in poetic tradition since the Bible. The elevation of Wordsworth in *Tintern Abbey* still trembles at the border of a theophany, and so derives from a universe centered upon religious experience. The vatic gift of Shelley's self to the elements, from *Alastor* on, has its remote but genuine ancestors in the sibylline frenzies of traditions as ancient as Orphism. Blake's moments of delight come as hard-won intervals of rest from an intellectual

warfare that differs little if at all from the struggles towards a revelatory awareness in Ezekiel or Isaiah, and there is no contentment in them. What Keats so greatly gives to the Romantic tradition in the *Nightingale* ode is what no poet before him had the capability of giving—the sense of the human making choice of a human self, aware of its deathly nature, and yet having the will to celebrate the imaginative richness of mortality. The *Ode to a Nightingale* is the first poem to know and declare, wholeheartedly, that death is the mother of beauty. The *Ode to Psyche* still glanced, with high good humor, at the haunted rituals of the already-written poems of heaven; the *Ode to a Nightingale* turns, almost casually, to the unwritten great poem of earth. There is nothing casual about the poem's tone, but there is a wonderful lack of self-consciousness at the poem's freedom from the past, in the poem's knowing that death, our death, is absolute and without memorial.

The same freedom from the massive beliefs and poetic stances of the past is manifested in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, where the consolations of the spirit are afforded merely by an artifice of eternity, and not by evidences of an order of reality wholly other than our own. Part of this poem's strength is in the deliberate vulnerability of its speaker, who contemplates a world of values he cannot appropriate for his own, although nothing in that world is antithetical to his own nature as an aspiring poet. Mr. Bate states the poem's awareness of this vulnerability: "In attempting to approach the urn in its own terms, the imagination has been led at the same time to separate itself—or the situation of man generally—still further from the urn." One is not certain that the imagination is not also separating itself from the essential poverty of man's situation in the poem's closing lines. Mr. Bate thinks we underestimate Keats's humor in the Great Odes, and he is probably right, but the humor that apparently ends the *Grecian Urn* is a grim one. The truth of art may be all of the truth our condition can apprehend, but it is not a saving truth. If this is all we need to know, it may be that no knowledge can help us. Shelley was very much a child of Miltonic tradition in affirming the moral instrumentality of the imagination; Keats is grimly free of tradition in his subtle implication of a truth that most of us learn. Poetry is not a means of good; it is, as Wallace Stevens implied, like the honey of earth that comes and goes at once, while we wait vainly for the honey of heaven.

Blake, Wordsworth, and Shelley knew in their different ways that human splendors had no sources but in the human imagination, but each of these great innovators had a religious temperament, however heterodox, and Keats had not. Keats had a clarity in his knowledge of the uniqueness and finality of human life and death that caused him a particular anguish on his own death-bed, but gave him, before that, the imagination's gift of an absolute originality. The power of Keats's imagination could never be



identified by him with an apocalyptic energy that might hope to transform nature. It is not that he lacked the confidence of Blake and of Shelley, or of the momentary Wordsworth of *The Recluse*. He felt the imagination's desire for a revelation that would redeem the inadequacies of our condition, but he felt also a humorous skepticism toward such desire. He would have read the prose testament of Wallace Stevens, *Two Or Three Ideas*, with the wry approval so splendid a lecture deserves. The gods are dispelled in mid-air, and leave "no texts either of the soil or of the soul." The poet does not cry out for their return, since it remains his work to resolve life in his own terms, for in the poet is "the increasingly human self."

Part of Keats's achievement is due then to his being perhaps the only genuine forerunner of the representative post-Romantic sensibility. Another part is centered in the *Ode on Melancholy* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, for in these poems consciousness becomes its own purgatory, and the poet learns the cost of living in an excitement of which he affirms "that it is the only state for the best sort of Poetry—that is all I care for, all I live for." From this declaration it is a direct way to the generally misunderstood rigor of Pater, when he insists that "a counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life," and asks: "How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses?" Moneta, Keats's veiled Melancholy, counted those pulses, while the poet waited, rapt in an apprehension attainable only by the finest senses, nearly betrayed by those senses to an even more premature doom than his destined one. What links together *The Fall of Hyperion* and its modern descendants like Stevens's *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* is the movement of impressions set forth by Pater, when analysis of the self yields to the poet's recognition of how dangerously fine the sells existence has become. "It is with this movement, with the passage and dissolution of impressions, images, sensations, that analysis leaves off—that continual vanishing away, that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves."

Though there is a proud laughter implicit in the *Ode on Melancholy*, the poem courts tragedy, and again makes death the mother of beauty. Modern criticism has confounded Pater with his weaker disciples, and has failed to realize how truly Yeats and Stevens are in his tradition. The *Ode on Melancholy* is ancestor to what is strongest in Pater, and to what came after in his tradition of aesthetic humanism. Pater's "Conclusion" to *The Renaissance* lives in the world of the *Ode on Melancholy*:

Great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us.

Only be sure it is passion—that it does yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness.

The wakeful anguish of the soul comes to the courter of grief in the very shrine of pleasure, and the renovating powers of art yield the tragedy of their might only to a strenuous and joyful seeker. Keats's problem in *The Fall of Hyperion* was to find again the confidence of Milton as to the oneness of his self and them, but with nothing of the Miltonic conviction that God had worked to fit that self and theme together. The shrines of pleasure and of melancholy become one shrine in the second *Hyperion*, and in that ruin the poet must meet the imaginative values of tradition without their attendant credences, for Moneta guards the temple of all the dead faiths.

Moneta humanizes her sayings to our ears, but not until a poet's courteous dialectic has driven her to question her own categories for mankind. When she softens, and parts the veils for Keats, she reveals his freedom from the greatness of poetic tradition, for the vision granted has the quality of a new universe, and a tragedy different in kind from the tragedy of the past:

Then saw I a wan face,  
 Not pined by human sorrows, but bright-blanch'd  
 By an immortal sickness which kills not;  
 It works a constant change, which happy death  
 Can put no end to; deathwards progressing  
 To no death was that visage; it had pass'd  
 The lily and the snow; and beyond these  
 I must not think now, though I saw that face.  
 But for her eyes I should have fled away.  
 They held me back with a benignant light,  
 Soft mitigated by divinest lids  
 Half closed, and visionless entire they seem'd  
 Of all external things—

Frank Kermode finds this passage a prime instance of his "Romantic Image," and believes Moneta's face to be "alive only in a chill and inhuman way," yet Keats is held back from such a judgment by the eyes of his Titaness, for they give forth "a benignant light," as close to the saving light Milton invokes as Keats can ever get. Moneta has little to do with the Yeatsian concept of the poetic vision, for she does not address herself to the alienation of the poet. M. H. Abrams, criticizing Mr. Kermode, points to her emphasis on the poet as humanist, made restless by the miseries of mankind. Shelley's

Witch of Atlas, for all her playfulness, has more to do with Yeats's formulation of the coldness of the Muse.

Moneta is the Muse of mythopoeia, like Shelley's Witch, but she contains the poetic and religious past, as Shelley's capricious Witch does not. Taking her in a limited sense (since she incarnates so much more than this), Moneta does represent the embarrassments of poetic tradition, a greatness it is death to approach. Moneta's perspective is close to that of the Rilkean Angel, and for Keats to share that perspective he would have to cease to depend on the visible. Moneta's is a perfect consciousness; Keats is committed still to the oxymoronic intensities of experience, and cannot unperplex joy from pain. Moneta's is a world beyond tragedy; Keats needs to be a tragic poet. Rilke dedicated himself to the task of describing a world regarded no longer from a human point of view, but as it is within the angel. Moneta, like this angel, does not regard external things, and again like Rilke's angel she both comforts and terrifies. Keats, like Stevens, fears the angelic imposition of any order upon reality, and hopes to discover a possible order in the human and the natural, even if that order be only the cyclic rhythm of tragedy. Stevens's definitive discovery is in the final sections of *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*; Keats's similar fulfillment is in his perfect poem, *To Autumn*.

The achievement of definitive vision in *To Autumn* is more remarkable for the faint presence of the shadows of the poet's hell that the poem tries to exclude. Mr. Bate calls the *Lines to Fanny* (written, like *To Autumn*, in October 1819) "somewhat jumbled as well as tired and flat," but its nightmare projection of the imagination's inferno has a singular intensity, and I think considerable importance:

Where shall I learn to get my peace again?  
 To banish thoughts of that most hateful land,  
 Dungeoner of my friends, that wicked strand  
 Where they were wrecked and live a wrecked life;  
 That monstrous region, whose dull rivers pour,  
 Ever from their sordid urns unto the shore,  
 Unown'd of any weedy-haired gods;  
 Whose winds, all zephyrless, hold scourging rods,  
 Iced in the great lakes, to afflict mankind;  
 Whose rank-grown forests, frosted, black, and blind,  
 Would fright a Dryad; whose harsh herbag'd meads  
 Make lean and lank the starv'd ox while he feeds;  
 There flowers have no scent, birds no sweet song,  
 And great unerring Nature once seems wrong.

This may have begun as a fanciful depiction of an unknown America, where Keats's brother and sister-in-law were suffering, yet it develops into a vision akin to Blake's of the world of experience, with its lakes of menace and its forests of error. The moss-lain Dryads lulled to sleep in the forests of the poet's mind in his *Ode to Psyche*, can find no home in this natural world. This is Keats's version of the winter vision, the more powerful for being so unexpected, and clearly a torment to its seer, who imputes error to Nature even as he pays it his sincere and accustomed homage.

It is this waste land that the auroras of Keats's *To Autumn* transform into a landscape of perfection process. Does another lyric in the language meditate more humanly "the full of fortune and the full of fate"? The question is the attentive reader's necessary and generous tribute; the critical answer may be allowed to rest with Mr. Bate, who is moved to make the finest of claims for the poem: "Here at last is something of a genuine paradise." The paradise of poets bequeathed to Keats by tradition is gone; a tragic paradise of naturalistic completion and mortal acceptance has taken its place.

There are other Romantic freedoms won from the embarrassments of poetic tradition, usually through the creation of new myth, as in Blake and Shelley, or in the thematic struggle not to create a myth, as in the earlier work of Wordsworth and Coleridge. Keats found his dangerous freedom by pursuing the naturalistic implications of the poet's relation to his own poem, and nothing is more refreshing in an art so haunted by aspirations to surpass or negate nature. Shelley, still joined to Keats in the popular though not the critical consciousness, remains the best poet to read in counterpoint to the Great Odes and *The Fall of Hyperion*. There is no acceptance in Shelley, no tolerance for the limits of reality, but only the outrageous desire never to cease desiring, the unflagging intensity that goes on until it is stopped, and never is stopped. Keats did what Milton might have done but was not concerned to do; he perfected an image in which stasis and process are reconciled, and made of autumn the most human of seasons in consequence. Shelley's ode to autumn is his paean to the West Wind, where a self-destroying swiftness is invoked for the sake of dissolving all stasis permanently, and for hastening process past merely natural fulfillment into apocalyptic renewal. Whether the great winter of the world can be relieved by any ode Keats tended to doubt, and we are right to doubt with him, but there is a hope wholly natural in us that no doubt dispels, and it is of this hope that Shelley is the unique and indispensable poet.



HELEN VENDLER

*Tuneless Numbers:  
The Ode to Psyche*

**T**he total shape of the *Ode on Indolence* is, as I have said, a dialectical one of advance and refusal, advance and refusal, advance and refusal—the shape of a stalemate. At the moment represented by the ode, both the reverie of gestating vision and the regressive choice of preconscious insensibility are being jealously protected from the claims of the heart, of fame, and even of art itself. To think of constructing anything at all—a love affair, a place in the world of ambition, a poem—threatens the slumbering embryonic self. Keats finally remains obdurate, the dreamer of the dim dream, the viewer of the faint vision. But the strain evident in the disparate and parallel languages of *Indolence*, as well as in the inherent instability of the condition of spiritual stalemate, predicts a tipping of the balance: as we know, it tips away from immobility toward love and art.<sup>1</sup>

The odes that follow *Indolence* investigate creativity by taking up various attitudes toward the senses, almost as though the odes were invented as a series of controlled experiments in the suppression or permission of sense-experience. Keats's deliberate interest in sense-response has usually been cited as proof of his love of luxury or his minute apprehension of sensual fluctuation. It has not been generally realized that Keats's search for "intensity" led him as much to a deliberate limiting of sense-variety as to a broadening of sensation, and led him as well to a search for an "intensity" of

---

From *The Odes of John Keats*. © 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

intellect that would rival the intensity of sense. In fact, the intensity to be found in the mind attracted Keats at least as much as, if not more than, the apparently easier intensity of sense; and the lapse of intensity following sexual climax seems to have been only an instance, for Keats, of a curious failure intrinsic to physical sensation itself. He described this eventual ennui of the senses at length in *Fancy*, contrasting it there with the associative powers of mental Fancy, which is able to assemble hybrid seasons and hybrid mistresses that combine all beauties and can never fade. Imaginative intellectual ecstasy seemed to Keats, at this point (*Fancy* was composed a few months before the odes), a more promising source of sustained intensity than physical sensation, and the second of the odes, the *Ode to Psyche*, is in this respect the most “puritanical” of the group in its intent (if not in its effect). It aims, whatever its sensual metaphors (and these will demand their own recognition later), at a complete, exclusive, and lasting annihilation of the senses in favor of the brain. The locus of reality in the ode passes from the world of myth to the world of mind, and the firm four-part structure emphasizes the wish to reproduce earlier sensual and cultic reality in a later interiorized form. The implicit boast of *Psyche* is that the “working brain” can produce a flawless virtual object, indistinguishable from the “real” object in the mythological or historical world. “O for a life of Thoughts,” says this ode, “instead of Sensations!”

In *Psyche* Keats emerges from the chrysalis of indolence, permits his soul to become a winged spirit, and takes the smallest possible step toward the construction of a work of art. He concedes that he will shape his reverie toward some end (that reverie which had remained floating and inchoate in *Indolence*), but decides that it will prescind from the bodily senses, and will remain an internal making, as in *Fancy*, contained entirely within his own mind. The shape of the *Ode to Psyche* is, in its essence, the shape of that initial constructive act, and so is a very simple one. It is a reduplication-shape; we might compare it to the shape made by a Rorschach blot. Everything that appears on the left must reappear, in mirror image, on the right; or, in terms of the aesthetic of the ode, whatever has existed in “life” must be, and can be, restored in art.

The notion of art which underlies Keats’s continual use of the trope of reduplication in the ode is a strictly mimetic one. The internal world of the artist’s brain can attain by the agency of Fancy—so the trope implies—a point-for-point correspondence with the external worlds of history, mythology, and the senses. The task of the poet is defined in excessively simple terms: he is, in this instance, first to sketch the full presence of Psyche and her cult as they existed in the pagan past—that is, to show the locus of loss—and then to create by his art a new ritual and a new environment for

the restored divinity.<sup>2</sup> Of course Psyche is incomplete without her other half, the god Cupid. Dissatisfied with the thinness of his allegorical and emblematic urn-figures in *Indolence*, and economically reducing his figures from three to two, Keats writes a hymn to the goddess traditionally representing the soul, but the soul under one aspect—the soul in love.<sup>3</sup> Each of the subsequent odes worships a single divinity; each, like Psyche, is female; after Psyche, all are unpartnered.

In the view of the *Ode to Psyche*, a pursuit of the most minute verisimilitude becomes the task of art, since divinity will not grace art with her presence if she lacks an exact interior re-creation of her former sensual and cultic world. In the fiction of this ode, art does not objectify the natural world in an external medium such as music or sculpture or even language. In the ode, Keats's art is the insubstantial one of Fancy, the inner activity of the working brain, not even, as yet, the art of poetry embodied in words. The art in *Psyche* is the pre-art of purposeful, constructive, and scenic or architectural imaginings, not the art of writing; and the entire locus of this art is a mental domain, within the artist's brain, where Fancy, engaging in a perpetual rivalry with nature, remains forever in a competitive (but apparently victorious) relation to an external world.

In brief, in the *Ode to Psyche* Keats defines art as the purposeful imaginative and conceptualizing activity of the artist—entirely internal, fertile, competitive with nature, and successful insofar as it mimics nature, myth, and history with a painstaking spiritual verisimilitude. It is art without artifact. The artist is both worshiper of a divinity and its possessor: the possession is envisaged here in mental, if erotic, terms, terms of invitation and entreaty rather than of domination or mastery.

The shape of the poem pairs the opening tableau of the mythological Cupid and Psyche embowered in the forest with the closing envisaged tableau of the unpartnered Psyche awaiting Cupid in the bower of the artist's brain; and, in the center, it juxtaposes the absent historical cult of Psyche with her imagined mental cult. I believe that the later odes demonstrate how unsatisfactory, on further reflection, Keats found this reduplicative mirror-image conception of art—art as a wholly internalized, mimetic, imaginative activity.

The ode declares, by its words and by its shape, that the creation of art requires the complete replacement of all memory and sense-experience by an entire duplication of the external world within the artist's brain (a process we have seen, in its undirected and simply pastoral sense, in *Indolence*, where the soul, had itself become a lawn of flowers, complete with weather, light, and shade). *Psyche* asserts that by the constructive activity of the mind we can assert a victory, complete and permanent, over loss:<sup>4</sup>



And there shall be for thee all soft delight  
 That shadowy thought can win,  
 A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,  
 To let the warm Love in!

The reparatory plot of the poem—the restoration of the proper cult and bower of Psyche—necessitates its mirror-shape, in which the second imaginative half of the poem reduplicates the first nostalgic portion, the replication in diction being most exact at the center of the poem. Psyche, because a late-born goddess, has, says Keats, no

virgin choir to make delicious moan  
 Upon the midnight hours;  
 No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet  
 From chain-swung censer teeming;  
 No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat  
 Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

Keats will heal, one by one, with exact restitution, each of these lacks:

So let me be thy choir, and make a moan  
 Upon the midnight hours;  
 Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet  
 From swung censer teeming;  
 Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat  
 Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

Yes, I will be thy priest.

This nearly exact repetition (within a relatively short poem) of identical words, the earlier ones describing precise lacks, the later precise reparations, is adapted from Wordsworth's reparatory technique of repetition in his *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*.<sup>5</sup> This strategy, unobtrusive in Wordsworth, is here verbally insisted on by Keats, so that the curative and restorative intent of this structure cannot be overlooked. At "So let me be thy choir," the *Ode to Psyche* folds over upon itself and by repetition of diction intends to heal its wounds of loss.

What is the wound that is being healed? It is, in Keats's view, a wound to poetry itself, inflicted by Christianity. Because Christianity banished the pagan divinities, good and bad alike, the body of poetry inherited from the ancient world was, by Christian poets, mutilated. It was in Milton's Nativity

Ode that Keats found the amplest description of the banishing of the pagan gods, and he borrows his vocabulary for *Psyche* from Milton's equivocal and beautiful account of the effect of the nativity of Jesus on pagan religions. I quote Milton's ode, italicizing Keats's borrowings for *Psyche*:

The *oracles* are dumb,  
 No *voice* or hideous hum  
 Runs thro' the arched *roof* in words deceiving.  
 Apollo from his *shrine*  
 Can no more divine,  
 With hollow shriek the *steep* of Delphos leaving.  
 No *nightly* trance, or breathed spell  
*Inspires* the *pale-eyed priest* from the *prophetic* cell.

The lonely *mountains* o'er  
 And the resounding shore;  
 A *voice of weeping* heard and loud lament;  
 From *haunted* spring, and dale  
 Edg'd with poplar *pale*,  
 The parting genius is with sighing sent;  
 With *flow'r*-inwoven tresses torn  
 The Nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

In consecrated earth,  
 And on the *holy* hearth,  
 The Lars, and lemures *moan* with *midnight* plaint;  
 In urns, and *altars* round,  
 A drear and dying sound  
 Affrights the Flamens at their service quaint ...

Peor and Baälim  
 Forsake their *temples* dim; ...  
 And mooned Ashtaroth,  
 Heav'n's queen and mother both,

Now sits not girl with tapers' *holy* shine.

All of Keats's Miltonic words in *Psyche* are drawn from Milton's banishing of the gentler and more civilized pagan divinities; none is drawn from Milton's subsequent stanzas on the defeat of the more "brutish" gods.<sup>6</sup> It is not to Keats's purpose here to suggest the darker side of the pagan pantheon. For

him, the classical world (even in its latest manifestation, Psyche) represented a repository of truth-giving mythology, and not, as it did for Milton, “error” or “fable.” Therefore Keats’s description of Psyche echoes the superlatives of Spenser’s *Hymn to Heavenly Beauty*:

These thus in faire each other farre excelling,  
As to the Highest they approach more near,  
Yet is that Highest farre beyond all telling,  
Fairer than all the rest which there appear.

Psyche, says Keats (recalling as well Shakespeare’s glow-worm), is the

latest born and loveliest vision far  
Of all Olympus’ faded hierarchy!  
Fairer than Phoebe’s sapphire-region’d star,  
Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;  
Fairer than these.

Keats’s ode, then, is a hymn to pagan heavenly beauty which, in despite of Milton’s ritual banishing, he will restore to sovereignty and will duly worship, thereby replenishing an impoverished poetic world where, imagination lacks proper deities to worship.<sup>7</sup> The goddess who has captured his veneration is Psyche, the soul in love, and the problem the poet sets himself is to find a spell powerful enough to conjure Psyche back into existence.

In one sense, of course, Psyche exists eternally, forever entwined with Cupid, in the realm of mythic forms.<sup>8</sup> Keats must find a liturgical language suitable for her eternal mythical being, and then a language seductive enough to woo her into an allegorical being, within his mind. Everyone has noticed the revelatory change in language which takes place in the poem: the first two stanzas are written, as one critic put it, in “early Keats,” while the last stanza exhibits in part the language of “late Keats.”<sup>9</sup> In this ode, the early language of erotic experience disputes the later language of aesthetic experience, as Psyche is embowered first with her lover Cupid in the forest of myth, but lastly with her poet-priest in his internalized shrine. Cupid and Psyche, though drawn, as Keats said in his letter sending the poem to his brother, from Apuleius, are described in terms Keats had gleaned from Lemprière. Keats’s decision to take up this material at this time, material which he had long known, is explained in part by his evolving notion of the world as a vale of soul-making, unfolded in the same letter as the poem. But Cupid and Psyche remind us too of Love and Poesy in the *Ode on Indolence*,

though they have exchanged sexes, with Love now a masculine Cupid, Poesy a Muse called Psyche. Ambition (which vanishes entirely from the later odes) is here still present in the vow, with something of a boast in it: “Yes, I will be thy priest.” The motives of Love, Poesy, and Ambition are still intertwined, but Keats has decided to modify allegory as, a way of exemplifying them, and has turned to mythology instead—not entirely seriously, as he had in *Endymion*, but in a more playful and self-conscious way: “I am more orthodox than to let a hethen Goddess be so neglected” (*Letters*, II, 106).

Keats’s perplexity on the subject of mythology arose from his severe notion of what it was to tell the truth. Though he had (as *I stood tip-toe* reveals) adopted Wordsworth’s theory in *The Excursion* about the allegorical source of mythology—that it originated from an attempt to adorn natural sights with the charm of story (a narcissus drooping over a pool, the moon alone in the sky)—Keats had expressed, as early as *Sleep and Poetry*, a suspicion that the proper subject of poetry was not only “the realm ... / Of Flora, and old Pan” (101–102; that is, the realm of allegorized natural beauty like that of the narcissus or the moon), but also human life. In the realm of Flora he could read allegorically “a lovely tale of human life” (110), but he would have to bid those joys farewell, in leaving them for “a nobler life, / Where I may find the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts” (123–125). It is not clear to Keats whether he can write about those agonies in mythological terms at all. One of his reproaches of the Augustan poets seems to be their neglect of nature and mythology at once; and yet, when in *Sleep and Poetry* he begins to enumerate his own possible subjects, he does not come to mythology until he enters, in memory, the house of Leigh Hunt, and recalls looking with him at a portfolio including a picture of Bacchus and Ariadne. After that, there follows a confusion of subjects—nature, mythology, past poets, ancient heroes, and modern revolutionaries, not excepting the allegorical figure of “Sleep, quiet with his poppy coronet.” In turning in a “modern” and “worldly” way to the tale of Cupid and Psyche, a topic already the subject for sophisticated, even decadent, interpretation, both in literature and in the fine arts, Keats hoped, we may surmise, to enjoy the benefits of mythology without seeming to engage in a false archaism. His struggle with mythological material was not, as we shall see in the subsequent odes, to be so easily resolved, if only because he connected it so strongly with the pictorial and sensuous representational arts, rather than with thought and truth.

Keats’s first sophisticating of mythology is evident in his assumption that it exists not so much in the pagan past as in an eternal region where, by purifying himself of skeptical modernity of thought (the dull brain that perplexes and retards), he may once again find himself. There is a formal

liturgical beginning to this ode (to which I shall return), but its beginning in narrative time retells Keats's penetration to that eternal region, as, by wandering "thoughtlessly" in a pastoral realm, he comes as spectator upon two winged creatures:

Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;  
 Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,  
 As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,  
 And ready still past kisses to outnumber  
 At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love.

We recognize this couple—this "happy, happy dove" and her "winged boy"—as sentimental adumbrations of the youth and maiden on the Grecian urn, warm in their "more happy love! more happy, happy love!" shaded by their happy, happy boughs which cannot "ever bid the spring adieu." However, by the time Keats writes the *Urn*, though he is still using the *Psyche* language of double happiness and no need to bid adieu, he has recognized that the blissful stasis can only precede consummation, not, as in the more innocent *Psyche*, outlast it. (By "recognize" of course, I mean, "realize in language and structure"—there was no time in which Keats did not recognize these plain truths in life.)

To present erotic desire unlesened by recent consummation, as Keats does here in the figures of Cupid and Psyche, is to imagine an eroticism without any share in the human cycle of desire and satiation. (Mythology thus becomes here the world of heart's desire, which puts into question its capacity as a literary vehicle for the agonies of human hearts.) The symbolic landscape in which Cupid and Psyche lie avoids the passionate and unequilibrated; the flowers are hushed, their roots are cool, they are even cool-colored: "blue, silver-white, and budded syrian" (corrected from the blushing eroticism of "freckle-pink")—though no one knows what Keats intended "syrian" to convey. (His publishers changed it to "Tyrian.") The lovers themselves lie calm-breathing. In short, the divine couple are the pure idealization of an eternal erotic desire for unsated and recurrent sexual experience with the same partner.<sup>10</sup> In this fantasy, love and beauty are served, but truth of human experience is not.

The poet-spectator, having had a vision of the eternal Psyche, decides, against Milton's proscription of pagan gods, to restore her cult, and to that end addresses her liturgically with the words which formally open the ode. He hails her in terms deliberately borrowed from *Lycidas* (as indeed the flower-catalogue of Psyche's forest bower is also partially so borrowed): just as "bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear" compel the uncouth swain, so

Keats's "tuneless numbers" are wrung by "sweet enforcement and remembrance dear," in piety and pity for the banished goddess. Keats's numbers must be "tuneless" (that is, silent, offering no audible tones) because the audible lyre of the ancients has fallen into disuse, but also because his own song will be only a silent inward one, an unheard melody. Keats's only audience, in the internal theater of his working brain, is Psyche herself, the soul, bereft of all other devotees. Keats's pious memory of her existence, and his sense of obligation in re-creating, however late, her cult, explain his "remembrance dear" and "sweet enforcement" to this piety. Yet the echo of *Lycidas* also tells us that this poem is, like its Miltonic predecessor, an elegy for a vanished presence.

The restoration of the forgotten Psyche is the real subject of the poet's endeavor, and two forms of re-creation are attempted in the ode. In the first, which opens the ode, the beloved divinity is represented as existing eternally in a world accessible by dream or vision when the conscious mind is suppressed, a world exterior to the poetic self. Had she been only within, the poet's vision of her could with propriety only be called a dream; but if she were without, he could genuinely affirm that he had seen her with awakened eyes. (Once again, I interrupt to say that I do not mean that Keats, in life, is uncertain whether or not he had had a dream or seen a vision. The diction of dream and waking is for Keats a way of making truth-claims; when he wishes to insist that poetry has something to offer us which is more than fanciful entertainment, he turns, as in his description of Adam's dream, to the metaphor of awakening and finding it truth.) The early rhetorical question in this ode—"Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see / The winged Psyche with awakened eyes?"—is clearly, as I will conclude later, meant to be answered, "With awakened eyes." This, then, is the first restoration, a pastoral, "thoughtless" waking vision; the second is the restoration by consciously inward architectural reduplication, where Psyche will lie not in the forest grass but in the shrine of the working brain. The first restoration requires of the poet a mythological doubling of the self as a visible Cupid; in the second, the poet in his own person becomes the allegorical Love. In the drama of these parallel experiments—the poet in the first so passive, a thoughtless, wandering spectator, in the other so active, a creator with a working brain—lies the interest of the ode, and the proof of its evolution out of *Indolence*. The meaning of divinity changes in the two restorations: in the first, divinity is conceived of as an idealized presence revealed in a past vision; in the second, divinity is conceived of as a presence which the poet must actively invoke, and create a repository for; and the intent of the poem in its latter part is consequently couched in the future tense of hope and will. The earlier part sees revelation as casual and easy:

So did he feel, who pull'd the boughs aside,  
 That we might look into a forest wide,  
 To catch a glimpse of Fauns and Dryades.

That had been Keats's earlier description, in *I stood tip-toe* (151–153), of the poet's activity, in his writing motivated by "the fair paradise of Nature's light" (126). Such a poet, Keats continues, would have been the one who wrote the tale of Cupid and Psyche, writing of them as if they were fauns and dryads, inhabitants of an unallegorized natural paradise, their tale one of charming adventure, happily ended (147–150):

The silver lamp,—the ravishment,—the wonder—  
 The darkness,—loneliness,—the fearful thunder;  
 Their woes gone by, and both to heaven upflown,  
 To bow for gratitude before Jove's throne.

But this facile parting of forest boughs to show us a tale of love lost and won is no longer Keats's idea of art, nor of the use to which it can put mythology. Poetry is no longer entertaining tale-telling, or even seeing; it is active doing, the poet's human work, here seen, however, as a private task rather than as a service to society.

The *Ode to Psyche* intends a wresting away of Psyche from the past, and a seduction of her into the present. Though Keats's first tones to the goddess are those of elegiac religious observance ("O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers"), he ends with wooing:

And there shall be for thee all soft delight  
 That shadowy thought can win,  
 A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,  
 To let the warm Love in!

Though Psyche is originally said to lack a cult and prayers, what she is offered in the last stanza is a landscape and a chamber for love, all in the theater of the mind (which will become eventually Moneta's hollow skull).

The elements of erotic bower and sacred temple, which will fatefully lose their unison in *The Fall of Hyperion*, are still peacefully conjoined in the *Ode to Psyche*. The poet promises a "rosy sanctuary" (an erotic version of the *Urn's* "green altar"), dressed "with the wreathed trellis of a working brain, / With buds, and bells, and stars without a name," in a landscape where "the moss-lain Dryads" sleep: there Psyche will find a fane that will be a bower for her and Cupid. These materials—wreath, trellis, bells, and moss in an

architectural setting—are also found (as Bloom early noted, in *The Visionary Company*, p. 394) in the beautiful “arbour” with its roof and doorway, placed near the opening of *The Fall of Hyperion* (25–29)

I saw an arbour with a drooping roof  
 Of trellis vines, and bells, and larger blooms  
 Like floral-censers swinging light in air;  
 Before its wreathed doorway, on a mound  
 Of moss, was spread a feast of summer fruits.

But on closer view the feast is seen to be over, and the arbor is littered with empty shells and half-bare grape stalks. When the poet consumes some of the remaining feast and drinks a draught of “transparent juice, / Sipp’d by the wander’d bee” (the nectar, we may suppose, of the gods), he sinks into a swoon, mastered by “the domineering potion.” When he awakes, he finds the landscape changed (60–62):

The mossy mound and arbour were no more;  
 I look’d around upon the carved sides  
 Of an old sanctuary with roof august.

In this fairy-tale substitution, the “drooping roof” of the trellised arbor has become the “roof august” of a sanctuary no longer rosy, like that of Psyche, but carved, as the later Keats fully accepts the separation of nature and art. Keats’s symbols in the epic imply his grand theme: that while the first, youthful, perception of the world is erotic, the second, adult, one is sacrificial. As he wrote to Reynolds after completing, so far as we can judge, all the odes but *Autumn*, “I have of late been moulting: not for fresh feathers & wings: they are gone, and in their stead I hope to have a pair of patient sublunary legs” (*Letters*, II, 128). In *Indolence*, Keats had ached, within his chrysalis, for wings; in *Psyche*, both Cupid and Psyche are winged creatures though not yet shown in flight; in *Nightingale*, Keats at last wills to fly, if not on actual wings, then on the viewless wings of Poesy. The erotic dream died only with difficulty; in *Psyche* Keats is still in the realm of wings and arbors, not steps and sanctuaries.

But though in *Psyche* bower and sanctuary are still one, a strain is evident in the fabric of writing. The ode attains its greatest writing not in its description of the rosy sanctuary-bower at the close, but in the slightly earlier description of the landscape surrounding that fane, the landscape of the as yet untrodden region of the mind that lies beyond the Chamber of Maiden Thought. Keats had been in what he called “the infant or



thoughtless Chamber” when the ode began, as he wandered in the forest “thoughtlessly.” When the working brain enters, he is no longer thoughtless: we are, he says, “at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle—within us” into the second Chamber, that of Maiden Thought, and it is there that the working brain operates, as it does through most of *Psyche*, “intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, seeing nothing but pleasant wonders.” That realm is still pastoral, but beyond it lie the “precipices” which show “untrodden green,” as Keats had said in his sonnet to Homer (Bate mentions the analogy in *John Keats*, p. 493): those steeps and cliffs are not barren, but green with a new, if more alpine, verdure. As one breathes in the atmosphere of the Chamber of Maiden Thought, Keats adds, in the famous letter I have been quoting (*Letters*, I, 280–281), that “among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one’s vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing ones nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression—whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken’d and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages.” Keats had written this passage a year before writing the *Ode to Psyche*, and we sense a positive effort, at the close of the ode, to stave off the encroaching dark passages:

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane  
 In some untrodden region of my mind,  
 Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,  
 Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:  
 Far, far around shall those dark-cluster’d trees  
 Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep.

So the passage begins, opening into untrodden heights, and acceding to both the pain and the pleasure of thought as work which *Indolence*, refusing pain’s sting and pleasure’s wreath alike, had forbidden. But, as we recall, the rosy sanctuary finally seems to lie within a cultivated garden, “with buds, and bells, and stars without a name, / With all the gardener Fancy e’er could feign.” It is not, however, the “gardener” Fancy who created the wild-ridged mountains and the dark-clustered trees: they are the creations rather of unconfined imagination, and they represent the sublime, as the garden represents the beautiful. Many parallels in sublimity have been cited for these lines, parallels from Milton and Shakespeare especially, but their effect in the poem—given their Miltonic origins in the setting of Paradise (*Paradise Lost*, IV) and in the mountains and steep of the Nativity Ode—resembles the effect in Wordsworth’s Immortality Ode of corresponding lines:

The cataracts blow their trumpets from the steep;  
 I hear the echoes from the mountains throng;  
 The winds come to me from the fields of sleep.

The winds, the mountains, and the steep form a characteristic Wordsworthian configuration of the sublime. The new dark-clustered thoughts this region will require will, Keats knows, give him pain, even though a pain which, because it calls up new creations, is compounded with pleasure. The new domain seems limitless: “Far, far *around* shall those dark-clustered trees / Fledge the wild-ridged mountains *steep by steep*.” The far-reaching and arduous sublimity of soul here envisaged is not maintained; the poem returns to the delicate, the beautiful, and the sensuous. It is hardly accidental that Keats should appropriate to himself, in a poem about two winged creatures, new pinions of his own by using the word “fledge” of his mountain-thoughts;<sup>11</sup> but the pinions, and the hope of steeps and mountains, show that Keats’s notion of the pursuit of sublimity here flies on eagle wings. The patient sublunary legs are still to come.

The earthly paradise described in the last stanza of the ode is entirely nonseasonal, nonagricultural, and nonbucolic (there are no crops, no flocks); it is a paradise within the working brain. Keats uses the paradisaic index—the “there” or *là-bas* or *dabin* of that “other country”—but he has abandoned the dream of a passively received revelatory vision with which he began. The chance sight of Cupid and Psyche is not one simply recoverable by a glimpse through forest boughs. Yet his new, allegorical, later paradise reduplicates the earlier, mythological one. There are, in the interior world, sleeping Dryads lain on moss, just as the sleeping Cupid and Psyche had been couched in grass; there are dark-clustered trees where there had been a forest; there is a murmur of pines where there had been a whispering roof of leaves, streams where there had been a brooklet, stars to replace Phoebe’s sapphire-regioned star, mental flowers where there had been mythological ones, soft delight where there had been soft-handed slumber, wide quietness where there had been calm breathing, a bright torch to substitute for the aurean light, and a “warm Love” in place of the winged boy. In all of these ways, the internalized closing scene of the poem is a copy, in its imagery, of the opening forest scene, just as the second of the two central Miltonic stanzas of the ode is a copy, in its catalogue of reparation, of the first, with its catalogue of loss. The imperative of reduplication is as clear in the matching of bowers as in the matching of cultic pieties. However, what is missing in the tableau of the last stanza is of course crucial: we miss the figural center of the opening tableau, the “two fair creatures” embracing. “Let me prepare toward thee,” Keats might be saying at the end of the poem, as he lavishes all

his profusion of imagery on the prospective interior world to be inhabited by Psyche. But she is not yet visible there, nor is Cupid: the close of the poem is an entreaty and a promise, as Keats writes the archetypal poem of an absent center.

If the *Ode to Psyche* were simply a restitution of what Milton's Nativity Ode had extirpated from English poetry, it would end with its restitutive fourth stanza of restored cultic practice. Milton's ode is far grander, in poetic success, than Keats's; but even in this novice effort Keats sees that what is life to Milton is death to him. It is not enough to restore Psyche's cult with a twin stanza written in Milton's religious vocabulary; Keats must reinvent Psyche's cult in his own language, the vocabulary of the luxuriant eroticism of his initial vision.<sup>12</sup> Milton's pagan deities, as they are seen in the Nativity Ode, are in no way erotic: even those who might have been are not so presented—Ashtaroth sits alone as heaven's queen and mother, and Thammuz is dead. Psyche's restoration, for Keats, must be not only the restoration of her cult-voice, lute, pipe, incense, shrine, grove, oracle, and prophet—but also the restoration of her atmosphere and presence. Milton's austere language permits itself nostalgia but no more; Keats, as Psyche's worshiper, requires the radiance of present conjuration. The radiant eroticizing of the interior landscape of the mind, as it is decked and adorned and decorated, is Keats's chief intent, as he makes himself a mind seductive to Psyche. When Psyche will have been won, and Love will have entered, the initial tableau will have been reproduced entire—but this last tableau will be a wholly mental one, in which the mind has been furnished by Fancy for the amorous soul, and Love is a welcome guest. Keats's characteristic erotic adjectives—soft, bright, warm, rosy—together with the activity of Fancy, his presiding *genius loci*, engaged in perpetual breeding of flowers, transform the mind from a place conventionally reserved for philosophical thought to a place where all possible thoughts and fancies (conceived after the manner of the poem *Fancy*) are eroticized by the goddess's imagined arrival. Worship, work, and embrace will be one in the mind-garden, in which the more literal Miltonic cult of swinging censers and moaning choir gives way to a new cult of tuneless numbers, in which Psyche's priest becomes himself her lyricist, her bower, and her Cupid.

Nonetheless, in spite of this amorous and sensual redefinition of religion and of the functions of the creative mind, the deepest energies of the *Ode to Psyche* lie in two nonamorous places—in the sublime, uncultivated periphery, lying outside the bower, of new-grown thoughts, and in the bold claim not for amorousness but for independent divining power, outstripping the soft dimness of dreaming: "I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired."<sup>13</sup> These high and solitary sublimities—almost sequestered in this poem of

amorous contact and decorative luxuriance—predict the more solitary Keats of *Urn*, *Autumn*, and *The Fall of Hyperion*. And it must be remembered that the cost of the bower in *Psyche* is the total yielding up of the temporally bound senses for a wholly spiritual world, the consequent singing of numbers that must be tuneless (since they are embodied in no outward melody), and the absence of all audience for this song, except one's own soul. These sacrifices of sense for mind, of melody for tunelessness, and of audience for a putative, though scarcely realized, solipsism, coexist uneasily with Keats's sensually opulent style in the ode, a nonascetic style developed for the happier embraces, both spiritual and physical, of *Endymion*. The tension between the amorous mythological style and the desolate sacrificial implications of *Psyche* will not be solved conceptually until Keats writes the *Ode on Melancholy*, and not solved stylistically until he writes the ode *To Autumn*. But in the internalizing of divinity, Keats has already advanced, conceptually, beyond *Endymion*'s awkward doubling of the Indian Maid and Cynthia and beyond *Indolence*'s three self-projections. The wholly internalized Psyche—one's own soul as interior paramour, as Stevens would call it—is one solution (but by no means a finally satisfactory one for Keats) to the question of the proper representation of divinity in art; and the internalized atemporal and nonagricultural bower is a solution (but again, for Keats, not an eventually satisfying one) to the problem of the modern representation of the locus *amoenus*, or beautiful place.

Keats wished (as he says in his famous journal-letter immediately contemporary with the odes) to sketch this world as a “vale of Soul-making,” “a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity”:

It is pretty generally suspected that the christian scheme has been copied from the ancient Persian and greek Philosophers. Why may they not have made this simple thing even more simple for common apprehension by introducing Mediators and Personages in the same manner as in the hethen mythology abstractions are personified— (*Letters*, II, 103)

Abstractions, Mediators, and Personages are the means of making moral truths “simple for common apprehension.” Keats's own mythological and allegorical personages, whether Psyche or Moneta or Autumn, represent his groping after a method he thought common to all “systems of salvation,” and therefore true in a way beyond fancifulness. If Psyche, a “happy, happy dove,” seems to us understandably insufficient as a personage aiding in salvation, she is nonetheless proof of the immense if circumscribed faith Keats placed, at this time, in the active soul emerged from its chrysalis, in the

strength of love in the soul, and in the imaginative force of the mind in finding constructive forms.

The *Ode to Psyche* was of course inspired at least in part by the presence of Fanny Brawne next door in Wentworth Place, and Keats may not at first have been aware, as his ode took on its final dimensions, of the social, moral, and aesthetic restrictiveness of its wholly internalized, timeless, and tuneless cult. Psyche, his only audience for his tuneless numbers, both is and is not a mythological being, both is and is not an allegorical form. The ode does not solve the equivocal nature of her being, just as it does not solve the relation between beautiful Fancy and truthful Thought—the one concentrated in a small garden-fane full of happy spontaneity of erotic invention, the other mysteriously far-ranging, sublime, and connected with pain as with eagle-aspiration. Cupid and Psyche together make up the actual joint divinity of the poem, and they stand for a unity of being through spiritualized eroticism, for flesh and soul in one couple—at the beginning not quite fused but not quite separate, at the end both invisible in darkness. It is a divinity Keats will forsake: all his subsequent divinities in the odes, as I have said, are unpartnered females—the light-winged Dryad-nightingale, the unravished bride-Urn, veiled Melancholy, and the goddess Autumn.<sup>14</sup> *Psyche's* exact reduplicative pairing of the outside world (whether of myth or of cult) with the inside world (of mind or Fancy) enacts the erotic pairing of the sensual Cupid with the spiritual Psyche celebrated in the matter of the ode. This is Keats's most hopeful ode, and yet his narrowest one. The willed pairing of flesh and soul in a perpetual and immortal embrace, the studied equivalence of the flowery bower of Nature and the architectural bower of Fancy, the total reconstitution of past religion in the present—the perfect “fit” of these competing realities is the dream embodied in the reduplicative shape of the *Ode to Psyche*. In the collapse of Keats's hopes for a spiritual art exactly mimetic of the sensual vision there collapsed as well the erotic joint divinity, the happy coexistence of Fancy with Thought, the notion of art as idyllic verisimilitude, the concept of aesthetic activity as a purely interior working, the valuing of decorative, atemporal Beauty over austere, evolving Truth, and the pure idealization of the immortal soul rescued, by the agency of the poet, from the attrition of time.

*Psyche* originally thought to find its distinctive language in the realm of religion mediated through Milton—as though the clear religion of heaven, as Keats wished to announce it, could borrow its diction from the religions of the past, Christian and pagan alike. Keats's wish, expressed in the letter I have quoted, to find something to substitute for Christianity explains his first notion of a deity's appropriate “numbers” as vows, voiced in piety, and culminating in a sanctuary. He will not cease to struggle for a religious

diction appropriate to his purposes, as *The Fall of Hyperion* testifies. But in mute confrontation with the religious language in *Psyche* there stand two other languages—that of pastoral eroticism and that of pastoral allegory, the first in the opening description of the forest bower, the second in the closing description of the cerebral fane. Each of these is contaminated, so to speak, by traces of the diction of religion; the diction of religion is contaminated, in its turn, by traces of them. The latter case is more quickly made: *Psyche* is a vision, as a devotee might say, of a religious goddess, but she is addressed in the diction of physical love. She is the “loveliest” of visions, “fairer,” in this lover’s comparison, than Venus or Vesper, that “amorous glow-worm of the sky”; her choir is a virgin one making delicious moan (a detail not borrowed from Milton, but inserted by Keats), and her pale-mouthed prophet dreams in a fever of heat. She is brightest or bloomiest, and possessed of “lucent” fans (the adjective later repossessed for Fanny Brawne’s “warm, white, lucent, million-pleasured breast”). The religious, Miltonic edge is softened, warmed, coaxed into pastoral bloom. But that very bloom and heat is itself chilled or chastened by the religious use to which it is to be assimilated, into the formality of “O Goddess” and the austerity of “tuneless numbers.” With the introduction of Psyche’s “soft-conched ear” the earliest lines begin their modulation into sensuality, and yet a restraint put on sexual warmth causes the introduction into the forest embrace of the clear note of the brooklet, the cool note of the roots, and the denial of rosiness to the flowers. The suspension of the lovers’ lips checks the double embrace of arms and pinions (the latter the warmest, and most boyish, imagining in the poem—“Their arms embraced, *and their pinions too,*” a dream of an embrace doubled beyond merely human powers). The “trembled blossoms” and “tender eye-dawn” bear out the fragile and near virginal nature of this aureorean love; Keats is uneasy, given his purportedly religious aims, about the extent of the erotic that he can allow into his devotions.

The governing question of the opening of the ode—“Who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?”—is, strictly speaking, epistemological rather than devotional, and springs, I think, from the opening of *Indolence* (already conceived even if not yet written down): “How is it, shadows, that I knew ye not?” Keats had asked that question in self-reproach, and then had exclaimed, in self-release, after seeing the three figures full-face, “I knew the three.” To know them is also, as Keats admits in wishing to banish them, to know “how change the moons.” In *Psyche*, “the winged boy I knew,” says Keats, but Psyche is at first strange, as the urn-figures in *Indolence* had been; she, like them, is eventually recognized.<sup>15</sup> Keats here raises the question of what he knows when he knows these personages, and though he briefly considers that his glimpse might have been a dream, he decides, as I have

said, that he saw them with awakened eyes: I “saw” two fair creatures, he announces, and later adds, “I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired”; Psyche is the loveliest seen thing, the loveliest “vision.” There is no further mention of dreaming, after Keats’s first wondering question; everything else in the text supports those “awakened eyes” in their seeing. Seeing, and knowing who it is that one sees, and seeing truly, not in dream, is the first condition of Keats’s clear religion, the opened eyes precluding any surrender to the drowsiness Keats strove to maintain in *Indolence*. For all the resemblance between *Indolence* and *Psyche* in what we might call their use of the diction of bedded grass, it is, we must recall, Keats who drowns, in *Indolence*, amid stirring shades and baffled beams, his head cool-bedded in the flowery grass; but in *Psyche* it is the sleeping lovers who lie calm-breathing on the bedded grass, and Keats has become the clear-sighted observer with awakened eyes. Therefore, “not seeled, but with open eyes” (Herbert), Keats sees his own former bower; like Ribh at the tomb of Baile and Aillinn, he has eyes by “solitary prayer / Made aquiline,” which see what they could not have seen when he drowsed in indolence. Keats as yet scarcely realizes whither his newly aquiline gaze will lead. Eventually, as we know, it will disclose to him, behind a parted veil, Moneta’s face. But for the moment Keats yearningly believes that he can, while lifting his own head from the grass, maintain a heavenly couple there in his place. The diction appropriate to their eroticism grows the chaster for his separated gaze, but it preserves enough warmth for knowledge and passion alike to be entertained in the hospitality of the poem.

The curb Keats has put on erotic fever in this passage is clear when we glance back to the passage on Cupid and Psyche in *I stood tip-toe* (143–46):

What Psyche felt, and Love, when their full lips  
 First touch’d; what amorous, and fondling nips  
 They gave each other’s cheeks; with all their sighs,  
 And how they kist each other’s tremulous eyes.

The balance of warm and cool is, in the ode, delicately kept in all the “stationing” of the first long stanza—the couple, though side by side, are nonetheless calm; embraced, they are disjoined; not bidding adieu, they are nevertheless not touching; they lie ready for a dawn that has not yet broken. The imagery of erotic pastoral is cooled not only by Keats’s detached seeing and knowing but also by his deliberately “tuneless” singing.

Keats’s diction for the embracing couple here is far more secure than his diction with respect to himself. Though he begins in high seriousness, the Byronic irony fitfully evident in *Indolence* has its say here too, though shrunk to the brief double condescending to the “fond believing lyre” and

to “these days so far retir’d / From happy pieties.” This tone, never a successful one in Keats, marks an instability in his enterprise, and a doubt of the very possibility of ode-writing. How believing is his own lyre in this hymn; how remote can he be, in truth, from his own skeptical epoch? The irony in his joking tone about the neglected goddess in the letter to George does not survive very well its translation into verse. And of all the language in the poem, the language of religious cult, borrowed from Milton, is most derivative, and least Keatsian.

The last diction invented in the poem is the diction for Psyche’s fane. It is at once the best and the feeblest in the poem, showing, as I have said earlier, the strain under which Keats is working. The feebleness is seen in two places: in the random enumerative arabesque of “zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees, / ... buds, and bells, and stars without a name,”<sup>16</sup> and in the unselective amassing of Keatsian erotic words—rosy, soft, delight, bright, warm. But the diction of Psyche’s fane also possesses a strength; the fane is Keats’s first portrait of himself as artificer, as he becomes for the first time not the youth in love, the ambitious man, or even the votary of the demon Poesy (as he was in *Indolence*) but a maker of an object, here the goddess’s sanctuary. Emerged from his embryonic indolence, Keats is born into work; but his indecision about a proper diction for creativity disturbs him here. The diction of “the gardener Fancy” is still the diction of pastoral eroticism, that of “breeding”; and it issues (as in *Fancy*) in buds and flowerlike “stars” and “bells.” These Spenserian breedings take place in the realm of the Dryads, amid moss and streams and birds and bees, where lulling sleep is (as it was in *Indolence*) the governing mode of being. In conflict with this soft, mythic pastoral is the Shakespearean and Miltonic strenuousness of the fane’s mountain landscape; and yet the sublime landscape is itself vegetative, “grown” from that pain and pleasure which, though two separate things when refused in *Indolence*, grow to one paradoxical single thing, “pleasant pain,” when admitted to the precincts of mind. The phrase is of course a blemish on the poem; but like so many of Keats’s blemishes it stands for an intellectual insight for which he has not yet found the proper style in poetic language. Keats, at this moment, can only note, baldly, that pleasure and pain have some intimate connection; the answerable style for painful pleasure and pleasant pain is yet to be found.

The diction of the fane is, as I have said, allegorical, as the original diction of Psyche’s bower is not (being mythological, and narrative). Keats had thought of following the line “Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same” with the line “So bower’d Goddess will I worship thee,” but he deleted it, realizing that his goddess was no longer in a bower but in a fane, that bower language is not fane language, that nature is not architectural



artifact. Catching himself up short, he put in the open casement, that casement which in *Indolence* had so meltingly brought the man-made and the natural into conjunction, as “the open casement press’d a new-leaved vine.” Here, the open casement will serve, so the poem hopes, to admit warm Love, the human form divine, instead of the natural bloom. But the landscape has perceptibly, in the thought-burdened allegorical moment, darkened from the erotic one presented mythologically; the new forest region, unlike the original one, is unknown, as yet untrodden; there are branches rather than buds or blossoms; they cluster darkly; mountains loom, wild-ridged; instead of feathery pinions there is a sterner fledge of trees; zephyrs are replaced by wind. The darkness persists into the indeterminacy of “shadowy thought” at the end, as Keats undertakes at one and the same time the burden of allegorical writing and the architectural objectification of self in artifact, an artifact which remains as yet internalized in thought, but which has been effectively freed of its creator and endowed with architectural presence and topographical depth.

The *Ode to a Nightingale*, which we next approach, marks a fresh approach to all the questions raised by the odes preceding it. In it Keats takes a step beyond the creative reverie of *Indolence*, beyond even the first creative interior constructions of mental Fancy in *Psyche*, and envisages the artist’s necessary embrace of a medium—in this case music, the art of Apollo. He thus takes up, in choosing music, the idea of an art which of its nature precludes mimesis and verisimilitude, an abstract art appealing only to the sensation of the ear, an art devoted, perforce, to a beauty to which truth is irrelevant. He will, pursuing his symbol of the artist as musician, adopt a more ironic view of aesthetic experience, one in which a remote composer-singer, indifferent to and unconscious of any audience, pours forth a song to a listener who is physically so passive, being pure ear, as almost to approach the condition of insentience. In *Nightingale* the immortal world of art, far from being an exact reduplication of the world of life, as in *Psyche*, is in fact in all ways its opposite. In *Psyche*, the embracing sculptural frieze-figures are no longer allegories of the poet’s desire for ambition, love, and poesy, but rather have taken on a separate, objectified existence of their own. This existence lapses somewhat at the end, where the poet seems to prepare to become Cupid, but *Psyche* retains her independence. As a pagan goddess, she preexisted her poet, and does not depend on him for her essence, as the Love, Ambition, and Poesy of *Indolence* do. Keats’s attraction toward a presence less contingent than his own selfhood dictates several of his other objects of worship—a bird, an urn, a season. In the later odes, after *Psyche*, he goes beyond an interest only in the psychology of inner reparatory creation into an interest in artifact, medium, audience, and the intrinsic will-to-

annihilation in art itself. But in one aspect, *Nightingale* represents a regression from *Psyche*. Though the composer-singer-bird is not “indolent,” neither does she have a “working” brain; her art is one of happy spontaneity, coming as naturally as leaves to a tree. Keats still hopes that art need not be “work” intellectually planned. But the working brain will not be absent forever; art as work reappears with the *Urn*.

## NOTES

1. [Stillinger’s notes.] Text (including heading) from 1820. Variants and other readings from Keats’s draft (*D*), his letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 February–3 May 1819 (*L*), and transcripts by Brown (*CB*) and Woodhouse (*W*<sup>2</sup>). *Heading* Ode to] Ode To (Ode *added afterward*) *D* 4 into] <to> into *L* 5 dreamt] dreamt *altered* to dream’d *W*<sup>2</sup> 6 awaken’d] awaked *L* 9 couched] <cl> couched *L* 10 roof] fan *D, L, W*<sup>2</sup>, and *originally* *CB*; fan *altered* to roof by Keats in *CB* 13 ‘Mid] *interlined above* <In> *D*; Near *W*<sup>2</sup> 14 silver-white] freckle pink *in the margin* (but silver-white *undeleted in the text*) in *D*; freckle-pink *L*; freckled, pink *W*<sup>2</sup> 14 Tyrian] syrian *D, L, CB, W*<sup>2</sup> 15 calm] soft *CB* 17 bade] bid *D, L, W*<sup>2</sup> 20 eye] <dawning> eye *D* 22 O happy] O <p> happy *L* 23 true!] ~ ? *L* 24 latest] lastest *L* 26 Phoebe’s] *successively* (a) Night’s <wide> full, (b) Night’s orb’d (c) Phoebe’s *D* 28 hast] hadst *L* 30 delicious] melodious *D, CB, W*<sup>2</sup> 32–34 No *and* no] No <r> *and* no <r> *in all eight places in D* 36 brightest] Bloomiest *D, L, CB, W*<sup>2</sup> 42 among] *interlined above* <above> *D* 43 by my] by (*corrected by Keats to by my*) *CB* 43 own] *interlined above* <clear> *D* 44 So] O *D, L, CB, W*<sup>2</sup> 45/46 <Thy Altar heap’d with flowers,> (*written vertically in the margin with a mark for insertion after 45, the line and the mark then deleted*) *D* 47 From] *interlined above* <Thy> *D* 57 lull’d] *interlined above* <charm> *L* 57 to sleep] asleep *altered* to to sleep *CB* 62 feign] *interlined above* <frame> *L* 63 breeding ... breed] *successively* (a) plucks a thousand flower and never plucks (b) plucking flowers will never pluck (c) breeding flowers will <never> breed pluck (never *deleted by mistake instead of pluck in the third version*) *D* 63/64 < So bower’d Goddess will I worship thee> *D* 67 the ... Love] warm Love glide *altered* to the warm Love *D*; Love *W*<sup>2</sup>.

2. Psyche is “restored,” not “resurrected”: she was forgotten, not dead; The opening tableau shows she is ever immortal. She is not a “dying immortal” or “immortal but also fading,” as Leon Waldoff would have it (“The Theme of Mutability in the ‘Ode to Psyche,’” *PMLA* [1977], 412). Psyche is, as Keats said, “neglected.” On the other hand, Waldoff’s psychoanalytic reading of the ode as a “rescue fantasy” (p. 410), a “defense against irrevocable loss” (p. 415), and, finally, an “adaptation” (p. 417) are intelligent insights into the ode as a psychological document. His concluding emphasis on will and resolution is far truer to the poem than readings which emphasize only irony or an empty center. The long and sometimes fanciful discussion of the ode by Homer Brown (*Diacriticals* 6 [1976], 49–56) considers, following Harold Bloom in the *Map of Misreading* (p. 153), that “Milton’s Satan as the artist of deceit at Eve’s ear becomes the ‘gardener Fancy’ and the speaker of Keats’s Ode” (p. 54). Brown urges too strongly that “the mortality of all the gods, including art, including the Psyche of this Ode, the mortality of all cultures” is Keats’s concern (p. 56). But the poem is a restoration poem (however qualified). It is a poem about substitution, as Brown says, but *not* about endless substitution around and over a Derridean absence: such is not its tone. Leslie Brisman argues (“Keats, Milton, and What One May ‘Very Naturally Suppose’”) that Keats is engaging in the creation of a

“countermyth” against the decay of nature, a countermyth asserting that “inspiration [is] renewed as faithfully as are plants and seasons” (p. 4). (See *Milton and the Romantics* 6 [1975], 4–7.)

3. I am not unaware by how much the poem falls short of its claim of restitution, nor of the ironies (discussed most recently by Sperry and Fry) that it encounters on its way to the final fane. But these difficulties in the path—culminating in the vacancy of the final tableau—do not defeat the passionate tone of the poem. Bloom, not insensitive to the ironies, yet speaks of the poem’s “rhapsodical climax,” and sees the open casement emphasizing “the openness of the imagination toward the heart’s affections” (*Visionary Company*, pp. 395, 397). It should not be forgotten that for Keats, especially in his moments of prizing verisimilitude, it was important to speak the truth about his life; one of the truths behind the *Ode to Psyche* was that he was not yet embowered with Fanny Brawne. That he still hoped and longed for her is evident from the final entreaty, and it goes counter to the current of the poem to prize its uncertainties over its hopes, still ardent and as yet undefeated.

4. Commentators have expended a good deal of effort on making an allegorical identification of Psyche. She is “the soul of human love” (G. Wilson Knight, *The Starlit Dome*, p. 302); the mind rescued by Love (Bate, *John Keats*, p. 490); the visionary imagination (Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence*, p. 222 ff.); the human-soul-in-love (Bloom, *The Visionary Company*, p. 390); “the simple consciousness of Being” (Fry, *The Poet’s Calling in the English Ode*, p. 226); “the goddess of the poetic soul, the Muse” (Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, p. 254); the “moth-goddess, who symbolized melancholic love” (Garrod, *Keats*, pp. 98–99); “the intelligent ‘Spark’ struggling to become a soul ... a love-goddess with an understanding of troubled human experience ... a personification of human nature subjected to an inevitable and cruel process of growing up and growing old” (Allott, “The ‘Ode to Psyche,’” in Muir, *John Keats*, pp. 84, 86); “Love itself, the poetic-butterfly-moth idea” (Jones, *John Keats’s Dream of Truth*, p. 206); and so on. Probably some such identification is necessary if one is to write about the poem at all; but surely the point to be made is that Keats is engaged in one of his recurrent recoils against emblematic allegory; such recoils always took him in the direction of mythology. Mythology was suggestive, emblematic allegory bald. Mythology, capable of motion, hovered; emblematic allegory was frozen in a single gesture. Mythology derived from narrative and came bearing, even if lightly, the aura of its narrative around it; allegory, originating in conceptualization, had no richness of story about it. The fluidity of concept associated here with Psyche comes precisely from her mythological origins; the ode marks Keats’s resistance to the “fair Maid, and Love her name” sort of writing, to which he had resorted in *Indolence*.

5. I discuss this art of wounds and cures at length in “Lionel Trilling and the Immortality Ode,” *Salmagundi* 41 (1978), 66–86.

6. Though critics mention the derivation of this passage from Milton, they have failed to see that Keats draws only on the passage about the more acceptable pagan gods, and they have not seen Keats’s anti-Miltonic aim—to put the gods back into English poetry, when Milton had banished them as unfit and false subjects for the Christian poet.

7. Allott (p. 87) and Sperry after her (p. 254) mention that Keats recalls the banning of pagan gods in Milton, but they do not see that Keats saw the ban as a *loss to poetry*, or that he is defying Miltonic truth-categories. Douglas Bush’s assumption that Keats adopted echoes from Milton “simply because they fitted his idea of providing [Psyche] with proper rites” seems to take too lightly Keats’s indignation that anyone should think it

possible to do without “the beautiful mythology of Greece.” See “The Milton of Keats and Arnold,” *Milton Studies* 11 (1978), 103.

8. She in fact is the only one of the “faded Olympians” not to have declined; she is still properly addressed as “brightest.” It therefore seems no part of Keats’s intent to show her as careworn and acquainted with grief, as Allott would have it (Muir, pp. 84, 86).

9. I owe this formulation to Professor Patrick Keane of Le Moyne College.

10. I cannot therefore share Fry’s conviction that the couple represent “the bisexual and at least partly daylight scene of creation that chaster poets, notably Collins, had tried to represent euphemistically” (*The Poet’s Calling*, p. 223). Nothing is being “created” by Cupid and Psyche, whether in the myth or in Keats’s poem; they are figures for sexuality, but not for procreation. (Keats’s departure from *Comus*, where Milton envisages twins born from the union of Cupid and Psyche, is explicit.) Nor can the forest scene be legitimately called a “primal scene” (Fry, p. 225) if those words are to carry the shock and dismay which Freud predicated in the mind of the child witnessing such a scene. Keats does not stand to his scene as a child witnessing a parental act; the scene is a projection of his own desire, and he cannot therefore be said to be, as Fry says he is, following Bloom, “the poet as voyeur” (p. 225). If Fry means that Cupid and Psyche are to be taken as figures drawn from Adam and Eve, then there is no reason to call the scene “bisexual,” at least not in the usual sense of that word.

11. He speaks of his “half-fledged brain” in a letter of July 1819 (*Letters*, II, 130).

12. The chiasmic structural pattern of bower-cult-cult-bower (what I have called the mirror-image shape of the ode) seems to me clear enough to bring into question Fry’s notion that the shape of the ode is one of “rondure”—“The whole poem is the shrine, couched and soft-couched. It is a shell, rounded as the mind” (*The Poet’s Calling*, p. 227).

13. Homer Brown notes the defiance of Milton (“blind and blindly superstitious”) in these lines. But he thinks of Psyche as too exclusively one with Keats, contrasting Keats’s ode to the traditional ode “of worship to an otherness.” Keats is not writing a hymn to himself; Psyche is, not least, Fanny Brawne. See Brown, “Creations and Destroyings: Keats’s Protestant Hymn, The ‘Ode to Psyche,’” *Diacritics* 6 (1976), 49–56.

14. Leon Waldoff, also making the point that Keats’s divinities are female (in a paper delivered at the MLA, 1980, and entitled “Processes of Imagination and Growth in Keats’s Odes”), argues psychoanalytically that all are attempts at the (impossible) restoring of a maternal image.

15. Lawrence Kramer in “The Return of the Gods: Keats to Rilke,” *Studies in Romanticism* 17 (Fall 1978), 483–500, places the ode into a tradition of the theophanic poem, “the genre in which the return of the gods takes place” (p. 484), and writes very interestingly on “the riddle ritual” (p. 494) of the naming of Psyche, and the subsequent withholding of her name.

16. Sperry voices the same criticism (p. 259); but he is wrong in saying (p. 257) that the “buds ... burst into thought ‘with pleasant pain.’” They do not—only thoughts, in the form of trees on the steep, do. Fancy is not painful; thought is. Keats allows in his earthly paradise in this poem only flowers, not fruits, thus restricting his gardener to the single season of spring.



JEFFREY BAKER

*Nightingale and Melancholy*

Keats' love narratives were concerned principally with subjective judgement and the special difficulty the mind experiences, when stimulated by so powerful an emotion as sexual desire, of distinguishing between object and image. *Hyperion* and *The Fall* were meant to be even more subjective, for they were supposed to be, in narrative guise, examinations of the sensibility of a great poet, conducted, almost certainly, in the hope of finding that Keats' own sensibility corresponded sufficiently to the Apollonian ideal to justify the hazardous career for which he had abandoned Apollo's other demesne, medicine. In this sense even the early version of *Hyperion* was to have been Keats' *Prelude* rather than his *Paradise Lost*; and in both versions we may detect an aspect of the truly egotistical sublime. In both versions, however, we also see Keats being lured out of his private concern into an examination of the great common concerns of humankind—the pathetic dualism of the aspirations and limitations of human nature, and the universal hunger for the perception of some principle whereby the great human and natural paradoxes might be resolved.

The four greatest odes, which I am now going to consider, represent a return to private and subjective matters; but now, although there remains a substantial concern with the problem of perception, the most painful difficulty is what to make of reality rather than how to recognise it. The need

---

From *John Keats and Symbolism*. © 1986 by The Harvester Press.

to grasp some 'lore of good and ill' has been made bitterly sharp by personal grief, frustration, and fear. Consequently the symbolism by which these themes are expressed becomes astonishingly complex and oxymoronic. The imagery and diction of the odes is pervasively antithetical, and the richness of the poetry so engendered is perhaps the finest product of Keats' own negative capability. For the odes express an aporetic rather than a tragic vision of life, and they constitute something which may be unique in the greatest literature—the achievement of a highly ordered, controlled and sophisticated art springing from radical bewilderment.

For purposes of discussion I have chosen to group the odes in pairs. I take *Nightingale* and *Melancholy* together because although they differ greatly from each other in total effect, they have certain important aspects in common. Both are impassioned, reflecting personal anguish; both insist on the supreme value of unclouded consciousness. The *Grecian Urn* and *Autumn* are meditative rather than impassioned; both operate by means of symbolic picture-making, yet depend for their most important effects on modulation of tone; both form ironic commentaries on certain cherished doctrines of contemporary humanism. The element which all four odes have in common is implicit debate.

That the *Ode to a Nightingale* is a form of meditative disputation is by no means a new perception, and the poem has been most aptly described by Jackson Bate as a 'form of lyric debate that moves actively towards drama'.<sup>1</sup> I believe, however, that the ode has not yet been fully examined from this point of view, partly because the very concept of debate is apt to misdirect a reader's attention. One is tempted to suppose a single issue to be argued, a 'motion' in the Oxford Union sense. The proposer and the opposer become a pair of abstract adversaries; thus Allen Tate described the central problem of the ode as the 'antinomy of the ideal and the real'.<sup>2</sup> The consequences of this conception, which is now widely accepted, are distressing.

Take, for example, Jack Stillinger's view of the structure of the poem. As I mentioned earlier, he offers us a 'blackboard diagram', consisting of a horizontal line 'separating the actual world (below) and the ideal (above)', and the progress of the poem's supposed thought is represented by a broken line starting somewhere below the solid line at a point A, and proceeding to a point B somewhere above it. From point B the broken line returns at a rather obtuse angle to point A1, about the same depth below the solid line as point A, but much further to the right. Stillinger assures us that the poet could not have gone directly from A to A1. From this point on Stillinger becomes, I believe, oversimplistic. 'The two realms,' he tells us, 'have many common labels: earth and heaven, mortality and immortality, time and eternity, materiality and spirituality, the known and the unknown, the finite

and the infinite, realism and romance, and so on.<sup>3</sup> Stillinger seems to propose that since all the first terms in these pairs undoubtedly belong to the actual, all the second terms must be consignable to the unreal, hence they must all be of the same nature and status, and of equal value. Scientists and mathematicians may not, I think, agree that 'the unknown' belongs to the same realm as 'romance', and astronomers might be chary of setting finite limits to the actual.

One suspects that Stillinger's sorting of conceptions into ideal and real is much too tidy. A more important objection to his scheme concerns that very horizontal line itself. To suppose that such a line can be drawn is to ignore that central problem of human subjectivity that so painfully engaged Keats' attention in his love narratives, particularly *Lamia*. It ignores too the question of the status of the products of human subjectivity—the things which Keats calls 'semi-real', and Karl Popper assigns to his 'World Three'.<sup>4</sup> Also, it ignores, of course, centuries of epistemological striving. In the *Ode to a Nightingale* Keats' conception of the two worlds, and the relations between them, is much more complicated and much less assured than Stillinger's, and there is one point in the ode where the poet speculates that a line such as the 'blackboard diagram' postulates does not in fact exist, that materiality and spirituality may be neither separable nor discontinuous. As Bate has said, the poem is: 'no simple dialogue of the divided heart with itself between two choices.'<sup>5</sup>

Another danger in the notion of debate is the assumption that, a motion having been argued, a result must be declared. Richard Harter Fogle has said: 'In the *Nightingale* Keats is ... affirming the value of the ideal, and this is the primary fact.'<sup>6</sup> Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren on the other hand see the knowledge of mortality overshadowing the whole ode: 'The word "buried" conveys, in this context, (lines 77–8) a view of death very different from that conjured up by "embalmed darkness" in the fifth stanza.'<sup>7</sup> This itch to find a decision in the poem is perhaps connected with an itch to place the poet in a school of thought—'we have learned,' says Stillinger, '[to see] Keats primarily as a humanist.'<sup>8</sup>

My own view is that what is achieved in great poetry is much more interesting than decision-making; consequently I shall deny myself the satisfaction of philosophic labelling. In reading the *Ode to a Nightingale* I shall try neither to extrapolate a statement, nor to recruit Keats into an ideological camp. Nor is it my intention to trace a line of argument, for as Bate has said, this ode, together with the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, is the 'most striking single precedent ... for the modern poetic development of symbolic debate' (my italics).<sup>9</sup> David Perkins has identified the singular vitality of Keats' symbols: 'With Shelley, for example, symbolism provides a way of translating the



abstract into the concrete. His attitudes are already formed ... But with Keats a poem is more likely to be a dynamic process of cognition carried on by means of a symbol.<sup>10</sup>

Although I cite this as a most valuable comment, I have two reservations. First, Perkins seems to suggest that there is a single, dominant symbol in such a poem as the *Nightingale*. I believe that there are several symbols implicit in the poem, and that these interact with each other, as well as with the controlling one. Secondly, I believe that there is also a dynamic process going on somewhat below the level of cognition, and I hope to identify such activity in the course of this discussion. My object is to illustrate, by showing the complexity of the interrelationships of the symbols and of the imagery and diction Keats uses, the truth of Bate's further comment: '... the Odes are analogous to experience as a whole. We therefore continue to return to them as we could not if they betrayed experience by oversimplifying it.'<sup>11</sup>

How far the *Ode to a Nightingale* is from such simplification we can gauge from the fact that it is full of opposites and alternatives, and it raises an extraordinary number of questions to which only tentative answers may be possible. There is no single, formally stated question to be discussed, as Tate, Stillinger and others seem to imply, but a number of interrelated ones. 'Is human consciousness immortal?' seems to be the dominating question, but there is a moment in the poem where the prospect of annihilation seems so restful that the matter of immortality becomes secondary to the question whether or not life is worth enduring.

