NEW GROWN WITH PLEASANT PAIN: A READING OF KEATS’S ODES

Humphrey Tonkin
tonkin@hartford.edu

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This is very much a work in progress. It began as a series of lectures for the President’s College at the University of Hartford but has advanced beyond that, enlivening anew an interest in the Romantics that was nurtured by Walter Jackson Bate and by Douglas Bush and is much indebted to the work of Helen Vendler, Stephen Gill and other recent writers on Keats, Wordsworth and Coleridge.

Still to be built into the text is the normal apparatus of footnotes and bibliography. Since these chapters saw their beginnings as lectures, I have been slow to turn them into a scholarly text. No doubt the process will continue, stimulated, I hope, by the comments and suggestions of readers of these pages. I welcome comments, corrections, and additions.

H.T.
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INTRODUCTION

What more is there to say about Keats? One of the most written-about poets in the English language, he has been the subject of half a dozen biographies, hundreds of critical works, and the continued attention of generations of students and general readers. But despite such attention, his life remains something of a mystery – not because of a lack of information: Keats and his circle left abundant testimony behind; but because this information, ample though it is, is oddly hard to evaluate. When great poets die, their value as commodities lives on, sometimes leading to unseemly tussles at their gravesites. In Keats’s case, it was his fortune, in the years following his death, to be characterized by his friends as a rather impractical dreamer, who was loved by many and offended few. His first biographer, Richard Monckton Milnes, described him (1848) as “one whose whole story may be summed up in the composition of three small volumes of verse, some earnest friendships, one passion, and a premature death.”

Stopford Brooke, writing early in the twentieth century (1907), declared, with all the authority of the truly ignorant, that Keats “has, in spite of a few passages and till quite the end of his life, no vital interest in the present, none in man as a whole, none in the political movement of human thought, none in the future of mankind, none in liberty, equality and fraternity, no interest in anything but beauty.” A few years later, Sidney Colvin (1916), suggested that his mind was “ready to entertain and appreciate any set of ideas according as his imagination recognised their beauty or power,” and that “he could never wed himself to any as representing ultimate truth.”

Why, then, did the Tory publication Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, beginning in October 1817, launch so vehement and sustained an attack on the so-called Cockney School of poetry (the term was theirs, and it stuck), particularly a vitriolic attack on Keats that appeared in August 1818, after the publication of Keats’s first two volumes, Poems and Endymion? The anonymous article, the work of John Lockhart (the son-in-law of Sir Walter Scott), attacked Keats for his youth, his social class, his education, and what Lockhart perceived as a certain femininity in his writing. Indeed, the “feminine” Keats, a kind of David Bowie or Michael Jackson of English literature, was the Keats who caught the attention of the Victorians and their successors. In a sense Lockhart succeeded: his critique established the identity of Keats for years to come, even among Keats’s friends.

There is, however, every evidence that Keats was far more politically engaged, and far more threatening to Tory views, than this deliberately neutered image would suggest.

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1 Quoted by Nicholas Roe, John Keats and the Culture of Dissent (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.2. I am indebted to Roe for his discussion of Lockhart’s article and the animus behind it.
2 Roe, John Keats, p.12.
3 Roe, John Keats, p.3.
His volume of poems contained two sonnets of more or less direct political commentary. One was addressed to Leigh Hunt, on the occasion of his release from jail in 1815.

What though, for showing truth to flatter’d state,
Kind Hunt was shut in prison, yet has he,
In his immortal spirit, been as free
As the sky-searching lark, and as elate.
Minion of grandeur! think you he did wait?
Think you he nought but prison walls did see,
Till, so unwilling, thou unturn’dst the key?
Ah no! far happier, nobler was his fate!
In Spenser’s halls he stray’d, and bowers fair,
Culling enchanted flowers; and he flew
With darling Milton through the fields of air:
To regions of his own his genius true
Took happy flights. Who shall his fame impair
When thou art dead, and all thy wretched crew.

Hunt, poet and essayist, had been jailed in 1813 for libeling the Prince Regent in the periodical that he published, The Examiner. We have it on Charles Cowden Clarke’s authority that Keats was a regular reader of The Examiner, which, says Clarke “no doubt laid the foundation of his love of civil and religious liberty.” Hunt was singled out by Lockhart and his co-author John Wilson for particularly vehement attack as the mainstay of the so-called Cockney school. The other sonnet, written in 1816, was addressed to the great Polish patriot Tadeusz Kosciuszko, veteran of the American War of Independence and defender of Polish liberties against the Russians.

Keats’s poetry grew out of a period of great political and economic turmoil in England and it was closely linked with ideas regarded as deeply subversive by the writers for Blackwood’s. The rapid expansion of the industrial cities of the north and the accompanying social deracination, the upheavals in Europe produced by the revolutions in America and France, the enclosure movement, the shifts in taste brought about by the Romantic movement -- all contributed to a political radicalism that seemed to some to threaten civil order, the monarchy, the church, and the established parliamentary system. The Tories were fighting a bitter rearguard action. By 1832, and the First Reform Act, the walls of privilege had been breached at least in part, and it was people like Keats who had contributed to the change.

He had his predecessors in the field, some of whose views were changed by the very turbulence of the period. William Wordsworth was born in 1770, the son of John Wordsworth, law-agent to Sir James Lowther, later Lord Lonsdale, a major landowner and the most powerful man in the county of Westmorland in northwest England. His mother died in 1778 and his father in 1783 (leaving behind him Sir James’s financial obligations to him which the Wordsworth family had to resort to law to obtain). William was sent to Hawkshead Grammar School, which enjoyed a special relationship with St.

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4 Roe, John Keats, p.8.
John’s College, Cambridge, where he matriculated in 1787. In 1790, a year after the fall of the Bastille, he went on a walking tour through France, the Alps and Italy, returning to France for a year-long stay the following year – a stay during which he fathered an illegitimate daughter by Annette Vallon, daughter of a surgeon of Blois. Wordsworth was fired with enthusiasm for the revolution and for liberty. But soon, as with many other English observers of the French scene, he became disillusioned as Robespierre gained power and the Terror took over. Initially shocked at Britain’s declaration of war against France, he little by little lost his enthusiasm for revolutionary action and moved steadily and gradually towards the right, more fearful of social upheaval than supportive of social reform. When Lord Lonsdale’s son offered him help and a measure of financial security, he took it, leaving his somewhat rootless existence behind and settling down in Grasmere, in Lonsdale’s home territory.  

The late 1790s were no time for political expression: French military successes were putting increasing pressure on England, which felt isolated before Napoleon’s armies and French expansionism, as one by one its European allies were either overrun by the French or made peace with the new republic. Fear of subversion put strict limits on free speech. Indeed, a government agent was dispatched from London to Somerset in 1797 to check on Wordsworth and Coleridge and their circle at Nether Stowey, to be sure that they were not a nest of dangerous radicals. Into this atmosphere Keats was born. Writes Nicholas Roe, “Autumn 1795 [when Keats was born] ... was a season of riots and rumoured conspiracies. Crop failures, inflation, bread shortages, and the threat of invasion contributed to the misery of a nation that had been at war ... for almost three years.”

It is in this context that we should see the grand declaration of poetic independence that accompanied the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* of Wordsworth and Coleridge in 1800. The preface that accompanied the slim volume of that year was perhaps less revolutionary, in its call for poetry written in “a selection of the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation,” than it might seem: we can trace a continuum in Wordsworth’s poetic development through the 1790s from eighteenth-century models, and his poetry abounds in homage direct and indirect paid to his predecessors. But in its concern with accessibility it was a politically charged declaration none the less.

That Wordsworth was a very great poet there can be no doubt, but for Keats he was something of a problem poet – technically and philosophically accomplished, he could hardly be ignored as one in the great tradition of English poetry; but in some sense he betrayed his calling, turning from his earlier idealism to a condition of increasing resignation accompanied by increasing engagement in Tory politics. In a measure the same was true of Wordsworth’s friend Coleridge, who swung from early interest in utopian experiment to Christianity and retirement. Both he and Wordsworth found in

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6 Barker, pp.188-193.

retreat, and in the companionship of friends and family, a safe alternative to radical politics. It was the particular achievement of Wordsworth, if such was an achievement, to move this idea of retreat out of the province of radicalism and into the sphere of conservatism, traveling on an ideological journey on which Robert Southey, among poets, and John Constable, among painters, accompanied him. By the time Keats began to write, the idea of retreat was in some sense politically compromised.

When John Keats died in 1821 at the age of 26, he left behind him a body of work relatively small for a mature poet but large indeed for one so young. It included, in addition to a small body of lyric poetry

- a four-book “poetic romance,” *Endymion*, composed in 1817 and published in 1818;

- several narrative poems, including *Isabella*, written in 1818, and *Lamia*, and *The Eve of St. Agnes*, both dating from 1819 (all three were published in 1820);

- *Otho the Great*, a tragedy in Shakespearean style written in 1819, and *King Stephen*, a fragment of a second play;

- three books of an epic-style narrative poem, *Hyperion*, written and abandoned in 1819, and *The Fall of Hyperion*, an attempt at a shorter, more focused version;

- a total of some forty sonnets, written over several years;

- and six extraordinary odes, all written in 1819, over a period of a few months.

Keats also left behind him one of the language’s greatest collections of letters – letters that chronicle in detail not only his short life but his struggles as a poet, and the conflict between a young man growing and the poet within him. Keats was at one with the Romantics in his belief in a poetic calling, in some sense larger than himself. Endowed with such gifts, he saw himself as taking his place in a poetic line that began at the beginning of the English language, particularly in the poetic trio Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton, or even behind that, most notably in Dante and Virgil. To write was both inevitable and a duty, both a responsibility and a burden.

In a memorable phrase, that has firmly attached itself to its object, Keats once described Wordsworth’s approach to the poetic calling as “the egotistical sublime.” He was determined to regard his own poetic gifts with more modesty and reticence than the poet of the *Lyrical Ballads* and the autobiographical pieces that ultimately led to Wordsworth’s grand poetic statement *The Prelude* of 1805. But the very perplexity that this reticence produced in him was a source both of conflicted indecisiveness and of poetic inspiration. The story of Keats’s development as a writer is the story of his
attempt to come to terms with the oddly alien poet within him, his embarrassment at this being’s presence, and his use of his own reading to bring it under control.\(^8\)

Mingled with this conflict were conflicts of class and education,\(^9\) exacerbated by a somewhat rootless upbringing (something Keats shared with Wordsworth): the eldest of four children, he was nine when his father was killed in a fall from a horse, and in the ensuing domestic turmoil he and his brothers and sister went to live with his grandmother, who deeply disapproved of his mother’s immediate remarriage. That marriage in due course collapsed, Keats’s modest inheritance was lost, and his mother died an invalid when he was fifteen. A child of the suburbs and the city, he could lay no claim to the vast green England of Wordsworth or Shakespeare or Milton; a child of parents in trade (his father ran a livery-stable), he was neither born into the aristocracy, like Byron or Shelley, nor into its radical opposite. To claim his birthright, he had first to define it.

He was fortunate in his education. Even before his father’s death, he was sent to school in Enfield, just outside London, to a school run by a Mr. John Clarke, who treated the 75 or so boys under his charge, mostly sons of tradesmen, with enlightened respect. The school at Enfield had its origins in the radical ideas of John Collett Ryland, who had founded it in 1786, after several successful years running a similar school in Northampton. Ryland was a Baptist minister and a republican, and in his school he encouraged dissent and original thinking. When he died in the early 1790s, he was succeeded by John Clarke, who had been his assistant at Northampton. Keats entered the school in 1803. There, he learned Latin and French, and became fast friends with the headmaster’s son, Charles Cowden Clarke. Keats was a voracious reader, who read his way through most of the quite distinguished library at the school. Before he was finished at Enfield, he had read the major English poets and a range of historical and philosophical works. He had also steeped himself in the classics, original and translated (he did not study Greek), and in such works as Lemprière’s classical dictionary and Spence’s survey of mythology and classical sculpture, *Polymetis*. He continued to return to the school from his apprenticeship to a surgeon in nearby Edmonton: Clarke recalls their sitting together reading Spenser in the garden at the back of the school. In 1812, when he was seventeen, Keats wrote an “Imitation of Spenser” – four Spenserian stanzas and four sonnets in imitation of Spenser’s sonnet sequence the *Amoretti*. This is the earliest of Keats’s surviving work. Here are the four Spenserian stanzas:

Now Morning from her orient chamber came,  
And her first footsteps touch’d a verdant hill;  
Crowning its lawny crest with amber flame,  
Silv’ring the untainted gushes of its rill;  
Which, pure from mossy beds, did down distill,  
And after parting beds of simple flowers,


\(^9\) See note 13 on the “Cockney” school of poetry.
By many streams a little lake did fill,
Which round its marke reflected woven bower,
And, in its middle space, a sky that never lowers.

There the king-fisher saw his plumage bright
Vieing with fish of brilliant dye below;
Whose silken fins, and golden scales’ light
Cast upward, through the waves, a ruby glow:
There saw the swan his neck of arched snow,
And oar’d himself along with majesty;
Sparkled his jetty eyes; his feet did show
Beneath the waves like Africa’s ebony,
And on his back a fay reclined voluptuously.

Ah! could I tell the wonders of an isle
That in that fairest lake had place been,
I could e’en Dido of her grief beguile;
Or rob from aged Lear his bitter teen:
For sure so fair a place was never seen,
Of all that ever charm’d romantic eye:
It seem’d an emerald in the silver sheen
Of the bright waters; or as when on high,
Through clouds of fleecy white, laughs the coerulean sky.

And all around it dipp’d luxuriously
Slopings of verdure through the glossy tide,
Which, as it were in gentle amity,
Rippled delighted up the flowery side;
As if to glean the ruddy tears, it tried,
Which fell profusely from the rose-tree stem!
Haply it was the workings of its pride,
In strife to throw upon the shore a gem
Outvieing all the buds in Flora’s diadem.

The stanzas catch the syntax and movement of the stanzas of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* with remarkable exactitude, though the insistently sensuous language, derived though it may be from Spenser himself, is richer and more indulgent (and less precise) than its original. Mood-poetry rather than narrative, the stanzas not only read like a skillful exercise, but also have nowhere particular to go: there are four of them and they simply end. Both the power and limitations of early Keats are readily discernible in the lines: the remarkable poetic ear, the intention (as Keats himself put it) to “load every rift with ore,” the concomitant problem of control and focus.

Spenser was a strong influence on Keats, and his favorite reading. While we may think of Spenserian allegory as a conservative and historicist force, Greg Kucich has shown that “a broadly based ‘radicalizing’ of Spenser was characteristic of Romantic poets, who summoned the ‘tension of reality and ideality’ in his poetry as a way to comment upon
oppression and deadlock in the contemporary political scene." And it is Spenser and Milton who are Leigh Hunt’s solaces in the sonnet about Hunt’s release from prison.

Coming to this early Keatsian poetry from the poetry of Wordsworth, we may ask ourselves what the two poets have in common, that they could both be labeled Romantics. This may not be the moment to try to fit the two poets into a single framework, not least because this early work also shows the heavy influence of Keats’s immediate predecessors in the 18th century as well as his Spenserian original. We might remember, though, that Wordsworth also felt constrained in his early poem *Salisbury Plain* to try Spenserian stanzas: Spenser was clearly one of the poets in the English pantheon with which the aspiring poet had to come to terms. Though Spenser had his imitators in the 18th century, the semiotics of his presence contained equal ingredients of poetic constraint (in the sheer complexity and regularity of his stanza) and “Gothic” abundance: the style of *The Faerie Queene* was identifiably different from the continental and classical tradition of the 16th century: the Romantics could (and did) claim him as one of theirs. Byron chose the Spenserian stanza for his long poem *Childe Harold*.

Furthermore, Keats’s first collection of poems, published in 1817, and consisting of a collection of largely fragmentary pieces, plus three verse epistles, and seventeen sonnets, opened with the poem “I stood tip-toe upon a little hill” whose 242 lines of lush description resemble a somewhat formless version of Wordsworth’s early poem *An Evening Walk*, written at an equally tender age. Both involve movement through a series of country scenes, though Keats’s excursion is colored not by a desire to describe the countryside as it is, but by an attempt to present a series of imaginary scenes shot through with the descriptive abundance of the poets, and with Keats’s reading of Shakespeare and Spenser. Consider this, for example. The first passage resembles nothing so much as Oberon’s speech in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and the second is a pastiche of Spenser’s *Epithalamion*.

A bush of May flowers with the bees about them;  
Ah, sure no tasteful nook would be without them;  
And let a lush laburnum oversweep them,  
And let long grass grow round the roots to keep them  
Moist, cool and green; and shade the violets,  
That they may bind the moss in leafy nets.  
A filbert hedge with wild briar overtwined,  
And clumps of woodbine taking the soft wind  
Upon their summer thrones; there too should be  
The frequent chequer of a youngling tree,  
That with a score of light green brethren shoots  
From the quaint mossiness of aged roots:  
Round which is heard a spring-head of clear waters

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Babbling so wildly of its lovely daughters
The spreading blue-bells: it may haply mourn
That such fair clusters should be rudely torn
From their fresh beds, and scattered thoughtlessly
By infant hands, left on the path to die.

Open afresh your round of starry folds,
Ye ardent marigolds!
Dry up the moisture from your golden lids,
For great Apollo bids
That in these days your praises should be sung
On many harps, which he has lately strung;
And when again your dewiness he kisses,
Tell him, I have you in my world of blisses:
So haply when I rove in some far vale,
His mighty voice may come upon the gale.

But if Keats’s relish of the natural world is rendered in the idiom of the poets in all its most spectacular abundance, and if Wordsworth’s more restrained and moral approach to his surroundings suggests a more serious turn of mind, there is no doubt about the high seriousness of both poets’ sense of their calling. It is here that their kinship is most evident. It lies in the irresistibility of poetic inspiration (I use the word deliberately, in analogy to the Protestant doctrine of irresistible grace: if God chooses to bestow His grace on us, we can neither resist nor avoid it). Both poets embark on an exploration of their poetic gifts, an anatomizing of them, almost as though they belonged to someone else. Wordsworth, living longer and with more leisure to explore them, examined the growth of a poet’s mind in The Prelude. Scattered through Keats’s work, both in explicit references in the letters and implicit ones in the poetry, is a similar, deeply conflicted examination.

The poem with which the 1817 volume ends, at 400 lines Keats’s longest to date, is entitled Sleep and Poetry, an early, and still somewhat callow, linking of inspiration and suspended animation that is derived in part from Wordsworth’s reflections on poetic inspiration in Tintern Abbey:

    that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world
Is lighten’d: -- that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul.
For Keats, this poetic inspiration may be more than his frame can bear, may crush him under its weight – or alternatively may lead him in youth to a magical and enchanted world and then, beyond, into “vistas of solemn beauty,” the state of poetic maturity.