Other questions in their turn become primary. Is consciousness itself so valuable that either its extinction by death, or its reduction by drugs, wine, or mere comforting fancy, must be resisted to the very end? Is the traditional hope of immortality, argued by Socrates and affirmed by the Bible, a matter of revelation, or merely another offering of wistful daydreams? All these questions, shifting and interchanging as they do, contribute to the fullness of the poem's meaning. But what makes the ode great is the fact that the problems are all debated subterraneously, in conflicting implications of the imagery, the nuances of diction and phrasing, and even in the rhythm of punctuation.

One does not expect a logical sequence in a debate so conducted; nevertheless the poem has an inner shape, a construction based on two pairs of opposed symbols, their relationship to each other, and to the controlling symbol of the bird's voice. First, and very obviously, we have two different worlds, represented by the substance of stanzas two, three, and five. Secondly, we have two kinds of burial, one represented by lines 11–14, the other by lines 59, 60, 62. The first six stanzas of the ode are an intense,

painful meditation on these opposites, tending steadily, in spite of momentary springs of vitality and joy, toward despair. But when despair itself seems to have been reached in the last lines of stanza six, the mood is obliterated by the astounding declarations of the first two lines of stanza seven. Nor does this confidence fade immediately; it is maintained through the next five lines, collapsing only in the last three lines of the stanza. But it would be wrong to suppose that the rest of the poem consists only in a return to the terms and feeling of the earlier debate. The uncertainty expressed in the final stanza is, because of what happens in stanza seven, of a very different quality from the wistful scepticism of the rest of the ode. Let us now try to follow the whole of this disputation as closely as we can.

The first major subject is introduced obliquely, and to understand the allusion fully we need to note that the statements in the first two lines of the poem are distinguished from each other. The painful numbness of the senses does not extend to Keats' heart (the fact that Keats is here using 'heart' figuratively does not, in this context, vitiate its allusive function). When we remember the physical details of Socrates' death, 'hemlock' becomes very specific in its implications. Keats is imagining his own early death to be a very immediate prospect indeed ('... when [the numbness] reached the heart Socrates would be gone').<sup>12</sup> We should remember how Socrates spent his last hours before accepting the executioner's cup, and it is a reasonable speculation that as he lay under the blanket, waiting for advancing coldness, his mind was once more engaged in an urgent rehearsal of the arguments for the immortality of the soul. But Keats may have flinched from quite such immediate apprehension of death, hence, perhaps, he provides a substitute for hemlock. The sense of ebbing consciousness becomes narcotically Lethean, not Stygian.

At this point Keats introduces another theme, associated with the theme of death. He shrinks from the hemlock which he suspects nature will soon force upon him, but he appears to choose opiate eagerly, emptying the alternative cup 'to the drains'. Hemlock would finally extinguish consciousness, laudanum would merely suspend it, or reduce it to dream consciousness—a welcome reduction in the face of heartbreak, pain and fear. The rest of the stanza implies, however, that Keats shrinks from the alternative too. The phrases 'happy lot', 'too happy in thine happiness', 'light-winged Dryad', 'melodious plot', 'beechen green', and 'Singing of summer in full-throated ease' strike such surprising notes of joy that they constitute a rebellion against the mortifying numbness offered by either chalice, and the heartache is transmuted by having its source in happiness. There is a curious shuttling of emotional states here; Keats' heart aches, line six implies, because the supreme happiness must end, but the fact of the

inescapable end reveals and glorifies the happiness. Keats is surprised by joy not because he has found it at the heart of pain, but because he has found mortality to be a catalyst of happiness.

A third subject implicitly introduced in the last four lines of this stanza concerns the nature of the nightingale itself, and this problem may be associated with the doubt about whether the reader is to suppose himself experiencing the poem in darkness or daylight. In stanza four Keats speaks of moon and stars, in stanza six of midnight, and in stanza seven of 'this passing night', but the first stanza speaks of 'beechen green and shadows numberless'. The possible explanation that darkness falls during the progress of the poem is scarcely satisfactory, for there are no transitional images, no dusk or lingering sunset.<sup>13</sup> The matter may, of course, be merely a solecism, but it may be functional. Just possibly Keats is suggesting that amid the surrounding darkness the bird brings an idealising brilliance of its own to its immediate neighbourhood. Also just possibly Keats had this purpose in mind when he rejected an earlier version's 'small winged Dryad' for the final 'light-winged Dryad', suggesting the symbolic nature of the nightingale not merely by the classical allusion, but also by a deft and unassertive pun. Again if the bird is such a creature as this suggests, what is its song, and what is the summer which it celebrates 'with full-throated ease?'

One of the many remarkable features of stanza two is the oddity of its conclusion. The first eight lines constitute a paean not merely to wine, but to music, dance, laughter and joyous exuberance. We glimpse a festival that is the finale of an ideal summer, the summer, perhaps, of which the bird sings:

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been  
 Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
 Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
 Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!  
 O for a beaker full of the warm South,  
 Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,  
 With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
 And purple-stained mouth;

There is a sense in which this is an ideal world, but it is not a dream world; its pulse beats too powerfully for that. One can scarcely imagine therefore, a more inappropriate preliminary to the wish that completes the sentence:

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
 And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Not merely the wish itself is inappropriate—who would turn away from the world Keats is describing?—but the means for leaving the world, as they have just been specified, are equally inappropriate. The long-cooled vintage tastes of summer warmth and peasant energy, and the ‘blushful Hippocrene’ inspires more intense consciousness. Nothing here suggests ebbing vitality, drugged sensibility, Lethan despair. A further oddity resides in the phrase ‘leave the world unseen’. It is ambiguous, but the apparently primary meaning, that Keats wishes to slip away unnoticed, has little point. The apparently secondary meaning, that he wishes to leave the world without looking at it, is more dramatically effective. For Keats has already looked at the world and seen its marvellous gusto: ‘Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth,’ and he has looked with eyes capable of the sharpest focus: ‘With beaded bubbles winking at the brim, / And purple stained mouth.’ Yet, mysteriously it first seems, the reader does not protest against this inappropriateness—in fact most readers are unaware of it. I suggest we accept the paradox easily because we already know that a debate is under way about whether or not the gift of life is worth accepting. At the end of stanza two, Keats’ momentary position is that the gift is not worth having, consciousness not to be endured, even though he knows the glories of life. The grape harvest is real, but it is only half, or less than half, of a real world.<sup>14</sup> The world which Keats wishes to leave unseen will follow in stanza three.

There is, however, another and perhaps more important debate initiated in stanza two: what is the nature of death? Many people are rightly suspicious of the business of digging up deeply fundamental universal images and expatiating on their tentacular ramifications, but one may safely recognise wine as an archetype. It is, moreover, an obviously religious archetype, dating back beyond the first miracle and the eucharist to the priesthood of Melchizedek. But I suggest that for a poet the greatest symbolic power of wine lies not in its Biblical associations, but in the nature of its own life-cycle:

Cool’d a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!

It is scarcely necessary to explicate the suggestions of burial, resurrection and glorified life, or the suggestive paradox of warmth deriving from age-long coolness, vitality from deep stillness. It is necessary though, to remember that such suggestions operate not in the context of faith, but of debate. Meanwhile, the shape of the poem is being established. This is the first of our two kinds of burial.

The second stanza's vision of sunburnt joy, which I have called half, or less than half, of a real world, receives its complement in stanza three. The nightingale has never known 'The weariness, the fever, and the fret / *Here*,' (the comma insists on a rhythmic emphasis). But when we examine the dying world that Keats locates 'Here' we cannot shake off the living festival world of stanza two, for the memory of its vitality intensifies the deadness of stanza three. There life was celebrated, 'Here' it is 'undergone'. Even the expression of pain is presented passively: 'men sit and hear each other groan.' The only transitive verb is attributed to a physiological condition, not an agent: 'palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,' and verbs active in form nonetheless denote something merely happening to their subjects: 'youth grows pale ... and dies,' 'Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them.' The last verb carries only the slightest trace of wilful effort. What gives this stanza its particularly tragic tone is not the physical dying, but the spiritual deadness it renders, the lack of transitivity in what is merely happening. The argument between stanza two and stanza three is not only between a world without snags and a world full of them, it is an argument between active and passive, response and deadness, energy and despair. This argument is conducted not merely in diction and imagery, but rhythmically. In stanza two note the trochaic fling with which the pulsating iambs begin:

Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!

In stanza three the verse moves through weighted, long-vowelled spondees to an expiring breath:

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies.

The milieu that Keats calls 'here' may indeed be more than half a world, but it is not a whole world. In the common reality which is 'Here' for all of us, palsied despair may indeed be more widespread than sunburnt mirth, but when we have tough-mindedly acknowledged this fact, we still know that from time to time men and women abandon themselves to dance and song. Keats, I believe, held such a balanced view, in spite of his own desperate misery; and struggled to maintain such a genuinely realistic balance throughout the ode. For this reason, for this invincible grasping for fullness

of living, F.R. Leavis distinguishes him from his decadent imitators.<sup>15</sup> Even at the end of stanza three we see this grasping for life beginning again. The mere presence of beauty, youth and love is in itself a positive force against what is present in the earlier part of the stanza. More powerful is the manner in which 'lustrous eyes' more than counterbalances 'leaden-eyed despairs', and more powerful still is the energy generated within the double-meaning of 'lustrous'.

The life of sunburnt mirth is too virile too be kept down, and has erupted into the deathly half-world of 'Here'. When we notice this, we realise that we are dealing with one world, the world we live in, where the extreme positives and negatives that have been expressed in these stanzas interpenetrate each other, and blend with much that is drab and neutral. Keats has disentangled and intensified these extremes in order to question more dramatically whether the life he dreads to lose is worth the keeping. But together the elements of stanzas two and three, whose common characteristic is reality, constitute one world, and it is our world. It is also the first of the two opposed worlds I spoke of earlier. The other is an imitation world, and Keats is about to construct it.

The expressions used to convey the wish to escape at the end of stanza two and the beginning of stanza four are worth comparing:

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:  
Away! away! for I will fly to thee.

In the first case we have a stretched diminuendo that suggests an effete pleasure in the sensation of failing consciousness. In the second we have abrupt energy (the vital strength we felt returning in the last lines of stanza three has broken through here), and an appearance of decisiveness. The energy, however, is quickly dissipated by the effect of certain intriguing false notes and ambiguities. The associations of 'Bacchus and his pards' are substantially different from those of the imagery of stanza two. Keats' mental savouring of the stored vitality of the wine and the vividness of its sparkle implies a measured, discriminating enjoyment. 'Bacchus' suggests gluttonous swilling and snoring oblivion. When Keats declines Bacchus' chariot he is rejecting an option he has not really proposed. Perhaps what he has proposed, an epicurean consolation in wine, now, for the moment, appears to him in another light, without the sophisticated gloss of connoisseurship. This is very much the manner in which symbolic debate may proceed, by presenting the same notion in two sets of images with very different associative powers.

The second false note is 'Poesy'. In the first place it is never easy to be sure exactly what Keats means by it, though in the last stanza of the ode he seems to equate it with 'fancy'. In the second place, many readers will feel that the word is sentimentally precious, the last traces of Keatsian mawkishness (cf. 'his erstwhile timid lips grew bold, / And poesied with hers in dewy rhyme'—*Isabella*, 69–70). Yet the use of this doubtful word here may be a tactic rather than a lapse, for it is connected with two very fruitful ambiguities. In what sense are the wings of Poesy 'viewless'? The immediate suggestion is that they are wings of the mind or spirit, and therefore invisible. But as we carry on, during, say, a third or fourth reading of the poem, we may suspect that Poesy's wings offer no view, for 'here there is no light', and 'I cannot see what flowers are at my feet'.<sup>16</sup> There is rather more confusion with 'dull brain'. Poesy, it seems, would like to take to its viewless wings, but the brain is clumsy or protesting, and fancy is encumbered by it.

Poetry engages the intelligence as well as the sensibility, but perhaps Poesy is better off without the narrowly ratiocinative faculty. Or perhaps the dullness of the brain 'perplexes and retards'; a keen brain would speed the fancy on its delighted way. But one has to tease such a meaning out of the lines; the overriding impression is that intelligence ('dull' in the sense of 'boring, mundane'), is an obstacle to Poesy. 'Poesy' then maybe a well-chosen word, signalling that Keats is proposing to surrender the faculty that tirelessly reaches for substance and wholeness.

One's suspicions about 'Poesy' are soon confirmed, for the Queen-moon only very momentarily suggests Greek myth or Elizabethan convention. Her 'starry Fays' make her more like Titania than Cynthia, and her function is to be decorative and comforting ('Tender is the night'). In a vital respect she is ineffective: 'here there is no light.' Like Poesy, however, the Queen-moon's faery triviality is, I suggest, Keats' tactic. He is describing a means of dealing with his agonised bewilderment that must fail, and to propose an ineffective solution in order to reveal it as such as a traditional debating ploy. Keats, therefore, will now attempt the pastiche world that fancy can manufacture, though, being a great poet and making his faery place for a valid strategic purpose, he will do better than ships of pearl and seas of amber.

In spite of the statement 'I cannot see ... / But guess', all the richness of stanza five is presented confidently. Precisely because 'here there is no light' Keats can be sure of his richness. David Perkins has described these lines as: 'a vivid assertion of the power of the imagination to see more than the sensory eye can see.' This is misleading, for the imagination here is merely remembering what the sensory eye *has* seen. Walter Evert's view makes better sense: 'One is struck ... by the fact that what is seen in the imaginative

vision includes nothing that the real world does not supply.<sup>17</sup> This is, in fact, a constructed world, conceived in a mind that, while remembering reality, has deliberately tried to limit its consciousness. It is meant to be an expurgated world, from which all disagreeables have been evaporated, the sort of world we think the world ought to be, an Eden which some power called 'the seasonable month' perpetually 'endows'. Inevitably it is soft-focussed, there are no 'globed peonies', no 'sweet peas on tip-toe for a flight'.

The world created by wishing fancy cannot be looked at so sharply. Hence the sweets which Keats assures us are there are presented as little more than a catalogue: 'flower', 'boughs', 'grass', 'thicket', 'fruit-tree', 'hawthorn', 'eglantine'. Yet we sense that this stanza does indeed offer richness, a wealth that is, at least in part, made possible by the darkness and generalised vision. Other senses are wonderfully alert. 'Incense' and 'embalmed' bring exotic fragrance; 'eglantine' and 'musk' offer native scents. 'Dewy wine' brings a reminder of the taste of 'Flora and the country green'. Sharpest of all though, is the sense of hearing: we listen to a continuously rustling music, created by 'breezes blown / Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways' (the motif actually begins in these lines), that modulates virtually unnoticed into the buzzing of insects. It would be tiresome to explicate the onomatopoeia; I shall simply reproduce the stanza and allow the reader to detect for himself the pervasive delicate sibilance carried in language that might be entirely justified by its connotative function:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
 But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet  
 Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
 White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;  
 Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;  
 And mid-May's eldest child,  
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
 The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

I am going to suggest an interpretation of this sensory compensation. In a poet as sharply intelligent as Keats, the attempt to limit consciousness cannot succeed, even partially, for very long. The imagery here, as Douglas Bush has noted: 'admits, almost unwittingly, the fact of process, of transiency, of death along with life.'<sup>18</sup> The attempt to make a world out of fragments of fancy therefore quickly founders, and the dull brain, which deals with reality, soon reassumes command. Indeed, intelligence was always at fancy's elbow,



offering vital hints. 'Embalmed darkness' carries suggestions of fragrance, healing ('balm in Gilead'), and oriental exoticism, but it may also suggest not merely, as Perkins says, 'a scented, hushed burial', but grimmer and more absolute images: mummification and burial chambers.<sup>19</sup> 'Seasonable month' proposes a timely bounty, but it also reminds us that the seasonal cycle includes winter. Once we have picked up these clues, we recognise that all the 'sweets' the stanza offers bloom and fade in their turn, and 'embalmed's' reminder of burial is renewed in 'Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves'.

In other words, we now become aware of a stiffening ambiguity throughout the stanza; the world of fancy is shot through with reality, and therefore with time, death, and, paradoxically, life again. Once the consciousness has been jogged into readmitting death into its cognition, the outcome is renewed life. The burial of the violets is ambiguous—they will bloom next year and die next year. But there is nothing ambiguous in the assertion of life in the last three lines of the stanza. After the death of the violets we have the birth of the rose, 'mid-May's child', offering a form of that Provençal energy, 'dewy wine'. Finally there is the busy music of vitality, the warmth of mellow sunshine and life in the occupation of the flies on summer eves. The escape offered by fancy has failed; Keats knows that only a world that includes death can offer plenitude of life.

In stanza six the debate which has so far been conducted beneath the threshold of direct argument now breaks surface, and its main issues become clear. In spite of his claim 'Already with thee', Keats has not attained the world of the nightingale, the 'melodious plot/ Of beechen green', but he does seem to achieve what we might call communion with the bird, in an intimate, confessional moment. I suggest the notion of communion because I do not believe that Keats is merely conducting a conversation with an aspect of himself. The nightingale does not represent his poetic genius, or his conception of imagination or beauty; the expression 'Darkling I listen' (with its near-pun on 'Darling') indicates a true apostrophe. What then is Keats apostrophising? Perhaps it is an abstract principle, having such reality as principles have. The most attractive temptation is to say that the bird represents art, but there is a difficulty in this conception which I will deal with in the appropriate place. Whatever the objects of the apostrophe is, it is something to which Keats will attribute permanence. We should note too that Keats is obviously also addressing the physical bird itself; 'Darkling' suggests a tenderness towards the mere creature. That Keats can thus address himself to the ideal and the actual at once is significant, and will become more important in stanza seven.

Although the debate is now, for the moment, to be conducted in plain speech rather than impressionistically, it remains subtle and suggestive.

There appears to be a simple statement: 'For a long time I have been attracted to the prospect of death.' But the contrary case is put in the reservations, of which 'half in love' is only the most obvious. Note also that Keats' expression 'for many a time' refers to numerous individual occasions, not a longstanding, settled state of mind. Also, he has been attracted only to a particular kind of death, 'easeful Death', entered into by a comfortable passage: 'Take into the air my quiet breath,' and the apostrophes to death never become actual, they remain 'mused rhymes'. At the moment though, Keats seems to be, in Shakespeare's phrase, 'absolute for death'. 'Now more than ever seems it rich to die'—but note how that dramatic absoluteness is undermined by 'seems'. The sentiment itself is an odd one—in what sense can it ever be rich to die? The romantic notion is that it may be rich to die in a moment of supreme happiness (See Naples and die!). Although Keats half suggests the notion, and partially supports it ('with no pain'), in fact he will have none of it, and his dismissal of it is managed by a beautiful rhythmic and structural allusion. Let us listen again to lines 5 and 6 of this stanza:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain.

Hamlet is much taken with the same hope for bringing heartache to an end, but he goes on to reject the idea after conjuring with synonyms and their implications:

'Tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;  
To sleep! perchance to dream: ay there's the rub.

Keats' debate, like Hamlet's, hinges on the play of synonyms, and the suggestiveness of a rhetorical pause: 'to die / To cease.' Hamlet's attraction to death was counterbalanced by the fear that there might be life after death; Keats, while reminding us of Hamlet's argument, uses his device to make the opposite point—'To cease upon the midnight.'

It can hardly be rich to die when, as Walter Evert says: 'the brutal fact is that escape from the world of mutability entails as a necessary correlative the loss of that same world's beauty.'<sup>20</sup> Keats' recognition of this brutal fact perhaps now sends the debate underground again. Keats' position at this moment in the poem is that consciousness is extinguished by death, but the contrary case is offered by the conflicting implications of the diction. If Keats dies, he will cease, but the bird will continue to pour its soul abroad. In the next line Keats seems merely to be restating this 'rub' in plain terms: 'Still

wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain;’ but in the parallel complementary statement that follows, the submerged dialectic is activated again. If the word ‘requiem’ had carried no qualifying adjunct, its figurative nature would have been negligible, but ‘high requiem’ certainly renders the notion of a solemn funeral mass. The final word of the stanza not only denies the implication of this image, but conveys the burden of despair that the denial brings with it. Douglas Bush has identified not merely the evocative power of such implicit antitheses, but their function in the drama of the poem: ‘The fact of death, real death, opens all the stops for what now becomes the dominant theme, the contrast between the mortality of man and the immortality of art.’<sup>21</sup>

I cannot, however, fully agree with Bush when he goes on to say of the succeeding stanza:

The most wonderful thing about this stanza ... is that the climactic affirmation is also a tissue of implicit irony. For the conscious rejoicing in the immortal life and power of art turns—as it were unconsciously and inevitably—into recognition of the perpetuity of pain and sorrow through all generations of mankind.<sup>22</sup>

I believe the total effect of the stanza to be even more complex than Bush has indicated. The implicit irony is there, certainly, and the recognition of the inevitability of human suffering; but these are, I believe, tempered by the fact that Keats is not simply rejoicing in the immortality of art. He derives from the bird’s song hints of something more important, as I hope, at length, to make clear.

The statement made in the first line of stanza seven should not surprise anyone, because the symbolic nature of the nightingale has been so strongly hinted from the beginning of the poem. The radiance suggested by ‘light-winged Dryad’, and ‘beechen green’, the marvellous happiness of the bird, its freedom from all knowledge of suffering, its unwearied song of summer, the ecstasy of its overflowing soul, all indicate that it represents some supremely good abstraction or principle, possibly, indeed, a spiritual being, but certainly something timeless. Nevertheless we are astonished, not by what is said, but rather by the incredibly swift change of mood from the end of stanza six: ‘Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!’ There is a rush of energy and bursting confidence in the line that we are utterly unprepared for. At this moment Keats’ faith is so complete and secure that he can now deny his worst fears about death while expressing them with macabre vividness: ‘No hungry generations tread thee down.’

Let us reflect for a moment on the image of death which is denied and presented in this exclamation. Keats was evidently influenced by certain lines from Wordsworth's *Excursion*, but he has made the image so much more specifically gruesome that we need to look at his words very carefully.<sup>23</sup> We are not trodden down after death by living generations trampling over our resting places; the suggestion is that we are pressed down by succeeding dead generations buried in the same grave (the headstones of old churchyards give ample evidence). This interpretation raises two problems. First, why are the generations hungry? There is nothing in the poem to suggest social injustice, famine, and generations of starvelings. The most satisfactory explanation of the effect the word has on us is that it is a transferred epithet—it is the grave that is hungry for succeeding generations. All the energy of begetting and living implied in 'generations' ('The young / In one another's arms, birds in the trees / —Those dying generations') provides unending food for the endless appetite of death. Secondly, there is the problem posed by the expression 'tread thee down'. I have already rejected the image of the living walking over our burial plots; in Keats' vision of the grave the dead are trampled by the dead. Now this is the nadir of pessimism, and yet the line retains that triumphant sense of happy and invulnerable faith that informs the previous line. This seems to need more than the 'No' at the beginning of the line to account for it fully, more even than the carry over of visionary enthusiasm from 'immortal Bird!'

Near the beginning of this chapter, in describing the symbolic shape of the ode, I claimed that we could find two images of burial with conflicting implications. The first of these was the burial of the wine, 'Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth'. In the succeeding lines there is an implicit, but vivid, resurrection image; when the wine is brought out of its cellar it has new rich life. There seems to be no parallel to this in the line we are now examining, yet the two images are implicitly connected. Before the wine can be buried, the grape must be trodden down in the winepress. I am suggesting we might make a rather long and tenuous connection here, but I think it may not unreasonably be made. By far the most powerful suggestion of the line we are discussing is of death piled on death, but the vineyard associations of 'tread ... down' are strong enough, perhaps, to remind us of the poem's earlier symbol of burial with all its implications of vitality and renewal. It is not impossible that such a connection contributes something to the strange retention of joy in a line expressing so grimly final a picture of death. Keats' moment of joy cannot be accounted for merely by his conviction of the nightingale's immortality (symbolising the immortality of art); somehow his vision seems to raise a more human hope.

In the worst of his despair ('I have ears in vain / To thy high requiem become a sod') Keats is again surprised by joy, and perhaps relieved by hope. Both joy and hope are momentary, the ecstatic vision becomes itself a subject for debate, and its status decays to a thing of 'magic' and 'faery'. But not yet. The nightingale's song, as a symbol, modulates in a more complicated way than many readers have been inclined to suppose—the visionary moment does not fade smoothly into fancy, as Perkins, for example, suggests: 'But throughout the seventh stanza the nightingale, even as a symbol, continues to move farther away from the human world. It is first heard by "emperor and clown", figures presumably out of the historical past, then by Ruth in a world of biblical legend, and finally it is heard in "faery lands".' This is an odd comment. Perkins seems to assume that the story of Ruth is a legend, though we have no means of knowing whether it is fact or fiction. There is nothing inherently unlikely in the narrative, and Ruth's situation was probably not uncommon. The Jewish laws and customs concerning property inheritance involved in the story have a factual, commonplace atmosphere about them.

More to the point immediately though, is the firm reality of Ruth as the poem presents her: a heartbroken woman longing for, yet resisting comfort. As Claude Finney has said, this tercet 'which distills the essence of the story of Ruth from the Hebrew Bible, is the poetry of human emotions'.<sup>24</sup> Perkins is perhaps a little too anxious to trace a smooth decline from fact to faery—there is no such smoothness. The world in which the voice is heard remains fully human until it plunges into faery. There is then, I believe, a dramatically sharp change from the humanity of Ruth amid the busy working world of hired hands on a prosperous farm to the emptiness and sterility of faery lands. One can only speculate why Keats' choice of 'emperor and clown' as hearers of the nightingale's song seems so remarkably right. The conjunction of the two, combined with the stretch of time between their 'ancient days' and Keats' 'passing night' indicates the universality of the voice, and the summer of which it sings perpetually. But one seems to hear fainter resonances, and perhaps Keats has chosen his personae from Rome's eastern empire. Perhaps he has in mind the fabled work of Grecian goldsmiths, the 'Miracle, bird or golden handiwork ... Planted on the starlit golden bough'—the jewelled mechanical nightingales with their artificial songs which reputedly kept a drowsy emperor awake, and perhaps his drowsy jester; and which, because such toys seemed to be a form of art and to be comparatively immortal, drew the curious soul of W.B. Yeats to Byzantium. If Keats does have such products in mind, he is making better use of the image than Yeats does, for he is casting a quizzical eye on his symbol. Is the voice a mere human artifact, or does it have a greater provenance? I suggest that at this

point Keats' confidence rallies as he examines another possible source of hope than immortal art.

It is certainly not a fabricated voice that sings in the succeeding lines. In relation to Ruth we most clearly perceive that Keats thinks of the song as a message not originating within his own subjective being, nor yet within the realm of human art, for the nightingale's voice appears to meet a good deal of resistance here—it is obliged to 'find a path' through Ruth's 'sad heart'. But why is Ruth mentioned? This question puzzled H.W. Garrod: 'Whence Keats fetched, in this stanza, the thought of Ruth ... it is idle to conjecture ... I have the fancy, for what it is worth, that the image of Ruth amid the corn came to Keats, by some obscure process of association from Wordsworth's *Solitary Reaper*.'<sup>25</sup> Conjecture is in fact unnecessary; Keats fetched the thought of Ruth from the Old Testament. Ruth in the scriptural scene Keats so vividly pictures is not solitary, nor is she cutting and binding. She is in a field with busy labourers and she is gleaning. Perhaps what Garrod is really trying to ask when he inquires 'Whence Keats fetched the thought of Ruth' is what purpose the image is meant to fulfill. We can answer this, at least provisionally, when we answer other questions. Why is she homesick and why is the corn alien? Does the nightingale's song indeed find a path to her consciousness? We know that Keats read the Bible regularly, and that he was particularly impressed with this episode. The *Book of Ruth* is now less well-known than it used to be; I shall therefore recall the most significant features of the story.

Orpah and Ruth were the Moabite wives of the Hebrews Mahlon and Chilion, sons of Elimelech and Naomi of Bethlehem-judah, but at that time living in Moab. After the early deaths of Mahlon and Chilion, and that of Elimelech, Naomi released her daughters-in-law, so that they might seek fresh husbands. Orpah left, but Ruth, with a matchless declaration of love, determined to remain with Naomi. The two widows returned to Bethlehem-judah at the beginning of harvest, and Ruth took the opportunity to glean in the fields of Boaz, a wealthy kinsman of Naomi. The ruse succeeded, Boaz took kindly to the Moabite, redeemed for the family the patrimonial lands Naomi had been obliged to sell, married Ruth, and begat a line that was finally royal.

Keats' mention of Ruth places her at the point in the narrative where she is newly arrived in Bethlehem-judah, at the beginning of harvest. Her homesickness and tears are Keats' attributions, but understandably so. In the biblical phraseology the Almighty had dealt very bitterly with both Naomi and Ruth, and the latter, though she has totally adopted Naomi's racial and spiritual heritage, is now among a foreign people worshipping a strange god. She also has much to be thankful for. She is wonderfully well-received; Boaz

invites her to take her meals with him, instructs his field-hands not merely to allow her to glean, but to 'let fall some of the handfuls of purpose for her'. Of course she is presumably confident about how things must turn out; in purely human terms her salvation is at hand. But her greatest blessing is unknown to her; the end of the story is a genealogy: 'Boaz begat Obed, and Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.' Christ therefore will be of her flesh. Yet she is in exile and doubtless sick for home, not yet consolable by the family love that now surrounds her, the resources of wealth that must now work on her behalf, and the natural riches and joy of harvest. Keats imagines her, in Eliot's phrase, 'fearing the warm reality, the offered good'. Grief and homesickness may be proof for a long time against such gifts. Even the harvest may seem foreign in a strange land, even corn in the fields near Bethlehem, the house of bread.

At this point in the poem I believe it is the whole of this 'offered good' that constitutes the nightingale's song, and is obliged to 'find a path' through Ruth's heart. Ruth, I suggest, is in the poem because, although her circumstances as the Bible describes them are widely different from Keats', the emotional and psychological difficulty Keats attributes to her is very much his own. The Almighty had dealt very bitterly with the young poet; death had knocked on his door regularly since childhood and now seemed to be calling for Keats himself. But he has just had a visionary movement, an ecstasy which he speculates was not generated within himself, nor was merely a response to a creature's song. It may be that something has been offered, as something was offered to Ruth. But the thing offered is associated with a religious tradition that Keats despises. He could not imagine ever being at home in this tradition; this harvest, for him, must always be 'alien corn'. But the fact that he considers, even so obliquely and momentarily, the prospect offered by a tradition of incarnational idealism erases Stillinger's line between two worlds.

The greatest significance is that the image of Ruth, with all the implications I have indicated, should occur at this point in the poem. The first four lines of the stanza may be read as a momentary conception of the nightingale's song as a symbol of the immortality of art, but 'Perhaps' it is something more humanly satisfying. Here we have a major obstacle to perceiving the bird throughout the poem as a symbol of the immortality of art, for the assumption behind all the speculations of the ode is that such a symbol must be inadequate. The immortality of a symbol or an abstraction offers only spurious satisfaction; what Keats hungers for is the immortality of consciousness itself, and 'Perhaps' this is what the bird offers. The visionary climax of stanza seven is not the first two lines, but the fifth, sixth, and seventh, where the offered hope almost finds a path through Keats' sceptical

defences. If breached at all, these defences are rapidly mended. The visionary moment is quickly reduced to a matter of charm, magic, and faery. Yet there is little that is charming in these magic charms; the landscape viewed by faery fancy is a prospect of ominous shores and dangerous tides. If the moment when the nightingale's voice promised more abundant life was a moment of illusion, imagination and art can offer nothing better, nor even as good. Compared with the 'alien corn' their world is romantically barren, so Keats travels swiftly back to what must appear to be waking reality—'Here,' where there is no light, and where the fading song of the nightingale is punctuated by a mournful bell: 'Forlorn ... Forlorn ... toll ... sole.'

Although stanza eight expresses the withdrawal of the vision, it is not an anticlimax, for something has been gained. The bird's anthem becomes plaintive with distance, but the bird is not a failed illusion, it continues to exist and sing, though more and more remotely: 'Past the near meadows, over the still stream / Up the hillside ... in the next valley glades.' As Katherine Wilson has said: 'The experience of the nightingale's song was a reality—a reality experienced for too short a time. That an experience comes to an end does not mean it never was. Keats does not repudiate it.'<sup>26</sup> Nothing has been settled in the course of the lyrical argument, but something has been added to the range of the debate—the nightingale experience itself. Was it indeed a spiritual reality making itself known to Keats, or was it the subjective product of painful longings? Is the nightingale's world, the rich summer of its song, a real world or faery land? Or (the parallel and opposite question) is 'Here, where men sit and hear each other groan' a lesser reality from which we may awake? The debate is inconclusive, but the questions which Keats asks at the end of the poem could not have been asked at the beginning. Perhaps Harold Bloom has made the most perceptive comment on the last lines of the poem: 'Once back in experience, the honest answer is only in the continued question ... "Do I wake or sleep"'.<sup>27</sup>

The *Ode on Melancholy* has long been thought to typify a characteristic Romantic posture. E.C. Pettet has summed up the agreed placing:

... the Hamlet mood, and all the various shades of unhappy sentiment, are fundamental constituents of the Romantic temper. Most of the major poets of this period produced at least one important poem that can be grouped with the *Ode on Melancholy*, and this ode was written by one who, on his own confession, had luxuriated in a 'love of gloom' and who felt it necessary to warn his sister against dieting the mind with grief.<sup>28</sup>



Pettet's final relative clause ought to sound a cautionary note against this too easy and convenient classification of the poem. The warning to Fanny Keats indicates that the poet saw real danger in this particular romantic sentiment; however much he had luxuriated in his own love of gloom he was anxious that his young sister should not contract the habit. The fact is that the poem is too complex in its structure to justify this kind of critical assumption, for it is an argument, strenuously conducted, which is gradually transformed into a contemplative monologue. Unfortunately it is also a seriously flawed poem, for in the transition from dialectic to meditation Keats seems to lose his sense of direction. The resulting ambiguity is not of the fruitful kind.

The ode is the one short poem of Keats' that is undoubtedly a dramatic lyric (we can, if we like, make all the odes dramatic lyrics by pretending that we hear someone other than the poet speaking). But in the first two stanzas of *Melancholy* someone who may or may not be the poet is heard talking urgently to someone who is not the reader. Even if half-Keats is talking to half-Keats, the sense of dramatic interplay is there—we overhear the speech of one party in an implicit dialogue, and from this side of the colloquy we can deduce the sentiments of the unheard partner. In the third stanza, however, either the poet has abandoned his persona and is speaking in his own voice, or the persona has forgotten his interlocutor, for the dramatic urgency—the sense of sentiments being answered and a different attitude promulgated—has faded out, and a contemplative monologue has taken its place.

The debate then, in the first part of the poem, is between two voices, one heard, one unheard. Keats suggests what the 'other' voice has already said, and/or would say if allowed to speak, by means of disciplined counterproductivity. This is particularly clear in the opening lines, and reminds us of Donne's 'For God's sake hold your tongue and let me love!' Empson's famous comment on the first lines of *Melancholy* that 'somebody, or some force in the poet's mind, must have wanted to go to Lethe very much if it took four negatives ... to stop them' can scarcely be bettered, except that we might note also the urgency of the speech rhythm, the sense almost of a fist beating a table: 'No, no, go *not* to Lethe ...'<sup>29</sup> The voice is loud, tinged with alarm, as the voice of Donne's persona is loud with exasperation. In the rest of the stanza, the voice becomes quieter, but the device of counterproductive emphasis goes on—there are five more prohibitions in five lines, all rendered ambiguous by their force.

There is however a less theatrical but more important ambiguity in the stanza. The powerful negatives do not counterbalance the prevailing sense of self-pitying gloom that emerges on a first reading of the poem; on the contrary, they strengthen it. The sense we have after repeated readings of the poem that it is more complex than the 'indulgence' that F.R. Leavis

considered it to be, springs from at least two other sources.<sup>30</sup> Of these the most easily identifiable is the force of 'wakeful anguish'. Let us look at the phrase in its context. After all the negatives forbidding narcotic escape, the speaker explains that 'shade to shade will come too drowsily, / And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul'. We have in the first of these lines a pun that draws attention to itself and asks to be explained, and in the second line an explication of the pun and its significance. The first 'shade' seems to mean the darkness of approaching unconsciousness ('too drowsily' suggests the narcotic lethargy that precedes sleep); the second 'shade' seems to mean the remaining consciousness, the phantasmal spirit that in ancient mythology inhabits Hades after death, and this meaning is subsequently made explicit and less classical by the plain term 'soul'.

The argument, in so far as one can paraphrase it, seems to be a circular one: 'Do not, by any of the means specified here, obliterate your consciousness, because if you do, your consciousness will be obliterated.' The unheard voice in the dialogue might well protest here that was exactly what he wanted to do; but such a rejoinder is preempted by 'wakeful anguish'. Its very unexpectedness gives 'wakeful' at least as much force as 'anguish'. The implication is that wakefulness itself has a value that must not be surrendered. The words battle against each other, and while the reader may have doubts about the outcome, Keats plainly intends that 'anguish' submits to 'wakeful'.

The other source of complexity in the stanza is less startling, but ultimately more effective and pervasive. The images of the stanza are predominantly drawn from what one might think of as the dark side of folk-lore, and the punctuation of these by classical allusions has little balancing effect. 'Lethe', 'wolfe's-bane', 'poisonous wine', 'nightshade', 'beetle', 'Proserpine', 'yew-berries', and 'downy owl' all point in one direction only, and suggest a state of mind where despair is dramatically savoured. Even Psyche is presented as 'mournful', and her symbol is not the delightful butterfly, but the ominous moth with the death's-head markings on its wings.

'Rosary', however, is significantly different from the other images, and is also more important, since it has greater extension within the stanza; after being named once specifically it is alluded to twice more in a subsequent line, and in such a way that the reader's attention is directed to its real meaning rather than the popular misconception of it. The poet recognises that a rosary is not in itself a symbol of melancholy, and not an 'approximate equivalent of the beetle or the downy owl'.<sup>31</sup> The meaning of Keats' lines is that one can make it so by concentrating on one aspect of it, thus making it 'of yew-berries', but the symbol itself commands a far wider range of

awareness and response. Keats means by 'rosary' what the informed Catholic means by it.

To most people the term signifies a string of beads, a pretty bauble containing things which Chaucer called 'gaudies'. The poet here seems at first glance to ratify this notion by suggesting that for the melancholy man a suitably dismal bauble might be made of yew-berries (because of the prevailing counterproductivity, we tend not to notice that he is actually saying that his interlocutor should not do this). A rosary is not a set of beads, however, the beads merely represent the rosary. That the real meaning of the term is implied in Keats' use of it becomes clear a little later, providing we can make the necessary connection:

Make not your rosary of yew-berries,  
 Nor let the beetle nor the death-moth be  
 Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl  
 A partner in your sorrow's mysteries.

'Yew-berries', 'beetle', 'death-moth', and 'downy owl' are so powerfully and morbidly earthy that they put more distance than three lines of verse between 'rosary' and 'sorrow's mysteries'. However, once we have overcome the gloomy force of the paraded *memento mori*, the balancing force of the rosary as a set of prayers is inescapable. The prayers actually recited in this devotion, 'Our Father', 'Hail Mary', and 'Glory be' are meant to accompany and in part to express a meditation on the fifteen mysteries of the Christian faith. These mysteries are grouped in three sets of five, the joyful Mysteries, concerned with the nativity; the Sorrowful Mysteries, concerned with Christ's passion and death; and the Glorious Mysteries, concerned with the resurrection and subsequent events. A recitation of the full rosary is an arduous affair, involving fifteen 'Our Fathers', fifteen 'Glory be's', and one hundred and fifty 'Hail Marys'. While a devout Catholic may say the rosary privately, alone, its public recitation is usually an antiphonal affair: the leader of the prayers, usually a priest, says the first halves of the 'Our Father', 'Hail Mary', and 'Glory be', the congregation completing them from 'Give us this day', 'Holy Mary, Mother of God', and 'As it was in the beginning' respectively.

If Keats expected many of his readers to have this much knowledge of the Catholic tradition of prayer, it was rather unreasonable of him; but the evidence is strong in the poem that he knew this much himself.<sup>32</sup> Not merely is the phrase 'sorrow's mysteries' a literal reference to the Sorrowful Mysteries of the rosary, the warning not to take the downy owl as partner surely alludes to the tradition of antiphonal recitation.

It has been necessary to digress into the most popular form of Catholic prayer (other than the mass itself) because the force of Keats' allusions seems to have been missed by commentators and editors, and it is possible that it has been missed by the majority of readers. Keats himself, with his intervening relish of beetles, death-moths and downy owls has made it difficult even for an informed reader to make the vital connection. We must add to this, of course, the fact that the allusion is so unexpected; Keats' hatred of the Church of England was so strongly expressed that the liberal-minded Anglo-Saxon reader will assume that he hated the Catholic church even more. Nevertheless the allusion is there, and we must now examine the work the rosary symbol does in this stanza, and possibly in the first few lines of the next.

The contemplation of Christ's suffering and death, with the grief, fear, bitter disappointment and sense of defeat that it brought to his mother and friends, is at the centre of the rosary, as suffering is at the centre of human experience. But on either side of it are more positive things, and the cycle is completed with 'Glorious' promises. Keats, at the time of writing was almost certainly not confident of a glorious destiny for man, but he was honest enough to acknowledge in this way that grief, though apparently central and predominant in life is not all-pervasive. The prime function of the rosary image here is to place the melancholy mood in context-grief, pain, and fear there may be in experience, but there is also joy and renewal. To make a rosary of yew-berries and to pray only the sorrowful mysteries, antiphonally, with a downy owl for partner, is to pretend that this is not so; it is to parade one's melancholy as a posture of romantic stoicism. Keats does not recommend this, on the contrary he repeatedly warns against such dramatising self-indulgence.

What the Catholic rosary image works against in the poem is not the physical poison of wolf's-bane or nightshade, but an intellectual poison which takes the form of the exclusive, undiversified, and continuous recitation of the yew-berries' rosary. One must remember that these Christian images and the traces which, as I am about to suggest, they may have left on other images, are almost certainly being used dramatically, and we must not take them as evidence of a particular direction in Keats' thought. What is important is their balancing function within the poem.

The rosary symbol does more than render a sense of perspective, it exerts an influence on the imagery around it. By reminding us of the passion and death of Christ, the allusion alerts us to possible implications in earlier lines: 'Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd / By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine.' In Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* Keats would have come across the treatment of 'head melancholy' by washing the forehead with a

potion containing juice crushed out of hellebore.<sup>33</sup> Just as self-intensifying melancholy would substitute a death-moth for Psyche's butterfly, so here she substitutes a more treacherous poison; nightshade, whose fruit looks wholesome, the 'ruby grape of Proserpine'. Similarly a kiss looks like an expression of love, but was the means of an appalling betrayal. To surrender to the poisonous luxury of despair is to play Judas to one's own mind. Consciousness, or wakefulness, must be held on to, however anguished—'Life must be undergone' (*Letters* 1:293). The soul must not, however drowsy, submit to the ultimate 'shade'.

The second stanza begins with a remarkable number of positive implications. The melancholy 'fit'—the word surely indicates a passing mood—falls from Heaven, and the 'weeping cloud' is necessary for the hill to be green, and the flowers to be fostered. Cleanth Brooks, commenting on an aspect of Keats' poetry that he finds akin to the Metaphysicals, 'thinking through images', has said of these lines:

Keats' 'April shroud' in the *Ode on Melancholy* is as characteristic of Keats as Donne's more famous shroud is characteristic of Donne. First of all it is an *April* shroud, and the associations of joy and fruitfulness clash sharply with the more sombre associations of grave clothes. But the phrase is not merely a showy but incidental flourish of rhetoric. The 'weeping cloud' covers the 'green hill' with an April shroud, and the descent of the cloud is used to describe the falling of the 'melancholy fit'. But such a description argues that melancholy is fruitful as well as sad. It catches up the reference to 'droop-headed flowers ...'.<sup>34</sup>

Brooks is surely right, for there is a spring-like freshness in the images which somehow gets through the ostensible gloom. There is also an implication that the melancholy mood is part of a cycle, as necessary to the development of man as rain to the natural world. There may also be resonances from the rosary image in 'green hill' and 'April shroud'.

We now arrive at the major problem of the ode, its central ambiguity (it comes almost exactly in the middle):

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

What does Keats mean by 'glut thy sorrow'? How we interpret this phrase will determine our understanding of the rest of the poem. If we take it as

meaning ‘Nourish to excess your feeling of misery’ (the ostensible meaning), then the rest of the poem is indeed an emotional indulgence. The poet is saying: ‘Make yourself even more miserable by reminding yourself that the beauty of the rose and the peony last only for a season, the rainbow of the sea-spray an instant, the mature beauty of a woman a mere few years. The posturing infatuation of the lover is still briefer. Surrender then to unhappiness, and try to wring from it a perversely luxurious pleasure.’

The difficulty with this reading is that it conflicts with all the prohibitions of stanza one, and the spring-like freshness of the imagery of the first four lines of stanza two. Keats’ interlocutor has been told not to commit suicide, not to drug himself into oblivion, and not to make a litany of morbid suggestions. He has been encouraged implicitly to a balanced consciousness of reality, to see sorrow as necessary to refreshment and renewal. It seems most unlikely that he should now be given quite contrary instructions, particularly as the word ‘But’ at the beginning of stanza two implies that what follows will be a more positive prescription. How then may we read ‘glut thy sorrow’ so that the rest of the poem will follow the changed direction implied by ‘But’? It is perhaps possible to understand the words as forming an unusually compressed phrase, which might be expanded thus: ‘Sate your sorrowing consciousness with images of beauty.’ This might still be an indulgence—an escape into the cult of the exquisite and the religion of beauty.

But what strikes the reader about the images which follow is not merely their beauty but, once more, a sense of natural freshness: ‘the morning rose’, ‘the wealth of globed peonies’, ‘the rainbow of the salt sand-wave.’ Such beauty is simple, concrete, and is offered by nature as part of her rich ordinariness. Note again the positive tone struck by ‘wealth’, ‘globed’ and ‘rainbow’. The escape, if one is being recommended, is not to aestheticism or indulged emotions, but to reality, which has such pearls among its rubbish.

The last three lines of the stanza, however, present a serious difficulty:

Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

There is nothing fresh or healthy about the boorish silliness Keats seems to be recommending here. It is possible, of course, that he is not recommending it; there is something in the tone of ‘let her rave’ that is half flippant, and the exaggerated vowel emphasis of ‘feed deep, deep ... peerless’ may equally suggest either a determined aesthetic intensity or a mockery of it. But if irony was intended, it scarcely comes off; the abiding impression is of a relapse into

the cult of beauty. Robert Gittings attempts to solve the problem by resurrecting from a manuscript version (the draft known as K) a capital 'M' for Mistress. Assuming, as I cannot, that Keats' capitalisation was always logical and purposeful, Gittings suggests that 'Mistress' is a personification of Melancholy, and thus we can interpret the rest of the poem as an invitation to become the thrall of such a mistress.<sup>35</sup>

Leaving aside one's doubts about Keats' punctuation, there are difficulties in the figure itself. While one can allow personified Melancholy to have a soft hand and peerless eyes, one cannot imagine in what way she can be angry—even richly so—or for what reason. Anger is an emotion which might have a personification of its own. One must not endow a state of mind with an existence independent of the mind, and thus with the power of will and motivation. One is more impressed with Ian Jack's point that the lines in the ode recall the sentiments concerning Jane Cox which Keats expressed in a letter to the George Keatses: '... she has fine eyes ... When she comes into a room she makes an impression the same as the Beauty of a Leopardess ... I always find myself more at ease with such a woman; the picture before me always gives me a life and animation ... I forget myself entirely because I live in her.'<sup>36</sup> Unlike the abstraction Melancholy, a real woman is quite capable of the kind of anger that enhances her eyes, and many young men may find her beauty a sovereign remedy for the blue devils, even if only temporarily. But few, one hopes, will bully her in the way Keats seems to recommend.

Perhaps the principal difficulty, the source of the reader's confusion, is syntactical. The final 'or' in the series of three which begin lines six, seven and eight of the stanza may in fact not be part of the series. If 'mistress' is introduced, according to the traditional reading of the lines, as another object of beauty on which one may glut one's sorrow, then the image is in certain ways inappropriate. It is not merely that 'mistress' is human, while 'rose', 'rainbow', 'wave', and 'peonies' are not (though modern readers will be quick to detect an attitude implied by thus adding a woman to a list of objects); the major point is the nature of the transience of the beauty of the objects. The roses and the peonies will bloom again, the waves will roll to shore again tomorrow and there will be a spectrum in their clouds of spray. They are transient, but cyclical. The beauty of a woman is transient, but not cyclical; as she fades, she fades for ever.

One must consider, then, that the third 'or' may be introducing an alternative to the whole concept of glutting one's sorrow on beautiful objects. Instead of trying to improve one's mood by simple Hartleian therapy, one may make a cult either of Melancholy itself, as Gittings suggests, or of pleasure, as Ian Jack's citation implies, or of both. If this is so, and the lines

about letting one's mistress (or Mistress) rave are not ironic, then the poem has changed direction again, and Keats has returned to his vomit. However we take them, the lines fail, and constitute a major flaw in the poem, for their ambiguity is distracting, not dramatic.

In stanza three we find the most explicit expression of that sense of time passing that is not a stoic posture but a necessary part of true fullness of living. There is something fundamentally healthy in the dialectic of the first four lines of the stanza, something clear-eyed that insists on seeing things as they are:

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;  
 And joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
 Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh  
 Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips.

There emerges from the clash of opposites an implicitly equal valuation of positive and negative. Beauty dies, but first lives; Joy bids adieu, but has first been welcomed; Pleasure's ache accompanies its intensity. Stuart Sperry has pointed out a peculiar doubleness in the symbolic figure of joy eternally bidding farewell: 'Yet one realises that the gesture is forever suspended, forever withheld, forever in the process of being made.'<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless the lines appear to clash with those in stanza two recommending recourse to natural beauty as a cure for melancholy. That being so they may well be a way of ratifying a lapse into exquisite self-pity, as many critics seem to suppose. Quoting a passage from Burton to the effect that one must accept and make use of the advantages of melancholy, Robert Gittings says: 'Keats indeed took this philosophy to a much finer conclusion in the last stanza of the ode, to a creed of luxurious acceptance which might stand as the Romantic poet's solution for the dilemmas of life: "His soul shall taste the sadness of her might / And be among her cloudy trophies hung."' <sup>38</sup>

This is clearly meant as high praise, yet in its effect, particularly in the use of the word 'luxurious', it is more deadly to Keats' reputation than Leavis' most magisterial strictures. If one can luxuriate in one's unhappiness, is one really unhappy? What kind of poet luxuriates in his sense of 'the giant agony of the world'? What kind of solution is it to any of the 'dilemmas of life' to become the thrall of any particular state of mind? What justification is there for assuming that Keats is recommending this creed to his supposed interlocutor? Can we really suppose that whoever is referred to by the second person pronouns in stanzas one and two is being asked to share the besotted state of 'him' in stanza three? Again, in what sense is this self-dramatising surrender a finer thing than Burton's more sober advice that one should



make use of the advantages of melancholy? Finally, before we assume that Keats is offering this prescription to himself or anyone else, should we not bear in mind the advice he really did offer to his sister? ‘Do not suffer Your Mind to dwell on unpleasant reflections—that sort of thing has been the destruction of my health ... Do not diet your mind with grief, it destroys the constitution.’ (*Letters* 2:329–30).

It is possible that in these lines Keats meant to sound a cautionary note against the cult of pleasure, and perhaps the lines about feeding deep upon a woman’s eyes really were meant as part of an ironic transition that failed. The notion may be that although the way to deal with the melancholy fit is to refresh one’s sensibility with beautiful objects, it is a deadly mistake to replace the cult of sorrow with the cult of beauty. The fate of the sorrowing romantic and the epicure will be similar: the melancholy man will deaden his consciousness with drugs, or more insidiously with a self-dramatising relish of morbidity; the epicure, finding beauty and pleasure always slipping from his grasp, and the wine of life turning to poison (Proserpine’s ‘ruby grape’) while the delicate palate is savouring, will become the thrall of melancholy. Keats is not referring to the common human joy in the beauty that can be experienced from time to time in everyday living, he is referring to the obsessive pursuit of enjoyment, the ‘strenuous tongue’ forcing all things to disgorge their last increment of sensation. The sybarite loses his soul as humiliatingly as the melancholy man—it will be a trophy in misery’s holy place, a gossamer flag in a mystic chapel.

#### NOTES

1. *John Keats*, p. 500.
2. ‘A Reading of Keats,’ in *On the Limits of Poetry* (Swallow Press, New York, 1948), p. 177.
3. ‘Imagination and Reality in the Odes of Keats,’ in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Keats’ Odes*, ed. Stillingner (Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1968), pp. 2–3.
4. See *Objective Knowledge*, passim. 5. *John Keats*, p. 500.
6. ‘Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale”’, in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, p. 36.
7. ‘The “Ode to a Nightingale”’, in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, p. 46.
8. ‘Imagination and Reality’, in *Twentieth Century Interpretations*, p. 15.
9. *John Keats*, p. 500.
10. *The Quest for Permanence* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Ma), p. 231.
11. *John Keats*, p. 500.
12. Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Penguin, London and Baltimore, 1957), p. 157.
13. Douglas Bush suggests: ‘The poem had begun in an hour of sunlight; now, [stanza four] when the poet’s imagination has carried him to join the bird in the forest, it is midnight, in a secluded fairy world of sense that is almost cut off from moon and starlight.’—*John Keats: His Life and Writings*, pp. 134–5. But Keats has already

imaginatively seen the bird in stanza one—he does not see it in the ‘secluded fairy world’ of stanza four.

14. I believe it is a mistake to suppose, as many critics have done, that the scheme depicted here belongs to an unreal or visionary world. Bernard Blackstone, for instance, implies a lesser reality when he says, ‘Provençal song and sunburnt mirth he [Keats] has only imagined!’ (p. 326). This does not make them unreal. Though Keats never saw them, they do exist.

15. *Scrutiny*, 4:388.

16. John Bernard suggests that ‘viewless’ may imply ‘that the flight of “Poesy” is so high as to make the world invisible’, *John Keats: The Complete Poems*, p. 656.

17. *The Quest for Permanence*, p. 250; *Aesthetic and Myth*, p. 263.

18. *Life and Writings*, p. 135.

19. *Quest for Permanence*, p. 251.

20. *Aesthetic and Myth*, p. 265.

21. *Life and Writings*, p. 135.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

23. ‘And countless generations of mankind / Depart, and leave no vestige where they trod.’ (4:761–2).

24. *Quest for Permanence*, pp. 254–5; *The Evolution of Keats’ Poetry*, p. 630.

25. H.W. Garrod, *Keats*, p. 111.

26. *The Nightingale and the Hawk* (George Allen and Unwin, London, 1964), p. 138.

27. *The Visionary Company* (Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1961), p. 403.

28. E.C. Pettet, *On the Poetry of Keats*, p. 298.

29. *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1947), p. 205.

30. *Scrutiny* 4:391.

31. David Perkins, *Quest for Permanence*, p. 286.

32. There is also some evidence in the letters from Winchester. See, for example, *Letters* 2:148, 189. One might note also an occasional whimsical liturgical phrase such as *Incipit Poema Lyrica de Staffa tractans*’ (2:199).

33. ‘Irrigation of the head shaven, of the flowers of water-lillies, lettuce, violets, camomile, wild mallows, wether’s head, &c must be used many mornings together. Montanus would have the head so washed once a week. Laelius a Fonte Eugubinus, for an Italian count troubled with head-melancholy, repeats any medicines which he tried, but two alone which did the cure; use of whey made of goat’s milk, with the extract of Hellebore, and irrigations of the head ... upon the suture of the crown.’—*Anatomy of Melancholy*, Part 2, Sect. 5, Memb. 1, Subs. 5.

34. Cleanth Brooks, ‘The Artistry of Keats: A Modern Tribute,’ from *The Major English Romantic Poets: A Symposium in Reappraisal*, eds Clarence D. Thorpe, Carlos Baker, and Bennet Weaver (Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1957), p. 247.

35. Robert Gittings, *The Odes of Keats and their Earliest Known Manuscripts* (Kent State University Press, Ohio, 1970), p. 79.

36. Ian Jack, *The Mirror of Art*, p. 108, and *Letters* 1:395.

37. Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, p. 284.

38. Gittings, *John Keats: The Living Year*, 21 September 1818 to 21 September 1819 (Heinemann, London, 1954), p. 143.



THERESA M. KELLEY

*Poetics and the Politics of Reception:  
Keats's 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'*

Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" illustrates the lesson Keats chose to learn from reviewers who criticized the patently factitious rhyme and figuration of his first published poems. For his early critics, these features betray a Cockney poet's unjustified poetic ambition. For the mature Keats, they register the value of poetic craft and the status of the poet as maker. In "La Belle Dame sans Merci" Keats makes the strongest possible case for this view of his poetic task by presenting the belle dame as a figure whose otherness belongs to allegory, the most factitious of poetic figures. In doing so, he also acknowledges a line of poetic indebtedness and ambition that goes back to Spenser and allegorical romance.

In Keats's poem the knight and male chorus of kings, princes, and warriors claim that the belle dame has them in "thrall," even as her literary antecedents have enthralled their lovers. Although critics have rarely questioned this claim, it masks a prior entrapment.<sup>1</sup> As the object of their dread and fascination, she is a fetish, a figure whose alien status is the product of a collective decision to name her "la belle dame sans merci." Her figurative capture suggests the reciprocal relation between capture and estrangement that exists in poetic figures whose otherness implies an allegorical rather than symbolic structure of meaning. By this I mean that as a figure she resists the instantaneous understanding Coleridge found in Romantic symbols, those

---

From *ELH* 54, 2 (Summer 1987). © 1987 by The Johns Hopkins University Press.

figures whose tenor and vehicle are so closely bound (or so represented) that we understand their meaning immediately.<sup>2</sup> As a poem whose central figure is defined by her antithetical relation to the speakers of the poem and to a long tradition of belle dames, Keats's "La Belle Dame sans Merci" explores the value of poetic figures whose meaning is not intuited but learned. As a figure the belle dame dramatizes what readers of traditional allegory assumed: an allegorical structure of meaning (whether or not the figure in question is part of a fully allegorical narrative) takes time to understand.<sup>3</sup>

The allegorical otherness of Keats's belle dame indicates two ways we might understand the historical consciousness of Romantic figures. First, because the poem that bears her name is evidently riddled with signs of its indebtedness to earlier poems, it presents a strong, perhaps deliberately exaggerated, case for the poetic value of figures that acknowledge their history. Second, because her otherness is a provocative if half-evasive reply to Keats's early critics, the belle dame makes this reception history part of her meaning.

Read in these terms, Keats's belle dame suggests how poetic composition may be bound up with the exigencies of publication and critical reception as well as personal circumstance. Clearly the extent to which this mutual binding exists depends on the poet, the occasion for writing, and other circumstances of time, ideology, and place. Until recently, critics have argued that these considerations are marginal, if relevant at all, for reading Keats. Instead, they have often assumed that Keats achieved poetic greatness in part because he transcended the negative criticism that greeted his first published poems.<sup>4</sup> A version of this assessment remains influential among post-structuralist critics. Thus Richard Macksey proposes that as Keats matured he abandoned the "the chatty archaism" of his Cockney style to adopt a simpler, more serene style that renounced much, including the poetic indebtedness of earlier poems.<sup>5</sup>

I suggest instead that as Keats composed then revised "La Belle Dame sans Merci" in 1819 and possibly 1820, he employed provocative elements of his early Cockneyism for specific poetic ends. If, as Jack Stillinger has argued, what distinguishes Keats's mature poetry is not the emergence of new themes but its style, a curious strength of this style is its exploitation of the Cockney "faults" that characterize Keats's early imitations of the language of Spenser and the seventeenth-century Spenserians: participial forms that verbalize nouns or nominalize verbs; metrical pauses and rhymes that loosen or demolish the closed neoclassical couplet; and a mannered blend of sensuous details and abstract figures.<sup>6</sup> These intersections among Keats's poem (both the early draft and the ill-favored *Indicator* version), its poetic tradition, and his early critical reception mark the terrain of Romantic

allegory—that poetic space where history and the otherness of poetic figures meet.

In the first section of this essay, I consider the different figurative values assigned to the belle dame in each version of the poem; in the second and third, how both versions respond to a variety of sources and contextual pressures. These include its ambiguous generic identity as ballad and allegorical romance, attacks on Keats's Cockneyism, and other poems and letters that reiterate key figures in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." The poetic inquiry that holds this matrix of sources and contexts together is Keats's fascination with the allegorical properties of Spenserian figures and emblematic tableaux.<sup>7</sup>

#### I. KEATS'S BELLE DAMES

Of the two versions of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" that Keats composed, the early draft of April 1819 and the version published in *The Indicator* a little more than a year later, readers have usually preferred the former or, more precisely, one of three later transcripts made of it by Charles Brown and Richard Woodhouse. Claiming that Hunt unduly influenced Keats as he revised the poem for Hunt's periodical, most critics and editors have dismissed the *Indicator* version as aesthetically inferior.<sup>8</sup> In his recent and authoritative edition of Keats's poems, Stillinger prints Brown's 1848 transcript of the early draft and relegates *Indicator* variants to the critical apparatus. His rationale for doing so is textual: Brown's holographs are in general more reliable than early printed texts of poems Keats composed in 1819 and 1820.<sup>9</sup> Jerome McGann argues to the contrary that since the *Indicator* version is the only one Keats chose to publish, it is, or should be, the authoritative text. This assessment assists McGann's larger polemic about the ideological bias that prompted the outcry against the *Indicator* version in the first place. He claims that the "aesthetic" decision in favor of the early draft masks an ideological preference for a Keats untainted by the bad poetic influence of the radical and Cockney Hunt.<sup>10</sup> Though McGann argues persuasively that the *Indicator* version should no longer be suppressed, I am less persuaded that it is the only version Keats authorized and therefore the only one we ought to read. Instead I suggest that Keats composed the early draft as well as the *Indicator* version with two quite different audiences in mind—the private family audience of George and Georgiana Keats and the more problematic audience of *Indicator* readers. Considered as parallel texts, each offers a slightly different belle dame and anticipates a slightly different reception. Both register Keats's oblique reply to the controversy that dominated reviews of his early poetry.

In the *Indicator* version the “knight-at-arms” of the early draft became a “woeful wight,” an archaic and generic term for a human being or, in this case, a man. Along with other revisions, this one makes the poem more emphatically a ballad about a doomed relationship between a faery woman and a mortal lover. In this version the belle dame shows more human fears—or at least more sadness—and the “wight’s” response to her is more active, even slightly masterful as he “kisse[s her] to sleep.” Unlike the knight, who is lulled to sleep by his faery lover, the wight reports that they both “slumbered on the moss.”<sup>11</sup>

Keats suggests the naturalized, human emphasis of this version by using the English spelling of “mercy” in the title and the text. Whereas the early draft and its later transcripts preserve the French spelling, in the *Indicator* text the belle dame is half-Englished, as she is in the translation of Alain Chartier’s medieval poem of the same title, which Hunt’s *Indicator* preface identifies, somewhat misleadingly, as Keats’s source.<sup>12</sup> Keats’s substitution of “mercy” also replaces one ambiguity with another. The French *merci* may mean pity, compassion or thanks. In the chivalric context of Chartier’s ballad, the “beautiful lady without pity” is she who refuses a lover—in effect, she shows no chivalric *politesse*, or says “no thanks.” The English “mercy” of the *Indicator* text abandons the implied chivalric pun. Moreover, its presentation of a belle dame who seems less in control of the love relation encourages us to read her name and the title of the poem as a comment on her woeful predicament as well. Like the wight, she stands in need of the “mercy” neither can expect from a society threatened by her supernatural nature.

McGann contends that the archaism of “wight,” already archaic when Spenser used it in *The Faerie Queene*, makes the narrator of Keats’s poem more objective by creating a distance between him and the “wight.”<sup>13</sup> Yet this apparent objectivity may be little more than a mask for Keats’s proximity to the wight as well as the narrator. In July 1819, three months after he drafted the first version, Keats was woeful enough as he wrote poems and letters to Fanny Brawne from the Isle of Wight. As his letters make clear, kisses and honey, what the wight of the poem gets from the belle dame, are what John Keats longed to get from Fanny Brawne (*L*, 2:123, 127). Much as the scene of the poem is an external sign of the wight’s inner desolation, so is the Isle of Wight the scene of letters that emphasize Keats’s isolation from Fanny Brawne. Even if Keats did not compose the “wight” version at this time, the punning association between the Isle of Wight and the *Indicator* “wight” was certainly available to him after the summer of 1819. Moreover, in both versions the anaphora that links the narrator’s “I” at the beginning of stanza three to the knight/wight’s “I” in the next stanza undermines the purported narrative distance between the two speakers.<sup>14</sup>

By reversing the order of two stanzas in this version, Keats makes the mutuality of the love relationship take precedence over the wight's eventual enthrallment. In the early draft the knight explains that first he saw the belle dame and made her bands of flowers. Then she "looked at me as she did love, / And made sweet moan." After this he put her on his "pacing steed" and saw nothing else; finally she gave him her wild food. In the early draft the "pacing steed," which waits none too patiently for his owner to cease dallying, signifies the knight's chivalric identity. Thus by putting the belle dame on the horse after she loves him, he implies that her enthrallment has led him to abandon chivalric responsibilities. In the *Indicator* version the wight puts her on his horse before their exchange of love and gifts. This new sequence presents a different view of the protagonist's role in his own enthrallment. Rather than simply succumbing to the belle dame, he now seems to invite her to enthrall him. Keats's reversal of these stanzas also changes the figurative significance of the steed. Now the sexual implications of a horse and female rider overtake the chivalric emphasis of the earlier version.

Yet the different sexual politics of the two versions does not simply make the *Indicator* text a less misogynous narrative about men and women in love. As a poetic figure, the belle dame pays a price for her more sympathetic portrait in the published version: in the figurative economy of Keats's revisions, when she becomes a more sympathetic figure she also becomes a less alien one and for this reason less powerful. In the earlier draft her alien, supernatural identity more clearly sets her apart in the eyes of the narrator, the knight, and the chorus of kings, princes, and warriors who warn that she is fatal to human life and society. Figured in these terms, she is their fetish: an object of worship whose supernatural power over them (which they in fact have assigned to her) inspires dread and fascination.<sup>15</sup> As such, she knows that poetic figures become fetishistic if they are presented as powers that hold our attention precisely because they are extra-human. If the fetishistic power presented in the *Indicator* version illustrates the latent fetishism in human love relationships which Freud describes, the early draft of the poem gives the same power a wider reference.<sup>16</sup> There it shows how some figures belong to an allegorical structure of meaning, in part because they call attention to their separate, alien identity as figures.

The first writer to suggest that fetishism is allied to poetic figuration was Charles de Brosses, whose mid-eighteenth-century treatise on fetish gods in Egyptian and African cults prompted later writers to look for fetishism in modern Western cultures as well. Noting that fetishism reflects a universal human tendency to personify things, de Brosses insisted that "this use of metaphor" ("*cet usage des metaphores*") is as natural for "civilized peoples" as it is for "savage nations."<sup>17</sup> Although the figurative value of the



belle dame in Keats's early draft is not as overtly declared as, for example, that of Spenser's Una or Holiness, it is more apparent there than in the *Indicator* version, which David Simpson prefers because he finds in it an indeterminate play of signs and meaning that is absent in the earlier draft. Simpson's reading ignores the instructive possibility that the figurative status of the belle dame in the early draft dramatizes a necessary, if haunting, risk—the transformation of life and the world into well-wrought urns or, in Mikhail Bakhtin's phrase, the "fetishization" of the art work.<sup>18</sup>

In his study of fetishism and imagination in nineteenth-century literature, Simpson argues that Romantic poets avoided fetishism by engaging in "healthy figurative activity," a continuous process of re-creation by which figures refuse the fixity and alienation that characterize Keats's belle dame.<sup>19</sup> As a poet who repeatedly warns himself and readers about the dangers of figures that are lifeless, Wordsworth is Simpson's exemplary Romantic instance of this refusal. Certainly what Simpson describes is what Romantic poets, including Wordsworth, sought to do. Yet even Wordsworth (or especially Wordsworth) created figures that are fixed as objects of his or a speaker's poetic attention—a leech-gatherer, a thorn, a blind beggar. It may be more accurate to say that a healthy recognition of the fetishistic tendency inherent in poetic figures is what helps Romantic poets understand their inclination to confuse natural objects, human beings, and poetic figures. In other words, not all Romantic figures are organic symbols, that is, figures in which the literal and the figurative articulate an organic, indivisible whole. Instead, some Romantic figures are so evidently factitious that their otherness as figures has to be recognized.

In Keats's poem this otherness is a property both of its figures and of their relation to the sources that readers have identified for the poem. For example, in Thomas the Rhymer's medieval ballad about a faery lady who seduces him then tells him prophecies before abandoning him, Thomas spies an "arbour" of fruits which the lady warns him not to eat if he wishes to save his soul.<sup>20</sup> In most versions of Thomas the Rhymer's poem that were published in the eighteenth century, including one reprinted in Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, the fruits are pears, apples, dates, figs, wineberry, filberts, and damson (a Mediterranean variety of plum)—all cultivated fruits grown in Europe and the Mediterranean. Scott also discusses an ancient manuscript version in which the lady offers Thomas a loaf of bread and wine after she warns him against this rather Blakean "garden of fruits."<sup>21</sup> Keats's version of this story presents a different kind of food. Unlike the cultivated if forbidden fruit of Thomas the Rhymer's poem or the bread and wine offered in the manuscript Scott describes, roots, wild honey, and manna dew are what Keats's lady provides. As foods that are wild

and heaven sent, they are manifestly “other,” in contrast to the “harvest” mentioned by the narrator as the poem begins.<sup>22</sup>

The belle dame's food is “other” for another reason: in the discourse of the poem, it signifies her alienation from society, represented by the knight, the narrator, and the male chorus. That is to say, her food remains wild, undomesticated, because these speakers insist on this point, not because wild food cannot be domesticated—by ritual or mythic as well as agricultural means—if a society chooses to do so. In *From Honey to Ashes*, the second in the series on structural anthropology that begins with *The Raw and the Cooked*, Claude Lévi-Strauss explains that some South American tribes domesticate honey by converting it into a food that is gathered and distributed according to specific rituals. Among these tribes, several myths tell of a woman who tries to grab honey for herself by defying rituals for gathering and distributing it. (This woman is not authorized to gather honey for the tribe; that job is the woodpecker's, whom she often marries to get honey.)<sup>23</sup>

These myths and the rituals they authorize pit woman's greed for honey against a well-orchestrated social network for food production and consumption. By presenting honey as a sign of the belle dame's alien as well as sexual power, the speakers of Keats's poem specify what such myths imply. Yet this difference masks an intriguing parallel. In both cases, social and linguistic processes define the meaning of honey and woman. In Lévi-Strauss's structuralist analysis such processes domesticate honey and women by assigning them tasks and limits that neutralize or eradicate their “natural” wildness or greediness (or both). In Keats's poem this process places the belle dame and her food outside the society of speakers represented by the narrator, the knight, and the male chorus of kings, princes, and warriors whose warning the knight receives in a dream. Paradoxically, like all fetishes her alien status is a social, linguistic invention.