O Poesy! for thee I grasp my pen
That am not yet a glorious denizen
Of thy wide heaven; yet, to my ardent prayer,
Yield from thy sanctuary some clear air,
Smooth’d for intoxication by the breath
Of flowering bays, that I may die a death
Of luxury, and my young spirit follow
The morning sun-beams to the great Apollo
Like a fresh sacrifice; or, if I can bear
The o’erwhelming sweets, ‘twill bring to me the fair
Visions of all places: 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. Also imaginings will hover
Round my fire-side, and haply there discover
Vistas of solemn beauty, where I’d wander
In happy silence, like the clear Meander
Through its lone vales; and where I found a spot
Of awfuller shade, or an enchanted grot,
Ora green hill o’erspread with chequer’d dress
Of flowers, and fearful from its loveliness,
Write on my tablets all that was permitted,
All that was for our human senses fitted.
Then the events of this wide world I’d seize
Like a strong giant, and my spirit teaze
Till at its shoulders it should proudly see
Wings to find out an immortality. (53-84)

For Keats, death and poetry are never far apart, and distinguishing between poetic swooning and poetic duty is a puzzle that carries over also into the Odes. We should of course resist the temptation to read the sad circumstances of Keats’s death from consumption back into the earlier verse, but it is an arresting fact that Keats was not only trained in medicine but was also confronted with death at every turn, as his mother wasted away in his grandmother’s house as he was growing up, and then later as he nursed his brother Tom through his final lonely illness in 1818, the year preceding the annum mirabilis of 1819. Already in 1818, Keats began to suffer from a persistent sore throat, and perhaps feared the worst – the consumption that ultimately overtook him in
1820 and killed him in 1821. And if poetry and death are related, what is the connection, or rather the conflict, between the humanitarian impulse and the possible self-indulgence of poetry (an issue that George Herbert had confronted two centuries earlier and that Gerard Manley Hopkins was to grapple with later in the century)? Is it the very tension of these contrary impulses, the true melancholy of unresolved emotions, that best characterizes the truth of the human spirit? If so, the single-minded pursuit of beauty leads not to Edmund Burke’s idea of beauty but rather to his idea of the sublime: to experience beauty is to know the fear of death. In a letter dated 22 November 1817, written right after the completion of his long poem *Endymion*, Keats puts it this way:

> I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination – What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not – for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love, they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty.

One poem in the 1817 volume stands out from the others, and gives the lie to Lockhart’s “feininz” of Keats. In 1815, after four years of apprenticeship with Dr. Hammond, in Edmonton, Keats entered Guy’s Hospital, situated on St. Thomas’s Street in the heart of a rapidly expanding London. He was twenty years old. At Guy’s he qualified as a surgeon and apothecary a year later (the rules said that he could not actually practice until he turned 21). Aware of the need of a profession, if only to take care of his family, he none the less continued to follow his poetic calling, indeed as a first order of business. He read everything that came his way – most particularly Spenser and Milton, Shakespeare, the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists like Jonson and Fletcher, the major eighteenth-century poets including Thomson. He read his contemporaries too – Leigh Hunt, Wordsworth and others.

It was in September 1816, after a summer trip to Margate, on the Kent coast, that he undertook alone, following his examinations at Apothecaries’ Hall, that he returned to London and took up lodgings at 8 Dean Street, near Guy’s Hospital. During the summer, he had continued his writing: it is due to the loneliness he felt in Margate that he wrote the three verse epistles that were included in the 1817 volume. Back in London, he looked up his old friend Charles Cowden Clarke, now living across town in Clerkenwell. Clarke had recently obtained a copy of George Chapman’s early 17th-century translation of Homer – an accomplished work by one of the finest poets and dramatists of the age, even if now neglected. Clarke and Keats, you will remember, were given to reading things together, aloud to one another. Remember, too, that Keats had studied Latin but had no Greek. This is how Clarke tells the story:

> One scene I could not fail to introduce to him—the shipwreck of Ulysses, in the fifth book of the “Odysseis,” and I had the reward of one of his delighted stares, upon reading the following lines:

> Then forth he came, his both knees falt’ring, both  
> His strong hands hanging down, and all with froth  
> His cheeks and nostrils flowing, voice and breath
Spent to all use, and down he sank to death.

The sea had soak’d his heart through...\textsuperscript{11}

There were other lines that caught his attention (Keats was a great collector of lines and images), and he and Clarke stayed poring over the book through much of the night. “At day-spring,” as Clarke put it, Keats left Clarke’s lodgings and headed back south and east through the City of London and across London Bridge, composing a sonnet in his head as he went. Back in his lodgings, he at once fell to writing. By ten o’clock that morning, so Clarke tells us, the sonnet was delivered to him, essentially in its finished form. The sonnet, of course was “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.

This is the poet as Odysseus, heading out into unknown seas beyond the Pillars of Hercules; it is the poet as discoverer of new worlds\textsuperscript{12}; the poet as Galileo, looking into the heavens as Galileo does in Milton’s poem, in the description of Satan’s shield:

... the broad circumference
Hung on his shoulders like the moon, whose orb
Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views
At ev’ning from the top of Fesole,
Or in Valdarno, to descry new lands,
Rivers or mountains in her spotty globe.

It is also the poet remembering Robertson’s History of America that he had read a few years before in Mr. Clarke’s school library. In short, Keats’s reading is crowded into the poem, and his poetic career seems summed up for us as a journey beyond reading, a journey of discovery that is as much inward as outward, as much towards his poetic psyche as towards the world of experience. Its sheer poetic quality (and it stands out in the 1817 volume) makes it a milestone in Keats’s development. Its dynamic, the


\textsuperscript{12} Famously, Keats confuses Cortes and Balboa.
movement of the gazing eye, pushes the reader out beyond the confines of the poem itself, to new discoveries, new realms at the rim of the horizon.

*Endymion*, the poem that occupied Keats during much of 1817 and was published in 1818, runs to over 4000 lines and constitutes Keats’s longest sustained composition. It is a work perhaps more ambitious than his brief poetic apprenticeship can maintain – a story derived from Ovid, modeled on the Ovidian narrative poems of the late sixteenth century (by people like Marlowe, Spenser, and Chapman), but attenuated by an often obscure and imprecise allegorical structure that resembles nothing so much as Spenserian allegory insufficiently understood. It is a poem of rich description, full of incidental beauties. Its story, in which the speaker, rejecting the love of a goddess in favor of a mortal, only to find that the mortal is in fact a goddess (Cynthia) in disguise, deals with a subject that will remain with Keats – the tension between human mortality in its brevity, and the extended durability of beauty. If its couplets lend it a certain monotony, and its rich descriptions occasionally cloy, and if it displays rather too clearly the essentially malign influence of a somewhat misapprehended Spenser, the poem none the less serves as a fine training-ground for the young poet.

But *Endymion* and, in a different way, poems like *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer*, irritated Lockhart, as his article in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* attests, beyond all measure. They did so not strictly for political reasons, but for what might be called meta-political reasons. Keats, declared Lockhart, was simply inadequately educated. Lockhart saw in the writing of a poem about the discovery of Greek poetry through the medium of translation a vulgar declaration of the poet’s ignorance. Keats, unschooled in Greek, lacking the benefit of a mainstream education and an undergraduate degree, was simply not entitled to join the club of true classicists. His crude misapprehension of the spirit of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, at least as those properly schooled in the classics read that work, led him in his *Endymion* to turn mythology into a kind of contemporary adolescent fantasy, full of elaborately sensuous imagery that, in Lockhart’s estimation, misappropriated the spirit of the original. Keats, in short, was an upstart, his poetry resembling what Lockhart regarded as the uneducated excesses of contemporary female poets, like Charlotte Smith and Mary Tighe, denied by their very gender a place of any significance in the male-dominated world of classical scholarship.

Nor, Lockhart suggested, did Keats stop, in his ignorance, with the classics. His hijacking of such mainstream poets as Milton (de-radicalized by the eighteenth century) and Spenser, to serve his disagreeably revolutionist purposes, misappropriated the canon. Keats’s greatest offense was lack of taste and lack of education. And thus he became a victim of the culture wars of the early nineteenth century for daring to suggest that the classics might be put to new uses, and in new ways, in a broader population. Today Ovid, tomorrow the vote...

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But Keats’s relationship with his predecessors was not so much that of hijacker, Lockhart notwithstanding, as that of antagonist and acolyte. Keats struggled with the figures of Spenser, Milton and Shakespeare (largely in that order: Spenser in *Endymion*, Milton in *Hyperion*, and Shakespeare in *The Fall of Hyperion*), even as he sought to rearticulate their poetry in his own. At about the same time as he was making the final corrections on his highly Spenserian *Endymion*, he was rereading Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. The occasion, he wrote at the time, “appeared to demand the prologue of a sonnet,” and he accordingly wrote “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again.”

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! 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 Shakespearian fruit:
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,
But when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.

At the opening of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*, the poet-speaker turns away from pastoral romance to address “knights and ladies gentle deeds,” replacing the pastoral voice with the voice of epic. But in the intervening two centuries, not least in Keats’s construction of him, Spenser has himself come to be identified with retreat from the world, with disengagement. Now, in turn, Keats abandons the Spenserian “golden tongued Romance,” the “Queen of far away” (how easily *The Faerie Queene* becomes a far-away queen...) for the immediacy of Shakespeare. He does so, incidentally, at a time when he is thinking particularly hard about his future as a poet. He has just begun to contemplate his next major undertaking now that *Endymion* is complete: an epic poem on Hyperion. He has also recently had a good deal of personal contact with Wordsworth, one of the great examples of Romantic seriousness about the poet’s calling: at the turn of the year he had met Wordsworth, who was on one of his occasional (and often testy) visits to London, for the first time at the home of Thomas Monkhouse.

It is striking that, at a time when he is contemplating his most Miltonic of poems, Keats casts *King Lear* in strongly Miltonic and Promethean terms, as “the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion’d clay.” While he rightly interprets the play as dealing with the most elemental yet most sublime concerns of human existence, Milton is as

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much on his mind as Shakespeare. Like Prometheus, Keats’s speaker must “burn through” this dispute, and, like Adam and Eve, taste “the bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit” – an image that concentrates into a single point both the Fall on the one hand and the paradoxically forbidden appropriation of Shakespeare on the other.\(^\text{14}\) He will pass through the “old oak forest” of British antiquity, either to awake empty-handed from the self-indulgence of a dream of “far away” -- the kind of empty and disorienting dream which constantly haunts Keats, for example in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” or in the Nightingale Ode, and which symbolizes lack of poetic productivity – or to emerge into new life, to “die into life,” by rising phoenix-like from the ashes to “fly at” new poetic achievement. *King Lear* offers not only a “deep eternal theme” but also the liberating and salubrious objectivity of drama, in which verse is mediated through fictional characters, and thereby separated from the poetic self.\(^\text{15}\)

The poetic training that Keats received in the writing of *Endymion* was augmented by a series of events in 1818 of crucial importance to his development, all of them preparing him for the astonishing productiveness of 1819.\(^\text{16}\) These events include an eight-week stay at Teignmouth, in Devon, in the spring, with his two brothers. George was considering marriage and emigration to America; Tom was clearly ailing. When the three of them headed back to London in early May, Tom was seized by a major hemorrhage along the way, but seemed to recover. George and his intended, Georgiana, duly married in May, and John and his friend Charles Armitage Brown accompanied them in June to Liverpool, where they took ship for Philadelphia. John never saw his sister-in-law again. Keats and Brown went on to the North of England, for a memorable walking tour of the Lake District, with a continuation into Scotland, during which Keats caught a cold, and the sore throat that was to continue to plague him first took hold.

Along the way, Brown and Keats made a stop at Grasmere to visit Wordsworth. Keats had met Wordsworth for the first time, as we noted, at the end of the previous year, when Keats had been persuaded to read to Wordsworth his Hymn to Pan, included in *Endymion*, by his painter friend Benjamin Robert Haydon – with mixed results. Later, Keats attended Haydon’s “immortal dinner,” one of the great literary events of all time.\(^\text{17}\) In addition to Keats and Wordsworth, in attendance were Thomas Monkhouse, cousin of Mrs. Wordsworth, Charles Lamb, a young surgeon Joseph Ritchie, about to depart for Africa, and Haydon himself. Lamb, in his cups, disgraced himself, most notably upon the appearance of John Kingston, a government official who happened to be Wordsworth’s superior in the latter’s capacity as Collector of Stamps for Westmorland. Lamb had to be hurried from the room, singing “Diddle-diddle-dumpling, my son John /
Went to bed with his breeches on.” A few days later, Keats went to dinner with the Wordsworths, but found the event stiff and problematic, not least because on that same day both had received bad news – Keats about his brother Tom’s health, and Wordsworth about the fact that the flamboyant and wildly popular Whig lawyer Henry Brougham was planning to contest the Westmorland parliamentary seat essentially owned by Lord Lonsdale and occupied by his son.

The Westmorland election of 1818 was a political event of considerable prominence. In the town of Kendal, rioters took to the streets in opposition to the Tories, and Brougham’s agents did what they could to incite further trouble. Brougham’s tactic was not to worry about the small group of actual electors, but to create such pressure on them from the ordinary populace that they would be forced to resist the blandishments and threats of the Lowthers. When he found sympathy with the local newspaper, the Lowthers, with Wordsworth’s assistance, founded a newspaper of their own, and Wordsworth arranged for Thomas de Quincey, another convert to the conservative cause, to become its editor. Brougham was out-maneuvered: Lonsdale put enough pressure on the voters to bring about the desired result and his son was returned to Westminster. When Keats and Brown visited Wordsworth’s home, Rydal Mount, the election was weeks away. They found him absent: he was off campaigning for the Lowthers. Keats was deeply shocked. “Lord Wordsworth,” he wrote to his brother Tom, “instead of being in retirement, has himself and his house full in the thick of fashionable visitors.”

Back in London, Keats nursed Tom through his worsening illness. When Tom died on December 1, Keats was consequently bereft of the companionship not of one but of both brothers. Shortly after Tom’s death, Keats moved into Brown’s house in Hampstead. In September, Keats had met Fanny Brawne, the woman he was to love for the rest of his life and with whom he contemplated marriage. It was Fanny, along with his friend Brown, who helped him through his ensuing troubles: in spite of everything, including their abundant shortcomings, Brown was his companion and Fanny his inspiration.

Fanny’s presence perhaps is manifest in the rich imagery and romantic plot of The Eve of St. Agnes, written in early 1819, while Keats and Brown were visiting the parents of Keats’s friend Charles Dilke at Chichester. Its rapid composition came at the expense of a much larger work that Keats was contemplating and with which he experienced difficulty from the beginning: Hyperion was to be an epic work, dealing with Saturn’s efforts to regain the kingship of the gods after being overthrown by his son Jove. His attempts to rally the Titans cause him to conclude that, among the Titans, only Hyperion can overcome Jove. Milton is Keats’s model, but also his jailor, from whose tyrannous line he cannot escape. It is significant that throughout 1819 Hyperion is at the top of Keats’s agenda: the amazing poetry of 1819 was made possible by the neglect of his major task. Indeed, arguably the Odes are a product of the pressure of Hyperion, Keats’s mourning for Tom, and the absence of George and Georgiana.

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We are fortunate to have as a guide to the genesis of this poetry a long journal-letter addressed to George and Georgiana Keats, begun on February 14 and extending to May 3. Its 41 pages in Trilling’s *Selected Letters* include the texts of several of the poems of the period, among them *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and the *Ode to Psyche*. *Psyche* was completed in late April, and *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and *Ode on Melancholy* followed in quick succession in the course of the month of May. The most famous of all the odes, *To Autumn*, followed on September 19. The process may or may not have begun with the *Ode on Indolence*, whose precise date is disputed, but it is here that we will begin our journey through the odes.
1. THE ODE ON INDOLENCE

The date of the Ode on Indolence is not easy to establish. Walter Jackson Bate puts it at the end of the sequence of April and May and sees it as a kind of reprise of the themes of the odes. Helen Vendler puts it at the beginning (the place, by the way, that I put it in an ill-fated graduate paper written for a seminar on Keats conducted by none other than Bate himself). The genesis of the poem seems relatively easily established. The March 19 entry in the journal-letter to George and Georgiana includes the following passage:

This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless: I long after a stanza or two of Thompson’s Castle of indolence ... Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me: they seem rather like three figures on a greek vase – a Man and two women – whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguise.

The paragraph sums up in detail the starting-point for the ode. There are those who argue that, if he had finished the poem then, Keats would have included it in the letter; there are those who argue that to recall these particulars with such exactness two or three months later would be unlikely. Either way, and even if the ode was completed after the others, it began percolating before they were written, and it offers a kind of schema for the entire sequence.

What does this mysterious poem have to say? It is the least known of the six and in some ways the most difficult and obscure. But it looks more like a cartoon than a copy, more like a preliminary sketch than a reproduction.

One morn before me were three figures seen,
With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced;
And one behind the other stepp’d serene,
In placid sandals, and in white robes graced:
They pass’d, like figures on a marble urn,
When shifted round to see the other side;
They came again; as when the urn once more

19 Bate, John Keats, p. 528, refers to its “echoes” of the other Odes, though one person’s echoes may be another person’s anticipations.
Is shifted round, the first seen shades return;
And they were strange to me, as may betide
With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore.

The stanza form – abab cdecde – suggests an opening statement followed by a more complex and interwoven structure, and that is very much the way this first stanza works. The first four lines provide us with the basic picture: three figures, in profile, their necks bowed, their hands joined, move one behind the other, serenely and placidly (the epithet “placid” transferred to “sandals,” which, combined with “white robes,” suggests a classical scene. Note the extreme passivity of the scene: these figures appear before me. I do not even take the active step of seeing them: the three figures were seen. They move slowly, quietly. It is morning. Why morning? Perhaps because this is a beginning, as the evening of Autumn, the last in the sequence, is an ending, whose mystery is recalled in the ending of Stevens’s Sunday Morning, a rewriting of Keats:

Sweet berries ripen in the wilderness;
And, in the isolation of the sky,
At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
Downward to darkness on extended wings.

The movement of Keats’s figures, in fact, seems to take place beyond them: they themselves seem to move by being moved, as figues on a marble urn move when the urn is turned. The urn keeps moving, and so they emerge once more, described now not as figures but as shades. The urn, mysteriously, seems to revolve in front of the speaker, or, rather the movement of the figures resembles such a silent process.

These figures were strange to me. Again, I seem passive in this process. I do not recognize the figures – but also (because the word strange can mean both “unknown” [to me] and “distant” or “unrecognizing) they are pulling away from me. They are strange, also, “as may betide / With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore.” Why might vases produce a feeling of strangeness in “one deep in Phidian lore,” and what is “Phidian lore”? Phidias (5th century, B.C.) was supposedly the sculptor or designer of the Elgin Marbles taken (some would say despoiled) from the Parthenon in Athens and bought from Lord Elgin by the British Government in 1816. Keats first saw them just two years before, when, in March 1817, the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon took him and his friend Reynolds to their first public display at the British Museum, whence they had been removed in 1816 from Burlington House.21

It is difficult to quantify the full effect of the Elgin Marbles on the populace of London: they were a huge sensation. The protracted story of their acquisition and appropriation from Greece by Lord Elgin has been often told – and variously interpreted as the despoliation of antiquities or as their fortunate preservation. First stored in a large shed built in 1810 at the corner of Piccadilly and Park Lane, whence they were removed to a

21 The suggestion, then, is that someone deeply engrossed in study of the grandiose remains of the Parthenon, i.e. “Phidian lore,” might be confused by the rotundity, smallness and semiotics of vases.
similar shed at Burlington House, they were shown privately to a select few, among them the actress Mrs. Siddons, who was “said to have been moved to tears by the pedimental figures then known as the Three Fates.” The artists Flaxman, Wilkie, Haydon, Fuseli, West, and Lawrence all went to see them, Haydon remarking that he felt “as if a divine truth had blazed inwardly upon my mind, and I knew that they would at least rouse the art of Europe from its slumber of darkness.” But it was not until 1817 that the Marbles, now officially acquired by His Majesty’s Government, were put on public display in the “Temporary Elgin Room” at the British Museum, where they stayed for fourteen years. The term “public display” is perhaps important in this context: Keats was not among those favored with a private viewing, but rather a member of the general public -- a public whose profaning stares were perhaps resented by the more privileged, and whose unbridled enthusiasms could be construed as sullying the purity of the appreciation of ancient art: there was always a measure of ambivalence about opening the treasures of the ancients to the display of an over-curious public.

At the same time, the presence of the marbles in London brought to the city not an account of antiquity such as travelers had brought back in earlier years, nor mere isolated fragments such as these travelers had returned with, but a huge assemblage of materials which could be regarded not only as static and isolated sculptural figures but as elements in an extended experience that resembled narrative: the viewer walked by this enormous frieze, asked questions about the interrelationship of its parts, viewed it from different perspectives. It was this as much as anything that inspired Keats, always interested, like his predecessor Wordsworth, in the relationship between movement and stasis. But, above all, these fragments brought the past into the confines of this northern city: north interrogated south, the present interrogated a fragmentary past, nostalgic romanticism viewed the essence of ruin. And of course what had once perhaps been clear was no longer so, both because the creators of the marbles were long gone and because these headless torsos or armless sculptures were but fragments.

“He went again and again to see the Elgin Marbles,” wrote Severn later, “and would sit for an hour or more at a time beside them, rapt in reverie.” Two sonnets came out of the experience, both published posthumously. One of them speaks of the way in which the Marbles point backwards to a dimly perceived civilization at the very back of time (a movement not dissimilar from the memories of Albion in the King Lear sonnet):

Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old Time – with a billowy main –
A sun – a shadow of a magnitude.

23 The room (actually two rooms) was then demolished: see Marjorie Caygill and Christopher Date, Building the British Museum (London: The British Museum Press, 1999), p. 19.
The poem, then, exudes an immediate sense of mystery, a shadow of a magnitude. Neither we nor the speaker can make the figures out, contained as they seem to be on the side of an urn, like curved miniatures of the wider and grander expanses of Elgin’s marbles.

Whether a knowledge of “Phidian lore” makes the marbles easier to understand or more difficult is never made entirely clear. Certainly there was considerable interest at the time in the sculpture of the marbles. Hazlitt wrote two brief articles on them for Leigh Hunt’s journal *The Examiner* in 1816, stressing their plastic quality:

> Let anyone look at the leg of Ilissos or River-God, which is bent under him – let him observe the swell and undulation of the calf, the intertexture of the muscles, the distinction and union of all the parts, and the effect of action everywhere impressed on the external form, as if the very marble were a flexible substance, and contained the various springs of life and motion within itself, and he will own that art and nature are here the same thing.  [Paulin 105]

Perhaps next to the marbles, the figures on urns seem distant, imprecise.

The turning and returning figures not only remind the poet of urns – to recur in due course – but also cause him (as in *Psyche*) to puzzle over their identity:

> How is it, shadows, that I knew thee not?
> How came ye muffled in so hush a masque?
> Was it a silent deep-disguised plot
> To steal away, and leave without a task
> My idle days? Ripe was the drowsy hour;
> The blissful cloud of summer-indolence
> Benumb’d my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;
> Pain had not sting, and pleasure’s wreath no flower.
> O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
> Unhaunted quite of all but – nothingness?

“The winged boy I knew; / But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?” asks the speaker in *Psyche*. The shadows on the urn are unknown to the speaker. Why? Is he suggesting that he should have known them, but didn’t? That he had known them in the past but no longer recognized them? That, like the god Hercules leaving Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*, they are stealing away from him, “muffled” so that he will not recognize them, silent so that he will not hear them?

It has been suggested that the three figures, as well as representing Love and Ambition and Poesy, may be seen as the Three Graces, who accompany Venus and who in Spenser are associated with poetic inspiration through their association with the figure of Pastorella in Book Six of *The Faerie Queene*. Some have even suggested an identification with the Fates – though the epigraph that accompanies the poem, “They toil
not, neither do they spin,” hardly confirms such an idea. That they do in some sense represent duty surely becomes evident as the poem proceeds. As for the epigraph, it takes us back to the Sermon on the Mount: “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.” Is indolence itself like the lilies of the field, more full of beauty than those who “take thought for the morrow”? 

In the stanza that I have just quoted, the speaker’s tone is at first accusatory, but soon he yields the point, even wishes that the figures would disappear completely. If they leave him to his idle days ... without a task, he will be able to lose himself in this “ripe” and “drowsy” hour (we are reminded of Autumn), in a blissful and all-enveloping cloud. He will drift into a kind of torpor, in which he is numb even to pain and pleasure, and in which he is unhaunted by such spirits, indeed haunted only by nothingness. The condition is like that at the opening of Nightingale: “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense...”

The “indolent and careless” condition to which I referred a little earlier, described in the March 19 entry, seems to have been brought on by a rather mundane event: Keats had been playing cricket and was hit in the eye by a ball. “This is the second black eye I have had since leaving school – during all my school days I never had one at all – we must eat a peck before we die.” The result is that “My passions are all asleep from my having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fibre all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness... In this state of effeminacy the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body, and to such a happy degree that pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown.”

At the same time, we note from the journal letter’s entry for March 17, a couple of days before the entry about Poetry, Ambition and Love, that “There is a great difference between an easy and an uneasy indolence. An indolent day – fill’d with speculations even of an unpleasant colour – is bearable and even pleasant alone ... but to have nothing to do, and to be surrounded with unpleasant human identities; who press upon one just enough to prevent one getting into a lazy position, and not enough to interest or rouse one, is a capital punishment of a capital crime.”

Defining the various states described in Indolence in terms of this taxonomy of the condition would prove a hopeless and idle task: Keats’s scheme is too inchoate for that. But it is clear that the condition of indolence is deeply ambiguous for him: there are good and bad indolences.

The third stanza contradicts the conclusion of the second: now the speaker “aches” to accompany the figures:

A third time pass’d they by, and, passing, turn’d
Each one the face a moment whiles to me;
Then faded, and to follow them I burn’d

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26 Rollins, 2: 77.
And ached for wings, because I knew the three:
The first was a fair maid, and Love her name;
The second was Ambition, pale of cheek,
And ever watchful with fatigued eye;
The last, whom I love more, the more of blame
Is heap’d upon her, maiden most unmeek, --
I knew to be my demon Poesy.

The subject of Endymion is an ambitious youth caught between an Indian Maid (or Love) and Cynthia (or Poesy); the subject of Psyche is Cupid (Love) and the Soul (or Poesy). The mysterious figures, then, are a kind of representation of the condition of the poet. The speaker vacillates between pursuing this vision and ignoring it. He aches for wings – perhaps the “viewless wings of poesy” of the Nightingale, or the wings he longs for at the end of the King Lear sonnet – and seeks to pursue these tutelary spirits, who, by turning to him, make it clear that they belong to him, and he to them. They are, of course, allegorical figures, almost Spenserian in their representation, and recognition of them depends in a very direct sense on cognition: the poet must think, must be alert. Love, we learn, is a fair maid, presumably meek and comely. Ambition is in the center of the three, male (if we agree that this is the figure in the journal letter) – pale and fatigued like the watchful poet. The third, Poesy, is immodest, not to say a woman of ill-repute, blamed by those around her, but all the more beloved for it. “Two loves have I, of comfort and despair,” writes Shakespeare, and so, it seems, has Keats.

They faded, and, forsooth! I wanted wings.
Oh folly! What is Love? And where is it?
And for that poor Ambition – it springs
From a man’s little heart’s short fever-fit.
For Poesy! No, she has not a joy –
At least for me – so sweet as drowsy noons,
And evenings steeped in honeyed indolence.
Oh, for an age so sheltered from annoy
That I may never know how change the moons,
Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

I wanted wings – both “I desired wings” and “I lacked wings,” the latter meaning moving in to obliterate the first. The ambiguity of the sentence signals a further change. The tone shifts back to that of the second stanza: the sense of indolence having taken hold, the drowsiness having enveloped the speaker, Love is nothing, and Ambition is the pursuit of the temporary and short-lived. As for Poetry, it is contrasted with drowsy noons (noons, we assume, that follow the morning of the opening of the poem) and honeyed indolence, in which the spirit is emptied of the particular – the type of particular that is needed for the active interpretation of the kind employed in the cracking of the allegory in stanza 3.
Indeed, to crack allegory is precisely what does not interest Keats. There are several instances in his writings of a recoil from poetic allegory, which is too precise and too restricting for his interests. This is not the aspect of Spenser that he admired.

A third time came they by. Alas, wherefore?
My sleep had been embroidered with dim dreams;
My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o’er
With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams.
The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,
Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;
The open casement pressed a new-leaved vine,
Let in the budding warmth and thrrostle’s lay;
O Shadows, ’twas a time to bid farewell!
Upon your skirts had fall’n no tears of mine.

The first line, “A third time came they by,” is mildly problematic. The 1848 edition of the poems emends it to “And once more came they by,” since the “third time” has already occurred. Or perhaps this is a reprise of the third stanza, a restatement of the speaker’s readiness to dismiss the three figures. The rather negative condition of the second stanza, full of numbness and drowsiness, has been replaced here by a more positive and active situation. The little landscape that is described in this stanza is a landscape of the soul, indeed is the soul, like a lawn sprinkled with flowers, where the shadows are constantly moving and beams of light are baffled or checked presumably by moving branches (there is a certain unresolved discrepancy between the beams in this line and the cloudiness in the next). It is a scene full of humid fecundity – an atmosphere on the edge of showers, and (this is a wonderful touch), a casement window newly opened (now that the spring is here) on a vine that until recently was without leaves and is now pressing about the surrounding stonework (the casement will recur in Psyche and again in Nightingale). The thrrostle, the thrush, sings in the background. There is no place in a scene such as this for the figures, now become shadows, of Love, Ambition and Poesy. The poet bids them farewell with no regrets: “Upon your skirts had fall’n no tears of mine.”

So, ye three Ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise
My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;
For I would not be dieted with praise,
A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!
Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more
In masque-like figures on the dreamy urn.
Farewell! I yet have visions for the night,
And for the day faint visions there is store.

27 “A Man’s life of any worth is a continual allegory – and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life ... Shakespeare led a life of Allegory; his works are the comments on it,” Keats wrote to George and Georgiana (Rollins 2:67). Aileen Ward comments, “It is a fine statement of a truth that [Keats’s] own life was proving: that the most significant experiences are often revealed in haphazard and trivial circumstance, and that it requires all the energy of the imagination to grasp their meaning and translate it into poetry” – Aileen Ward, John Keats: The Making of a Poet (New York: Viking, 1963), p. 251.
Vanish, ye Phantoms, from my idle sprite
Into the clouds, and never more return!

Now the shadows are *ghosts*, and soon they are transformed into *phantoms*. Note how
the urn, brought in merely as a simile in the first stanza (the figures are *like* figures on an
urn), has now assumed reality in the sixth, and the “ghosts” are consigned to it, carefully
constrained and imprisoned within the work of art. Keats has wrought a kind of self-
deceiving alchemy by making his figures not merely *like* those on a Greek urn, but
*reduced* to such a status, and by fixing them firmly in *allegory*, which he then rejects for
the more or less acceptable reason that such approaches to poetry are too narrow. Thus,
poetic responsibility is recast as poetic drudgery and tutelary spirits are reduced to mere
pictures. As for the speaker, his head is bedded in the flowered grass of the previous
stanza, lost in communion with the soul that is the landscape itself. To follow the figures
is to follow worldly fame and fortune, and to be patronized (a pet-lamb) by the praise of
readers who do not understand (a sentimental farce). Better, then, that they fade into
obscurity and resume their masque-like postures *on the dreamy urn*, dreamy because the
speaker sees it only through the imprecision of his dreamy state, and dreamy because
unreal.

Indeed, the three figures seem in some sense to represent that “irritable reaching after
fact” that Keats so firmly dismisses elsewhere in the letters. Already in December 1817,
in a letter to his brothers George and Tom, Keats has described his idea of *negative
capability*, perhaps his most widely cited critical principle (so much is made of a single
formulation):

> At once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially
in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative
Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries,
doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason... With a great poet
the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all
consideration.

The tables are now turned: the speaker is apparently not reduced to a kind of effeminate
and negative indolence, but transformed into a condition in which “visions” can still
come to him – vivid in the dreams of night, and in daydreams fainter but abundant. He
has opted for the imagination over duty, for exploration of the soul over mechanical
writing for publication, for his own interior life over the exterior tension-filled life of
making a living and dealing with people, for internalities over the externalities of
allegory. Is this a variant of negative capability, or mere neglect of responsibility?
Everything depends on how he sets the terms of the debate. Are they fair?

In short, is this the right decision, to dismiss the figures and resume the dream? Is he
justified in turning away? And precisely what is he turning away from? The workaday
world, or the very vision of art? We recall Keats’s comment at the conclusion of his
preface to *Endymion*: “I hope I have not in too late a day touched the beautiful
mythology of Greece, and dulled its brightness: for I wish to try once more, before I bid it
farewell.” Is this an attempt to bid farewell to a storied past, the wellspring of his poetry? As the poem twists and turns in its arguments, and as each turn of the urn brings the figures back again, it is surely clear that the tension, whatever that tension may be, is only temporarily resolved. The urn will continue to revolve. To bid farewell is not necessarily to dismiss these representatives of duty, but in fact, through the jarring sentiments associated with leavetaking,

To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf.

Thus *Nightingale*, taking the germ of an idea in this poem and expanding it outwards. These lines, of course, undo the “drowsy numbness” of the poem’s opening, offering a more explicit conclusion, a single thread of meaning, drawn from the ambiguity of *Indolence*’s conclusion.
2. THE ODE TO PSYCHE

The Ode to Psyche is contained in the entry for April 30 of the journal-letter of 1819 to George and Georgiana. It follows, perhaps significantly, Keats’s copying out of two sonnets on fame and one on sleep, the twin poles on which the Ode on Indolence has revolved. “The following poem – the last I have written,” says Keats

is the first and only one with which I have taken even moderate pains. I have for the most part dash’d off my lines in a hurry. This I have done leisurely – I think it reads the more richly for it and will I hope encourage me to write other things in even a more peaceable and healthy spirit. You must recollect that Psyche was no embodied as a goddess before the time of Apuleius the Platonist who lived after the Augustan age, and consequently the Goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour – and perhaps never thought of in the old religion – I am more orthodox than to let a heathen Goddess be so neglected.  

And then the poem follows.

O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
Even into thine own soft-conched ear:
Surely I dreamt today, or did I see
The winged Psyche with awaken’d eyes?
I wander’d in a forest thoughtlessly,
And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,
Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side
In deepest grass, beneath the whisp’ring roof
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
A brooklet, scarce espied:
‘Mid hush’d, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,
They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;
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 auroean love:
The winged boy I knew;
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?

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28 Rollins 2: 105-106.
His Psyche true!

O 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, though temple thou hast none,
   Nor altar heap’d with flowers;
Nor 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.

O brightest! though too late for antique vows,
Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
Holy the air, the water, and the fire;
Yet even in these days so far retir’d
From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,
Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired.
So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
   Upon the midnight hours;
Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
From swinged censer teeming;
Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
Of pale-mouth’d prophet dreaming.

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;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull’d to sleep;
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath’d trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e’er could feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
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!

Keats’s Psyche has her origins, as he tells us in the journal-letter, in Apuleius, the late Latin author (he was born and lived in North Africa) whose fictional narrative The Golden Ass is the only remaining Latin “novel,” and whose philosophical works show a strong neo-Platonist strain. The Golden Ass contains, as one of its embedded stories, the story of Cupid and Psyche (retold in 1805 in Spenserian stanzas by Mary Tighe, in a poem that Keats had read years before, echoes of which reappear in his Ode). Psyche, we are told, was so beautiful that Venus became jealous of her, and sent Cupid (like Puck in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, which also looks back glancingly at Apuleius) to make her enamored of something thoroughly ugly. Instead, Cupid fell in love with her himself. He kept her in a palace and visited her only at night, forbidding her to attempt actually to see him. Her sisters said that he was really a monster. To check on the matter, she lit a torch and saw the beautiful young man – but a drop of wax fell on him and woke him up. So he left her in anger and did not return. Psyche was condemned to wandering over the earth in search of him, carrying out various apparently impossible tasks set by Venus. In various ways she succeeded at them all, though the last, to fetch a casket of beauty from Persephone in the Underworld, was particularly difficult. Curiosity overcame her and she opened the casket, which contained not Beauty but Sleep, and she fell into a deep sleep. Finally, Cupid prevailed on Jove to release her and she was united with him in heaven.

The story was often interpreted as the journey of the soul, so as a kind of pre-Christian Christian allegory (though Augustine goes out of his way to criticize Apuleius in The City of God). Keats probably read the story in Adlington’s 16th-century translation, but he may also have consulted Lempière’s Classical Dictionary, which we know he used, and whose 1806 edition has the following to say:

PSYCHE, a nymph whom Cupid married and carried into a place of bliss, where he long enjoyed her company. Venus put her to death because she had robbed the world of her son; but Jupiter at the request of Cupid granted immortality to Psyche. The word signifies the soul and this personification of Psyche first mentioned by Apuleius, is posterior to the Augustan age, though still it is connected with ancient mythology. Psyche is generally represented with the wings of a butterfly to intimate the lightness of the soul, of which the butterfly is the symbol, and on that account, among the ancients, when a man had just expired, a butterfly appeared fluttering above, as if rising from the mouth of the deceased.

Keats may also have turned to Joseph Spence’s Polymetis, or perhaps remembered this collection of, and commentary on, engravings of ancient sculpture, a copy of which was in Mr. Clarke’s school library.

There are two further texts that we might keep in mind, both from the letters. Just a few days before he wrote out *Psyche* in the journal letter, Keats included in the letter the following observation:

The common cognomen of this world among the misguided is as a “vale of tears” from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven – What a little circumscribed straightened notion! Call the world if you please “the vale of Soul-making.”

The world, says Keats, is like a school, in which, the soul is formed through examination of the human heart. A year earlier, in a letter to Reynolds from Teignmouth, dated April 27, 1818, Keats had written about something he called the “chamber of maiden thought:

I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being yet shut upon me. The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think – We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open ... we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of this thinking principle within us – we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight. However 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 one’s 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 – We see not the ballance of good and evil. We are in a Mist. We are now in that state – We feel the “burden of the Mystery”, to this Point was Wordsworth come ... when he wrote “Tintern Abbey” and it seems to me that his genius is explorative of those dark Passages.

Keats may well have felt as he felt, because he was depressed by Tom Keats’s condition down there in Teignmouth and by his conflicted feelings about George and Georgiana – his wish for their happiness but his sadness at their possible emigration. However, his notion, here and in the Vale of Soul-Making passage, about the progress towards an understanding of the human heart, closely reflects Wordsworth’s thinking. I have already quoted the passage from “Tintern Abbey” in which Wordsworth attempts to resolve the concerns of the world and the concerns of poetry:

*that blessed mood,*

*In which the burthen of the mystery,*

*In which the heavy and the weary weight*

*Of all this unintelligible world*

*Is lighten’d: -- that serene and blessed mood,*

*In which the affections gently lead us on,*
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame,
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul.