In Keats's early draft and its later transcripts, then, the belle dame is fixed, even impaled by the narrator, the knight, and the chorus as someone who opposes the social plenty of harvest and granary. She is the reason their lips are “starv'd” of everything except incantatory warnings that the knight will repeat their history. The balladic repetition of the opening and closing stanzas emphasizes the collective understanding the figure of the belle dame reflects. In the first stanza the narrator asks the knight why he is “alone and palely loitering” when “The sedge is withered from the lake, / And no birds sing”; in the last one the knight explains that “this”—meaning his union with the belle dame—is why he is “alone and palely loitering.” The fact that both narrator and knight use the same phrases to specify the knight's situation suggests that each gives the same interpretation to the story he tells.

Although the *Indicator* version has virtually the same opening and closing stanzas, the “this” to which the knight refers in the last stanza is not the same because Keats has altered his story. As a figure with a fixed if different currency in each version, the belle dame makes these mirror exchanges between the narrator and the speaker possible. By presenting the belle dame as a figure whose otherness separates her from the knight despite her evident sympathy for him, Keats makes her figurative enthrallment more apparent and thus more chilling.

## II. “LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI” AND POETIC TRADITION

This enthrallment is all the more compelling because it does not end at the border of Keats’s text (or texts). Indeed, insofar as reading “La Belle Dame sans Merci” requires reading its relation to its sources, among them Chartier’s medieval poem of the same title, Thomas the Rhymer’s ballad, and Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, Keats’s poem dramatizes the otherness that prompts its poetic speech.<sup>24</sup> Keats’s most obvious acknowledgment that extratextual pressures are part of the meaning of his poem is generic. The poem is at once a ballad and an allegorical romance.

Subtitled “A Ballad” in the Brown and Woodhouse transcripts (but not in Keats’s early draft or the *Indicator* version), its ballad meter, rhyme, and stanza make its formal commitment to this genre clear.<sup>25</sup> This commitment appears to serve two purposes. First, as a genre with a less than exalted position in the neoclassical hierarchy of literary genres, the ballad would be an appropriately humble literary vehicle for a Cockney poet. More immediately, the early Romantic rehabilitation of the ballad, accomplished largely by Scott, Wordsworth, and Coleridge, had made the ballad respectable poetic fare for the next generation of young poets. By writing “La Belle Dame sans Merci” as a ballad, then, Keats may play a double game with his audience. For if writing ballads is on the surface less ambitious than writing in the more aristocratic genres of epic, tragedy, or allegorical romance, writing ballads after Scott and Wordsworth is also a bid for a contemporary poetic fame and audience. The Wordsworthian echo of “her eyes were wild” may assist this double appeal for poetic authority and successorship. This appeal may mask an intriguing, perhaps deliberate tension between Keats’s political sympathy for the liberal values implied in the early Romantic ballads, particularly the *Lyrical Ballads*, and his rejection of the Tory politics adopted by the older Wordsworth. Although he was by 1819 a political ally of those who had criticized Keats’s poetic ambition and his politics, here Wordsworth’s early poetic practice legitimates Keats’s present poetic ambition. Second, whatever the narrative gaps or lack of

narrative progress in traditional as well as lyrical ballads, the ballad meter and rhyme of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" keep the poem going or, more to the point, they keep its readers reading. By choosing the ballad form, then, Keats restrains his youthful fondness for the lingering metrical pauses and syntactic inversions that irritated reviewers of *Endymion*.<sup>26</sup>

The ballad features of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" mask its more problematic relation to Spenser and allegorical romance. As many readers have noted, the union between Keats's belle dame and knight echoes those between Spenser's errant knights and evil enchantresses disguised as virtuous women. Specifically, the garland, bracelets, and "fragrant zone" Keats's knight makes for the belle dame recall the bands two of Spenser's knights make for the False Fidessa and False Florimel, as well as the magic girdle the true (if hapless) Florimel loses as she flees would-be despoilers. Although Keats's belle dame is not, like Spenser's deceitful simulacra, False Fidessa and False Florimel, antitruth, she is a figure for the "erring" of meaning that allegorical truth requires in *The Faerie Queene*.<sup>27</sup>

Not content to make the lady just one band of flowers, Keats's knight makes her three, a garland, bracelet, and fragrant "zone." Considered together, they are a redundant visual sign of Keats's indebtedness to Spenser, an emblematic portrait something like the pictorial tableaux Spenser uses to reveal and conceal allegorical meaning. Keats's knight presents the belle dame as though he were listing details in an emblem or a Spenserian tableau, among them her long hair, light foot, and wild eyes, as well as the gifts she receives and the food she gives. Along with her tears and sighs, these are the signs of who or what she is. Neither the reader nor the knight is privy to her inner thoughts. As a figure known exclusively by her attributes, then, the belle dame is alien to her human observers, and alien in a thoroughly Spenserian manner. For if she is clearly not a full-fledged allegorical figure like Spenser's Fidessas and Florimels, she shares their emblematic separateness.

As a poetic figure borrowed from a long tradition and defined within the discourse of Keats's poem, the belle dame of the early draft directs our attention to the alienation of other figures in the poem, including the landscape, the knight, and the chorus. Of these, the human characters are the most suggestive, since the figures Keats invents to depict them are themselves alienated from their referent—death or its approach. This "language strange," thoroughly Keatsian by way of Spenser, illustrates how figurative meaning tends to "err," half-mistaking itself as it wanders from its referent in ways that dramatize the allegorical potential of figures as factitious *and* referential signs.

Two deletions in the early draft make it clear that the lily and fading rose the narrator "sees" on the knight's countenance are Petrarchan figures

of death. Keats first wrote but then crossed out “death’s” in the phrases “death’s lily” and “death’s fading rose.” Scholars have suggested several sources for these figures, including Tom Keats’s death of tuberculosis in the winter of 1818. In his copy of Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Keats underlined Drayton’s use of the same Petrarchan figures in one of his *Heriocal Epistles*. In Drayton’s poem an abandoned female lover uses the terms “Rosie-blush” and “lily-vale” to indicate that she grows “pale” and is about to die. The visual source for the “death’s lily” or “lily” in Keats’s poem is probably William Hilton’s early nineteenth-century painting *The Mermaid*. On exhibit in Sir John Leicester’s gallery when Keats visited it in early April, 1819, the painting depicts a knight lying dead in a mermaid’s lap with a water-lily on his brow.<sup>28</sup>

Keats’s poem alters the way readers construe the visual aspects of its figures. We are not likely to think of them as visual or visualizable in the same way that the water-lily of Hilton’s painting is. Instead we are more likely to assume that the lily and rose on the knight’s face are poetic figures because their obvious Petrarchanism invites us to make this assumption. By forcing us to notice what these figures do as figures, Keats emphasizes their mannered, Spenserian relation to their referents. Both the figures that describe the knight’s face and the “starv’d lips” of the “death-pale” chorus are death-masks; they have the look a face assumes just before death or in a death-like state of exhaustion.<sup>29</sup> The difference is of course that the chorus is dead and the knight isn’t dead yet. Even so, each of these figures emphasizes what is left-remnants of life that is going or gone. As fixed, residual, even disembodied images, they signify death or its approach much as the cheshire cat’s smile is a lingering, residual sign of the cheshire cat. None of these is a fetish, yet all are detached, and as such patently objects of poetic attention. The material separateness that is part of the aura of the primitive fetish—whether it is a stone, a carved stick, or something else—is oddly yet appropriately reborn in these figures.

### III. “HONEY WILD AND MANNA DEW”

Two revisions in “La Belle Dame sans Merci” register the climate of reception embedded in the figurative project of the poem. The first revision appears in the stanza where the knight presents the belle dame’s gifts of food and “language strange” as syntactically parallel. The second reveals Keats’s half-playful, half-serious recognition of earlier critical objections to his rhymes. Considered together, these revisions help to define the intersection between Keats’s early reception and his mature poetics.

In both versions of the poem, the knight declares:

She found me roots of relish sweet,  
 And honey wild, and manna dew,  
*And* sure in language strange she said—  
 I love three true.

(25–28; my emphasis)

The perplexities of language and truth implied by the knight's conviction that he understands what she tells him recall the Spenserian dilemma of mistaking the false Florimel for the true one and vice versa. A stronger perplexity in Keats's poem concerns the status of its key figures, whose sensuous details contend with their abstract or semi-abstract meaning in ways that make the language of the poem alien poetic food.

Nineteenth-century readers who objected to Keats's poetry often attacked his frequent use of food and eating imagery to represent poetic or sexual longing. Byron repeatedly charged that Keats indulged in "onanism" or "mental masturbation," while Carlyle somewhat less harshly chastized Keats for his insatiable and infantile desire for "treacle." In his more sympathetic account of Keatsian treacle, Christopher Ricks suggests that the risk of this diction is the unsettled middle ground it occupies between primitive sensuality and self-conscious poetic refinement. Ricks astutely observes that nineteenth-century criticism of Keats's frequent use of "honey" as a poetic figure shows just how provocative this poetic strategy was.<sup>30</sup>

Even before he wrote the notorious phrase "honey-feel of bliss" in *Endymion* (1.903), "honey" was for Keats a figure for poetic language. For example, he began an 1817 verse in praise of "The Flour and the Leafe," a poem then attributed to Chaucer, with this simile:

This pleasant tale is like a copse:  
 The honied lines do freshly interlace  
 To keep the reader in so sweet a place  
 (1–3)

Ricks notes a more personal use of "honied" in an acrostic verse on his name which Keats composed for his sister-in-law Georgiana Keats in 1818 (*L*, 2:123). A year later "honey" reappears in two letters he wrote to Fanny Brawne from the Isle of Wight. On July 1, 1819, he asks her to kiss the "softest words" she writes in her next letter. A week later, replying to her reply, he writes: "I kiss'd your writing over in the hope you had indulg'd me by leaving a trace of honey" (*L*, 2:127). In his last letter to Fanny Brawne, Keats recalls his earlier use of "honey" as a figure for desire by figuring the barriers to that desire as bitter in taste. He tells her he cannot be happy

without her because “everything else tastes like chaff in my Mouth.” Rebelling against plans then being made for his departure for Italy, he declares: “the fact is I cannot leave you, and shall never taste one minute’s content until it pleases chance to let me live with you for good.” Echoing lines from the abandoned *Hyperion*, he complains, “the last two years taste like brass upon my Palate (*L*, 2:311–12).<sup>31</sup>

In “The Eve of St. Agnes” “honey” assists the provocative sensuality that is the crux of the modern critical debate about the poem. For some readers the poem is a quasi-allegorical narrative whose sensuous diction serves a non-sensuous end. For others it is a thoroughly sensual and rakish poem about the deception and seduction of a maid who doesn’t quite know what is happening until it has happened. Earl Wasserman defends the first view, arguing that Porphyro’s gifts of food and sex are ultimately transmuted into “a finer tone,” whereas Jack Stillinger contends that the “solution sweet” of Porphyro and Madeline is preeminently a sexual act that concludes the “hoodwinking of Madeline” which began with her enthrallment by “enchantments cold” (299–318). The last to assist in this hoodwinking is Porphyro, whose seduction of Madeline begins with the exotic foods and spices he heaps beside her bed and ends when he joins her there.<sup>32</sup>

Although the sensuous imagery of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” is less overtly provocative, its echoes of “The Eve of St. Agnes” also explore the unsettled middle ground of Keatsian figuration. Much as Porphyro plays the melody of “La belle dame sans mercy” (292) to assist his seduction of Madeline, so does Keats’s version of this “ancient ditty long since mute” seek to persuade readers to accept a mature version of the figurative project that his early critics had dismissed as vulgar Cockneyism. It is not surprising that other textual resonances linking the two poems concern the figure of “honey.” According to “The Eve of St. Agnes,” legend has it that maidens will receive “soft adorings” their future lovers “upon the honey’d middle of the night” (49). In his astute analysis of this revision of a line from *Measure for Measure* (“the heavy middle of the night”), Ricks emphasizes the “delighted physicality” of Keats’s figure.<sup>33</sup> The noun “honey” figures in a series of revisions that extend from this poem to “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” where Keats’s successive revisions of the line “And honey wild and manna dew” echo his revisions of a line in “The Eve of St. Agnes.” In the final text of the latter poem the line in question reads, “Manna and dates, in argosy transferr’d / From Fez” (268–69). Remarking that this is “the most worked over line in all of Keats’s MSS,” Stillinger proposes that the sequence of revisions probably began with two different attempts to include “Manna wild” among the foods Porphyro heaps beside Madeline.<sup>34</sup> A few months after he drafted this poem, Keats rehearsed the same textual debate as he

composed "La Belle Dame sans Merci." In the phrase that became "honey wild and manna dew" in the final text of the draft version, Keats replaced "honey dew" with "manna dew" and restored the "wild" dropped from the manuscript of "The Eve of St. Agnes."

The textual and figurative implications of these revisions go back to Keats's early critical reception. Among the charges levied against *Endymion* in the 1818 reviews were several pointed criticisms of his frequent use of "honey" as a figure (and an adjective). For example, the anonymous reviewer for the *British Critic* complained that by using phrases like "honey-dew," and "the honey-feel of bliss" the poet of *Endymion* repeated the stylistic excesses of Leigh Hunt's poetry. Reviewing *Endymion* for the *Quarterly Review*, John Croker cited the second phrase to show how Keats "spawns" new nouns to replace those he has transformed into verbs.<sup>35</sup> The implied premise of this objection is syntactic decorum: using the noun "honey" as an adjective or as the adjective portion of an invented compound word violates the legislated boundaries of syntax. The poetic implications of Keats's lawlessness (and Croker's critique), however, extend beyond matters of syntax. By verbalizing nouns, Keats layers his poetic texture much as Spenser's allegorical tableaux layer descriptive and sensuous details. Keats acknowledges this literary debt in his early poem "In Imitation of Spenser," where the noun "oar" is verbalized: the king-fisher "oar'd himself along with majesty" (15). Forty years later, in an otherwise favorable assessment of Keats's poetry, the Victorian editor and critic David Masson cited the by then infamous phrase "honey-feel of bliss" to demonstrate Keats's occasional poetic vulgarity.<sup>36</sup> For Keats's contemporaries and his later critics, syntactic irregularity signals a broader debate about the self-absorbed blend of sensuous details and abstract, or semi-abstract, poetic figures to which such irregularities call attention.

When Keats revised the early draft of "La Belle Dame sans Merci," then, he tacitly acknowledged the objection raised by the reviewers for the *British Critic* and the *Quarterly* by substituting "manna" for the second "honey" in the line that originally read: "And honey wild, and honey dew." Yet if this revision removed an obvious invitation for criticism, the final version of the line retains a strong poetic reminder of Keats's desire to participate in the great tradition of English poets—the Miltonic inversion of "honey wild." Moreover, his syntactic error remains even after the removal of the second "honey." For whatever else "manna" is, it too is a noun that here serves as an adjective; moreover, its figurative task is at least as provocatively Keatsian as that of "honey dew." Because "manna" signifies supernatural rather than human food, its appearance in the list of foods the belle dame gives the knight emphatically reiterates the uneasy blend of sensuous and semi-allegorical details that troubled Keats's early critics.



The rhetorical figure suggested by this and similar Keatsian figures is *catachresis*, a “harsh” or “unnatural” figure whose misuse or misapplication of one category for another forces us to acknowledge it as a figure. To borrow Joseph Priestley’s example, when trees are called the “*hair of mountains*, or the walls of cities their *cheeks*,” the figure is a *catachresis*.<sup>37</sup> Although Keats’s early critics do not specifically charge him with this “figure of abuse,” their critique of his poetic language emphasizes the unnaturalness of its figures, particularly those that appear in an allegorical or quasi-allegorical context. Keats’s repeated use of “honey” as a figure thus signals a larger, more troubling, figurative deformation that his early critics called “vulgar Cockneyism,” either because that is what they believed it was or because they wanted to dismiss his poetic radicalism by presenting it as the uneducated, pretentious ravings of a lower class versifier. In different ways, both versions of “*La Belle Dame sans Merci*” anticipate possible critical objections to its figurative argument. The *Indicator* version minimizes the allegorizing tendencies of the early draft, making it less easy to abuse this version for its unnatural figuration. At the same time, this published version flaunts its Cockney sensuousness. The unpublished early draft is more daring insofar as it emphasizes the tension between its sensuous and semi-allegorical referents. When Keats revised this draft in his letter to George and Georgiana Keats, he removed the most obvious markers of its radical poetic argument.

By making the love relationship between the wight and the belle dame the focus of the *Indicator* text, Keats draws attention away from the allegorizing tendency of details like the belle dame’s food. For this reason, the association between honey and language receives less notice than the more natural or more sensuous association between honey and desire. Yet Keats also makes this sensuousness more provocative by signing the poem with the pseudonym “Caviare.” Taken from a speech in which Hamlet explains that a play did not succeed because it was “caviare to the general,” that is, food too rich or elevated for plebeian tastes, the pseudonym ironically presents the poet and the poem as just this kind of poetic food. Keats thus makes it clear that he is still the Cockney poet who dares to offer the public a poetic fare that is supposed to be beyond his and their capabilities—a reminder that is all the more pungent for its appearance in one of Hunt’s periodicals. Critics who have supposed that Hunt dictated the *Indicator* revisions usually claim that the pseudonym was also his idea.<sup>38</sup>

This claim is suspect for two reasons. The first concerns the authorship of the *Indicator* revisions. Keats may have written them himself either before Hunt decided to print the poem in *The Indicator* or for the occasion of its publication. As Stillinger and Hyder Rollins note, after Georgiana Keats’s

death her second husband John Jeffrey sent a list of Keats's verse manuscripts in his possession that included a poem whose first line is "Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight."<sup>39</sup> If Jeffrey's description is accurate, Keats must have sent the *Indicator* version as well as the early draft to his brother and sister-in-law between the spring of 1819 and the publication of the later version. Even if Keats composed the *Indicator* version just before its publication, he would hardly have sent it to George and Georgiana Keats if he thought it inferior to the early draft. Instead, it seems likely that he sent it along so that his best familial audience could compare it to the draft. Second, the turns and counterturns in Keats's friendship with Hunt after the *Endymion* reviews strongly suggest that by 1820 Keats could no longer be unduly influenced by his early mentor. Keats's sharp-eyed criticisms of Hunt's character and talent in 1817 and 1818 show that the younger poet had become a good deal less suggestible than he had been earlier in their friendship. Perhaps because Hunt's poetic influence had cost Keats much, he had reason enough to learn what he did and did not value in Hunt. Even in the spring and summer of 1820, when an ill Keats was grateful to Hunt for his kindness, their personal relationship was not smooth. Keats angrily left the Hunt household when one of his letters was opened by a servant. Afterward he said he had been a "prisoner" while staying with the Hunts.<sup>40</sup>

I review these matters to suggest another view of the Keats–Hunt collaboration for the two poems Keats published in the *Indicator*. Even if the "Caviare" pseudonym was Hunt's idea, its allusion to *Hamlet* is one Keats himself might have chosen to defend his poetic Cockneyism. Instead of being led by Hunt, he probably recognized that publishing one of his poems in a Hunt periodical would inevitably create an ideologically charged context for its reception. For this reason, Keats may have shaped the poem and its pseudonym to fit the goals and intended audience of this periodical in ways that would invite a more sympathetic reception than his early published poetry had received.<sup>41</sup>

Attached to a poem where honey is a figure for forbidden, probably fatal food, Keats's pseudonym exploits the resonances of the title Hunt chose for *The Indicator*. Commenting on the first of two mottoes that appear at the beginning of the first eight issues, Hunt explains that, like the *Indicator* (also known as the Bee Cuckoo or Honey Bird), an African bird that instinctively guides bees to honey, his "business is with the honey of the old woods"—stories from antique literature and mythology gathered to entertain readers.<sup>42</sup> The second motto, which Hunt retained throughout the run of *The Indicator*, is taken from Spenser's *The Fate of the Butterfly, or Muiopotmos*, which had earlier supplied Keats with the epigraph for *Sleep and Poetry*:

There he arriving round about doth flie,  
 And takes survey with busie curious eye:  
 Now this, now that, he tasteth tenderly.<sup>43</sup>

Although the “he” in these lines refers to the butterfly whose fate Spenser’s poem describes, the analogy suggested by these lines works equally well for the bee of Hunt’s title.

In the first issue of *The Indicator*, Hunt refers obliquely to the political turmoil in which he had long been embroiled as editor of *The Examiner* to insist that his new periodical will be apolitical: “the Editor has enough to agitate his spirits during the present eventful times, in another periodical work.” Yet if *The Indicator* was not intended to be and never became identified with a specific political program, Hunt’s assessment of its intended audience invokes the old squabble about Keats and Hunt as charter members of the “Cockney School of Poetry”:

To the unvulgar he [Hunt as Editor] exclusively addresses himself; but he begs it to be particularly understood, that in his description of persons are to be included all those, who without having had a classical education, would have turned it to right account; just as all those are to be excluded, who in spite of that “discipline of humanity,” think ill of the nature which they degrade, and vulgarly confound the vulgar with the uneducated.<sup>44</sup>

This appeal to an audience not necessarily trained in the classics offers a new perspective on that debate. Instead of preparing to defend contributors to his new periodical against similar charges, Hunt chooses to imagine and invite an audience less likely to object to him or his contributors. Mindful of the class bias evident in Lockhart’s charge that in *Endymion* Keats used classical materials without benefit of a classical education, Hunt proposes a new distinction between the vulgar and the unvulgar: the vulgar are those who consider people who are uneducated in the classics vulgar. Hunt’s intended audience is “the unvulgar,” a group that includes, among others, those who lack a classical education but who, had they had one, would have “turned it to right account.” By this Hunt presumably means that they would not have used it to bludgeon the reputations of poets who lacked training in classical languages and literature.

Seen from the perspective of the *Indicator* mottoes and Hunt’s description of its intended audience, the *Indicator* version of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” plays an intriguing double game with its probable reception. By

emphasizing the erotic, sensuous appeal of its story for a plebeian (that is, middle class) palate eager to be offered the rich poetic food that better educated critics would deny them, Keats both allies himself with the audience for which *The Indicator* was intended and taunts his early critics. Yet because the *Indicator* version mutes the figurative argument of the early draft, where the alliance between sensuous details and the fetishistic powers of its key figures is more prominently displayed, this taunt operates on safe ground. In the preface to the *Indicator* version, Hunt assists this strategy by suggesting that, like its medieval source, Keats's poem is a love story. Precisely because the published context and text of the *Indicator* "La Belle Dame sans Merci" emphasize the love relation between a wight and a faery lady, the differences between this version and the early draft make the figurative risks of the draft more apparent.

Another revision in the draft version of "La Belle Dame sans Merci" marks a second intersection between the critical reception of *Endymion* and Keats's mature poetics. To defuse possible objections to rhymes richer in sound than earlier critics wanted them to be, Keats replaced these lines in the early draft,

And there she wept and sigh'd full sore  
And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
With kisses four,  
(30–32)

with the lines printed in the *Indicator* text:

And there she gazed and sighed deep.  
And there I shut her wild sad eyes—  
So kissed to sleep.  
(30–32)

In the journal-letter to George and Georgiana Keats, Keats's adroit defense of the original "sore"/"four" rhyme suggests why the rhyme he later chose for the *Indicator* version would be even less likely to invite the kind of criticism leveled at the end-rhymes of *Endymion*:

Why 4 kisses—you will say—why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would have fain said 'score' without hurting the rhyme—but we must temper the Imagination as the Critics say with judgment. I was obliged to choose an even number that both eyes might have fair play: and

to speak truly I think two a piece quite sufficient—Suppose I had said seven; there would have been three and a half a piece—a very awkward affair—and well got out of on my side.

L, 2:97

John Crowe Ransom's examples of single, duple and triple perfect rhyme or *rime riche* make its potential for excess apparent: "Keats-beets"; "Shelley-jelly"; "Tennyson-venison."<sup>45</sup> By substituting the less suggestive rhyme "deep"/"sleep" in the *Indicator* version, Keats retained the perfect rhyme but avoided the patently archaic sensuousness of the original rhyme ("sighed full sore"/"kisses four"). Much as this revisionary strategy declares Keats's apprehensiveness about the reception of the poem, so does the *Indicator* revision suggest that he gave up the sensuousness of the early draft as one too many provocations in a version that makes amorousness its theme.

The apparent defensiveness of Keats's revision may mask a more aggressive stance toward neoclassical (and Tory) values implied and declared in negative reviews of *Endymion*. As William Keach and others have observed, reviewers attacked the Cockney couplets of *Endymion* because they undermined the poetic and political values identified with the neoclassical couplet. Croker in particular singled out Keats's rhymes for special blame, arguing that Keats played the game of *bouts rimés* badly by writing rhymes that were still nonsense at the end of the poem.<sup>46</sup> The point of this complaint is not that Keats should have played the game better, but that he should not have played it at all. The implied neoclassical touchstone for Croker's criticism is an issue of the *Spectator* devoted to a discussion of false wit. Using the game of *bouts rimés* as one example, Joseph Addison chastized the French for inventing the game and then playing it relentlessly.<sup>47</sup> According to Croker, then, Keats's rhymes display both his poetic shortcomings and a penchant for foreign affectation. A year later, in his 1819 letter to his brother and sister-in-law, Keats chose to defend a rhyme in "La Belle Dame sans Merci" by playing *bouts rimés* to show how much more mannered and self-conscious he could have been. Had he written "kisses score," the resulting "sore"/"score" rhyme would have been, if anything, a Keatsian version of *rime très riche*. Moreover, so many kisses would have been a Keatsian excess of another kind.

In this witty and rebellious reply to his early critics, Keats presents himself as someone whose rhymes exemplify poetic restraint, not Cockney license. Yet his playful inventory of possible rhymes also suggests that he could let rhymes dictate to sense if he chose, as Francis Jeffrey later accused Keats of doing in his 1820 review *Endymion*.<sup>48</sup> This notice of the potential lawlessness of rhyme belongs to Keats's larger poetic recognition of the

factitious, at times arbitrary, character of poetic figures as well. In his letter to George and Georgiana Keats, Keats implies this alliance between rhyme and figure when he explains his choice of rhyme as though it were a compromise among the half-personified, abstract forces of "Imagination," "Critics," and "Judgment"—all key elements in reviews of *Endymion*. The plural "Critics" pointedly shows how badly Keats and his defenders were outnumbered in that battle. If Keats appears to grant the merit of some of this criticism when he chooses (or says he chooses) to temper his imagination with judgment, the language he uses to make this point shows him as willing as before to create poetic figures that are factitious and semi-abstract and, in doing so, to transform real critics into abstract ones.

The tentative allegory implied by this half-playful, half-serious defense of the rhyme Keats eliminated altogether in the *Indicator* version echoes an allusion to Spenserian allegory in the journal entry that precedes this one in his long letter of February 14 to May 3, 1819. Explaining that he had agreed to review Reynolds's parody of Wordsworth's *Peter Bell*, which had not yet been published, Keats quotes the first section of his review to show how "politic" it is:

This false florimel has hurried from the press and obtruded herself into public notice while for ought we know the real one may be still wandering about the woods and mountains. Let us hope she may soon appear and make good her right to the magic girdle—The Pamphleteering Archimage we can perceive has rather a splenetic love than a downright hatred to real florimels.

(*L*, 2:93)

By using a Spenserian conceit to make the truth or falseness of an allegorical character a figure for the difference between a real poem and its parody, Keats can be in good "conscience" about reviewing the parody before the real thing. The conceit also suggests a Spenserian antecedent for the syntactic parallel between "language strange" and "honey" in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Two echoes, or putative echoes, link Keats's poem to this review: Florimel's "girdle" reappears in Keats's poem as one of the knight's gifts and *florimel* is "language strange" for "flower honey" (the same "language strange" used in Chartier's poem). Although Keats does not mention this etymology in his letter, Spenser's blend of allegorical abstraction and sensuous detail in his portraits of Florimel and other ladies, both false and true, suggests why Keats admired "honey'd lines," including his own.

Much as Spenser's allegorical romance makes erring—in the double sense of making mistakes and wandering—the condition of knowing or

discerning allegorical truth, so do Keats's sensuous and semi-abstract figures elicit readings that err between sensuous detail and abstract meaning. Wandering and making mistakes about which category is which are what readers do to find out how Keatsian figures work. Thus, for example, the interpretive mistake of thinking the belle dame a deceiving enchantress (like Spenser's false ladies) makes it easier to see that she is neither false nor true, but simply alien. By this I do not mean that Keats's figurative truth is relative or, conversely, that Spenser's is fixed. My point is rather that Keats's poetic figures, like Spenser's allegory, persistently work the terrain between referential truth and its representation, borrowing obliquely from one to characterize the other. Specifically, the materiality of Keats's figures—those "honey-feels" that disgusted his early critics because they consorted with archaic, semi-abstract figures like Spenser's—belong to his signifying practice, much as the *realia* of Spenser's emblematic portraits belong to their referents.

When Keats's early critics attacked the lusciousness of his diction and rhyme, they blundered on the network of poetic concerns and figures that Keats later clarified in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Both versions of the poem, but especially the early draft, retain the essence of Keats's Cockney style—its odd blend of sensuous and archaic or semi-abstract figures—to represent the belle dame. In the early draft, she dramatizes the consequences, for art and for life, of turning natural objects and human beings into poetic figures or poetic abstractions. As Keats's version of a traditional personification, the enchantress who enthralls human lovers, her sympathetic qualities are subordinated to her fixed, supernatural value in the poem as a semi-abstract figure. So regarded, she is an object animated by the supernatural powers Keats and the speakers of the poem attribute to her. Like a fetish, whose material fixity is one sign of its special status, her identity isolates her. By presenting the belle dame in this way, Keats examines how and why some poetic figures are patently alien objects of a speaker's attention. Like Keats's nightingale and grecian urn, she shows how such figures are alien poetic powers that hold our attention precisely because they are extra-human.

Unlike Romantic symbols, whose figurative meaning is presented as an organic, simultaneous extension of their literal meaning, Romantic figures that tend toward allegory emphasize the fact that their meaning is not organic, not simultaneously understood. Such figures encourage historical awareness among readers. Unlike symbols, whose meaning is supposed to be understood at first glance, allegories require a process of reading and reflection. So understood, Keats's belle dame presents one model for the presence of history and allegory in Romantic figures.

## NOTES

I began work on this essay while a fellow of The Society for the Humanities, Cornell University. I am grateful to its director, Jonathan Culler, and staff for their support of the larger study of allegory from which this essay is taken, to audiences at University of Rochester and the 1985 Convention of the Modern Language Association who commented on earlier versions, and to Peter Manning and Susan Wolfson for their responses to the final version.

1. Those who read the poem as a narrative about the knight's enthrallment include: Dorothy Van Ghent, *Keats; The Myth of the Hero*, ed. Jeffrey C. Robinson (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 63–64, 128; Robert Graves, who identifies the belle dame with various literary enchantresses and concludes that she represents "Love, Death by Consumption ... and Poetry" (*The White Goddess*, 3rd. ed., enlarged [1971; reprinted, London: Faber and Faber, 1972], 429–32); Charles I. Patterson, Jr., who, although he argues that Keats's belle dame is not evil but a neutral daemonic force, also assumes that the knight is the only one who is enthralled in the poem (*The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats* [Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1970], 128–29); and Richard Macksey, who presents the belle dame as someone who (like Keats's Lamia) "imprison[s] the knight and "exile[s] him from the human" ("'To Autumn' and the Music of Mortality: 'Pure Rhetoric of a Language without Words,'" in *Romanticism and Language*, ed. Arden Reed [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985], 270n. But in *La Belle Dame sans Merci and the Aesthetics of Romanticism* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1974), Barbara Fass notes that the belle dame is not always presented as a deceitful enchantress (18); and in *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), Stuart Sperry observes that the tradition from which Keats derives his belle dame includes several Janus-like figures who are both benevolent and malevolent (237). In a paper delivered at the 1985 Convention of the Modern Language Association, Karen Swann presents a strong feminist reading of the belle dame's enthrallment by the narrator and speakers of the poem.

2. Coleridge, *The Statesman's Manual*, in *Lay Sermons*, ed. R. J. White, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols., Bollingen Series 75 (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), 6:29–31. For fuller accounts of Coleridge's distinctions between symbol and allegory, see John Gatta, Jr., "Coleridge and Allegory," *Modern Language Quarterly* 38 (1977): 62–77; and Jerome C. Christensen, "The Symbol's Errant Allegory: Coleridge and His Critics," *ELH* 45 (1978): 640–59. See in particular Paul de Man's influential essay, "The Rhetoric of Temporality," in *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Charles S. Singleton (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1969), 173–209. My analysis differs insofar as it considers how referentiality and history extend de Man's account of the "temporality" of allegory.

3. Gorden Teskey discusses the role of error in allegory in "From Allegory to Dialectic: Imagining Error in Spenser and Milton," *PMLA* 101 (January 1986): 13; for an analysis of allegorical narratives that specifies the reader's task, see Carolyn Van Dyke, *The Fiction of Truth* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1985), esp. 247–87.

4. For example, Lionel Trilling argued in "The Poet as Hero: Keats in His Letters" that one source of Keats's genius is his geniality, which allowed him to discern the larger poetic or, philosophical implications of his and others' private concerns. This claim assumes that Keats's poetic achievement derives in part from his ability to transcend personal crises like the hostile reception of his early poetry. See Trilling, *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking Press, 1955), 11–19. Working against Trilling's biographical emphasis, de Man argued that Keats's poems are "the work of a man whose experience is mainly



literary” principally because he kept “his capacity for personal happiness in reserve” for a better future he did not live to see. Like Keats, de Man turns this biographical pathos into metaphors for poetry and a program for reading. See de Man, ed., *John Keats: Selected Poetry* (New York: Signet NAL, 1966), Introduction, xi. Once again, this critical perspective presents Keats’s poetry as an achievement wrought outside the fray of personal circumstance and public opinion. In an astute essay on the ideology of genre in “To Autumn,” Geoffrey Hartman proposed that the ode surpasses the sublime ode of his predecessors by offering figures of death whose impersonal tranquility rejects the hysteria of earlier odes as well as Keats’s mortal fears after the death of his brother Tom. See Hartman, “Poem and Ideology: A Study of Keats’s ‘To Autumn,’” in *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1975), 146. For all these strong readers of Keats, one mark of his poetic greatness is his superiority to circumstances of career and biography. Jerome McGann invited renewed attention to the relation between Keats’s politics and his poetics in “Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism,” *Modern Language Notes* 94 (December 1979): 988–1032. See too the valuable discussion of this topic in a print forum on “Keats and Politics” in *Studies in Romanticism* 25 (Summer 1986): 171–229. Contributors include Susan Wolfson, Morris Dickstein, William Keach, David Bromwich, Paul H. Fry, and Alan J. Bewell.

5. Macksey (note 1), 264.

6. Jack Stillinger, *John Keats: Complete Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), xxiv. Bhabatosh Chatterjee lists these and other Cockney traits of Keats’s early style in *John Keats: His Mind and Work* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1971), 211. Cited by Jerome McGann (note 4), 997.

7. Robert Gittings offers a tactful discussion of Spenser and the allied contexts indexed in the long journal-letter in which the early draft of “La Belle Dame sans Merci” appears in *John Keats: The Living Year* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1954), 113–23.

8. See for example Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge; Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), 479n., and Sidney Colvin, *John Keats* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1917), 468–69. McGann quotes Colvin’s categorical dismissal of the *Indicator* text, 1029n–30n.

9. Jack Stillinger, *The Texts of Keats’s Poems* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974), 70 and 232–34.

10. McGann, 1000–1005.

11. The text of the early draft appears in Keats’s *Letters*, ed. Hyder Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1958), 2:97. Further citations of Keats’s letters (*L*) will be included parenthetically in the text. The definitive text of the poem is provided in Stillinger’s edition, *The Poems of John Keats* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1978), 356–67. Line numbers appearing parenthetically in the text refer to this edition. Miriam Allott reproduces the *Indicator* text in her carefully annotated edition, *The Poems of John Keats* (Harlow: Longman, 1970), 757–58. See *The Indicator*, No. 31 (May 10, 1820), 248. All three texts are reproduced in an appendix at the end of this essay. The texts in Keats’s *Letters* and Stillinger’s edition are reprinted with the permission of Harvard University Press; the *Indicator* text is reprinted with the permission of the Harry Ransom Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

12. *The Indicator*, No. 31 (May 10, 1820), 246–47. Keats probably took little more than his title from Chartier’s poem, a chivalric love *debat* between the narrator (the hopeful but finally disappointed suitor) and the unwilling lady who, he complains, lacks compassion. Robert Graves rightly emphasizes Keats’s stronger debt to Thomas the Rhymer’s medieval ballad about an encounter with a faery woman. See Graves, 430.

13. McGann, 1002.

14. Susan Wolfson and David Simpson both comment on the implications of this narrative doubling. See Wolfson, "The Language of Interpretation in Romantic Poetry: 'A Strong Working of the Mind'," in *Romanticism and Language* (note 1), 38, and Simpson, *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (Totowa, N. J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979), 15–17.

15. S.v. "fetish," *OED*. See too Simpson's analysis of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century accounts of fetishism in *Fetishism and Imagination* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982), 11–12.

16. Freud, "Fetishism," in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love* (New York: Colliers Books, 1963), 214–19.

17. Charles de Brosses, *Du Culte des dieux fétiches* (Paris, 1760), 215–16. Quoted by Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination*, 14–15.

18. Simpson, *Irony and Authority*, 16–18; Bakhtin/Volosinov, "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Art," in *Freudianism: A Marxist Critique*, trans. I. R. Titunik (New York: Academic Press, 1976), 96.

19. Simpson, *Fetishism and Imagination*, 14.

20. Chartier's medieval poem does not include a garden of fatal fruits. This detail appears in several versions of Thomas the Rhymer's ballad. See especially Robert Jameson's edition, *Popular Ballads and Songs*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1806), 2:19. Noted by Graves, 430.

21. Scott, *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, ed. T. F. Henderson, 4 vols. (1902; reprint, Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1968), 4:85.

22. Kenneth Gross points out that whereas manna is an exilic, Old Testament food for prophets and their peoples, honey is mentioned in post-exilic and New Testament narratives as a food for prophets. By using both in his version of "an ancient ditty," Keats elaborates the range of prophecy granted Thomas the Rhymer by his lady.

23. Lévi-Strauss, *From Honey to Ashes*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1973), 39, 47, and 105–23.

24. Allott (note 11) lists these sources in her edition, 500–506. See also Sperry's (note 1) analysis of the significance of Keats's allusion to Spenser, 236–39.

25. See Stillinger, ed., *The Poems of John Keats*, 644.

26. See reviews published in the *Edinburgh Magazine*, the *British Critic*, and the *Quarterly Review*. Excerpted or quoted in full in G. M. Matthews, ed., *Keats: The Critical Heritage* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1971), 72, 92, 98–109, and 111–14.

27. For the relevant passages in Spenser see *The Faerie Queene*, in *The Works of Edmund Spenser*, eds. Edwin Greenlaw et al., 11 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1947), 1:26 (1.2.30) and 3:98 (3.7.17). See Teskey (note 3), 9 and 13.

28. Allott (note 11) points out Keats's echoes of Burton's *Melancholy* and mentions his visit to Sir John Leicester's gallery, 501.

29. For a discussion of the allegorical properties of *facies hippocratia*, a death mask or death's head, see Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 53.

30. Byron's comments appear in letters to John Murray, [Nov. ?] and 9 November 1820, *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 16 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1977), 7:217 and 225. Carlyle's complaint is recorded in *William Allingham's Diary*, ed. H. Allingham and D. Radford (1907; reprint, Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1967), 205; quoted by Matthews (note 26), 35. For Ricks's remarks see Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), 120.

31. In his edition of the letters Rollins cites H. Buxton Forman's notice of the *Hyperion* echo: "Instead of sweets, his ample palate took / Savour of poisonous brass and metal sick" (1:188–89).

32. Earl Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1953), 109–16, 120–21; Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1971), 67–93.

33. Ricks, 136–37.

34. Stillinger, *Poems of John Keats*, 312n. Noted by Gittings (note 7), 116.

35. Quoted in Matthews (note 26), 92–93 and 114. Keats's frequent use of nominalized verbs as adjectives in "To Autumn" and other poems composed in 1819 may reply to Croker's earlier charge by offering a mirror image of his Cockney tendency to verbalize nouns.

36. Extracts of Masson's 1860 essay appear in Matthews, 371.

37. George Puttenham calls catachresis the "figure of abuse" in *The Arte of English Poesie*, eds. Gladys D. Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1936), 180. Joseph Priestley calls it a "harsh" and "unnatural" figure in *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism*, eds. Vincent Bevilacqua and Richard Murphy (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1965), 185.

38. McGann argues that "the *Hamlet* allusion shows us that Keats means to share a mildly insolent attitude toward the literary establishment with his readers in *The Indicator*, who are presumed to represent an undebased literary sensibility" (1002). Ricks reiterates the attribution of the pseudonym to Hunt, 120–21.

39. Stillinger, *The Poems of John Keats*, 644, and Rollins, ed., *The Keats Circle*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1948), 2:119.

40. Edmund Blunden suggests that during 1819 "the bitterness [between Keats and Hunt] went away" in *Leigh Hunt: A Biography* (1930; reprint, New York: Archon, 1970), 143. Keats's remarks about Hunt in letters written between 1817 and 1820 suggest instead that their relationships was uneven throughout this period. See *L* 1:170; 1:191; 2:11; 2:301; 2:309; 2:313; 2:351.

41. In the same 1819 letter that includes the draft of "La Belle Dame sans Merci," Keats remarks concerning his review of Reynolds's parody of Wordsworth that he wished to "suit" it "to the tune of the examiner" (*L*, 2:95). By 1819, the "tune" (or tone) of this periodical seems to have become more moderate, in part because Hunt probably could not afford to be jailed again for his incendiary articles but also because Charles Lamb's extensive contributions to the *Examiner* during this period are characteristically moderate in tone.

42. *The Indicator*, No. 1 (October 13, 1819), 1.

43. *The Works of Edmund Spenser*, 8:161–73. Stillinger notes Keats's use of lines from *Muiopotmos* as the epigram for "Sleep and Poetry" in *Poems of John Keats*, 736.

44. *The Indicator*, No. 1 (October 13, 1819), 1. In the second issue (October 20, 1819), Hunt rather disingenuously compares the subject-matter of the two periodicals: "as far as the Editor is concerned, the Examiner is to be regarded as the reflection of his public literature, and the Indicator of his private.... The Examiner is his tavern room for political pleasantries, for criticism upon the theatres and living writers. The *Indicator* is his private room, his study, his retreat from public care and criticism, with the reader who chuses to accompany him" (9).

45. Ransom's examples are cited in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), s.v. "Perfect, True or Full Rhyme." See William Keach's remarks on Shelley's use of *rime riche* in *Shelley's Style* (New York: Methuen, 1984),

192 and 198, and John Hollander's on true *rime très riche* ("total homonymic rhyme") in *Vision and Resonance* (1975; reprint, New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1985), 118. Cited by Keach, 257n.

46. Croker's analysis of Keats's rhyme is reprinted in Matthews, 112. For a thoughtful account of Croker, Addison, Jeffrey, and Keats's rhymes, see Keach, "Cockney Couplets: Keats and the Politics of Style," *Studies in Romanticism* 25 (Summer 1986): 191–93.

47 Addison, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), No. 60 (May 9, 1711), 1:253–58. Keach notes that the "self/"elf" rhyme in "ode to a Nightingale" may recall Croker's attack on Keats's *bouts rimés* ("Cockney Couplets," 192).

48. Jeffrey's remark is reprinted in Matthews, 203.

## APPENDIX

La belle dame sans merci—

O what can ail thee knight at a[r]ms  
 Alone and palely loitering?  
 The sedge has withered from the Lake  
 And no birds sing!

O what can ail thee knight at a[r]ms  
 So haggard and so woe begone?  
 The squirrel's granary is full  
 And the harvest's done.

a

I see (~~death's~~) lilly on thy brow  
 With anguish moist and fewer dew,

a

And on thy cheeks (~~death's~~) fading rose  
 Fast Withereth too—

I met a Lady in the (~~Wilds~~) Meads  
 Full beautiful, a faery's child  
 Her hair was long, her foot was light  
 And her eyes were wild—

I made a Garland for her head,  
 And bracelets too, and fragrant Zone(s)



Letter to G. G. Keats, April 21 or 28, 1819

*La Belle Dame sans Merci:*  
*A Ballad*

1

O what can ail thee, knight at arms,  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge has wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

2

5 O what can ail thee, knight at arms,  
So haggard and so woe-begone?  
The squirrel's granary is full,  
And the harvest's done.

3

10 I see a lily on thy brow  
With anguish moist and fewer dew,  
And on thy cheeks a fading rose  
Fast withereth too.

4

15 I met a lady in the meads,  
Full beautiful, a fairy's child;  
Her hair was long, her foot was light,  
And her eyes were wild.

5

20 I made a garland for her head,  
And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;  
She look'd at me as she did love,  
And made sweet moan.

6

I set her on my pacing steed,  
And nothing else saw all day long,  
For sidelong would she bend, and sing  
A fairy's song.

## 7

25 She found me roots of relish sweet,  
 And honey wild, and manna dew,  
 And sure in language strange she said—  
 I love three true.

## 8

She took me to her elfin grot,  
 30 And there she wept, and sigh'd full sore,  
 And there I shut her wild wild eyes  
 With kisses four.

## 9

And there she lulled me asleep,  
 And there I dream'd—Ah! woe betide!  
 35 The latest dream I ever dream'd  
 On the cold hill's side.

## 10

I saw pale kings, and princes too,  
 Pale warriors, death pale were they all;  
 They cried—"La belle dame sans merci  
 40 Hath thee in thrall!"

## 11

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam  
 With horrid warning gaped wide,  
 And I awoke and found me here  
 On the cold hill's side.

## 12

45 And this is why I sojourn here,  
 Alone and palely loitering,  
 Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,  
 And no birds sing.

Brown transcript, ed. Stillinger (1978)

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCY

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,  
    Alone and palely loitering;  
The sedge is wither'd from the lake,  
    And no birds sing.

Ah, what can ail thee, wretched wight,  
    So haggard and so woe-begone?  
The squirrel's granary is full,  
    And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow,  
    With anguish moist and fever dew;  
And on thy cheek a fading rose  
    Fast withereth too.

I met a Lady in the meads  
    Full beautiful, a fairy's child;  
Her hair was long, her foot was light,  
    And her eyes were wild.

I set her on my pacing steed,  
    And nothing else saw all day long;  
For sideways would she lean, and sing  
    A fairy's song.

I made a garland for her head,  
    And bracelets too, and fragrant zone;  
She look'd at me as she did love,  
    And made sweet moan.

She found me roots of relish sweet,  
    And honey wild, and manna dew;



And sure in language strange she said,  
I love thee true.

She took me to her elfin grot,  
And there she gaz'd and sighed deep,  
And there I shut her wild sad eyes—  
So kiss'd to sleep.

And there we slumber'd on the moss,  
And there I dream'd, ah woe betide,  
The latest dream I ever dream'd  
On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings, and princes too,  
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all;  
Who cried, "La belle Dame sans mercy  
Hath thee in thrall!"

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloom  
With horrid warning gaped wide,  
And I awoke, and found me here  
On the cold hill side.

And this is why I sojourn here  
Alone and palely loitering,  
Though the sedge is wither'd from the lake,  
And no birds sing.

CAVIARE.

*Indicator text.*

MARJORIE LEVINSON

*'Hyperion' and 'The Fall of Hyperion'*

And thus there arises what at first sight seems to be the paradoxical situation that this projected, mythological world seems closer to consciousness than does the immediate reality. But the paradox dissolves as soon as we remind ourselves that we must abandon the standpoint of immediacy and solve the problem if immediate reality is to be mastered in truth. Whereas mythology is simply the reproduction in imagination of the problem in its insolubility.

Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. R. Livingstone

*One*

*Overview*

*'Hyperion,' 'The Fall of Hyperion,' 'Lamia'*

I'd like to frame a question that has seemed so eminently answerable we haven't bothered asking it. I pose the question so as to articulate the answer we silently advance and to challenge its governing assumptions. Why do we put both *Hyperion* poems in the same critical field as 'Lamia'? The first part of the answer involves the period of 'The Fall's' composition, an interval that coincides nearly exactly with 'Lamia's' compositional season (June, July 1819–September 1819). 'Hyperion' enters into the late-period discussion by way of 'The Fall'. The earlier work, or its specific difference from the later

---

From *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*. © 1988 by Basil Blackwell.

version, helps us establish ‘The Fall’'s structure and tendency. While many of us characterize ‘The Fall’ as ‘revisionary’, our practical operations tend to define the fragments as antithetical exercises bound by a common subject matter and by the binary differentials of their procedures. In the most literal sense, ‘Hyperion’ figures in our criticism as ‘The Fall’'s intellectual, formal, and stylistic point of departure.

Our critical constellating of the two *Hyperion* poems with ‘Lamia’ makes good sense, but a different kind of sense than we’re accustomed to developing. Elsewhere, I have argued that ‘The Fall’ is neither a revision (insofar as that word implies a one-way, one-text improvement), nor a *volte-face*, but rather a *revisionary* poem.<sup>1</sup> By that adjective, I invoke Bloom’s theory of influence and its intertextual power-plays. Where my account differs from Bloom’s own reading of the poems is first, in its focus on ‘The Fall’ and second, in its naming of ‘Hyperion’ as ‘The Fall’'s strong poem. To make these differences is also to designate ‘Hyperion’'s authorial persona (Keats himself at a particular writerly *niveau*), rather than Milton as ‘The Fall’'s precursor poet. Or, if we must preserve Milton as ‘The Fall’'s troublesome influence, we must also conceive that figure as ‘Hyperion’'s invention: a thoroughly reproduced Origin. Third, in place of the Hegelian logic underlying Bloom’s account, I propose the interruptive function of ‘The Fall’ and the determined inconclusion of the whole project. By its truncation, ‘The Fall’ interferes with the two-text dialectic, or with the rationally progressive, self-totalizing teleology promoted by that intertextual model. To read Keats’s epic fragments as moments within a single, discontinuous, and terminally arrested project is to situate ‘Hyperion’ as ‘The Fall’'s point of *return* as well as departure. The object of the later work is to effectuate the earlier, not escape it. The irresolution of ‘The Fall’, a foreclosure, executes a refusal of the form to which both works allude: that of the progress poem. The logic of the enterprise is better described as dyadic than dialectical. We are, of course, conversant with the virtues of the dyad for Keats; more important, we have explored the dangers of the sweet, dialectical solution.

By rewriting my earlier account of the *Hyperions*’ textual genetics in the different idiom of this book, I hope to explain the peculiar success and failure of the poems in terms of Keats’s general literary project: as we have seen, a social, psychic, and existential project. Where I had used Bloom’s revisionary ratios to define the *Hyperions*’ special intertextuality, I now employ the metaphor of translation, which includes, we know, the model of parody. Like Bloom’s protocol, the translation schema figures a strategy for a certain kind of canonicity, entailing a transformation of the Tradition in the interest of the present and its obligatory subversiveness (its originality, that is), and equally, in the service of the past: its constitution as an absolute Origin.

I have said that our criticism binds 'Hyperion' and 'The Fall' by their common subject matter and distinguishes them with respect to their antithetical ways of framing this material. Both poems are said to be about the Titanic–Olympian struggle: a theme of dynastic succession (or, from the 'trodden' side, genetic displacement). 'Hyperion', stylistically a naive, unself-conscious, and, in the idiom of the period, 'virile' work, concerns itself with the events, spectacle, and ethos of that mythic theme, while 'The Fall' entertains with a distinctively modern reflexiveness the meanings of that myth, which is positioned in the poem as a symbolic, archetypal structure rather than a culture-specific material. Roughly, then, we find in 'Hyperion' and 'The Fall' a concrete expression of a familiar epochal dualism: naive–sentimental, ancient–modern, mimetic–expressive, ethos–pathos (and, by an implication we shall explore below, male–female).

To rethink those antitheses and their encoded teleology by the translation logic we studied in the context of the two 'La Belle Dame' poems is to differentiate the *Hyperions* according to their respective subject-forms and contents. While we continue to identify *Paradise Lost* as 'Hyperion's' subject—topic and agency—we see that 'The Fall' takes 'Hyperion', that epic voice, for *its* hero. The very existence of 'The Fall' pinpoints the problem with 'Hyperion'. Specifically, as I'll show, it explains the sharp stylistic discrepancy between the unit formed by Books 1 and 2 of that poem, and Book 3. As we know, a subject is no subject for Keats unless it is also an object. Keats cannot use the expressive medium (say, the Miltonic sign), unless it is also a representational object: a signified. The double-distance Keats gains on Milton by composing 'The Fall' suggests that the assimilation of the authorizing Original is, in 'Hyperion', exemplary. So good is the translation that Keats forfeits the representational salient of the act, which is also the condition of his originality.

This construct, which might sound like the standard account of 'Hyperion's' abandonment (that is, Keats's rejection of its derivativeness), is, in fact, diametrically opposed to that reading. There is nothing derivative, nothing 'Miltonic' about 'Hyperion', and that is precisely its problem: it *is* Milton. We recall Keats's comment on 'Hyperion'—'Life to him [Milton] would be death to me'—a comment occurring in the context of Keats's struggle with 'The Fall'. The statement helps us see that the object of 'The Fall', its formal intention, is to realize by its self-signifying artifice the helplessly natural poem, 'Hyperion'. To think along these lines is to take seriously Keats's troubled description of 'The Fall' as a 'very abstract Poem'. By its determined conceptual character, 'The Fall' murderously represents 'Hyperion's' *material* sublime, making that inert goodness thus 'die into life', that 'original', 'bad' sort of life we have been studying. Keats's 'Miltonic'

epithet applies then, *just as he said it did*, to ‘*The Fall*’. That poem, which objectifies Milton’s voice while seizing its expressive virtue, is the expediently derivative exercise. Keats marks the representational salient by the literariness of his style, by the complex recursiveness of the narrative structure, and by the incorporation of multiple expressive Originals. The Dantesque character of ‘*The Fall*’ should be read neither as a rejection of ‘Hyperion’s’ Milton nor as a Bloomian swerve from that Origin. Dante’s signature is for Keats a way of representing Milton’s functional, *categorical* status in ‘*The Fall*’: that of the Master, or what we might call the (dis)enabling Original. Below we’ll consider Keats’s withdrawal from this scene of writing.

To argue that ‘Hyperion’ aborts because it’s too good for Keats’s purposes is, it would seem, to ignore the conspicuous vulgarity of Book 3. Alternatively, it is to describe the project of Book 3 as an attempt to vex the strong utterance of the first two books and by that reflexive disturbance (in the language of psychic dynamics, an autoerotic and masochistic move), to put the transparency of those books to work. Here, then, is the first stage of that ‘remodel[ing]’ Keats undertook more radically and on a larger scale in ‘*The Fall*’.

This alternate construct, which is, naturally, the one I advance, poses the question of ‘Hyperion’s’ irresolution. We have seen in our studies of ‘*St. Agnes*’ and ‘*La Belle Dame*’ how fruitfully Keats frigs his Imagination. Why, then, does he fail to bring off the operation with ‘Hyperion’? We may assume that in autumn 1818–April 1819, Keats was still experimenting with the techniques we’ve investigated. ‘*St. Agnes*’, with its writerly exercise, occurred at the very end of that span, just before Keats’s confession to Haydon that he was ‘not exactly on the road to an epic poem’. The subject and spirit of ‘*St. Agnes*’ are often construed as a reaction both to Tom’s death and to the deadlocked ‘Hyperion’. Moreover, Keats abandoned ‘Hyperion’ at just about the same time he was composing the first ‘*La Belle Dame*’. Not until 1820, with the *Indicator* revision, did Keats start solving in a critical fashion the problem of his ‘good’ derivativeness. That solution is, I believe, related to Keats’s practical experience with the *Hyperions* (and to the technical lessons of ‘*St. Agnes*’). Through the peculiarly overdetermined failure of ‘Hyperion’ and the similarly constrained success of ‘*The Fall*’, the meaning of Keats’s productive method—literally, its status as *means* to a complex end—became available to him.

It is the *incomplete* badness of ‘Hyperion’s’ Book 3 that betrays Keats’s less than capable grip on his creative process. Because Keats translates in *propria persona*, he cannot gain the needed distance on the first two books. Keats uses his own early voice—the weak, swooning, Johnny Keats voice—

to lift himself above 'Hyperion's' severe virility. He doesn't realize that in order to gain a reflexive position on his achievement, he must construct a specifically Miltonic idiom: not just a generic 'late' and / or 'personal' voice but a distinctly *parodic* narration. He cannot simply antithesize his first utterance, he must *materially conceptualize* it.

Keats began 'The Fall' in July 1819, three months after completing the Brown 'La Belle Dame', six months after 'St. Agnes', and almost a year before the *Indicator* revision. The letters of August 1819 are filled with Miltonic enthusiasm. Suddenly, in the letter of 21 September, there's a backlash; Keats violently rejects both Milton and his own talent for identification *and* parody. It would appear that Keats's abandonment of 'The Fall' (September 1819) is the consequence of that *ressentiment*. 'I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written but in the vein of art—I wish to devote myself to another sensation'. Keats's claim to have resisted Milton, a statement generally taken as a reference to 'The Fall's' irresolution, could also mean that he had recently given up '*Hyperion*' (April), a poem possessed by Milton's strong voice and lacking the Keatsian salient. (Keats referred to the two poems indifferently as 'my *Hyperion*'.) We read in the comment Keats's confession that, in undertaking 'The Fall', he had moved into a *self-consciously* derivative mode, had found the 'artfulness' of the critique unsatisfying, the 'abstraction' too strenuous, and had shifted his attention to 'Lamia', the twin project of the period and a very differently abstract sort of poem. There are, in addition to the textual genetics sketched above, strong formal reasons for configurating 'Hyperion' and 'The Fall', treated as independent texts, with 'Lamia'. There are also good reasons for coordinating 'Lamia' with *both Hyperions*, read by the translation logic sketched above and as a single exercise in self-actualizing parody.

We begin with the 'Hyperion'-'Lamia' connection. These poems which frame the 1820 volume are to that extent structurally aligned. Both represent attempts at 'unsmokeable' verse: 'Hyperion' in a grave, austere, and lofty vein, 'Lamia' in an urbane, ironic mode. Both poems use satire as a strategy for writerly distance and in both cases, the defense betrays by its form the conflictual material it was designed to fend off. In both poems, the satire amounts to an allegory on the topic of legitimacy.

'Hyperion' develops its mythologically idealized theme of dynastic revolution by way of associative structures so specific and unconventional as to suggest a topical interest at work. Hyperion, 'dweller on high', is, of course, first of the Sun Gods and thus, unlike his Olympian counterpart, a decidedly prehistorical figure. In Keats's poem, however, Hyperion is very strongly associated with an *ancien régime*, Egypt. The connection appears to

be unique to Keats. By contemporary notions of historical evolution, Egypt signified tyrannic, hieratic, and corrupt government: its genetic legitimacy the basis of its political illegality.

We give to these loose, cultural connections a certain edge by recalling that unlike Apollo, Hyperion has nothing to do with poetry or art in any of the sources available to Keats. Hyperion is mythographically related to Apollo only by reference to the sun, a relation completely suppressed by Keats's poem. This omission, along with Keats's accented narrative coupling of the gods, hints at an argument rather more specialized than the one articulated through the poem's official plot.

Alan Bewell has discerned within 'Hyperion's' prominent Egyptiana a general, Napoleonic allusion, the connection being Napoleon's reputation during the period as Egypt's cultural liberator: the agency by which her royal treasures were disseminated throughout the civilized western world.<sup>2</sup> Keats had, we know, seen some of these marvels at the British Institution.

Bewell's acute and important observation suggests a more developed allegorical burden. Hyperion, the Sun God, looks very much like an inscription of that symbol of a more recent and occidental old order: Louis Quatorze/Quinze. (Quite possibly, Keats's Egyptian setting serves to establish Ra—a Sun God with definite monarchical associations—as a mediating allusion.) The awful extravagance of Hyperion's palace underlines the east–west conceptual association.

One would not, of course, venture this reading without locating in Keats's Apollo a Napoleonic inscription, the phonetic resemblance (Apol–Napol) motivated by a narrative gesture. Apollo, that type of all things Greek, liberal, republican, and aesthetic, is in Keats's poem history's coming hero. In this context, we observe that 'Hyperion' departs most pointedly from Hesiod in Keats's failure to emphasize the lawfulness of the Olympian rebellion. In the traditional versions (Keats's sources, that is), the Olympians resist the Titans' usurpation of an authority properly descended to their offspring. To name Keats's different representation (a displacement of legitimate power, not a restoration of right government), a departure from tradition is to put the matter too mildly. By the formal economy of his poem, Keats implies that although historical necessity and natural law support the Olympian cause, authority is somehow on the side of the fallen Titans. What reader feels for Olympus? The old gods speak to us from what appears, by the Miltonic allusion, to be a morally fallen plane, but since Keats neither indicates their original guilt nor intimates their new corruption, we remember rather the injured dignity of Milton's devils than their hubris. And, as if by a kind of literal poetic justice, neither 'Hyperion' nor 'The Fall' consummates the dynastic transition. Hyperion remains on his throne. In

short, Keats urges us to focus the Olympians as usurpers even as he indicates their temporal and natural claims. In effect, he separates authority (Hyperion) from legitimacy (Apollo), giving the latter a bad—or rather, 'bad'—name.

A narrative departure of this kind and magnitude must illuminate the father–son, Original–original dynamics we have examined in the context of Keats's other romances and shall pursue below. At this point, I explain Keats's surprising emphasis on Apollo's felt illegitimacy as a way of tightening the connection between that new god and Napoleon, another wayward son in history's vanguard. By the Hyperion–Apollo (Louis–Napoleon) agon, Keats opposes Egypt to Greece, barbarism to classicism, repressive to progressive culture, abstract to organic principles, force to intellect, power to beauty, religion to art, slavery to freedom. It's not difficult to register the contemporary political resonance of this schema. What is hard is accounting for the bifurcated sympathy of Keats's poem, or what would translate into his ambivalence toward Napoleon. Keats's refusal to toe the urban-liberal party line on this matter was established some time ago, in an interesting essay by June Koch.<sup>3</sup> Below, we consider from a frankly critical viewpoint the function of this ambivalence.

\* \* \*

'Lamia's satiric component is at once a more restricted and a more profound affair. The poem opens with a meditation on dynastic displacement.

Upon a time, before the fairy [faery] broods  
 Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods,  
 Before king [King] Oberon's bright diadem,  
 Sceptre, and mantle clasped [clasp'd] with dewy gem,  
 Frighted away the Dryads and the Fauns  
 From rushes green, and brakes, and cowslipped [cowslip'd] lawns,

The passage places the action which follows—Hermes' amours and the story of Lamia: both her descent into history, a metaphysical break, and her Corinthian debut, a fallen passage—in the interval just before the Golden Age collapsed into an age of Gold. (Just before, we shall see, history supplanted myth, and commerce, Hermes' province, displaced direct exchange.) These lines describe in a most schematic fashion the transition from a naturally egalitarian community to a hierarchical, institutionally articulated formation; and, from easy, universal prosperity to the fetish form and its corresponding political structure. The progression is from Nature to



Culture, symbolized by the extremest form of power (the monarch), concentrated in the single image of royal possession: diadem, sceptre, mantle, gem. If this passage had a headnote, it would surely be 'For 'tis the eternal law / That first in *wealth* should be first in might.' Again, it's important to identify the period of the poetic action not as a secure Golden Age but as something like an interregnum, bracketed by Golden on the one side (myth, Nature, substance, pleasure) and Gold on the other (history, Culture, symbol, power).

This transitional period is the moment in which Hermes participates: or, that Hermes, that go-between god, textually defines. We begin to gloss that character and the episode in which he figures by remarking the general resemblance of this material to the dramatic *donnée* of 'The Cap and Bells', the poem Keats composed shortly after 'Lamia'. Like the Emperor Elfinan, hero of 'Cap and Bells', Hermes is as we meet him 'bent warm on amorous theft'.<sup>4</sup> Both highborn creatures are characterized by their interest in illicit liaisons with creatures of a lower order: a matter of mortal-immortal, fleshly-faery, common-royal sexual commerce. (The contemporary satiric thrust of 'The Cap and Bells' is explicit: its comic butt, the Prince Regent and his amorous escapades.)

This surprising resemblance between the broadly ironic Hermes episode and the very restricted satiric groundplot of 'The Cap and Bells' might remind us that those same liberals who defended the *political* 'natural son', Napoleon, denounced the *natural*, or genetically authorized Prince for his false and unlawful—that is, *unnatural*—vilification of Queen Caroline. It was, of course, the Queen's sexual constancy which the philandering Regent called in question. The meaning of the Elfinan-Hermes connection would seem to take shape as a rather abstract insight into sexual and civil power: varieties of natural rights, so to speak. Or, one way to construe Keats's apparently lighthearted, fanciful comment on Hermes' conniving accomplishment of his desire, 'Real are the dreams of Gods ...', is as a sincere and bitter reflection on that class of men—'Gods'—which alone and by virtue of its privilege (that is, everyone else's exploitation) can realize its dreams. To articulate that relatively located reading is to recall that for Keats, particularly at this time in his life, no theme could have been more immediate than the question of entitlement, both sexual and political (and no god so congenial to his interests as Hermes, associated with commerce, discourse, and sexual potency). In the affair of Queen Caroline's trial, Keats could find an excellent metaphor for his own social helplessness and a vehicle for critical inquiry into the political and ultimately, economic determinants of his most private concern: his love for Fanny. 'Lamia's' opening six lines outline a hermeneutic method (roughly, a theory of economic

determination); in the subsequent prefatory material (ll. 7–26), Keats introduces a contemporary political topic obviously suited to a method of that kind. It is my feeling that 'Lamia's 170-line introductory excursus articulates in a narrative fashion the text to which the rest of the poem relates as a dramatic demonstration. By what mechanisms and to what extent, Keats asks, are love and money, pleasure and power, consumption and production, related in contemporary life? This is a question we shall consider at length and as the concluding discussion of this book.

\* \* \*

The satiric edge of both poems, 'Hyperion' and 'Lamia', quickly dulls. The problem concerns both the content of the satire and its defensive function. Generally speaking, Keats's textual engagement with contemporary political issues develops as a line of resistance against the more primary processes that were always endangering his special freedom. We notice; however, that the topical themes of both 'Hyperion' and 'Lamia' center on questions of legitimacy, authority, origination, and desire. Both defenses, in other words, reintroduce the very nexus of Keats's psychically enacted class conflicts.

Above, I observed Keats's ambivalence toward the Olympian succession; and as we well know, 'Lamia' plays havoc with the affective distributions which define the romance form in its classic (Manichean) manifestation. By their doubled sympathies, both poems betray the contradiction which governs Keats's writing. I refer to the self-fashioning exercise plotted throughout this book: a process whereby 'having' is equated with 'being' and where 'having' describes, paradoxically, a state of self-alienation—a parody, as it were, of genuine ownership and a corruption of *bona fide* 'being'.

I have described Keats's capable position as that of the perverse son: the boy who appropriates the father's talent and preserves its virtue by keeping it alienated. He maintains this talent as the sign of the father: a dangerous supplement to the father's lawful and particular being, and to those properties which are continuous with his person (that is, qualities and expressions). In the canonically central romances, these paradoxes translate into varieties of discursive tension, the collective function of which is to station Keats and to suspend his voice in the ways we have discussed. In the *Hyperions* and 'Lamia', where the inscription of Keats's class contradictions tends to be *narrative* rather than discursive, it is not poise that we feel but something more like deadlock. However, inasmuch as Keats's poise represents a particular *management* of contradiction, the stalemate of the later poems could indicate less of a *need* for management, or, Keats's better

control. We have seen how, in the 'La Belle Dame' poems and 'St. Agnes', the real, contrived, and signified tensions get mobilized in such a way as to constitute textually a speaking subject. In 'The Fall' and 'Lamia', conversely, Keats, a textual effect, seems to be an already consolidated subject, painfully straddling a genetic fence: treaders and trodden, sons and fathers, devouring and devoured.

There is, however, a difference between 'The Fall' and 'Lamia': indeed, a difference between 'Lamia' and all the works treated here. I refer to the greater self-consciousness with which point of view is handled, and its relative independence of those textual interests that typically motivate in an *aesthetic* way the business of perspective. Keats seems in this late work to thematize his enacted stylistic protocol. We could also say that 'Lamia' discovers to Keats the difference between what we have called 'capable negativity' and the virtue he denominated 'negative capability'. In this poem, we feel Keats positioning his best solutions as the core of the problem.

This is a dangerously Romantic proposition. I'd like to elaborate it in such a way as to force out the conditions of its veracity. With respect to the critical detachment of Keats's last romance, one's impulse is to reason that only a person who *has* a self can negate it. To argue thus is to identify 'Lamia' as the enlightened, self-critical product of Keats's exercise in self-fashioning. One could even to some extent 'materialize' that argument by observing that the capacity to suspend self-definition is the privilege of those who inherit a self, or who can afford truly to become their invented self, which means, as we know, ceasing to own it.<sup>5</sup>

This reading model is not consistent with the textual facts. We have repeatedly seen Keats produce an authorial self by a sustained exercise in self-negation. This is to say, we really must put the cart if not before the horse, then alongside it. We cannot postulate two sequential Keatses: the poet who constructs an ideal, and to that extent, mystified self, and the philosopher who, by taking that self and its myths apart, creates a new kind of consciousness, one that is proof against illusion.

This textually derived critique of the Romantic argument for Keats's enlightenment is consistent with the general interpretive pattern of this book. Throughout, we have found in Keats's peculiar social place (that is, an imperative to produce his life in a certain way) the condition for a special kind of knowledge. I have distinguished this knowledge not by its content so much as its formal relation as 'knowledge' to all that is conventionally considered 'non-knowledge': or, action, feeling, experience.<sup>6</sup> We may allow Keats to lift himself by his own bootstraps, so long as we keep the eminence thus attained within the activity curve that produces it; and, so long as we see

that this movement and its products are supposed for Keats—realized *through* him—by his given, positional way of focusing some contradictions of his time and place.

\* \* \*

What binds 'The Fall' to 'Lamia' is primarily a matter of technique. Above, I suggested that 'The Fall' positions 'Hyperion' as its subject: in structuralist terms, its hero. 'Hyperion' is also 'The Fall's' object: the alienated item upon which it reflects. I have described this dynamics as a process of self-translation. Another way to conceive it is by reference to the masturbation logic. In this context, we recall the double perverseness of Keats's literary reflexiveness: his substitution of the canonical phallus for his own, given talent. What distinguishes 'The Fall' and 'Lamia' from the poems we've already treated is that here, Byron's insult is, *for the first time*, a technically accurate assessment. The image projected by both poems' formal activities is that of a writer frigging his *own* Imagination. (As I've noted, Byron's verb, 'to frig'—in today's English, 'fuck'—retains the older meaning, 'to rub or chafe', 'to agitate the limbs' [OED]: that is, to masturbate in a transitive sense.) The reflexive operations of 'The Fall' are performed upon 'Hyperion', Keats's properly authorized/authored utterance. Similarly, 'Lamia's' Hermes material—Keats's production of his own mythic Origin—is textually situated as a point of departure and, as a discourse to which the body of the poem systematically alludes, it is also a point of return.

Putting a different slant on the matter, we could say that in these late poems, Keats produces for the first time his own means of production. Like Chatterton, Keats undertakes the invention of his own, authorizing Original, the difference being Keats's pronounced return upon that Master-voice and thus, the production of his originality. The process is familiar to us from 'La Belle Dame'. By contrast, however, 'Hyperion' so thoroughly assimilates its Miltonic inspiration as to figure a *natural* Origin, preempting all other firsts. Below, we consider the meaning to Keats of this difference: psychically, the difference between internalization and introjection.

*Two*  
*Readings*  
*'Hyperion'*

'Hyperion's' failure to reach an ending is not without its semantic charge, but the poem's hardworking imperfection—its *anti*-closure—occurs internally. The discrepancy between Books 1 and 2 on the one hand, and Book 3 on the

other is sharp and encompassing, involving style, structure, thought, and feeling. One can say with surprisingly little exaggeration that the entire Hyperion project unfolds in the gap between Books 2 and 3.