The message of Wordsworth’s poem is that this condition is attainable through a kind of human solidarity, and only in that way. To reach it, of course, requires a certain understanding of the burden, an understanding of the “heavy and weary weight” of the world and a willingness to set it aside, without, as it were, irritable reachings after fact. Implicit in such thinking, and explicit in Keats’s discussion of the opening and closing doors of human experience, is that the journey into experience is both crushing and inevitable: to recoil from it is natural and understandable. Indeed we hang back for as long as possible. But ultimately we must move forward, and no amount of play in the paradise of infancy will educate the soul as the progress through human life, through this vale of soul-making, will do.30 “We will grieve not, rather find / Strength in what remains behind,” wrote Wordsworth, only half-convinced, in the *Ode: Intimations of Immortality*.

And this vale of soul-making is the starting-point for the *Ode to Psyche* – a poem that deals in the most obvious sense with the story of the soul. The poem begins with an address to the goddess Psyche:

> O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
> By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
> And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
> Even into thine own soft-conched ear:

The address resembles an invocation of the Muse, much as, for example, Spenser (in a passage to which we have already had occasion to refer) invokes the Muse at the beginning of *The Faerie Queene* by stressing his own inadequacies (“Me, all too meane, the sacred Muse areeds”). The numbers are “tuneless” and they are “wrung” (both *rung* and *wrung*) by “sweet enforcement” – yet another instance of Keats’s particular interest in the relationship of pain and pleasure – much as they are wrung from Spenser (*areeds* means *commands*). The “remembrance dear” is both pleasurable memory and memories dearly bought: both the memory of the encounter and the memories of experience that brought the poet to this point of recognition and discovery. The goddess is asked to forgive the repetition of the sacred mysteries – though the fault is perhaps small if they are delivered back to her. This rather tight circle of addresser and addressee, this miniature feedback-loop, is important: the fact that Psyche was not worshipped by the Ancients allows her to become the poet’s personal goddess.

The impreciseness of the vision (dream-vision?) at the opening of *Indolence* is repeated in a somewhat different way at the opening of *Psyche*:

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30 We are reminded once again of the attraction and guilt associated with the reading of Shakespeare in the sonnet on *King Lear*, and of the reluctance in putting aside golden-tongued romance in favor of “the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassioned clay.”
Surely I dreamt today, or did I see
The winged Psyche with awak’nd eyes?

In the previous poem, the figures that the speaker saw dimly before him were of course manifestations of his own inner conflicts, extensions of himself. The vision of Psyche is perhaps similar: she is perhaps a manifestation of his own Poesy, his own poetic inspiration. The condition in which he wanders in the forest is similar to the indolent condition with which the other ode opens: “I wander’d in a forest thoughtlessly.” Such abandonment of thought, I might add (and indeed the setting of the opening itself), reminds one of the opening of *The Faerie Queene*, in which Una and the Red Cross Knight wander into a wood where they meet the monster Error – or the opening of the *Divine Comedy*, to which Spenser is also lightly referring: “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura, / chè la diritta via era smarrita.” Dorothy Sayers translates:

> Midway this way of life we’re bound upon,  
> I woke to find myself in a dark wood,  
> Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

> Ay me! how hard to speak of it – that rude  
> And rough and stubborn forest! the mere breath  
> Of memory stirs the old fear in the blood;

> It is so bitter, it goes nigh to death;  
> Yet there I gained such good, that, to convey  
> The tale, I’ll write what else I found therewith.  

Forced, then, to tell the tale, Dante proceeds, through the exercise of memory, to his narration. In Keats’s case, the scene that we enter upon is startlingly beautiful (as, by the way, it is as Una and Redcrosse move into their forest):

> And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,  
> Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side  
> In deepest grass, beneath the whisp’ring roof  
> Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran

Abrooklet, scarce espied:

Lemprière describes the Vale of Tempe, where Psyche resides, as “the most delightful spot on earth, with continually cool shades and verdant walks, which the warbling of birds rendered more pleasant and romantic.” A river ran through this beautiful and pleasant valley. In this setting, this *locus amoenus*, the speaker comes upon “two fair creatures,” lying in the grass (we are reminded of the grass in which the poet’s head is sunk at the conclusion of *Indolence*, as though this is a kind of reprise of the other poem),

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under trees touched by the breeze, and blossoms that tremble, almost as though their surroundings are themselves animate, trembling like nymphs, whispering like naiads.

‘Mid hush’d, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,
They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;
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:

The heavily sensuous imagery may look like a throwback to *Sleep and Poetry* or *Endymion*. It is all a bit much. The flowers are blue and white, and purple like the purple dye that came from Tyre. Amid them are the two creatures, their embrace a kind of post-coital pause, their lips neither touching nor separate – held in a kind of suspended animation that makes us think forward to the suspended animation of the Grecian Urn. Their kisses will be renewed when their eyes open (at “eye-dawn”, when their love, naturally, will be “aurorean”, of the dawn).

Again, as in *Indolence*, we are faced with a question: Who are these people?

The winged boy I knew;
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
His Psyche true!

We are dealing then (and the first verse-paragraph is devoted to making this clear) with the god Cupid and with a Psyche who started out as a mortal woman and became immortalized: it is a combination of mortal and immortal that we meet frequently in Keats.

Psyche is a late-discovered goddess, as Lemprière and Keats himself have told us. The hierarchy of Olympus has faded (faded now, or faded then?), and this latest goddess outshines Phoebe, the moon, and Vesper, the name given to Venus when she appears as the evening star:

O 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; .

The “faded hierarchy” of the gods contrasts with the lightness and brightness of Psyche. And as he turns to address her, the speaker’s verse changes, taking on a certain incantatory movement. Critics have pointed out that the movement, and the content, of the verse here resembles Milton’s “Nativity Ode,” in which the pagan gods yield to the
Keats seems to answer Milton (and to answer such poets as Wordsworth, who have banished from their verse the preciosity of the classical deities) by suggesting that Psyche is not as the other goddesses are, indeed that she is half-Christian, a kind of honorary Christian as her creator Apuleius was often regarded.

Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,
   Nor altar heap’d with flowers;
Nor 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.

Psyche, then, is without temple or altar, has no virginal priestesses, or lutes or incense. There is no “pale-mouth’d prophet” whose ecstasies can honor her. She was too late for such worship, at a time when earth, air, fire and water were imbued with the forces of pantheism and the entire natural world was sacred.

O brightest! though too late for antique vows,
   Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
Holy the air, the water, and the fire;

The poet, living in a more mundane time, far from “happy pieties,” can still see her wings and still sing her praises in the beauties of the world around him.

Yet even in these days so far retir’d
From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,
Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired.

The word “inspired” brings a turning-point, launching us into a massive, but logical, redirection of the poem, in which earlier rhythms are recaptured and turned to different effect: the poet himself will serve as Psyche’s priest and will dedicate himself to her service, becoming, in this sense, the “pale-mouth’d prophet dreaming” of the earlier, negative, section of the poem.

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

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32 See, for example, Vendler, *Odes*, pp. 50-51.
And so we enter the final section of the poem, in which the landscape is redefined and we move into surroundings animated in a different way. You will note that the meeting with Cupid and Psyche (or rather the vision of them: we do not know really whether the speaker is actually a part of the scene or simply its observer\(^{33}\)) takes place in a sheltered valley. The landscape that follows bears more resemblance to a different Romantic vision, not a paradise, so much as a sheltered spot contained within a wild landscape.

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:

The fane, or temple, to be erected to the goddess is “in some untrodden region of my mind”: we move into an interior landscape, in which “branched thoughts” replace the “leaves and trembled blossoms” of the earlier scene – thoughts that have grown from the “pleasant pain” of experience and that “murmur in the wind” in contrast to the “whisp’ring roof” of the first landscape. They are there “instead of pines” – perhaps the pines of Rome, or perhaps the pines of an imagined and less hospitable northern landscape, contrasting with the southern scene that we have already encountered. These trees are “dark cluster’d,” and they cover “wild-ridged mountains.”

Far, far around shall those dark-cluster’d trees
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;

It is only in the context of the darkness and wildness of these mountains that the landscape of paradise can exist:

And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull’d to sleep;
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath’d trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e’er could feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:

The trellis is the trellis of a working brain. It is rosy. Remember that Keats was trained in medicine, that he understood about brains and their appearance. We are dealing here, hard though it may be to make the required aesthetic leap, with the inside of the cranium, and with the physiological wonders associated with it. Within this sanctuary, there will be buds and bells and stars (like the budded Tyrian, the blue perhaps of bluebells, the white perhaps of daisies) – the poetic creations of the poet, aided by Fancy, the

\(^{33}\) The possibility that we are here dealing with an observed scene, or rather with two viewers, one inside the poem and one outside it, raises interesting questions about the relationship of this poem, and indeed other poems of Keats, to visual representations. See Ian Jack’s chapter on the ode in his Keats and the Mirror of Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 201-213.
“fantastic” quality of the poetic imagination, whose creations are potentially infinite, and who will serve as imaginative gardener for this blessed plot.

In the poem “Ever let the fancy roam,” written during the winter of 1818-19, in December, Keats offers us his most extensive definition of fancy, a term that occurs frequently in the poetry. He and his contemporaries distinguished between fancy and imagination, the first the unfettered creative impulse, the second the faculty that shapes and directs the fancy: in an October 1817 letter, Keats calls fancy the sails and imagination the rudder of poetry, the first catching the motive power and the second steering it. This poem, with its short lines and musical rhythms, offers us an introduction to many of the images that will later reappear in the odes – the bubbles of Nightingale, the buds and bells of Psyche and so on. But it also tells us that Fancy is a fleeting thing (Keats calls it “wingéd Fancy”), and it mourns the passing of the products of Fancy even as it reminds us that it is infinitely rich and capable of renewal.

Such a scene created, we can move to the conclusion of the poem, to the casement open to the larger world, the soft delight associated with the linking of love and the soul, and, in this environment slightly different from the original story, even a bright torch.

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!

We might note, though, that bright torches suggest the very negation of the scene here presented: they ended, at least for a time, the love of Cupid and Psyche and brought with them all manner of hardship. Indeed, the ambiguity does not end here: it is perhaps too prosaic to inquire who, exactly, is in the room and who outside? If the “rosy sanctuary” is built by the poet, then it might seem to be he who is enticing the moth-like Psyche to join him; but Apuleius tells us that Cupid, “the warm Love,” visited Psyche, not the other way round. In Keats’s poem, Cupid now seems transformed into a kind of tutelary god, presiding over the coming together of love and poetry in the poet’s “working brain.” But the very ambiguity of the ending, hauntingly beautiful as it is, is a kind of admission of poetic incompleteness: even this most optimistic of poems suggests that it is only a certain kind of poetic enthusiasm, of poetic wishful thinking, that will keep the vision alive.

The ambiguity of the final moment of the poem cannot, however, mask the radical realignment that has taken place in the shift from Indolence to Psyche – a very specific opting for one of the three figures dimly perceived in the earlier poem, namely for Poetry. This poem of rededication to the poetic calling nevertheless suggests that Love too will find a place in the new equation. Keats’s own love Fanny Brawne is never far from this poem, and the poem’s displaced sensuality perhaps springs from his longing for her. On July 18, 1818, a couple of months before he met Fanny, Keats had written to Benjamin Bailey from Inverary during his walking tour of Scotland, “I am certain I have

34 See, for example, Jack, Mirror of Art, p. 207.
not a right feeling towards Women – at this moment I am striving to be just to them but I cannot – Is it because they fall so far beneath my Boyish imagination? When I was a Schoolboy I thought a fair Woman a pure Goddess, my mind was a soft nest in which some one of them slept though she knew it not.”

Perhaps most striking is the fact that the poem constitutes a rather clear progression: the vacillation of *Indolence* is replaced by a firm sense of direction, which takes us from the Endymion-like vision of the earlier portion of the poem, self-indulgent, clingingly sensuous, voyeuristic, through the injection of the poet himself into the poem and his capture of its center. We pass through a rugged landscape, the landscape of a Vale of Soul-Making, if you will, and we emerge into a new version of the initial scene, but now internalized within the poet himself. This sacred space, contained within a landscape of “dark cluster’d trees,” resembles nothing so much as the setting of Coleridge’s *Kubla Khan*, written in 1797 and first published in 1816:

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In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
    Down to a sunless sea.
So twice five miles of fertile ground
With walls and towers were girdled round:
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;
And here were forests ancient as the hills,
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.
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The contrast between southern and northern landscape, between the sinuous rills of the one and the forests of the other (*Ein Fichtenbaum steht einsam*, as Heine would have it), symbolizing, at least according to some critics, the varied landscape of poetic inspiration, is reproduced in the movement of the *Ode to Psyche*. After an introductory stanza, we move into a sequence of four stanzas in which stanzas 4 and 5 are mirror images of stanzas 2 and 3: the speaker comes upon Cupid and Psyche in a flowery landscape in stanza 2, regrets that Psyche has not been worshiped by the ancients in stanza 3, declares that he will be her priest in stanza 4, and creates a new landscape for her in stanza 5. We are reminded again of the sonnet “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again,” dating from January 1818, in which “golden-tongued romance with serene lute” is replaced by “the fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion’d clay” –

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When I am through the old oak forest gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream,
But when I am consumed with the fire,
Give me new phoenix-wings to fly at my desire.
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If *Indolence* suggests a poetic sleight of hand that reduces Duty to the harmlessness of an antique, classical object, by fixing it firmly to a Greek urn, *Psyche* reanimates that object,
and puts the poet in the very center of things. Perhaps this new strategy is also a kind of sleight of hand. Perhaps it will be tested in new ways in the poems that follow. Certainly, the indolence of the earlier poem is replaced by the systematic creative activity of the later one: while the earlier poem is characterized by its use of the passive voice, there is hardly a passive construction to be found anywhere in the *Ode to Psyche*.

We should remember, though, that the poem undermines its own argument in various ways. I have pointed out already that the torch at the end of the poem, while it creates a warm and welcoming vision, reminds us that it was a lit torch that both told Psyche of the beauty that she was in love with and also tore that beauty away from her. Perhaps we are being told here that the marriage of Love and Poetry will be warmer and brighter than the vision of Cupid and Psyche among “blue” and “silver-white” flowers (in stanza 2). Likewise, not only does the opening of the poem remind us of an invocation to the Muse, but it also echoes Milton’s *Lycidas*, whose poet-speaker utters his elegy because “Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear, / Compels me to disturb your season due.” The undertow of sadness, so insistent in the odes, is reinforced by shadowy poetic presences that we cannot readily explain away.

3. THE ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE

The *Ode to Psyche* was written probably at the end of April: it turns up in the journal-letter to George and Georgiana under April 30. Keats tells them that he has written the poem “leisurely – I think it reads the more richly for it.” Just a few weeks before, on April 11 to be exact, Keats was walking toward Highgate from Hampstead when he came upon Coleridge talking with Joseph Henry Green, who later became Coleridge’s literary executor and was a colleague of Keats at Guy’s Hospital. Keats writes in the journal-letter:

I walked with him at his alderman-after-dinner pace for near two miles I suppose. In those two Miles he broached a thousand things – let me see if I can give you a list – Nightingales, Poetry – on Poetical sensation – Metaphysics – Different genera and species of Dreams – Nightmare – a dream accompanied by a sense of touch – single and double touch – A dream related...

Keats goes on to mention an abundance of other curiosities, and adds: “I heard his voice as he came towards me – I heard it as he moved away – I had heard it all the interval.” Coleridge was nothing if not loquacious. We can see perhaps how some of that conversation might have been transmuted into the Coleridgean elements in the *Ode to Psyche* – but we might also note that among Coleridge’s topics of discourse was “Nightingales.”

Coleridge’s poem *The Nightingale: A Conversational Poem, Written in April, 1798*, was one of the poems printed in the first edition of the *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. It is among the most distinguished pieces in that uneven collection (and not, by the way, his only address to a nightingale: it arises out of an earlier effort of 1795). The poem records an evening’s walk from Nether Stowey, where Coleridge lived, with William and Dorothy Wordsworth, to a nearby wood known for its nightingales. It quotes from the following passage about the nightingale, in Milton’s *Il Penseroso*:

Sweet bird, that shunn’st the noise of folly,  
Most musical, most melancholy!  
Thee, chauntress, oft the woods among  
I woo to hear thy even-song;  
And missing thee, I walk unseen  
On the dry smooth-shaven green,  
To behold the wand’ring moon  
Riding near her highest noon,  
Like one that hath been led astray  
Through the heav’n’s wide pathless way.
Coleridge’s poem is a kind of rewriting of this passage from Milton, but to very different end. The poets say Coleridge, have associated nightingales with melancholy and with the tragedy of Philomela, but we know better:

\`
\textquote{T}is the merry Nightingale  
That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates  
With fast thick warble his delicious notes,  
As he were fearful, that an April night  
Would be too short for him to utter forth  
His love-chant, and disburthen his full soul  
Of all its music.
\` 

In his emphatic rejection of the mythological connections of the nightingale, and his insistence that the song be listened to for its own sake, Coleridge set up for Keats a wider range of poetic possibilities, which Keats exploits to the full. Thus Keats responds to Coleridge who echoes Milton. Other poets before Coleridge have, of course, resisted the connection with Philomela, among them Philip Ayres, in To the Nightingale (1687), and Anne Finch (To the Nightingale, 1713), both of whom, like Keats in his way, stress the indifference of the nightingale to the affairs of this world.

Charles Brown, Keats’s walking companion in the Lakes and Scotland, with whom Keats had been living since the death of Tom the previous December, recalls the writing of Nightingale in well-known lines:

\`
In the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast-table to the grass-plot under a plum-tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of the nightingale.
\`

If these scraps of paper contained all of the Nightingale ode, it was clearly written at astonishing speed (not at all in the “leisurly” fashion of Psyche), a matter of a few hours of a morning. The resulting poem is the longest of the odes, building on those we have already examined and pointing the way to the ones that followed:

\`
My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:  
\textquote{T}is not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thine happiness, --  
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,  
In some melodious plot
\`
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

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

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

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.
Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad

In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;

The same that oft-times hath
Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! The very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now ‘tis buried deep

In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: -- Do I wake or sleep?