Bate, that fine stylist, characterizes 'Hyperion' as an 'imposing fragment', sustained by its Miltonic inspiration through Books 1 and 2 but exhibiting a marked falling off in style in Book 3.<sup>7</sup> 'Falling off' is not perhaps the best description of what happens in Book 3. The phrase implies a continued but unsuccessful endeavor at the special grandeur of the first two books. What we have, however, is something so bad from a poet who has just proved himself so *good*, that we may infer him to be working a decidedly different vein. What looks like an abysmal failure at the Miltonic sublime can also be read as the embrace of a stylistic norm whose salient is precisely its belatedness: sentimentality, reflexiveness, abstraction. (One could, of course, construe the departure as a modulation toward 'The Fall', a construction consistent with the above account insofar as we read 'The Fall' as 'Hyperion's' parodic effectuation.) If we want to maintain the idea of a lapse, we should emphasize the deliberateness of the desuetude.

The transition occurs in the narrative move from Hyperion to Apollo. By the binary logic of the poem, this shift from Titans to Olympians signifies an advance from past to present, mimesis to expression, narrative to lyric voice, epic to romance. The change does not, however, develop in so comfortably teleological a fashion as the schema suggests. What *should* take a progressive form (categorically, ancient to modern, classic to romantic, action to consciousness) is, in the poem, a manifest regression. We explain this effect by the inauthenticity of address in Book 3. The Romantic voice of that book is better characterized as Romanticizing. Its circular, solipsistic urgency interrupts the classic poise of the opening books and by contrast to that stylistic transparency, assumes a distinctly feeble, interested look. By its excess and insincerity (what one might call a vulgar, as opposed to a philosophic self-consciousness), the narration of Book 3 forfeits its status as formal equivalent to, much less improvement, on the genuine classicism of the opening books. In effect, Keats opposes a genuine Greek artifact *not* to its nineteenth-century counterpart, but to a bad, contemporary *imitation* of such an object. Keats's juxtaposition makes sense only at the level of categorical thought. To put this another way, the *effect* of the comparison is to isolate from each expression its style, and to position the work itself, concrete and actual, as a representation of that reified style.

That effect is consistent with the practical task of Book 3: namely, to break the spell of the first two books' success. By the exaggerated subjectivity of its portraiture, Book 3 *represents* the largeminded, serene impersonality of

the characterization, Books 1 and 2, much as the 'falsetto' octet of 'Chapman's Homer' *represents*—brings into being—the genuine 'virility' of the sestet. It would appear from Book 3 that the image of Saturn, Book 1, lines 1–14, is an emblem for the manner and meaning of the opening books. One reads in his trance the morbidity of that correctness: the penalty for authentic discourse.

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale  
 Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,  
 Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star,  
 Sat grey-haired [gray-haired] Saturn, quiet as a stone,  
 Still as the silence round about his lair;  
 Forest on forest hung about [above] his head  
 Like cloud on cloud. No stir of air was there,  
 Not so much life as on a summer's day  
 Robs not one light seed from the feathered [feathered] grass,  
 But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest.  
 A stream went voiceless by, still deadened more  
 By reason of his fallen divinity  
 Spreading a shade;[:] the Naiad 'mid her reeds  
 Pressed [Pressed] her cold finger closer to her lips.

Saturn defines the realm of silence and slow time, the organic world presented by the balladeer in 'La Belle Dame'. Because this is the order of being, in permanent parallel, as it were, with the realm of negation, it is also monochronic. Here, where there is no morning, afternoon, and evening—no differentials because no representation—there is also no temporal passage which is not repetition: no history, thus, nor meaning as we know it. Saturn, seated at the centre of this zero-degree, generates the dead realm, the spatial expression of his trance. Its thick, obstructive atmosphere is his emanation, its dreaming forests (ll. 6, 7; 74–5), the dark vegetation of his own brain. The discourse of the opening passage compels us to register the continuity between maker and image: the organicism, one might say, of Saturn's invention. We experience this natural expressiveness not, obviously, as an accomplishment but as the concrete equivalent of the god's feeble-mindedness. While the passage is, of course, a *tour de force*, its virtuosity is not in the Keatsian vein which we have exposed, a fact which the contemporary reviewers were delighted to observe. The force of the passage under discussion is a function of its mediated symbolic transparency, a figured collapse of subject and object, manner and means. In other words, the style of the passage executes the very fusion described by Saturn and his

sunk realm, but because this effect is framed as an exercise in imitative form, Saturn's weakness becomes Keats's strength.

Still, to focus this anomalous excellence within the critical field we've been developing (and with attention to the treachery of Book 3) is to guess that the silence of this realm, its predominant feature, reflects the cost to Keats of a literary goodness modelled on Saturn's organic expression. 'But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest.' As we know, the naturally inherited letter or 'leaf'—the Tradition, correctly entertained—was, for Keats, both a dead and a murderous letter: inert on its own behalf and preempting all new, original marks. A Milton positioned in this fashion (for Milton is clearly the tutelary genius of this passage) is a dead voice twice over: already an echo, 'still deadened more'. One meaning of this assimilative mode unfolds in lines 15–21. Saturn's 'old right hand lay nerveless, listless, dead, / Unsceptred ...' The description is powerfully concrete, and what it most concretely inscribes is the image of impotence. Saturn's limp, unsceptred state signifies the cost of a healthy relation to the authorial alter ego: abandonment to the desire for full identification. To assimilate the Miltonic 'leaf', 'hand', or 'sceptre' in this fashion is, clearly, to lose that phallic virtue as an instrument of defense and display. 'Life to him [Milton] would be death to me.' 'Hyperion' offers no sharper demonstration of this confession than the opening twenty-one lines. To coordinate this influence issue with the sexual anxieties concentrated in Saturn's sad relaxation is to see that 'Hyperion's' masculinity (a virtue widely remarked in the contemporary reviews and pertaining exclusively to the first two books) is not power and accomplishment to Keats but impotence and death.<sup>8</sup> Books 1 and 2, those complete authorial wish-fulfillments, prove that for Keats to live in and through Milton (as opposed to the narcissistic Milton-in-Keats dynamic) is, like Chatterton's solution, final.

We return to Keats's richly telling complaint: 'Life to him would be death to me.' To give life to Milton, as by 'Hyperion's' innocent reproduction of his discourse, is to kill off the whole Keats canon: to destroy the virtue of its contradictions, the greatness of its badness. Moreover, when we turn the phrase inside out—an inversion invited by the parallel syntax—we learn that a Milton executed by the textuality attempted in 'Hyperion's' Book 3 and accomplished in 'The Fall' is the condition of Keats's authorial existence. One recalls in this context Keats's comment on the pleasure he felt in composing 'Hyperion'. 'I have no identity, meditating saturn [*sic*] and Ops.' What the letter presents as a delicious abandon ('easeful death' is the phrase that comes to mind) is, in the poem, a differently accented affair, from which Keats withdraws with the same urgency evinced by the seventh stanza of the Nightingale Ode and the aggressive foreplay/forepleasure of 'St. Agnes'.

As I've said, the stylistic vulgarity of Book 3 signifies Keats's attempt to vex his own large utterance. There's no need, I think, to demonstrate that largeness. Let Byron's astonished approval of the opening books—their calm, masculine power—stand as a testimony to their perfectly unKeatsian (and unRomantic) achievement. The interesting and timely task is to plot the project of Book 3, which I shall do at some length. Before undertaking that stylistic analysis, we should note a structural symmetry between the first and third books. I have read Saturn's fearful composure as an emblem of the undefended Miltonic dreaming of Books 1 and 2, or of its special meaning to Keats. Similarly, the Apollo we meet in Book 3 is not only the Keatsian persona (an identity confirmed by 'The Fall's' nested narrations), but the very symbol of that book's perversely authorized discourse. 'There is something too effeminate and human in the way in which Apollo receives the exaltation which his wisdom is giving him. He weeps and wonders somewhat too fondly ...' Hunt's critique (which hastens to redeem Apollo from this initial self-indulgence) responds not only to the substantive characterization, lines 88ff, but more acutely, to the rhetorical reflexiveness of the whole book. In the most general terms, we explain the soggy of Apollo's discourse as a problem of address. Apollo is not, clearly, engaged dialectically by his Muse. His utterance, an abandonment to the rich sensation of speech (the feeling of a 'white melodious throat/ Throbb[ing] with ... syllables'), describes by displacement the form of a fantasy. We encountered this full-throated (masturbatory) dream in the context of 'St. Agnes' (Madeline's swelling silence), and noted its virtuous contradiction: the short-circuiting of expression the *condition* of reflexive eloquence, the real ineffectiveness the condition of felt vitality. Those readers who would affirm the intersubjectivity of Apollo's speech might meditate the character of Apollo's auditor, Mnemosyne: she who already knows all that Apollo is about to utter, who has seen all the spectacles he would depict. Like Psyche ('pardon that thy secrets should be sung / Even into thy own soft-conched ear'), Mnemosyne typifies Keats's ideal interlocutor. Knowing what he knows, prepossessing his very words and figures, Mnemosyne, whose divinity guarantees her categorical alterity, is a device for the production of psychic dissonance. She enables that special dialogism that is the condition of Keats's full-throated utterance.

Apollo weeps and wonders fondly, but his self-interrogation evinces a respectable logic. He wants to know what's wrong with him: why *should* he feel cursed and thwarted 'when the liegeless air yields to [his] step aspirant'? Apollo wonders why Nature's unforced courtesy, sign of his marvelous new authority, gives him no pleasure.



By the Keats–Apollo superposition, we infer that a liegeless air cannot satisfy a creature who is nothing without the liege–vassal, Original–original, Good–bad ratios. Keats must find his freedom in contradiction and constraint. Apollo’s mournful query ironically confirms his accession to power, a metamorphosis from youth to liege. ‘Goddess benign, point forth some unknown thing.[.] / Are there not other regions than this isle?’ We, who have read Books 1 and 2, see that this is the complaint, ‘*in truth*’ (my emphasis), of ‘one who once had wings’. The utterance belongs to a poet who knows his strong self (the narrator of Books 1 and 2, fledged by Milton), and refuses it. Here is the lamentation of a newly realized god, who intones to the universe ‘bethou me’ and finds that nothing can resist his strong voice. Even Hyperion trembles at the sound of this ‘new chord’. A poet who finds himself fully in possession of his precursor’s power, a son whose paternal supplementation has evolved into a plain substitution: these creatures, victims of their own victories; are the subject of Book 3.<sup>9</sup> By this line of argument, we illuminate Keats’s departure from Hesiod, explained above as an expression of ambivalence toward the progressive figure of Napoleon. The authority of the old regime is the condition for the bad strength of the new. Napoleon’s originality does not materialize outside his relation to Origins, or, to what must be maintained in that ideal aspect by those who would, paradoxically, cleave to the conqueror.

In a note to line 12, Book 3, Allott records Keats’s echo of *Paradise Lost* I:550–1, ‘the Dorian mood / Of Flute and soft Recorders’, lines marked in Keats’s Milton edition with this note: ‘The light and shade ... the sorrow, the pain, the sad-sweet melody ...’ Keats’s association to Milton’s ‘penseroso’ state, and specifically, the ‘sad-sweet’ coupling with its resonance to ‘pleasant pain’ and other familiar Keatsian oxymorons, accents the working perverseness of the narration: its Romantic-baroque quality.

Indeed, the whole invocation (ll. 1–28) announces a return to the negatively capable posture. Keats, who candidly speaks to himself in addressing his Muse, declares himself ‘weak to sing such tumults dire’ as the Titans suffer. He recommends to himself the minor key, pathetic rather than tragic accents: ‘A solitary sorrow best befits / Thy lips, and antheming a lonely grief’. The most casual reader observes in Books 1 and 2 an author powerful to sing his Titanic themes; the confession of weakness is, of course, a false confession and a power play of a familiarly indirect kind. Keats is trying, in lines 10ff, to recover a subordination he has surpassed. The wish is to retreat from linear, masculine song into ‘soft warble’, ‘sad-sweet melody’: or into that end-stopped, movement-in-place sort of discourse (‘wandering in vain about bewildered shores’) in which we have located Keats’s enabling stratagem.

The narrator immediately proceeds to accomplish that wish by dedicating his song, already authored by his Muse, to 'the father [Father] of all verse', in this way reconstituting himself a son. The dependence, illegitimacy, and self-contradiction plainly surface in that litany of 'let's. The locution, which belongs to the rhetoric of power, sounds decidedly puerile following the authoritative verbal *display* of Books 1 and 2. As for the pleasures solicited by the hymn,

Let the rose glow intense and warm the air,  
 And let the clouds of even and of morn  
 Float in voluptuous fleeces o'er the hills;  
 Let the red wine within the goblet boil[,]  
 Cold as a bubbling well; let faint-lipped [lipp'd] shells[,]  
 On sands, or in great deeps, vermilion turn  
 Through all their labyrinths; and let the maid  
 Blush keenly, as with some warm kiss surprised [surpris'd]

these clearly evince the immature sensuality familiar to us from Keats's early poetry. What is summoned is warmth, softness, and a titillating indirection: the pleasure of foreplay by the device of discursive forepleasure. The visionary place is described as a 'covert', 'retired cave', 'green recess'; itself an 'embowered' zone, it is stuffed with poplars, lawn-shading palms, and song-laden beeches. Coziness and plenitude are its preeminent attributes. Apollo ('where was he, when the Giant of the Sun / Stood bright, amid the sorrow of his peers') is the fit denizen of this regressive domain. Keats introduces Apollo as one who has just 'left his mother fair / And his twin-sister sleeping in their bower'. The description, which gives us a figure defined by the mother and her nest, distinctly presents to us the very idea of the boy. This particular boy, who reminds us of Blake's transitional symbols (Lyca, Thel), is, like those figures, symbolically amplified by association with a transitional moment: 'And in the morning twilight wandered forth ... The nightingale had ceased [ceased], and a few stars / Were lingering in the heavens, while the thrush / Began calm-throated'. Again, we note the inscription of Keats's enablingly oxymoronic, and also restricted position: the both-and/neither-nor state. The middle station.<sup>10</sup> Apollo encounters his world through 'half-shut suffused eyes'. Assisted / obstructed by this dark glass, Apollo 'with eager guess began to read / Perplexed [Perplexed], the while melodiously he said[:]' Were his eyes dry, wide open, and trained directly upon the goddess and her 'purport', Apollo would be, presumably, in a position to *know* and *declare*, rather than 'guess' and reflexively describe Mnemosyne's

meaning. This is to say, the freedom of the ‘perplexed’ reading and telling would not be available.

What I’m driving at is the virtue of the handicap, or the special power—a sponsored freedom—afforded by Apollo’s self-mystification. One cannot but feel that the flow of melodious surmise which swirls about, precipitating no question and brooking no closure, only interruption, is a function of Apollo’s voluntary constraint. Mnemosyne, who characterizes Apollo’s song by its painfully pleasurable effect (l. 66) upon the ‘vast / Unwearing ear of the whole universe’, formulates Apollo’s sad-sweet experience. In his pleasant pain of speaking, we hear the ‘new chord’: a surpassing of the early gods, or of their large, firm utterance. Mnemosyne’s question, ‘Is’t not strange / That thou shouldst weep, so gifted?’ answers itself. Apollo weeps *because* of his gift, just as his access of power over the otherwise ‘liegeless air’ is to him both curse and impediment. (By reference to the antinomial meaning of ‘liege’ [‘vassal bound to feudal allegiance and service; feudal superior to whom allegiance and service are due’], Apollo’s mastery is also his servitude.) Apollo solicits the Muse to relieve him of his new virtue by finding in the universe ‘some unknown thing’. He seeks, of course, a new Master: the condition of that structural dissonance required for his ongoing song. ‘Where is power? / Whose hand, whose essence, what Divinity [divinity], / Makes this alarum in the elements ...’ The question executes an alienation of power; by posing, it, Apollo injures his own strong hand. Thus does he recover his ‘aching ignorance’ and the prolific tension that attends it.

Apollo’s decisive change of voice (l. 111) appears to be triggered by Mnemosyne’s silence. ‘Mute thou remainest—mute! Yet [yet] I can read / A wondrous lesson in thy silent face’. The emphasis suggests that Apollo owes his transfiguration to Mnemosyne’s perfect resistance; the ‘yet’ should be a ‘thus’. In the goddess’s unbreachable negativity, Apollo discovers the ‘essence’, ‘Divinity’, ‘power’ which his own new accomplishment (the ‘birth / Of such new tuneful wonder’) had, he feared, annihilated. Apollo does not become a god ‘through his knowledge of human suffering’ but rather through his discovery of an irreducible order of being.<sup>11</sup> History, Apollo learns from the remembering Muse, is the virtuous pharmakon. What it offers is the ‘sheer puzzle of pain’, the very *form* of irrecuperable otherness: the exact opposite of meaning. The deifying wine, a ‘bright elixir peerless’ (by that punning adjective, Keats again invokes the power of blindness; one thinks, perhaps, of ‘viewless wings’), is also a draught of hemlock. It brings about a tumult ‘most like the struggle at the gate of death; / Or liken still to one who should take leave / Of pale immortal death, and with a pang ... Die into life’. Apollo’s

remedy, the cure for his self-possession, is the ingestion of that which resists humanization, remaining stupidly objective: a catalogue of 'Names, deeds, grey legends, dire events, rebellions, / Majesties, sovran voices, agonies'. These facts—the sheer chronicle of history—when 'Pour[ed] into the wide hollows of [Apollo's] brain', put him in 'fierce convulse', 'anguish[ing]': 'His very hair ... / Kept undulation round his eager neck'. We recognize in the form of Apollo's apotheosis that circular urgency which signals the Keatsian project: a coming without a going. Naturally, Keats cannot conclude the action; he cannot *consummate* the ravishment by producing the transfigured Apollo. The new god is kept anguishing and liminal: unclothed but not yet mantled with the new authority. 'Forever panting', as it were. Hyperion, the old god and somehow the very statute of that negativity Apollo requires for his perverse power, remains in place. Literally, Book 3 'disturbs' his realm—Books 1 and 2—but it will not surpass that dominion. The relation of Book 3 to the preceding books is that of a touching tension.

*Three  
Readings  
'The Fall of Hyperion'*

We should expect to find some striking stylistic contrasts between 'Hyperion's' Book 3 and the general manner of 'The Fall', insofar as their projects, while they are comparable in intention, differ sharply with respect to strategy. The task of Book 3 is to antithesize the first two books and by that contrived tension, to restore to Keats his warm and capable hand, otherwise possessed by Milton. The job of 'The Fall' is to *represent* that possession—a paralysis—and thus to effectuate while undoing it. 'The Fall's' (mis)translation of 'Hyperion' establishes that poem as an Original tragic moment: a displacement, this, of Milton's large utterance. At the same time, the Miltonic supplementation reinstates Keats's capable negativity with this difference: the master he serves and disturbs is, now, his own early words.

We can see, for example, that by discontinuing 'The Fall', Keats at once truncates *Paradise Lost* and formally motivates 'Hyperion'. That fragment suddenly emerges as a noble ruin, the complete formal necessity of which explains (inferentially) its resistance to time's ravages. By reference to this absolute Origin (to this phenomenology, that is), *Paradise Lost* starts looking *Miltonic*: prolix, diffuse, and literary, as compared to the concentrated power of 'Hyperion' as represented by 'The Fall'. That poem's stylistic allusion to Dante is not to be read as an antithetical gesture but as a purchase on 'Hyperion's' Milton: the means of producing a Miltonic voice.

Further, and, as I mentioned, the very presence in 'The Fall' of multiple authorities cancels out the totalizing properties of any one canonical world. We will see that the perverse but by now familiar form of intertextuality played out by these fragments requires the inconclusion of 'The Fall'. Not only does that poem thereby represent 'Hyperion's' ruined state, but thus does 'The Fall' maintain its attachment to 'Hyperion', its strong Original. 'The Fall' can only live by making 'Hyperion' continuously die into life: literally, into 'The Fall', which becomes as 'reality' to 'Hyperion's' 'representation'.

'*Hyperion*' 'lives' in 'The Fall' as a relative, natural, transparent beauty ceaselessly ravished / represented by a cold truth; like the 'Grecian Urn', 'The Fall' is a museum with one work inside. It is, of course, only the difference between the container and the contained which creates those ontological distinctions, beauty–truth, signifier–signified. The virtue and mechanism of this difference are coded in the celebrated induction to the poem: the opening eighteen lines.

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave  
 A paradise for a sect,[;] the savage too  
 From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep  
 Guesses at Heaven; [heaven:] pity these have not  
 Traced [trac'd] upon vellum or wild Indian leaf  
 The shadows of melodious utterance.  
 But bare of laurel they live, dream, and die;  
 For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,  
 With the fine spell of words alone can save  
 Imagination from the sable charm  
 And dumb enchantment. Who alive can say, [say]  
 'Thou art no poet; may'st not tell thy dreams'?  
 Since every man whose soul is not a clod  
 Hath visions, and would speak, if he had loved [loved]  
 And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.  
 Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse  
 Be poet's or fanatic's will be known  
 When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave.

The dimension of this passage I wish to develop is its preoccupation with writing, conceived not as an act of knowledge, expression, or communication, but as a negation of deep truths and wishes. The problem posed by this passage is how to tell one's dreams without losing oneself in the telling, the very problem addressed in 'St. Agnes'. *Not* to tell the

dream—or, what is the same thing, to tell it correctly: in its own language or in the spirit of the original—is to resign oneself to the order of organic repetition: Saturnian silence, sylvan historiography. The way to resist 'the sable charm and dumb enchantment' of natural dreaming and its 'melodious utterance' is to frame, corrupt, and estrange the vision, as by the medium of a material 'shadow' language, 'traced upon vellum'. The alternative to the sweet speech ('dumb enchantment') of fanatic and savage is, Keats declares, *writing*. Indeed, the narrator, who designates his hand his scribe (l. 18), answers the question which opens line 16. The following verse can only be 'poetry', not just because it is written but because it is written by an agency, 'hand', which is claimed as a property and, thus, (dis)owned by its generative source, whose own natural authority, consequently, is put at risk.

'But bare of laurel they live, dream, and die'. The thought of this line does not, as it might seem, concern material preservation: the production of a dream record to save Imagination from historical oblivion. Poetry's virtue—the virtue of the *written* trace—resides in the special artifice of the form, a function of its special alienation. 'Telling' is equated in the passage with 'the fine spell of words'. The pun on 'spell,' one of Keats's favorites, accents for us the materiality of Keats's general linguistic conception. We are familiar with his invention of a multiply estranged language, defense against the longing for 'paradise', 'heaven', natural escape. The 'spell' of poetry is not a releasing magic. It is, like most enchantments, a thralldom: in this case, the secured freedom of a cage of letters severed from subjectivity, intention, and living presence.

The difference between the dream of poet and fanatic is in the telling, and the telling difference is a question of self-alienation. 'Every man ... [h]ath visions' and would *speak*, if he had loved [lov'd] / And been well nurtured in his mother tongue' (my emphasis). *Not* every man, however, can tell his visions, representing the thing and the conditions of that representing in the selfsame action.<sup>12</sup> Only the poet can *practically* destabilize the mimetic and expressive tendencies of his tongue. This is, one might say, the privilege of the *not* so 'well-nurtured'. By the binary poet–fanatic relation, Keats presents this reflexively alienating skill in terms of cultural sophistication: the more advanced the culture, the more self-estranged. 'Hyperion' marks out the 'fanatic' moment to 'The Fall's' 'poetry'. (Generally speaking, 'The Fall' objectifies 'Hyperion's' essential and ideal narrative mode. That poem's absolute truths are historically relativized.) This evolutionary matrix operates a rationalization. Thus does Keats try to frame logically the deep perverseness of the 'Hyperion'–'Fall' relationship. He succeeds, of course, only in reproducing that bad logic.

The proper beginning of 'The Fall', 'Methought I stood where trees of every clime ...', places the narrator in an abandoned bower that, by its strong resonance to *Paradise Lost*, Book 5, suggests Keats's own Miltonic idyll: namely, 'Hyperion', Books 1 and 2. Structurally, we have a continuation of the bower scene, Book 3 'Hyperion'. The narrator-poet, a post-Apollonian figure, would seem to be observing the exhaustion of the Miltonic place. The grounds are deserted, and as if to represent the vacancy, Keats features in that precinct a collection of 'remnants', 'refuse'. The narrator drinks deeply of a beverage remaining from some first feast and subsequently 'sipped by the wandered [wandered] bee': a sort of double-leftover. 'That full draught', defined strictly in terms of the attrition it has suffered, is, we are told, 'parent of [Keats's] theme'. We glimpse in this oxymoronic figure of subtractive completion something very like a crossing of the supplement with the pharmakon. Like Mnemosyne's 'elixir' in 'Hyperion', the 'full draught' (a partial potion/perfect portion) initiates a dying-into-life process.<sup>13</sup>

I'm suggesting that we attend to the doubleness of Keats's word 'draught'. By the argument of this chapter, 'Hyperion', that fully accomplished draft, is in a very real sense 'The Fall's' parent. By drinking that po[r]tion, Keats casts off his 'unwilling life', the Miltonic possession, and enters upon a new form of being. 'I started up / As if with wings ...' The action sequence describes a process of introjection, the sort we've seen Keats perform with a range of canonical figures. The object seized by 'The Fall', however, is Keats's *own* Original: his own verbal power, alienated and recovered, its Otherness reconstituted (we might say, looking ahead, its naturalness fetishized). 'Hyperion', that 'domineering potion', is just the Master that Apollo/Keats has been seeking. The 'wings' upon which both poets ascend are, naturally, their own appendages, but they acquire by their contrived strangeness a saving virtue.<sup>14</sup>

Lifted by 'Hyperion', his own altered discourse, the poet finds himself transported to another sunk realm: another collection of literary effects. In contrast, however, to the creaturely and organic grace of the Edenic-Miltonic place, this domain, which can only be entered perversely, signifies Culture under the aspect of the tomb. The representation has about it something of the pyramid: better yet, the museum. In this dead space which houses a collection of cultic objects, the poet observes what he takes for 'an image' of Saturn ('... what first I thought an image huge, / Like to the image pedestalled [pedestal'd] so high / In Saturn's temple', ll. 298–300). The anticipated correction does not arrive for 200 lines, and within that textual interval, the god's sculptural character is *elaborated*, not effaced. Thea appears and Moneta remains, assuming, however, a more objective form in the poet's brain. 'Long, long those two were *postured*

*motionless*, / Like *sculpture* builded-up [builded up] upon the grave / Of their own power ... *still* they were the same; / The *frozen* God *still* bending to the earth, / And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet,[:] / Moneta silent ... the three fixed [fixed] shapes ... *Still fixed* [fix'd] he sat' (382–91; 446, my emphasis). The narrator, positioned as an observer, might be said to encounter the presiding deities of 'Hyperion', Books 1 and 2. Or rather, what he so virtuously 'finds' in 'The Fall' is an *image*—the sculptural sign—of, his own authorial power. Below we explore the effects of this formal distinction.

There is a sexual logic to 'The Fall's' introjective authority, and it is encoded in a number of arresting locutions: 'sphered words', 'hollow brain', 'globed brain', 'wide hollows', 'enwomed' (and its phonetic cognate, entombed). In the graphic conceptualism of these phrases, we read a collective identity as well as a symbolic, self-referential dimension. 'The Fall'—a dream (within a dream within a dream) poem—takes Moneta's brain as a topos for its structure and theme. First, we recall that 'Hyperion' was widely described as Keats's singularly virile poem. We accept the adjective (interpreted, of course, by the general argument of this book), and characterize 'The Fall', by contrast, as a distinctively female discourse. I refer not only to the obvious time-space, linear-circular, external-internal, narrative-lyric, objective-subjective differences, but to the way in which 'The Fall's' appropriation of the phallic 'Hyperion' (its location of that 'good', self-authorizing discourse in the inner space of individual consciousness) figures a distinctly sexualized intertextuality. (Here is the ideal enactment, as it were, of Lawrence's phrase, 'sex in the head'.) We seem to have something closer to the model of hermaphroditism than to intercourse, although both ideas obtain. In the end, however, neither metaphor is completely satisfying in that nothing comes of the coupling. To coin a Keatsianism, the 'internestling' of these discourses is, and is meant to be, a sterile affair: a matter of reciprocal alienation and the production of internal dissonance.

'The Fall', whose primary task is to frame 'Hyperion', transforms that fragment from an expression into a figure, rendering *itself*, thus, a meta-representation. By the later poem's operations, 'Hyperion's' 'existence' emerges as an *idea* of existence, or what Keats calls a 'Nothing'. By materializing this Nothing, 'The Fall' itself materializes as a fetish, Keats's 'Thing semi-real'. What, after all, is Moneta's elaborately self-contradictory message but a justification for the virtuously *represented* fraudulence which is Keats's solution to his diverse binds? Moneta tells the poet that only he, who is less than the practical philanthropists of the world, and less, too, than the strong poets, is privileged to survive. Only he, a 'dreamer weak' and



‘dreaming thing’, a ‘fever of [him]self’ who ‘venoms all his days’ and ‘vexes’ everyone else’s, is ‘favoured for unworthiness’.

The special inferiority which Moneta ascribes—honorifically—to the poet is a function of his alienation: from his audience, his precursors, and his fantasies. Not so ironically (since irony is the rhetorical norm of this poem), the dramatic consequence of this instruction is yet another alienation. The poet, silenced by the sheer perversity of Moneta’s accusations, is positioned by that silence as a spectator. Moneta, the object of his gaze, is blind; and, *because* her eyes do not reflect their objects, they absorb them. The virtue of the poet’s muteness emerges in the field of Moneta’s more obviously capable blindness. The two negations become as one single affirmation with the poet’s entry into Moneta’s globed brain. In that temple, he shares the goddess’s visions: the ‘theme’ that had once, literally, *occupied* him—‘Hyperion’—now ‘hung vast *before* [his] mind’ (my emphasis).

We see the concrete product of this positional difference—the result of tortuous ‘wanderings’, turns, and ironies—in the alienated representation of ‘Hyperion’, beginning on line 310. What concerns us are the discrepancies between this long passage and the corresponding material in ‘Hyperion’. Throughout this section of ‘The Fall’, one feels a strongly narrated quality. We watch a poet watching a sort of *tableau vivant*, ‘narrated’ by Moneta. The natural grace of the ‘primary’ spectacle, or the vision of Saturn and Thea, is represented, and thus de-natured and consecrated all at once, by this complex voyeurism. Thea, for instance, characterized by Moneta (‘softest-natured of our brood’), is further characterized by the narrator, whose description formally embraces/surpasses Moneta, via *her* account, as well: ‘I marked [marked] the goddess in fair statuary / Surpassing wan Moneta by the head, / And in her sorrow nearer woman’s tears.’ Allott glosses ‘statuary’ as ‘stature’, in this way suppressing the obvious contradiction, one that we should rather emphasize. What ‘Hyperion’ offers as a deeply human, immediate, *living* representation is rendered in ‘The Fall’ a sort of frieze, not unlike the ‘sculptured dead’ in ‘St. Agnes’. By his encounter with these frozen figures, Keats can have his dream and know it; he can *own* his identifications even as he uses them. That this represents an advance in consciousness is suggested by the substance of the poet’s comparison. Thea, whose vastness is aligned with her historical precedence, surpasses Moneta in natural feeling. We, who *see* Moneta’s strange griefs but are not permitted to enter into them, feel the great mystery of her heart. Thea, the large and positive figure, is where we all begin. What we learn—what Moneta, mediated by the poet’s narration, represents—is the negation of Nature and the production of an alter ego. Moneta survives *to* tell and, we infer, *by* telling her dreams to creatures like the poet. As for Thea, that early goddess lives

only by the perverse efficacy of Moneta's brain, emulated by the poet. In line 368, for example, Thea exclaims, '*me thoughtless*, why should I / Thus violate thy slumbrous solitude ...'; the corresponding phrase in 'Hyperion', line 68, is '*Oh, [O] thoughtless ... I*' (my emphasis). The obvious question is why Keats thus violates the solitude of 'The Fall' with a phrase that out-Miltons Milton? Why indeed, but to *represent* 'Hyperion's' firstness and goodness—its large utterance, large as Thea—in this way effectuating and displacing it.

In this vein, we note that the awkwardness and halting disjunction of lines 376–8 do not, as Kenneth Muir proposes, transform 'Hyperion's' 'regular rhythm' into 'one which suggests what it describes', a liquid imagery. To the contrary, these stuttering lines, by metrically counterpointing 'Hyperion's' suave regularity, represent that uninflected smoothness as an onomatopoeic effect. Muir's very curious discrimination is thus explained as a displacement from the signified to the signifier: 'Hyperion' as altered by 'The Fall', to the 'The Fall'.

Thea and Saturn, the symbols of 'Hyperion's' huge success, become, as I've noted, frozen effigies in 'The Fall'. 'Like sculpture builded-up upon the grave / Of their own power'. We can at this point appreciate the extraordinary disclosure contained in that simile. 'The Fall' is, precisely, a sculpture erected upon the grave of Keats's own expressive power: 'Hyperion'. I am reminded of those medieval casts of the supine corpse that lie the length of the coffin, imitating in stone its mortal contents. The poet's long and steady gaze upon the death-in-life of Saturn and Thea—his capacity to sustain the contradiction he has precipitated—ennobles him. Indeed, this action puts him in exactly Moneta's state: deathwards progressing to no death (see ll. 388–99). His role, like Moneta's, is a punishing one but both figures feel its preservative virtue.

#### *Four* *Critical Opportunities*

I have suggested that Keats truncates 'The Fall' by way of maintaining the dependent posture required for his special authorial practice. We enhance the formal explanation and begin to situate 'Lamia' within the Keatsian project by noting some circumstantial particulars of the *Hyperion* exercise.

In the three-month interval separating the two phases of that exercise, the logic of their sequence might have emerged clearly enough as to have prompted Keats's abandonment of the project. To clarify that conjecture, I pause to spell out what I hope has been implicit throughout this book. The writerly protocols I have presented as Keats's working solution to his legitimacy / originality problems are not to be identified with conscious

intention or practical design. They represent what I take to be the *meaning* of Keats's practice: a reconstruction *of* the problem from the nature, which is also the *style*, of the solution. Keats is not to be read as a proto-Genet, nor should we confuse even *that* arrogantly abject writer with the consummate strategist Sartre delivers. I'm talking about the difference between meaning and knowledge, and I'm suggesting that the *Hyperion* exercise could have produced for Keats a knowledge of the meanings we have developed through this dialectically totalizing study.

Keats's conscious desires were, one suspects, perfectly conventional—if you will, 'good'—ambitions. It would seem that he craved very strongly the recognition of his peers, the admiration and patronage of an audience, and a place in English literary history, and that he wanted to secure these blessings in the customary fashion: by writing poems both good and great. These respectable wishes are the stuff of Yeats's caricature: the boy peering hungrily through the sweet-shop window. We have studied what that boy did when he realized that because he would never get in through the front door—never have his desserts properly—he would never *properly* have them at all. Moreover, a man who consumes factitiously cannot produce anything but substitute sweets, the very sign of his subjective irreality. Nowhere have I meant to suggest that Keats, were he *able* to define his capable negativity, would have done so with any kind of flourish. The misappropriative and diseased character of Keats's literary production was the bargain he made with the facts, which had already made *him* a certain kind of bargainer.

It is by reference to these general facts that we may construe Keats's abandonment of 'The Fall' as an attempted evasion of insight into his productive methods. 'The Fall's' inconclusion may also be read as a response to 'Hyperion's' remarkable success. The first 'La Belle Dame' is a magical and accomplished poem, but compared to the massive achievement of 'Hyperion', it's a slight affair. I'm suggesting that 'Hyperion' was a hard poem for Keats finally to kill, no matter how attractive or certain the redemption. To do so meant rejecting the very thing he had coveted from the beginning. It meant rupturing the identification with Milton in order to display it and, in displaying it, to corrupt what had already degenerated from an identity into a relation. Simply, the cure might have begun to seem worse than the disease: the damaging dimension of the pharmakon in excess of its curative properties.

In the language of phallic issues, we could say that 'Hyperion' signified to Keats the direct inheritance of the father's talent. Keats approximates in that poem for the first time to the model of the good son, who solves his competition problems by identifying with (that is, assimilating) his rival: the normative, superego solution. As I've noted, 'The Fall' proves, as does no

other work of the canon, the justness of Byron's accusation; in 'The Fall', Keats frigs 'Hyperion', his *own* Imagination. We might at this point use Byron's metaphor to imagine the special danger attending Keats's success. A phallus that is not really one's own cannot really be lost; the loss of one alienated property is perfectly remedied by new acquisition. Conversely, a natural, naturally expressive phallus is not only irreplaceable, its meaning is synecdochal and therefore any form of its alienation must have encompassing ego consequences. Perhaps, then, we might read Keats's abandonment of 'The Fall' by the logic of castration anxiety. He stops frigging his Imagination because for the first time, he feels himself naturally possessed of that faculty. He has, for the first time, something of his own to lose.

Finally, we might consider in an openly speculative way Keats's life circumstances in the general period of 'The Fall's' composition. This is also the interval that initiates what de Man calls Keats's 'late period', a phrase intended to describe the ironic, often embittered, and uneven character of the poems dating from the autumn of 1819 on.<sup>15</sup> De Man's periodization places 'The Fall' in the same field as 'Lamia', generally taken to reflect the crisis precipitated by what we presume to have been, by autumn 1819, Keats's complete despair of the longed-for marriage to Fanny. We might reasonably, then, investigate the bearing of this crisis upon 'The Fall'. Indeed, this theme, raised to a categorical level, might turn out to be the most critical connection between the two poems.

The logic defined for Keats by the *Hyperion* venture—a model of mechanically determined self-violation—was in some ways mirrored by the romantic situation. We know that in order to write at all, Keats had to work in an unusually conflictual, self-alienating manner: in effect, an exercise in self-abuse. I have proposed that the unfreedom of Keats's mode of production crystallized for him through the *Hyperion* project and, above all, in the programmed failure of his first 'good' poem.

Rather than meditate the deep issues raised by the stalemate with Fanny, we might study the surface. Here we return to some matters broached toward the beginning of this chapter. Generally speaking, Keats's involvement with Fanny emplots an action wherein money (poverty, to be exact) thwarts love. A more useful description would oppose Keats's private life—his chosen mode of sexuality: categorically, a form of consumption—to the public domain, a domain controlled by the means and relations of production. Keats's knowledge that he would never marry Fanny (nor, in all probability, sleep with her), because he would never realize by his poetry the income required to keep her, was also a knowledge that in order to *write* a profitable poetry, he would have had to enjoy different life circumstances.

Keats was forced, in short, to realize the extent to which the gratification of his most private wishes was determined by the most impersonal, Urizenic law of his society: the law of its productive modes. At the exact point in his life when Keats was compelled *consciously* to live his class facts in the sphere of consumption, his experience with the *Hyperions* brought him up hard against his special, self-wounding productive mode.

In this context, Keats's abandonment of 'The Fall' signifies a remarkably sound response: a refusal to cooperate with his own class exploitation. There is an aggressive charge in the truncation of this poem: a new kind of gainful renunciation, this. One feels in that formal arrest the decision of a man digging in his heels. By his silence—the only authentic refusal—Keats negates the factual order which prescribed for him such a terrible way of working. At this moment when his instinctual demands were so great and his sense of his span so certain, Keats would not do to himself what was done to him by others. What I'm proposing as the project of this period is the dismantling of the compromise formation which was Keats's authorial agency. Through 'Lamia', the critical phase of the *Hyperion* endeavor, Keats begins to articulate the *subject* meanings of his social objectivity. I believe with John Bayley that had Keats lived, he would have abandoned poetry, and for the best of reasons.

By these lights, 'Lamia' is not, as de Man would have it, the herald of Keats's negative period, but the most lucid, self-critical, and assertive poem of the canon. For the first time, Keats tries to *relate* social facts to private life, production to consumption, outside to inside, work to love: dimensions entangled within his experience and, in his poetry, representationally intertwined. Simply, but quite incomprehensibly, Keats leaves behind the standpoint of immediacy.<sup>16</sup> He performs this awesome relational act—an investigation of the meaning of his style—by a dramatic meditation on the commodity and the money forms, revealed to him through the *Hyperion* exercise as the model of his literary production. In those forms, he finds the explanation of his misery *and* of his writerly achievement.

\* \* \*

We have seen that the job of 'The Fall' is both to displace 'Hyperion' and, by representing it, to realize its effects. From 'Hyperion's' sensuous concreteness, Keats derives an exclusively formal and social value, parallel to, not coinciding with the work itself. 'The Fall', which supplements 'Hyperion', at once creates for the original work a new value and depreciates 'Hyperion' *by reference to* that value. From another angle, the job of 'The Fall' is to render 'Hyperion's' expressive value an object of representation,

and by thus changing the form of its meaning, to alter the semantic *value* as well. We can see that the unity of 'Hyperion' as a particular expressive product does not coincide with its unity as a *representation* of expressiveness: that is, with its unity within 'The Fall'. There, 'Hyperion' coalesces as something like an object-sign, something resembling that material Concept which we studied in 'St. Agnes'. The epic's expressive specificity is not so much *effaced* as put under a new sign or raised to another power. Keats's operations upon 'Hyperion' amount to a systematic representation of the literary sign: a dissociation of its value from its body, and by the reincarnation of that original value, the creation of a new and exclusively social value.

The operation closely resembles the formal logic and tendency of the commodity: that really effectual Thing semi-real. I have suggested that the value today's readers often find in Keats's verse is its negativity and alienation. Keats's textually actualized distance from nature and need gives us a new remove on our own insistent particulars. We experience through Keats the pleasure of an oxymoronically *sensuous* abstraction: 'real' desire, gratified by 'real' and specific sensation, but where the relation of desire to satisfaction is infinitely variable because the reality of both moments is so thoroughly textualized. Any desire can modulate into any other (say, oral to tactile), and any one object can substitute for another. The intensity of 'palsy-twitched' is somehow interchangeable with the intensity of a happily-ever-after. Another word for this effect which we have come to associate with commodity fetishism is 'formalism'.

The closure we feel in Keats's career derives from his glimpse into the structure of his subjectivity. In his working brain, subject and object of his art, Keats discerns the dissociated, reified consciousness *of* the commodity, identified below as the money form. In other words, Keats finds himself recapitulating most profoundly the social relations thrust upon him by the age. His dearly bought freedom amounts to the completest bondage. The heroine of Keats's latest romance is the incarnation of this knowledge and she is also Keats's purest persona. Lamia *is* the fetish—gold, commodity, money, Pythagorean number—descending through its sequence of historical bodies. This is the meaning of the metamorphoses she undergoes when situated in the field of Hermes' designs, Lycius's desires, and Apollonius's reason. This is also the meaning of her strange individuality in Keats's poem. Burton's 'lamia' is a common noun: a class term, or logical abstraction. We shall see that the material and dramatic individuality of Keats's creature is both a suppression of her minute particulars and a disguise for her generic character. Lamia, an outrageously naturalized perversity and nonlogical phenomenon, an idealized particular and a concrete Idea, lives only in

circulation, by the effects she engenders and by the social agreement to recognize her reality and rationalize her contradictions.

\* \* \*

In order to trace this difficult theme, we return to the early poetry where we can plot the rudiments of Keats's mature style. I regret the procedural awkwardness of this move; the detour is long and involved, and something of an excursion in its own right. The gains are not just in the way of inclusiveness and not just heuristic. We return to first things partly because the end ('Lamia' is Keats's last major effort) recapitulates the beginning. As usual, it is the difference within the identity that concerns Keats and us. Like the very early verse, 'Lamia' is a poem about things, always problematical for Keats. In the early verse, Keats is always looking for a hero and an action and always finding catalogues of objects. In 'Lamia', he positions a thing and its historical career as his subject-in-action. In a queer, apparently unaccountable way, 'Lamia' is, of all Keats's poems, the most humanly animated and immediate, for all its grotesquerie and its allegorical apparatus. The job of this critique is to account for that effect.

#### NOTES

1. Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1986), pp. 167–96.

2. Alan Bewell, 'The Political Implication of Keats's Classicist Aesthetics', *Studies in Romanticism*, 25, Summer 1986, pp. 220–9. Bewell observes the Napoleonic inscription in 'Hyperion's' Apollo.

3. June Koch, 'Politics in Keats's Poetry', *JEGP*, 71, pp. 491–501.

4. Hermes does and does not not steal the nymph; or, what Keats sketches in this episode is a form of commercial theft. Insofar as Hermes pays for the nymph, his act must be considered a transaction, not a robbery. But, since it is *Lamia* whom he pays, and since the legitimacy of her power over the nymph, creature of the Wood-Gods, is not established, no value can be imagined to redound to them. The text plainly figures for them a value loss.

5. By analogy (developed in chapter 6), the freedom to spend one's money—that is, to translate it into property, thence into qualities—is the phantasmagoric privilege of those to whom money comes 'as easily as leaves to a tree'. Obviously, there is nothing free about an exchange of wages for food and shelter; somewhat less obvious is the unfreedom of that expense which purchases signs and is itself a sign.

6. There is also a substantive difference to Keats's knowledge and I'd like to explain it by way of Lukács. In Keats's suffered objectivity, we have found the condition for his practical knowledge of the subject-forms that were his stock-in-trade: the canon. Keats had grasped, we might say, the objective character of his mode of professional consumption. What his circumstances *prevented* him from knowing was the subjectivity of the object; he couldn't penetrate the fetish from the side of production. Keats, who had no

collective life to speak of, had nothing that might correspond to a class-consciousness, and therefore no experience of himself as an agency capable of effecting change. Moreover, the part-whole, object-subject fissures which Lukács finds in capitalism's worker—contradictions that explain for him the capable (that is, revolutionary) negativity exclusive to that class—could not materialize for Keats who had no whole and primary being to antithesize the objectified part. For him, the writing was the means of producing that total form. Keats didn't work for a living, he worked to produce a life.

The advances I plot in 'Lamia' may be partly traced to the upsurge of instinctual life which, we suppose, accompanied his vision of the end. They may also be related to the technical impasse objectified in the Hyperion project. Lamia, the money form, is precisely the reified subject Keats had been producing for the past five years. The work of the poem is to melt her down. In more conventional terms, the project is to make her a subject, as well as *the* subject of a romance which is also a myth of origins. Lukács observes that the dialectical method is only possible because of a change in the actual relations between subject and object. 'Lamia's dialecticity, discussed in chapter 6, can, I believe, be traced to a change of this kind. (See Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, pp. 116–18, 168, 169–70.)

7. Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), pp. 402–5. 'Falling off in style' is Miriam Allott's summary phrase for Bate's description of Book 3.

8. Keats's most strongly enacted wish was not, we have learned, for instinctual gratification or its sublimated equivalent, but rather for recognition and mastery. The strategies we have studied in his poetry betray quite consistently a determinate form of desire which we elucidate at this point by a Hegelian model. The object of Keats's desire is not the Other *per se*. Or rather, because there really is no such thing, we should say that the wish of Keats's poetry is not to assimilate by identification its beloved sources. Nor does Keats covet the Other's desire: does not substitute himself for the value which his Other desires. Between these two classic desires, a respectively subjective and objective identification with the Other, stands Keats's end-stopped dialectic. Keats produces his subjectivity through the familiar master-slave dynamic, but one that is played out between categorically noncomparable parties. The exaggeratedly representational form with which Keats invests his influential Others may be read as a rough solution to Hegel's famous antinomy. I refer to the paradox whereby the recognition conferred by the Other instantly deconstructs his effective Otherness, rendering the recognition slavish and therefore useless as a subjectively constitutive device. Keats's narcissistic maneuvers, which maintain the alterity of the interiorized Other (or, the objectivity of the possessed' subject), interfere with this self-consuming dynamic, and that is just the point of these moves.

In 'Hyperion', where Keats assimilates Milton so well, securing, as it were, Milton's recognition once and for all, Keats also loses that master-figure and the power it had conferred.

9. Keats's circumstances were such as to prove on the pulses that Hegelian groundplot sketched in note 8. Without an opposing Self, there is, for Keats, no self at all. Return upon the 'sole'—literally, singular, untenanted—self cannot but be forlorn.

10. There is a helpful contrast here, between the atemporal zone marked out by Saturn, and the intermediate temporality defined by Apollo. Saturn's paralysis is related to the perfect organicism of his being; Apollo's capability comes from the unnaturalness of his state. Saturn's full presence amounts to a suffered negation; Apollo's disease is the effect of a fetishized negation.

11. Allott, p. 440, note to ll. 113–20, 'Hyperion', Book 3.



12. Arthur Danto, *Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Viking, 1975). 'Wittgenstein ... supposed that we could not in principle bring into language, as part of what it represents, the conditions of representation: language could *show* the world, but not the fact that it showed it' (p. 95).

13. Two meanings of 'elixir' still very much alive in Keats's day were 'life-prolonging substance' and 'philosopher's stone', both of them consistent with a 'pharmakon' reading of that potion drunk by 'The Fall's' narrator.

14. This is, one might say, the difference between the locution 'my hand' and 'this warm scribe my hand'. It is also the Lacanian distinction between penis and phallus.

15. Paul de Man, *John Keats: Selected Poetry* (New York: 1966), pp. xxvi, xxxiii. 'There is some logic in considering the entire period from June till the end of the year as one single unit—the 'late' Keats—that includes the poems to Fanny Brawne, dating from the fall of 1819, and frequently considered as poetically unimportant and slightly embarrassing documents written when he was no longer in full control of his faculties. In truth, it is from *The Fall of Hyperion* on that a sharp change begins to take place; it is also from that moment on that the differences among the commentators begin to increase'.

16. That Keats does not fully penetrate the irrationality of matter and of the socially given, is suggested by his preoccupation with the relatively manifest fetish form, money. Capital, Lamia's fourfold form and a reunion, of sorts, of use—with exchange-value, substance with meaning, has no being in Keats's poem. While he *plots* 'the moment when the links that bind the contemplative attitude of the subject to the purely formal character of the object ... become conscious', he cannot *elucidate* that moment in a practical manner, one that would shadow forth Lamia's final transformation. (Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 126.)

ANDREW BENNETT

*'The Eve of St Agnes'*

Throughout Keats's career the oppositions generated by the semiotics of vision (imagining/seeing, blindness/sight, words/images, language/painting) provided crucial organizing principles for his poetry: there is not only a constant self-conscious reference to 'The Poet's eye',<sup>1</sup> to the importance of poetic visions, but also an articulation of visionary seeing that often paradoxically precludes sensory apprehension. Indeed, in some of Keats's most famous, his most achieved poetry, the line of vision is profoundly central to the narrative movement of the poem. Despite recent critical interest in the semiotics of perception in the early nineteenth century and despite critics' recognition of the importance of sensory perception to the form and content of Keats's poetry, little work has been done on the relationship between the visual and the visionary in his poetry on the one hand, and on the other hand on the problematic representation of these visions in descriptive language. 'The Eve of St Agnes', in particular, despite recent work on the poem and 'vision' by Stuart Ende and Leon Waldoff, has been overlooked in this respect.<sup>2</sup>

As a number of critics have noted, 'The Eve of St Agnes' involves a double plot, or, at least, a double plotting:<sup>3</sup> while Porphyro requires a visual embodiment of his desires and a physical consummation of those desires, Madeline requires a vision of her desires and a visionary dream of a

---

From *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing*. © 1994 by Cambridge University Press.

consummation. This provides Keats with the narrative friction that generates the poem.<sup>4</sup> But around this friction of plotting may be discerned several other frictions: the friction of gender—male/female desires; the friction of narration—the production and disruption of narrative in description; the friction of the antagonism of the visionary to the visible; the friction between sleeping and waking; the friction of response—the conflict between the desires of the poet and those of his reader; and the (related) friction of the reader's gender—the question of male/female reception. Friction generates heat, just as irritability generates life in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourse of physiology: out of the frictions and irritations of 'St Agnes' Keats produced his most seductive narrative poem. And perhaps the most decisive and influential binary opposition in the twentieth-century criticism of 'The Eve of St Agnes', that between the transcendentalism of Wasserman and the voyeurism of Stillinger, may be understood in terms of description, which, as Michel Beaujour has pointed out, constitutes the contradictory locus of the utopian and the voyeuristic.<sup>5</sup>

The central narrative impulsion that draws together the frictions of Keats's fiction is Porphyro's desire for the vision of Madeline (her sight and the sight of her; Porphyro's visual vision of Madeline and her visionary vision of him; his seeing and her unseeing eyes; he unseen and she seen). Not only does the description of Porphyro watching Madeline undress in stanzas twenty-four to twenty-six provide one of the narrative cruxes of the poem,<sup>6</sup> but it also provides the most explicit—the most visible—figure of reading. Not only is reading figured in the vision of Madeline, but it is at this point of seeing, more than at any other point in the poem, that the questions of the gender of the reader, his/her (dis)taste, ethical judgement, vision and desire are most clearly posed. Madeline's undressing impels a series of questions, such as what a female reader is to make of Porphyro's pleasure; whether the poem should be read as a vulgar adolescent fantasy of voyeurism; the intentions (honourable or otherwise) of Porphyro; the extent to which readers (male here, presumably) are implicated in an unreflexive ocular violence towards Madeline;<sup>7</sup> the extent to which the poet can make the reader 'see'; and the question of the congruence of Porphyro's desire with that of the (again, male?) reader. Moreover, the fact that narration is generated by desire in Porphyro, the narrator, and ultimately the reader for this anti-narratorial (or descriptive) epiphany of watching Madeline, means that the mechanics of narrative form may be most clearly interrogated at this climactic moment. The fact that the poetry constantly refers to, entices, and describes visual perception, suggests that the internal duality of the visionary/visible is doubled in the relationship of the reader with the poem. In 'St Agnes', reading is figured in ocular fixation.

In 'The Eve of St Agnes' the narrative is impelled by vision: looking both organizes the plot and figures the reading. At the same time, looking produces a resistance to narration as the characters and narrator attempt to fix the look and halt the narrative. It is, above all, the narrative friction of the double plot in 'St Agnes'—Madeline's plot to 'see' her lover and Porphyro's plot to see his—that produces the narrative friction generative of the complex of narrative relationships—narrator to reader, narrator to narrative, reader to text. Before discussing the implications of textual looking for the narrative form of 'St Agnes', then, I want briefly to delineate the thematic sight-lines in the poem, a poem which figures looking in extraordinary profusion, in order to establish the coherence and complexity of the text's engagement with the rhetoric of the visible.

While Porphyro is intent on seeing, Madeline is continually presented as unseeing.<sup>8</sup> Part of this blindness is a requirement of tradition, the convention that in order to have a 'vision of delight' virgins must 'Nor look behind, nor sideways, but require / Of heaven with upward eyes for all that they desire' (lines 53–4). The upward eyes are not looking at all—they 'require' rather than look—for heaven is to be apprehended through vision and not through eyesight. Another aspect of Madeline's blindness is her refusal to see what she does not want to: as she waits to leave the party she 'heed[s] not at all' the other guests (line 59) and refuses to see the 'amorous cavalier[s]' (line 60). Similarly, her 'regardless eyes' (line 64) refuse to see because it is a visionary vision which she requires, and Keats makes no bones about her blindness to 'reality': she is 'Hoodwink'd with faery fancy' (line 70). What Madeline 'sees' are 'visions wide' (line 202) or waking dreams:

Pensive awhile she dreams awake, and sees,  
 In fancy, fair St. Agnes in her bed,  
 But dares not look behind, or all the charm is fled.  
 (lines 232–4)

The distinction between looking in reality and looking 'in fancy' is clearly marked by what Jack Stillinger calls Madeline's 'stuporous insensibility'.<sup>9</sup> In her bed, she is 'Flown', 'haven'd', 'Clasp'd', and, finally, 'Blinded' (lines 239–42): all these participles point to a protective withdrawal from the world of sensation. Indeed, such is Madeline's protective enchantment that Porphyro's problem of converting the magical fantasy of her desire into desire for himself is expressed in terms of the enchantment of Madeline's eyes in stanza thirty-two: 'It seem'd he never, never could redeem / From such a stedfast spell his lady's eyes' (lines 286–7). Porphyro's problem does not immediately dissolve when she wakes: her very soul seems to be

expressed in the state of her eyes, which in the immediate moment of (half-) waking are ‘blue affrayed’ (line 296). Ultimately, her refusal to see threatens to destroy Porphyro’s plan: ‘Her eyes were open, but she still beheld, / Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep’ (lines 298–9). And it is, in particular, the visible change wrought in Porphyro as she wakes, that disturbs her: she complains of his visual difference from her (visionary) dream of him, “‘How chang’d thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!’” (line 311).

Porphyro, by contrast, is intent on seeing. His plan is simple: to see Madeline. In his first appearance on the scene he ‘implores / All saints to give him sight of Madeline’ so that he might ‘gaze and worship all unseen’ (lines 77–80). That he must be ‘unseen’ is also vital to his plot—‘All eyes be muffled, or a hundred swords / Will storm his heart’ (lines 83–4)—vital because in remaining unseen he will continue to be the ‘mover’ of the action: it will be his plot.<sup>10</sup> Throughout the poem there is danger from unfriendly eyes: Porphyro must be led ‘in close secrecy’ (line 163); Angela’s eyes are ‘aghast / From fright of dim espial’ (lines 184–5); Porphyro is obliged to tell Madeline that they can escape because ‘There are no ears to hear, or eyes to see’ (line 348); in her paranoia, Madeline perceives ‘dragons all around, / At glaring watch’ (lines 353–4); and the final eye is that of the bloodhound, who might block the lovers’ way but whose ‘sagacious eye an inmate owns’ (line 366). Despite the fact that Porphyro promises not to harm Madeline by his gaze, not to ‘look with ruffian passion in her face’ (line 149), looking in ‘St Agnes’ is represented as potentially violent: sight constitutes power—the power of seeing and of not being seen.

Porphyro’s plan, which is a plot of looking, stops, significantly, at the look: Porphyro will be hidden

in a closet, of such privacy  
That he might see her beauty unespied,  
And win perhaps that night a peerless bride,  
While legion’d fairies pac’d the coverlet,  
And pale enchantment held her sleepy-eyed. (lines 165–9)

His seeing and her unseeing come together in this stanza, and Porphyro’s desires are expressed in what Stuart Ende calls a ‘jarring pun’ on ‘peerless’:<sup>11</sup> she is peerless because she does not peer.

Porphyro’s sight of Madeline, the generating force of his plot, at least, if not of the whole poem, is marked lexically by a change from the vocabulary of looking/seeing to that of gazing: ‘Now prepare, / Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed’ says the narrator in stanza twenty-two, and six stanzas later this is what Porphyro is still doing: ‘Stol’n to this paradise, and so

entranced, / Porphyro gazed upon her empty dress' (lines 244–5). There is a danger that, through enchantment, Porphyro will become like Madeline—unseeing. Here, his look is displaced metonymically to her dress, just as hers has been displaced to the ladies' trains, the ceiling, etc. To gaze is to look fixedly or intently, and it also involves bewilderment, astonishment, curiosity: the control and power Porphyro's seeing gives him threaten to be disrupted by this fixed gaze as the narrative force of the poem threatens to come to an abrupt halt. But Porphyro pulls himself out of this gaze and, true to his promise not to employ 'ruffian passion', 'tween the curtains peep[s]' (line 252) at Madeline.

Porphyro's next problem, after he has laid out the feast, is to retrieve Madeline's look for himself: although he asks her to 'Open thine eyes' (line 278), the problem is not so easy to overcome: 'It seem'd he never, never could redeem / From such a stedfast spell his lady's eyes' (lines 286–7). As she eventually wakes and refuses to see her flesh-and-blood lover, Porphyro approaches petrification—'Upon his knees he sank, pale as smooth-sculptured stone' (line 297)—like the staring statues that surround the poem and that surround the actors in the poem.<sup>12</sup> But Madeline, too, is caught in the fixation of the gaze:

While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep;  
 Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye,  
 Fearing to move or speak, she look'd so dreamingly.  
 (lines 304–6)

The interchange of gazes is complex and enthralling: the rhetoric of gazing gets caught up in its own confluences of syntax. Her gaze is on his eye which is on her look: but her 'look' suggests both her active gaze and the look of her—an ambivalence that threatens the enthrallment of ocular fixation. These enfolded looks end the drama of vision as it concerns Madeline and Porphyro in this poem—although the narratorial drama of vision continues to the end of the poem—as Madeline breaks through fixation with her first words.

The significance of this brief delineation of sight-lines in 'The Eve of St Agnes' is not primarily thematic: what is important is the way that this internal tale of seeing infects and affects both the narratorial strategies and the reader's relation with the tale. The characters' looks provide potential models, embedded within the text, of the reader's gaze. If the point of Porphyro's plot is to gaze, then the point of Keats's poem is to gaze at this gaze. Indeed, the rhetoric of response which the poem has elicited is overwhelmingly couched in terms of *looking* at the poem: early in the history

of the poem's reception, critics translated its rhetoric of the visual into their own. Charles Lamb, quoting stanzas twenty-four to twenty-seven, tautologically compared the description of Madeline undressing to what it describes: 'like the radiance, which comes from those old windows upon the limbs and garments of the damsel, is the almost Chaucer-like painting, with which the poet illumines every subject he touches' (*Heritage*, p. 157). Similarly, Leigh Hunt, describing the poem as 'rather a picture than a story' (*Heritage*, p. 172), registered a similar reception for the scene: the 'rich religion of this picture' (*Heritage*, p. 278) 'falls at once gorgeously and delicately upon us, like the colours of the painted glass' (*Heritage*, p. 173). The light that falls on Madeline also falls, metonymically, on the atmosphere of the whole poem, according to one anonymous reviewer—'A soft religious light is shed over the whole story' (*Heritage*, p. 218)—or, as George Gilfillan stated later in the nineteenth century, 'Its every line wears *couleur de rose*' (*Heritage*, p. 305). Hazlitt, too, felt affected by the colouring of the window:

The beautiful and tender images there conjured up, 'come like shadows—so depart'. The 'tiger-moth's wings', which he has spread over his rich poetic blazonry, just flit across my fancy; the gorgeous twilight window which he has painted over again in his verse, to me 'blushes' almost in vain 'with blood of queens and kings'. (*Heritage*, p. 247)

In the middle of the nineteenth century Alexander Smith repeated this emphasis when he said that the poem 'is rich in colour as the stained windows of a Gothic cathedral, and every verse bursts into picturesque and graceful fancies ... [It is] a perfect chrysolite—a precious gem of art' (*Heritage*, p. 367). A related tradition is that of comparing the poem to a picture, as in, for example, John Scott's comment that in watching Porphyro watching Madeline, 'we know not whether most to admire the magical delicacy of the hazardous picture, or its consummate, irresistible attraction' (*Heritage*, p. 224).<sup>13</sup> This repeated insistence by critics on the importance of the visual, and their repeated internalization and reinscription of stanzas twenty-four and twenty-five within their own critical rhetoric, marks almost a fixation in the critical response to the poem—an inability to wrench the critical gaze away from the surface imagery, the light cast by the intensely evocative imagery and diction, and to look towards other aspects of the poem.<sup>14</sup>

It seems, then, that in 'The Eve of St Agnes', narrative has been subsumed under the rule of the descriptive, a displaced linguistic representation of the visual: everything in the plot points towards and implies the look, hence description and narration are appropriated towards

this end. The point of the narrative is the descriptive.<sup>15</sup> It seems, further, that the position of the reader or critic in relation to the poem is inevitably a double of Porphyro's position in relation to Madeline, and this duplicity is redoubled in the text's doubling of the reader's (speculative and specular) relationship with Porphyro: Porphyro watches Madeline, the text watches Porphyro (and Madeline), and the reader watches the text. But this vertiginous series of embedded looks is disrupted by the reader's ability to 'gaze' directly at Madeline, while at the same time the vicissitudes of the visual/visionary delineated throughout the poem are also short-circuited by the occlusion of language: as I shall attempt to show, the reader's ability to 'see' the events of the narrative is precluded by the rich intensity of poetic language. However hard the poet tries, he cannot make the reader see anything: 'The Eve of St Agnes' asserts the priority of the imaginative over the visual, of the word over the (visual) image.<sup>16</sup>

The tropes of seeming and seeing are introduced in the framing narrative of the Beadsman's passage through the castle, as the visual is imbued with projected emotion: 'his frosted breath, / Like pious incense from a censer old, / Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death' (lines 6–8).<sup>17</sup> The underlying and unstated rhetorical figure in these lines is a visual image and this produces the question of who sees, who imagines:<sup>18</sup> more than descriptions in these early stanzas, 'seem' presupposes a consciousness which imagines, but it also presupposes a logically prior act of seeing. The repetition of 'seem' in stanza two ('seem to freeze'), emphasizes the same procedure in the opening line, 'Ah, bitter chill it was!', which, through the exclamatory mode; asserts the sensuous apprehension of a narrator (and, by implication, of a reader). Such 'narratorial' perception is based on the following paradoxical logic: narrative seeing leads to narrative imagining (the imaginary is generated by the germ of the visual), but narrative 'seeing' is a trope which is logically subsequent to narrative imagining. This paradox is crucial to the descriptive and generates the seductively textured feel of the poem: the more the language approaches precise specification of concrete detail, the further it moves from verisimilitude.

Keats's Gothic descriptions in the poem similarly oscillate between the fantastic, almost, at times, the phantasmagoric or hallucinatory, on the one hand, and the 'realistic', the 'simply' descriptive on the other: indeed, it is when description is most concentrated that the fantastical is most strongly apparent (a paradox evident in the etymology of fantasy, from the Greek *φαντασία*, 'appearance'). Thus, in stanza four, what is motivated as description owes its force and peculiarity to the disturbing anthropomorphic grotesquerie of the building



Soon, up aloft,  
 The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide:  
 The level chambers, ready with their pride,  
 Were glowing to receive a thousand guests:  
 The carved angels, ever eager-eyed,  
 Star'd ... (lines 30–35)

'Snarling', 'chide', 'pride', 'glowing', 'eager-eyed', 'Star'd': anthropomorphism constitutes the major trope of the stanza. As such, the 'carved angels' proleptically parody Porphyro (whose religious rhetoric makes him something angelic) and his gaze, or Madeline (the 'missioned spirit' and 'splendid angel') and hers. But the parody involves a petrification of the viewers which exaggerates the characters' potential fixation later in the poem: the gaze is petrified in stone.

In the early stanzas, narrative is overwhelmingly subsumed under the visual and under the descriptive possibilities of scenic plotting. But the teleological inspiration of the poem's looking and description in these stanzas—as if Keats is preparing readers to look, setting their visual nerves on edge with suspense—is the scene of Porphyro's voyeurism in stanzas twenty-four to twenty-eight. Here the conditions for sight are particularly carefully prepared. Indeed, Keats is so intent on preparing for the look that he almost short-circuits the narrative and the vision at the start of the scene: 'Out went the taper as she hurried in; / Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died' (lines 199–200). Both by the proleptic analogue of sexual fulfilment and by the narrative occlusion of the visual (or the conditions necessary for the visual), the lines threaten to end the poem without reaching the desired end. Indeed, the casement of stanza twenty-four is not only an example of poetic serendipity but also a product of *narrative*, necessity: the stanza most often quoted as an example of Keats's mastery of the visual/descriptive is motivated, paradoxically, by narrative. Having extinguished the taper in stanza twenty-three, Keats has to provide an alternative source of light for his narrative to continue.

Stanzas twenty-four to twenty-six, which provide the motivating force for both Keats's and Porphyro's plots, and which generate a poetry of the visual, demonstrate, in the texture of their language, the paradox of the language of description:<sup>19</sup> the more descriptive language becomes, the less visual are the descriptions, the less coherent and probable are the possibilities for readers to generate a 'visual' scene in the 'mind's eye'. Descriptive writing operates on different levels from the visual: repetition, antithesis, paronomasia, metaphor, onomatopoeia, the foregrounding of diction, verbal ambiguity, etc., produce a verbal rather than a visual enticement to the

reader. Indeed, rather than 'description' we might better use the term 'inscription', where the negative force of the prefix suggests a denial of the possibility of linguistic representation and at the same time a self-contained or even self-convoluted sense of the play of signifiers in the act of 'scripting'. 'Inscription' is felicitous, too, in its geometric sense of one figure delineated within the boundaries of another—Keats's highly geometric descriptions are traced within the geometry of stanzaic form. Rather than suggesting a transference from the referent to the signified, Keatsian inscription emphasizes the priority of the signifier.<sup>20</sup>

A second problem introduced by the descriptive is that of motivation: although one might want to argue that the descriptivity—or inscriptivity—of the poem is motivated by the character of Porphyro (he is a voyeur, therefore the attempt to reproduce sight linguistically in description is both necessary and apposite), it could equally be argued that the character of the voyeur is motivated by Keats's desire to describe.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, although stanza twenty-four is motivated by the narrative necessity for light on the scene, and justified in its baroque elaboration by the Gothic setting, we could equally argue that the extinguishing of the candle in line 199 and the decorous half-light of the scene is generated by the virtuosity of the poet.

But, as I have said, one might want to question the nature of the 'description' in stanzas twenty-four to twenty-six: what seems to be produced above all is the self-reflexivity of language. Philippe Hamon has pointed out that description is 'the lexicographical consciousness of fiction', and that to describe 'is almost always to actualize a latent lexical paradigm based on an underlying system of referential knowledge about the world'. Hamon goes on to comment fruitfully on the dynamics of this process: 'The elements of a descriptive system are organized globally as a *permanent equivalence* between a lexical *expansion* and a lexical *condensation* into a term ... A description organizes the persistence in memory of a single sign by means of a plurality of different signs'.<sup>22</sup> The 'single sign' in stanza twenty-four, which includes 'the most celebrated visual imagery in the whole poem'<sup>23</sup>—although seemingly 'casement'—is 'emblazonings':

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,  
 All garlanded with carven imag'ries  
 Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,  
 And diamonded with panes of quaint device,  
 Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,  
 As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;  
 And in the midst, 'mong thousand heraldries,  
 And twilight saints, and dim emblazonings,

A shielded scutcheon blush'd with blood of queens and kings.  
(lines 208–16)

'Emblazonings' lights up the poem with heraldic devices: the stanza is a blazon that marks the heraldic heritage of the poem, the provenance of its lexicon and the authority of its imagery. The stanza emblazons its filial descent from the blazonry of old romance.<sup>24</sup>

Hamon points out that the 'extension' of the description 'is related to the *available* vocabulary of the author, not to the degree of complexity of the reality itself',<sup>25</sup> but another constraint upon the descriptivity in 'The Eve of St Agnes' is the space of the stanza: the Spenserian stanza form accounts, to a large extent, for the economy and precision of Keatsian blazonry in this poem, and contrasts markedly with his earlier description-induced poetry (of which *Endymion* is paradigmatic), which knows no bounds. The Spenserian stanza form, which Byron said was 'perhaps too slow and dignified for narrative'<sup>26</sup> provides a precise delineation of dilatory space for Keatsian narration. For Keats, this enforced lingering provides a framework within which the blazonry operates, like the frames provided by the shield or *cartouche* that, while allowing play within the limits of the frame, strictly delimits the blazon to the space of that frame. Keats's drafts show that stanzas twenty-four and twenty-five were first conflated, after which the two distinct images (the casement and the effect of the light on Madeline) were separated into their discrete stanzaic frames: the stanza form provides a necessary frame for the limits of locution, but the rich wordiness of description constantly threatens to break through the artificially imposed, limits.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, the larger frame device of Angela and the Beadsman marks the limits of the narrative and simultaneously incorporates the symbolic oppositions of youth/age, warmth/coldness, life/death, etc: the frame here marks the narrative of Madeline and Porphyro as only one episode in a larger tale while simultaneously providing a boundary for the reader's interest.

Stanza twenty-four provides the reader with a verbal analogue of the visual by the elaborate way in which its language imitates the baroque elaborations of visual detail in the casement. At the same time, the stanza remarks upon its own ocular limits by simultaneously representing a visual image and occluding the visual in the foregrounding of poetic diction: readers can never 'see'. Michael Riffaterre has claimed that the 'primary purpose' of description 'is not to offer a representation, but to dictate an interpretation':<sup>28</sup> Keats's descriptions dictate the reader's ideological position in relation to poetry, to looking and to sexuality. One major function of description in 'The Eve of St Agnes' is to seduce the reader into an

acceptance of a potentially scandalous ethos: while it is possible to read it as a narrative of voyeurism and even rape, the critical tradition and, presumably, most readers, tend to read the poem as an extravagantly luxurious romance in which the only scandal is the sheer plenitude of language.<sup>29</sup> Thus, what description calls attention to most of all is its own rich, textured and lexically profuse form, in particular the 'quaint device' of heraldic vocabulary and, like 'La Belle Dame' later, the impacted semantic resonances of descriptive diction. But this also means that another major function of the descriptions is to ensure that such an acceptance is problematic: by undermining the possibility of verisimilitude the descriptions (threaten to) deny the reader an unproblematic or unselfconscious role. The gorgeousness of description not only enhances the reader's pleasure but also estranges him or her from an unmediated experience of the visual: the very virtuosity makes us wary, its very profusion alienates.

The specificity of detail in stanza twenty-four has led Robert Gittings to claim that the window is a simulacrum of windows in Stansted Chapel: nevertheless, it is a pictured window that he 'sees'.<sup>30</sup> Like the picture of somebody reading before an ambiguously painted window described in a letter by Keats to his sister,<sup>31</sup> the casement in stanza twenty-four is undecidably 'real' and seductively 'realistic', oscillating between the texture and the transparency of language, a 'charm'd magic casement'. Rather than allowing our vision out, however, the next two stanzas show that the casement in 'St Agnes' is designed to let warm light in: indeed, the emblazonings of the casement stanza become subject to the necessities of narrative as we move from stanza twenty-four to stanza twenty-five. Throughout the poem, motivation alternates between narration and description. As we move into stanza twenty-five, and read 'warm gules', 'Rose-bloom', 'soft amethyst', 'a glory', it becomes clear that stanza twenty-four is narratively dispensable except for its provision of colouring to the next stanza. The extinguishing of the candle in stanza twenty-three is narratively motivated by the need for decorum; stanza twenty-four is motivated both by narrative and by descriptive necessity; stanzas twenty-five to twenty-six assert the necessity of stanza twenty-four on the plane of narrative, but seek to deny its force on the level of description (the descriptive impulsion and indeed the central *blazon* for the poem, is not the window but Madeline's body).

The third stanza of the scene—the undressing—is what Porphyro has been waiting for, but the vision is non-visual: Christopher Ricks has pointed out that in this description 'the gratifications of the enkindled ear ... outdo those of the gazing eye',<sup>32</sup> but this elides the full variety and fecundity of sensory stimulation involved:

Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;  
 Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one;  
 Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees  
 Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees (lines 227–30)

The pleasures of Porphyro are of an entirely different order to the pleasures of the reader. The latter are created in various ways. Firstly there is the syntax: repetition (of verb—‘frees ... Unclasps ... Loosens’—and of noun-phrase—‘wreathed pearls ... warmed jewels’) and the interruptions of the semi-colons parody both the repetitive action of undressing and—like a striptease—the impatience of the spectator. But the syntax is more complex than this suggests: there is the holding back, the delaying of tension in syntactic inversion—‘Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees’—so that the (notorious) tension-releasing sensation in the lines conflicts with the pressure of delay.<sup>33</sup> A variation on this strategy is the mimetic undressing of enjambment in ‘by degrees / Her rich attire creeps’—a lingering of the line on ‘degrees’ before it creeps down to the next. And for the ‘enkindled ear’ there is the mimetic rustling in the sound of ‘creeps rustling’. Moreover, although Porphyro is watching, the ‘enkindled’ senses are other than sight: there is touch in freeing and unclasping and loosening, there is the warmth of ‘warmed’, there is the sound of rustling, there is the smell of the fragrant bodice. Although readers are figured; with Porphyro, as voyeurs in this erotic display, the words provide an opaque screen, a teasing veil over the spectacle of Madeline’s body: the picture is painted in non-visual colours.

Similarly, in stanza thirty, the second descriptive climax and the proleptic substitute for sexual union in stanza thirty-six, the visual is subsumed under the aural/oral in the description of food. Leigh Hunt commented that the words ‘make us read the line delicately, and at the tip-end, as it were, of one’s tongue’ (*Heritage*, p. 280): the interplay of vowels—both the sound and the very movements of tongue, lips, mouth and larynx necessary to speak the stanza—provide mimetic reassurance of luxuriant riches.<sup>34</sup> But, again, such mimesis tends to eradicate the descriptive, which is based on the distinction between signifier and signified: once the two have collapsed into each other, description is annulled. The meal is almost unimaginable in its profuse richness, and the exotic diction of its presentation in the poem—like the heraldic vocabulary of stanza twenty-four—marks it as semantically improbable: its significance is expressed in the mimetic effect.

The final descriptive climax of the poem occurs in stanza thirty-six, which is also the most overt narrative and sexual climax (although stanzas

twenty-four and thirty also provide potential/displaced/ alternative climaxes: the poem is, in a sense, tri-centred):

Beyond a mortal man impassion'd far  
 At these voluptuous accents, he arose,  
 Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star  
 Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;  
 Into her dream he melted, as the rose  
 Blendeth its odour with the violet,—  
 Solution sweet. (lines 316–22)

As Earl Wasserman has shown so influentially, the stanza provides a climax of super-sensory apprehension: the whole gist of the imagery is towards the non-visual, the extra-sensory, the transcendent.<sup>35</sup> But here again description is strongly asserted and at the same time strongly questioned, in the phallic imagery of 'he arose, / Ethereal, flush'd, and like a throbbing star / Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose'. Visual description is produced by the vehicle of the metaphor, which is specifically ocular (in the right atmospheric conditions a twinkling star may, literally, be seen to throb, and 'sapphire heaven's deep repose' is quite coherent as a description of the sky), but there are a number of problems: firstly, a throb is far more tactile than visual, and the word finds easier collocations in the vocabulary of sexual excitement than twinkling stars; secondly, as a metaphor, and combined with the following lines, the image is scandalously suggestive in its sexual vision; lastly, 'seen' presupposes a spectator, which introduces the question of the identity of the perceiver and immediately disrupts the eminent visuality of the image:<sup>36</sup> it is not seen, only said.

Porphyro's romance pledge of love and protection two stanzas later, is curiously couched in terms resonant of stanza twenty-four: 'Say, may I be for aye thy vassal blest? / Thy beauty's shield, heart-shap'd and vermeil dyed?' (lines 335–6). To the extent that the central narrative impulsion of 'The Eve of St Agnes' is constituted by Madeline's body, the poem is structured around the form of the Renaissance blazon: in these lines, however, Porphyro wants to make *himself* a spectacle, Madeline's own personal and human blazon. This helps us to understand the connection, on one level, between stanzas twenty-four and thirty-six: some of the emblazonings of stanza twenty-four are echoed in stanza thirty-six by various forms of repetition, metonymy, dilation, condensation, or substitution:

<i>Stanza 24</i>	<i>Stanza 36</i>
in the midst	seen mid

deep-damask'd	deep repose
A casement high	window-panes
diamonded	sapphire
twilight saints	Ethereal ... heaven's
blush'd	flush'd
blood	throbbing

And 'Full on this casement shone the wintry moon' of stanza twenty-five becomes, in stanza thirty-six, 'St. Agnes' moon hath set', while the 'splendid dyes' of stanza twenty-four becomes Porphyro's wish to be 'vermeil dyed' in stanza thirty-eight. Moreover, this allows us to understand the significance of a whole cluster of colour-words that stud the poem and have the cumulative effect of tainting, staining, colouring and blending with the lines 'Into her dream he melted, as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet,— / Solution sweet' (lines 320–22). In 'The Eve of St Agnes' there is a repeated description of Madeline as 'pure', 'white', 'untainted', and a repeated sense of the tainting of this purity by colour: indeed, the sense of colour in this poem is more of colouring than of colour—'Flushing his brow' (line 137), 'Made purple riot' (line 138), 'stains and splendid dyes' (line 212), 'deep-damask'd' (line 213), 'blush'd with blood' (line 216), 'threw warm gules' (line 218), 'Rose-bloom, fell' (line 220), 'flush'd' (line 318).<sup>37</sup> Sensory blending, together with the heraldic tainting of a modern poem is expressed in the image of odourful blending (rose and violet are both colours, of course, as well as being flowers) and we have a solution to the narrative thrust of the poem. Madeline has been described as 'free from mortal taint' in line 225: one effect of the gorgeous descriptivity of the poem is the tainting of Madeline's purity, the successful consummation of Porphyro's purple plan to emblazon himself on Madeline.

In analysing the poem in terms of visual perception, it is clear that we have—along with most readings of the poem—implicitly read Madeline as a surrogate for the poem itself: we 'look' at her as we 'look' at the text. But we also look at Porphyro, and his desire to emblazon himself has implications for the text itself: 'The Eve of St Agnes' is a blazon that guarantees Keats's poetic credentials, that identifies him as a descendant of poets. That Keats required such a blazon is evident from our knowledge of his anxiety of audience and of the comments on and revisions to 'The Eve of St Agnes' recorded by Richard Woodhouse. In particular, Keats's comments—when riled by Woodhouse's prudish objections to the explicit sexuality of the poem—that he wanted to 'fling [the reader] off at last' and that he did not write for 'ladies' suggest a virulently antagonistic attitude towards his readers (see *KC*, vol. 1, pp. 91–2). But this antagonism is counterpointed by the

immense seductiveness of the poem—its explicit engagement with readers' desires. In 'The Eve of St Agnes' Keatsian rhetoric is caught up in the contradictions of poetic seduction: not only does Keats want to seduce his readers but he also desires an audience sufficiently detached to appreciate his technical mastery. Although this is expressed most explicitly in Keats's wish 'to fling the reader off at last', it is everywhere apparent in the nuances and matrices of visibility in 'St Agnes'. While both Porphyro and Madeline provide models for the reader's vision, and while the poem provides ample opportunity for readers' imaginative envisioning, the ambiguities and tensions involved in both cases generate their own, internal, flinging off. Thus if we simply accept the ideological implications of a man covertly watching a young woman undressing, entering her bed, and making love to her, and of a poet writing poems about such an imagined experience, then the poem manages to lose much of its point: it is essential that the actions displayed be at least partially shocking for the conflated nuances of tone, colouring, reference, intertextuality, and emotion, to be activated.

Richard Woodhouse, one of Keats's closest, most sympathetic readers, provides a fascinating early reaction to 'St Agnes' in his comments on how a decorous reader might 'look' at the poem:

You know if a thing has a decent side, I generally look no further—As the Poem was orig<sup>y</sup> written, *we* innocent ones (ladies & myself) might very well have supposed that Porphyro, when acquainted with Madeline's love for him, & when 'he arose, Etherial flush<sup>d</sup> &c.&c (turn to it) set himself at once to persuade her to go off with him, & succeeded & went over the 'Dartmoor black' (now changed for some other place) to be married, in right honest chaste & sober wise. But, as it is now altered, as soon as M. has confessed her love, P. <instead> winds by degrees his arm round her, presses breast to breast, and acts all the acts of a bona fide husband, while she fancies she is only playing the part of a Wife in a dream. This alteration is of about 3 stanzas; and tho' there are no improper expressions but all is left to inference, and tho' profanely speaking, the Interest on the reader's imagination is greatly heightened, yet I do apprehend it will render the poem unfit for ladies, & indeed scarcely to be mentioned to them among the 'things that are'. (*KC*, vol. 1, p. 92)

The idea of 'looking' at a poem, and the idea that one can 'overlook' the indecent aspects of a 'decent' poem, or that one can avert one's gaze, is highly significant in terms of our analysis of 'vision' in 'The Eve of St Agnes'. There



is an uncomfortable duplicity in the phrase ‘I generally look no further’, which includes the sense that by ‘... look[ing] no further’ the reader neglects to read: from this it follows that to be read—to be read properly, fully, with attention—the poet is forced to make the poem *in-decent*. To a certain extent this is precisely what Woodhouse is saying: if it appears to be ‘decent’ then he will overlook any indecencies, he will gloss over what Jean Hagstrum has termed ‘the blazing sensuality-become-sexuality of the poem’;<sup>38</sup> but in the revised version of the poem Woodhouse finds such a reading strategy impossible. Although the question of whether the revisions make the sexuality of ‘St Agnes’ more explicit is debatable (indeed, Woodhouse’s reading seems to be highly questionable), if we assume this to be the case then we might imagine that Keats’s revisions were aimed precisely at this effect—to stop readers neglecting to read.

What both Michael Ragussis and John Barnard have described as Woodhouse’s double reading is precisely what is provided for by this poem, a duplicity of the reader’s gaze which responds to the ‘hazardous magic’ of the poem.<sup>39</sup> The ‘Eve of St Agnes’ is the poem which engages most directly and at the same time most successfully of all Keats’s long poems with the desires and anxieties of its audience such that in succumbing to its magic the reader realizes its hazards, in responding to its hazards the reader experiences its magic. The audience is caught, fixated, in the figured gaze: the hallucination of reading in ‘St Agnes’ is figured in the hazardous magic of the gaze.

#### NOTES

1. ‘To My Brother George’, line 35.

2. Stuart A. Ende, *Keats and the Sublime* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1976, ch. 2, discusses Keats and sight in relation to the sublime; more recently, Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination*, pp. 71–6, has discussed sight in ‘St Agnes’, although he confines his analysis to Porphyro’s vision and ignores the vision of Madeline and of the reader, and, moreover, focuses his argument on the question of the relationship between seeing and imagining; Ian Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 191–5, also comments on sight in the poem but similarly fails to follow the discussion through to the ‘vision’ of the reader. The fullest consideration of Keats and vision is, perhaps, that of Helen E. Haworth, ‘Keats and the Metaphor of Vision’, *JEGP*, 67 (1968), pp. 371–94, but Haworth seems to conflate the crucial distinction between the visual and the visionary. Both G. J. Finch, ‘Wordsworth, Keats, and “the language of the sense”’, *Ariel*, 11, 2 (1980), pp. 23–36, and John Barnard, ‘Keats’s Tactile Vision: “Ode to Psyche” and the Early Poetry’, *KSMB*, 33 (1982), pp. 1–24, have explicitly argued for the priority [of touch in Keats’s poetry; on the importance of the tactile as contrasted with the visual in ‘St Agnes’, see Walter Jackson Bate, *The Stylistic Development of Keats* (New York, Humanities Press, 1962), pp. 94–5.

3. See Jack Stillinger, ‘The Plots of Romantic Poetry’, p. 102; Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination*, p. 63.

4. See Steven Greenblatt's idea of the transformation of sexual friction into the friction of words in Shakespeare's comedies, in *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford University Press, 1988), ch. 3. Although the frictions I delineate in this paragraph are conceived on a different level in that they attempt to take account of the (erotic) frictions between reader and text, we might argue that it is the displaced frictions of sexual desire—correlative with the heat created by sexual/verbal foreplay/byplay which Greenblatt recognizes in Shakespearean comedy—that ultimately control the form of Keats's poem.

5. Michel Beaujour, 'Some Paradoxes of Description', pp. 27–59: 'As the multifaceted mirror of Desire, description bears only an oblique and tangential relationship to things, bodies and spaces. This is the reason why description is so intrinsically bound up with Utopia, and with pornography' (pp. 58–9). See Earl R. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems* (Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953) pp. 97–137; Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline*, pp. 67–93.

6. The other cruxes may be said to be the physical consummation of this visible vision at stanza 36—a consummation which is, in itself, sublimated into the language of sight—and the displaced consummation of the inedible, the visual feast in stanza 30.

7. For a reading of the violence of Porphyro, see Beverly Fields's analysis of the poem in terms of the Philomel myth in 'Keats and the Tongueless Nightingale: Some Unheard Melodies in "The Eve of St Agnes"', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 14 (1983), pp. 246–50, on the 'repressed violence' of the poem and Porphyro's 'rage' (p. 247), the 'fantasy of eroticized destructiveness' and 'the terrifying aspects in the figure of Porphyro' (p. 249).

8. Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination*, p. 73, makes a similar distinction between Porphyro's seeing and Madeline's; and compare Richard Cronin, *Colour and Experience in Nineteenth-Century Poetry* (London, Macmillan, 1988), p. 71, on Madeline's eyesight.

9. Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline*, p. 86; see also Michael Ragussis, 'Narrative Structure and the Problem of the Divided Reader in *The Eve of St Agnes*', *ELH*, 42 (1975), pp. 383–4.

10. See Laura Mulvey's influential essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen*, 16, 3 (1975), pp. 6–18, for an analysis of the female as spectacle and the male as mover of narrative in film, which seems to correspond well with the dynamics of the gaze in 'St Agnes'.

11. Ende, *Keats and the Sublime*, p. 40 (referring to 'peerless' in 'Ode on Melancholy').

12. Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, p. 207, comments finely on this feature of the narrative form of 'St Agnes': 'Throughout the poem we find Keats using the imagery of sculpture to express the way feeling is arrested or repressed, then liberated and fulfilled in a new onrush of emotion'.

13. See also W. M. Rossetti in Hill, ed., *Keats: The Narrative Poems*, pp. 63–4; and see Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985), p. 410.

14. See Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory*, pp. 108–9; for an analysis of how the poem demands a critical fixation on the surface figuration; but see Stillinger, 'The Plots of Romantic Poetry', pp. 102–3, on the necessity of considering the effects of *discours* in order to overcome the problem of the confusions of plot.

15. In the following discussion of description, I am indebted to certain 'structuralist' analyses of the function and functioning of description in narrative: see Genette, 'Boundaries of Narrative', pp. 5–8; Philippe Hamon, 'What is a Description?', in Tzvetan Todorov, ed., *French Literary Theory Today: A Reader* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 147–78, and 'Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive', *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981), pp.

1–26; and Beaujour, ‘Some Paradoxes of Description’, pp. 27–59. Recently, Alexander Gelley has argued against the rigid subordination of description to narration in the structuralist analysis, and has attempted to theorize the (phenomenological/pragmatic) ‘distinctive mode of descriptive cognition’ (*Narrative Crossings*, p. 13). Gelley does not, however, seek to collapse the distinction between narrative and description which I discuss.

16. See Michael Riffaterre, ‘Descriptive Imagery’, *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981), p. 125; and see Barnard, ‘Keats’s Tactile Vision’, p. 3: ‘the reader does not literally “see” a picture created from words ... It is more helpful to examine visual effects in poetry through the linguistic and rhetorical techniques used to create those effects’. My reading of the incommensurability of figurative language with ‘seeing’ might be compared with Jean-François Lyotard’s analysis of the disruptive force of the figure: Lyotard suggests that ‘whatever is language is dedicated to communication between interlocutors, while the figure ... has to jam that communication’, and that ‘language, at least in its poetic usage, is possessed, haunted by the figure’ (‘The Dream-Work Does Not Think’, in Benjamin, ed., *The Lyotard Reader*, p. 30).

17. For an extended reading of stanza one, see Levinson, *Keats’s Life of Allegory*, pp. 133–159, esp. pp. 136 and 143 on the visuality of the stanza.

18. This question is generated again by the deleted ‘See, while she speaks his arms encroaching slow’ at line 314.

19. I am concerned here with ‘motivation’ in the sense discussed by the Russian Formalists: it might be argued that stanza 9 provides an explanation of Porphyro’s motivation (‘That he might gaze and worship all unseen; / Perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss’, lines 80–81) which includes not only looking but more tactile experiences as well. But what is extraordinary about Porphyro’s plot is his desire to look rather than his (more conventional) desire for physical consummation—it will at least be granted that it is Porphyro’s hidden gaze which leads to this consummation.

20. See Paul de Man’s notion of ‘inscription’, expressed most explicitly in ‘Hypogram and Inscription: Michael Riffaterre’s Poetics of Reading’, *Diacritics*, 11, 4 (1981), pp. 17–35: de Man argues, against Riffaterre’s ‘evasion’ of prosopopoeia, that this figure ‘undoes the distinction between reference and signification on which all semiotic systems ... depend’ (p. 34) such that what is important ‘is not the assertion of non-referentiality, which is obvious, but the implied assertion of semantic determination of which non-referentiality is the specular negation’ (p. 34). Similarly, in the title essay of *The Resistance to Theory* (Manchester University Press, 1986), de Man states, categorically, that he does not deny ‘the referential function of language’ (p. 11) but rather ‘its authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition’: it is precisely the seductions of such an (apparent) authority that I am attempting to describe in the present essay, such that the mechanics of the language of the text are repeated in the mechanics of reading, or, to put it another way, it is not only the case that we ‘see’ like Porphyro (and in some senses, of course, we don’t) but also that the problematic structure of descriptive language in ‘St Agnes’ is generated by and at the same time generates’ the problematic structure of the reader’s ‘vision’—the hallucination of reading.

21. Compare Hamon’s argument that description in nineteenth-century realism has to be motivated by a character’s status as, for example, a spy (‘What is a Description?’, p. 150).

22. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

23. Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, p. 193.

24. See Levinson, *Keats’s Life of Allegory*, p. 162: ‘Stanza 24 is the shielded scutcheon at the center of the poem’ (see also p. 119); and see Tilotama Rajan, *Dark Interpreter*, p. 111, on Keats’s use of ‘self-duplicating structure[s]’ in the poem. Recently John Kerrigan,

in 'Keats and *Lucrece*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 41 (1989), pp. 103–18, has written fruitfully on Keats's modernizing of Shakespearean blazonry in his response to *Lucrece* in 'St Agnes' (see esp. p. 108).

25. Hamon, 'What is a Description?', p. 162.

26. Dedication to *The Corsair*, in *Lord Byron: The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome J. McGann (7 vols., Oxford University Press, 1980–1993), vol. III (1981), p. 49.

27. See W. M. Rossetti's argument that the octave stanza of 'Isabella' accounts for the narrative energy of the poem, while the Spenserian stanza of 'St Agnes' accounts for the fact that it is 'hardly a narrative' (in Hill, ed., *Keats: The Narrative Poems*, pp. 62–3); for comments on the effect of the stanza form in 'St Agnes', see also Bate, *John Keats*, pp. 91–2; and Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory*, pp. 132, 186 (note 40).

28. Riffaterre, 'Descriptive Imagery', p. 125.

29. See Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline*, pp. 67–93, for a reading of Porphyro as a voyeur; both Fields ('Keats and the Tongueless Nightingale', pp. 246–50) and Kerrigan ('Keats and *Lucrece*', pp. 111–13) suggest the possibility of reading 'The Eve of St Agnes', through the Philomel myth, in terms of rape. For a recent example of critical resistance to such ethical considerations, see Cronin's discussion of the poem (*Colour and Experience*, pp. 69–80), which repeatedly refuses both 'meaning' (see p. 74) and ethics: most remarkable, perhaps, is Cronin's assertion that Madeline 'is neither the object of our moral concern nor the victim of our irony. She is just beautiful' (p. 75). This is immediately followed by a quotation from the scene of her undressing—precisely the scopophilic scandal that threatens to undermine this kind of reading: Cronin's objectification of Madeline in the assertion that she is 'just beautiful' is precisely the kind of response 'The Eve of St Agnes' both demands and puts into question. On this point, see Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment*, p. 89: 'the case for some of Keats's most impassioned poetry is essentially the case for a purified and liberated scopophilia: for a contemplating which is more than permissible since it is so enabling and free of anxiety, and yet is still felt to be surprising because it includes a sense of possible guilt, shabbiness, or prurience held off by an unmisgiving largeness of mind'.

30. Robert Gittings, *John Keats: The Living Year* (London, Heinemann, 1978) pp. 79–81.

31. *Letters*, vol. II, p. 46; see the Epilogue, below, for a discussion of this important letter.

32. Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment*, p. 91.

33. See, for example, Jeffrey Baker, *John Keats and Symbolism* (Brighton, Harvester, 1986), p. 58, on the 'relieved tension' of the description.

34. Compare Cronin's comment on the meal that it is 'a feast so fairy that it is eaten just by being pronounced' (*Colour and Experience*, p. 75), and Karl Kroeber's assertion that it 'literally makes a reader's mouth water if he reads it aloud' (*British Romantic Art*, p. 205).

35. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone*, pp. 109–11.

36. Clifford Adelman, 'The Dangers of Enthralment', in Allan Danzig, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of 'The Eve of St Agnes'* (Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1971), pp. 113–14, suggests that 'The fact that [Porphyro] is "seen" as a star indicates that his being is a function of the disposition of the perceiver. Both the narrator and Madeline, if only for a moment, have seen him simultaneously exist in the world of the immortal dream and that of mutability', but this elides the question of the identity of the narrator, and the curious narratorial doubling of Porphyro which must take place for a narrator to 'see' this image.

37. Many critics have developed a comment by Keats on the colouring of the poem: 'I wish to diffuse the colouring of St Agnes eve throughout a Poem in which Character and

Sentiment would be the figures to such drapery' (*Letters*, vol. II, p. 234); see R. H. Fogle, 'A Reading of Keats's "The Eve of St Agnes"', *College English*, 6 (1945), p. 327; C. F. Burgess, "'The Eve of St Agnes": One Way to the Poem', *English Journal*, 54 (1965), pp. 391–2; Stillinger, 'The Plots of Romantic Poetry', pp. 102–3. On Porphyro as 'tainting', see Martin Aske, 'Magical Spaces in "The Eve of St Agnes"', *Essays in Criticism*, 31 (1981), p. 203.

38. Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Romantic Body: Love and Sexuality in Keats, Wordsworth, and Blake* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1985), p. 52.

39. See Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 89, and Ragussis, 'Narrative Structure', p. 389; 'hazardous magic' is from John Scott's review of Keats's 1820 volume: 'the magical delicacy of the hazardous picture' (*Heritage*, p. 224). For a discussion of one 'hazard' of 'St Agnes', the possibility of its subtextual engagement with the discourse of prostitution, see Wendy Steiner, *Pictures of Romance*, pp. 62–6; and see my "'Fragment of Castle-builder" and Keats's Use of Sexual Slang', *English Language Notes*, 28, 2 (1990) pp. 49–50.

GRANT F. SCOTT

*Keats and the Urn*

And here, on this sarcophagus, the exquisitely carved figures might assume life, and chase one another round its verge with that wild merriment which is so strangely represented on those old burial coffers; though still with some subtile allusion to Death, carefully veiled, but forever peeping forth amid emblems of mirth and riot.

—Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*

I

Perhaps no poem in the English language has been subjected to as much intense scrutiny as “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” One often feels that it has been ravished by too many interpretations, laid down alike with poets and biographers, new critics and semioticians, structuralists and philosophers. Aware that every foot of its sacred territory has been explored, every nuance announced, every word attended to with what Keats in his sonnet on sonnets calls “ear industrious” (line 9), the critic trembles before the ode with a sense of belatedness as oppressive as that felt by the Romantic poets from Milton. Small wonder that Harvey Lyon could call a collection of essays “the well-read urn”; Cleanth Brooks complained of the “dulling effect of many readings,” and W. J. T. Mitchell, able to generate only a slim paragraph on the poem, capitulated, citing “weariness with its monumentality.” “Ode on a

---

From *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts*. © 1994 by Grant F. Scott. **Note:** Figures 12, 13, and 14 which appear in the original edition of this essay have been removed from this reprinting.

Grecian Urn” is as well visited as “Indolence” and the Elgin Marbles sonnet are neglected and has prompted one glum observer to call it “the critics’ graveyard.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet for all this there remains something vestal about the ode, something essentially untouched. Interestingly, the relationship between critic and poem reveals itself to be much similar to that of poet and urn. The objet d’art, like the poem, is an enigma, an oracle to which the speaker comes demanding information, seeking knowledge. There is a sense even in the ode that the urn has been plumbed before, but to little advantage (“Thou *still* unravish’d bride of quietness” [my italics]). The poet, in fact, departs from the urn with the realization that his own personal drama will be reenacted in other times, amid “other woe / Than ours” (47–48), and that the activity of interpretation is a continuous and ongoing one. The dual sense of a territory well trodden and a “fresh green breast of the new world,” to borrow a phrase from F. Scott Fitzgerald, is thus built into the ode’s own structure and is reflected in the critic’s as well as the poet’s mixed feelings about confronting the artifact.

This intuitive sense that the ode, like the urn, has never been fully explored—along with our own interest in Keats’s steadily evolving use of ekphrasis—provides a justification for approaching the monolith one more time. For all the dozens of articles and chapters devoted to “Grecian Urn,” surprisingly few have discussed the poem in specifically ekphrastic terms. Although important critics like Krieger and Spitzer have addressed this issue, they have seen the ode either through the rigid categories prescribed by Lessing’s *Laocoon*, and hence in terms of temporal and spatial limits, or as a “purely aesthetic ... account of an exemplary experience felt by the poet confronted with an ancient work of art” (Spitzer, “Content vs. Metagrammar,” 83). Spitzer goes on to discuss the ode generically but in relation to ancient Greek epigrams and epitaphs rather than contemporary Romantic forms. His attempt to explicate the poem shares with the other critics who have used ekphrasis as their model a language grounded in abstract and philosophical principles that separate the poem from its central metaphors of sexual pursuit and ravishment. “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” it seems to me, is a poem we must speak of not only in terms of genre but of gender and sex role, categories that we have shown to be closely associated with ekphrasis (see chapters 1 and 4). Perhaps more than any of its companions, “Grecian Urn” is the one ode that begs to be read as an allegory of sexual identity, of feminine power and male fear.

That criticism has largely dismissed the ode’s complex gender networks as merely decorative, as peripheral metaphor, is surprising only if we overlook the sex of the majority of its commentators. It is no accident that

the most frequent critics of the ode have been male, nor that their essays focus predominantly on the philosophical and aesthetic implications of the final five lines.<sup>2</sup> At work here is a species of avoidance that can be traced to the dynamics of perceiver/perceived in the ode itself. Criticism has tended to follow the path of the poet as he escapes from the frustrating embrace of the urn/bride into a more comforting and inspiring little aphorism. Most critics are drawn toward this concluding phrase, then, not so much because it presents an intriguing logical problem but because it offers a means of escaping the rest of the ode and its unsettling implications of feminine power and thwarted male sexuality. The lines provide an opportunity for bringing to bear external theories about the epigram's derivation, aesthetics, and eighteenth-century associationalist origins; in other words, they offer the critic solace and lend him a voice that the rest of the ode is implicitly intent on denying. For there is something that both frightens and challenges the power of male speech in the urn; there is something about its shape, its hollowness, and its silence that threatens to render the observer himself mute, to turn him, like the predecessors of Perseus in the Greek myth, into a lifeless statue. Although it will not become readily apparent until we have begun to explore the poem, the urn shares a number of attributes with Medusa, a figure whose gaze, according to Freud, at once promises to stiffen and threatens to castrate the enthralled male.<sup>3</sup> If the fear of castration in "Indolence" is translated into images of flatness and inertia—personified by the sexless and two-dimensional pet lamb—then in "Grecian Urn" it manifests itself more nearly in terms of silence, as an imminent and terrifying loss of voice.

## II BACKGROUNDS TO "ODE ON A GRECIAN URN"

In keeping with our approach to the previous ekphrastic poems, it is important now to consider the genre of "Grecian Urn" and to situate it in relation to its predecessors and contemporaries. As it happens, the ode's place is less easy to determine and more problematic than his other works. Contrary to the examples provided by "Indolence," "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," and even the odes to a nightingale, on melancholy, and to autumn, whose themes are well represented in the literature of the eighteenth century, there are very few poems on urns or vases in this period; and the ones we do find are much more concerned with didactic messages about mortality than with descriptions of aesthetic objects or with any formal process of ekphrasis. If we limit ourselves to such narrow parameters of the genre, then, we must admit that "Ode on a Grecian Urn" has no direct forebears and indeed remains a unique "foster-child."



But if we relax the requirements somewhat, we may notice some interesting and fertile parallels. Although the eighteenth century cannot boast any great meditations on urns, it is surprisingly well stocked with picture-poems and verse essays (“poetical essays”) on painting. Beginning with Matthew Prior’s “Picture of Seneca Dying in a Bath: By Jordain” (1720), the period witnesses a steady industry in portrait ekphrasis; some of the better known pieces include John Dyer’s “An Epistle to a Famous Painter,” Edward Young’s “On Michael Angelo’s Famous Piece of the Crucifixion,” John Byrom’s “Verses Written under a Print, Representing the Salutation of the Blessed Virgin,” and Richard Cambridge’s “On Painting; Addressed to Mr. Patch, a Celebrated Picture Cleaner.”<sup>4</sup> Of the subjects chosen for these ekphrases, perhaps the most popular is that of the beautiful woman. Alexander Pope’s “Epistle: To a Lady” (1735), with its implied stroll through a picture gallery of feminine types, inaugurates a thriving subgenre of poems all devoted to a laudatory inspection of female beauty. Thomas Tickell’s “On a Lady’s Picture” and Christopher Smart’s “On Seeing the Picture of Miss R-G-N” stand as typical examples of the form at midcentury. Toward the latter half of the period, poems on portraits begin to appear more and more frequently in the fashionable collections of fugitive poetry and in the popular magazines of the day, particularly *Gentleman’s*, *Universal*, and *London*. Testament to the persistence of this popularity into the early years of the nineteenth century is the fact that Wordsworth, Shelley, and Hunt all wrote poems on pictures.

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” cannot accurately be defined as a description of a picture, however, for as the poet makes us aware, the urn has “shape” and occupies a three-dimensional space. Many critics have argued that the object’s function as a funerary urn is crucial to an understanding of the poem. Yet in spite of the significant allusions to external form, the principal focus of the poem remains the observable frieze and the frantic fertility ritual that it depicts. Ostensibly, then, we are presented with a difficult problem. As Charles Patterson puts it,

There must be a reason for Keats’s bringing together the outlines of the urn as framework and the carvings as centerpiece, for he actually saw prototypes of his urn-figures among the Elgin Marbles, and could as readily have written an ode on a Grecian frieze or pediment except for a conscious or subconscious desire to represent them as encompassed by form suggesting vitality.<sup>5</sup>

Patterson surmises that the urn's shape provides a vital and generative compensation for the arrested activity displayed on its surface. But this reading views the problem symbolically and thematically, rather than generically. Confusion about the urn's shape disappears once we realize that the work falls between sculpture and picture-poem and as such combines a perception of three-dimensional form with a meditation on two-dimensional space. In this sense, Keats uses what he had learned about the immediate presence of sculpture in the Elgin Marbles sonnet along with what he had discovered in "Ode on Indolence" about the idea of sequence and order that governs a frieze. The urn-as-object contains elements found in both earlier works: it maintains an existence not only as a solitary and integral piece of sculpture (the apostrophes of the opening and concluding stanzas make this clear)—a work not unlike one of the caryatids or female figures in the Parthenon pediment—but also serves as canvas for a spatial scene. In Patterson's terms, then, it is both "framework" and "centerpiece," signifier and signified.<sup>6</sup> This is one reason that the Elgin Marbles sonnet and "Indolence," as special considerations of either sculpture or frieze, are apprentice works, preparing Keats for the advanced poetics of ekphrasis in "Grecian Urn."

In summary, then, we may think of "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as a synthesis, at least in formal terms, of an ekphrasis concerned with three-dimensional sculpture and one devoted to a frieze or picture. Since the Oxford and Cambridge Prize poems were frequently interested in describing friezes and rendering ancient statues like the Laokoön or the Apollo Belvedere into a temporal narrative (George Robert Chinnery's "The Statue of the Dying Gladiator" [1810] is a good example of this tendency), we may also think of the ode as Keats's own prize poem, his submission to the *Annals of the Fine Arts* for the Newdigate or the Cambridge medal. To return to our earlier discussion, then, the ode can be seen as descending from two distinct genres of poetry: the portrait/picture poem and the university prize poem.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, Keats derives the formal methods of description, particularly of the urn processional, from the often mechanical adumbrations that became a common feature of the medal poems. Richard Burdon's "Parthenon," reprinted in *Gentleman's Magazine*, August 1811, offers a good example—

In slow procession move around the frieze,  
Virgins, and youths, and guardian deities.  
Some stately ride, some march to measur'd sound,

Whilst youthful champions walk their chariots round.  
 Here victims pace their voluntary way,  
 And bards proclaim Minerva's festal day

—as does a section from Thomas Babington Macaulay's "Pompeii" (1819), a poem that manifests the phenomenon of ekphrastic fear on the national level:

With fillets bound the hoary priests advance,  
 And rosy virgins braid the choral dance  
 . . . . .  
 From ev'ry crowded altar perfumes rise  
 In billowy clouds of fragrance to the skies.  
 The milk-white monarch of the herd they lead,  
 With gilded horns, at yonder shrine to bleed;  
 And while the victim crops the 'broider'd plain,  
 And frisks and gambols tow'rds the destined fane,  
 They little deem that like himself they stray  
 To death, unconscious, o'er a flow'ry way,  
 Heedless, like him, th' impending stroke await,  
 And sport and wanton on the brink of fate.

(lines 41–56)

William Haygarth's ekphrasis on the Parthenon, like these other examples, recalls stanza 4 of "Grecian Urn," though it pushes the theme of sacrifice to its logical conclusion:

the metopes

Start into ambient air, and breathe with life.  
 Fall back with white upturned wond'ring eyes  
 To gaze upon the sculptur'd frieze; the long  
 Procession moves—light female forms array'd  
 In stole and modest peplus bear the load  
 Of sacred urns and torches; fir'd with rage  
 The bull glares wildly by; with bended knees,  
 And firm projected arms, the struggling boy  
 Draws the tight cord; till to the altar dragg'd,  
 It backward bends its dewlapp'd throat, to meet  
 The blow. There youths and warlike bands are seen—  
 Some grasp the ringing buckler; some bind on  
 The martial greave; some guide the dusty car;

Or seated graceful on their snowy steeds,  
 Whose eye-balls flash and nostrils snort with fire  
 They press the foaming curb, and give their vests  
 To stream in careless folds upon the wind.

(2.624–41)

On the whole, however, the prize poems rarely live up to their name; they are dull and formulaic and follow a monotonous recipe of pentameter couplets. They frequently end with a didactic, moral message that reminds us, if only in form, of the conclusion of Keats's ode. Unlike their more illustrious offspring, however, these poems indulge in varieties of sentimental melancholy and patriotic effusion that borrow from the very worst qualities of the poetry of Sensibility. If we are to gain anything by a retrospective look at genre, we must turn to the portrait poems, for they are far more closely linked to the psychological elements of ekphrasis and aesthetic meditation.

### III THE PORTRAIT POEM GENRE

Because it illustrates many of the century's prevalent beliefs about the nature and purpose of painting, J. Holland's translation of Pliny's "On the Picture of Medea" seems a good place to start. The poem was published in the following form for the *Gentleman's Magazine* of April 1804:

When the great master all his art combin'd,  
 To paint the tumults of Medea's mind;  
 Her inward struggles, swelling into view,  
 Beneath the magic of his pencil grew,  
 Behold the vivid lines distinctly glow,  
 Stamp'd with a double character of woe.  
 Dark is the frown that clouds her gather'd brow,  
 But bright the tear which trembles from below.  
 Parental pity in that glist'ring tear,  
 In that black frown a thousand threats appear.      10  
 Each look is pregnant with an offspring's fate,  
 Now life in love, now death is doom'd in hate.  
 But here the skillful artist drew a veil  
 O'er the dire sequel of the dreadful tale;  
 Else had we seen a parent's hand embrued,      15  
 Suffice the horrid thought, in filial blood  
 His fault'ring touch confess'd a finer soul,  
 Nor stain'd the canvas with a deed so foul.

The first thing to note is the distinct separation that the poet establishes between artist and canvas. Though the poem is titled “On the Picture of Medea,” the opening lines concern “the great master” and emphasize his artistic and mimetic powers. We are made acutely aware of the artist’s presence at both the beginning and end of the poem, and it is the powerful presence of a chaperone or a guardian rather than the shaping hand of a Prospero. Holland is careful to articulate the artist’s strict control over subject matter and form. His pencil may contain “magic,” but it is a magic that knows its limitations—knows what to depict, what to omit. As important to the picture as the myth itself, then, is the careful choice of a moment in the plot directly preceding its climactic bloodbath; indeed, the artist’s discretion becomes as crucial to the poem as his imaginative powers, for in the end he “draws the veil” over subsequent events and is praised more for what he refuses to paint than for what he portrays. At work in this ekphrasis is a subconscious interest in decorum and restraint and a corresponding leeriness about aesthetic identification.

That such an alliance with the figure of Medea is dangerous becomes apparent through the poet’s careful use of frames. Holland’s view of the picture, mediated in the first instance by Pliny, is further offset by the illusion that the artist himself stands close by, benevolently watching over our shoulder. The implication is that Medea’s image remains lethal even in paint and should be sequestered. The poet must take steps to discharge her threatening power by making the artist as well as the process of translation part of the dynamics of perception. This elaborate distancing occurs, as I have said, at either end of the poem and indicates a determined countermovement against what happens in the middle, where the work most nearly aspires to true ekphrasis. Of the poem’s eighteen lines, only a third are devoted to an emotional description of Medea; these six lines come the closest to a sympathetic, though sentimentalized, acknowledgment of her plight.

Even this small degree of identification remains dangerous, however, precisely because it violates the decorum of the sister arts and thus constitutes a breach of aesthetic etiquette as violent in some degree as the crime Medea perpetrates. The next line, “But here the skillful artist drew a veil” (13), abruptly breaks the illusion of empathy, taking leave of the painting and reestablishing proper relations between artist, poet, and picture. The adjective *skillful*, it should be pointed out, has little to do with the artist’s technical abilities—and thus does not hark back to the virtuosity stressed in the opening lines—but instead serves as an indication of his tact and moral integrity. As a polite turning away from the object, the line represents one of the clearest transitions from ekphrastic hope to ekphrastic indifference that we will come across.

At the conclusion of the poem, Holland draws another formal demarcation between the painting and his own medium. Even as the artist discreetly refuses to portray the “dire sequel of the dreadful tale” (14), the poet finds no difficulty in doing just that. He goes on to sum up Medea’s fate in a sanguine little couplet, made even more mischievously dramatic by caesura and dash: “Else had we seen a parent’s hand embrued, / Suffice the horrid thought, in filial blood—” (15–16). The effect, whether the poet intends it or not, is firmly to separate the temporal elements of his narrative from the static ones in the picture. Whereas the poet completes the myth without breaching decorum, the painter will “stain” (18) the canvas if he chooses to depict it. For the painter, the deed and its portrayal become synonymous crimes. In fact, the artist’s restraint, exemplified in his “fault’ring touch” (17), carries moral overtones that do not obtain for the poet. He bears a direct responsibility for the action that the poet manages to evade if only because he is working in a different medium.

Implicit in this contradiction is a fear of the powerful feminine image, what W. J. T. Mitchell calls “iconophobia.” To write about the massacre of Medea’s brood is to distance the event, turn it from an image into an idea. Inscribed, the myth becomes far less threatening to the poet, who can banish a “horrid thought” (16) more quickly than a fearsome image.<sup>8</sup> The tendency to privilege the unseen over the seen runs throughout the poem: the artist, we may note, is praised for painting “the tumults of Medea’s mind; / Her inward struggles” (2–3) rather than for any purely technical displays of color or design. The more the artist approximates writing (he uses a “pencil” [4] instead of a brush), invoking invisible complexities of character, the closer he comes to a masterpiece. The bias against painting, along with the propensity to replace art with writing, to subordinate the spatial to the temporal, governs Holland’s ekphrasis and serves as a defense against the irrational fears that the image generates. If he can successfully turn Medea into words, assimilate and then diffuse her power through language, then the poet has exorcised a large part of her mesmerism and has deferred the muteness that traditionally accompanies any perception of a sublime object.

“On the Picture of Medea,” then, is a poem that approaches the feminine other with enormous caution. It constructs a *series* of protective frames to contain the power of the image and dispel its threatening omnipotence.<sup>9</sup> Holland carefully brackets the central ekphrastic encounter and sets up a number of preconditions that assign responsibility for the image’s dangerous influence to the artist, whose abilities as a censor, an aesthetic and moral judge, preempt his talents as a painter.

Of course, the ability to select the appropriate moment on which to base a sculpture or painting is precisely what Lessing spends so much time

discussing in *Laocoon*. His essay shows a greater interest in the propriety of the subject matter than in its potential for drama or sublimity (the discussion of Laokoön's agonized expression and the indelicacy of his ugliness is a case in point). Lessing's special concern with etiquette, though it appears, as Mitchell has shown, buried in a universal language of philosophy and aesthetics, nevertheless underlies Holland's own ekphrasis, as well as a host of popularized treatises that appeared subsequently in the contemporary magazines. Of these, none expresses more anxiety over the issue of improper conjunction than an essay that appeared in the *Universal Magazine* of May 1797 titled "Coalition between Poetry and Painting." The title itself betrays the unspoken political intent of Lessing's text; and the first words, referring to the arts as potentially "congenial," point to the argument's sexual politics. It is worth quoting from the essay at some length:

A coalition of a very pleasing nature has been attempted by some British artists, between poetry and painting. Poetry and painting are no doubt congenial arts. But the observation is no less just in criticism than in morals, that where we enjoy a great deal of pleasure, we also encounter a good deal of danger. Pleasing as on many occasions may be the effects of this combination between two of the most elegant arts, it ought not to be attempted in any instance, without cautious deliberation and acute discernment.... Here the admirers of painting and the partisans of its alliance with poetry may be inclined to ask, are not all fine passages in a poem fit to be delineated by the painter; are not the arts congenial, and are they not produced by similar energies? They are admitted to be congenial; but some distinctions must be attended to. Let it be particularly attended to and remembered, that what is highly poetical is not always picturesque, Many fine thoughts of the poet, and many objects presented by him to the mind, cannot by all the creative power of lines, colours, and shades be rendered visible. (321)

The passage serves as an excellent gloss on Holland's "Medea," for both works are governed by similar motivations. Not only do they share the same concern with caution and with keeping the arts safely segregated (the hopeless entangling of moral with aesthetic issues is also a characteristic feature of this genre of "polite" essays), but both arguments are beset by an essential contradiction. Like Holland, the author proposes a "coalition" or "alliance" between the arts, whose fundamental impulse is not reciprocal. The essay presupposes that painting finds its *raison d'être* in poetry, that

when it wishes to capture the picturesque, it inevitably turns for its material to the temporal arts. However, the author claims that painting simply cannot replicate or “render visible” poetical thoughts, though he says nothing about the limitations of poetry in conveying the immediacy of an image or documenting the sensuous effects of color and shape. What he means by “coalition,” then, has more to do with a painter’s choice of poetic themes and the proper moral guidelines he must follow when attempting such a “union” than with any genuine cooperation between the arts.

Although it is obviously inferior to *Laocoon* as an aesthetic document, “Coalition between Painting and Poetry” expresses some of the same reservations about allocating freedom to the spatial arts. In its attempt to establish the superiority of poetry, the essay falls back on an assertion of authority and power that mirrors the patriarchal and political systems of the day. A coalition between the arts is a dangerous proposition precisely because it threatens to undermine existing systems of political and sexual hegemony. Importantly, the author of this essay neglects to mention the other side of the equation, namely, the inclusion of painting in poetry, or ekphrasis.

The threat of the visual image, particularly the feminine one, and the importance of keeping the arts duly segregated appears even in the most ostensibly harmless of occasional ekphrases. James Vale’s “Verses on Seeing the Portrait of Miss C—N”<sup>10</sup> is a case in point:

Sweet Nymph! as late I trac’d with curious eye  
 Thy auburn flowing locks and snowy breast;  
 My bosom heav’d the sympathetic sigh,  
 And what my tongue conceal’d the sigh confess’d.  
 What though to one unknown, yet still the smiles  
 That play luxuriant o’er thy beauteous face,  
 The converse sweet that ev’ry care beguiles,  
 The taper form combin’d with ev’ry grace.  
 Ah! these are charms that caught my raptur’d gaze,  
 And pierc’d my breast with Love’s soft thrilling smart;  
 Be mine those charms in silent joy to praise  
 Nor risk a view, which surely wounds the heart.

The poem stands as a typical example of the genre: The roving masculine “eye” that traces over the woman’s “taper form,” the catalog of features, the fetishistic lingering over hair and breast, the mild allusions to being “caught,” a prisoner to beauty, beguiled into a trance by the woman’s sweet eyes—all these are commonplace devices of the portrait poem. Yet even with its mawkishness and innocent voyeurism, the work still contains hints of



distress. The verses actually constitute a remembered rather than an immediate ekphrasis. When he distances the experience in a manner appropriate to the larger genre of sensibility, the speaker demonstrates the same characteristics of recollected and self-conscious sympathy that MacKenzie popularized in *The Man of Feeling*. However powerful, though, the tête-à-tête with the picture is “late” and is praised “in silent joy” at a careful remove from the immediacy of the experience. These lines thus reflect a furtive ekphrasis enjoyed in secret; by the end of the poem, the speaker is in grave danger of being captured by the portrait, bound in thrall to its deceptively strong power. To risk another gaze, we are given to understand, would compromise the poet’s heart or “art” altogether.

Although he appears to have taken sufficient precautions to ward off her power and maintain his own separate masculine identity, the poet is closer to “Miss C—N” than he might consciously admit. There is a suggestion that in the process of gazing on the portrait (and perhaps in the fertile interim since) the speaker has been mildly feminized. After itemizing her “snowy breast,” he remarks that his own “bosom heav’d the sympathetic sigh”; it is *his* breast that is later “pierc’d ... with Love’s soft thrilling smart” and his own tongue that remains speechless before the picture, capable now of expressing itself only in wordless gasps of sympathy (it is precisely this type of paralysis before the beautiful object that will become such an important part of Keats’s ode). Even though the speaker requests that the picture’s charms “[b]e mine,” it is nevertheless unclear by the end who possesses whom. Though he may not suspect it, the poet carries the lineaments of the lady’s face and form “trac’d” on his own bosom.<sup>11</sup>

Another tendency in the genre of the portrait poem is to counteract the threat implied by the feminine objet d’art by exacting a kind of revenge on its image. “On Looking at the Picture of a Beautiful Female,” printed anonymously in *The Literary Magazine and British Review*, begins innocently enough with a set of characteristically breathless rhetorical questions:

What dazzling beauties strike my ravish’d eyes,  
 And fill my soul with pleasure and surprize?  
 What blooming sweetness smiles upon that face?  
 How mild, yet how majestic ev’ry grace!  
 In those bright eyes what more than mimic fire  
 Benignly shines, and kindles gay desire?  
 Yet chasten’d Modesty, fair white-rob’d dame,  
 Triumphant sits to check the rising flame.<sup>12</sup>

The last couplet hints at the delicacy of the author's situation and suggests a reason for the abrupt thematic and tonal shift that is to follow. After singing the praises of the woman's fair and modest form, the poet takes an extraordinary step by separating the immediate ekphrastic object from its real world model:

No more soft dimpling smiles those cheeks adorn,  
 Whose rosy tincture sham'd the rising morn;  
 No more with sparkling radiance shine those eyes,  
 Nor over those the sable arches rise;  
 Nor from those ruby lips soft accents flow,  
 Nor lilies on the snowy forehead blow.  
 All, all are cropp'd by death's impartial hand.  
 Charms could not bribe, nor beauty's pow'r withstand;  
 Not all that crowd of wond'rous charms could save  
 The fair possessor from the dreary grave.

The poet summons the usual catalog of feminine accoutrements only to defeat them and her "by death's impartial hand." The frustration brought on by an erotic ekphrasis, itself spurred by the portrait's "more than mimic fire," is quelled by a sleight of hand that tampers with the idea of dramatic illusion. Only by separating the portrait from the model is the author able to exact a degree of recompense for the "rising flame" that the ekphrasis brings on. He manages warmly to invoke and caress her image at the same time that he cools his ardor, reassuring himself of her absence with knowledge of "the dreary grave." The last lines, in fact, do not concern the portrait at all but elegize the actual woman. The manipulated schism between painted image and real one, then, becomes a covertly defensive maneuver that, like Holland's deployment of frames, protects the author from a perilous ekphrastic identification with the beautiful figure. To achieve this separation, however, he must undermine the conventional aesthetic illusion that the portrait "breathes life."

Of special concern for the genre of the picture or portrait poem, then, is the speaker's ingenuity in devising protective shields against the harmful effects of the feminine image. The observer must develop a repertoire of countercharms with which to deflect the powerful gaze of the Other and ensure himself against emasculation and muteness—two conditions that become increasingly difficult to distinguish in the genre. When the poet is not busy contriving ways to insulate his voice, he is scheming at revenge, devising methods of neutralizing the image so that it no longer poses a

significant threat. The problem with these elaborate ploys, of course, is that the poet has come to the portrait in the first place because he finds the image irresistible, because he needs to look at it. And yet at the same time, he realizes that such an activity threatens the very sources of his poetry and his craft (these are the ambivalent motivations that prompt the Elgin Marbles sonnet as well). The poet's challenge in this form of ekphrasis is therefore to walk a fine line between making the image speak and avoiding the loss of speech himself. He must elude the fate of the prize poems—a passive and mechanical description of the object—and yet he must also devise a way of being sufficiently in control of his own imagination and language so as to enter fully, sensuously into the image. His challenge is to translate its beauty into words without compromising the boundaries of his own fragile selfhood.

One way of achieving this, as we have seen, is to erect rhetorical barriers between the object and the observer so that a direct perception of the image is safely mediated and never the sole concern of the poem. In this instance the poet invites all the peripheral elements of ekphrasis—the artist, the artist's materials, the historical context—as friendly aides-de-camp in occupying or decentering the image. Another way of approaching the object, employed primarily by the theoreticians of ekphrasis, involves drawing up finely delineated moral and aesthetic boundaries between the arts and implicitly privileging poetry over painting. It is only when painting tries to accomplish too much, the argument goes, tries to trespass on themes that are better left to poetry, that the conjunction becomes a dangerous one. Much of this debate finds its way into the interstices of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," to which we must now turn.

#### IV THE IMAGINATIVE EUNUCH: KEATS AND THE URN

He added new treasures to his mother-tongue,—and what is worse, he out hunted Hunt in a species of emasculated pruriency, that, although invented in Little Britain, looks as if it were the product of same imaginative Eunuch's muse within the melancholy inspiration of a Haram.

—*Blackwood's*, January 1826

... he shd despise a man who would be such an eunuch in sentiment as to leave a maid, with that Character about her, in such a situation.

—Richard Woodhouse to John Taylor, 20 September 1819

The eighteenth-century portrait poems we have been examining illustrate what I would call the Medusa model of ekphrasis.<sup>13</sup> Each poem is interested in employing apotropaic devices and frames to deflect the harmful effects of the feminine image. Shelley's "On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery" (1819) represents the culmination of this genre and its most chilling nightmare. All the carefully constructed scaffolding of psychological safeguards and compensations, all the symbolic barriers between the observer and the observed, are dismantled, and the speaker is left staring at the Medusa as if she were actually present:

Yet it is less the horror than the grace  
 Which turns the gazer's spirit into stone,  
 Whereon the lineaments of that dead face  
 Are graven, till the characters be grown  
 Into itself, and thought no more can trace.  
 (lines 9–13)

Shelley directly confronts the implicit threat of paralysis and of voicelessness that the portrait poems continually defer. And his poem—full of strange contortions, elliptical expressions, lacunae—writhes under the "tempestuous loveliness of terror," acting out the mortification of Medusa's gaze. "On the Medusa" relates what Perseus really saw when he beheld the Gorgon and why he could not describe it.<sup>14</sup>

The art object in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is neither so obviously fearsome nor so terrifyingly radical as Shelley's Medusa. The urn teases rather than accosts the speaker and prefers to engage him in a more civil form of rivalry. Still, the poem dramatizes a *paragone* between poet and artwork, and the fears encountered in the eighteenth-century portrait poems are clearly present. As the speaker says, the urn is a "Sylvan historian," who threatens to "express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme" (lines 3–4). The prospect of paralysis before the silent beauty of the unravished bride is never far from the speaker's mind and on several occasions forces him to stammer and repeat himself, in the middle stanza almost embarrassingly so. Rather than succumbing to the urn's eternal silence, however, the speaker improvises a series of empathetic effusions that challenge the very temporality and movement of his own medium. As in "Epistle to J. H. Reynolds," the speaker finds himself too close to the artwork he surveys and must contrive an escape, though this time his leave-taking is far more enigmatic and elusive than in the earlier ekphrasis.

If “Ode on a Grecian Urn” portrays the confrontation between Keats and the urn, and by implication the age-old agon of word and image, it also reveals the tension between the two competing strains of ekphrastic description: the yearning for movement, for animation, and the equally strong desire for graphic stasis. In this sense, “Grecian Urn” represents a unique compromise, a poem that attempts to balance the narrative claims of ekphrasis found in “On a Leander” and “Epistle to J. H. Reynolds” with the static ones in poems like “Fragment of Castle-builder,” “The Eve of St. Agnes,” and *Hyperion*. Whether the poem achieves the integration of these two strands is a question we will leave open for the moment. Even from a brief inspection of the ode, it seems clear that a difficult struggle is likely: stanzas 2 and 3 celebrate the joys of permanence and eternity, while 4 and 5 appear to question these joys, devising a tale for the urn that is not displayed on its surface and criticizing the vase’s gaudy design. It is enough to say that by the last stanza, even by the last few lines, the outcome of the contest is still very much in doubt.

In addition to these two dominant impulses, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” also plays off the fundamental association between ekphrasis and deception, ekphrasis and literary sleight of hand. Although it purports to be an exercise in pure ekphrasis, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” like its cousin “Indolence,” is purely notional and constitutes an ingenious illusion. There is no urn, and this makes the accomplishment all the more astonishing. Unlike its predecessor, however, the ekphrasis is so confident that we are tempted to believe in the urn’s materiality, in its actual existence. Dozens of scholars have done just this and joined the hunt for “the real urn,” unwilling to believe that the eponymous artifact is the first and perhaps most clever *trompe l’oeil* of the poem.<sup>15</sup> But it surely is, as Ian Jack has shown, and like the preliminary ekphrasis in “Epistle to J. H. Reynolds” (lines 19–25), it represents a composite drawn from various sources. “Ode on a Grecian Urn” summons the Elgin marbles for its figures, Claude’s paintings for its scenes of pursuit and sacrifice, and a number of neo-Attic vases for its overall shape; thus, it deftly combines the inspirations of each of Keats’s previous ekphrastic poems.

At the same time that it harks back to these earlier works, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” improves markedly on their general use of ekphrasis. The poet never actually describes the marbles in the first sonnet, though he recruits their battered condition for the shape of his poem; ekphrasis is composed solely of aesthetic response. In “Epistle,” Keats takes so many liberties with Claude’s picture that we are scarcely able to recognize it; the artwork is effortlessly narratized, swept up into the swift current of the poem’s freely associating consciousness. Except briefly at the end, little attention is

devoted to the problematics of ekphrastic encounter, particularly its inclination toward stasis. Finally, "Ode on Indolence," as I have argued, represents the sculptural figures as nebulous shades, caught between simile and dream and thus never able to achieve more than an allegorical status. If the figures receive the narrative charge of ekphrasis, it is certainly not from the speaker, who remains passively lounging in the grass.

In "Grecian Urn," by contrast, there is neither hesitation over the ontological status of the urn—the object is fixed and permanent—nor indecision over how to animate it or what it represents. We have left the dreamy natural landscape of "Indolence" and the surreal personal world of "Epistle" and have returned to the museum, though this time Keats is unaccompanied by Haydon and free from the onus of having to confront specific historical artifacts. The urn's imaginary status is a tribute to Keats's growing independence and shows his increasingly disciplined use of imagination, an imagination he could barely contain in "Epistle" and "Indolence." The famous last lines of the poem demonstrate a rapprochement with the ekphrastic object that is absent from Keats's earlier poems, where the speakers are left agitated and overwrought. The aphorism "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (line 49) not only broadens the aesthetic experience to include all of humanity but also establishes a peaceful coexistence between artifact and poet that none of the early ekphrases, especially "Indolence," was ready to concede.

Where the poem does show affinities with his previous works (particularly "Indolence" and "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles") is in its concern with aesthetic response; the ode is as much about the speaker as the urn and involves a dramatization of the circumstances of aesthetic observation. This is, of course, one of the many ironies of this strand of ekphrasis—that what advertises itself as a description of an Other turns out to be a catalog of the observing self's own characteristics and a confession of its most daunting insecurities and fears. In truth, Keats makes the perception of the object less important than the exploration of the hermeneutics of such an activity and the psychology of the perceiving eye. "What the ode mainly is about," writes Michael Hinden, "is the nature of aesthetic response."<sup>16</sup>

To understand this response, it is important to examine the ways in which the observer approaches the object and indulges in a traditional species of ekphrastic identification. More importantly, it seems imperative, now that we have seen a number of eighteenth-century reactions and established the Medusa model, to explore Keats's handling of ekphrastic fear and to arrive at some sort of conclusion about the speaker's enigmatic farewell to the urn. In this regard, we need to address a specific set of questions: to wit, how does our knowledge of the poem's generic heritage

help us to explain the epigram? How do we account for the speaker's abrupt change in tone at the end? Is the aphorism really a "serious blemish on a beautiful poem," as T. S. Eliot famously argues, in effect "a brilliant failure," or something else?<sup>17</sup>

Finally, how are we to interpret the language of this concluding phrase? Can it be accommodated to the rest of the poem and the *paragone*? Can it be reconciled with the competing strands of ekphrastic description at work in the ode? Should it be? Part of the difficulty in approaching the lines, I shall argue, stems from the fact that previous criticism has tried to see them textually rather than psychologically or generically; that is to say, commentators have needed to understand the epigram as contributing to a kind of New Critical thematic unity.<sup>18</sup> What is required is what Thomas Kuhn calls a "paradigm shift." If there is an identifiable sense lurking in this most notoriously inscrutable of Romantic oracles, then it is to be found in the special grammar of ekphrasis.

Interestingly, the ode does not begin with the speaker's attempt to compete with the urn but with an homage to its strange genealogy and to its paradoxical powers of eloquence:

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,  
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,  
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express  
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme.  
 (lines 1–4)

After apostrophizing the urn, however, the speaker almost immediately becomes impatient with its silence and challenges the object with a number of pointed questions. As Heffernan has astutely noted, "Rather than silencing the virgin artifact, he longs to hear it speak, or more precisely to understand what its silence is saying. Yet the opening stanza plainly expresses an almost violent urge to *make* it speak" (*Museum of Words*, 111):

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape  
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?  
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?  
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  
 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?  
 (5–10)

After a brief honeymoon, Keats distances the urn and establishes its otherness through an onslaught of factual inquiries. “The constitutive trope of the *Urn*,” Helen Vendler writes, “is interrogation, that trope of the perplexed mind” (118). What we gather from these opening lines is that the objet d’art remains essentially foreign to the sensibility of the observer. Like Aeneas looking on Vulcan’s shield, he is ignorant of its “legend,” its figures, its scene. He can neither identify its host of characters nor make out the inscription that might possibly lend him a clue in his endeavor. Indeed, the urn is temporally as well as spatially alien to him: its medium is “slow time” (2), something with which the eager observer, in his rapid-fire burst of inquiry, shows himself to be completely unfamiliar.

The change from impatience to tolerance and even acceptance begins with the first line of the next stanza: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on” (11–12). The space that separates these words from the introductory of the first stanza is a fertile one, for in it the speaker has realized that his initial approach was somewhat too academic and thus inappropriate. He wanted facts and names; he wished to attach precise myths to the various activities of the figures. These lines, along with the next and its pun on “endear’d” (13), indicate that the observer has internalized his response and is able now to entertain an aural paradox and to accept and imaginatively affirm the “ditties of no tone” (14). The third stanza finds the observer at the acme of his optimism, closer to an absolute empathy with the urn than he has been or will be:

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed  
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;  
 And, happy melodist, unwearied,  
 For ever piping songs for ever new;  
 More happy love! more happy, happy love!  
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,  
 For ever panting, and for ever young;  
 All breathing human passion far above,  
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy’d,  
 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

(21–30)

The exact middle of the ode, line 25 (“More happy love! more happy, happy love!”), represents the point at which the narrative logic of temporal progression (Lessing’s prerequisite for poetry) collapses and the spatial



simultaneity of the urn's frieze takes over.<sup>19</sup> The entire stanza threatens to grind to a halt as narrative; the speaker stutters and froths in an ecstasy of identification with the urn's lovers, repeating the word *happy* no less than six times; the phrase "for ever," five. The static impulse of ekphrasis has apparently triumphed, and the speaker, like his comrade in the final section of "Epistle to J. H. Reynolds," finds himself within the bas-relief scene. At the midpoint of the ode, then, language is no longer able to perform its task of narration; as he utters it the sixth time, the word *happy* becomes meaningless, capable of being understood only as an illustration of the speaker's erotic fixation and his beholdenness to the urn.<sup>20</sup>

By the fourth stanza, the observer has sufficiently recovered from his paralysis to resume another series of questions. This time, however, they are far less factual, far more concerned with conditions *outside* the world of the urn, and far more imaginatively narrative:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?  
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,  
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?  
 What little town by river or sea shore,  
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?  
 And, little town, thy streets for evermore  
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell  
 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

(31–40)

The speaker ignores the urn altogether, moving beyond its borders and speculating over a history it could not possibly tell. The stanza dwells on the altar and the town, both objects to be found nowhere on the urn's surface. Now it is the speaker who becomes the "Sylvan historian" chronicling the past (the town) and the future (the altar). Instead of the magisterial urn, he apostrophizes the more egalitarian "little town" (35) this time, lamenting and identifying with its emptiness. The stanza, in fact, constitutes a parodic inversion of the poem's opening and its principles of ekphrastic vision, addressing an invisible place rather than the material spectacle of a museum artifact. Implicit in this second homage is a critique of the urn's permanent imprisonment and its silencing of the townsfolk. The happy stasis of stanza 3 is now revealed to be hostile to human interaction and ultimately to language and story-telling as well.

As if culminating the overall skepticism, the stanza's last syllable—"urn"—reminds the speaker of his subject and throws him back into the kind of formal address that characterized the opening:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede  
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,  
 With forest branches and the trodden weed;  
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought  
 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

(41–45)

The first five lines of the last stanza circle back to the introduction but differ significantly in their tone; instead of honoring the aesthetic object, the speaker now rebukes it for its impertinence: "Cold Pastoral!" he remonstrates, as if he were scolding a coquette. The observer complains subsequently that the urn "tease[s] us out of thought" (44), in effect luring us away from our true project of neutral aesthetic meditation. What was extolled for its powers of expression and as recently as the third stanza for its passion and warmth is now chastised for being "overwrought" (42).

Such an abrupt change of heart can only remind us of the circumstances at the end of "Ode on Indolence." The return to the sexualized language of stanza 1 suggests that the speaker's hasty departure, as in the earlier ode, may be motivated by a suspicion that the art object will usurp the poet's powers of creation and turn him into a kind of mute stump, a harmless and sexless object. This fear is accompanied by the speaker's reconsideration of his ecstasy in stanza 3 and the realization that sporting on the surface of the urn may have been an intriguing short-term proposition but is not an appealing long-term one.

In the prevailing metaphor of the poem, then, the speaker enters the urn, finds it frigid and unaccommodating (barren even), and quickly withdraws. All that warmth of stanza 3 is discovered to be contrived and illusory. Again we find ourselves with James Thomson's narrator, who at last realizes that the wizard in the *Castle of Indolence*, rather than being a glorious savior, is no more than an impostor with a flashy wardrobe. The beginning of stanza 5 stands as the observer's recognition of the urn's existence as a conceit and his sense of the illusion of ekphrastic hope; the reprimands constitute both a reaction to the urn's clever masking of its desolation and a revelation of its funereal purpose.

So far, we have traced the ode's structure in a general way, noting the various stages of ekphrasis and hinting at some of the reasons for the

observer's changing attitude toward the urn. It remains to show how the language and psychology of ekphrastic encounter operate in more detail and to grapple with the ode's quixotic final lines.

Along with the obvious allusions in the first stanza of the poem to the urn's historical remove, its otherness, there are also indications that the artwork weighs more heavily on the speaker than the benign and unthreatening presence of most museum objects. His personification of the urn as an "unravish'd bride" suggests that it is not a neutral aesthetic object to be contemplated in philosophical calm; on the contrary, with this metaphor Keats not only situates his ekphrasis in the eighteenth-century tradition of female portrait poems but implicitly sets up his speaker as a voyeur, intent on ravishing this obscure object of desire (in Buñuel's phrase). The fact that the urn remains "*still* unravish'd" (my italics) serves as an irresistible challenge to the speaker.<sup>21</sup> He will ravish it with his gaze, unlock the mysteries that have stymied so many before him. A modern day Perseus, he will skillfully capture the urn/Medusa and convert her into his own specialized masculine discourse of language. By the end of the poem, he would like to be able to flatten the urn into a two-dimensional symbol, like the Medusan aegis on Athena's shield, and display her as a domesticated symbol of the power of the word.

The observer's immediate reaction to the urn's challenge, however, comes as an embarrassing contretemps. He responds to the urn by firing off a premature salvo of questions that reveal little more than his enthusiasm. If we understand the lines as forms of nervous delay, rather than as an instance of overeagerness, however, they may be even more revealing. The observer asks the questions precisely because they have no answers. They fill up space and reassure him that his mind is still working even in the presence of this most eloquent silence. His buoyant chatter represents the exact opposite of the proverbial muteness he is supposed to feel and as such serves as a means of postponing it.

That the image poses a significant threat to the observer, even in this most urbane and ostensibly detached of settings, becomes apparent as early as the third line, where he refers to the urn as a "Sylvan historian, who canst thus express / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme." Unexpectedly, as I have argued earlier, the object emerges as a better poet or narrator than the speaker, a "historian" who illuminates the tales of pastoral Greece more effectively than he does, even in his own early idiom of flowery sweetness, the idiom of *Endymion*. Thus, the urn offers a challenge both to his masculinity (can he ravish it?) and to his writing (can he write it?). The problem in the poem reduces itself to several variations on a key question: Can the poet-observer tell the tale the urn tells better than the urn can? Can

he counter the urn's silence, ravish it, turn it into writing, and then dazzle us in the way the urn dazzles him?

Such issues of fear and rivalry haunt the interstices of the first stanza but quickly give way to a pact with the urn in the following two. As we have shown, these lines entertain a union with the object that the opening stanza was not prepared to concede. The fiction that the speaker addresses the urn figures as if they were alive, and thus enters the scene himself, is not without its risks, however. Jeffrey Cane Robinson, speaking for Dorothy Van Ghent in her unfinished study of Keats, argues that “[t]he poem becomes the nightmare of the Odes, a communion with an object that beckons him erotically but departs from him as stone—a meditative counterpart to ‘La Belle Dame.’”<sup>22</sup> Like the femme fatale in this ballad, the urn holds the observer in thrall. And this is nowhere more apparent than in the ode's middle lines, where the narrative, as we have shown, gives way to the stasis of art. “The stanza is somewhat asthmatic and short-winded,” Van Ghent continues later, “with no through-flow of syntactical rhythm, as if the hero himself, like the figures on the urn, were suffering a stoppage of circulation” (165); or, we might add, as if he were being slowly turned into stone. The corresponding moment in the genre of ekphrasis is, of course, muteness before the artwork. This is the moment when Shelley's speaker feels his spirit being inscribed by Medusa's lineaments.

Even as it threatens to paralyze the speaker, however, the state remains fraught with radical possibilities and offers the potential for the free play of language now exempted from its task of narrative progression:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave  
 Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;  
 Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,  
 Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;  
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,  
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

(15–20)

If the dark side of ekphrastic identification is realized in the painful concessions apparent on the urn's surface, its more hopeful side emerges in a type of mischievous paronomasia. As he does with the urn itself, the speaker now attempts to overcome another form of opposition—that between the figures and nature—through an ingenious tinkering with verbal ambiguity. His deployment of puns illustrates that ekphrastic hope has now reached its highest pitch and that the paralysis and fear that van Ghent describes may arise only in retrospect.<sup>23</sup>

Perhaps the best example of the utopian desire to suspend boundaries occurs at the outset of stanza 4.<sup>24</sup> The “green altar” (32) to which the priest leads the lowing heifer looks in two directions. It is at once the conventional location for the sacrifice and the sacred edifice in front of which the urn/bride will be married to her groom “quietness” (1) by the priest. In this manner, the altar becomes a synecdoche for either social custom: for the ceremonial of a wedding or the ritual of a sacrifice. If “green” is an emblem of nature—and how could it be otherwise with the preceding references to forests, dales, leaves, and trees—then in this phrase Keats combines the most elemental and organic aspect of the natural world with the most conventional features of the human and social realm.