We note at once a significant shift in mood from the Ode to Psyche. The poem opens with the speaker in a condition not so different from the Ode on Indolence, in a kind of trance, a “blissful cloud of summer indolence,” as it is called in the earlier poem. The cause in this case (we are never quite sure what induces the condition in the earlier ode) is the song of a nightingale – an external stimulus of a kind that we have not encountered in either of the two previous poems (Indolence actually conjures up its urn, and Psyche is played out as a kind of internalized drama). The opening stanza is curious: we back into the song:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
‘Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness, --
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

Perhaps the very first thing we notice about the stanza is its syntax, which has the effect of setting up a series of ambiguities at the center. The first four lines are clear enough syntactically, but then follow the lines “‘Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness, -- / That thou ... singest...” Our first reaction is to try to link lines 5 and 6 to the nightingale, stumbling as we do so over the second-person pronouns. The lines, we then discover, refer back to the first four lines: “My state of drowsiness and numbness is due not to jealousy of your situation [perhaps the quality of the song; perhaps the apparently carefree life of the bird], but to an excess of happiness at the happiness that you are displaying, in that you sing of summer so easily.” The very confusion of referents suggests a kind of identification with the bird – an identification that reduces the speaker to a condition somewhere between animation and non-existence (we are reminded of Keats’s letter to Bailey of 22 November 1817: “If a Sparrow come before my Window, I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel”). Envy, a negative emotion, is replaced by happiness, an uplifting one: this is not some singing competition, or a debate. Perhaps somewhere in the back of Keats’s mind was Handel’s organ concerto The Cuckoo and the Nightingale, based in turn on Clanvowe’s poem of the same name (of 1403, in Keats’s day believed to be by Chaucer), in which a young lover goes out into the fields at night to listen to the nightingale, falls asleep and dreams that he is listening to a debate on love between a nightingale and a cuckoo (Wordsworth “modernized” the poem in 1801, but his version was not published until 1841, and therefore probably not known to Keats). Not this, then, but rather Coleridge’s “merry nightingale, / That crowds, and hurries, and precipitates / With fast thick warble his delicious notes” – though the structure of the medieval dream-vision (the poet falling asleep and entering a miraculous landscape) does form a kind of tentative jumping-off point for both Nightingale and Psyche.

The nightingale is never exactly introduced: it is simply already there. The mode of movement into the poem is the very reverse of what we might expect, since we are first told what results, then why it happens, and only after that do we discover the cause in the nightingale’s song. The nightingale, then, is in some sense already singing when the poem begins – and, of course, is still singing when the poem ends: the poem is in effect appended to, exfoliated from, this ongoing and continuous song. The nightingale is described as a “light-winged Dryad of the trees,” reminding us perhaps of the moss-lain dryads of Psyche. It sings, we are told “in some melodious plot / Of beechen green,” the very space itself becoming melodious, filled with the easy song. The poem is a (failed) celebration of lyric as (to use Helen Vendler’s terms, Odes, p. 131) “pure, spontaneous, nonrepresentational melodiousness evocative of rich sensations.”
We might recognize in the first four lines the reverie of *Indolence*. It is true that “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense,” whereas the earlier poem is quite specific about the fact that pain is suppressed, but the heart-ache of line 1 may correspond to the state of the speaker who “ach’d for wings” in the earlier poem, a longing for union with the three mysterious figures that perhaps finds a parallel in the speaker’s yearning after the nightingale (and, as we shall see, a certain ambivalence in that regard). Edmund Blunden suggests that Keats, who was fond of Horace, had the Latin poet in mind here: Horace’s *Epode* 14 opens with lines that ask “why soft indolence [mollis inertia] has diffused as great forgetfulness over my inmost senses as if with parched throat I had drained the bowl that brings Lethean sleep?” Such indolence, says Horace, prevents him from completing the poem he has begun. Blunden’s observation might apply also to the *Ode on Indolence*, a poem concerned in part with the poet’s inability and unwillingness to take action and perhaps inspired in part by Horace’s well-known lines.  

In any event, we open with a set of signals that suggest not the forward movement of *Psyche* (in which negatives are turned to positives, and the insistent Miltonic line eventually drives the poem forward), but the lethargic motionlessness of *Indolence*. However, the indolence, if that is what we call it, is linked to the bird’s song, so that the disconnection at the center of *Indolence* – the figures going one way, the poet another – is in some sense bridged. But the poem begins not with images of rising to meet the bird but with images of decline: “hemlock” and “Lethe” suggest a decline, a dropping downwards (Keats uses the word *sunk*), that is the very opposite of the movement of the bird, and suggests death rather than rapture: hemlock, while it is a soporific when taken in small quantities, is a poison when taken in larger quantities, and Lethe is, after all, a river of the underworld. In other words, the very response of the poet to the song of the nightingale seems to guarantee the impossibility of any kind of union with it: indolence is not the answer.

So the poet looks for ways of recasting the lethargy in order to reach the singing bird: the second stanza performs the function of neutralizing and overcoming the rather ambiguous liquid draughts of the opening lines by replacing them with draughts of a different kind, imbibed, perhaps with the “full-throated ease” of the nightingale’s song:

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;

---


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

The image of a kind of burial, of the “deep-delved earth,” is still there, and indeed will linger in various ways throughout the poem, essentially unresolved; but here it is turned into a positive: the draught of wine that the poet calls for may have matured deep in the earth in cool cellars, but it evokes a kind of pastoral mirth, a scene of happy peasants and sunlit landscapes, a scene that seems to sing “of summer in full-throated ease.” Wine, he suggests, is “the true, the blushful Hippocrene,” the Muses’ fountain transformed – indeed almost personified in the bubbles that wink and the “purple-stained mouth” of the beaker – an unusual container for a draught of vintage, but one with a distinctive mouth.

No “pale-mouthed prophet” this. Warmth and song will overcome the here and now and allow the poet to “leave the world unseen” (both leaving the world without being seen to do so, and also leaving the world without seeing it), losing himself in the continuity of the nightingale’s song to “fade away into the forest dim.”

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs,  
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

The old Keatsian dichotomies are firmly present: art as a means of escape; the reconciliation of poetry and life through the difficult discovery of what Wordsworth calls “the still sad music of humanity.” The first predominates, at least at this stage in the poem. The world from which the speaker seeks to escape, in contrast to the situation of the nightingale “among the leaves” is full of weariness, fever, and fret. Helen Vendler (pp. 89-90) faults Keats for a certain formless repetition here, but in fact the sequence is rather carefully organized to move us from cold realism to the distancing achieved through personification and allegory: we begin with men who listen to one another’s groans, “where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs” – literal palsy shaking literal hairs (though one wonders whether Keats had in mind Shakespeare’s sonnet 73, where palsied winter is linked with the withering of poetic talent:

That time of year thou mayst in me behold  
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang  
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,  
Bare ruined quires where late the sweet birds sang).
But, as numbers of readers have pointed out, the word “palsy” readily transforms itself into a kind of personification of that condition, followed by “youth” that “grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies,” and so on to Beauty and Love in the final lines of the stanza. Many readers remind us, however, that it is not that youth becomes age, but that young people die, withering away into leanness and death much as Tom Keats had withered away just a few short months before. It is not an image that Keats can easily hold: the poem draws back from it almost immediately. As it does so, it perhaps suggests why the poet in *Psyche* “wander’d in a forest thoughtlessly”: to think, after all, is “to be full of sorrow / And leaden-eyed despairs.” The poem seems once again to sink beneath the weight of care.

But the images of Beauty and Love in the final lines of the stanza both distance the tragic sadness of mid-stanza and constitute what is perhaps a different way, a different mechanism, for bridging the gap between this vale of tears and the song of the nightingale – a way of turning tears to soul-making. Beauty and Love die in *their particulars*, but as presences in this world they continue forever: they are an *endless* series of iterations of loss and desire. It is not, then, that the fever and fret vanish and disappear but that they are contained in the larger context of eternity.

For the moment, though, the development of the third stanza is indeed forgotten. The opening of the fourth stanza, “Away! Away!” picks up the language of the opening of the third: “Fade far away, dissolve...”

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

Indeed, the stanza seems to vault over stanza 2, with its mention of wine, as well: Bacchus and his leopards (who drew his chariot) are set aside, and it is on the “viewless wings of Poesy” that the speaker will be borne. Again, we are reminded of *Indolence*:

A third time pass’d they by, and, passing, turn’d
Each one the face a moment whiles to me;
Then faded, and to follow them I burn’d
And ached for wings, because I knew the three:

In *Indolence* there were no wings, though the poet desired them. If, in *Psyche*, the poet was able to lure the winged creature to him (the matter is left unresolved of course), here, for a moment, flight seems possible. The wings are *viewless*, invisible: Shakespeare
refers to “viewless winds” in Measure for Measure. Flight is held back by the dull brain of the poet, but he seems none the less to reach his goal: “Already with thee! Tender is the night, / And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne, / Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays.”

Haply... but if it is so, it does not last. The wings are not only invisible but they are evidently in this context “viewless” in the other sense as well: the poet sees nothing. In fact, far from soaring, he is kept in darkness amid “verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.” So what we have just witnessed – this union with the bird, the moon and the stars, is an illusion – a suggestion that if it is simply stated firmly enough it will be so. The sudden reversal in this stanza is a reminder of something very important about the dramatic movement of this poem and of many other poems of Keats: to state that something is so is not necessarily a declaration that it is so. The speaker here is trying every device, every approach, every gambit, to make something happen, including what under more mundane circumstances would be called wishful thinking (“Away!” and the negative thoughts of earthly suffering are banished; “Away!” and the speaker is flying with the soaring bird). Indeed, the whole poem turns on the question of wishful thinking, on trying to bring about a particular conclusion that remains as elusive as the bird. It is as though there are two speakers of the poem, themselves engaged in a kind of intrapoetic dialogue: the speaker who composes, who, Orpheus-like, seeks to change the world through language, and the speaker who critiques the first speaker’s composition, questioning it, rejecting it, and reformulating it. Perkins describes the argument of the odes as “symbolic debate.”

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 eglandine;
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.

So we enter into a kind of darkened dream landscape, in which the landscape is not seen but felt, not touched but perceived through its wondrous odors. Keats once again has Milton in mind (Charles Brown and Keats packed a copy of Milton in their knapsacks on their walking tour to the Lakes and Scotland: Keats knew his Milton well): in Lycidas the poet calls on nature to bloom once again, in language that prefigures not only Nightingale but Psyche too:

Return, Sicilian Muse,

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39 Vendler, Odes, p. 91.
And call the vales, and bid them hither cast
Their bells and flow’rets of a thousand hues.
Ye valleys low where the mild whispers use
Of shades and wanton winds and gushing brooks,
On whose fresh lap the swart star sparely looks,
Throw hither all your quaint enameled eyes,
That on the green turf suck the honied show’rs,
And purple all the ground with vernal flow’rs.
Bring the rathe primrose that forsaken dies,
The tufted crowtoe, and pale jessamine,
The white pink, and the pansy freaked with jet,
The glowing violet,
The musk-rose, and the well-attired woodbine,
With cowslips wan that hang the pensive head,
And every flower that sad embroidery wears.

This flowery garden of stanza 5 is a kind of enchanted garden, but one in which there is no light, in which objects can be perceived only through their odors. So the description that we are given here is a kind of negative description – of a scene that both exists and does not exist. Keats conveys this sense particularly effectively in the stanza’s second line: the speaker cannot see the flowers among which he is standing, and he cannot see what is above all a phenomenon of the sense of smell, the “soft incense” that “hangs upon the boughs.” Indeed he finds himself in “embalmed darkness,” guessing at the objects around him – grass, thicket, fruit-tree, and violets that are fading and musk-rose that is just blooming. With the passing from violet to musk-rose (a passing that precisely mirrors Milton’s), we are reminded of the change of seasons and the passing of time, and the repetition of sweets that the summer brings, even as the poet seems to stand outside the process. This is a curious kind of enclosed garden, different, surely, from Psyche’s, and both sensuous and disturbing: it is a place of “embalmed darkness,” embalmed because full of balms, of odors, but embalmed also because it is dead: this is the heaped bier of a dead poet. And why do the violet and musk-rose bloom in Milton’s poem? “To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.” There is no denying the beauty of the scene, but it is a scene that leads only to poetic death.

The “verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways” of the scene seem reminiscent of the labyrinthine paths encountered by Spenser’s Red Cross Knight and Una in the innermost parts of the Wood of Error, or the downward slope that will lead Redcross into the Cave of Despair, scattered with the bodies of suicides. Redcross and Una enter the wood to shelter from the rain, but they move forward through the trees, deeper and deeper into the forest, marveling at the beauties around them: it is a trap, a distraction, this wandering wood.

In such a setting, in this garden of Proserpine (see Spenser, *FQ* 2.7) at the center of Keats’s poem, Coleridge’s merry nightingale is all too likely to become a Philomela, to become the singer of a funeral dirge:
Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
   In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –
To thy high requiem become a sod.

The word “darkling” has always struck me as a word particularly rich in implications. It is both an adverb and an adjective, both “in the dark” and “having to do with the darkness.” It is derived from an Old English suffix –ling, meaning “in the direction of,” as though somehow the poet is turned towards the dark, turned away from the light, dealing with the onset of darkness. It is as though he is caught here between light and dark, contemplating at this moment a turning in the direction of darkness. Others have caught the agonies of Hamlet here. Vendler (p. 85) points out that the tragic ironies of Hamlet’s “To die, to sleep” are here translated into Keats’s “To die, to cease,” just as his “weary, stale, flat and unprofitable” world emerges in Keats’s poem as “the weariness, the fever and the fret.” Hamlet wishes that his flesh might “melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,” while Keats seeks to “fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget.” Vendler remarks that as the poem ends, the Ghost’s “Adieu, Adieu, Adieu” echoes in its lines. To be half in love with easeful death, given that love itself cannot pine for beauty “beyond tomorrow,” may not be wholly inappropriate. And how easy it might be, this self-erasure, in this vale of soul-making, when the nightingale himself pours forth its soul so freely! But such release would not produce the soaring power that the poet seems to seek in the fourth stanza. It would merely complete the scene: the bird would sing, the body would dissolve into the turf beneath the pensive poet’s feet, “To thy high requiem become a sod.”

No, the path of Philomela is, as Coleridge suggested, the wrong path. Keats, following Coleridge, is at pains to avoid the traditional associations of the nightingale, but, oddly, they keep tugging at him: the suggestion that the bird sings requiems over a poet who has become one with the turf, once stated, is in effect rejected (another example of the turning mind of the speaker), to be replaced by an exclamation about the bird’s immortality. So we put aside the fifth and sixth stanzas, with their heady images of death, and the fourth with its false vision of soaring flight, and move back to the conclusion of the third. If Beauty and Love depend for their very realization on their ephemerality, they are none the less, in themselves, eternal. Beautiful things die; love is extinguished. But in truth the abstractions called Love and Beauty endure.

40 Thomas Hardy’s poem “The Darkling Thrush” is heavily reminiscent of Keats’s ode.
Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

What are we to make of the first, most famous, line? F.R. Leavis quotes Robert Bridges: “The thought is fanciful or superficial – the man being as immortal as the bird.” A good point, but Leavis points out, wisely, that the fallaciousness of the thought “witnesses ... to the intensity of the wish that fathered it.” It is in the nature of poetic truth to reach beyond the possible, and Keats, in declaring the immortality of the bird, is also expressing his own wish to become one with that line of poets that links emperor and clown, the poetry of the Bible, and the great writers of romance. It is not just that these antique peoples heard the nightingale, but that they heard the poets too. You were not born for death, Keats says, in the sense that your song has always been heard; but I was born for death as long as I can find no way to share in the poetic line and contribute to it. Furthermore, you were not born to officiate at funerals: we need no requiems from you, no representations of Philomela.

If, then, we read these lines as the poet’s attempt to reject thoughts of death in favor of thoughts of life, and to reject descent into dejection in favor of a rising to engage with the nightingale’s song, we can read the poem as another attempt by the poet to identify himself with poetry, with the tradition to which he feels so firmly that he belongs. The line is the turning-point, the tipping-point in the ode, much as Psyche has a similar point in which the positive and personal replaces the negative – the emphasis on lack of a cult of Psyche, lack of a shrine. In this poem the turn resembles the anastrophe of pastoral elegy at which lament for death is replaced by an affirmation of life: “Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more, / For Lycidas, your sorrow, is not dead.” But if the line of Shakespeare and Milton is powerful, it is less easy for Keats, as he labors vainly at his great epic Hyperion, never finished, indeed abandoned, to make the leap to poetic greatness, to seize the vision and make it his own. Nightingale, a poetic triumph in its soaring beauty, is none the less a record of poetic failure.

We can at least affirm that the stanza’s first line, much fought-over by the critics, tells us two things (among many). First it tells us that the nightingale’s song is life-affirming, not life-denying. Secondly, it suggests that the nightingale is eternal, even if a nightingale is not. This, in its way, is the message of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, that most influential of classical works: the tragedies of the gods and of mortals are transformed into forms that will endure forever. Adonis becomes, not an anemone but the anemone, Syrinx becomes

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not a laurel, but the laurel, Philomela becomes the nightingale: the indefinite becomes definite. It is this, this ongoing sense of significant time, to which the young poet must attach himself: he is, or should become, part of an enduring tradition. The process of metamorphosis of course resembles the process of allegorization: a substitution of the general for the particular, the transformation of the ephemeral into the universal. In this sense, the presence of Love and Beauty in the third stanza draws the sting of the human misery at its center, as the particulars of human tragedy are subsumed under the redeeming processes of allegorization.

Of course, the declaration that the nightingale was not born for death does not automatically carry us away from the funereal gloom of the previous stanzas into a new participation in the relationship between time and eternity. Our nightingale, firmly separated from any notion of a mournful Philomela, is supremely indifferent to the affairs of human beings, and to pull the bird into some Ovidian drama is to question its very nightingale-ness and the purity of its song. Perhaps we are being told, in short, that the bird was not born for death, but that we, most emphatically were.

So in the most obvious sense, the nightingale is immortal because its song is immortal: it is not beaten down by weariness and fever and fret, by the “hungry generations” of the human race because it has no part in these things. The same song was heard “in ancient days,” across generations and across ranks, “by emperor and clown.” It was heard perhaps by Ruth who was forced by famine (the hungry generations of the second line of the stanza perhaps suggest the image) to work as a gleaner in the fields of her kinsman Boaz. Hers is a story that begins sadly but ends well: Boaz has compassion on her and encourages her fellow-workers to help her (Ruth 2: 15-17).

And when she was risen up to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, saying, Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not: And let fall also some of the handfuls of purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not. So she gleaned in the field until even, and beat out that she had gleaned: and it was about an ephah of barley.

Eventually Boaz marries her. Their son will be the father of Jesse, the father of David. No nightingale figures in her story, nor are we told that she weeps in the fields, but her solitary figure is almost certainly also a reminiscence of Wordsworth’s Solitary Reaper:

Behold her, single in the field, Yon solitary Highland Lass! Reaping and singing by herself; Stop here, or gently pass! Alone she cuts and binds the grain, And sings a melancholy strain; O listen! for the Vale profound Is overflowing with the sound.
No Nightingale did ever chaunt
More welcome note to weary bands
Of travellers in some shady haunt,
Among Arabian sands:
A voice so thrilling ne’er was heard
In spring-time from the Cuckoo-bird,
Breaking the silence of the seas
Among the farthest Hebrides.

So our excursion into the past takes us not only to the Old Testament and its often strange
and mysterious stories, but also to one of Wordsworth’s figures of endurance – and from
there to the world of romance, with its magic casements (the third open casement in three
poems, we note), “opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.” No
one has ever adequately explained (as far as I know) why we should expect to find a
cuckoo among the waters of the farthest Hebrides, hardly a likely setting for such
creatures, but perhaps the reference to these wide waters prompts Keats’s equally
unlikely ornithological conjunction of “perilous seas” and the nightingale’s song. That
aside, why are these faery lands forlorn? Primarily perhaps because they are simply lost
in the reaches of time – but the word also carries a sense of tragedy, of doom, that carries
the poet forward into the next stanza:

Forlorn! The very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now ‘tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: -- Do I wake or sleep?