The “green altar” is just one instance of the ode’s delight in fertile oxymorons. Keats finds it hard to resist such pairings, as he demonstrates in “Sylvan historian” (3), “soft pipes” (12), “peaceful citadel” (36), and “Cold Pastoral” (45)—phrases that resonate with irony. If the speaker uses puns to dismantle conventional forms of difference and therefore forge an aesthetic compact with the urn, he also employs them as weapons in a subversive counterattack that threatens to undermine this accord as well as the predominant empathy of stanza 3. The impulse to sabotage the timeless and idyllic circumstances on the urn can be traced in almost every line of the poem: witness the fiendish juxtaposition of words at key moments, the hangman hid in the verbal puns: “Forever *wilt* thou love” (20), “thou *art* desolate” (40), “thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought” (44). Every “happy” in this ode finds its counterpart in a cruel double entendre, a deftly concealed memento mori (though it is hidden right out in the open).

One of the reasons the poet devises such subversive puns, I would argue, is precisely so that he can exhibit a verbal mastery of his own that will vie against the urn’s acknowledged visual expertise. He hopes that his guerilla word-fare will contest the object’s dominion, as well as hamper its aspirations to narrative art. For the absolute perfection and stillness of the visual frieze, the speaker attempts to substitute a shifting and ambiguous verbal array. He intends to challenge the urn on its own ground by questioning its qualifications as an eloquent teller of tales. When, in stanza 4, he extends the eternal present of the urn’s frieze forward into the future (the priest leading the heifer to the altar) and backward into the past (the empty town), Keats becomes a historian himself, creating an imaginative history that does not rely for its material on either mythology or fact.<sup>25</sup> As he writes the frieze into time, the observer begins to rival the urn’s powers of story-telling. He supplies the urn’s dramatis personae with a context, giving the figures a narrative continuum consistent with the temporal dimensions of his own world. Most importantly, he invokes a form of Negative Capability that the

word *historian*—particularly in the sense implied in stanza 1—is unable to accommodate. The speaker’s questions are relevant not to the sort-and-file don of order but to an imaginative spectator intent on fantasizing the artwork in a “slow time” of a different order. With his reference to the empty town and to the fact that no one will ever return to “*tell / Why thou art desolate*” (39–40, my italics), the speaker effectively calls the urn’s articulateness into question.

That the speaker has abandoned the ekphrastic empathy of the third stanza and resumed his rivalry with the urn can be gathered from the scene of sacrifice itself. For a bull—the usual victim of the type of ritual he depicts—the poet substitutes a heifer, echoing the urn’s feminine identity and suggesting a kind of revenge on the virgin bride (see figs. 13 and 14). In this sense, it is no accident that the heifer’s garlands bear a keen resemblance to the legend that haunts about the urn’s shape; neither is it surprising that the sacrificial cow is cousin to the urn, just as the little town ravished of its people reminds us of the observer, also silent, staring in a kind of bewitched reverie at the aesthetic object. Surrogates for both observer and urn show up in every corner of the ode, even (and especially) in the drama that is unfolding on the frieze itself. The bold lover’s frustrated pursuit of his maiden (what painful irony in the word *bold!*) becomes an allegory of the speaker’s own thwarted connection with the urn. “Though winning near the goal” (18), the poet will never be able to caress the object of his affection, never be able to push his fancy for the urn further than a species of impotent voyeurism. He is as much an outsider to the urn’s world as the members of the pagan group are forever expatriates to their own town.

If we look carefully at both the peculiar family tree of the first stanza and the ode’s implicit themes of pursuit and frustration, we may be prepared to understand the speaker’s ambivalence toward the urn and see why it poses such a threat to his masculinity. In the urn, the speaker encounters a symbol that is even more complex and problematic (especially in terms of gender) than Shelley’s Medusa. The object’s symbolic heritage is full of incomplete arrangements, unresolved and unnatural relations. She is a bride, but unravished; a child, but adopted; a historian, but one that is pastoral, mythical, strangely unlikely. Her parents—“silence” and “slow time”—never have a natural child of their own but receive the urn into their family as an outsider. Thus, there is an ominous sterility that looms over the urn’s muddled patrimony, a legacy of deferred sexuality and baffled unions.

In addition to its peculiar family background, the urn itself reveals an ambiguous relation to gender. It is distinctly female (“unravished bride”) yet vaguely male (“Sylvan historian”), particularly if we bear in mind the nineteenth-century context (though the musty effect of “historian” is

somewhat muted by “Sylvan”). By the last stanza, the urn has become an “Attic shape,” a “fair attitude,” a “silent form,” and a “Cold Pastoral”—all slightly feminine assignations, suggestive of stateliness and bearing but also of aloofness and arid grace. The final apostrophe, “A friend to man” (48), admits of reconciliation with the observer but nevertheless hints at the cool detachment of an ex-lover, or a woman *d’un certain age* who whispers pithy advice—“Beauty is truth, truth beauty’—that is all ... ye need to know”—and leaves with a faint smile. What was in the beginning a virgin “bride” at last becomes a sophisticated confidante as well as a shapely mother who gives birth to a “brede” of Attic children. Somewhere in the course of four stanzas, then, “quietness” has managed to consummate the marriage.

So the urn is maddeningly Janus-faced; it coyly beckons with one hand, curtly dismisses with the other. It has form (shapely and fair) but only in outline, and its intrinsic hollowness seems sinister, funereal. In a very real sense, the urn depletes, desolates, wilts, and turns to dust. It is chaste, unravished, and yet it portrays a tableau of teeming sexuality, of steamy pursuit and intense excitement. Offering a scene of titillation, the urn nevertheless resists the efforts of the speaker to caress or “know” it, remaining a stubborn virgin, a “Cold Pastoral.” At least partially, then, the urn teases the observer out of thought because it vacillates among so many meanings and so many roles. Like the phantoms on the figural vase in “Indolence,” the urn, albeit in a condensed form, represents three familiar feminine types to Keats: mother, maiden, “minx.” The urn reminds us also of the powerfully ambivalent figure of Medusa, whose writhing snake-hair combines with a placid mien to confuse the gaze of Shelley’s poetic observer.

Perhaps most disturbing of all, however, are the urn’s deep-seated metaphorical associations with maleness. Like the speaker, it too can narrate a “flowery tale” and so dispense a version of “truth.” The urn, then, is not figurally silent even if it is materially so, just as the speaker is never actually silent even if he is made figurally so by the urn’s powerful and disabling presence. In the complex genealogical weave of stanza 1, moreover, “quietness” *must be* male, since he is the bridegroom of the virgin urn. The pointed chiasmic heritage of the first two lines underscores this unconventional role reversal even more: the apostrophe “Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time” cross-pairs the bride with “slow time” and the groom, “quietness,” with “silence.” Here it is men who are associated with silence, women who are allied with the movement of time, even if it is slow (in this case “still” must be read as an adverb, indicating that the urn as yet is unravished). From the very beginning, then, silence is figured as both male and female, since it signifies both the actual state of the material urn and the metaphorical

condition of its male family members. This complicated gender system radically revises the portrait poem genre with its fixed protocol and its firm conviction that the male poet always envoices and enables the silent female artwork.

If we return for a moment to the lines leading up to the epigram, we may be able to consolidate some of the major concerns of our argument to this point. Teunissen and Hinz have noted the priapic pun in “marble men,” a pathetic lot who are conveniently paired with the “maidens overwrought” (42). The description of these figures comes to represent a miniature allegory of the Medusa model of ekphrasis, an allegory that is being enacted right in front of us on the urn’s surface. The concept of “marble men” should be familiar to those who have read the Perseus myth and Shelley’s poem. Medusa’s cave is littered with petrified men, frustrated types of the ekphrastic hopeful. The implications of this state are terrifying, for the observer is paralyzed in his moment of greatest intensity and passion; the union he seeks with the objet d’art is never permanently achieved. And herein lies perhaps the cruelest irony of this strain of ekphrasis: that the sublime artwork freezes the observer’s imagination at precisely the instant when it is preparing for its most creative thrust.

Recall that this was the exact danger Keats confronted in the Elgin Marbles sonnet: the poets and painters of England could never be inspired by the stones because they prompted stasis rather than action. What was communicated in the creative frenzy was not an inspiriting charge but a species of deadly inertia. Like the marbles, then, rather than teasing out originality, the urn titillates the observer to the point of excruciating excitement and then leaves him breathless and frustrated. The urn impedes the speaker’s creative powers, posing a lethal threat to his vital sources of “generation” (46). Indeed, one of the several meanings this word suggests involves precisely the fate of the poet’s own “feminine” capacity to give birth to a poem. “[O]ld age” (brother to the Elgin Marbles’ “old time”) shall waste his production but not the urn’s breed.

The overtones of maleness in the urn’s identity, moreover, and its ready accessibility either to silence or slow time only increase the speaker’s anxiety and sexual insecurity. Above all, perhaps, it is the urn’s androgyny—the way it combines the daunting maleness of the Elgin Marbles (embodied in the sculpture of Theseus) with the feminine power of the figures in “Ode on Indolence”—that unsettles the speaker and drives him to contemplate his own perplexed gender identity.

It would seem, then, that by the end of the poem the urn holds the decided advantage in the *paragone* and is in an ideal position to take the laurel wreath.



In spite of a few minor victories by the speaker, the urn has succeeded in frustrating his desire to know it, even to the extent of forcing him outside its own borders for narrative solace. The classical pregnant moment is absent from the urn's frieze—the speaker can find no implied narrative in the random pursuit of satyrs and nymphs, no discernible point from which to launch his ekphrasis—so the elements that make up the conventional moment must be discovered in the speaker's own imagination. As I have argued, the altar and town are imported for use in devising a tale for the urn.

Moreover, Keats's array of puns may console the speaker temporarily, but they do not further his understanding of the urn, nor do they aid his attempts to write it convincingly into his verse. Instead, the puns reflect a kind of showmanship that, in fact, prevents the enabling empathy that would ensure a full comprehension of the urn's mysteries. As we approach the concluding lines, then, we are prepared for the same sort of departure (or withdrawal) that we experienced in earlier ekphrases, like "Epistle" and "Indolence." We are led to expect a retraction, or a confession that the speaker's attempt to write the urn has been a feigning (fining) not to be taken seriously.

Thus, it comes as some surprise when we suddenly encounter the "leaf-fring'd legend" that the speaker could not identify in the opening stanza. Just at the moment when he is about to throw in the towel, when he has given up trying to envoice it, the urn finally speaks:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.<sup>26</sup>  
(49–50)

Read with an eye to the competing strains of movement and stasis that characterize ekphrasis generally and the *paragone* in particular, the maxim "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" reveals a remarkable compromise, an attempt not to establish a victor but to highlight and preserve the dynamic tension between word and image. The first half is narrative, "Beauty is truth"; the second half, as even the comma falls away, is iconic: "truth beauty." On this side of the equation, as Heffernan ingeniously argues, "language assumes the juxtapositional effect of sculpture. Entering and envoicing the mute still object, language abandons its narrative impulse and gives itself up to the lasting suspension of visual art" ("Ekphrasis and Representation," 308). In terms of the *form* of the aphorism, then, Keats has it both ways. The *paragone* appears to result in a draw.<sup>27</sup>

There are, of course, hints of this stand-off even earlier in the ode. We need look no further than the second word of the poem, "still," to find that

what absorbs Keats about the agon between word and image is the agon itself. The perennial ekphrastic debate of temporal movement and graphic stasis finds its purest embodiment in the word's ambiguity: it can be read as an adjective or an adverb, as "still, unravish'd bride" or "still unravish'd bride," illustrative of the urn's motionless stillness *and/or* its susceptibility to time, its potential mutability. The same holds for the later pair of famous puns, the "*brede / Of marble men and maidens overwrought*" (41–42, my italics). The words reflect both dimensions of ekphrasis and appear to alternate them like the duck/rabbit trick: "breed" animates the figures; "brede" stills them into art, just as "overwrought" signifies both the passionate pursuit of the initial stanza, with its implicit narrative tension, and the excessively ornate frieze of the urn itself.

As I have argued throughout this chapter, however, no analysis of the ode can be complete without considering the epigram from the vantage point of the speaker's psychological state. If seen in terms of the Medusa strand of ekphrasis and its generic heritage, rather than from the perspective of the space/time dialectic, the aphorism looks quite different. The earlier discussion of the portrait poems demonstrated, I hope, that ekphrasis is nothing if not a genre about decorum, about etiquette, and about proper sex roles. The typical ekphrastic encounter in these works is characterized by its indirection and caution, its tendency to interpose as many reflections and ruses as it can between itself and the feminine image. The observer understands that if he is to succeed in his own project—that of capturing the image in words—he must brave the possibility of silence and glance at the image without succumbing to its seductive spell. To write this kind of ekphrasis, then, is to recognize the moment when admiration turns into idolatry and to prepare tirelessly to forestall this dangerous transition.

Thus, the observer must simultaneously look on the image and look away. Whether by means of a shield or its rhetorical equivalent, he must pacify the icon so that he may gaze at it like a voyeur, stare from the safety of distance at what he has remade through representation. This is precisely the strategy of "Grecian Urn"'s last four lines. After rebuffing the urn at the outset of stanza 5, the speaker returns to it for one final ekphrastic rendezvous. And this time he is prepared. He comes equipped with a phrase resplendent in its dazzling panoply, a polished epigram as circular as the urn itself, cleverly appropriating and reflecting its iconic, talismanic power. In this regard, the phrase is analogous to the mirror of Athena's shield that Perseus uses to con Medusa into petrifying herself. Keats uses the urn to defeat the urn.

The device is unique to the last stanza, a verbal feint for which nothing in the poem has hitherto prepared us. For many critics, as I tried to show at

the beginning of this chapter, the phrase's incongruity is an impediment to the poem's successful conclusion. Its language cannot be reconciled with the language in the rest of the ode. Yet this anachronistic quality is precisely the point. The epigram is *meant* to be anomalous, a rhetorical trump Keats has kept up his sleeve all along. Showcased in its quotation marks, itself museumed, the motto flashes its message in the twinkling of an eye, in nearly the same time it takes for us to receive and recognize an image. The words counter the urn's magisterial ubiquity with a totality of their own and, like a statue, dominate the last stanza, mesmerizing all who attempt to make sense of it.

In its imperial presence, the aphorism steals attention away from the urn (even as it borrows from its shape) and establishes its own rather powerful hegemony. Like Stevens's jar (in another, sparer ekphrastic exercise), it takes "dominion everywhere" and as such seems to have a "palpable design upon us" (*Letters*, 1.224). It stands like a synecdoche in place of the urn, even though it is nominally what the urn says. Keats's final act of ventriloquism at least in part, then, becomes an assertion of control and assures the speaker's victory. The poet puts words into the urn's mouth, forcing it out of its embattled silence and into a medium that is alien to it. What at first seems like a generous act, a gesture worthy of "a friend to man" (48), in the end becomes an act that is willful, deliberate, perhaps even violent. The speaker finally does ravish the urn and bring it into time (as the pun on "brede" and the image of the "trodden weed" would suggest), though he is no closer to an understanding of its mysteries than he was before.<sup>28</sup>

As a ventriloquism with overtones of violence, the epigram reflects a response to ekphrastic fear that is reminiscent of the speaker's in "Ode on Indolence." The aphorism represents as vehement a reaction to the urn's "overwrought" sexuality as to its stubborn chastity. It is hermetically sealed, anemotional, denying as it does all memory of the heated ekphrastic encounter and sublimating what harmony was attained in the middle stanzas into an abstract reformulation of the urn's feminine power. An example of symmetry and order, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" belongs in a line of Pope or Dryden rather than in a Romantic ode. Its neoclassical balance indicates a determined return to civilization, to a place governed by quantifiable rules and codes of behavior.

Thus, the aphorism rewrites and restores the crumbling syntactical conclusion of the Elgin Marbles sonnet and becomes itself an objet d'art about which we are continuously trying to write our own ekphrases. It is a curious fact that, in explicating the epigram, criticism has brought to bear all of the ruses to which the temporal strand of ekphrasis lays claim: it has been obsessed with transforming the aphorism into a narrative, giving it a context,

and transferring it into time. We have fetishized the phrase as tellingly as Keats does the urn or James Vale does his model. That it is too quick, too nifty, too autotelic; that it rounds back on itself and tricks the eye into an uncontrollable dance of reflection; that it forces us to look away at the same time that we fixate on its powerful symmetry: all these are reasons enough for the pages and pages of historical explication, the scores of articles on background sources, on eighteenth-century philosophy, on aesthetics. As I have said, these constitute our efforts to fill in with words the awful silence that the phrase produces.

Interestingly, few critics have noted what is perhaps the most obvious inference we can draw from the lines: that they eradicate difference, dissolve the distinctions between “Beauty”—which I would be tempted to read as designating the urn’s static image—and “Truth”—read as the speaker’s narrative imagination, the word—into the most perfect chiasmus of the entire poem. Keats performs a nostalgic reenactment of ekphrastic hope, only in the reified space of aesthetics. This union is clean, nearly flawless (the single copula is hampers an absolute identification) and in its blurring of ideological boundaries achieves a fulfillment that the logic in the rest of the poem had been resisting. At last the speaker’s desires are met; he stands alone with the urn in a realm of ethereal safety and assurance. His resort to the maxim has come to represent his flight from the fires of ekphrasis and the threatening female image into a cool classicism.

Though a more sophisticated and refined successor, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” echoes some of the same themes of ravishment and violence that characterize the Perseus myth. Even as it may seem that both observers challenge and combat the threatening image, however, they are finally more interested in domesticating and appropriating it. Both intend to usurp its mysterious feminine power and use it to their own advantage (Perseus uses Medusa’s head as a last-ditch coup de main against his enemies; the epigram’s circular beauty borrows from the urn’s). As Athena at the end of the myth installs the image of Medusa on her shield—thereby taming it, turning it into an aesthetic icon—so Keats encapsulates the urn in an epigram, labeling it, naming it, and returning it to the poise and timeless calm of the museum.

This is not to say that either of these images loses its captivating power but that both are recontextualized in art so that their influence can be safely monitored and controlled. They belong now to the artist and in a larger sense to the culture, and they serve their more disciplined and rational authority (Athena’s emblems, we recall, include the scales of reason). It is hardly an accident that the first ekphrases ever written involved shields and armor and thus, rather than being aesthetic exercises, constituted battle pieces, poems of conquest and domination. However unlikely it appears at

first, Keats's "Urn" is firmly rooted in this heritage and evolves from the seeds sown by the political and sexual hegemony of Homer's ekphrases. Beneath its surface sangfroid, the ode masks a heredity deeply implicated in violence and usurpation and inextricably bound up with the ambivalent power of the visual image.

## NOTES

1. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947) 144; W. J. T. Mitchell, confessional letter to the author; David Simpson, "Keats's Lady, Metaphor, and the Rhetoric of Neurosis," *Studies in Romanticism* 15 (Spring 1976): 265. The poem's textual elusiveness is also a well-documented problem. See Jack Stillinger's "Who Says What to Whom at the End of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Keats's Odes*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice-Hall, 1968).

2. A notable exception to this pattern is Helen Vendler, whose treatment of "Grecian Urn" nevertheless shares with her male colleagues (and the Harvard Keatsians) a tendency to examine the lines abstractly and in the context of Keats's grand aesthetic meditation on the fine arts. Her explanation that the phrase "alternates" as a visual *trompe l'oeil* acknowledges the poet's use of illusion in the ode but neglects to consider the prevailing sexual metaphor, especially as it pertains to the ode's generic heritage and to the poetic observer. In her excellent "On Ravishing Urns: Keats in His Tradition," Froma I. Zeitlin does write extensively about the treatment of gender in the ode, arguing that it brings together two different literary modes: ekphrasis and the courtship poem. Unfortunately, her essay came to my attention too late to consider (see *Rape and Representation*, eds. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver [New York: Columbia UP, 1991]: 278–302).

3. Sigmund Freud, "Medusa's Head" (1922) in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff (New York: Collier Books, 1963) 214.

4. These works can be found in Alexander Chalmers's popular collection, *The Works of the English Poets, from Chaucer to Cowper*, 21 vols. (London, 1810).

5. Charles Patterson, "Passion and Permanence in Keats's Grecian Urn," in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Keats's Odes* ed. Jack Stillinger (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 51.

6. If this is the case, then the real problem may arise not from our worries over the correct placement of the poem but from our confusion about when to see the urn as object, when as frame. Helen Vendler has suggested that there is a kind of duck/rabbit mechanism that determines both our own and the poet's orientation to the urn: "Allowing thought as well as sensation full play, Keats recognizes that his own voluntary submission to the art object entails not only empathy but also the detached recognition of its specific medium-causing ... [a] successive rhythm of entrance and exit" (132). How we view the object depends on the poet's control over his powers of illusion and whether, at a particular moment, he wishes us to empathize with the figures, or coolly weigh the entire scene. *Pace* Vendler, it is not clear that this process occurs only at obvious junctures in the poem (e.g., stanzas 3 and 5). The ambiguous use of puns, which take up the theme of *trompe l'oeil* on the level of the phoneme, is an indication that any precise determination of visual stance is extremely hazardous.

7. For a list of these poems, see Oxford *Prize Poems*, 8th ed. (Oxford: J. H. Parker, J. Vincent, and H. Slatter, 1834). Thomas Macaulay's "Pompeii" (1819) appears in *Cambridge Medal Poems* (Cambridge: MacMillan, 1859) 1:61–69.

8. On the curious potency of images and the strategies we use for controlling them, see Jean Laude's "On the Analysis of Poems and Paintings," *New Literary History* 3 (Spring 1972): 471–86. Of particular relevance to Holland's poem is the following passage:

Whether figurative or "abstract," images assert themselves by the immediacy of their perception.... This is especially true of images used in advertising and in television; once they have been registered, we consider them forgotten. It is by the illusion of forgetfulness that images, however furtive or accidental they may be, work upon the minds of their viewers. Whatever activity takes place is achieved by the image itself and not by its viewer. One may avoid being directed by the image by reading it. If we have at our disposal some method by which to decipher, appraise, refuse, subvert, or accept pictures knowingly through a demythifying and demystifying process, the kind of activity undertaken to accomplish this is not of the same character as that activity which strives for the comprehension of a text. (477)

9. Thomas De Quincey's description of Piranesi's *Il Carceri* (in *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* [London: Dent, 1907]) uses frames even more obtrusively than Holland does. In an ekphrasis that itself describes a series of framed images, the author contrives no less than three levels of remove (actually, four if we include the fact that the ekphrasis is used solely as a metaphor for De Quincey's own dream experiences); I transcribe from the preface to his account: "Many years ago, when I was looking over Piranesi's Antiquities of Rome, Coleridge, then standing by, described to me a set of plates from that artist called his Dreams, and which record the scenery of his own visions during the delirium of a fever. Some of these (I describe only from memory of Coleridge's account) represented vast Gothic halls" (237). The harrowing description of the Dying Trumpeter in section 3 (the "Dream-Fugue") of De Quincey's "The English Mail-Coach" is also germane to my psychological account of ekphrasis: "By horror the bas-relief had been unlocked unto life. By horror we, that were so full of life, we men and our horses, with their fiery fore-legs rising in mid air to their everlasting gallop, were frozen to a bas-relief" (Perkins, 755).

10. *Gentleman's Magazine* 79 (August 1809): 752.

11. Leigh Hunt's sonnet on the self-portrait of Raphael reveals a similar, even more obvious strain of feminization:

Rafael! It must be he; we only miss  
 Something which manhood gave him, and the fair;  
 A look still sweeter and more thoughtful air;  
 But for the rest, 'tis every feature his,  
 The oval cheek, clear eye, mouth made to kiss,  
 Terse lightsome chin, and flush of gentle hair  
 Clipped ere it loitered into ringlets there,—  
 The beauty, the benignity, the bliss.

How sweetly sure he looks! how unforlorn!  
 There is but one such visage at a time  
 'Tis like the budding of an age new born,  
 Remembered youth, the cuckoo in the prime,  
 The maid's first kiss, or any other thing  
 Most lovely, and alone, and promising.  
 (cited in *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*,  
 ed. H. S. Milford [London: Oxford UP, 1923] 240).

12. *The Literary Magazine and British Review* 3 (August 1789): 139.

13. I am indebted to James Heffernan, who, in his chapter on Romantic ekphrasis, coins this phrase to refer to my theory.

14. The Perseus myth offers us what may be the earliest symbolic enactment of ekphrasis, highlighting the trope's primitive subtext. The hero's pilgrimage to the Medusa, who remains concealed in her cave/museum surrounded by other works of sculpture (though of her own making), reminds us of any traditional visit to an objet d'art by an ekphrastic hopeful. Instead of camera, guidebook, and notepad, however, Perseus comes equipped with a more combative set of paraphernalia. For unlike the *Mona Lisa* or the *Maid of France*, the Medusa represents an aesthetic trap that threatens to realize what is only a metaphorical possibility in the *ut pictura poesis* genre: the fate of speechlessness and paralysis. The myth focuses on perception, on the power of images, and on the ways Perseus, as prototypical male observer, discovers of controlling and subduing a threatening feminine icon. For germane discussions of the Medusa myth, see Neil Hertz, "Medusa's Head: Male Hysteria under Political Pressure," *Representations* 4 (Fall 1983): 27–54; Louis Marin, *Detruire la Peinture* (Paris: Galilee, 1977); and Tobin Siebers, *The Mirror of Medusa* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983). For a fuller discussion of this myth and Shelley's poem, see my "Shelley, Medusa, and the Perils of Ekphrasis," in *Imagination in English and German Romanticism: Literature and the Fine Arts*, eds. Frederick Burwick and Jürgen Klein (Berlin: Georg Olms Verlag, 1994)

15. Despite Jerome McGann's recent defense of scholars who have attempted to locate an exact source for the urn, it still seems to me that such quests have missed the point. See "Keats and the Historical Method," in *The Beauty of Inflections* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1985). See also Jack's discussion of possible sources for the urn (217–19), and Noel Machin, who in "The Case of the Empty-Handed Maenad," *Sunday Times Magazine* (London), 31 April 1965, 11–12, claims that Keats's urn derives from a number of etchings he saw in Henry Moses' book of engraved plates, *A Collection of Antique Vases, Altars, Paterae, Tripods, Candelabra, Sarcophagi, etc. from Various Museums and Collections* (1814).

16. Michael Hinden, "Reading the Painting, Seeing the Poem: Vermeer and Keats," *Mosaic* 17 (1984): 26. See also Douglas B. Wilson's "Reading the Urn: Death in Keats's *Arcadia*," *Studies in English Literature* 25 (1985): 823–44, which takes my argument one step further and focuses on the hermeneutics of the reader's response to the ode.

17. The epigram's long list of detractors is full of eminent names, all of whom, by the way, hail from different critical camps. Alongside Eliot and Wigod ("a brilliant failure" [183]), we may place I. A. Richards ("a pseudo-statement"), Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch ("pardonable in one so young and ardent" [159–60]), Middleton Murray ("disruptive directness"), H. W. Garrod ("not wholly worthy"), John Jones ("opaque and almost featureless"), and most recently, William H. Gass ("fatuous little motto").

18. See, for example, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, who in *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1968) comments on the epigram's "tenuous and perhaps spurious relation to the ode's structure" (232).

19. Heffernan reads this section not as an example of empathy with the urn's stasis, but as instancing the stand-off between the temporal and spatial impulses in the ode's ekphrastic duel:

These lines are profoundly self-contradictory. To imagine the figures on the urn as lovers caught in a state of permanently arrested desire is to expose them to the strain of time even as we profess to exempt them from it. To tell the lover not to grieve is to endow him with the capacity to do so, and thus to imply that he will do so forever, for by the very nature of graphic representation, the lover is powerless—both physically and psychologically—to do anything other than what he is already doing ("Ekphrasis and Representation," 306).

20. Critics have noted the stanza's static impulse but have by and large condemned the lines as saccharine gratuity. If we consider this stanza's language in terms of ekphrastic hope, however, then it is perfectly in keeping with the speaker's psychological state at this point in the ode. For an exception to the critical rule, see James O'Rourke's "Persona and Voice in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" *Keats-Shelley Journal* 36 (1987): 27–48: "The repetition of 'happy, happy boughs,' the 'happy melodist' and the 'More happy love, more happy, happy love!,' in its monotony, demonstrates what happens when the simultaneity of the visual arts is transposed into poetry" (36).

21. The phrase resonates with the hackneyed trope of eighteenth-century portrait poems—the ravishingly beautiful woman. In some sense Keats's use of "still" here is a comment on this generic heredity and the lasting inviolability of the feminine image.

22. Dorothy Van Ghent, *Keats: The Myth of the Hero*, ed. Jeffrey Cane Robinson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1983) 155.

23. In this respect, I cannot agree with Helen Vendler, who quite surprisingly "see[s] no evidence for puns here [brede/breed or overwrought maidens]" (311n). Keats rarely passed up the opportunity for paronomasia, and this stanza is no exception. Just as the youth borrows from the diction of nature for his tune ("thou canst not *leave* / Thy song" [15–16, my italics]), so too the natural world adopts the "bare"-ness of the human: the trees will never be bare or half-clad like the piping youth (Keats rhymes the adjective with "Fair" in the previous line to emphasize the collusion). This exchange of roles continues into the next stanza. When Keats writes, "Ah, happy, happy boughs!" (21), we are reminded of the "Bold lover" (17) who has just concluded a series of "bows" to his fair maiden in the previous stanza. And indeed, the passionate address seems as equally well suited to him as to the branches. (The parallelism of "happy boughs" [21] and "happy melodist" [23] only reinforces this blithe confusion of roles). The lover cannot take "leave" of his maiden, "bid" her "adieu," as the tree will never part with its leaves. The personification of nature thus becomes more than a figure of speech; it effectively eliminates the boundaries between man and the natural world and "happily" commingles their roles. As the speaker himself moves ever closer to a union with the urn figures, the lines of demarcation between this other form of difference also blurs.



24. In “A Museum with One Work Inside: Keats and the Finality of Art” (*Keats-Shelley Journal* 33 [1984]: 85–102), Philip Fisher notes that the “realms overlap and bracket one another” but argues that they do so in order “to create the richness of anthology” (91). His argument concerns the larger problems of aesthetic intertextuality, of citing one work of art within another. Consistent with other commentary on the ode, Fisher acknowledges that the puns show up the limits of visual art, enacting paradoxes impossible in an image. One way of reconciling our positions, I would suggest, is by thinking of Fisher’s term *anthology*—a bringing together of disparate but integral artworks, an eradication of all space-time differentials (97)—as simply a larger, more institutional way of talking about ekphrastic hope. Fisher’s focus, however, is on the visual and verbal artists, rather than on the poetic observer and the psychology of aesthetic response. One problem in what is otherwise a perceptive essay involves the author’s curious neglect of the famous aphorism.

25. I cannot agree with Wolf Z. Hirst, who in *John Keats* (Boston: Twayne, 1981) argues that “On one side this urn depicts a ‘Fair youth’ playing on a pipe while a ‘Bold lover’ is pursuing a maiden [stanza 21 and on the other a priest leading a heifer in a sacrificial procession [stanza 4]” (128). To propose that the urn has “sides,” is to fall into Keats’s trap and to assume that the urn he describes is real. As I have argued, neither the priest nor the town’s folk exists on any part of the urn; rather, they serve as protagonists in the speaker’s own imaginative history, his rewriting of the urn’s story.

26. The problem of punctuation in the concluding lines has been much discussed. See Jack Stillinger’s “Who Says What to Whom at the End of Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in *The Hoodwinking of Madeline* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1971) 167–73. I follow Stillinger’s recommendation that we privilege the 1820 *Lamia* volume’s punctuation over that of the 1819 *Annals of the Fine Arts* and the various copied transcripts.

27. One could certainly make a case for the iconic elements of the epigram outweighing the narrative ones, however. The phrase replicates the urn’s circular shape and also stands outside the language and poetics of the ode, just as the urn stands outside time. The phrase and its subsequent moral—“that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know”—appear not to be susceptible to the vicissitudes of culture or aesthetic philosophy, reflecting instead the urn’s transcendence and universality.

28. The speaker’s ventriloquism does not end with the famous aphorism. The lines that follow are also attributable to the urn, though they dissipate the power of the epigram. In this phrase, the urn is made to speak not as oracle but as a critic, emphatically moralizing its preceding utterance. In this way, Keats makes the urn an interpreter of its own motto, in effect doubly envoicing the artwork and thereby removing it even further from its original imagistic power.

NICHOLAS ROE

*Lisping Sedition:*  
Poems, *Endymion*, and *the Poetics of Dissent*

I don't defend that rhyme; I know 'tis bad,  
Though used by Hunt & Keats, & all that squad.  
(William Maginn to William Blackwood,  
8 Dec. 1820)<sup>1</sup>

Hear how their bantling has already learned to lisp sedition.  
(Z, 'On the Cockney School of Poetry: No IV')

A COCKNEY BANTLING

**R**ichard Woodhouse wrote in his copy of *Endymion*, 'K. said, with much simplicity, "It will easily be seen what I think of the present Ministers by the beginning of the 3d Book"'.<sup>2</sup> If not quite 'easily', one can see readily enough from the opening of *Endymion III* that Keats was unimpressed by the establishment:

There are who lord it o'er their fellow-men  
With most prevailing tinsel: who unpen  
Their baaing vanities, to browse away  
The comfortable green and juicy hay  
From human pastures; or, O torturing fact!

---

From *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*. © 1997 by Oxford University Press.

Who, through an idiot blink, will see unpack'd  
 Fire-branded foxes to sear up and singe  
 Our gold and ripe-ear'd hopes. With not one tinge  
 Of sanctuary splendour, not a sight  
 Able to face an owl's, they still are dight  
 By the blear-eyed nations in empurpled vests,  
 And crowns, and turbans. With unladen breasts,  
 Save of blown self-applause, they proudly mount  
 To their spirit's perch, their being's high account,  
 Their tiptop nothings, their dull skies, their thrones—  
 Amid the fierce intoxicating tones  
 Of trumpets, shoutings, and belabour'd drums,  
 And sudden cannon. (III. 1–18)

Keats wrote the third book of *Endymion* in September 1817 at Magdalen Hall, Oxford, where he was staying with Benjamin Bailey, and he completed it by 28 September (*Letters*, i. 168). Many years afterwards Bailey, now Archdeacon at Colombo, Ceylon, wrote a series of letters to Richard Monckton Milnes in which he made much of his short acquaintance with Keats: 'I knew his *inner* man so thoroughly that I may be able to throw light upon his genius and character' (15 October 1848, *KC* ii. 263–4). When he recalled the composition of *Endymion* III, however, Bailey grew thoroughly stern and censorious, claiming that Keats had written 'the first few introductory lines which he read to me, before he became my guest':

I did not then, & I cannot now very much approve that introduction. The 'baaing vanities' have something of the character of what was called 'the cockney school'. Nor do I like many of the forced rhymes, & the apparent effort, by breaking up the lines, to get as far as possible in the opposite direction of the Pope school. (7 May 1849; *KC* ii. 269)<sup>3</sup>

He labours the point, emphasizing that this was his impression 'at the time of the composition of this Book, & remains so now' (*KC* ii. 269–70). Bailey may indeed have consistently disliked the passage, although in September 1817 he could not have associated 'baaing vanities' with 'Cockney School' poetics since *Z*'s first essay, inventing and then denouncing the sect, had not yet appeared in *Blackwood's Magazine*.

It is more probable that Bailey would have been reluctant to approve the introduction to Book III because of its anti-clerical sentiments:

With not one tinge  
 Of sanctuary splendour, not a sight  
 Able to face an owl's, they still are dight  
 By the blear-eyed nations in empurpled vests ...

These lines are too awkward and convoluted to be effective as anti-clerical polemic, although for Bailey they came to represent one of the 'errors of Keats's character' (*KC* ii. 260). 'On *religion*, for instance, he had ... the most lax notions', Bailey informed Milnes, adding that at the time of their friendship '[his] own mind was fully & gravely determined to [his] sacred profession' (*KC* ii. 291). Oddly enough, it was Bailey's disappointment at not gaining a curacy in the diocese of Lincoln which had prompted an angry outburst in Keats's letter to him of 3 November 1817:

it must be shocking to find in a sacred Profession such barefaced oppression and impertinence—The Stations and the Grandeurs of the World have taken it into their heads that they cannot commit themselves towards an inferior in rank—but is not the impertinence from one above to one below more wretchedly mean than from the low to the high? There is something so nauseous in self-willed yawning impudence in the shape of conscience—it sinks the Bishop of Lincoln into a smashed frog putrifying: that a rebel against common decency should escape the Pillory! That a mitre should cover a Man guilty of the most coxcombical, tyrannical and indolent impertinence! I repeat this word for the offence appears to me to be most especially *impertinent*—and a very serious return would be the Rod—yet doth he sit in his Palace. Such is this World ... (*Letters*, i. 178–9)

*Endymion* III demonstrates that Keats was most unlikely to have been astonished at the 'tyrannical impertinence' of any bishop and, as Robert Ryan has shrewdly pointed out, this letter probably expressed what Keats assumed his friend Bailey must be feeling (something akin to 'negative curacy'). Ironically, too, Bailey's disappointment may well have resulted from the conscientious efforts by George Tomline, Bishop of Lincoln, to eradicate corruption in ecclesiastical appointments by raising the educational requirements for ordination.<sup>4</sup> A little later in his letter to Bailey, Keats followed his invective about bishops and mitres by mentioning the first of Z's essays, 'a flaming attack upon Hunt in the *Edinburgh Magazine*—I never read any thing so virulent ... These Philipics are to come out in Numbers—call'd "the Cockney School of Poetry"' (*Letters*, i. 179–80). In bringing

together strenuous anti-clericalism and the Cockney School essays, I suspect that Keats's letter (which remained in Bailey's possession) provided materials for the censorious remarks passed many years later to Milnes.<sup>5</sup>

When *Endymion* was published in April 1818, the anti-clerical sentiment which so preoccupied Bailey passed almost without notice in reviews. The *British Critic* observed: 'The third book begins in character, with a jacobinical apostrophe to "crowns, turbans, and tiptop nothings"; we wonder how mitres escaped from their usual place.'<sup>6</sup> In *Blackwood's*, Z prefaced his quotation from the opening of Book III with these remarks:

We had almost forgot to mention, that Keats belongs to the Cockney School of Politics, as well as the Cockney School of Poetry.

It is fit that he who holds Rimini to be the first poem, should believe the Examiner to be the first politician of the day. We admire consistency, even in folly. Hear how their bantling has already learned to lisp sedition.<sup>7</sup>

The terms of Z's criticism in this passage have received less attention than they deserve. Keats is a 'bantling'—a bastard child—taught by the 'Cockney School' to versify in a 'lisp', associated at this period with childish or 'effeminate' sensibility. The beginning of *Endymion* III is indeed characterized by a sort of unstable, childish exuberance. But the verse is clogged with awkward parentheses: 'or, O torturing fact! | Who'; forced 'Cockney' rhymes 'fact! | Unpack'd', 'past and gone— | Babylon'; archaic words such as 'dight'; and elliptical phrases like 'There are who lord it', 'most prevailing tinsel', 'a sight | Able to face an owl's', 'unladen breasts, | Save of blown self-applause'. As political invective, the lines are almost wholly obscure. In the *Quarterly Review*, September 1818, John Wilson Croker contended that Keats had written *Endymion* 'at random', so that the poem wandered from one subject to another as the rhymes suggested fresh thoughts and images.<sup>8</sup> But to Z the poem's marred and imperfect verse, its 'lispings' voice, was a further expression of the political agenda which he associated with Hunt and the Cockney School. Was this simply one more gibe to ridicule the 'young Cockney rhymester'?—or should we take Z's observation seriously as an insight that reveals the ideological grounds on which Keats's poems were identified with 'the Cockney school of versification, morality, and politics'?

The ways in which *Poems, by John Keats* deliberately announced the author's relationship to Leigh Hunt have been discussed already, but the complex design of this volume deserves further consideration here. Keats

had divided his book into five parts: following the dedicatory sonnet to Hunt were three sections—‘Poems’, ‘Epistles’, ‘Sonnets’—and the book concluded with *Sleep and Poetry*. The contents comprised occasional verses, ‘To Some Ladies’, ‘On Receiving a Curious Shell’, ‘On Leaving Some Friends’; two imitations of Spenser, the ‘Specimen of an Induction’ and ‘Calidore’; and familiar and fraternal verse epistles to friends and his brother George. As we have seen, many of these poems were explicit in announcing Keats’s politics, most obviously so in the sonnets to Hunt and Kosciusko, and in the epistles to Mathew and George Keats. The ode ‘To Hope’, probably written shortly after Hunt’s release from gaol on 2 February 1815, declared:

Let me not see the patriot’s high bequest,  
Great Liberty! how great in plain attire!  
With the base purple of a court oppress’d,  
Bowling her head, and ready to expire ... (37–40)

‘To Hope’ is written in a conventional eighteenth-century libertarian idiom and, along with the other poems already mentioned, it reinforces the political interests directly voiced by Keats’s first book.<sup>9</sup> In some of these early poems Keats interweaves comparably explicit liberal sentiments with passages of luxurious description in which a decorative Spenserian bower is identified as a place of imaginative retirement and recreation:

a bowery nook  
Will be elysium—an eternal book  
Whence I may copy many a lovely saying  
About the leaves, and flowers—about the playing  
Of nymphs in woods, and fountains; and the shade  
Keeping a silence round a sleeping maid;  
And many a verse from so strange influence  
That we must ever wonder how, and whence  
It came. (*Sleep and Poetry*, 63–71)

This arbour of fancied sequestration may be read as ‘an eternal book’ which expresses Keats’s wish to lose the responsibilities of life to erotic enchantment and the ‘strange influence’ of poetry. But, as we saw in Chapter 4, the luxurious bower also defined a space of imagined ‘elysium’ comparable to Hunt’s ‘Places of nestling green for Poets made’, and intelligible as an expression of the liberal ideals announced more directly elsewhere in the book. When critics noticed Keats’s ‘natural freedom of versification’, or

observed that ‘in his enmity to the French school, and to the Augustan age of England, he seems to have a principle, that plan and arrangement are prejudicial to natural poetry’, they were responding to the stylistic signature of the ‘natural freedom’ that also defined his opposition to ‘the present Ministers’.<sup>10</sup>

Keats’s ‘bowery nooks’—‘Some flowery spot, sequester’d, wild, romantic’ (‘To George Felton Mathew’, 37), the ‘fresh woodland alley ... the bowery cleft’ (*I stood tip-toe*, 20–1)—are resorts of imaginative life which at the levels of poetic style, vocabulary, and imagery link with the ideological contexts of his creativity. In some instances this association is more fully drawn out, as in the ‘outlaw’ or greenwood lyrics of January 1818. In an earlier lyric, ‘Oh! how I love’, the fanciful retreat to ‘A fragrant wild, with Nature’s beauty drest’ awakens thoughts of

patriotic lore,  
 Musing on Milton’s fate—on Sydney’s bier—  
 Till their stern forms before my mind arise ... (7, 9–11)

A comparably patriotic inflection of retreat appears in *Sleep and Poetry*, where withdrawal into ‘the bosom of a leafy world’ (119) gives rise to thoughts of the fully humanized poetry which Keats hoped to write in the future:

And can I ever bid these joys farewell?  
 Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,  
 Where I may find the agonies, the strife  
 Of human hearts ... (122–5)

Here, and elsewhere in Keats’s early poems, the bower serves as a temporary refuge in the poet’s quest towards a humane, historicized imagination—indeed, Jack Stillinger has seen the whole of the 1817 collection as a narrative addressing issues related to Keats’s career as a poet.<sup>11</sup> A similar progression appears in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, where ‘verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways’ (40) lead into the ‘embalmed darkness’ of reverie figured as a woodland bower in which the poet may

guess each sweet  
 Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
 White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;  
 Fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves;

And mid-May's eldest child,  
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
 The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves (43–50)

—much as he had delighted to catalogue ‘luxuries’ in his earlier poems. But in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ this child-like poring over ‘sweets’ of the imagination (which Yeats thought was characteristic of Keats) gives way to an awareness of mortality, the passage of time, and the tread of ‘hungry generations’ of humankind. This movement from ‘sweets’ or ‘luxuries’ to a chastened awareness of history is a recurrent pattern in Keatsian romance, and in his early verse it is accompanied by a more evident preoccupation with the political life of England.

#### A TIME WHEN PAN IS NOT SOUGHT

these are times to make the most delicate-minded look warily about them ... we must confess, that the idea of ten poor wretches huddling together in ragged starvation on a bridge at night is at least as much calculated to make us grave and shuddering, as that of a single high-living PRINCE who has his coach-window cracked.<sup>12</sup>

The title-page of *Poems*, by *John Keats* was carefully arranged to announce the relationship between liberal politics and the poet's imaginative life. On opening the book, Keats's first readers saw an epigraph from Spenser complaint *Muiopotmos; or, The Fate of the Butterfly*:

‘What more felicity can fall to creature,  
 Than to enjoy delight with liberty’

Just beneath this verse is a laurelled head of William Shakespeare,<sup>13</sup> a juxtaposition that is worth exploring a little further. In bringing together Spenser and Shakespeare, Keats paid tribute to his poetic heroes (two months after *Poems* appeared he ‘dared’ to acknowledge Shakespeare as his ‘good Genius’ *Letters*, i. 142) and also made a public declaration of his political allegiances. By coupling ‘delight’ and ‘liberty’ with Shakespeare, Keats neatly focused a theme in Hunt's leaders for the *Examiner* where Shakespeare was invoked as presiding over ‘our liberties’ in a liberal pantheon that included King Alfred, Chaucer, Milton, Sydney, and Marvell.<sup>14</sup> Keats may well have expected his readers to know that in Spenser's poem libertarian ‘felicity’ is immediately succeeded by ‘mishap’, and an elegiac meditation on the vulnerability of joy:



But what on earth can long abide in state?  
 Or who can him assure of happie day;  
 Sith morning faire may bringe fowle evening late,  
 And least mishap the most blisse alter may? (217–20)<sup>15</sup>

Earthly mutability also characterized the first poem in Keats's volume, the dedicatory sonnet to Leigh Hunt. The sonnet echoes in its first line the 'May-morning' festival of Wordsworth's 'Immortality' ode, recalling Wordsworth's loss of visionary power ('there hath passed away a glory from the earth') as a comment on the historical moment of Keats's compliment to Hunt:

*To Leigh Hunt, Esq.*

Glory and loveliness have passed away;  
 For if we wander out in early morn,  
 No wreathed incense do we see upborne  
 Into the east, to meet the smiling day:  
 No crowd of nymphs soft voic'd and young, and gay,  
 In woven baskets bringing ears of corn,  
 Roses, and pinks, and violets, to adorn  
 The shrine of Flora in her early May.  
 But there are left delights as high as these,  
 And I shall ever bless my destiny,  
 That in a time, when under pleasant trees  
 Pan is no longer sought, I feel a free,  
 A leafy luxury, seeing I could please  
 With these poor offerings, a man like thee.

The impact that this impressive dedicatory poem would have made on Keats's readers and reviewers should not be underestimated. By placing it on the first page of his first collection Keats deliberately identified himself with an outspoken figure of public opposition to the government, but, more than this, he did so in the unsettled period following the Spa Fields riot—'a crisis of ... general and unexampled pressure and calamity'.<sup>16</sup> On 2 March 1817, the day before *Poems* was published in London, the front page of the *Examiner* carried an article 'On the Proposed Suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act', denouncing the Foreign Secretary Lord Castlereagh—'a man, who is proved guilty in the House of Commons of violating the Constitution and setting at nought the representative rights of the people, coming forward and asking for a suspension of our most sacred privilege'—and warning that 'The Suspension Bill, if it pass, will be an unconstitutional assumption of

power by the House of Commons illegally constituted.<sup>17</sup> By appearing the day following Hunt's attack in the *Examiner*, Keats's lyrical compliment to Castlereagh's opponent would have seemed markedly controversial—and not only because of the political stakes it so clearly announced. In the economy of Keats's sonnet national crisis is associated with dislocation from the classical world, with the loss of pastoral innocence and 'a time, when under pleasant trees | Pan is no longer sought'.<sup>18</sup> The contemporary association of paganism and the cult of Pan with liberty of conscience has been discussed already in Chapter 2. More relevant here, I think, is what Keats may have intended by that slightly elliptical reference to the present as 'a time, when ... | Pan is no longer sought'. One could cite the mass meeting of reformists in Spa Fields, London, 2 December 1816, which was followed by rioting; the frequent petitions to the Commons for reform; the attack on the Prince Regent's coach, 28 January 1817; the numerous bankruptcies caused by the post-war depression; capital trials of the rioters, and the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act on 4 March.<sup>19</sup> All of these developments afforded evidence of mounting national emergency; circumstances in which 'Pan is [not] sought'; a time when, as Hunt wrote,

sophisticated men set up and deify their own selfish and petty feelings of all sorts, and then make virtue consist in maintaining them. The business of society is thus turned into shewing an outward reverence for a hundred stupidities, and resenting them with involuntary spleen all the while; and nations become formal, morose, and evil-thinking. The best piety is that which is most alive to the beauty of the creation, and would see all enjoy it alike; but the weak, the hypocritical, and the greedy, turn aside from it to jostle for absurdities, to keep up despicable possessions and superfluities in its stead, and to sing damnatory hymns at each other in ill-built sepulchres, where they thank GOD for giving them certain commandments, and saving from their own madness those who do not keep them.—For GOD'S sake, let us get out of this subject, and breathe again the fresh air of reason and nature.<sup>20</sup>

Hunt's final remark finds an echo in Keats's sonnet where ('in a time' that is 'formal, morose, and evil-thinking') he too associates release from present oppressions with nature and 'a free, | A leafy luxury'. The greenwood flourish, emulating Hunt's poetic style,<sup>21</sup> was a compliment and also a libertarian signal bringing Keatsian 'luxury' within the compass of history. Against Castlereagh's suppression of 'the representative rights of the people',

and in spite of ‘despicable possessions and superfluities’, Keats brings his ‘poor offerings’ in *Poems* as a witness to the renewal of what Hunt called ‘our green and glorious country’.<sup>22</sup>

#### THE SUBURBAN SCHOOL

How Cockneyish it was of me to be delighted with this scene, which I was, unfeignedly!

(Cornelius Webb, ‘A Walk Near Town’)

But mostly it was footsteps, rustling leaves,  
And blackbirds fluting over miles of Heath.

Then Millfield Lane looked like a Constable  
And all the grassy hillocks spoke of Keats.

(John Betjeman, ‘Before MCMXIV’)<sup>23</sup>

After the politically motivated attacks on Keats in the *Quarterly* and *Blackwood’s*, Keats’s friends rallied to his defence. One of their tactics was to insist upon the separation of poetry and history, the aesthetic and the political. John Hamilton Reynolds, for example, asserted Keats’s rural ‘independence’:

We have the highest hopes of this young poet. We are obscure men, it is true ... We live far from the world of letters,—out of the pale of fashionable criticism,—aloof from the atmosphere of a Court; but we are surrounded by a beautiful country, and love Poetry, which we read out of doors, as well as in. We think we see glimpses of a high mind in this young man ...<sup>24</sup>

The poet’s ‘high mind’, by implication, was disengaged from the traffic of letters, criticism, and politics. Yet each of Reynolds’s claims for Keats’s ‘obscurity’ was socially definitive: ‘fashionable criticism’, for instance, denoted criticism which was currently ‘stylish’, but also a manner ‘current in upper-class society’ or ‘in vogue among persons of the upper class’ (*OED*)—that is, the coterie of ‘fashionables’ who contributed to ‘the atmosphere of a Court’.<sup>25</sup> Reynolds’s purpose was to defend Keats by insulating him in ‘beautiful country’, although the poet’s distance from ‘fashionable criticism’ and ‘the atmosphere of a court’ might readily be interpreted as reprobate—a characteristic of the literary revolution announced in *Sleep and Poetry* and championed by Hunt in his ‘Young Poets’ essay and in the preface to *Foliage*.<sup>26</sup> Certainly, Z took this view and

contrived to frustrate Keats and the other Cockneys by banishing them to a cultural limbo on the fringe of metropolitan civilization, yet not quite removed to the country. In retrospect the strategy of enforcing Keats's isolation from 'the world', adopted by friends and hostile critics alike, can be seen to have initiated the long-standing critical consensus which agreed that historical analysis was 'irrelevant' to the understanding of Keats's poetry.<sup>27</sup>

The London 'mob' had always been seen as a vulgar, turbulent mass, and it was probably this historical association with social upheaval that Z wished to invoke with the 'Cockney' label. But his criticism displaced the Cockney territory from the inner city to the northerly village of Hampstead, and confined it there by coining the disagreeable adjective 'suburban'. The *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the pejorative sense of 'suburban' to 1817, its first recorded use being Laura's 'pitying survey' of her 'dearest friends' in Byron's *Beppo*—completed October 1817, published February the following year:

One has false curls, another too much paint,  
 A third—where did she buy that frightful turban?  
 A fourth's so pale she fears she's going to faint,  
 A fifth's look's vulgar, dowdyish, and suburban ... (521–4)

One might argue further that it was Z's essays on the Cockney School, which also dated from October 1817, that served to fix the modern, pejorative senses of 'suburban' as part of his caricatures of Hunt, Hazlitt, Keats, Reynolds, and Webb.

In his first essay, Z writes about Hunt's poetry of nature and place:

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. But he is determined to be a poet eminently rural, and he rings the changes—till one is sick of him, on the beauties of the different 'high views' which he has taken of God and nature, in the course of some Sunday dinner parties, at which he has assisted in the neighbourhood of London.<sup>28</sup>

Cockney nature poetry, for Z, was a Cheapside sublime expressed in catch-phrases and jingles. In Hunt's poems, nature's 'magnificent scenes' had been reduced to a familiar local territory—'Hampstead's whole merits,—heath, wood, hill, and vale' ('To Thomas Moore'); Romantic ecstasy had dwindled to table talk, 'Too witty, for tattling,—too wise, for dogmatic' ('To W.H.'). A comparable citation of Cockney faults had appeared in Byron 'Second Letter on Bowles's Strictures', which discriminated 'two sorts of Naturals;—the Lakers, who whine about Nature because they live in Cumberland; and their *undersect* (which some one has maliciously called the "Cockney School"), who are enthusiastical for the country because they live in London'. Byron agreed with Z in that he too associated Cockney imagination with the bogus sublimities of Hunt's poetic landscape: 'the far distant boundaries of the wilds of Middlesex', 'the Alps of Highgate', and 'the Nile of the New River'.<sup>29</sup> Although Byron was principally concerned in his 'Second Letter' to vindicate Pope as a nature poet, his essay also shows that the Cockney controversy generated a public revaluation of Wordsworth as an ornament of the literary and political establishment.<sup>30</sup> The consequences of this alteration for later criticism of Wordsworth and Keats are notable. Generally speaking, modern critics and editors lose interest in Wordsworth from this period of the poet's career. On the other hand, adverse criticism of Keats at this time has obscured the ideological force of his early poems, which Z and other contemporary readers understood as a revival of the English Jacobin movement of the 1790s.

Z's attacks on the Cockney School included a mock-obituary of Hunt which also identified his distinction in establishing the terms of suburban vision for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

It is much to be regretted, that the deceased bard's rural life was so limited and local. He had no other notion of that sublime expression, 'sub Dio', than merely 'out of doors'. One always thinks of Leigh Hunt, on his rural excursions to and from Hampstead, in a great-coat or spencer, clogs over his shoes, and with an umbrella in his hand. He is always talking of lanes, and styles, and hedgerows, and clumps of trees, and cows with large udders. He is the most suburban of poets. He died, as might have been prophesied, within a few hours saunter of the spot where he was born, and without having been once beyond the wellfenced meadows of his microcosm. Suppose for a moment, Leigh Hunt at sea—or on the summit of Mont Blanc! It is impossible. No. Hampstead was the only place for him.

‘With farmy fields in front and sloping green.’

Only hear how he revels in the morning before breakfast, when out on an adventurous constitutional stroll.

Then northward what a range,—with heath and pond,  
Nature’s own ground; woods that let mansions through,  
And cottaged vales with pillowy fields beyond,  
And clump of darkening pines, and prospects blue,  
And that clear path through all, where daily meet  
Cool cheeks, and brilliant eyes, and morn-elastic feet.

Mr Hunt is the only poet who has considered the external world simply as the ‘country’, in contradiction to the town—fields in place of squares, lanes *vice* streets, and trees as lieutenants of houses. That fine line of Campbell’s,

‘And look on nature with a poet’s eye,’

must, to be applicable to him, be changed into,

‘Look on the country with a cockney’s eye.’<sup>31</sup>

Z’s remarks were calculated to present a kind of suburban grotesque, ‘in a great-coat or spencer, clogs over his shoes, and with an umbrella’, but they actually locate Hunt in the midst of a scene which is dismayingly akin to the densely populated modern landscape of southern England. And more than this, Hunt’s Cockney, suburban microcosm has expanded to form the reality of modern life in the western world—and increasingly so elsewhere; the globe itself is becoming local, limited, socialized, well fenced: Hampstead is the only place left for us—a suburban patch known and frequented by all. We need also to recognize that Z’s criticism succeeded in making suburban life and literature synonymous with cultural vulgarity, for later generations followed him in regarding the ‘Suburban School’ of English writing (so Byron termed it) as beyond the pale of serious critical attention.<sup>32</sup> As part of this systematic cultural depreciation, the ‘Cockney School’ essays worked further to prejudice understanding of Keats’s politics from an early date, by establishing a powerful idea of Keats as an immature poet and thinker.

John Hamilton Reynolds had recommended Keats’s poetry by drawing attention to his youth, and other critics made similar points, so that William

Rossetti, writing in 1887, could claim that Keats had been ‘doomed’ to ‘youthfulness’.<sup>33</sup> Hunt had introduced Keats in the *Examiner*, 1 December 1816, under the heading ‘Young Poets’: ‘The last of these young aspirants ... is, we believe, the youngest of them all, and just of age. His name is JOHN KEATS.’<sup>34</sup> Reviews of *Poems* and *Endymion* refer to Keats as ‘a very young man’; ‘our young poet’; ‘the young writer’; ‘a young poet giving himself up to his own impressions’; ‘an immature promise of possible excellence’; ‘sentiments sometimes bordering upon childishness’; ‘a very young man’; ‘our young friend’; ‘the young aspirant’; ‘a young man of genius’.<sup>35</sup> For Wordsworth, too, ‘young Keats’ was ‘a youth of [great] promise’.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, in April 1818, when *Endymion* was published, Keats was 22 years old: hardly young any longer, and certainly not ‘bordering on childhood’. Wordsworth had been not quite 23 when he published *An Evening Walk* and *Descriptive Sketches* in 1793; Byron was just 24 when *Childe Harold* was published in 1812, and the reviews certainly did not dwell at length upon his young manhood. So while many of Keats’s first reviewers welcomed his poetry, their preoccupation with youth pointed to qualities that other less sympathetic critics found suspect: the callow sentiments of a poet ‘just of age’, the unformed imagination of a man still ‘bordering on childishness’, the ‘lisped’ verses of a ‘bantling’.

Keats himself tried to deflect hostile criticism of *Endymion* by alerting readers to his own ‘great inexperience [and] immaturity’. ‘The imagination of a boy is healthy’, Keats wrote in his preface to the poem, ‘and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceeds mawkishness.’ ‘Mawkishness’ (denoting sickly sentimentality) is derived from ‘mawk’, a maggot, and in this context may also be related to the auxiliary sense of ‘maggot’, meaning ‘a whimsical fancy’. The pathology of ‘mawkishness’, outlined by Keats, appeared more fully in an 1806 review of Charlotte Dacre’s novel *Zofloya* in which her ‘maggotty’ prose style was diagnosed as the symptom of an infectious ‘disease ... in the brain ... overwhelming all meaning in a multitude of words’:

The ravings of persons under its influence, whenever they are heard or read, have a sensible effect upon brains of a weak constitution, which themselves either putrify and breed maggots, or suffer a derangement of some kind. It might be a charitable thing to have an hospital for the reception of these unfortunate people while under the influence of the disease, where they might be confined in such a manner as not to infect others; the incurables being of course kept separate from the rest.<sup>37</sup>

Z recognized the symptoms of this ‘maggotty’ disease in the ‘drivelling idiocy’ of *Endymion*, responding to the poem’s style but also to the preface where Keats associated mawkishness with a ‘space of life between’ at which the imagination is ‘sickly’ (and fantastical) in that it lacks character and steadiness of purpose. *Endymion*, according to the preface, is a ‘feverish attempt’, a ‘youngster’ which ‘should die away’. In December 1817 Keats had identified a comparable uncertainty of self as one characteristic of imaginative genius, a quality he defined as ‘negative capability’ (*Letters*, i. 193). Reviews of *Poems* and *Endymion* described the poetry as ‘remarkably abstracted’, ‘indiscriminate’, ‘the shadowings of unsophisticated emotions’, and ‘indistinct and confused’<sup>38</sup>—and some of the reviewers found these effects attractive. For example, the *Edinburgh Magazine*<sup>39</sup> drew attention to Keats’s ‘licentious brilliancy of epithet’, describing the following passage from the epistle ‘To Charles Cowden Clarke’ as ‘the very pink of the smart and flowing conversational style ... such elegant *badinage*’:

But many days have past since last my heart  
 Was warm’d luxuriously by divine Mozart;  
 By Arne delighted, or by Handel madden’d;  
 Or by the song of Erin pierc’d and sadden’d:  
 What time you were before the music sitting,  
 And the rich notes to each sensation fitting;  
 Since I have walk’d with you through shady lanes  
 That freshly terminate in open plains,  
 And revel’d in a chat that ceased not  
 When at night-fall among your books we got:  
 No, nor when supper came, nor after that,—  
 Nor when reluctantly I took my hat;  
 No, nor till cordially you shook my hand  
 Mid-way between our homes:—your accents bland  
 Still sounded in my ears, when I no more  
 Could hear your footsteps touch the grav’ly floor.  
 Sometimes I lost them, and then found again;  
 You chang’d the footpath for the grassy plain.  
 In those still moments I have wish’d you joys  
 That well you know to honour:—‘Life’s very toys  
 With him’, said I, ‘will take a pleasant charm;  
 It cannot be that ought will work him harm’.  
 These thoughts now come o’er me with all their might:—  
 Again I shake your hand, friend Charles, good night. (109–32)



After quoting this ‘banter’ in full, the *Edinburgh Magazine*’s reviewer described it as ‘ground very dangerous for a young poet’—although why the epistle should have drawn this judgement may not be immediately apparent to a modern reader. A principal danger was that its easy, colloquial manner (‘before the music sitting’; ‘chat that ceased not’; ‘among your books we got’; ‘nor when supper came, nor after that’) was insufficiently considered to achieve a ‘permanent effect’:

That style is vivacious, smart, witty, changeful, sparkling, and learned—full of bright points and flashy expressions that strike and even seem to please by a sudden boldness of novelty,—rather abounding in familiarities of conception and oddnesses of manner which shew ingenuity, even though they be perverse, or common, or contemptuous.

At a first glance, ‘vivacious’, ‘smart’, ‘witty’, ‘sparkling’, ‘learned’ would seem to be a full approbation for the brisk and lively manner of Keats’s poetry. But the critic’s unease is registered through a second strand of vocabulary in the review: the poetry is ‘licentious’, ‘changeful’, ‘flashy’, mingling a ‘boldness of novelty’ with familiarities and commonplaces. Evidently, this novel (and ‘maggotty’) style was perceived as a challenge to received literary values, and specifically to the neoclassical ideal of stylistic and intellectual ‘decorum’. But, as Olivia Smith has demonstrated, such criticism had an agenda that extended far beyond linguistic and literary matters. Its core vocabulary had a social register which derived from the preface to Johnson *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), in which ‘such terms as “elegant”, “refined”, “pure”, “proper”, and “vulgar” ... conveyed the assumptions that correct usage belonged to the upper classes and that a developed sensibility and an understanding of moral virtue accompanied it’.<sup>40</sup> In direct contrast to this authorized language was what Johnson termed the ‘fugitive cant’ of current usages among ‘the laborious and mercantile part of the people’: ‘illiterate writers will at one time or other, by publick infatuation, rise into renown, who, not knowing the original import of words, will use them with colloquial licentiousness, confound distinction, and forget propriety.’<sup>41</sup> The *Edinburgh*’s reviewer makes Keats’s poetry conform exactly to Johnson’s paradigm of the ‘illiterate’. It is ‘licentious’, which was glossed by Johnson as ‘unrestrained by law or morality’; and when carried over into literary criticism, the word retained its unsettling legal and moral associations. Those senses of ‘licentious’ are echoed by ‘changeful’, defined by Johnson as ‘Full of change; inconstant; uncertain; mumble; subject to variation; fickle’, and also by ‘flashy’, that is, ‘Empty; not solid; showy without substance’. The

'boldness of novelty' in Keats's poems, which one might expect to be a praiseworthy quality, was in fact a persistent fault: rather than expressing a courageous break with literary precedent, for the *Edinburgh's* critic (as for Johnson) Keats's 'boldness of novelty' signalled a lack of caution; an aspiration to liberty without responsibility (after the pattern of revolutionary France) through which proper 'distinctions' were overturned and 'confounded'.

All of these critical terms show how Keats's vocabulary, poetic idiom, and style were intensely freighted with moral, social, and political meanings. His 'mawkishness' was not just the impotence of an adolescent poet; it represented a more radical unsettlement, the poetics of dissent which defined Keats's opposition to establishment ideology. Like Hunt's and Hazlitt's writings, Keats's innovative poetry is 'full of conceits and sparkling points' which were understood as the voice of a reformist political agenda: their writing is 'alive to the socialities ... of life', and is 'too fond, even in their favourite descriptions of nature, of a reference to the factitious resemblances of society'. John Wilson Croker, reviewing *Endymion* in the *Quarterly*, elucidated the politics of Keats's style by characterizing his poetry as an anarchy of neologisms and run-on couplets, to be understood only in so far as Keats was 'a copyist of Mr Hunt, but ... more unintelligible'.<sup>42</sup> Byron, like Croker, felt threatened by Keats's mawkish novelty. But for him Keats's imagination was less involved with 'soul ... character ... [and] way of life' and rather more absorbed by the sexual awakening of an adolescent 'Mankin': his imaginative impotence was integral to his '*Vulgarity*... a sad abortive attempt at all things, "signifying nothing"'.<sup>43</sup> The Tory journals demonstrated a comparable preoccupation with Keats's 'mankin' sexuality, but more distinctly in the context of childish and 'effeminate' sensibility and seditious politics. And, as with the review from the *Edinburgh Magazine* discussed above, this politically oriented criticism reflected eighteenth-century preoccupations with language.

The politics of childish poetry link reviews of Keats and Hunt with the critical reception of the earlier generation—Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Southey—in the 1790s. Criticism of Keats's poetry from 1817 was, as Jerome McGann has observed, 'in many respects a repetition of the attack upon Wordsworth's programme in the *Lyrical Ballads*'.<sup>44</sup> Favourable reviews of *Poems* were attracted by Keats's devotion to simplicity. Leigh Hunt found in the poems a 'most natural and least expressible simplicity'; the *European Magazine* and the *Eclectic Review* pointed respectively to poetry 'as pretty and as innocent as childishness can make it', and to 'sentiment sometimes bordering upon childishness'.<sup>45</sup> John Hamilton Reynolds recommended Keats's simplicity in more complex terms: 'He

relies directly and wholly on nature. He marries poesy to genuine simplicity. He makes her artless,—yet abstains carefully from giving her an uncomely homeliness:—that is, he shows he can be familiar with nature, yet perfectly strange to the habits of common life.<sup>46</sup> Here the function of poetic ‘simplicity’ is a ‘marriage’ which will domesticate and subdue a consciously feminized nature, ‘mak[ing] her artless’. The crucial word is artless. It denotes stylistic transparency and directness (as opposed to metaphysical ‘mystery’), but also gathers a cluster of social, moral, and gendered meanings. Feminine nature is ‘artless’ in that it is sexually and socially conformative: ‘sincere, guileless, ingenuous’ (*OED* 4), ideally passive, tractable, and (as for Samuel Johnson) ‘comely’ because averse to ‘habits of common life’. Reynolds laboured this point to refute those critics who claim that ‘artlessness is a vice’; Keats’s ‘natural freedom of versification’ does not descend into licentiousness—indeed, the ‘best poets of the day might not blush to own it’.<sup>47</sup>

Early reviews of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) had been remarkably similar. Joseph Johnson *Analytical Review* praised ‘the studied simplicity, which pervades many of the poems’, noting ‘poems which particularly pleased us from their character either of simplicity or tenderness, or both’. For the *British Critic* the poems aimed at ‘simplicity and nature’, and ‘succeeded in attaining [a] judicious degree of simplicity’. The *Monthly Review* found Wordsworth’s ‘natural delineations of human passions, human characters, and human incidents’ to be ‘pleasing and interesting in no common way’, and described one poem, ‘We are Seven’, as ‘innocent and pretty infantine prattle’.<sup>48</sup> Each of these reviews responded to Wordsworth’s advertised desire to offer ‘a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents’ in an appropriately democratic idiom. But to an anti-Jacobinical reader poetry (and poetic theory) of this character might appear ‘levelling’ in that it sought ‘to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted for the purposes of poetic pleasure’.<sup>49</sup>

The *Anti-Jacobin* magazine (20 November 1797) substantiated this political context by elaborating ‘the elements of a *Jacobin* Art of Poetry’ to illustrate ‘the poetical, as well as the political, doctrine of the NEW SCHOOL’. The ‘Ode to Jacobinism’ (26 March 1798) represented the French Revolution as a ‘darling child’ whose ‘infant mind’ had been infected with Voltaire’s writings—a scene which was depicted with deathly, nightmarish intensity in James Gillray’s oil sketch of *Voltaire Instructing the Infant Jacobinism*. A little later in 1798, the satirical poem *New Morality* (9 July) identified a proto-Keatsian ‘mawkish strain’ as the unstable residue of ‘*French* Philanthropy ... filtered through the dregs of Paine’. And the same poem

offered another genealogy, this time of Rousseau's foster-child, 'Sweet Sensibility':

Sweet child of sickly Fancy! her of yore  
 From her loved France Rousseau to exile bore;  
 And, while midst lakes and mountains wild he ran,  
 Full of himself, and shunn'd the haunts of man,  
 Taught her o'er each lone vale and Alpine steep  
 To lisp the story of his wrongs, and weep;  
 Taught her to cherish still in either eye,  
 Of tender tears a plentiful supply,  
 And pour them in the brooks that babbled by;—  
 —Taught by nice scales to mete her feelings strong,  
 False by degrees, and exquisitely wrong;—  
 —For the crushed beetle *first*,—the widow'd dove,  
 And all the warbled sorrows of the grove;—  
 Next for poor suff'ring *guilt*;—and *last* of all,  
 For Parents, Friends, a King and Country's fall.<sup>50</sup>

The *Anti-Jacobin* argued repeatedly that the cult of sensibility had been exploited by Rousseau and Paine to enlist sympathetic and tender feeling as motives for a democratic revolution: a revolutionary mawkishness in which emotional susceptibility and changeful politics were combined. Indeed, another famous cartoon by Gillray, *New Morality* (which illustrated the poem), showed the English Jacobins (including Coleridge, Southey, Thelwall, and—as 'toad and frog'—the Charleses Lamb and Lloyd) paying homage to an icon of 'SENSIBILITY': a bedraggled *citoyenne* wearing a cap of liberty, cradling a dead dove in one hand and, in the other, a book inscribed 'Rousseau'.

Sensibility was identified with democratic revolution by the *Anti-Jacobin* because its franchise extended beyond the social and political distinctions of class or status, to hitherto marginal, vulnerable, and inarticulate sections of the community—especially women and children. Such 'prodigals of grief' possessed the dangerous capacity to feel ('falsely', 'wrongly', according to the *Anti-Jacobin*) for all humankind, generating 'a universal benevolence' through which 'the widest communal good' superseded established social structures and categories.<sup>51</sup>

Besides lending a sense of revolutionary possibility to Keats's mawkishness, the democratic sensibility of the 1790s foreshadowed the unselfish principle of Keats's negative capability, which identified a universal hospitality as the prerogative of poetic genius. I shall explore the implications

of this relationship in greater detail in the Epilogue, but for now it is sufficient to notice that when Keats pondered negative capability in his letter of late December 1817, he concluded: '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' (*Letters*, i. 194). Here, Keats's idea of beauty authenticated creative genius—specially Shakespeare's—but its power to 'overcome' and 'obliterate' presented a combative aesthetic appropriate to an age of revolutionary struggle. Writing sixty years previously, Edmund Burke had said that beauty invokes ideas of 'weakness and imperfection', arguing further that '[w]omen are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness'.<sup>52</sup> For Keats 'feminine' sickliness and imperfection were overcome and assimilated by the imagination as a paradoxical source of human strength which, unlike the French Revolution, might offer a lasting renewal for the world: 'a joy for ever'. And the diction of Keats's poetry, glossed by reviewers as an 'effeminate' and childish lisp, articulated the challenge of beauty to the authorized 'masculine' discourses of the political and cultural establishment.

So, twenty years after the publication of 'New Morality', critics of Keats identified him as the latest offspring of 'sickly Fancy': Leigh Hunt's foster-child, or 'bantling' illegitimate son, taught to 'lisp' sedition not 'midst lakes and mountains wild' but in the studio of a suburban villa at Hampstead—'a poet's house' (*Sleep and Poetry*, 354). By insisting on Keats's 'youth' and 'effeminacy', these critics sought to disperse the Jacobin potential in his poems. The extent to which later generations have been unwilling to treat Keats's political interests seriously is one measure of the reviewers' success in enforcing earlier, Burkean standards according to which Keats's distinctive poetic voice could be identified with stereotypes of passivity and weakness, and thus accommodated to the prevailing masculine structures of social and cultural authority.

As we have already seen, for Z childishness was a definitive characteristic of the 'Cockney School' of 'politics, versification, and morality', and of Keats in particular as 'a young Cockney rhymester'. In Z's essays the following profile of Cockney culture is firmly outlined: 'exquisitely bad taste', 'vulgar modes of thinking', 'low birth and low habits', 'ignorant', 'under-bred', 'suburban', 'paltry', 'morally depraved', 'indecent and immoral', 'licentious', 'obscene and traitorous'. The occasion for this sexual slander was Hunt poem *The Story of Rimini*, that 'lewd tale of incest, adultery, and murder',<sup>53</sup> and Byron used much the same language in his abusive remarks about Keats. Yet in Z's essay on Keats, the social-sexual hostility aimed at Hunt gives place to the different, more radical sense of

'Cockneyism' associated with childishness. In the fourth Cockney School essay the political charge of 'Cockneyism' had less to do with Keats's social circumstances and origins than with Z's recognition of the disruptive possibilities of Keatsian 'childishness'. But what precisely did Z intend by disparaging Keats as a young *Cockney* rhymester?

In Samuel Johnson *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) the leading sense of 'Cockney' is 'A native of London' (which fits Keats surely enough). But Johnson also lists a second sense of Cockney, which has obvious gendered and social inflections: 'Any effeminate, low citizen'. So there we have it: Cockney Keats: effeminate, common, and a Londoner. This tells us a lot about how the 'Cockney' tag might be employed in sexual-social conflict, but perhaps not very much, yet, about how the word was intended to apply to Keats's poetry. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the four primary senses of 'Cockney' are glossed as follows:

*Cockney*: egg; lit. 'cocks' egg'

1. An egg ... hen's egg ... one of the small or misshapen eggs occasionally laid by fowls ... 2. 'A child that sucketh long', 'a nestle-cock', 'a mother's darling' ... 'a child tenderly brought up'; hence, a squeamish or effeminate fellow, 'a milksop'. 3. A derisive appellation for a townsman, as the type of effeminacy in contrast to the harder inhabitants of the country. 4. One born in the city of London ...

For Z Keats was a Cockney not merely because he was supposedly a 'young man', and an admirer of Leigh Hunt and Hazlitt. The charge was more specific: Cockney Keats was an unweaned boy-child, unwilling to 'bid farewell' to the exuberant joys of early, sensual experience at his mother's breast. His 'simplicity' was a token of his opposition to the 'artful' duplicity of government (compare William Hone *Political House that Jack Built*, dedicated to 'The Nursery of Children Six Feet High, His Readers', in which the nursery rhyme was adapted in a satirical exposure of state oppression after the Peterloo Massacre of August 1819).<sup>54</sup> Keats's vulnerable 'tenderness' enervated the discourse of masculine authority, which Z now associated with those ('classical') writers who had formerly appeared amid the Jacobin rabble of *New Morality*. In his first essay on the Cockney School, Z admired the one-time republican William Wordsworth as a figure of austere 'patriarchal simplicity'. Charles Lamb, Gillray's toad or frog, was happily re-embodied by Z as 'that simple-minded man of genius'.<sup>55</sup> Keats, meanwhile, had become potentially more dangerous than his natural father Leigh Hunt, as the 'new brood' of

treacherous sensibility that had formerly been associated with Rousseau and the French Revolution.

As the political unrest of the post-Waterloo years grew more distant, or moved through different channels, the unsettling aspects of Keats and Hunt (which had seemed so alarming in an age of revolutions) gradually vanished. During the nineteenth century both writers were accommodated by sustaining the stereotypes of childish and effeminate passivity established by Z and others after 1817. In this manner, Hunt and Keats were publicly depoliticized, and disengaged from the ideological context which had so powerfully informed their creativity and their thinking about literature. Z's caricature in *Blackwood's* had transformed Hunt into a figure of fun. Thirty-five years later Hunt was no longer a force in political affairs, although still very much alive. In 1853 he reappeared as the amiably childish Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House*:

‘I don't mean literally a child,’ pursued Mr Jarndyce; ‘not a child in years. He is grown up—he is at least as old as I am—but in simplicity, and freshness, and enthusiasm, and a fine guileless inaptitude for worldly affairs, he is a perfect child.’ (chapter 6)

Hunt, once the most articulate radical journalist in England, was doomed by Dickens to eternal childishness, and Keats's reputation developed in a similar manner during the nineteenth century. Once his ‘mawkish’ sensibility no longer appeared as a token of Jacobin sympathies, Keats survived as the poet of ‘delicate and fragile’ genius lamented by Shelley in *Adonais*. According to William Howitt in 1847: ‘On this world and its concerns he could take no hold, and they could take none on him’; for David Macbeth Moir, in 1851: ‘all ... was the result of imaginative wealth and youthful inexperience’; the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1857 (Alexander Smith) thought that ‘he still wrote in a style of babyish effeminacy ... [and] of a ... nauseous sweetness’.<sup>56</sup> These judgements were echoed by much weightier critics: David Masson wrote of ‘an intellectual invalid, ... a poor youth too conscious of ‘the endeavour of the present breath’, watching incessantly his own morbid symptoms’ (1860); Algernon Swinburne of ‘some of the most vulgar and fulsome doggerel ever whimpered by a vapid and effeminate rhymester in the sickly stage of whelphood ... [who] lived long enough only to give promise of being a man’ (1886). Gerard Manley Hopkins thought Keats ‘one of the beginners of the Romantic movement, with all the extravagance and ignorance of his youth ... His contemporaries, as Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, and even Leigh Hunt, right or wrong, still concerned themselves with great causes, as liberty and religion; but he lived in mythology and

fairyland the life of a dreamer' (1887–8). Matthew Arnold commented, that Keats was 'let and hindered with a short term and imperfect experience,—“young” as he says of himself' (1880, 1886).<sup>57</sup> The feminizing of Keats during the nineteenth century, apparent in some of these criticisms, has been analysed in detail by Susan Wolfson,<sup>58</sup> who shows how during this period Keats was 'deemed to have particular appeal to women'; his poetry was marketed in particular 'to female audiences'. This was one way of assimilating Keats's threat to prevailing codes of masculinity, and was effectively a continuation of Z's polemical criticism in *Blackwood's Magazine*. The prolonged feminizing of Keats helps one to make sense of the otherwise laughable masculine over-compensation in David Masson's Sweeney-Keats: 'a slack, slouching youth, with a thick torso, a deep grave voice, and no fixed principles ... [who] kept aloof from opinion, doctrine, controversy, as by a natural instinct.'<sup>59</sup>

In all of these nineteenth-century responses to Keats, the revolutionary potential of his 'style of babyish effeminacy' has been forgotten: Keats entered the canon as the Romantic poet widely believed to have had no interest in politics and the events of contemporary history. My previous chapters have shown how a recovery of the historical, cultural, and ideological contexts in which Z could detect Keats's poems 'lipping sedition' reveals that his poetry was thoroughly (and, to some eyes, dangerously) engaged with contemporary politics. Furthermore, Keats's thinking about creative genius and ideal beauty (so often regarded as aesthetic 'escapism') can be seen as developments of the democratic sensibility formerly identified with Jacobin revolution in France. My 'Epilogue' explores the radical inflections of Keats's concept of 'negative capability', relating that theory to a poem which has often been viewed as serenely detached from history: 'To Autumn'.

## NOTES

1. NLS, MS 4005, quoted by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.

2. See AP 206n.

3. The likelihood is that Keats composed all of Book III at Oxford; Woodhouse noted in his copy of *Endymion* 'At the End of this line [in the draft] is written 'Oxford Sept 5'.' See also *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. W. Garrod (2nd edn., Oxford, 1958), p. xci.

4. See the very informative discussion in Robert M. Ryan, *Keats: The Religious Sense* (Princeton, 1976), 121–4.

5. The letter was in Bailey 'Ceylon Scrapbook'; see Hyder E. Rollins, 'Benjamin Bailey's Scrapbook', *K-Sj* 6 (Winter 1957), 15–35, esp. 18. Bailey's recollection of his



determination to enter the 'sacred Profession' echoes Keats's observation, 'it must be shocking to find in a sacred Profession such barefaced oppression and impertinence'.

6. *British Critic* (June, 1818), rpt. in *KCH* 94.

7. 'Cockney School IV', 524.

8. See *Quarterly Review*, 19 (1818), 206, and *KCH* 112.

9. See also the discussion in Newey, 'Alternate uproar and sad peace', 267–8, and, for the 'hard-driving Whig perspective' of the early verse, Newey, 'Keats, History, and the Poets', *K&H* 165–93.

10. See the following two reviews of *Poems, by John Keats*: J. H. Reynolds in *Champion* (9 Mar 1817), rpt. *KCH* 49, and George Felton Mathew in the *European Magazine* (May 1817), rpt. *KCH* 52.

11. See 'The Order of Poems in Keats's First Volume', in *The Hoodwinking of Madeline*, 1–13.

12. 'Attack on the Prince Regent, and a Word or Two of Plain Comment upon it', *Examiner* (2 Feb 1817), 65.

13. For the identification of Shakespeare, and Keats's 'deliberate design' of the title-page in *Poems*, see Stuart M. Sperry, 'Richard Woodhouse's Interleaved and Annotated Copy of Keats's Poems (1817)', in E. Rothstein and T. K. Dunseath (eds.), *Literary Monographs* (Madison, 1967), 120–1.

14. See for example *Examiner* (2 Mar 1817), 129, 138, and (9 Mar 1817), 145. For Hunt, Chaucer was 'a Reformer in his day' *Examiner* (9 Mar 1817), 145; 'a politician and a reformer, zealous enough even in his old age to get imprisoned for the space of four years, [who] took a special delight in rural pleasures'; *Examiner* (10 May 1818), 289. See also the discussion of Chaucer's significance for Reynolds and Keats in Ch. 5, pp. 134–40.

15. *Spenser: Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (Oxford, 1912).

16. From the first resolution taken at the 'Meeting for a Reform' reported in *Examiner* (26 Jan 1817), 58.

17. *Examiner* (2 Mar 1817), 129–30. Castlereagh had introduced the Suspension Bill in the Commons on 24 Feb.

18. Martin Aske has emphasized how this default may register an anxiety of belatedness in Keats, an imagination seeking consolation for the impossibility of recovering a pure classical inspiration. Aske foregrounds the role of the classics in Keats's quest for poetic identity, and differentiates his 'privatisation' of response from the ideologically driven poetry of Shelley and Peacock. See *Keats and Hellenism*, 3, 47–52. I differ from Aske in seeing Keats's troubled invocation of classical literature and myth, and the dedicatory sonnet in particular, as inseparable from the poet's engagement with contemporary social and political issues.

19. *Examiner* (2 Mar 1817), 133, reports that in the previous week the Commons received petitions for reform from Ludlow, Blackburne, Duffield, Stuarton, Perth, Hull, 'and other places', and one from an individual, Henry Hunt. In the same issue, 138, forty-eight bankruptcies are listed, most of them small businesses; a comparable number of bankruptcies appeared in the paper each week at this period. For more, see E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), 691–700.

20. 'Attack on the Prince Regent, and Thanksgiving in the Churches', *Examiner* (16 Feb 1817), 98.

21. Compare Hunt's Hampstead sonnet quoted in full on p. 126.

22. *Examiner* (2 Mar 1817), 139.

23. See Cornelius Webb, *The Man about Town* (2 vols., London, 1838), ii. 108; Betjeman, *Summoned by Bells*, 3.

24. John Hamilton Reynolds, *Alfred, West of England Journal and General Advertiser* (6 Oct 1818), rpt. *KCH* 120.

25. For 'the atmosphere of a Court' see for example 'Court and Fashionables', *Examiner* (3 May 1818), 284. The report describes the Queen's visit to the Mansionhouse, for the examination of children educated in the London National Schools: 'About 300 girls and 700 boys were paraded before the Company, and underwent some examination, after singing a hymn and repeating part of the Church Service. This being over, they sang another hymn, and said some prayers; they then sang "God save the King", with an additional verse about the QUEEN'S letting her "gentle and serene brow grace the fair wreath".—The LORD Mayor then addressed the little children, reminding them of the high honour which had been done them by her MAJESTY, and ordering them a small sum of money each (sixpence we believe) by order of the QUEEN.—The children conducted themselves with military precision.—The Royal Party, having first partaken of a choice collation, left the Mansion-house amidst the shouts of the populace. After this exhibition the Royal Dukes, the Bishops, the Lord Mayor, &c. went to dine at the City of London Tavern, upon "all the delicacies of the season". "Church and State" was drank by the Princes and Bishops in great style; and their happy union was commented upon with much gravity by the Archbishop of CANTERBURY.' For 'fashionable criticism', see the article on 'the *Government Critic*... an invisible link, that connects literature with the police'; 'Literary Notices', *Examiner* (14 June 1818), 378: 'He is under the protection of the *Court*; and his zeal for his King and country gives him a right to say what he pleases of every writer who does not do all in his power to pamper the one into a tyrant, and to trample the other into a herd of slaves.'

26. See Jones, 'The Suburban School', 14, for the suburbs as a representation of the 'bourgeois ideal' of a landscape in which nature and culture coexist 'within a carefully constructed domestic environment'.

27. See *KHM* 26.

28. 'Cockney School I', 39.

29. 'Observations upon "Observations"', vi. 410, 412.

30. William Blackwood's correspondence discloses Coleridge's significant role in encouraging *Blackwood's* popularizing of Wordsworth. In spring 1819 *Blackwood's Magazine* was trying to woo Coleridge as a contributor, using William Davies (of the London publishing house Cadell and Davies) as an intermediary. Davies reported Coleridge's opinion that *Blackwood's* should avoid 'any perceptible bias to either political party, and ... every disposition to indulge in personalities'. He added, 'as I discover that Mr W. is a very great favorite with Mr C. I am rather inclined to recommend that you occasionally say something kind and conciliatory, about Mr W., in your future Nos, though merely to shew a kindly feeling towards Mr C.' NLS, MS 4004, quoted by permission of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland. For *Blackwood's* championing of Wordsworth, see Alexander, 'Blackwood's: Magazine as Romantic Form', 57–68, esp. 61, and for Z's approbation of Wordsworth, see p. 227 below.

31. 'Cockney School VI', 74.

32. Byron to John Murray, 4 Aug. 1821, *BLJ* viii. 166.

33. See Rossetti, *Life of John Keats*, 209.

34. *Examiner* (1 Dec 1816), 761.

35. *Champion* (9 Mar 1817), *KCH* 45; *European Magazine* (May 1817), *KCH* 52; *Examiner* (1 June 1817), *KCH* 55; *Eclectic Review* (Sept 1817), *KCH* 67; *Edinburgh Magazine*, and *Literary Miscellany* (Oct 1817), *KCH* 71; *Examiner* (27 Sept 1818), 609;

*Chester Guardian*, rpt. in *Examiner* (1 Nov 1818), 696; *Alfred, West of England Journal and General Advertiser* (6 Oct 1817), KCH 117.

36. See *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth*, ed. E. de Selincourt, 2nd edn., *The Middle Years Part II, 1812–1820*, rev. M. Moorman and A. G. Hill (Oxford, 1970), 360, 578.

37. *Literary Journal: A Review of Domestic and Foreign Literature* (1806), 633, 635. I am grateful to Dr Nicola Trott for this reference.

38. See J. H. Reynolds in *Champion* (9 Mar 1817), rpt. KCH 46; Hunt in *Examiner* (6 July 1817), 429, rpt. KCH 57; *Edinburgh Magazine*, and *Literary Miscellany* (Oct 1817), rpt. KCH 73; Baldwin *London Magazine* (Apr 1820), KCH 137.

39. See KCH 72.

40. Olivia Smith, *The Politics of Language 1791–1819* (Oxford, 1984), 9.

41. From the ‘Preface’ to Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London, 1755), unpaginated.

42. See KCH 111. For Keats as a ‘copyist’ of Hunt, compare Keats’s ‘among your books we got’ with ‘get among trees’ from Hunt’s epistle ‘To William Hazlitt’. See Ch. 4, p. 127.

43. Byron ‘Addenda’ to his *Letter to John Murray Esqre.* See *Lord Byron: The Complete Miscellaneous Prose*, ed. Andrew Nicholson (Oxford, 1991), 160, and Byron to John Murray, 12 Mar. 1821, *BLJ* viii. 92.

44. See KHM 30.

45. *Examiner* (6 July 1817), 429, rpt. KCH 59; *European Magazine* (May 1817), rpt. KCH 53; *Eclectic Review* (Sept 1817), rpt. KCH 67.

46. *Champion* (9 Mar 1817), rpt. KCH 46.

47. See KCH 46, 49.

48. See *Analytical Review* (Dec 1798); *British Critic* (Oct 1799); *Monthly Review* (June 1799). All are rpt. in ‘Appendix C’ of *Wordsworth and Coleridge: Lyrical Ballads*, ed. R. L. Brett and A. R. Jones (2nd edn., London, 1991), 322–40.

49. See the “‘Advertisement’ to Lyrical Ballads’ (1798) in *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, i. 116–17.

50. *The Poetry of the Anti-Jacobin* (6th edn., London, 1828), 225. For more on the politics of childish poetry in the 1790s, see Fairer, ‘Baby Language and Revolution’, 33–52.

51. For the ‘potentially radical strain of sensibility’ see in particular Chris Jones, *Radical Sensibility: Literature and Ideas in the 1790s* (London, 1993), esp. 1–19.

52. See Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, 100.

53. ‘Cockney School III’, 453.

54. *The Political House that Jack Built* (47th edn., London, 1820).

55. See *Blackwood’s Magazine* (Oct 1817), 40, and *Blackwood’s Magazine* (Oct. 1819), 72.

56. William Howitt, *Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent British Poets* (1847), KCH 311; D. M. Moir, *Sketches of the Poetical Literature of the Past Half-Century* (1851), KCH 351; ‘Keats in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*’, KCH 365.

57. David Masson, ‘The Life and Poetry of Keats’, *Macmillan’s Magazine* (Nov 1860), KCH 371; Algernon Swinburne, *Miscellanies* (London, 1886), 211, 213; G. M. Hopkins to Coventry Patmore, 20, 24 Oct. 1887 and 6 May 1888 in G. M. Hopkins, *Selected Prose*, ed. G. Roberts (Oxford, 1980), 154, 159; Matthew Arnold, ‘John Keats’, first published 1880, rpt. in *Essays in Criticism: Second Series* (1888) quoted from *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold*, ed. R. H. Super (11 vols., Ann Arbor, 1960–77), ix. 214.

58. See Wolfson, ‘Feminizing Keats’, 317–56.

59. Masson, ‘The Life and Poetry of Keats’, KCH 373–4.

JACK STILLINGER

*The “story” of Keats*

The “story” of Keats—how a young man of no apparent distinction in family or social origins, education, or early accomplishments, grew up to become one of the ten or twelve most admired poets in all of English literature—is really several stories, some of them not entirely consistent or compatible with some of the others.<sup>1</sup> This chapter focuses on two. The first is the story of Keats the young genius whose life and career were cut short—some said by the hostility of reviewers—just as he was about to produce the major works that his friends thought him capable of. This is the Keats of Shelley’s *Adonais*; of Byron’s famous quip in Canto II of *Don Juan* that Keats’s “mind, that very fiery particle,” was “snuffed out by an article”; and of the inscriptions on his gravestone in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome: the broken lyre symbolizing unfulfilled aspirations; the words that the poet himself requested, “Here lies one whose name was writ in water”; and his friends’ well-meant embellishments mentioning the poet’s “bitterness [...] of heart, at the malicious power of his enemies.” The product of this first “story” is the Keats whom the British public thought of, if they remembered him at all, during the first three decades following his death on 23 February 1821.

The second story, more a critical construct than imagined facts of biography, tells how Keats rapidly rose to canonicity, beginning in the

---

From *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, Susan J. Wolfson, ed. © 2001 by Cambridge University Press.

middle of the nineteenth century, as his poems became increasingly published, read, quoted, and talked and written about. This is a story about readers' changing interests and values, and how Keats, once he got some readers, has appealed to each separate one of those interests and values ever since. The two stories are connected in that the first, along with some noteworthy attempts by the poet's friends to correct its principal details, became the means of providing the audience and the accompanying attention that enabled the second. The first story is, in effect, the history of Keats getting into the canon by way of biographical interest. The second is, in effect, the history of Keats staying in the canon by virtue of the complexity and openness of his writings. Whether or not these stories are true, it is a fact that Keats has been, just as he predicted he would be, "among the English Poets" (*KL* 1.394) for the last 150 years. What was lacking in the thirty years preceding that period—the 1820s through the 1840s—was a sufficient readership.

## I

Some of the first story is biographically accurate. Keats did die young, at twenty-five, and his active writing career amounted to little more than three and a half years, from the earliest sentimental effusions in his first published volume, *Poems* (1817), through the late ode, *To Autumn*, the last attempts at *The Fall of Hyperion* in the fall of 1819, and some private odes and sonnets to Fanny Brawne (1819 to early 1820). Certainly he would have written more had he lived longer, though we have very little idea where his interests would have taken him. But it is clearly erroneous to think that the brevity of his life and career prevented him from achieving anything of significance. On the contrary, even if cut off just as he was getting under way, this "poet of promise" had nevertheless left a body of mature work in narrative and lyric forms sufficient to make him a "major" writer by anybody's standards. The imagined poet of promise was in fact a poet of enormous accomplishments.

The traditional notions of Keats's low origins and patchy education also have required adjustment. His father was head innkeeper, livery-stabler, and principal manager at the Swan and Hoop, a prosperous London lodging owned by his father-in-law (Keats's grandfather), John Jennings. Notwithstanding the reports of hostile reviewers and the fables of literary history, the poet's "low" origins were actually soundly middle class, as we reckon these things today. As for education, from 1803 to 1811 Keats attended an excellent boarding school, John Clarke's at Enfield, north of London, and proved an insatiable reader and remarkable learner. He then served a four-year apprenticeship to an apothecary-surgeon (1811–15),

followed by a first year of courses as a medical student at Guy's Hospital in London. He passed the apothecaries' exam and received his certificate to practice as apothecary and surgeon in July 1816, at which point he abandoned medicine for a full-time career in poetry. The literary part of his education was as comprehensive as that of many another famous writer, and the scientific (and human) aspects of his medical training, as Alan Richardson's essay in this volume shows, were a further enrichment.

What has most needed correcting is the idea that Keats was killed by the reviewers. Of all the elements of the story, this is the most often repeated and perforce the most firmly established, extending even into some of the Shelley scholarship of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> The assassins in the story are the two most notorious pronouncers on Keats's second volume, the long poem *Endymion* (1818): John Gibson Lockhart, writing in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* for August 1818, and John Wilson Croker, in the *Quarterly Review* for April (both reviews actually appeared in September, just after a nagging sore throat had forced Keats's early return from an impressive but physically demanding walking tour of northern England, Ireland, and Scotland with his robust friend Charles Brown). Lockhart, in the fourth of his series of articles on the "Cockney School of Poetry," calls *Endymion* "imperturbable drivelling idiocy," quotes passages of "very pretty raving" and "loose, nerveless versification, and Cockney rhymes," and concludes by urging Keats to abandon poetry and return to his apothecary's shop (*KCH* 98, 200, 104, 109–10): Croker, declaring that he could not get past the first book of *Endymion* and could make no sense even of that, goes on at length about faulty diction and versification. He too relegates Keats's poetry to the "Cockney School," characterized by "the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language" (*KCH* 111). Denouncing the liberalism implied by Keats's connections with his anti-Tory mentor Leigh Hunt, both reviewers make clear that their criticism has a political bias.<sup>3</sup>

Keats's admirers—some scores of his acquaintances at the time and many hundreds of thousands of readers subsequently over the past 180 years—have hated Lockhart and Croker for their contemptuous treatment. But the poet himself seems to have been very little affected. With Shakespeare as his "presider," he had higher standards than his assailants did. "Praise or blame," he told his publisher J. A. Hessey on 8 October 1818, "has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic on his own Works. My own domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what Blackwood or the Quarterly could possibly inflict" (*KL* 1.373–74). To his brother and sister-in-law in America he commented a week later, "This is a mere matter of the moment—I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death. Even

as a Matter of present interest the attempt to crush me in the Quarterly has only brought me more into notice" (1.394).

It was consumption—what we now call tuberculosis—that killed Keats. But the sentimental fable of fatally harsh reviews quickly arose during the final stage of his illness, and it got into print soon after his death. Here is an example from Shelley's (admittedly self-serving) Preface to *Adonais* (1821):

The genius of the lamented person to whose memory I have dedicated these unworthy verses, was not less delicate and fragile than it was beautiful; and where cankerworms abound, what wonder if its young flower was blighted in the bud? The savage criticism on his *Endymion*, which appeared in the *Quarterly Review*, produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind; the agitation thus originated ended in the rupture of a blood-vessel in the lungs; a rapid consumption ensued, and the succeeding acknowledgements from more candid critics, of the true greatness of his powers, were ineffectual to heal the wound thus wantonly inflicted.

"Delicate," "fragile," "blighted in the bud" set the tone, and Shelley's descriptions of Keats in the poem—for example, as "a pale flower by some sad maiden cherished ... The bloom, whose petals nipt before they blew / Died on the promise of the fruit" (48, 52–53)—further emphasize the poet's pitiful weakness.

Shelley did not know Keats very well. Those who did, a group of fiercely loyal surviving friends, almost immediately conceived the idea of writing a memoir to tell the truth about the poet's "beautiful character,"<sup>4</sup> a character that did not include delicacy and fragility. Hessey's publishing partner John Taylor sent announcements to both the *New Times* and the *Morning Chronicle* (29 March, 9 April, and 4 June 1821) to the effect that "speedily will be published, a biographical memoir of the late John Keats" (*Letters of Brown*, 89). Then followed a prolonged squabble among the surviving friends over which was best qualified to do the job and who had the rights to his unpublished poems, letters, and other papers. Charles Brown, Keats's housemate during 1819–20 and the friend closest to him while he was writing *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the odes, and the rest of his most important poems, was a frontrunner, but it was more than a decade before he could begin serious work on the project.

The first memoir in print was Leigh Hunt's chapter, "Mr. Keats, with a Criticism on His Writings," in his *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* (1828), a lively account that opens with a lengthy paragraph

on Keats's physical appearance and contains ten pages of excellently chosen quotations (with *Ode to a Nightingale* entire) to illustrate his descriptive genius, as well as most of his letter of 10 May 1817 on his aspiration "to be in the Mouth of Fame" (*KL* 1.136–40). Hunt draws on and supports elements of the "story" that had been taking shape, with details of the poet's "origin" ("of the humblest description"), his schooling ("the rudiments of a classical education"), and the bad effects of the reviews (a "system of calumny" that injured "a young and sensitive nature").<sup>5</sup> Hunt presents Keats as a sickly person all his life, and concludes with details of the poet's final illness and death in Rome supplied by Joseph Severn. Hunt's memoir is one of a small cluster of events of the late 1820s marking the beginning of Keats's emergence from obscurity. The first English edition of Shelley's *Adonais* appeared in the following year (1829), a publication sponsored by the so-called "Cambridge Apostles"—Richard Monckton Milnes, Alfred Tennyson, and Arthur Hallam—and printed from a copy of the original 1821 Pisa edition that Hallam had brought back from Italy. Also in 1829 appeared a pirated *Poetical Works of Coleridge, Shelley, and Keats*, constituting the first collected edition of Keats's poems, with a memoir of Keats based on Hunt's *Lord Byron*, from the Paris publishers Anthony and William Galignani. Because of copyright laws, this Paris edition could not be sold in England, but it was freely available in the United States, where the Keats section was several times reprinted. It was a principal cause of the rapid growth of Keats's reputation among American readers.<sup>6</sup>

Brown thought Hunt's account of Keats, as he told Fanny Brawne on 17 December 1829, "worse than disappointing; I cannot bear it." But in combination with Galignani's edition, just then being printed, it had the effect of spurring Brown to action: "I am resolved to write his life, persuaded that no one, except yourself [Fanny Brawne], knew him better" (*Letters of Brown*, 295). He read through the letters in his possession, wrote to friends seeking information and papers, but also entered into a prolonged and increasingly bitter controversy with his old schoolfellow Charles Dilke concerning the honesty of George Keats in his financial dealings with the poet. One result was George's injunction against the printing of any of his brother's unpublished poems in Brown's possession, a considerable obstacle to Brown's plans. Brown, who had been living in Italy, returned to England and settled at Plymouth in the spring of 1835 and soon afterward became a member and an officer of the Plymouth Institution, the local organization for the promotion of literature, science, and the fine arts. It was for a lecture at the Institution, on 29 December 1836, that Brown finally wrote his "Life of John Keats." Though not published for another hundred years, in 1937, it is a work of considerable importance in the history of Keats's reputation.<sup>7</sup>



After several unsuccessful attempts to get it published on his own, Brown, about to emigrate to New Zealand in the spring of 1841, gave the manuscript along with his copies of Keats's unpublished poems to Richard Monckton Milnes, whom he had met in Italy and considered a good choice: a person who had not known Keats at first hand and therefore could rise above the conflicting interests of the surviving friends. Seven years later, Brown's work became the basis of the first full-scale biography, Milnes's *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains, of John Keats* (1848).

In the history of his reputation, 1848 is the year after which Keats has always been "among the English Poets." With the help of Brown's manuscript "Life," as well as information from several others who had known Keats intimately and contributed their letters and reminiscences, Milnes gave Keats more respectable origins, a richer education, a healthier constitution, and a much fuller and more vital character. He included sixty-six poems (forty hitherto unpublished) from Brown's and others' manuscripts, as well as some eighty of the poet's letters, most of them published for the first time. In much of the two-volume compilation he let Keats speak for himself through his letters, and the result—just as readers of the poet's letters have been discovering ever since—is a portrait of an interesting and thoroughly attractive personality, one that at the time was guaranteed to stimulate interest in the poetry. Milnes's work was widely reviewed, and Keats's reputation soared dramatically. Most important among the consequences was the new demand for Keats's works in print. The three lifetime volumes (the print-runs no more than 500 copies) were no longer available, and a cheap collected edition published by William Smith in 1840 had not been a commercial success. But some fifty editions or "quasi-editions"—reprints presented as new editions—of the complete poems were published in the four decades between the year of Milnes's work and that of the next two biographies, by Sidney Colvin and William Michael Rossetti (brother of Dante Gabriel and Christina), both published in 1887.<sup>8</sup> With Milnes and fresh biographical interest facilitating the development, Keats at last got the requisite readership, and he has been "with Shakespeare," which is where Matthew Arnold placed him in an introductory essay of 1880, ever since.

## II

In the second story that I am presenting, "poor Keats" (the subject of the first) gives way to smart Keats, accomplished Keats, and lucky Keats—this last, among other reasons, because it was just by chance that Brown, preparing to sail to New Zealand, gave his "Life" and the unpublished poems

to Milnes. In the first story, Keats is “with” Thomas Chatterton (to whom Keats dedicated *Endymion*), Henry Kirke White, and a few other permanently young poets famous for dying before they fulfilled their promise. In the second story, Keats is with Shakespeare—and Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, and a handful of others—at the top of all lists of the most esteemed writers in English poetry. Regardless of the critical standards in use at a particular time, Keats regularly comes through with flying colors.

Keats has been likened to Shakespeare for some central stylistic similarities: richness of language, concreteness and particularity of descriptions, and an almost magical dexterity in harmonizing and varying the sounds and rhythms of his lines. For many decades now, while readers have grumbled at Milton’s high seriousness, Pope’s mechanically constructed couplets, Wordsworth’s excessive plainness, Coleridge’s shaky theology, Tennyson’s wasteful musicality, and so on, commentators on Shakespeare and Keats have unstintingly praised their command of language and technique. Both writers have been the subjects of an immense quantity of critical writing. Along with their art, their lives and times have been exhaustively researched for clues to increased understanding, and their texts have been analyzed and interpreted endlessly, lending themselves to every kind of critical and theoretical approach.

This openness to interpretation shared by the two poets may result from their self-division. Their authorial character (as we infer from their writings) and the works themselves are full of ambiguities and contradictions; or, to put it in terms of Keats’s definition of *Negative Capability* (“which Shakespeare possessed so enormously”), are full of “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (*KL* 1.193). These two qualities—the durable attractiveness of the works and the kinds of ambiguity that the contradictions produce in those works—are causally related: the writings of Shakespeare and Keats are attractive *because of* these uncertainties, doubts, ambiguities, and contradictions.<sup>9</sup>

One of the wisest and most comprehensive short definitions of canonicity recently in print is by the intellectual historian David Harlan:

Canonical works are those texts that have gradually revealed themselves to be multi-dimensional and omni-significant, those works that have produced a plenitude of meanings and interpretations, only a small percentage of which make themselves available at any single reading. Canonical texts [...] generate new ways of seeing old things and new things we have never seen before. No matter how subtly or radically we change our approach to them, they always respond with something new;

no matter how many times we reinterpret them, they always have something illuminating to tell us. Their very indeterminacy means that they can never be exhausted [...] Canonical works are multi-dimensional, omni-significant, inexhaustible, perpetually new, and, for all these reasons, “permanently valuable.”<sup>10</sup>

This emphasis on multiplicity of meanings, indeterminacy, and interpretive inexhaustibility applies admirably to Keats; both as a person and as a poet.

In 1995, when exhibitions celebrating the bicentennial of Keats’s birth were staged at Harvard, the Grolier Club in New York, the Clark Library in Los Angeles, the Dove Cottage Museum in Grasmere, and elsewhere, several Keatses were on display: the Keats of the poetry drafts, produced, as he told his friend Richard Woodhouse, as if by magic (*KC* 1.129); the Keats of the boldly inscribed fair copies; the Keats first known to the public in the magazines and the three original volumes; posthumous Keats, in his character as creator of the one hundred poems first published after his death; the personal Keats seen in the privacy of his surviving letters; Keats as the beloved friend at the center of what we now call “the Keats Circle”; Keats of the various portraits that were made of him; and Keats the artistic collaborator, providing materials for subsequent nineteenth- and twentieth-century book designers, printers, and binders.

Many more Keatses can be extracted from criticism and scholarship over the years (including the several hundred papers delivered at the bicentennial celebrations): Aesthetic Keats, the champion of art for art’s sake; Sensuous Keats, the burster of joy’s grape, with or without cayenne pepper on his tongue, and the creator of some of the most palpable imagery in all of English poetry; Philosophic Keats, the describer of the Vale of Soul-making and life as a Mansion of Many Apartments; Theoretical Keats, the formulator of “Negative Capability” and of the idea of the “camelion Poet”; Topographical Keats, the well-traveled tourist through the Lakes and Scotland; Theatrical Keats, the theater reviewer and unproduced playwright; Intertextual Keats, including Spenserian Keats, Leigh Huntian Keats, Shakespearean Keats, Miltonic Keats, and many others; Political Keats, especially in the early poems and letters; a more sharply focused Radical Keats; Vulgar Keats, the only canonical male Romantic poet besides Blake who did not attend a university; Cockney Keats, a reference both to the 1818 Cockney School articles in *Blackwood’s* and to the poet’s supposed “lowly” upbringing, described in the earliest biographical accounts after his death; Suburban Keats, referring to Keats’s politically tinged connections with Hampstead and Leigh Hunt on the outskirts of London; Effeminate Keats, the fainting flower of Shelley’s *Adonais*; Masculine Keats, his friends’ defense

against the notion of the fainting flower; Heroic Keats, the one who suffers and matures from the trials of existence; Consumptive Keats, the one who dies so movingly every time we make our way to the end of the letters.

These different manifestations of the ever-changing chameleon Keats, selected from a large array of possibilities, are interesting in themselves but do not add up to the more concentrated canonical complexity—which I shall call Multiple Keats—that I think is at the heart of Keats's widespread and longstanding appeal to readers. "Multiple Keats" stands for an internal complexity in the poet constituted primarily by self-division—a sort of unresolved imaginative dividedness between the serious and the humorous, the straight and the ironic, the fanciful and the real, the high-flying and the down-to-earth, the sentimental and the satiric, the puffed up and the deflated. It shows itself in many places, both in biographical anecdote and in Keats's writings—and in the poetry, both in the frivolous pieces tossed off for immediate amusement and in the most serious efforts that Keats hoped would one day earn him a place among the English poets. One way of representing this self-division is by referring to various kinds of comedy: the antic, the zany, the farcical, the ridiculous, all of which have a basis in some kind of incongruity or misfittingness. Something doesn't fit with something else.

There are hundreds of passages in Keats's letters involving puns, practical jokes, self-mockery, and comic description—many of them in incongruous juxtaposition with serious matter such as a friend's or his own illness, lack of money, disappointment in love, anxiety about the future, an unfavorable review. Likewise, a sizable number of Keats's poems and passages in the poems are openly funny: the early lines about his trinity of women, wine, and snuff; the sonnet celebrating the grand climacteric of Mrs. Reynolds's cat; the whimsical self-description beginning "There was a naughty boy"; the lines about the cursed gadfly; the lines about the cursed bagpipe; the silly dialogue between Ben Nevis and Mrs. Cameron; the Spenserian stanzas making fun of his friend Charles Brown; the extended self-parody in *The Jealousies*. The comedy in these pieces, just as with the jokes in the letters, regularly depends on juxtaposition of incongruities, as in the overthrow of expectations with a punch line.

Keats often juxtaposes the comic and the serious in poems that are not primarily funny. Consider, for a handful of quick examples, Endymion pausing to rest on his extended travels and, when he casually stretches "his indolent arms" into the air, unintentionally clasping "O bliss! / A naked waist" (*Endymion* 2.711–13); Isabella and Lorenzo's myopic lovesickness in the opening stanzas of *Isabella*; the "monstrous" mice, birds, and Angora cat on Bertha's fire screen in *The Eve of St. Mark* (78–82); Porphyro's cartoon-

like tiptoeing across Madeline's bedroom to check whether she is asleep in *The Eve of St. Agnes* (244–52); the redness of Hermes's blushing ears in the first paragraph of *Lamia* (1.22–26). There are larger; more serious mismatches—comic misfitting without the comedy, as it were—everywhere one turns in the major poems. Porphyro is the hero of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, an ardent lover, a Prince Charming to the rescue, Madeline's future husband, and at the same time is associated with images of sorcery, peeping Tomism, cruel seduction, and rape; while Madeline is the beautiful heroine, the belle of the ball, Sleeping Beauty, a pious Christian, Porphyro's bride, and at the same time is a foolish victim of both his stratagem and her own, self-deception. In stanza six of *Ode to a Nightingale*, the speaker first thinks it would be “rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain,” then the richness of his thought is immediately nullified by the realism of mortal extinction: “Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain— / To thy high requiem become a sod,” he laments to the nightingale (55–60). In *To Autumn* we read a series of statements about the season's beauties, then we are made to realize that all this beauty is dying, and finally (perhaps), if we put these two contrary notions together, we understand that death is somehow beautiful. In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, which I shall use as a single extended example of the way Keats's characteristic self-dividedness shows up in the juxtaposed opposites of his poetry, the hypothetical romance world of “Tempe or the dales of Arcady” in ancient Greece (7) stands in obvious and pointed contrast to the speaker's own modern world of process and mortality. On the painted surface of one side of the urn (the subject of stanzas 2–3), the piper's melodies are imagined to be “unheard” and therefore “sweeter”; the piper never tires; the lovers, pursuing and pursued, never age or lose their beauty (“She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, / For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!”); the “happy” trees never shed their leaves (it is eternal “spring”). Everything is “far above” the “breathing ... passion” of living humans, who are subject to “a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd, / A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.” On the other side of the urn (stanza 4), a sacrificial procession of “mysterious priest,” lowing heifer, and townsfolk is stopped forever on the way to some “green altar”; they will neither reach their destination nor go back to their “little town” (though the heifer will never reach the altar, and the people, like the lovers, will not age or die). This is different from the process of life in the real (the poet's) world.

There is a greater density of opposites in this poem than in perhaps any other of comparable length in all of English literature. The fast image of the urn, as a “still unravish'd bride of quietness,” evokes the unstated counternotions of violence and sexual fulfillment in “ravished” bride; “quietness” implies a contrary noisiness. The allied image, of the urn as

“foster-child of silence and slow time,” makes one think of a natural child. Pairings of this sort are a principal element of the ode’s structure, and very shortly are made explicit in the first two stanzas in such phrases as “deities or mortals, or ... both,” “men or gods,” “mad pursuit ... struggle to escape,” “Heard melodies ... those unheard,” “sensual ... spirit,” and so on. This pairing of opposites turns, in the ode’s final two lines, into a pairing of abstractions brought together in the urn’s message: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty...” What is important, for present purposes, is the near balance of pluses and minuses accorded to both sides of these pairs. Throughout the poem, in the phrases I have quoted and in the larger oppositions connected with time and timelessness, the two contrasted sides tend to get approval and disapproval almost equally.

Earlier critics—for example, the American New Humanists of the 1920s—tended to read the poem as unequivocal celebration of the timeless world of art, and they censured Keats for the supposed Romantic escapism that such celebration implied. Then in the close attention of New Criticism to ironies, ambiguities, and paradoxes, readers began to notice (just as the speaker in the ode, being a clever reader, had noticed all along in perhaps half the lines of the poem) that the art-world has its drawbacks as a hypothetical alternative to the human world: the piper cannot stop playing (“thou canst not leave / Thy song”); the lovers can never finally kiss or make love (“never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal”); the trees are confined to a single season (“nor ever bid the spring adieu”); the permanent halting of the sacrificial procession leaves an unseen “little town” forever “silent” and “desolate.” Some critics took these misgivings, especially the last image (38–40), to signify the poet’s rejection of the ideal: the urn in the final stanza, now a “Cold Pastoral,” is only a work of art after all, a “tease” just like eternity itself, somehow “a friend to man,” but not of much practical help, since the concluding aphorism (“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”), as compelling as its terms are, really makes very little sense.

Both kinds of critical rendering—pro-ideal (therefore escapist) and pro-reality (therefore skeptical of the ideal)—are necessarily one-sided. The poem itself is actually on both sides at once, because the urn, like the ideal that it represents, is both admired and gently pitied throughout the speaker’s musings. Readers do not keep returning to the ode to learn that life in the real world is preferable to life on an urn (or vice versa). Rather, they are repeatedly drawn to the spectacle of the speaker’s full feeling for uncertainties, mysteries, doubts in the face of these oppositions. At any point, a resolution could go either way, and they read and reread, I think, to see how the conflict will conclude each time anew.

*Ode on a Grecian Urn* is an exemplary illustration of Keats's canonical complexity, as the accumulated critical literature on it attests.<sup>11</sup> The poem abounds in multiple and conflicting possibilities for interpretation—in the terms of David Harlan's definition (quoted above), it is “multi-dimensional, omni-significant, inexhaustible, perpetually new”—and it also, in very practical terms, gets the highest ratings (in anthology publishers' surveys) from teachers in graduate and undergraduate literature classes. It seems to be the nature of canonical works to have, or to provide the basis for, more meanings than any reader can process at a single reading and therefore to be, in a manner of speaking, infinitely readable. In literature courses having a seminar or lecture-discussion format, canonical works elicit more discussion because of their greater density, ambiguity, and self-contradiction. They are, above all, the works that are more interesting to read, teach, talk about.

### III

My second “story” of Keats, therefore, is quite simply (also quite remarkably) the story of Keats writing a reckonable number of poems of this sort of complexity—among them, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode to a Nightingale*, *To Autumn*, *Lamia*, the *Hyperion* fragments, and several sonnets—and of large numbers of readers from the 1850s to the present day finding them interesting, moving, and delightful. I do not mean to suggest that readers admire indeterminacy and the component qualities—uncertainty, ambiguity, contradiction, and so on—in the abstract. My point is that a poem's indeterminacy, uncertainty, and the rest make every individual reader's reading possible: in effect, the text of a complex poem validates what the reader wants to read in it. Thus for some readers, *The Eve of St. Agnes* has been (and still is) a poem about love, even specifically Keats's love for Fanny Brawne, while for others it is a poem about the authenticity of dreams, about stratagems, about wish-fulfillment, about artistic creativity, about Gothic literature, about family politics, about the crisis of feudalism, about escape, about critical interpretation, and so on and on.<sup>12</sup> As one can see even in the briefest sampling of the critical literature, there have been (and presumably will continue to be) many different explanations of what ails the knight-at-arms in *La Belle Dame*. There are multiple possibilities for interpreting each of the odes and the rest of the poems in the canonical list. The key to understanding the universality of Keats's appeal is the fact that in every case the text may be seen to support the interpretation, even when the interpretation stands in direct conflict with another interpretation based on exactly the same text.

What was absolutely necessary, then, was Keats's attainment of a large readership to make all this multiple interpreting possible; and he did this posthumously, chameleon-like, by being all things to all people who sought out his texts. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when biographical interest in writers was at an all-time high, Keats's fame got an enormous boost from the publication of Milnes's *Life, Letters, and Literary Remains*, in which many readers learned for the first time about the liveliness of the poet's personality, the heroism of his struggle to achieve something lasting in literature, the cruelty of the reviewers, and the tragic shortness of his life. Not long afterward, when first the Pre-Raphaelites and then the art-for-art's-sake enthusiasts made much of him, Keats represented their ideals on two counts: he filled poems such as *Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* with gorgeous, exquisitely detailed pictures that could be transferred, as it were, directly onto the painters' canvases, and he seemed to act as a theorist as well as a practitioner of aestheticism—in the famous exclamation to Benjamin Bailey, "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" for example, and his numerous affirmations of the importance of beauty over all other things.<sup>13</sup>

In the early decades of the twentieth century, when the philosophical and moral ideas of a writer were considered of prime importance (an era marked in Keats studies by Clarence Thorpe's *The Mind of John Keats*, 1926), the poet could again provide what was wanted, this time in the thematic seriousness of the *Hyperion* fragments and especially, again, in statements in his letters concerning such concepts as Negative Capability, life as a Mansion of Many Apartments, and the world as a Vale of Soul-making. In the mid-century heyday of New Criticism, Keats supplied poem after poem for "close readings" in the classrooms and the critical journals.<sup>14</sup> More recently, evidences of political and social concerns are among the prime critical desiderata, and again Keats has come through, in a Modern Language Association symposium on "Keats and Politics" (1984) and a spate of fresh books and articles on the topic by Daniel Watkins, Nicholas Roe, and others.<sup>15</sup>

Most important is the fact that all through these decades, as one set of values and emphases succeeded another, Keats has continued to be the author of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Hyperion*, *La Belle Dame*, *Lamia*, and the Great Odes—poems that seem open to every possible interpretation and therefore are eminently adaptable to whatever special interest or approach seeks them out. For biographical matter, there is the spectacle of Keats speaking personally to the Urn or the Nightingale, or figuring in love situations in the guise of Porphyro, the knight-at-arms, or Lycius in *Lamia*. For the art interests of the later nineteenth century, no writer created so many pictures



in poetry since Spenser and Shakespeare, and nobody so fervently expressed the love of beauty—beauty was truth itself at the end of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. For Matthew Arnold and all subsequent Arnoldians, the poems have been full of moral situations, and therefore moral ideas—especially in the numerous contrasts of human life with some hypothetical alternative. For the New Critics—and for generations of teachers and readers influenced by them—Keats’s complexity of language has provoked repeated investigation, analysis, and interpretive response. For the current concern with politics, consider just the tiny example of “peaceful citadel” in one of the emptied towns imagined in stanza four of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: the image joins the contrary notions of peace and war (a citadel is a military fortress) and has faint nonpastoral implications both for the religious activity of the townsfolk away on their sacrificial procession and, more generally, for the pastoral tranquility of Tempe and the Vales of Arcady (where, we already have heard, maidens “struggle to escape” the “mad pursuit” of men or gods). Just two words from the poem, “peaceful citadel” could be the starting point for an essay on (say) “The Ominous Politics of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.” This kind of interpretive plenitude—allowing the possibility of a critical essay for every two words of text, as it were—can illustrate what Keats has been for readers since the middle of the nineteenth century: a figure whose life, letters, and poems taken together are rich and varied enough to satisfy every idea of what a poet and poetry should be.

#### NOTES

1. For an overview of materials on the development of Keats’s reputation, see my “John Keats,” *The English Romantic Poets*, 711–16. The most useful collections of early reviews and other nineteenth-century comments are Donald H. Reiman, *The Romantics Reviewed*; Lewis M. Schwartz, *Keats Reviewed by His Contemporaries: A Collection of Notices for the Years 1816–1821* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1973); *KCH*, with a useful introduction by editor G. M. Matthews; and J. R. MacGillivray, “On the Development of Keats’ Reputation,” in *Keats: A Bibliography and Reference Guide with an Essay on Keats’ Reputation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1949). For early editions and commentary on Keats in the US, see Hyder E. Rollins, *Keats’ Reputation in America to 1848* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946); for his influence on Victorian poetry, George H. Ford, *Keats and the Victorians: A Study of His Influence and Rise to Fame 1821–1895*; and for early biographies, William H. Marquess, *Lives of the Poet: The First Century of Keats Biography*.

2. See the comprehensive account by Susan J. Wolfson, “Keats Enters History: Autopsy, *Adonais*, and the Fame of Keats.”

3. See John Kandl’s chapter in this volume.

4. Joseph Severn’s phrase, in a letter to Brown, 17 July 1821; *The Letters of Charles Armitage Brown*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 78.

5. Quotations are from the 2nd edition, 2 vols. (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), 1.407–43.

6. "The Galignani volume was [...] pirated in America, where various composite editions of Keats, reprinted or imitated from it [...] show clearly that in the decade from 1830 to 1840 he was much better known and more highly esteemed by the general reading public of the [American] East than by that of Great Britain" (Rollins, *Keats' Reputation*, 29). On its significance in the history of Keats's British reputation, see Joseph Grigely, *Textualterity: Art, Theory, and Textual Criticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 311–32.

7. Charles Armitage Brown, *Life of John Keats*, ed. Dorothy Hyde Bodurtha and Willard Bissell Pope (London: Oxford University Press, 1937). A slightly more accurate text from the same ms. is in *KC* 2.52–97.

8. MacGillivray, *Bibliography*, liv–lv.

9. My explanation of Keats's "canonical complexity" draws on my more detailed discussions: "Multiple Readers, Multiple Texts, Multiple Keats," and the last two chapters of *Reading "The Eve of St. Agnes": The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction*.

10. David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," *American Historical Review* 94 (1989) 598. Harlan draws on, among others, Frank Kermode and Wolfgang Iser, but his own definition is clearer and more comprehensive than what he quotes from them.

11. For the first 125 years of criticism, see Harvey T. Lyon, *Keats' Well-Read Urn: An Introduction to Literary Method* (New York: Henry Holt, 1958), and for 1820–1980, see Jack W. Rhodes, *Keats's Major Odes: An Annotated Bibliography of the Criticism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1984).

12. In *Reading "The Eve of St. Agnes,"* chapter 3, I expound fifty-nine different ways of interpreting the poem, a token of a theoretically infinite number of possible readings.

13. See his letters to Bailey, 22 November 1817 (*KL* 1.185); to his brothers, late December 1817 (1.194); to Reynolds, 9 April 1818 (1.266); to Woodhouse, 27 October 1818 (1.388); to George and Georgiana, 24 October 1818 (1.403, 404) and 31 December 1818 (2.19); to Fanny Brawne, February (?) 1820 (2.263).

14. As Stuart Sperry remarks, the Great Odes seem "by nature ideally suited to the kind of close analysis that was the radical innovation of the New Criticism" (*Keats the Poet*, 242).

15. The papers of the MLA session were collected by its chair, Susan J. Wolfson, for a forum in *Studies in Romanticism* (1986). See Daniel Watkins, *Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination* (1989), Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (1997), and the essays Roe edited in *Keats and History* (1994).



HELEN VENDLER

*John Keats:  
Perfecting the Sonnet*

The flower must drink the nature of the soil  
Before it can put forth its blossoming.  
(*Spenser, a jealous honorer of thine*, 5 February 1818)<sup>1</sup>

If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd,  
And, like Andromeda, the sonnet sweet  
Fetter'd, in spite of pain'd loveliness;  
Let us find out, if we must be constrain'd,  
Sandals more interwoven and complete  
To fit the naked foot of Poesy:  
Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress  
Of every chord, and see what may be gain'd  
By ear industrious, and attention meet;  
Misers of sound and syllable, no less  
Than Midas of his coinage, let us be  
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;  
So, if we may not let the muse be free,  
She will be bound with garlands of her own.  
(*On the Sonnet*, end April/early May 1819)

---

From *Coming of Age as a Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath*. © 2003 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

Keats enters the anthologies with a sonnet—*On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*—which has become the most famous of his early poems, and which will be the central subject of this essay. Keats is an example of the young poet who finds his voice by persistently composing in a single inherited form—in Keats's case, the sonnet—until he has made it his own. He is already thinking of this form as one of his chief fields of endeavor when, at twenty-one, he begins to assemble work for his first volume, the *Poems* published in March of 1817. In the table of contents of this volume, the verses are grouped by genre under three categories—"Poems," "Epistles," and "Sonnets"—among which sonnets are the dominant cluster: there are 21 of them in the book.<sup>2</sup>

By contrast, Keats's second volume, *Lamia and Other Poems*, issued in 1820, confines itself to narrative poems, ballads, and odes. It contains, surprisingly, no sonnets at all, even though Keats had finished and kept some 32 sonnets between 1817 and 1820. He had allowed six of those 32 sonnets to be published either in journals or in Leigh Hunt's yearly anthology called the *PocketBook*, but he suppressed even the already published sonnets from his 1820 volume. He no longer wished to be identified with sonnets: they were too acutely reminiscent of Leigh Hunt, from whose poetry he had distanced himself. Writing to Benjamin Robert Haydon in March 1818, he remarked, "It is a great Pity that People should by associating themselves with the fine[st] things, spoil them—Hunt has damned, Hampstead [and] Masks and Sonnets and italian tales" (L, I, 252). (Nonetheless, the volume of 1820 revealed what Keats had learned by writing sonnets, since the 10-line stanza he invents for several of the odes appends a Petrarchan sestet to a Shakespearean quatrain, hybridizing his two inherited sonnet forms.)<sup>3</sup>

When we look back to Keats's first sonnets, we see that they are confined to the Petrarchan form (if we except two very early experiments with hybrids). After much practice (summarized in my appendix on the pre-1817 sonnets at the end of this chapter), he composes the strikingly mature Petrarchan sonnet *On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*, which has become a canonical poem of British Romanticism. Some of the other sonnets in *Poems 1817*—such as *Keen, fitful gusts* and *On the Grasshopper and Cricket*—remain among Keats's most frequently anthologized poems, and I'll turn to them as context for *Chapman's Homer*. In spite of these Petrarchan successes, Keats does not remain content with what he has accomplished; in 1818, at twenty-two, he begins with a passion to compose Shakespearean sonnets, both in the received form and in variants of it that he invents (see the appended chronological chart of post-1817 composition).

We can say, then, that Keats finds himself as a young lyric poet through apprenticing himself to the Petrarchan sonnet. Though he never drops that form altogether, his principled adoption of Shakespearean tragic values after the 1818 publication of his long romance *Endymion* marks a distinct change in his moral (and consequently literary) affiliation. After 1818, Shakespeare moves into the ascendant—over Petrarch, Spenser, and Chatterton—and the Shakespearean sonnet becomes Keats's vehicle of choice (though even then, as my second epigraph shows, Keats continues to experiment in the sonnet form). Although the post-1817 work falls, strictly speaking, outside my aim of showing Keats's first perfect work, I'll briefly consider the manifesto-in-sonnet-form that records his turn to Shakespeare, *On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again*, because in that sonnet Keats judges, and criticizes, the earlier poems that are my subject here.

How does Keats come to his eventual superb ease of manner in the Petrarchan sonnet? To do so, he has to learn to use effectively the binary nature of the sonnet, to find accurate and emotionally authentic symbols of his feelings, to achieve a combination of intimacy and objectivity with respect to the outer world, to make words enact (rhythmically, syntactically, phonetically) their assertions, to minimize egotism, and to press the sonnet as far as it can go toward a personal style, on the one hand, and to an epic reach, on the other. Why did the form of the sonnet so attract Keats? What were Keats's errors and successes in the non-tragic mode of his early Petrarchan sonnet-practice? And how does he put himself to school so that he can—by twenty-one—write lasting poems in this form? Finally, why is he compelled to turn definitively, at twenty-two, to Shakespeare as his model?

Keats is drawn to the Petrarchan sonnet by the example of his early mentor, Leigh Hunt,<sup>4</sup> but unlike Hunt, he is imaginatively interested from the beginning in the inherent malleability of the form. His first extant sonnet (*On Peace*) grafts an irregular Petrarchan sestet onto a Shakespearean octave; it also violates the rules of the sonnet-form by continuing into the sestet a rhyme-sound found in the octave: *abab cdcd ddedee*. And although most of the lines of *On Peace* have five beats, Keats defies the normative pentameter by giving seven beats to line 9, and six beats to line 14. In short, Keats, unlike Hunt, launches himself into the form as into a workshop, never to cease experimenting.

The sonnet offers to Keats not only the variety of its forms, but also the attraction of both following (and revising) its perennial themes. While under Hunt's influence, Keats sometimes explores, in and out of sonnets, political subjects—Leigh Hunt's imprisonment, the 1660 Restoration, Kosciusko—but his most frequent early concerns remain those of the Renaissance sonnet: love, friendship, and art. We can see Keats thinking out his positions on these

intense topics throughout his sonnet work, often in the dialectic of inner debate prompted and seconded by the binary Petrarchan form.

Although Keats loved poetic narrative, especially its two extremes—the spare ballad and the digressive tale—he was perhaps intrinsically more a meditative poet than a narrative one, and the sonnet is irresistible as a flexible container for meditation. Keats knew the effort made by Milton and Wordsworth to modernize the sonnet and expand its formal and thematic range, and his ambition led him to continue the effort of those daunting poets. By the end of his life, he had succeeded in adding notably to the renewal of the sonnet, questioning its inherited neo-Platonic axioms, rearranging its rhymes, and humanizing its diction. How did he learn—in the first part of his short career—to be original in his treatment of the sonnet's themes, to become at home in its intellectual demands, and to modify its architectonic and rhyming forms?

I will begin at the worst and rise toward the best, though Keats's own early trajectory is one of ups and downs. He has resolved to master the Petrarchan form, and before the publication of his first Poems he has written and kept (as the appended chart of pre-1817 composition shows) 30 Petrarchan sonnets. As we read these chronologically, we see him struggling at first simply to obey the rules of the octave, to find four *a* rhymes and four *b* rhymes. Once he has found them, he is thrifty in recycling them: the *fair*, *air*, and *impair* of sonnet 2 (the numbers refer to the chronological list of Keats's sonnets in my appendix) turn up in exactly the same order in 5; the *fate* and *elate* of sonnet 4 turn up immediately in 5; the *rest* and *drest* of 7 reappear in 12; the *dell* and *swell* of 9 are put to use in 10. I could cite more, but the point is made.

Yet even as Keats relies on conventional rhymes, he begins to imagine better ones. The first few extant sonnets naturally make use of easily found and common monosyllables (such as *love* and *dove*), but as early as *Woman! when I behold thee* (sonnet 6) we can mark a striking advance, as Keats begins to search for interesting (that is, unpredictable) rhymes. The sestet rhymes in 6, for instance—none of them self-evident or foreseeable—are the unexpected *tender*, *adore*, *defender*, *Calidore*, *Leander*, and *yore*. But a more profound advance (because it is a moral one) is visible in 7 (*Light feet*, a poem about his susceptibility to women) in which Keats is looking for a rhyme for lark and mark. He could have found a way to use, as his final rhyme, something thematically suitable for this poem: *dark* or *hark*. Instead, the rhyme-word is—absurdly—shark. Keats chooses, crucially, to follow the path of his intended meaning even if it makes for incongruity. He has been speaking of his susceptibility to women's physical charm, which (he says in self-reproach) he cannot ignore, even when it is not “drest / In ... virtues

rare.” But when he finds intelligence as well, in the person of a woman whose talk does not bore or disgust him, his ear (he adds, finding his rhyme for *lark*), “is open like a greedy shark / To catch the tunings of a voice divine.” That greedy shark—preposterous as it is—testifies to Keats’s wish to tell the candid truth about his appetitiveness for the sound of beautiful and intelligent language. A less truthful or more timid poet would have canceled the shark in favor of a more decorous rhyme, but Keats refuses to sacrifice exactness to decorum.

The early sonnets are often insignificant, derivative, and sentimental. Yet already, in the first 15 sonnets that have come down to us, Keats has tried out as many as seven sonnet-types ( $H_s$ ,  $P_{2a}$ ,  $P_1$ ,  $P_{3a}$ ,  $P_{2a+}$ ,  $P_4$ , and  $H_p$ , to use the shorthand of my appended chart of his sonnet-types). His first known sonnet, as I’ve said, is a hybrid of Shakespearean and Petrarchan units; and within his prevalent Petrarchan mode, where the octave-form is inflexible, he assiduously varies, from sonnet to sonnet, the arrangement of syntax and rhyme in the sestet—a form of work invisible to the casual eye, but indispensable to the apprentice poet. He is also amassing experience in managing the articulation of octave to sestet: he may make the whole sonnet a single sentence, for example; or he may break it into asymmetrical or enjambed sentence-units that contest the rhyme-units of octave and sestet. These experiments are carried out in the service of feeling, as Keats searches for means to express a sequence of emotions, emotions that have been strong enough to compel him from silence into composition.

It matters to Keats not only what a sonnet says but the way it sounds as spoken utterance. But how, the young poet wonders, does one convey the feel of emotion in language? Some of his first experiments at expressive emotionality fail utterly. Distressed by Chatterton’s suicide at eighteen, Keats tries, unsuccessfully, to symbolize his pity by spastic exclamatory utterance:

O Chatterton! how very sad thy fate!  
 Dear child of sorrow! son of misery!  
 How soon the film of death obscur’d that eye,  
 Whence genius wildly flashed, and high debate!  
 How soon that voice, majestic and elate,  
 Melted in dying murmurs! Oh! how nigh  
 Was night to thy fair morning!  
 (*To Chatterton*, 1815)

The seven exclamation marks in as many lines surely suggest Keats’s strong response to Chatterton’s “sad fate,” but no syntactic means occurs to him



other than the exclamatory, and no semantic means other than the repetition of synonyms—*sad*, *sorrow*, *misery*. The early sonnets exhibit many such outbursts; in some, Keats varies the exclamation points with question marks, as in the rhetorical attitude struck about female beauty:

Ah! who can e'er forget so fair a being?  
 Who can forget her half retiring sweets?  
 God! she is like a milk-white lamb that bleats  
 For man's protection.  
 (*Ah, who can e'er forget* 1815–1816)

And these are among the sonnets Keats decided to *publish*, from which we can infer that there were worse ones, perhaps destroyed or never even committed to paper. As he wrote in 1816 to Charles Cowden Clarke, “I have copied out a sheet or two of Verses which I composed some time ago, and find so much to blame in them that the best part will go into the fire” (L, I, 113).

Keats's taste, at this point, is still so uncertain that he can produce, on the very same occasion, two sonnets of which one is good and the other bad. We are thereby led to ask what misstep leads astray the “false” twin. In the *Poems* of 1817, he published two sonnets written (according to Charles Cowden Clarke) close together, both of which recount his emotions as he walks home from an evening at Leigh Hunt's cottage. *On Leaving Some Friends at an Early Hour* is embarrassing in its adoption of images from conventional Christianity (an ideological system in which Keats has no spiritual or emotional investment). Inspired by his evening with Hunt, Keats desires (he says) to write poetry of a sort possible only to the angels:

Give me a golden pen, and let me lean  
 On heap'd up flowers, in regions clear, and far;  
 Bring me a tablet whiter than a star,  
 Or hand of hymning angel, when 'tis seen  
 The silver strings of heavenly harp atween:  
 And let there glide by many a pearly car,  
 Pink robes, and wavy hair, and diamond jar,  
 And half discovered wings.  
 (*On Leaving Some Friends at an Early Hour*,  
 October/November 1816)

This sonnet is written, culturally speaking, on automatic pilot, as the poet borrows Christian diction familiar to nineteenth-century readers in order to

illustrate the “height” for which his spirit is “contending” in its compositorial enthusiasm. The young poet endangers his art by trying to convey his inner aspiration in terms familiar to his audience rather than in terms authentic to himself.

The inept *On Leaving Some Friends* sprang from the same occasion as *Keen, fitful gusts are whisp’ring here and there*, a sonnet that is intensely personal both in its opening natural detail and in its closing literary evocations:

Keen, fitful gusts are whisp’ring here and there  
 Among the bushes half leafless, and dry;  
 The stars look very cold about the sky,  
 And I have many miles on foot to fare.  
 Yet feel I little of the cool bleak air,  
 Or of the dead leaves rustling drearily,  
 Or of those silver lamps that burn on high,  
 Or of the distance from home’s pleasant lair:  
 For I am brimfull of the friendliness  
 That in a little cottage I have found;  
 Of fair-hair’d Milton’s eloquent distress,  
 And all his love for gentle Lycid drown’d;  
 Of lovely Laura in her light green dress,  
 And faithful Petrarch gloriously crown’d.

There are some lapses here: the “silver lamps that burn on high” come from the general stock of the poetic warehouse, and a human home, for rhyme’s sake, is awkwardly referred to as a *lair* (although Keats tries to attenuate the usual connection of this word to poverty or predators by attaching the mitigating *pleasant*). There is a degree of deleted intellectuality, too, in the poem: Keats has suppressed both Milton’s excoriation in *Lycidas* of the corrupt clergy and Petrarch’s Christian remorse. For this very reason, though, we feel that we are hearing what an ardent young poet might be likely to remember of *Lycidas* and the *Canzoniere*.

Keats’s distinctive twinned adjectives in such phrases as *keen, fitful* gusts, *half-leafless and dry* bushes, and *cool bleak* air suggest an effort at a complex accuracy. These markedly original modifiers, engaging two senses at once, are a far cry from the other sonnet’s conventional single adjectives: *silver* strings, *pink* robes, *wavy* hair, and a *hymning* angel. In the “angelic” sonnet, there is no discoverable progression or alteration of thought, no fruitful use of the binary nature of the sonnet form: the octave wants a golden per and the company of angels, and the sestet merely reiterates those desires,

wanting to use the pen to “write down a line of glorious tone” and acknowledging that it is not good “to be alone.” *Keen, fitful gusts*, by contrast, fulfills the intrinsic duality of the Petrarchan sonnet in moving backwards in time from the cold outdoor octave to the warm indoor sestet, where both long-vanished characters in poems and the dead authors of those poems take on life.

The sestet-adjectives of *Keen, fitful gusts* are not double but single, because they deal not with contending personal perceptions, as the octave-adjectives do, but with received and known tradition: they tell of the aesthetic and ethical nature of literature. Keats’s predecessor-poets are humanly evoked in such characterizing epithets as *fair-hair’d* Milton and *faithful* Petrarch—persons respectively beautiful and constant: Milton possesses both eloquence (an aesthetic quality) and love of his dead friend (a moral quality); and Petrarch exhibits both fidelity (a moral quality) and—in being crowned with Apollo’s bays—aesthetic success. The persons whom the poets love are characterized by pastoral names and stereotypical ethical or aesthetic adjectives (*gentle Lycid* and *lovely Laura*). The words *friendliness*, *fair-hair’d*, and *faithful* make a meaningful alliterative chain linking the social cottage, the personal beauty of a precursor-poet, and the moral claim of strong emotions; and the individual affections memorialized in the literature of the past—Milton’s friendship, Petrarch’s love—find their analogue in the contemporary social friendliness of the sheltering cottage. The sensuous appeal of Milton’s and Petrarch’s poetry is recalled in the sonic liquidity and aesthetic innocence of the *berceuse* conveyed by the recurrently-rhyming—*cdcdcd*—and rhythmically-lulling sestet: Keats is “brimfull” “Of fair-hair’d Milton’s eloquent distress, / And all his love for gentle Lycid drown’d; / Of lovely Laura in her light green dress, / And faithful Petrarch gloriously crown’d.” (It is not surprising that the Keats in love with such liquid harmonies would at first resist the harsher and fiercer sonorities of *Lear*.)

Why—when he was able to compose the fine and touching sonnet *Keen, fitful gusts*—would Keats write *On Leaving Some Friends* (with its inauthentic Christianity), except that he was hoping to please, a reading public stocked with ready—made responses to angels with pink robes and wavy hair? Keats may have feared that general readers would not be moved by lines about how cold the stars looked to him or about literary exchange within a friend’s cottage. Because Keats’s own generosity of spirit made him instinctively reach out to his addressees—his brothers, Hunt, Reynolds, Haydon—he must have wished to create links with eventual readers outside his intimate acquaintance. Violating his own free-thinking convictions by making reference to Christian symbols was not, however, the way to reach an audience. He needed to find experiences authentic to himself but neither

eccentric or private, and to evoke them in images to which others could respond.