We have noted already how Keats uses particular words to serve as links between
stanzas: “away,” for example, takes us from the second stanza to the third, and then,
when the sentiments in the third stanza are erased, on to the fourth. We have noted also
how the poem has two speakers, one of whom creates while the other erases or reshapes.
The link between the seventh and eighth stanzas works in this way: “forlorn,” once stated
by one voice, is instantly questioned by the second.

The sound of the word “forlorn,” a rendering of the word “faery lands” with the a’s
turned to o’s, is like a tolling bell: the funeral theme is in this sense still with us. The
bell also denotes the passing of time, which intrudes on this meditation on immortality.
We recall from the sonnet “On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again” how the
poet turns aside from “golden-tongued romance” to Shakespeare’s tragedy of Lear, the
first seen as something of a self-indulgence, a distraction. It is this, above all, that
produces the turning aside here: it is not just that the selection of a word by the poet has
the effect of recalling the poet-speaker to his senses, but also that Keats’s growing distrust of particular kinds of poetic self-indulgence, swelling under the strain of certain poetic associations, provokes a negative response. The increasingly sentimentalized nightingale (Is Ruth weeping at her own misfortune or at the beauty of the nightingale’s song, or, heaven forbid, at both?), and the still more sentimentalized Spenser (or his like, the staple of *Endymion*), have no place here.

Or perhaps the problem lies still deeper: in contemplating the poetic tradition, in all its crushing power, Keats is able to explain away the nightingale’s departure with an access of sentimentality: it is not the awareness that he is not part of the tradition that brings him back to his sole self, but a kind of unfortunate mawkishness.

I should emphasize again that the odes are essentially dramatic pieces, and *Nightingale* perhaps more so than its predecessors. As was clear back in January 1818, when Keats wrote about *King Lear* and its “fierce dispute / Betwixt damnation and impassion’d clay,” he saw in the astringency, the tightness and focus, of drama an antidote to the dreamy imprecision of unfocussed narrative, and he pushed towards such dialogues of the mind in each of the odes, beginning with *Indolence*. But pushing into this debate yields tragedy, yields desire that cannot be fulfilled, leads back to the “sole self.” As Keats put it in a verse-epistle to Reynolds of March 1818 (a poem remarkably prescient of several of the themes in the Odes), “It is a flaw / In happiness to see beyond our bourn – / It forces us in summer skies to mourn; / It spoils the singing of the nightingale.”

This sole self to which we return at the end of the poem is a self devoid of poetic diction, devoid of mythological ornament. The realm of poetic association seems to fade, paradoxically, even as the nightingale fades, and as it does so it rings with the sad leave-taking of repeated adieus: “Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades...” Of course, it is the poet who bids the nightingale adieu, but the poem leaves one with the sense that at some level it is also the nightingale bidding adieu to the poet. Old Hamlet fades away with the coming of the dawn, leaving his son with the pressing burden of Duty: “Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me.”

*Luscinia megarhyncha*, the European nightingale, is a migratory bird, the males arriving in England in early to mid-April and the females a little later (as is common with migratory birds). While the nightingale does indeed sing after nightfall, it also sings during the day, a matter on which the poets are notably silent (Brown, in the passage quoted above, records that Keats sat in the garden in the early morning). But the nightingale is notable for its early departure from the summer musical scene: the male (and it is only the male who sings, though the poets seem more frequently to render the nightingale female) ceases his song in early June. Hence the song that fades over the next hill is an early sign of the fading of summer, the first of the birds who go silent, as the swallows of *To Autumn* are the last. Keats may have had in mind Charlotte Smith’s sonnet *On the Departure of the Nightingale* (1786), a poem he is thought to have known (it is one of two sonnets on nightingales written by this influential and accomplished poet):
Sweet poet of the woods, a long adieu!
Farewell, soft minstrel of the early year!
Ah, ‘twill be long ere thou shalt sing anew
And pour thy music on the ‘night’s dull ear.’

But if Keats remembers *Hamlet*, he also remembers the poet Spenser, who, in his alter ego Colin Clout, bids adieu to pastoral, in the final, December eclogue of *The Shepherd’s Calendar*, in order to dedicate himself to epic:

> Gather ye together my little flocke.
> My little flock, that was to me so liefe:
> Let me, ah lette me in your folds ye lock,
> Ere the breme Winter breede you greater griefe.
> Winter is come, that blowes the balefull breath,
> And after Winter commeth timely death.
>
> Adieu delightes, that lulled me asleepe,
> Adieu my deare, whose love I bought so deare:
> Adieu my little Lambes and loved sheepe,
> Adieu ye Woodes that oft my witnesse were:
> Adieu good Hobbinol, that was so true,
> Tell Rosalind her Colin bids her adieu.

If Spenser’s poem echoes behind Keats’s final stanza, and I believe it does, the echo implies an act of sacrifice and rededication – a turning aside from the merely decorative, the pastoral mode, and a dedication to more ambitious and stronger undertakings.

Nightingales, as far as I know, do not sing on the wing, so presumably Keats’s nightingale moves from spot to spot ever further off – but one certainly has the impression of a bird and its song gradually fading away into the distance. “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?” asks the poet, leaving his readers to puzzle for two hundred years (and beyond) over his meaning. “Surely I dreamt today, or did I see / The winged Psyche with awaken’d eyes?” asks the poet of *Psyche*. “Fled is that music,” exclaims the poet of *Nightingale*; “Do I wake or sleep?” The sadness of the question renders the answer unnecessary. Indeed there is no answer. Caught between sleeping and waking, the poet imagines for a moment a way of linking the here-and-now with this vision of beauty, but neither sleep nor waking can hold the linkage. The nightingale past, we are thrown back on our selves.

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43 Wu, *Romantic Women Poets*, p. 75. Smith’s quotation is from the Prologue to Act 2 of Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. We might note in passing that Wordsworth’s poem “O Nightingale! thou surely art,” written and published in 1807 and included in his 1815 collected edition, focuses on the nightingale and the stock-dove. The latter’s “voice was buried among trees.” This line is selected for particular discussion in Wordsworth’s preface to the 1815 volume.
And yet, and yet. In February 1818, a few weeks after the *King Lear* poem, Keats wrote an unrhymed sonnet about a thrush:

O thou whose face hath felt the winter’s wind,
Whose eye has seen the snow-clouds hung in mist,
And the black elm tops ‘mong the freezing stars,
To thee the spring will be a harvest-time.
O thou, whose only book has been the light
Of supreme darkness which thou feddest on
Night after night when Phoebus was away,
To thee the spring shall be a triple morn.
Oh, fret not after knowledge – I have none,
And yet my song comes native with the warmth.
Oh, fret not after knowledge – I have none,
And yet the evening listens. He who saddens
At thought of idleness cannot be idle,
And he’s awake who thinks himself asleep.

It is a dialogue poem: first the poet addresses the bird, then the bird the poet. The bird eschews irritable reaching after fact (to use Keats’s terms), “and yet the evening listens.” Sending the poem to Reynolds, Keats remarks, “All this is mere sophistication, however it may neighbour to any truths, to excuse my own indolence.” When the theme of indolence re-emerges a year later, it leads to an examination of the condition not dissimilar from this earlier effort to explain it. “He’s awake who thinks himself asleep,” says the poet, but can he believe his own assertion?

So should we conclude that the fleeting vision of beauty in the nightingale is nothing more than an illusion, nothing more than another false start? It is essentially another approach to the same problem that Keats poses at the outset, in the *Ode on Indolence* – how to link the creative moment with the discipline of poetry, and how to write poetry powerful enough to enter the great tradition of poets without being crushed beneath the weight of their example. It is a search for a metaphor of creation powerful enough to stand and withstand. In this series of poems chronicling the growth of a poet’s mind (for the odes are, in their way, Keats’s *Prelude*, though they are destined to stand as his monument), Keats has explored in *Indolence* the conditions of poetic inspiration and failed to link them with an animating metaphor: the poem is not itself a failure, but a poetic (indeed dramatic) retelling of a failed process. *Psyche* offers the possibility of success – a vision of the containment of beauty within the landscape of human experience and within the very being of the poet. It is an optimistic poem that leaves us on the edge of fulfillment. *Nightingale* uses an image from the natural world as its objective correlative, and the free spirit of the bird both creates great poetry and slips from the poet’s grasp. The poem twists and turns as much as, or more than, *Indolence* twists and turns (Wasserman says: “Forces contend wildly within the poem, not only without resolution, but without possibility of resolution”), but it also pushes aside the false allurements of self-indulgence, which can lead only to the death of the soul and perhaps

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to the death of the body, and forces on the poet a kind of rededication, if only because other options are eliminated. The awakening poet perhaps finds himself on a “cold hillside” like the knight in La Belle Dame Sans Merci (also written in this same period, in April 1819) – in a place where “the sedge is withered from the lake / And no birds sing.” Indeed, with its fierce concentration in the final lines on the actual bird, the actual scene, Nightingale leaves us, and the poet, poetically defenseless, alone with the passing of time.

Above all, the song of the nightingale, starting-point and dominant image, while it powerfully combines ephemerality and eternity (the song comes and goes, flies in and flies out; the song goes on forever, from before history until after it), none the less is insufficient to carry the complicated material that Keats seeks to pack into this complex and hurriedly written poem, and cannot provide him with a context for his aspirations as a poet and his own sense of being. The poem presses a whole series of keys into service, but none fits the lock – and we are left at the end of the poem with the nightingale “fading” and the poet alone on the shore. Wasserman (p. 183) summarizes: “By attempting to gain ‘happiness,’ one is brought beyond his proper bound, and yet, being mortal, he is still confined to the earthly; and thus he is left with no standards to which to refer, or rather, with two conflicting sets of standards.”

I earlier quoted one of Keats’ s two sonnets on the Elgin Marbles. It bears repeating, in its entirety, here, because it describes a progression not dissimilar from that of Nightingale – from awe, to confusion, to a shadowy and elusive sense of grandeur:

My spirit is too weak – mortality
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
And each imagined pinnacle and steep
Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
Yet ‘tis a gentle luxury to weep
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
Fresh for the opening of the morning’s eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old Time – with a billowy main –
A sun – a shadow of a magnitude.

Keats’s subject here is Greek sculpture, very different from the song of a nightingale; but the sentiments show a certain similarity: the sense of artistic inadequacy before the glories of the perceived object, a self-indulgent despair at this inadequacy, a sense of confusion at the course of human history and the effects of time, and, at the end, an object whose presence is only definable in its shadow cast by the sun. The metaphors are different in Nightingale, but the result is oddly the same. Not a cold hillside, this, but something experienced, the memory of which remains and, remaining, has the power to
transform. The poet is ready to try again – this time not with the heard and time-
dependent song of the nightingale, not with the natural world at all; but with the
permanence of art – an effort suited to one deep in Phidian lore.
4. THE ODE ON A GRECIAN URN

*Nightingale* and *Grecian Urn* were both published in the journal *Annals of the Fine Arts*, edited by James Elmes, a friend of the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon, who was in turn a close friend of Keats. Vendler (p. 116) suggests that *Nightingale* and *Grecian Urn* form a pair, the first concentrating on music, and the second on the plastic arts. It is an attractive idea, even if her emphasis on the musical connection in *Nightingale* may be a shade single-minded. Music is, after all, a human facsimile of significant time, a link between mere repetition and the timelessness of form. The poem itself, descriptive of a bird that sings at night (in fact, as we have seen, nightingales sing in daylight too, but no matter), is a poem not of sight but of sound and of smell. The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is in this sense a significant contrast – and a poem that takes us back to the beginning, to *Indolence*.

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:
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?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
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!

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.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead’st thou that heifer lowing to 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.

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!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Thanours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

_Grecian Urn_ is probably the most talked-about and fought-over of all of Keats’s odes. It is in certain respects markedly different from its predecessors. _Psyche_ and _Nightingale_ are both poems of darkness, night-pieces. This is a poem of daylight. While the two earlier poems are odes to _Psyche_ and to a nightingale, the poem that follows is _Ode on a Grecian Urn_. _Nightingale_ dwells on sound, on melodies that have no representational function, while _Grecian Urn_ is a poem that deals rather directly with the problem of meaning. And if _Nightingale_ is a poem of music, _Grecian Urn_ is a poem of the visual arts – a poem that reaches back to _Indolence_ for its dominant image.

The cruxes in the poem are well known: its opening (the terms “still unravished” and “bride”), the identity of the urn (Does it have an original?), the message that it delivers (What does Keats mean by Beauty and Truth?), the question of what the message is (Just the reference to truth and beauty, or the entire final lines of the poem?). The first and last of these cruxes are in part matters of punctuation, which varies from publishing to publishing, but they have a significant effect on how the poem is read and what it tells us.

We will come to these matters in due course, but first, a reminder of an important passage in Keats’s letter to Bailey eighteen months earlier (November 22, 1817): “I am certain of
nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth ... The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream – he awoke and found it truth.” The reference is to *Paradise Lost* – the passage in Book 8 (452-90) dealing with the creation of Eve. If the dream is the exercise of the imagination, in this instance it was miraculously transformed into truth. When Keats calls for a life of sensations rather than thought, he cuts himself off from the validating poetic principle of truth. The issue, throughout the odes and elsewhere, is how to render sensation as truth, how to make the two coincide. It is only now, in this fourth ode, that Keats confronts the question of truth – and he does so in a poetic structure, and in contemplation of a form, that is more controlled and focused (though with some of the same fluctuation of emotional content) than we have seen before, and perhaps with more modest intent than in the case of *Nightingale*.

We begin, as we began in *Psyche*, with a direct address to the urn itself, treated as a female (cf. *Psyche*). Keats had seen such urns in his visits to the British Museum. We can still see them today – battered by time, cracked, incomplete, like the ruins so admired by the Romantics for the mysteries that they contain, encapsulated in their dimly remembered histories. It is useful, perhaps to approach the poem with the Romantic vision of ruins in mind. We have seen before how ruins tell stories, how to touch them or to contemplate them or to behold them is, ideally, to release their stories. The urn that we see before us here is not quite like an object in the British Museum: it is an object as it was, and as it will always be when we have reconstructed it and made it whole. It is “still unravished” because it has avoided the marks of time, and because it has avoided the human violations that all human artifacts endure by their very use, their very mingling with the affairs of the world. More to the point, it is still unravished, still virginal, because it is potential: it contains within it a mystery that the poet seeks to tease out. And it is the bride of quietness because it will stand silent for generations, possessed by quietness: as Bate (*John Keats*, p. 511) puts it, “The essence of the urn is its potentiality waiting to be fulfilled.” When the poem was first published there was a comma after “still,” a far simpler, less resonant meaning, less suggestive of the damaging interrogations to which it will be subjected over time, less suggestive perhaps of the very violence that the present interrogation will inflict. We are reminded again of Keats’s comment at the end of his Preface to *Endymion*, a comment relevant also to *Psyche*: “I hope I have not in too late a day touched the beautiful mythology of Greece, and dulled its brightness: for I wish to try once more, before I bid it farewell.” To reach back to the time of the urn’s creator, to seek to use the urn as a means of opening the present day to the truths of the past, is a little like seeking to capture the essence of the last of the Greek deities. To do it without in some sense violating that past is doubly difficult.

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:
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?

The urn is a foster-child because its sculptor has long since died, leaving the urn to be fostered by silence and time. The choice of the term “foster-child” suggests a kind of perennial youth: the images with which the poem opens are carefully chosen both to take us back to its beginnings and to contemplate its endurance and antiquity. The term “sylvan historian,” while descriptive of an urn that tells stories contained by leafy borders, suggests two views of time – the cyclical changes of seasons, the flux and change of the natural world on the one hand, and the forward march of history on the other: the urn contains (both in its shape and in its decoration) notions of cyclical time and includes (in its continuous frieze and in its human representations) a sense of significant time. In the nightingale we saw a “light-winged Dryad of the trees,” in a poem that was all movement: here the action of the poem is contained by the still and silent shape, unmoved and unmoving, or turning back on itself (lie Indolence) in an endless circle.

The interrogation of the urn begins immediately, and with an insistent curiosity that we have not met before, not even in Psyche, where the poet is at pains none the less to identify the scene that he comes upon early in the poem, or in Nightingale, where the questions come at the end. Here, the questions come fast: What is the story told in the “leaf-fringed” frieze on the vase? Are we dealing with gods or humans (a topic of some relevance in the earlier Psyche and in other poems of Keats)? Are we in Tempe or in Arcadia (Tempe, we might note, was the likely dwelling-place of Psyche)? Who are the reluctant maidens, struggling to escape? What is all this “wild ecstasy”? Our interrogation leaves on one side the fact that this is, after all, an urn: there is an irritable reaching after fact in our insistence on answers. As for the scene itself, it is clearly a scene of a kind of bacchanalian frenzy, of sexual energy reluctantly entertained, a scene of violence as well as enthusiasm. And all of this takes place, of course, in the frieze of an urn. The urn itself, her tattoos subjected to vulgar inspection, remains quietly aloof. Are these questions directed at her, or at the world in general?

But it is, indeed, only an urn. This is not a “real” scene, but an artistic representation, not an attempt to depict some particular event, but rather to present a general impression. We turn from an attempt to pry the scene loose from its owner the urn to contemplate the fact of the urn itself, the fact that it is art:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
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!

The singing of the nightingale passed and disappeared. At one level a symbol of eternity, at another level the singing was a symbol of the passing of time, of transitoriness. The melodies on the urn last forever, and they echo only in the spirit. Perhaps we should revise our interpretation of the word “tuneless” in the opening lines of *Psyche*: the “numbers” composed to Psyche are tuneless because she has never had a cult, never been worshipped as other gods were worshipped. These “ditties of no tone,” inscribed in the urn, or implied by the inscription on the urn, will endure forever. They are not perceived by the senses but absorbed directly by the imagination. In fact (to return to an old analogy), they are not melodies but melody itself.

In Arcadia, we are told by the poets, there are no seasons. In this Golden Age, as Ovid describes it, the leaves stay always on the trees. In Arcadia, the music goes on forever and time stands still. Never mind who the youth is, or what the melodies are: our concern here is with the endurance of art, with the eternity of the images it expresses. We are, of course, also caught in the paradox of desire: the “bold lover” never completes his kiss, but longs for it forever: “Their lips touch’d not, but had not bade adieu,” as Keats puts it in *Psyche*, anticipating this later ode and, retrospectively, reminding us that the scene that we come upon in the forest in the earlier poem has about it a certain quality of statuarity, of a work of art observed.