Keats accomplishes such a potential sharing of common feeling when, departing from simple replication of literary content (*lovely Laura* and *faithful Petrarch*), he describes the effect of reading, Homer—not merely by mentioning *deep-brow'd Homer* (in the manner of *fair-hair'd Milton*) but by finding three figures recognizable to an ordinary audience: the seasoned traveler sailing “round many western islands,” the astronomer (“some watcher of the skies”), and the explorer (“stout Cortez”). These figures bring the felt exaltation of literary discovery home to any reader. Keats, not possessing Greek, knows what it is to be ignorant: he himself, before reading Chapman, hadn't been able to sense the poetry of Homer. The exalted passage from ignorance to knowledge climaxing in the sestet's “wild surmise” of further exploration is assumed to be one that any reader will have analogously undergone. And in making this link with common experience, Keats writes the sonnet in which all his early practice culminates:

*On First Looking into Chapman's Homer*

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
 And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
 Round many western islands have I been  
 Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
 That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;  
 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:  
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
 When a new planet swims into his ken;  
 Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
 He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
 Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien.  
 (October 1816)<sup>5</sup>

The first thing that may strike us as a sign of structural mastery in this two-sentence sonnet is Keats's firm syntactic chain of carefully delineated tenses organizing the octave: “Much *have* I travell'd,” “Round ... islands *have* I been,” “Oft ... *had* I been told,” “Yet never *did* I breathe,” “Till I *heard* Chapman.” The suspense of the steady narrative progress through present-perfect and pluperfect forms causes the simple preterite of “Till I *heard*”

strike on the ear as if a voice had spoken aloud: and the change in aspect from the visual to the auditory creates a parallel impact. The strategic absence of a concessive in the first line (such as “*Though* I had travell’d in the realms of gold”) causes the first quatrain, framed in ceremonious end-stopped lines, to seem one of ripe, even complacent, Odyssean wisdom, in no danger of being surpassed: “Much have I travell’d ... And many goodly states and kingdoms seen.” Suspense enters with the mention of a rumored “wide expanse” which is ruled by Homer but which is surprisingly, as yet, unknown to the richly-traveled speaker. Keats’s deliberately vague descriptive phrase *wide expanse* provokes implicit questions: Is this “expanse” an island, a state, a kingdom? How big is “wide”? Can one go there? What does it feel like to arrive there?

The sestet’s preterite consequent—“Then *felt I*”—issues in the two similes that replace the octave’s metaphor of the sea-voyager through the known world. Once we have seen the first simile—that of the watcher of the skies perceiving a new planet—we might ask: “Why does the poem not end here? Why is a supplementary simile—that of ‘stout Cortez ... and all his men’—necessary?” If Keats had been satisfied with the adequacy of the astronomer, he could easily have elaborated that simile through four more lines. The *or* that introduces Keats’s subsequent, substitutive simile—“*Or* like stout Cortez”—together with the replacement of the single watcher by the plural company of Cortez “and all his men” suggests that there was something incomplete about the earlier image of the astronomer. “Then felt I like—” “Like this,” Keats says, and then corrects himself—“Or [rather] [more] like that.” Keats’s successive similes show him searching for a satisfyingly accurate rendering of the contour of his feelings. (Simile, unlike metaphor, always implies provisionality.)

It is our sense of Keats’s active search for the right simile—“What is reading Chapman’s Homer like?”—that organizes our response to his sestet. There was no active thinking necessary to summon angels with pink robes or even to recall Petrarch and Laura. Suddenly we discover, in the sestet of *Chapman’s Homer*, the sinewy Keats of the *Letters*—someone actively wrestling with experience, sorting it and charting it. The complete self-forgetfulness of the sestet—as the hitherto prominent “I” disappears entirely as a voiced pronoun after “Then felt I”—reflects Keats’s plunge into a treasury of generally available, rather than topically personal, life-images. As we see him first inventing, then dropping, the astronomer, we realize that this figure now seems to him too passive, too isolated, too impotent. The astronomer, alone in his prolonged and attentive vigil, does nothing physically active to gain his new knowledge: it is the planet, by its own energy, that “swims” into his ken. And, crucially, the astronomer cannot visit the “wide expanse” he beholds: it is inaccessible. Moreover, the observatory

experience is a solitary one: no one else is present as the watcher views the planet. These inadequacies of reference press Keats on to a second, more satisfactory representation of his new knowledge—a discovery that differs from his earlier acquisitions not in degree but in kind. As “stout Cortez” stares at the Pacific, the “expanse” of Homer’s poetry is shown to be not a land-mass—an island or a state comparable to those the seasoned traveler has already seen—but rather an entire ocean offering innumerable new shores and islands for future exploration. Moreover, “Cortez” makes the discovery in the company of “all his men,” just as Keats made his discovery of Homer not only through the society of those who had “oft” told him about Homer, but also with the aid of Chapman, the cultural mediator of an ancient text written in a foreign tongue. One makes literary discoveries not alone, but as a member of a transhistorical cultural company of writers, readers, and translators.

Remembering the opening ceremonious cadence of the much-traveled speaker of the octave, we are struck not only by the persistence of that undisturbed rhythm in the relatively unexcited pace of the two lines about the watcher of the skies, but also by the disruption of that placidity of rhythm in the subsequent, more accurate rendition of a grander—but nonetheless humanly explorable—plane of discovery. Keats opens his vista of a new world with three accented syllables containing strong vowels—“Or *like stout Cortez*”—and then, as astonishment at last finds its rhythmic equivalent, he unsettles the last three lines by a dash, a strong enjambment, another dash, and a rare first-foot comma.

The young Keats has learned, we see, to write a “perfect” Petrarchan sonnet, one that readers—to borrow a phrase from Milton—have not willingly let die. If the chief signs of poetic maturity include an invention of sharable symbols, the fit of syntax to narrative, the intellectual adequacy of image to experience, and a rhythmically convincing personal voice, then we can say that in October 1816, as he writes this sonnet, Keats has become mature.

The sestet of this sonnet rhymes in the same way—*cdcdcd*—as that of *Keen, fitful gusts*, but the broken syntax here is far from the childlike, if devoted, music representing “gentle Lycid” and “lovely Laura.” Keats’s literary appetite has moved from the beautiful to the arduous and the ardent, to a willingness to invoke and convey force rather than loveliness or pathos. Laura and Lycid remain in the realm of the beautiful; but “stout Cortez” as everyone has remarked, belongs to the epic sublime. The three words that most evoke the sublime in this sonnet are *eagle*, *star’d*, and *wild*. Keats had originally written *wond’ring eyes*, eyes which could still belong to the mild plane of pastoral. By revising the adjective to *eagle*, he leaves the ground

behind and rises to the heavens, not on eagle wings, but by the eagle's piercing sight.<sup>6</sup> We might have expected Cortez to *look* (by analogy to the title's *looking into* and the men's *look'd at*) but instead (and unbeautifully) Cortez fiercely *stare[s]*, a word of riveted fixation rather than of traveled contemplation or telescopic wonder. And although Cortez's men look at each other, they do so with a *wild* surmise, not a merely curious or satisfied one.

The young Keats can't, of course, maintain a sure grasp on the sublime. The "angelic" sonnet—a poem composed *after* the one on Chapman's Homer—betrays, as we've seen, a concession to sentimental Christian iconography. Still, in having dared the fierce and ambitious image of Cortez, Keats has readied himself for further searches in epic areas—those that will ultimately lead to the internal, but historical, tragic theater of the Titaness Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion*. Her contemplation of human grief will displace heroic masculine achievement as the site of the Keatsian sublime. As early as 1816 (but not in a sonnet) Keats had foreseen, and even acquiesced in, a commitment to tragedy, when for a brief three and a half lines in *Sleep and Poetry* (ll. 122–125) he glimpsed his future:

And can I ever bid these joys farewell?  
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,  
Where I may find the agonies, the strife  
Of human hearts.

We'll come in a moment to Keats's 1818 sonnet announcing his turn toward the tragic, but first I want to point out a second form of early sonnet-mastery that is as characteristic of Keats, in its own way, as his reach to the sublime in *Chapman's Homer*. I am referring to Keats's achievement, in some early sonnets, of a complex union—neither tragic nor comic—of intimacy, detached objectivity, and lightness of touch (qualities we have already seen in Milton's *L'Allegro*). Such aspects appear in the double adjectives of *Keen, fitful gusts*, but they achieve their early Keatsian summit in the little sonnet *On the Grasshopper and Cricket*, written in light-hearted competition with Leigh Hunt.<sup>7</sup>

Yeats once said that "gradual time's last gift" was "a written speech / Full of high laughter, loveliness and ease" (*Upon a House Shaken by the Land Agitation*). *On the Grasshopper and Cricket* exhibits that ultimate gift. Somber by the dread that is its backdrop (voiced in the premonitory words *dead* and *ceasing*), it is made light by its octave of summer luxury. Grave (in the sestet) by the cold words *lone* and *winter* and *silence*, it is made humorous by the sprightly verb *sbrills* and the unliterary *stove*. Written in a few brief minutes, it shows perfect and effortless grace. Only a poet who had practiced the form

of the sonnet until it became second nature—this is Keats’s twenty-sixth surviving sonnet—could spontaneously throw off *On the Grasshopper and Cricket*. But Hunt, too, had written sonnets with great frequency, and his sonnet fails. Hunt’s is a sonnet of the fancy, and Keats’s is a sonnet of the imagination.

*On the Grasshopper and Cricket* was composed on December 30, in the dead of winter, the time of silent frost and of *Il Penseroso*’s cricket on the hearth. But Keats doesn’t begin with the frost and the cricket, any more than he’ll begin the autumn ode with the stubble-plains that inspired it. Instead, his reparatory imagination, in which the seasonal cycle is always hovering, speeds forward from deprivation to plenitude; and just as he’ll begin *To Autumn* with the loaded apple trees and overbrimming honeycombs of late summer, so he begins this sonnet, haunted by the potential death of song, with the comic hops of the irrepressible Grasshopper:

*On the Grasshopper and Cricket*

The poetry of earth is never dead:  
 When all the birds are faint with the hot sun,  
 And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run  
 From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead;  
 That is the Grasshopper’s—he takes the lead  
 In summer luxury,—he has never done  
 With his delights; for when tired out with fun  
 He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.

Keats’s receptive absorption of natural phenomena sometimes seemed to him to signify indolence or passivity. But when it didn’t induce guilt, it gave acute enjoyment, nowhere more visible than in this lightly sketched sonnet, where Keats’s aesthetic maturity is shown by the absence of any straining after either largeness or coyness of effect. *On the Grasshopper* is, however mutedly, a poem facing terminal loss. The speaker has noticed, with apprehension, that the dawn chorus of birds has fallen silent, because it is high noon at high summer and the birds are hiding in “cooling trees.” A voice within him says, apprehensively, “The poetry of earth has died.” Searching round to rebut that voice, the poet declares, “No: noon has its music too: the birds may be silent, but I hear the grasshopper’s song.”

The conspicuous enjambments of lines 3–4, 5–6, 6–7, and even 7–8 mimic the successive leaps of the grasshopper’s springy travels. Keats has by now learned how to make syntax mimic physical motion, so that the phrasal movements of the sonnet wonderfully enact their own observations. The



motion tracked in the octave—after the initial proposition rebutting Keats’s presentiment that the poetry of earth might indeed be able to die—is that of the grasshopper’s hopping from hedge to hedge as he sings. Pulled by enjambment, we follow his hops in three successive voicings, followed by a fourth allowing him to rest: “That is the Grasshopper’s” [hop]—“he takes the lead / In summer luxury” [hop]—“he has never done / With his delights” [hop]—“for when tired out with fun / He rests.” The hedgehopping grasshopper moves horizontally, so the poet must afford him places to hop to. Keats therefore goes to work stationing both the planar and vertical elements of the landscape: he mentions trees, hedges, a new-mown mead, and a “pleasant” weed. By the end of the octave, each level of height has been established, from the floor of the mown meadow through the small verticality of a weed, to the higher reach of hedges, all of these lying below the higher trees, the home of the silent birds. (This compact three-dimensional scene-sketching will reach its imaginative perfection in the creation of the virtual bower in the *Nightingale* ode, where the speaker, unable to see in darkness, “guesses” each element surrounding him.) As we “run / From hedge to hedge” with the grasshopper, we intuit the successive loci of the poetry of earth as the grasshopper’s lively voice constitutes them by its emergence, and we participate in Keats’s gratitude that even when the birds fall silent the summer season has an intermittent voice, hitherto unnoticed, to offer the ear.

The poet repeats his initial rebuttal in a different form in the sestet, taking full advantage of the binary form offered by the Petrarchan sonnet, but playing with it. The opening line of the sestet seems merely to repeat the opening line of the octave, and we imagine that the sestet will be nothing more than a restating of the octave. Yet Keats uses the sestet powerfully, showing that the two apparently identical propositions rebut two very different threats. He had previously insisted that “The poetry of earth is never dead” in answer to the sinister inner interlocutor who has asserted that the summer silence means that the poetry of earth is now dead. The interlocutor now returns, but this time to rebut the cheerful octave with a second gloomy assertion resembling his first (“is dead”) but extending it over time (to “is ceasing”): “Well, even if the poetry of earth is not yet *entirely* dead, it is in the *process* of ceasing; when winter arrives there will be no songs, whether of birds or of grasshoppers.” “The poetry of earth is ceasing never”—Keats’s vigorous refutation of this second implied warning—is embodied in a second natural creature: the Miltonic cricket on the hearth. It is now winter; we are indoors; heat comes not from the natural sun, not even from a visible fire, but from the modern and prosaic stove; and the first enjambment in this part of the poem represents not the hops of a running

summer voice but the stealth of a silence far more deathly than the temporary hush of the birds:

The poetry of earth is ceasing never:  
 On a lone winter evening, when the frost  
 Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills  
 The Cricket's song.

Keats's presentation of the cricket is a suspended one, as he reserves the grammatical subject of the second clause, *the Cricket's song*, to the end. And by contrast to the octave's narrative, which takes place in a generalized season, the sestet offers a much briefer narrative, that of a single winter evening:

On a lone  
 winter evening,  
 when the frost  
 has wrought a silence,  
 the Cricket's song,  
 there shrills  
 from the stove

The syntax descends, word by word, to a nadir of cold silence, broken magically by the unexpected trill of the Cricket. This would be reason enough for relief, but the poem offers more than relief; it offers joy. The Cricket's song is made to be unceasing by constantly increasing not in volume or frequency but in "warmth": it is itself the spiritual heat-source of the winter room, just as the stove is the physical heat-source.

As if defending itself against the nay-saying of its invisible interlocutor, the poem in its octave had turned to gaiety and fancifulness as adornments to its calendrical objectivity; it had allowed itself the pleasant anthropomorphizing fictions that the birds are "faint" and that the grasshopper is "tired out with fun." But as fear returns to the poet, the sestet departs from fancifulness and modulates into gravity. Even if at one select summer moment one hears the grasshopper, and at another select winter moment one hears the cricket, these isolated instances by themselves can't prove the absolute *never* of the poet's two forceful rebuttals. Even the ever-amplifying warmth of the Cricket's song doesn't prove the unbreakable continuity of nature's music, reassuring though the progressive verb *increasing* and Keats's assertive *ever* (rhyming in defiant positivity against the rebutting *never*) may be. We've been promised, by the two propositions, a perpetual and unbroken constancy in the poetry of earth that we haven't yet

reached. We've seen two individual vignettes of beatitude, but nothing that joins them.

It is only at the last moment, as we become intimate with the sweet drowsiness of the youthful Keatsian imagination (which is nonetheless objectively depicted as belonging to a third-person *one*), that we find the uninterrupted circle of beatitude:

from the stove there shrills  
 The Cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,  
 And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,  
 The Grasshopper's among some grassy hills.

The objectivity of knowledge claimed by the propositional rebuttals opening both octave and sestet is not disturbed by this fantasy, so carefully pointed out as fantasy by *seems*, *drowsiness*, and *half lost*. This is a self-aware fancy, since the listener is only "half" lost; but it is a viable one because the unbroken circle of beatitude is, after all, a logical extrapolation—to every moment of the year—of the two already-bestowed revelations of music vanquishing silence, the summer one and the winter one. It is imagination—positing a natural identity of the two seasonal revelations—that closes the circle. The magical effect by which the phrase *grassy hills* repeats the sound of *Grasshopper* becomes the linguistic sign of the mellifluous continuability of the winter song into the summer one. The alliterative iteration makes—to the listener's dreamy solace—every moment in the year one of potential natural song. If it were not the July grasshopper, it could be the August bees; if it were not the December cricket, it could be the March whistle of the redbreast. The moral is one of faith and vigilance: listen and ye shall hear. But such a moral can never be pointed by objective attentiveness alone: it is the imagination and its dream that perform the extrapolatory revelation.

As we have seen, Keats has found a convincing, secular, and shareable sublime in *Chapman's Homer*, and a firm natural objectivity that allows room for fantasy, humor, and imagination in *On the Grasshopper and Cricket*. But what has been haunting him, as he said in *Sleep and Poetry*, is tragedy, which he has so far avoided in his sonnets. How can he incorporate the tragic into the sonnet? His acknowledgment of agony and strife appears in sonnet form only after the publication of the *Poems of 1817*. This turning point of his lyric theory comes on the 22nd of January, 1818, when he composes a sonnet on *King Lear*. In a letter written on the same day to Benjamin Bailey, he mentions in a single breath his brother Tom's continuing hemorrhages and the decision to embark on the sonnet: "My Brother Tom is getting stronger but his spitting of blood continues—I sat down to read King Lear yesterday

and felt the greatness of the thing up to the writing of a Sonnet preparatory thereto” (L, I, 212). Tom’s illness—he would die within the year—was bound to compel Keats’s imagination toward tragedy; or perhaps Tom’s plight reanimated in Keats memories of their mother’s death that enabled the admission of a tragic sense present since his boyhood but long repressed in his verse. On the same day as he writes to Bailey, he sends a letter to his brothers, in which he mentions *King Lear* in the context of a “gradual ripening” of his “intellectual powers”:

I think a little change has taken place in my intellect lately—I cannot bear to be uninterested or unemployed, I, who for so long a time, have been addicted to passiveness. Nothing is finer for the purposes of great productions, than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers—As an instance of this—observe—I sat down yesterday to read *King Lear* once again the thing appeared to demand the prologue of a Sonnet, I wrote it & began to read. (L, I, 214)

The sonnet on *Lear* marks the exact moment of Keats’s intellectual break with the Romance mode, the mode from which most of his earlier sonnets had sprung. On the wintry day of 22 January 1818, Keats is prompted, by his purposeful intent to reread *Lear*, to look back with hindsight at the state of mind in which he wrote his Petrarchan sonnets. *On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again*, a hybrid sonnet, aims its address successively toward two different muses. In the Petrarchan octave, Keats addresses the female muse of Spenserian Romance, bidding her adieu (in one of those many Keatsian adieux that culminate in the odes):<sup>8</sup>

O golden-tongued Romance, with serene lute!  
Fair plumed syren, queen of far-away!  
Leave melodizing on this wintry day,  
Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute.  
Adieu!

Keats here dismisses serenity, Faeryland, and the Muse in her female, eroticized form. He excuses his turn away from Romance with the explanation that he intends, for a second time, to confront the experience of reading *King Lear*—that play in which there is no justice, only suffering and its stricken obverse, joy. In the sonnet on Chapman, reading Homer was represented by similes of far cosmic seeing and superb oceanic finding; but the reading of Shakespearean tragedy demands of Keats not

provisional similes but permanent metaphors. In the terrifying first of these, he declares that he must “burn through” the play’s “fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion’d day”; and we learn later in the poem that he expects to be “consumed” in the mimetic fire of that reading. Keats’s first reading of *King Lear*, we gather, had been a reluctant one; resisting its anguish, he could not yield himself wholly to its searing power. Now, he resolves to submit himself voluntarily to the pyre. But his second metaphor remembers that the play is not only an ethical document, a fierce mimesis of racked life; it is also an aesthetic object that gives exquisite sensation, a bitter-sweet fruit whose taste he must humbly “assay.” Using a chiasmus (an *abba* semantic positioning), which is always the *figure* of forethought, of conscious arrangement (by contrast to the more “natural” *abab* linearity of the stream of consciousness), Keats balances the two metaphorical actions—respectively moral and aesthetic—that he must undertake on confronting the play. We see, in the chiasmus, *noun-verb-verb-noun*: the *dispute* that he must *burn through*, and the *assay* of its *bitter-sweet fruit*:

Adieu! for, once again, the fierce dispute  
 Betwixt damnation and impassion’d clay  
 Must I burn through: once more humbly assay  
 The bitter-sweet of this Shakspearean fruit.

To the Petrarchan octave bidding farewell to the female muse of Romance, Keats now appends a sestet that is rhymed according to the Shakespearean model, because it is addressed to the male muse he has newly adopted: Shakespeare, the King not of far-away but of the near at hand—Albion, Lear’s and Keats’s England. Surprisingly, there is a second (and plural, and perhaps implicitly female) addressee as well, the “clouds of Albion” who are characterized (with an allusion to the “onlie begetter” of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*) as the “Begetters of our deep eternal theme.” These clouds (like their counterparts in the odes on Indolence and on Melancholy) seem to stand for the transcendent and ever-nascent sorrow behind the eternal theme of tragedy; they breed perpetual tears. Earlier, reading had seemed to Keats comparable to exotic traveling in Grecian isles and uncharted continents, but now it becomes—in positive metaphor, rather than speculative simile—an uncertain wandering on Keats’s inherited native ground, the primal oak forest of Lear’s Druidic Britain:

Chief Poet! and ye clouds of Albion,  
 Begetters of our deep eternal theme!

When through the old oak forest I am gone,  
 Let me not wander in a barren dream.

Fearing to be lost, like an erring Spenserian character, in the forest of tragic apprehension, Keats hopes that something good will come from his purposeful rejection of Romance, the genre that had been the most congenial to his idealizing youthful imagination. The whole of the 1818 *Endymion* had been a defense of Romance; its very subtitle was *A Romance*. What can replace Romance and its fair plumes? Can the fire-consumed creature rise on different pinions?

But, when I am consumed in the fire,  
 Give me new phoenix wings to fly at my desire.

(We recall that the phoenix of Shakespeare's *The Phoenix and the Turtle* is male, and is therefore available to Keats as a self-image.) In spite of its commitment to Shakespearean tragedy, *On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again* is identifiable as an "early" poem because Keats still desires wings: he hasn't yet "moulted," hasn't given up wings for "patient sublunary legs" (To J. H. Reynolds, 11 July 1819: L, II, 128). Nonetheless, the poem acknowledges the inevitability of tragic experience, an acknowledgment thematically symbolized by the sonnet's explicit turn from Spenserian Romance to Shakespearean tragedy, and formally symbolized by the turn from a Petrarchan octave to a Shakespearean sestet.

Has the poet then absolutely repudiated Spenser's melodizing and the Petrarchan lute in his vow to taste the Shakespearean fruit, enter the Shakespearean forest, and burn in the Shakespearean fire? (By alliteration, Keats links the three words *fruit*, *forest*, and *fire* in a single Shakespearean cluster.) Keats's generosity of spirit toward his earlier poetic "Presiders" would forbid such a gesture of total exclusion. Petrarch, therefore, is granted the octave-rhymes; and, although Keats *rhymes* his sestet according to Shakespeare, he ends it with a line that *scans* according to Spenser. The hexameter that doses the sonnet—"Give me new phoenix wings / to fly at my desire"—looks back in homage to the hexameters with which Spenser ends his stanzas in *The Faerie Queene*.<sup>9</sup> We may take this 1818 sonnet on *Lear* as Keats's retrospective critique of his own early poems, including the Petrarchan sonnets. They looked to the far-away, and to serene melodizing, and to the dream-idealizations of Romance; they admitted neither dispute nor damnation nor fire; they did not want to see human beings as "clay," even if "impassioned clay." Their fruit was sweet rather than "bitter-sweet"; they did not demand of their reader that

he be consumed in entering their precincts. They chose habitable bowers or visionary peaks rather than forests of potential error. Keats's self-criticisms implicit in the sonnet on *Lear*, resembling those in his original Preface to *Endymion*, are harsh ones, but they are justified as he recognizes—in the presence of his dying brother Tom—the manifest discrepancy between his early knowledge of tragedy (in the premature deaths of his parents and baby brother Edward and the 1814 death of his beloved grandmother, who, when his mother left for a second marriage, raised him) and the willed exclusion of tragic events and emotions from most of his work before 1817. When we read the youthful Petrarchan sonnets, we must be aware of how intent they are on suppressing everything that Keats already bitterly knew of fatal accident, fatal illness, premature death, and permanent loss.

Keats will write greater poems than the 1817 sonnets, and his apprenticeship in the sonnet will go on to bolder formal explorations as he writes not only such powerful Shakespearean sonnets as *Bright star*, but also his brilliant irregular sonnets *To Sleep* and *If by dull rhymes*. What Wallace Stevens said about the writing of an extended poem—that it was like a prolonged serenade to a señorita, that all sorts of favors would drop from it—can equally be said of a long apprenticeship to a genre. In his early practice of the sonnet between 1814 and 1817, Keats grew up with respect to language, syntax, rhythm, rhyme, and architectonic form; finding boldness with Cortez and lightness with the grasshopper, locating distinctive adjectives for natural observation and persuasive tones for the intimacy of social warmth, using the binary form of the sonnet to good purpose (outdoors versus indoors, the known versus the new). Moreover, since he could learn from his mistakes, he found out that borrowing conventional symbols (whether patriotic, as in *To Kosciusko*, or religious, as in *On Leaving Some Friends*) was an impediment to truth of utterance. Most of all, he exercised a Shakespearean ardor in hunting down, by simile and metaphor, the fictive correlatives adequate to the particulars of his experience. And he found the metrical and syntactical means to match the dulcet rhythm of lovely Laura, the abrupt rhythm of Darien discovery, the buoyant rhythm of a grasshopper's hops, the chiasitic rhythm of *Lear's* double moral and aesthetic demand. Through his work on the early Petrarchan sonnets, he became the Keats we know. Another young poet might have remained content with the "perfect" sonnet on Homer. Keats's depth of heart and mind required that he go on to enter, within a year, the burning nest of the Phoenix to write the sonnet of Shakespearean fruit, and forest, and fire.

## NOTES

1. Keats's poems are cited and dated from *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978). Keats's letters are cited and dated from *The Letters of John Keats; 1814–1821*, ed. Hyder Rollins (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), abbreviated in the text as followed by the volume and page number.

2. One piece in Keats's first category, "Poems," is in fact a sequence of three sonnets, and the dedicatory poem to Leigh Hunt, Keats's literary benefactor, is also a sonnet, making 21 sonnets in all. The 17 numbered sonnets in the third group are not arranged in chronological order of composition: Keats set first the sonnet "To My Brother George," as a second, internal, familial dedication: "[W]hat, without the social thought of thee / Would be the wonders of the sky and sea?"

3. Although quatrain and sestet forms were essential to the odes, the Shakespearean couplet, it seems, was not in Keats's mind while composing them (though it may have influenced his invention of the magical retarding couplet-within-the-septet in *To Autumn*).

4. Keats's early practice follows Hunt, whose sonnets are all Petrarchan (though in the essay cited below, Hunt gives examples of other kinds: blank verse sonnets, "tailed" sonnets, Spenserian and Shakespearean sonnets, and so forth). Hunt had written sonnets, imitated by Keats, on Kosciusko, Haydon, and the Nile, among others; and he had played—but only once—with sonnet rhyme (rhyming an entire sonnet, the "Iterating Sonnet," on the single compound word "United States"). See Leigh Hunt, *Poetical Works*, ed. H. S. Milford (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 235–253. See also Hunt's "Essay on the Cultivation, History, and Varieties of the Species of Poem called the Sonnet" in *The Book of the Sonnet*, ed. Leigh Hunt and S. Adams Lee (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1867), 3–91.

5. Keats's correction of "low-brow'd" to "deep-brow'd" and his replacement of two vague draft lines by "Yet did I never breathe its pure serene" reflect his capacity for self-criticism even when he is writing a poem far above the level of most of its predecessors.

6. By raising the eyes, rather than the legs, to a given height, Keats can combine sobriety and "wingedness." He achieves the same effect in *To Autumn* when, in the last line, rather than saying that the gathering swallows twitter "from" the skies (thereby placing their spectator below them on the earth receiving their song), he says that they twitter "in" the skies (making the spectator lift his eyes to the place of their twittering).

7. For purposes of comparison, I cite the execrable poem by Hunt:

*To the Grasshopper and the Cricket*

Green little vaulter in the sunny grass,  
 Catching your heart up at the feel of June,  
 Sole voice that's heard amidst the lazy noon,  
 When ev'n the bees lag at the summoning brass;  
 And you, warm little housekeeper, who class  
 With those who think the candles come too soon,  
 Loving the fire, and with your tricksome tune  
 Nick the glad silent moments as they pass;  
 "O sweet and tiny cousins, that belong,



One to the fields, the other to the hearth,  
 Both have your sunshine; both, though small, are strong  
 At your clear hearts; and both were sent on earth  
 To sing in thoughtful ears this natural song—  
 In doors and out,—summer and winter,—Mirth.  
 (*Poetical Works*, 240)

8. Leigh Hunt had written a sonnet called *The Poets*, in which, asked the desert-island question, he chose Spenser over Shakespeare for solace in sorrow:

But which take with me, could I take but one?  
 Shakespeare,—as long as I was unoppressed  
 With the world's weight, making sad thoughts intenser;  
 But did I wish, out of the common sun,  
 To lay a wounded heart in leafy rest,  
 And dream of things far off and healing,—Spenser.  
 (*Poetical Works*, 239)

9. Although there are other sonnets by Keats that end in a hexameter (1, 13, and 57), it is here that the effect most seems to carry thematic meaning.

HAROLD BLOOM

*Afterthought*

John Keats is unique among all major poets since Shakespeare in that his consciousness is so profoundly normative; that is, it is so natural, sane, sympathetic, balanced, and equable, as to give us an example of what human life can be at its most wise and compassionate. A normative person is very rare, whether in life or in literature, and this rareness enhances Keats's value for us, as a poet and as a human being.

Keats died at twenty-five, and left us a truncated canon. His two major long poems—*Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*—are fragments, but they manifest a greatness that transcends his art in the Great Odes, the sonnets and major lyrics, and in *Lamia* and *The Eve of St Agnes*.

Here I desire only to note a few of the particular excellences of the Great Odes, and of the astonishing ballad, "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." The most famous of the Odes is "On a Grecian Urn," which has haunted poetic tradition down to its reappearance in Wallace Stevens's "The Poems of Our Climate," where Keats's powerful estrangement: "Thou, silent form, doth tease us out of thought/as doth eternity: Cold pastoral" is echoed as: "cold, a cold porcelain." It is strikingly bitter that Keats becomes more and more distant from what he contemplates upon the urn as the poem proceeds. This is akin to the transition from the last line of stanza VII to the opening of stanza VIII in the "Ode to a Nightingale." "Faery lands forlorn" leads to the

tolling of the word, “forlorn,” like a bell, as Keats is tolled back from the state of being one with the nightingale’s song to the isolation of “my sole self.”

I have a personal preference for the “Ode to Psyche” and the “Ode on Melancholy,” but would have to grant that the superb “To Autumn” is probably the most eminent of the Great Odes of Keats. But, in these poems, we choose among sublimities:

Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find  
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,  
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;

Keats’s harvest-girl, profoundly erotic, lingers half-way between Milton’s Eve and Tennyson’s Mariana. The influence of Keats has been enormous; he fostered not only Tennyson and the pre-Raphaelites, but rather more subtly helped to form Emily Dickinson’s oxymoronic rhetoric. Keats has remained a presence in subsequent American poetry from Trumbull Stickney, Wallace Stevens, and Hart Crane on to the remarkable Henri Cole, one of the most accomplished of our contemporary poets. In England, Keats fathered Wilfred Owen, the great poet of World War I, while in Ireland his effect lingered always upon William Butler Yeats.

In his closing days, Keats began a crucial transition from his agon with Milton and with Wordsworth to a larger, loving contest with Shakespeare. The sonnet, “On the Sea,” suggests *King Lear*: “When last the winds of Heaven were unbound,” while Keats’s final fragment could be inserted in many Shakespearean contexts and be altogether at home, in its power of apprehension and its eloquence:

This living hand, now warm and capable  
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold  
And in the icy silence of the tomb,  
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights  
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood  
So in my veins red life might stream again,  
And thou be conscience-calm’d—see here it is—  
I hold it towards you.

## *Chronology*

- 1795 John Keats is born in London, October 31.
- 1803 Keats attends John Clarke's school at Enfield.
- 1804 His father, Thomas Keats, dies. His mother remarries.
- 1810 Keats's mother dies of tuberculosis.
- 1811 Keats leaves Enfield School and begins an apprenticeship with a surgeon, Thomas Hammond, at Edmonton.
- 1814 Keats writes 'Imitation of Spenser,' his first known poem.
- 1815 Keats attends Guy's Hospital as a medical student.
- 1816 "On Solitude" published in the *Examiner*. In July, he passes his examinations, thus making him eligible to practice as an apothecary. In October, he writes "On First looking into Chapman's Homer." He chooses to discard medicine in favor of poetry.
- 1817 His first volume, *Poems*, is published in March. He moves to No. 1 Well Walk Way with his brothers, George and Tom. In April, he travels to the Isle of Wight and begins *Endymion* which he finishes in November, after his return. In December, he meets William Wordsworth.
- 1818 Begins the year listening to lectures by William Hazlitt. His brother Tom begins to show signs of tuberculosis. In February, he begins "Isabella, or The Poet of Basil." *Endymion* published in March. In May, Keats's brother George marries and emigrates to America. Keats spends the

summer touring the Lake District and Scotland with his friend, Charles Brown. In the fall, Tory periodicals shred *Endymion*. Keats meets Fanny Brawne, begins 'Hyperion.' December 1, brother Tom dies. Keats goes to live with Brown.

1819 In January, he writes "The Eve of St. Agnes." Between April and May, he writes "La Belle Dame sans Merci," "To A Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "On Melancholy." During the summer, he travels back to the Isle of Wight and writes a play, *Otho the Great*, and finishes half of "Lamia." In September, he is at Winchester with Charles Brown and he finishes "Lamia," revises "Hyperion," and writes "To Autumn."

1820 In February, Keats has a severe hemorrhage, and his health begins a steady decline, culminating in tuberculosis by the year's end. He becomes engaged to Fanny Brawne. His final volume, *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes and Other Poems* is published in July. He winters in Italy by order of the doctor, accompanied by his friend, Joseph Severn. They arrive at Naples and move to Rome in November where they stay at the Piazza di Spagna.

1821 February 23—Keats dies at 11 pm. He is buried in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome.

## *Contributors*

HAROLD BLOOM is Sterling Professor of the Humanities at Yale University. He is the author of 30 books, including *Shelley's Mythmaking* (1959), *The Visionary Company* (1961), *Blake's Apocalypse* (1963), *Yeats* (1970), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), *Agon: Toward a Theory of Revisionism* (1982), *The American Religion* (1992), *The Western Canon* (1994), and *Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* (1996). *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) sets forth Professor Bloom's provocative theory of the literary relationships between the great writers and their predecessors. His most recent books include *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998), a 1998 National Book Award finalist, *How to Read and Why* (2000), *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (2002), *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (2003), *Where Shall Wisdom Be Found?* (2004), and *Jesus and Yahweh: The Names Divine* (2005). In 1999, Professor Bloom received the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Criticism. He has also received the International Prize of Catalonia, the Alfonso Reyes Prize of Mexico, and the Hans Christian Andersen Bicentennial Prize of Denmark.

HELEN VENDLER is the A. Kingsley Porter University Professor at Harvard University, where she received her Ph.D. in English and American literature in 1960. Her recent books include *Coming of Age as a Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath; Seamus Heaney; The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets; The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham; The Given and the Made: Lowell,*

*Berryman, Dove, Graham, and Soul Says: On Recent Poetry, Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats and Invisible Listeners: Lyric Intimacy in Herbert, Whitman and Ashberry.*

JEFFREY BAKER is the author of *Time and Mind in Wordsworth's Poetry* and *John Keats and Symbolism*. He has served as a professor of English at St. Francis Xavier University.

THERESA M. KELLEY is the Marjorie and Lorin Tiefenthaler Professor of English at University of Wisconsin-Madison. She is the author of *Reinventing Allegory* and *Wordsworth's Revisionary Aesthetics*.

MARJORIE LEVINSON is a professor of English at University of Michigan. Her books include *The Romantic Fragment Poem: Critique of a Form*, *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems* and *Keats' Life of Allegory: Origins of a Style*.

ANDREW BENNETT is the author of *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* and *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing*.

GRANT F. SCOTT is professor of English at Muhlenberg College. He is the editor of *Joseph Severn: Letters and Memoirs* and *Selected Letters of John Keats* and the author of *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis and the Visual Arts*

NICHOLAS ROE is professor of English at the University of St Andrews. He is the author of several books including *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, *Wordsworth and Coleridge. The Radical Years*, and *Fiery Heart: The First Life of Leigh Hunt*.

JACK STILLINGER is the author of *Multiple Authorship and the Myth of Solitary Genius*, *Reading "The Eve of St. Agnes": The Multiples of Complex Literary Transaction*, and *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*, among many others. Stillinger is a professor in the University of Illinois's Center for Advanced Study and received the 1986 Keats-Shelley Association's Distinguished Scholar Award.

## *Bibliography*

- Alwes, Karla. "Moneta and Ceres: The Final Relationship Between Keats and the Imagination." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. 43:2 (Sept. 1988): pp. 195–219.
- Baker, Jeffrey. *John Keats and Symbolism*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.
- Banerjee, Jacqueline. "Mending the Butterfly: The New Historicism of Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes.'" *College English*. 57:5 (Sept. 1995): pp. 529–545.
- Barfoot, C.C. *Victorian Keats and Romantic Carlyle: The Fusions and Confusions of Literary Periods*. Atlanta: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1999.
- Bennett, Andrew. *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing*. Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Brinks, Ellen. "The Male Romantic Poet as Gothic Subject: Keats's Hyperion and The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream." *Nineteenth Century Literature*. 54:4 (March 2000): pp. 427–454.
- Brotemarkle, Diane. *Imagination and Myths in John Keats's Poetry*. San Francisco: Mellon Research University Press, 1993.
- Christensen, Allan C., Lilla Maria Crisafulli Jones, Giuseppe Galigani, Anthony L. Johnson, eds. *The Challenge of Keats: Bicentenary Essays: 1795–1995*. Atlanta: Editions Rodopi B.V., 2000.
- Cox, Jeffrey N. *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt, and their Circle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- Cronin, Richard. "Keats and the Politics of Cockney Style." *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*. 36:4 (Autumn 1996): pp. 785–806



- De Almeida, Hermione. *Romantic Medicine*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- De Almeida, Hermione, ed. *Critical Essays on John Keats*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1990.
- Evert, Walter H. and Jack W. Rhodes, eds. *Approaches to Teaching Keats's Poetry*. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1991.
- Gallant, Christine. *Keats and Romantic Celticism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Harding, Anthony John. *The Reception of Myth in English Romanticism*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995
- Havercamp, Anselm. "Mourning Becomes Melancholia: A Muse Deconstructed: Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy.'" *New Literary History*. 21:3 (Spring 1990): 693–706.
- Hecht, Jamey. "Scarcity and Poetic Election in Two Sonnets of John Keats." *ELH*. 61:1 (Spring 1994): pp. 103–120.
- Heinzelman, Kurt. "Self-Interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats's Isabella." *ELH*. 55:1 (Spring 1988): pp. 159–193.
- Hoagwood, Terence Allen. "Keats and Social Context: Lamia." *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*. 29:4 (Autumn 1989): pp. 675–697.
- Hoeveler, Diane Long. "Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats's Isabella." *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. 49:3 (Dec. 1994): pp. 321–338.
- Lau, Beth. *Keats's Paradise Lost*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998.
- Levinson, Marjorie. *Keat's Life of Allegory: the Origins of a Style*. New York: Blackwell, 1988
- Marquess, William Henry. *Lives of the Poet: the First Century of Keats Biography*. University Park, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1985.
- Mauro, Jason. "The Shape of Despair: Structure and Vision in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. 52:3 (Dec. 1997): pp. 289–301.
- McFarland, Thomas. *The Masks of Keats: The Endeavour of a Poet*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Mellor, Anne Kostelanetz. *Romanticism and Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1993
- Minahan, John A. *Word Like a Bell: John Keats, Music and the Romantic Poet*. Kent, OH: The Kent State University Press, 1992.

- Mitchell, Thomas R. "Keats's 'Outlawry' in 'Robin Hood'." *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*. 34:4 (Autumn 1994): pp. 753–769.
- Mizukoshi, Ayumi. *Keats, Hunt and the Aesthetics of Pleasure*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.
- Motion, Andrew. *Keats*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1997.
- Najarian, James. "'Greater Love': Wilfred Owen, Keats, and a Tradition of Desire." *Twentieth Century Literature*. Vol. 47, No. 1 (Spring 2001): pp. 20–38.
- O'Neill, Michael. *Keats: Bicentenary Readings*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.
- O'Rourke, James L. *Keats's Odes and Contemporary Criticism*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998.
- Rajan, Tilottama. "Keats, Poetry, and 'The Absence of the Work'." *Modern Philology*. 95:3 (February 1998): pp. 334–351.
- Reed, Thomas A. "Keats and the Gregarious Advance of Intellect in Hyperion." *ELH*. 55:1 (Spring 1988): pp. 195–232.
- Roe, Nicholas. *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.
- Roe, Nicholas, ed. *Keats and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Sandy, Mark. *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2005.
- Scott, Grant F. *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts*. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994.
- Scott, Grant F. "The Muse in Chains: Keats, Durer, and the Politics of Form." *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900*. 34:4 (Autumn 1994): pp. 771–793.
- Sider, Michael J. *The Dialogic Keats: Time and History in the Major Poems*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1998.
- Stewart, Susan. "Lyric Possession." *Critical Inquiry*. 22:1 (Autumn 1995): pp. 34–63.
- Turley, Richard Marggraf. *Keats's Boyish Imagination*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Vendler, Helen. *Coming of Age as a Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003, pp. 43–67.
- . *The Odes of John Keats*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983, pp.48–70.
- Whale, John. *John Keats*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

- White, Keith D. *John Keats and the Loss of Romantic Innocence*. Atlanta, GA: Editions Rodopi B.V., 1996.
- Wolfson, Susan J., ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

## *Acknowledgments*

“Tuneless Numbers: The Ode to Psyche” reprinted by permission of the publishers from *The Odes of John Keats* by Helen Vendler, pp. 48–70, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College.

“Nightingale and Melancholy” by Jeffrey Baker. From *John Keats and Symbolism*, pp. 134–166. © 1984 by The Harvester Press. Reprinted by permission of Palgrave Macmillan.

“Poetics and the Politics of Reception: Keats’s ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’” by Theresa M. Kelley. From *ELH* 54, 2 (Summer 1987), pp. 333–362. © 1987 by The Johns Hopkins University Press. Reprinted by permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press.

“‘Hyperion’ and ‘The Fall of Hyperion’” by Marjorie Levinson. From *Keats’s Life of Allegory: The Origins of Style*, pp. 191–226. © 1988 by Basil Blackwell. Reprinted by permission.

“‘The Eve of St Agnes’” by Andrew Bennett. From *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing*, pp. 96–112. © 1994 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted by permission.

“Keats and the Urn.” In *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts*, pp. 119–150. © 1994 by Grant F. Scott. Reprinted by permission of University Press of New England, Hanover, NH.

“Lisping Seditious: *Poems, Endymion, and the Poetics of Dissent*” by Nicholas Roe. From *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, pp. 202–229. © 1997 by Oxford University Press. Reprinted by permission.

“The ‘story’ of Keats” by Jack Stillinger, From *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, Susan J. Wolfson, ed., pp. 246–260. © 2001 by Cambridge University Press. Reprinted by permission.

“John Keats: Perfecting the Sonnet” reprinted by permission of the publisher from *Coming of Age as a Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath* by Helen Vendler, pp. 43–67, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, Copyright © 2003 by the Presidents and Fellows of Harvard College.

Every effort has been made to contact the owners of copyrighted material and secure copyright permission. Articles appearing in this volume generally appear much as they did in their original publication with few or no editorial changes. Those interested in locating the original source will find bibliographic information in the bibliography and acknowledgments sections of this volume.

## Index

- Abrams, M.H., 9  
Addison, Joseph, 84  
“Adonais” (Shelley), 2, 206  
    Keats in, 211, 214–15, 218  
*Anatomy of Melancholy, The*  
    (Burton), 59, 63, 76, 125  
Arnold, Matthew, 207  
    Keats’s influence on, 3, 216, 224
- Bailey, Benjamin  
    Keats’s letters to, 186–88, 223,  
    243
- Baker, Jeffrey, 254  
    on biblical associations in “Ode  
    on Melancholy,” 37–65  
    on biblical associations in “Ode  
    to a Nightingale,”  
    37–65  
    on echoes of *The Anatomy of*  
    *Melancholy* in Keats’s poetry,  
    59, 63
- Bakhtin, Mikhail, 72  
Barnard, John, 144  
Bate, W.J.  
    on “Hyperion,” 108  
    *John Keats*, 1, 3–4, 6–7, 10–11,  
    24  
    on “Ode to a Nightingale,”  
    38–40
- Beaujour, Michel, 130
- “Before MCMXIV” (Betjeman),  
    194  
“Belle Dame sans Merci, La”  
    belle dame figure, 67–76  
    capture and estrangement in, 67  
    consciousness, 68  
    death theme in, 75–76  
    human fears in, 70  
    imagination in, 100  
    knight in, 67, 70–71, 73–77,  
    222–23  
    language in, 77, 85–86, 139  
    male chorus in, 67, 73, 76  
    mythology in, 73, 106–7,  
    122–23  
    narrator, 70–71, 73–74, 171, 249  
    romantic literary politics in,  
    67–96  
    sexual implications in, 71, 76,  
    78, 86  
    Spenserian allegory in, 67–96  
    style of, 68, 106, 109, 222–23  
    versions, 69–71, 74, 76, 78–79,  
    91–96, 99, 101
- Bennett, Andrew, 254  
    on hazardous magic of “The  
    Eve of St Agnes,” 129–48
- Beppo* (Byron), 195  
Betjeman, John  
    “Before MCMXIV,” 194

- Bewell, Alan, 102
- Bible  
 and immortality, 40  
 poetic tradition of, 6–7  
 story of Ruth in, 52–54
- Blake, William, 6  
 imagination, 4, 6–8, 11  
 influence of, 5  
*Milton*, 1–2  
 transitional symbols, 113
- Bleak House* (Dickens), 206
- Bloom, Harold, 98, 253  
 on Keats's artistry in Great Odes, 249–50  
 on Keats compared to Milton and Wordsworth, 1–11  
 on "Ode to a Nightingale," 55  
*The Visionary Company*, 23
- Brawne, Fanny, 56  
 inspiration for "Ode to Psyche," 28–29  
 Keats's love for, 104, 123, 215, 222  
 letters to, 70, 77, 212
- Brooks, Cleanth, 149  
 on "Ode on Melancholy," 60  
 on "Ode to a Nightingale," 39
- Brown, Charles  
 on "La Belle Dame sans Merci," 69, 74  
 on Keats, 213–16, 219
- Burdon, Richard  
 "Parthenon," 153–54
- Burke, Edmund, 204
- Burton, Robert  
*The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 59, 63, 76, 125
- Bush, Douglas  
 on "Ode to a Nightingale," 47, 50
- Byrom, John  
 "Verses Written under a Print, Representing the Salutation of the Blessed Virgin," 152
- Byron, Lord, 107  
*Beppo*, 195  
*Childe Harold*, 198  
*Don Juan*, 211  
 irony of, 30  
 on Keats, 77, 111, 123, 138, 204, 206  
 "Second Letter on Bowles's Strictures," 196  
 "Calidore," 189
- Cambridge, Richard  
 "On Painting; Addressed to Mr. Patch, a Celebrated Picture Cleaner," 152
- "Cap and Bells, The"  
 Hermes in, 104
- Carlyle, Thomas  
 on Keats, 77  
*Castle of Indolence* (Thomson), 169
- Chartier, Alain, 70, 74, 85
- Chatterton, Thomas, 107, 110, 217  
 suicide, 231
- Chaucer, Geoffrey, 58, 77, 134, 191, 217
- Childe Harold* (Byron), 198
- Chinnery, George Robert  
 "The Statue of the Dying Gladiator," 153
- Christianity  
 Christ's suffering, 59–60  
 and Keats, 16, 28–29, 58–59, 187, 233–34  
 mysteries, 58  
 rosary images, 57–61
- Chronology, 251–52
- Clarke, Charles Cowden, 232

- “Coalition between Poetry and Painting” (Lessing), 158–59
- Cockney style  
in Keats’s early poems, 67–69, 74, 77–78, 80, 82, 84, 86, 185–91, 194–97, 204–5, 213, 218
- Cole, Henri, 250
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 201, 203  
ballads, 74  
imagination, 4, 11, 217  
and Romanticism, 67
- Collins, William  
“Ode on the Poetical Character,” 4–5
- Colvin, Sidney, 216
- Cox, Jane, 62
- Crane, Hart, 250
- Crocker, John  
review of *Endymion*, 79, 84, 201, 213
- Dacre, Charlotte  
*Zofloya*, 198
- Dante  
influence of, 2  
influence on *The Fall of Hyperion*, 97–128
- Death, Keats, 212, 214–15, 249
- de Brosses, Charles  
on fetishism, 71
- de Man, Paul, 123–24
- Descriptive Sketches* (Wordsworth), 198
- Dickens, Charles  
*Bleak House*, 206
- Dickinson, Emily, 250
- Dictionary of the English Language* (Johnson), 200, 205
- Dilke, Charles, 215
- Don Juan* (Byron), 211
- Donne, John, 56, 60
- Dyer, John  
“An Epistle to a Famous Painter,” 152
- Education, Keats, 211–13, 215
- Eliot, George, 54
- Eliot, T.S., 166
- Endymion*  
book 3, 185–87  
honey-feel of bliss, 77, 79  
mythology in, 19, 198  
politics of, 185–210, 213  
publication, 188, 198  
reviews of, 75, 79, 81–85, 138, 185–88, 198–99, 201, 213–14, 217, 245–46  
spiritual and physical style of, 27  
style of, 2
- “Epistle to a Famous Painter, An” (Dyer), 152
- “Epistle to J.H. Reynolds,” 163–65, 168
- “Epistle: To a Lady” (Pope), 152
- Evening Walk, An* (Wordsworth), 198
- Evert, Walter  
on “Ode to a Nightingale,” 46, 49
- “Eve of St Agnes, The”  
Angela in, 132  
Bertha in, 219  
criticism, 130  
desires in, 129–30, 137, 143  
double plotting in, 129–31  
dream in, 111, 131–32, 135, 222  
forepleasure of, 110  
hazardous magic of, 129–48  
“honey” in, 78–79  
imagination in, 100, 125, 135  
imagery, 134, 138, 141



- language of, 129, 135–36,  
 138–39  
 Madeline in, 130–36, 138–43,  
 220  
 narrative, 129–31, 133–36,  
 138–40, 142, 164, 249  
 Porphyro in, 129–37, 139–43,  
 219–20, 223  
 sight-lines in, 133  
 tensions in, 106  
 vision in, 129, 130–31, 135, 141,  
 143–44  
 writing of, 101, 214, 222–23  
*Excursion, The* (Wordsworth)  
 mythology in, 19, 51  
  
*Faerie Queene, The* (Spenser), 70  
 allegory, 74–75, 245  
 “Fall of Hyperion, The”  
 abandonment of, 122–24  
 allegory, 102  
 consciousness in, 8–9, 11, 121,  
 124  
 Dante’s influence on, 97–128  
 irresolution of, 98–99, 101, 116  
 Milton’s influence on, 98–100  
 Moneta in, 8–10, 22, 27, 30,  
 118–21, 238  
 mythology of, 107, 110–11  
 narrative, 103, 108, 111, 117,  
 120, 124–25, 249  
 religious language in, 29  
 rosy sanctuary in, 22–23  
 sensibility of a poet in, 37  
 shrines of pleasure in, 9  
 solitary sublimities in,  
 27  
 structure, 98, 106–7  
 style of, 2–4, 100  
 Titanic-Olympian struggle  
 theme in, 99, 103  
  
 Wordsworth influence on,  
 97–128  
 writing of, 97, 100–1, 212  
 “Fancy”  
 Fancy in, 24, 26, 31–32  
 language of, 31  
 physical sensation in, 14  
*Fate of the Butterfly, or Muiopotmos,*  
*The* (Spenser), 81  
 Finney, Claude  
 on “Ode to a Nightingale,” 52  
 Fitzgerald, F. Scott, 150  
 “Flour and the Leafe, The”  
 praise of, 77  
 Fogle, Richard Harte  
 on “Ode to a Nightingale,” 39  
 “Fragment of Castle-builder,” 164  
 Freud, Sigmund, 151  
 on fetishism, 71  
*From Honey to Ashes* (Lévi-Strauss),  
 73  
  
 Garrod, H.W.  
 on “Ode to a Nightingale,” 53  
 Gilfillan, George, 134  
 Gillray, James, 202–3, 205  
 Gitting, Robert, 139  
 on “Ode on Melancholy,” 62–63  
 Gray, Thomas  
 “The Progress of Poesy,” 4  
  
 Hagstrum, Jean, 144  
 Hallam, Arthur, 215  
*Hamlet* (Shakespeare), 49, 55  
 speech, 80–81  
 Harlan, David, 217, 222  
 Hawthorne, Nathaniel  
*The Marble Faun*, 149  
 Haydon, Benjamin Robert, 228,  
 234  
 Haygarth, William, 154

- Hazlitt, William  
 and Keats, 4, 134, 201, 205  
*Heriocal Epistles* (Drayton), 76  
 Hessey, J.A., 213–14  
 Hilton, William  
*The Mermaid*, 76  
 Hinden, Michael, 165  
 Holland, J.  
 translations of “On the Picture  
 of Medea,” 155–58  
 Homer, 180, 235–36  
 Hone, William  
*Political House that Jack Built*,  
 205  
 Hopkins, Gerard Manley, 206  
 Howitt, William, 206  
 Hunt, Leigh, 3, 19  
 cockney school essays, 196–97  
 influence on Keats, 69–70,  
 79–83, 111, 134, 140, 162,  
 188–89, 192–94, 198, 205–6,  
 213, 218, 228–29, 232, 234  
*Lord Byron and Some of His  
 Contemporaries*, 214–15  
*The Story of Rimini*, 204  
 “To Leigh Hunt, Esq.,” 192  
 Young poets essay, 194–95, 201  
*Hymn to Heavenly Beauty* (Spenser),  
 18  
 “Hyperion”  
 alienated representation,  
 120–21, 123  
 allegory, 102  
 Apollo in, 37, 108, 111–15  
 consciousness of, 108, 119–22  
 criticism, 98–99  
 doubled sympathies in, 105, 118  
 language in, 122  
 Milton’s influence on, 1–2, 5,  
 97–128  
 mythology of, 107–9  
 narrative, 102–3, 105, 108,  
 112–13, 117–21, 123–25,  
 164, 249  
 pleasures, 113  
 satire in, 105  
 sensibility of poet in, 37  
 symbolism in, 119  
 Titanic-Olympian struggle  
 theme in, 99, 103, 105  
 wrestling Jacob in, 1  
 writing of, 78, 98–100, 108, 115,  
 122, 222–23  
 “In Imitation of Spenser,” 79  
 “Intimations of Immortality”  
 (Wordsworth), 16  
 Milton’s influence in, 24–25,  
 192  
 “Isabella, or The Poet of Basil,”  
 223  
 Isabella in, 219  
 Lorenzo in, 219  
 Jack, Ian  
 on “Ode on Melancholy,” 63  
 Jeffrey, Francis  
 review of “Endymion,” 84  
 Jeffrey, John, 81  
 Jennings, John (grandfather), 212  
*John Keats* (Bates)  
 accumulation of poetry in, 1,  
 3–4, 6–7, 10–11, 24  
 Johnson, Joseph, 202  
 Johnson, Samuel, 202  
*Dictionary of the English  
 Language*, 200, 205  
 “Jubilate Agno” (Smart), 4  
 Keach, William  
 review of “Endymion,” 84  
 Keats, George (brother), 11, 62

- honesty of, 215  
 letters to, 80–81, 83, 85, 189  
 Keats, Georgiana (sister-in-law)  
   letters to, 77, 80–81, 83, 85  
 Keats, Thomas (father), 212  
 Keats, Tom (brother)  
   death, 76, 100, 242–43  
 Kelley, Theresa M., 254  
   on allegory and politics in “La  
   Belle Dame sans Merci,”  
   67–96  
 Kermode, Frank, 9  
*King Lear* (Shakespeare), 243–46,  
   250  
 Koch, June, 103  
 Kuhn, Thomas, 166
- Lamb, Charles, 134, 203, 205  
 “Lamia”  
   allegory, 101  
   contemporary life, 105  
   doubled sympathies in, 105  
   Hermes in, 103–4, 107, 125,  
   220  
   humanity in, 39  
   love narrative, 39, 104–5, 123,  
   125, 249  
   Lycius in, 223  
   mythology of, 106–7  
   satire, 101, 103, 105  
   style of, 101, 106, 124–26  
   writing of, 97–98, 101, 222–23  
*Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes  
 and Other Poems*, 228  
*Laocoon* (Lessing), 150, 158  
*Last Poems and Plays* (Yeats), 5  
 Lawrence, D.H., 119  
 Leavis, F.R.  
   on “Ode on Melancholy,”  
   56–57, 63  
   on “Ode to a Nightingale,” 45
- Leicester, John, 76  
 Lessing, G.E., 157  
   “Coalition between Poetry and  
   Painting,” 158–59  
   *Laocoon*, 150, 158  
 Levinson, Marjorie, 254  
   on “Hyperion” and “The Fall of  
   Hyperion,” 97–128  
 Lévi-Strauss, Claude  
   *From Honey to Ashes*, 73  
   *The Raw and the Cooked*, 73  
 Lewis, C.S., 6  
*Life, Letters, and Literary Remains,  
 of John Keats* (Milnes), 216–17,  
   223  
 “Lines to Fanny”  
   imagination’s inferno in, 10  
 Livingstone, R., 97  
 Lockhart, John Gibson  
   review of *Endymion*, 213  
*Lord Byron and Some of His  
 Contemporaries* (Hunt), 214–15  
 Lukács, Georg  
   *History and Class Consciousness*,  
   97  
 “Lycidas” (Milton), 20–21, 233–35  
 Lyon, Harvey, 149  
*Lyrical Ballads* (Wordsworth), 74,  
   201  
   reviews of, 202
- Macaulay, Thomas Babington  
   “Pompeii,” 154  
 Macksey, Richard  
   on Keats’s Cockney style, 68  
*Marble Faun, The* (Hawthorne),  
   149  
 Masson, David, 79, 206–7  
 McGann, Jerome, 201  
   on “La Belle Dame sans Merci,”  
   69–70

- Mermaid, The* (Hilton), 76
- Milnes, Richard Monckton  
on Keats, 186, 215  
*Life, Letters, and Literary  
Remains, of John Keats*,  
216–17, 223
- Milton* (Blake)  
wrestling Jacob in, 1–2
- Milton, John  
influences of, 1–7, 9, 11, 16–18,  
20, 26, 28–29, 31, 79,  
98–100, 149, 190–91,  
217–18, 237–38, 250  
influence on *Hyperion*, 1–2, 5,  
97–128  
Keats compared to, 1–11  
“Lycidas,” 20–21, 233–35  
*Paradise Lost*, 24, 37, 99, 112,  
115, 118  
poetical life of, 1–2  
religious vocabulary of, 26,  
28–29, 31
- Mind of John Keats, The* (Thorpe),  
223
- Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*  
(Scott), 72
- Mitchell, W.J.T., 149, 157
- Moir, David Macbeth, 206
- Muir, Kenneth, 121
- “New Morality,” 203  
criticism, 204
- Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*  
(Stevens), 8  
vision in, 10
- “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” 149–84  
allegory, 150  
art in, 32–33, 86, 150–53,  
162–65, 167, 170–73,  
175–80, 220, 222–23, 249  
backgrounds to, 151–55  
beauty in, 116, 173, 176, 221  
bride, 28  
conclusion, 155  
criticism, 150–53, 178–79  
feminine power of, 151, 174,  
177  
freedom from the past in, 7  
green altar in, 22, 172, 220  
humor in, 7  
ironic humanism in, 38, 175  
language of, 20, 162, 176, 178,  
224  
narrative, 164–65, 168–69, 174,  
176, 178, 249  
sacrifice theme in, 154  
scrutiny in, 149  
solitary sublimities in, 27  
structure, 150, 169, 221–22  
symbolism in, 38–39  
tone of, 38
- “Ode on Indolence”  
allegory in, 15, 19, 21, 27  
Ambition in, 32  
dreamer in, 13  
language of, 13, 29–30, 32,  
150–51  
Love in, 18–19, 21, 26, 32  
mythology in, 19, 21  
narrative, 165, 169, 244  
pain and pleasure of thought in,  
24  
Poesy in, 18–19, 23, 31–32
- “Ode on Melancholy,” 250  
April shroud in, 60  
battle of words in, 56–57  
beauty images in, 61–64  
biblical associations in, 28,  
37–65  
consciousness in, 8–9, 27, 38,  
57, 61

- death in, 57  
 laughter in, 8  
 personal anguish in, 38, 59  
 romantic posture in, 55  
 rosary image in, 57–59, 61  
 structure of, 56, 244  
 symbolism in, 57  
 “Ode to a Nightingale,” 215  
   biblical associations in, 37–65  
   bird’s song in, 6  
   consciousness in, 38, 40, 45  
   death theme in, 7, 40–45,  
     47–49, 51, 53–54, 220  
   ideal and real world in, 38–42,  
     44, 47, 49–50, 54  
   imagery in, 47, 51  
   influence on, 4–5  
   language in, 47  
   narrative of, 190–91, 249  
   nightingale nature in, 42, 44,  
     48, 50–52, 55, 86, 110, 223,  
     240  
   personal anguish in, 38, 41–42  
   politics of, 191  
   regression of Psyche in, 32–33  
   Romantic tradition in, 7, 191  
   structure of, 38–39, 49, 222  
   symbolism in, 39–40, 45, 50–52  
 “Ode on the Poetical Character”  
   (Collins), 4–5  
 “Ode to Psyche,” 250  
   art in, 15, 23, 32–33  
   confrontation with past in, 3, 7  
   Cupid in, 15, 18–23, 25–26, 28,  
     30, 32  
   happiness in, 20, 22, 29  
   inspiration for, 28–29  
   language in, 18, 20, 29, 31  
   Maiden Thought in, 24, 28  
   Milton’s influence on, 16–17  
   mythology in, 20–22, 27  
   poet’s mind in, 11, 18  
   Psyche in, 14–23, 25–32, 57, 60,  
     111  
   rosy sanctuary in, 4–5, 22–23  
   triumph in, 3–4, 6  
   “On First looking into Chapman’s  
     Homer,” 228  
   narrative, 235–38, 242–43  
   “On the Grasshopper and Cricket”  
     narrative, 238–42  
   “On a Lady’s Picture” (Tickell),  
     152  
   “On a Leander,” 164  
   “On Leaving Some Friends at an  
     Early Hour,” 189  
   narrative, 246  
   religious themes in, 232–34  
   “On the Medusa of Leonardo da  
     Vinci in the Florentine Gallery”  
     (Shelley), 163  
   “On Michael Angelo’s Famous  
     Piece of the Crucifixion”  
     (Young), 152  
   “On Painting; Addressed to Mr.  
     Patch, a Celebrated Picture  
     Cleaner” (Cambridge), 152  
   “On Peace,” 229  
   “On Receiving a Curious Shell,”  
     189  
   “On Seeing the Elgin Marbles”  
     Elgin marbles in, 153, 162,  
     164–65, 175  
   “On Seeing the Picture of Miss R  
     G-N” (Smart), 152  
 Owen, Wilfred, 250  
  
 Paine, Thomas, 203  
*Paradise Lost* (Milton)  
   influence on Keats, 24, 37, 99,  
     112, 115, 118  
   “Parthenon” (Burdon), 153–54

- Pater, Walter, 8
- Patterson, Charles, 152
- “Per Amica Silentia Lunae” (Yeats), 5
- Perkins, David  
     on “Ode to a Nightingale,” 39–40, 46, 48, 52
- “Peter Bell” (Wordsworth), 85
- Petrarch  
     influence of, 229–31, 233–37, 240, 243–46
- Pettet, E.C.  
     on “Ode on Melancholy,” 55–56
- Phoenix and the Turtle, The* (Shakespeare), 245
- “Picture of Seneca Dying in a Bath: By Jordain” (Prior), 152
- Poems*  
     publication, 188–89, 191–92, 194, 212, 232, 242  
     reviews of, 198–99
- Political House that Jack Built* (Hone), 205
- “Pompeii” (Macaulay), 154
- Pope, Alexander, 178, 196, 217  
     “Epistle: To a Lady,” 152
- Popper, Karl  
     on “Ode to a Nightingale,” 39
- Prelude* (Wordsworth), 37
- Priestley, Joseph, 80
- Prior, Matthew  
     “Picture of Seneca Dying in a Bath: By Jordain,” 152
- “Progress of Poesy, The” (Gray), 4
- Prometheus Unbound* (Shelley, P.)  
     wrestling Jacob in, 1–2
- “Prothalamion” (Spenser), 6
- Ragussis, Michael, 144
- Ransom, John Crowe, 84
- Raw and the Cooked, The* (Lévi-Strauss), 73
- Recluse, The* (Wordsworth), 8  
     wrestling Jacob in, 1–2
- “Resolution and Independence” (Wordsworth), 6
- Reynolds, John Hamilton, 23, 85  
     on Keats, 194–95, 197, 201–2, 234, 245
- Richardson, Alan, 213
- Ricks, Christopher, 139
- Riffaterre, Michael, 138
- Robinson, Jeffrey Cane, 171
- Roe, Nicholas, 223, 254  
     on the politics of *Endymion*, 185–210
- Rollins, Hyder  
     on Keats, 80
- Romanticism  
     Coleridge, 67  
     and Keats, 5, 8–9, 11, 67–96, 106, 108, 111, 150, 191, 204, 218, 221, 228, 243–46  
     and literary politics, 67–96  
     Milton’s influence on, 1–2, 149, 166  
     in “Ode on Melancholy,” 55  
     in “Ode to a Nightingale,” 7
- Rossetti, William Michael  
     on Keats, 198, 216
- Rousseau, Jean Jacques, 206  
     “Sweet Sensibility,” 203
- Ryan, Robert, 187
- Scott, Grant F., 254  
     on “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” 149–84
- Scott, John, 134
- Scott, Walter  
     *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*, 72

- “Second Letter on Bowles’s  
 Strictures” (Byron), 196  
 Severn, Joseph, 215  
 Shakespeare, William, 2, 24  
   glow-worm, 18  
   *Hamlet*, 49, 55, 80–81  
   influence of, 4, 6, 31, 191, 204,  
     213, 216–18, 224, 228–29,  
     231, 249–50  
   *King Lear*, 243–46, 250  
   *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, 245  
 Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 84  
   “Adonais,” 2, 206, 211, 214–15,  
     218  
   imagination, 6–11, 171, 173  
   influence of, 5  
   Milton’s influence on, 1–3, 7  
   “On the Medusa of Leonardo  
   da Vinci in the Florentine  
   Gallery,” 163  
   *Prometheus Unbound*, 1–2  
   symbolism, 39  
   *The Witch of Atlas*, 2, 10  
 Simpson, David  
   study of fetishism, 72  
 “Sleep and Poetry,” 189  
   criticism, 194, 204, 238  
   epigraph for, 81  
   Flora in, 19  
   imagination, 189–90, 242  
   Pan in, 19  
 Smart, Christopher  
   “Jubilate Agno,” 4  
   “On Seeing the Picture of Miss  
   R-G-N,” 152  
 Smith, Alexander, 134  
 Smith, Olivia, 200  
 Smith, William, 216  
 Socrates  
   on immortality,  
     40–41  
 “Solitary Reaper” (Wordsworth), 53  
 Southey, Robert, 201, 203  
 “Specimen of an Induction,” 189  
 Spenser, Edmund, 4  
   allegory, 31, 67–96, 138  
   *The Faerie Queene*, 70, 74–75,  
     245  
   *The Fate of the Butterfly, or  
   Muiopotmos*, 81  
   *Hymn to Heavenly Beauty*, 18  
   influence on Keats, 189, 191,  
     217–19, 224, 227, 229, 243,  
     245  
   “Prothalamion,” 6  
 Sperry, Stuart  
   on “Ode on Melancholy,” 63  
 “Statue of the Dying Gladiator,  
 The” (Chinnery), 153  
 Stevens, Wallace  
   *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, 8,  
     10  
   on poetry, 7, 27, 249–50  
   *Two or Three Ideas*, 8  
 Stickney, Trumbull, 250  
 Stillinger, Jack, 254  
   on “La Belle Dame sans Merci,”  
     69  
   on John Keats’s career, 80,  
     211–25  
   on Keats’s Cockney style, 68,  
     78, 190  
   on “Ode to a Nightingale,”  
     38–40, 54  
   voyeurism of, 130–31  
*Story of Rimini, The* (Hunt), 204  
 “Suspension Bill, The,” 192–93  
 “Sweet Sensibility” (Rousseau), 203  
 Swinburne, Algernon, 206  
 Tate, Allen  
   on “Ode to a Nightingale,” 38, 40

- Taylor, John, 162, 214
- Tennyson, Alfred, 84  
Keats's influence on, 3, 215, 217, 250
- Thomson, James  
*Castle of Indolence*, 169
- Thorpe, Clarence  
*The Mind of John Keats*, 223
- Tickell, Thomas  
"On a Lady's Picture," 152
- "Tintern Abbey" (Wordsworth), 6
- "To Autumn," 23, 212, 250  
Autumn in, 28, 220  
definitive vision in, 10–11  
influence on, 4–5, 207  
ironic humanism in, 38  
solitary sublimities in, 27  
symbolism in, 38  
tone of, 38, 222
- "To Charles Cowden Clarke," 199
- "To Chatterton," 231
- "To George Felton Matthew"  
imagination in, 190
- "To Hope"  
politics in, 189
- Tomline, George, 187
- "To My Brother George"  
narrative, 129  
vision in, 129
- "To Some Ladies," 189
- "To Thomas Moore," 196
- Two or Three Ideas* (Stevens), 8
- Vale, James  
"Verses on Seeing the Portrait of Miss C–N," 159–60
- Van Ghent, Dorothy, 171
- Vendler, Helen, 253–54  
on "Ode on a Grecian Urn," 167
- on "Ode to Psyche," 13–35  
on story of Keats's sonnets, 227–48
- "Verses Written under a Print, Representing the Salutation of the Blessed Virgin" (Byrom), 152
- Visionary Company, The* (Bloom), 23
- Voltaire, 202
- "Walk Near Town, A" (Webb), 194
- Wanderings of Oisín, The* (Yeats), 5
- Warren, Robert Penn  
on "Ode to a Nightingale," 39
- Wasserman, Earl  
transcendentalism of, 130, 141
- Watkins, Daniel, 223
- Webb, Cornelius  
"A Walk Near Town," 194
- White, Henry Kirke, 217
- Wilson, Katherine  
on "Ode to a Nightingale," 55
- Witch of Atlas, The* (Shelley), 2  
playfulness in, 10
- Wolfson, Susan, 207
- Woodhouse, Richard, 142–44, 162  
and "La Belle Dame sans Merci," 69, 74  
on *Endymion*, 185
- Wordsworth, William  
criticism, 196  
*Descriptive Sketches*, 198  
*The Excursion*, 19, 51  
*An Evening Walk*, 198  
imagination, 4, 7  
influences of, 5–6, 11, 205–6, 217, 250  
influence on *The Fall of Hyperion*, 97–128  
"Intimations of Immortality," 16, 24–25, 192



- Milton's influence on, 1–3,  
     24–25  
 Keats compared to, 1–11  
*Lyrical Ballads*, 74, 201–2  
 “Peter Bell,” 85  
*Prelude*, 37  
*The Recluse*, 1–2, 8  
 “Resolution and Independence,”  
     6  
 “Solitary Reaper,” 53  
 “Tintern Abbey,” 6
- Yeats, William Butler, 52
- caricature, 122  
 influences on, 3, 5–6, 8, 10,  
     250  
*Last Poems and Plays*, 5  
 “Per Amica Silentia Lunae,”  
     5  
*The Wanderings of Oisín*, 5
- Young, Edward  
 “On Michael Angelo's Famous  
     Piece of the Crucifixion,” 152
- Zofloya* (Dacre), 198