Keats’s fascination with the frozen moment reflects a Romantic preoccupation with the potential for narrative, the potential for meaning, captured in art in the visual image (Hazlitt’s comments on the Elgin Marbles reinforce this idea). The novelist William Faulkner was fascinated by figures caught in frozen motion: the image of Col. John Sartoris on his horse, for example, the raw power of the galloping horse and the wild figure on its back, motion in stasis, recurs on more than one occasion in the novels, for example in the reflections of Quentin Compson as he tries to come to terms with the Civil War. This melding of the moment with eternity, of the fleeting with the enduring, is anchored in Faulkner’s reading of the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Keats himself, in a note in his copy of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, refers with admiration to Milton’s “stationing”:

Milton in every instance pursues his imagination to the utmost – he is “sagacious of his Quarry ... But in no instance is this sort of perseverance more exemplified than in what may be called his *stationing or statuary*. He is not content with simple description, he must station, -- thus here [PL 6.420-3], we not only see how the birds ‘with clang despised the ground,’ but we see them “under a cloud in prospect.” So we see Adam “fair indeed and tall – under a plantane” – and we see Satan “disfigured – on the Assyrian Mount.” (quoted by Bate, *John Keats*, p. 246)

But if the opening of the stanza suggests a certain drawing-back, a certain distance, and a realization that we are dealing with a work of art, indeed if the stanza as a whole offers us

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a different version of the eternity of art – different from, but related to, the immortality of
the nightingale – we are none the less once again drawn into the frozen scene: the
questions now are directed not at an inanimate urn, not even at our curious companions,
but at the lover, the “fair youth, beneath the trees” on the side of the urn. Perhaps, in
some way, Keats sees an idealization of his own state in this suspended animation. The
contemplation leads, at least, to a kind of cascading sentiment, not to say sentimentality,
in the third stanza, which is essentially an extension of the second:

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearyed,
For ever pipping 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.

“Ver erat aeternum,” spring was everlasting, writes Ovid of the Golden Age. The leaves
of the Nightingale Ode, so singularly ephemeral, even as the nightingale’s intrusion into
the affairs of men was ephemeral, are now rendered permanent and unchanging – and the
melody of the nightingale in effect constantly renews itself, “piping songs for ever new.”
But there is a disturbing focus on the here-and-now about these lines, as though we are
pushing to the limit the suggestion that the ephemeral can somehow be made permanent.
The reiteration of the word “happy” takes us back to similarly unsatisfactory sentiments
in earlier odes – the “happy, happy dove” of Psyche and the speaker’s being “too happy
in thine happiness” in Nightingale. Indeed, the speaker put aside “envy” in the first
stanza of Nightingale (“Tis not through envy of thy happy lot”), but this sentiment seems
to be creeping in around the edges here. And with it comes a certain helplessness,
reflected in the apparent impoverishment of the speaker’s very vocabulary.

Scholars have pointed out that Hazlitt, writing about Greek statues in his essay “On
Gusto” of 1816, says that “By their beauty they are raised above the frailties of pain or
passion,” an idea he elaborates on in a lecture of 1818, quoted below. Indeed, they are
raised so far above human suffering that the discrepancy is made immediately apparent.
As in Nightingale, where the bird “among the leaves” has never known the tribulations
of human existence, and where the very reference to the elevated condition of the
nightingale (literary and figuratively) leads into a consideration of weariness and fever
and fret, so here we are reminded, in a syntactic double-take that only widens the gap,
that these figures on the vase are raised above “all breathing human passion,” and that
passion leads to what Shakespeare calls the expense of spirit – a kind of empty
exhaustion.

46 See, for example, David Bromwich, in his chapter on Keats Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic (1984),
248-249.
So we turn back to the urn, looking once again for a certain kind of consolation, and setting aside much of the poem that we have read thus far. The orgiastic scene that we asked about in the first stanza is here replaced by a different kind of scene, broader in scope, more clearly defined, and dealing with a rather different subject:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead’st thou that heifer lowing to 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.

We move from sex to sacrifice, from the abandonment that we associate with youth, with its pipes and timbrels, wild ecstasy, maidens, to a more somber scene, encompassing an entire small society. A mysterious priest (mysterious because unknown, mysterious because he deals in holy mysteries) leads a heifer dressed in garlands (our maidens loth of stanza 1 are now reinvented as sacrificial heifers, perhaps), out of a town. The town is situated next to a river, or on a seashore, or among mountains – not, then, carved on the urn but extrapolated from the little scene before us, and evocative of all those little towns that we have seen in the background in late medieval and early Renaissance paintings, for example of religious themes. The town is empty and will remain so (not least because two thousand years have past), with no soul to tell its story, desolate (with a hint of a pun).

The fact that it is not easy, in fact nigh-on impossible, to recreate the scene on the urn – to take a pencil and draw it – suggests that we are dealing here not so much with a particular urn as with the experience of reading a work of art. Keats was continuing to visit the British Museum in 1819 to see the Elgin Marbles: “Phidian lore” continued to hold its attraction. It may well be that his imaginary figures in Grecian Urn owe more to the marbles than to any Greek vase – or that the images described in the poem may actually have more to do with painting than with sculpture: Ian Jack has suggested that Keats may have had in mind Claude Lorrain’s Landscape with the Father of Psyche sacrificing at the Milesian Temple of Apollo, which was exhibited at the British Institution in 1816 and seems hinted at both in Sleep and Poetry and in the verse-epistle to Reynolds already quoted (Psyche again, we note in passing). But, whatever the sources, the Grecian Urn is not so much a specific object as a representative symbol.

But let us return to the scene of the town and its “desolation.” In Nightingale similar sentiments, expressed in the vision of casements “opening on the foam / Of perilous seas,” equally empty and “forlorn,” had produced the same kind of rolling back that we

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47 Jack, Mirror of Art, pp. 219-220.
see at midpoint in that poem, when the fever and the fret break through and seem to increase the distance between poet and song. Here this image, as brilliantly evocative as that in the earlier poem, and as artfully arbitrary as the magic casements or the figure of Ruth amid the corn, leads us not into the desolation that we might expect, not into the emptiness that is the very subject of the image in Grecian Urn, but away from the scene on the urn to contemplation of the urn itself, indeed to the direct address with which the poem began (this poem rolls back on itself as Nightingale also tries to do, perhaps less emphatically). The character of the direct address, however, has changed: no more a “sylvan historian,” the urn is a shape, a form:

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!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

The term “Attic” means first and foremost simply “Grecian,” but an Attic order is a small order placed above another order of greater height at the top of a column or façade: the term evokes the attenuated shape of the Greek vase. As we ended the previous stanza with an oblique pun (on soul/sole), so Attic becomes Attitude, a verbal elongation that again helps define the dimensions of the urn (there are those who are offended by the suggestion of false etymology, but Bromwich, wisely, points out that this is the language of conjuring...). The vase, with its marble men and maidens (for a moment of syntactical confusion we see marble men and overwrought maidens...), and its marble versions of branches and undergrowth, “dost tease us out of thought.” Keats picks up on a phrase that he has already used in the verse-epistle to Reynolds – and in so doing raises a whole series of questions. Why and how does the urn “tease us out of thought”? When Keats uses the term first, he seems to mean “challenge me beyond my reasoning capabilities,” but the word “tease” seems odd. Are we back in the final stanza of Nightingale – “The fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is famed to do, deceiving elf”? Are we being told that any sense of unity with the urn is, perforce, a deception? Such sentiments, even if not dominant, may introduce a certain reservation, a certain oblique irony, that colors the poem’s conclusion. To be teased out of thought is perhaps to be combed out of existence, the urn enduring, like eternity itself, but humanity passing and dying.

In this sense, the urn is a “cold pastoral” indeed – if by this we mean a pastoral that is merely cold, rather than a frozen version of the richness of pastoral. Perhaps this “overwrought” urn is an artifact the particulars of whose engraving are less important than its enduring existence. Clearly we, and the poet, would like for this shape, this form, to contain both the momentary fever and fret on the one hand and the vision of eternity
on the other that the poet seeks to achieve through his poetry? If so, “Thou shalt remain” (the poem hovers delicately between transitivity and intransitivity) “...a friend to man.”

But there is about the term “cold pastoral” a certain rebuke. Earlier, seeking a way of describing the urn in small compass, the poet names it a “sylvan historian,” something that can tell stories, that has stored stories up and is ready to repeat them. Now, the poet draws back from its unknown and unknowable stories to consider its shape, its rather forbidding, yet teasing, virginity. Perhaps it is cold because it fails to respond sufficiently to the ardor of the interrogating poet; unwilling to commit to anything more, it declares itself “a friend.”

But perhaps its stillness and its perfection render it cold. Writing of the Elgin Marbles in his essay “On Poetry in General” (1818), Hazlitt makes a distinction between painting, which “gives the event,” and poetry, which gives “the progress of events”:

... but it is during the progress, in the interval of expectation and suspense, while our hopes and fears are strained to the highest pitch of breathless agony, that the pinch of interest lies.... It is for want of some such resting place of the imagination that the Greek statues are little else than specious forms. They are marble to the touch and to the heart. They have not an informing principle within them. In their faultless excellence they appear sufficient to themselves. By their beauty they are raised above the frailties of passion or suffering. By their beauty they are deified. But they are not objects of religious faith to us, and their forms are a reproach to common humanity. They seem to have no sympathy with us, and not to want our admiration.

While Hazlitt’s comments on the sense of distance caused by the very perfection of the Elgin Marbles are sometimes adduced as the genesis of Keats’s alleged rebuttal of such views in Grecian Urn, this last stanza would suggest a certain Keatsian affinity with Hazlitt’s view. Thus, while it is true that “When old age shall this generation waste, / Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe / Than ours...” it is precisely the urn’s chaste remoteness, its coldness, that causes it to endure. Like the nightingale’s song, it is always with us, but always remote.

And now, the interrogation finally striking through to the heart of things, we discover why the urn is not, however, quietness itself: in its way, it does speak (if only through the agency of a ventriloquist poet), addressing all of us (the “ye” of the last line makes it very clear that these words are not addressed to the urn): ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

What are we to make of these final lines? More or less all the critics now agree that the 1820 edition of the poems was mispunctuated when it put only the words “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” in inverted commas (Keats’s attentions to the proofs of the 1820

edition were, at best, desultory), but it is still worth noting that the final lines have two messages, performing in slightly different ways. The gnomic utterance “Beauty is truth, truth beauty” functions, as Bate (p. 517) has pointed out, rather as a monumental inscription functions: “Stranger, turn aside and read these words;” it seems to say – or, with Sir Christopher Wren, Lector, si monumentum requiris, circumspice (Reader, if you seek his memorial, look around you). It was in January 1818 that Leigh Hunt published in The Examiner a sonnet by Shelley that is among his best known, and as good an example as we have of the Romantic interrogation of ruins:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert ... Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

It is, I think, useful to see the message of the urn in terms somewhat similar to those employed by Shelley in Ozymandias. While we may conclude that Shelley felt about Ozymandias much as the sculptor (if it was he, in this maze of addresses, who wrote the inscription) felt about Ozymandias, but not for a moment would we confuse the inscription with Shelley’s definitive statement on power and fame. In the same way, we should resist seeing the urn’s message as a message from its sponsor the poet. More to the point, if Ozymandias wrote the inscription, pointing to his now vanished achievements, and if, with their vanishing, the inscription now carries exactly the opposite message from the one originally intended, might not the same be true of the urn? In Arcadia, in the leafy confines of its sculpture, such unity of Beauty and Truth may well have been a reality, but in this postlapsarian world, with its weariness and fever and fret, such pastoral visions are cold. This “cold pastoral” is telling us something significant, but if it disappoints those critics who find its message banal, or too neat, or too simplistic, that may be because of its inherent limitations as a device for fixing and defining the poetic experience – limitations of which Keats was aware almost from the beginning, as he shifted between the imagined reality of its stories and the actual reality of its carved marble. The words themselves, “like figures on a marble urn, / When shifted round to see the other side,” turn and return (Beauty is Truth is Beauty is Truth) in a closed and endless circle. As for the statement “that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to

49 Shelley’s poem, in turn, may well have been influenced by a poem of Keats, one of the two sonnets addressed to Benjamin Robert Haydon, “Great spirits now on earth are sojourning,” published in the 1817 volume.
know,” I am inclined to see these lines not as an inscription but as the urn’s commentary on its inscription, or as the speaker’s involuntary declaration – a declaration that is deeply self-contradictory, calling on human beings to be content with a pastoral dream that the poem itself has subtly undermined. Hazlitt saw in the Elgin Marbles the union of art and nature, and his assertion is arguably both profoundly true and also a rhetorical stance.

I allude to “the urn’s commentary,” but of course, as I have already suggested, the urn does not necessarily say anything at all: the speaker simply declares that it speaks, thereby, as David Bromwich suggests (p. 249), showing “the urn being rescued into meaning by the poet who speaks.” The speaker, addressing the urn, suggests that it will outlive the present generation and continue its existence as “a friend to man” (in itself an odd coinage). In this role, its message to man will be the message that the speaker attributes to it, as he in effect pins a motto on it: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” If this unravished bride cannot ultimately bring love to Keats, at least they can continue to be good friends....

For Keats, the message is both incomplete and an attempt at consolation. If he (the he to whom the poem is happening, as opposed to the he who is writing the poem) is to believe what the poem is telling him, it seems to be suggesting that the tension between sensation and thought, between the enjoyment of beauty and its applicability to human experience, is a tension not to be resolved but to be accepted, as the two sides of a single experience, leading to artistic creation. It is a neat solution, as the appropriation of the Cupid and Psyche legend is a neat solution to the problem of poetic self-dedication (or as moving Duty out of reality and on to an urn is a clever avoidance of poetic responsibility), but it contains within it its own negation, like the bright torch in Psyche. Barbara Herrnstein Smith speculatesthat Keats “sensed the need for a stabilizing or resolving conclusion and provided one more resolutely conclusive than the poem as a whole could justify,” and others have pointed out that the conclusion seems pulled out of the air rather than organically linked to the poem’s development. T.S.Eliot, famously, observed that “this line strikes me as a serious blemish on a beautiful poem; and the reason must be either that I fail to understand it, or that it is a statement which is untrue,” and an anonymous contemporary reviewer, to his lasting humiliation, commented, “... that is, all that Mr. Keats knows or cares to know. But till he knows much more than this he will never write verses fit to live.” It may be the case that for Adam the equation worked: he awoke from his dream and found it truth. But that was under other auspices, and prelapsarian besides. The answer here, as we know when we get home from interrogating the sphinx, is just another puzzle.

We call to mind Keats’s lines of 1817:

> Such dim-conceived glories of the brain  
> Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;  
> So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,

51 Quoted by Bate, John Keats, p. 517.
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old Time – with a billowy main –
A sun – a shadow of a magnitude.
5. THE ODE ON MELANCHOLY

No wonder, then, that we move from the Grecian urn to the Ode on Melancholy:

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolf’s-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss’d
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
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;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
Of if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose had is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

“I have been reading lately Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy,” Keats writes to George and Georgiana on September 18, 1819, providing an ample and not particularly inspiring quotation from this sprawling 17th-century treatise on the nature of melancholy. In fact, Keats owned a copy (which has come down to us, complete with annotations), and his
reading in it provided the inspiration and the plot for the narrative poem *Lamia*, which he worked on in early July during a visit to the Isle of Wight, returning to it again in late August and early September. While we cannot be sure about the date of the *Ode on Melancholy*, it is probable that it comes after *Nightingale* and *Grecian Urn* and was written before Keats’s departure from Brown’s house in Hampstead for the months of July and August.

But the beginnings of the poem go back to the same portion of the same journal-letter to George and Georgiana in which we find the germ of the *Ode on Indolence* – the passage that refers to Poetry, Ambition, and Love passing the poet “like three figures on a Greek vase.” Keats continues as follows:

>This is the world – thus we cannot expect to give way many hours to pleasure – Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting – While we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of events – while we are laughing it sprouts it grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck – Even so we have leisure to reason on the misfortunes of our friends; our own touch us too nearly for words.

The alternation of pain and pleasure, the aching drag of the cares of the world, these are subjects that preoccupy the poet in all the phases of thought that go to inspire the odes. They are certainly built into the *Ode on Indolence*. In that poem, Keats chooses in essence to reject the world in favor of his own particular version of poetic inspiration – but, as he discovers, and as the ending of the poem seems resolutely to deny, to be inspired is not necessarily to write: somehow the gap between the self and poetry must be bridged.

A version of the same state of suspended animation comes back, in less all-encompassing terms, in the dream-vision at the beginning of *Psyche*: “Surely I dreamt today, or did I see / The winged Psyche with awaken’d eyes?” The speaker “wander’d in a forest thoughtlessly,” much as presumably he was wandering at the opening of *Nightingale* when he was overcome by the nightingale’s song and fell into a similar swoon: “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains my sense...” As *Nightingale* ends, the poet again asks himself whether he has been dreaming or seeing a vision. *Nightingale*, more than the other odes, depicts the intrusion of the cares and cruelties of the world and the poet’s inability to contain and include them in his poetic self.

*Melancholy* picks up where *Nightingale* breaks off. It looks back to *Indolence*, of which it is in some respects a reworking, and it is a reaction to *Grecian Urn*, whose conclusion (like the ending of *Indolence*) is, on the mature reflection that comes with the silence following the poem, unsatisfactory. *Melancholy* is different from the preceding odes in that its protagonist is not necessarily a poet: the poem deals with experience *tout court* rather than specifically poetic experience. It is also a poem that is not without its internal contradictions, and perhaps just a shade below the high seriousness of *Nightingale* or *Grecian Urn*. 
The poem begins, like Nightingale, in the middle, in medias res. But it is linked with Nightingale in a different way too: it is as though the poem has begun in response to the opening of the earlier poem –

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:

“No, no, go not to Lethe,” the Ode on Melancholy admonishes, its speaker replying to this earlier voice...

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolf’s-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss’d
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
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;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

The sharp, dramatic beginning (and all these poems are in some measure dramatic monologues), answers a latent suggestion in the opening lines of Nightingale, made explicit as the poem progresses, that one option available to the poet is suicide – not hemlock this time but the equally lethal (I choose the word deliberately) aconite, or wolf’s-bane. Nightshade belongs here too, conflated with the wine, “the true, the blushful Hippocrene,” that was actually a means of escape from such melancholy reflections in Nightingale. Nightshade is a kind of anti-wine, the wine of Proserpine, goddess of the underworld. Beetles, death’s head moths, owls and the like, all creatures of the darkness, should have no place here, nor serve as partners “in your sorrow’s mysteries.” Such conjunction of shady creatures with one’s own shady thoughts will produce a drowsiness that will “drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.” The implication, then, is that we should preserve the “wakeful anguish,” felt, we assume, through the experiences of this world, Keats’s “vale of soul-making.”

Generations have admired the energy of this poem, the extremes that it presents, the intensity of its address. Behind it, or at least behind this stanza, lies Spenser’s Epithalamion, one of Keats’s favorite poems. When night comes on, the horrors of darkness are warned away from the marriage-bed:

Let no lamenting cries, nor doleful tears
Be heard all night, within nor yet without:
Ne let false whispers breeding hidden fears
Break gentle sleep with misconceived doubt.
Let no deluding dreams, nor dreadful sights
Make sudden sad affrights;
Ne let housefires, nor lightning’s helpless harms,
Ne let the Pouke, nor other evil sprites,
Ne let mischievous witches with their charms,
Ne let Hobgoblins, names whose sense we see not,
Fray us with things that be not.
Let not the screech-owl, nor the stork be heard:
Nor the night raven, that still deadly yells,
Nor damned ghosts called up with mighty spells,
Nor grisly vultures make us once afeared...

Such negatives laid out, and the “wakeful anguish” preserved, what options are available
to us? The first admonitory stanza, delivered to us in the imperative, gives way to a
second stanza of advice (again in the second person), structured somewhat like the first
stanza:

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

The first stanza was structured around a series of negative alternatives: No, no ... not ...
 neither ... nor ... not ... nor ... nor ... nor. This one provides a set of positives: when ...
then ... or ... or ... or. It describes a series of scenes devoid of the mythological ornament
of the first stanza, essentially naturalistic. The imagery itself is highly complex,
negatives undercutting positives, positives banishing negatives. As Empson puts it in
Seven Types of Ambiguity, the poem “pounds together the sensations of joy and sorrow
till they combine into sexuality.”\(^5^3\). The “weeping cloud” that falls from heaven
“shrouds” the green hill, but “in an April shroud,” so that the association of “shroud”
with death is neatly undercut by the emphasis on April showers that “foster the droop-
headed flowers all.” The melancholy fit thus stimulates, rather than withering, just as the
“sorrow” can be turned to admire the beauty of a mourning-yet-morning rose, its bloom
opening in the morning and maturing as the day progresses. Or it can be turned to admire
the shimmering quality of sands wetted by the ocean (salt tears turned to wonder, as it
were). Or it can be redirected to the beauty of peonies. The final section of the stanza
appears at first sight to parallel the other phrases, but in fact it presents a different kind of
melancholy described by Burton – the love melancholy that accompanies rejection by a

mistress. Hamlet comes to mind here (later, in one of his letters to Fanny Brawne, Keats equated himself with Hamlet and Fanny with Ophelia: 2.312). Says Ophelia:

He took me by the wrist and held me hard;
Then goes he to the length of all his arm,
And with the other hand thus o’er his brow,
He falls to such perusal of my face
As ‘a would draw it. Long stayed he so.

“This is the very ecstasy of love,” declares Polonius, hastening to the King.

Critics have suggested that the central stanza of this poem is much the weakest, particularly the final lines, which seem to fall into cliché and whose function is not at all obvious – except perhaps that the sight of a lover seizing and entrapping the hand of the beloved does suggest a kind of seizure of melancholy, a veritable clinging to it, that sets us up for the final stanza and the move to the goddess herself. The whole middle stanza is of course sharply different from the previous stanza, with its mythological references and its keenly observed originality. The language and the sentiments of this second stanza seem to revert to the language and the sentiments of Indolence: they are self-centered, indulging in a kind of Romantic passionate intensity that we associate with the Keats of Endymion rather than the Keats of the odes. If this is the answer to the effects of melancholy, it doesn’t seem to advance Keats’s agenda very much.

At this point the tone and direction of the poem change again. We move into the third person, a third person whose identity is quite unclear. The only “she” we have met is the mistress in the immediately preceding lines.

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:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil’d Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

Melancholy dwells, we are told, with a Beauty that cannot last. She dwells also with Joy – a figure caught here in frozen anticipation of his departure. We note, as we move into this third-person exposition, that the actors in this third stanza are not natural phenomena but personified abstractions, rather like the abstractions Beauty and Love that pull us out of contemplation of “the weariness, the fever and the fret” of the third stanza of Nightingale. There, we saw them as abstractions more palatable and more distant than the examples of human decay that were presented in the lines before. Here, they preside over a kind of hidden human activity that derives from the first and second stanzas,
almost as though a veil of abstraction has been thrown over such specificities. If beauty will die, it follows that they must be seized and held – and the tension, already presented in the second stanza, between the act of holding and enjoying (imprisoning the soft hand) and the act of recoil (the mistress’s ravings) defines the role of melancholy. If joy is ever bidding adieu, as it bids adieu in Nightingale, for example, it too must be seized and enjoyed, and so must Pleasure, whose poison takes us back to the first stanza and whose sipping bee links us with the second.

The scene with which the poem ends, the shrine of Melancholy, perhaps reminds us of the final stanza of Psyche, with its very different, and altogether more optimistic, shrine of buds and bells and stars without a name. It may also take us forward to The Fall of Hyperion, on which Keats was working over the summer and whose central episode involves the protagonist, the “I” of the poem, clearly a poet, approaching the altar where the priestess Moneta, last survivor of Saturn’s reign, performs her rites. The suppliant poet before this massive figure of memory resembles a Keats overwhelmed by the poetic line, the Titans, before him, as more than one critic has pointed out. Like Moneta, Melancholy is veiled. She has her all-powerful shrine “in the very temple of Delight,” and only he “whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine” can reach her – can see beyond the veil. The obvious sexuality of the imagery here, but the link also with the initial images, for example of Proserpine and her wine, takes us in directions that are as unsettling as they are reassuring. We may reject the facile antidote to stanza 1 presented by stanza 2; but the reaching of Melancholy’s shrine, while it perhaps involves the sexual completion that is clearly lacking in the Ode to Psyche, is hardly less disquieting, leading as it does to the hanging of the protagonist’s soul “among her cloudy trophies.” Is this, then, the end of the pursuit of the soul in Psyche – the victory of Melancholy and our reduction to the status of “trophies”? If this is where the linking of pain and pleasure ends up, we are inclined to say, we need an alternative.

We should perhaps note that there still survives a cancelled first stanza to this poem, very different in character from what was eventually kept. It goes like this:

Though you should build a bark of dead men’s bones,
And rear a phantom gibbet for a mast,
Stitch creeds together for a sail, with groans
To fill it out, blood-stained and aghast;
Although your rudder be a dragon’s tail
Long severed, yet still hard with agony,
Your cordage large uprootings from the skull
Of bald Medusa, certes you would fail
To find the Melancholy – whether she
Dreameth in any isle of Lethe dull...

Keats was clearly still working on the half-formed final lines. The idea that Keats is developing here is a kind of parody of Petrarchanism, specifically the idea of a ship of love. He very possibly had in mind Wyatt’s “My galley charged with forgetfulness,” itself a loose translation of Petrarch’s Italian original. The Gothick quality of the whole,
if it were combined with the existing first stanza, would have the effect of overbalancing
the poem, so it is as well that Keats dropped it. Furthermore, the grand imagery of the
stanza seems not to lead anywhere in particular, as we are specifically told (“certes you
would fail / To find the Melancholy”). The stanza does perhaps help us to understand
where Keats’s thoughts were leading, though. The “cloudy trophies” with which the
poem ends resemble the trophies of Love’s conquests, and might be a fitting ending to a
poem engaging in a kind of parodic Petrarchanism. Spenser’s description of the
predatory spoils of Cupid in Book 3 of *The Faerie Queene*, for example, comes to mind:

And all about, the glistring walles weree hong
With warlike spoiles, and with victorious prayes,
Of mighty Conquerors and Captaines strong,
Which were whilome captived in their dayes
To cruell love, and wrought their owne decayes. (3.11.52)

Love becomes Melancholy only somewhat awkwardly, as though the scaffolding around
the poem has been only partially kicked away, and Melancholy’s trophies seem to have
precious little to do with the rest of the existing poem. On the other hand, removal of this
preliminary stanza strengthens the beginning, and, by reaching back to *Nightingale*, has
the effect of tying the poem brilliantly to the sequence of the odes.

The sexual fulfillment, of a sort, with which the poem ends at least moves the sequence
of odes a further step forward. *Melancholy*, for all its thematic closeness to the tensions
in, for example, *Nightingale* and *Indolence*, is the only one of the sequence thus far that
has not focused on poets and poetry.
6. TO AUTUMN

A gap of several months separates the other five odes from To Autumn, written in September and conventionally included as one of the odes, though its title does not bear the designation “ode.” In May a disquieting letter arrived from George, indicating that his efforts in Kentucky were not prospering and that he needed money. Even as Keats was trying to extract money from Edward Abbey, the family’s guardian (so appointed by their grandmother), Brown was making plans to rent his half of the house out, as he always did in the summer. Keats, feeling the financial pinch more than ever and worried about his brother, contemplated in effect following in his footsteps by moving to South America, or else seeking a position as a ship’s surgeon. Eager to get moving, yet seemingly unable to face the prospect, he wrote to Sarah Jeffrey on June 9, “You will judge of my 1819 temper when I tell you that the thing I have most enjoyed this year has been writing an ode to Indolence.” Although most scholars now agree that Indolence came earlier, some have seized on this reference as an indication that Indolence, rather than constituting a kind of preliminary dry run for the odes, was in fact a rather unoriginal pastiche written after the others. The letter to Sarah Jeffre, who lived in Teignmouth, was actually an effort to come up with somewhere to stay, perhaps down in Devon, for the summer – but an invitation came from another quarter, and Keats moved in with his friend James Rice for a month on the Isle of Wight. They were joined in mid-July by Brown, with whom Keats was collaborating on the play Otho the Great, and Brown and Keats moved on to Winchester in August. It was here that To Autumn was written. So there was a gap between the other odes and this poem – a gap of time and a gap of place. To read it exclusively in terms of, and in the context of, the other odes is inevitably to distort it. We need to look at it with a wider gaze.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o’er-brimm’d their clammy cells.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap’d furrow sound asleep,
Drows’d with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Sparèst the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, --
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

Because of the journal letter to George and Georgiana that Keats was writing at the time, we know a good deal about the days surrounding the writing of the poem. The week had begun with a visit to London, where Keats called on his guardian Edward Abbey in the hope of arranging some financial relief for George. Keats also witnessed the triumphal entry of Orator Hunt, the radical leader, into London, when some 200,000 or more people turned out to welcome him to the city. The journal letter alludes to Hunt’s arrival and to the fact that it was Hunt who had addressed the great rally at St. Peter’s Fields, Manchester, a month earlier, at which eleven people were killed by charging troops and perhaps as many as six hundred people were injured. While it would be a mistake to see “To Autumn” as a political poem, its juxtaposition with Keats’s political comments in the journal letter adds another dimension to this most strongly elegiac of all his poems. Indeed, Keats’s interest in liberal politics was growing at this time, or so the letters would suggest. He found himself much in harmony with the political writings of his friend Leigh Hunt.

*To Autumn* is different from the other odes. To a quite extraordinary degree it is both objectified (there is no insistent “I” in this poem) and emptied of argument. *Indolence* told a story; *Psyche* addressed a goddess and expressed a vow; *Nightingale* pursued a melody with the insistence of a vision; *Grecian Urn* advanced an argument; *Melancholy* invoked the mysterious goddess of that name. The most dramatic of the odes involved artful turnings of argument and pace. *To Autumn*, on the other hand, while there are whispers of cyclical turnings, moves steadily and barely perceptibly forward to a conclusion carrying a dark and compelling inevitability. The world that it describes is at

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once a world of experience that has about it the ring of an almost prosaic truth (perhaps one would call it a *truthfulness*, an *honesty*), and a world of the mind. Indeed, the surprise of the poem is that the “untrodden region of the mind” described in *Psyche* should turn out to be so familiar, so recognizable.\footnote{Blackstone, *Consecrated Urn*, p. 354, points out that “it is noteworthy that *To Autumn* is the only major poem of Keats that is completely unsexual.” Paul D. Sheats remarks that “Keats banishes the Latinate vocabulary of Milton and Renaissance humanism in favor of words, many of them agricultural and domestic, that had been naturalized by the time of Chaucer. As in *Lyrical Ballads*, this winnowing of diction affects not only sound and imagery, but also the ode’s moral stance, its apparently lucid substantiality”: Paul D. Sheats, “Keats and the Ode,” in *Cambridge Companion*, ed. Wolfson, pp. 86-101.}

It is a poem about a season, but it is also a poem about a day: it begins with the dawn and it ends with the twilight; it moves into the warmth and out into the chill of autumn evening.

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Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss’d cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o’er-brimm’d their clammy cells.
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“I saw old Autumn in the misty morn / Stand shadowless like Silence, listening / To silence,” wrote Thomas Hood in his eponymous poem, a kind of homage to Keats, a few years later. But what Hood makes explicit, Keats approaches only by indirection: the word *autumn* occurs only in the title, nowhere in the body of the poem (*spring* and *summer* yes, but *autumn* no). The season is defined by a softness of the early light, the mists hanging on the trees. We are led into the poem through a chill in the air, of a kind that we as readers have experienced (no grand leap here to Provençal song and sunburnt mirth, no desperate reaching after experience) – and also of a kind that the painters of the period have invoked: the poem’s connections with 18th-century seasonal descriptions (Thomson and others) are very evident, as also its connections with the landscape tradition of Gainsborough, Loutherbourg, Morland, and on to Constable. So much of Keats’s poetry, most particularly in the odes, consists of attempts to capture the images of art, generally framed and embedded in the poems (we come upon Cupid and Psyche as upon statuary, or as upon a painting in a gallery, and move on): here the entire poem functions in this way, its images fading kinetically the one into the other.

A season, then, of mists – but of mellow fruitfulness too, the alliteration and the syllabic expansion capturing the sense of fruition. The coldness of the first and the warmth of the second sets up a slight tension in the poem that signals one of the poem’s principal
movements, to which I will return. As we progress into the second line it becomes clear
that the season invoked in line one is gradually personified, its mellow fruitfulness now
not only a matter of vegetative fullness, but of the fruitfulness of the womb. It is, we are
told “close bosom-friend of the maturing sun.” A bosom buddy, then. “There is nothing
better than a bosom-friend with whom to confer,” writes Shakespeare’s contemporary
Thomas Greene, in the earliest citation of the term in the OED. The sun, of course, is
growing mature (fit companion for a mellow personification of fruitfulness) and making
things mature and growing warmer as the day begins (driving off the mists in the
process). Indeed the season conspires with the sun. The word in Latin means “breathe
together,” not only as whispering conspirators, but primarily as close companions
combining to bring about a certain result. The breathing together seems given visible
substance in the mists of the morning, and the close conspiring of female season and male
sun is not in itself sexual, but the matchmaking that precedes and enables such sexuality
or perhaps even a slightly pandering and illicit bringing together of the sexual parties.

And these conspirators “load” and “bless / With fruit” the vines around the thatch-eves.
Today, we hardly associated English cottages with grape-growing, but such vines were a
common sight a century or more ago. There is nothing particularly idealized, nor exotic,
about the presence of grapes in To Autumn. Relative to apples, grapes were perhaps
delicate, but they were certainly not rare. Anne Scott-James, writing about cottage
gardens, cites a Miss Mitford of Three Mile Cross, Hampshire, whose Our Village was
written between 1824 and 1832, and William Howitt’s The Rural Life of England (1838)
in remarking:

The vines or wall-grapes which smothered so many cottages in the south of
England at this time were beautiful and productive plants and it is extraordinary
that they are so little grown today. There were at least two dozen named varieties,
all completely hardy in the south, some suitable for the table, some best for wine,
some useful for both purposes; some were black, others white, some fruited early
and others in late October. 56

In Keats’s poem, the vines grow up to, and run along the edges, the eaves, of the thatch.
The bunches of grapes load the vines, and by their associations both sacred and exotic
bless them as well. Apples grow on aged trees – the “moss’d cottage-trees” of the next
line. Note that the evocation of country cottages depends also on a kind of indirection:
we are aware of the cottage because of the reference to thatch (or rather the reference to
vines in connection with thatch), and by virtue of the proximity of the apple trees. There
is no reference in the OED to the coinage “thatch-eaves,” nor to “cottage-trees,” yet the
terms carry with them a kind of familiarity that belies their coinage, perhaps for this
specific occasion. So the cottage is brought into being by a couple of adjectival allusions,
but in some sense it presides over the scene, as carrier of the vines, and as close
accompaniment of the gourds and hazels and beehives that are the natural accoutrements
of a cottage garden and the adjacent lanes. This is a carefully constructed scene, its
elements placed and stationed with the meticulous care of a Gainsborough or a Constable.

The season and the sun conspire to “fill all fruit” with “ripeness to the core.” The very imprecision of the word *fruit* serves to sum up what has gone before (every fruit, then, from exotic grape to homely apple) and to lead smoothly downwards into further specificity: the gourd of cucumber and melon, the sweet kernel of the hazelnut, and so on, from vegetables and nuts (homely produce all) to flowers. The flowers are not brought to fruition so much as constantly renewed, as they bud “more, / And still more,” the word “more” sliding gently from its initial adverbial relationship to “budding” into an adjectival relationship with “flowers.”

So the season continues to bear fruit, continues to ripen, and its flowers grow “later.” It is not that we lose touch with time, but that time is somehow arrested, kept in a kind of golden-age fulfillment that leaves us wondering if it will ever change. So at least it is with the bees, who “think warm days will never cease, / For summer has o’er brimm’d their clammy cells.” Their cup quite literally “runneth over.” We hang for a moment among the murmuring warmth of a succession of m’s: “warm ... summer ... brimm’d ... clammy.” The sharp geometry of the cells of the honeycomb disappears beneath the sheer richness and wealth of the season...

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap’d furrow sound asleep,
Drows’d with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou doest keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

The mode of address shifts, the indirect personification of the first stanza here transforming itself into a slightly different figure, wraith-like, shifting beneath our gaze. Ian Jack has pointed out that the various scenes presented here resemble elements in the work of numerous earlier or contemporary painters: Giulio Romano, Poussin and others. Indeed the sequence of images here moves from one partially or wholly static image to another: the granary, the furrow, the gleaner crossing the brook, the cyder-press, like a series of variations on the season, a summing-up of the imagination of the poet’s predecessors.

“Who hath not seen thee?” All of us who have visited galleries have seen this figure (“The winged boy I knew,” says the poet of *Psyche*), and the scenes in which she is represented are in themselves representative. She sits “careless on a granary floor,” the grain piled behind her, but the warmth still around her (she is “careless,” unpinched, as it were), and her hair is lifted, diaphanously, by the wind blowing across the floor, catching the grain, we surmise, in shifting eddies, the wind itself “conspiring” to perform the work of the season. Of course, the very carelessness of the figure on the granary floor seems...
reflected in our own carelessness: there is a kind of matter-of-fact quality to the images that belies their freshness. It is a technique learned most particularly from Milton. Consider, for example, the sudden diminution of the followers of Satan at the end of Book I of *Paradise Lost*, until they resemble “fairy elves”

Whose midnight revels by a forest side  
Or fountain some belated peasant sees,  
Or dreams he sees, while overhead the moon  
Sits arbitress, and nearer to the earth  
Wheels her pale course.

One has the impression that such things happen to peasants with great frequency, and that the peasants do not understand that as Satan’s hosts resemble troops of fairies, so troops of fairies (and perhaps other more mundane phenomena, like bees in a hive) resemble Satan’s hosts. “Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find...” says the speaker, as though such transformations are glidingly easy.

We move from granary to a “half-reaped” furrow, the reversal of the normal order of the harvest (from threshing we are back to reaping, and even to uncompleted reaping), and, at dead center of the poem, are caught in the mid-day drowsiness of the harvest, like a resting harvester, the very poppies themselves “conspiring” to inaction among the corn. But this momentary suspension of time, the momentary reversal of the sequence of harvest, is nothing more than that: time moves forward, gradually, almost imperceptibly, as the gleaner moves across the brook (notice how we went from hair soft lifted to the utter repose of the reaper and are now moving forward into measured action). Gleaning implies an ingathered harvest, and the gleaner moving with her burden on her head is the final figure in this process, the brook slightly chilly, slightly astringent, beneath her feet (yet still the movement is gradual, the figure balanced and steady)  

The apple harvest comes last, after the grain is gathered in, and the cider press comes at the end, after the apples have been collected from the trees and brought into the barns. Time still moves slowly, though: the press is screwed gradually down, the juice of the apples flowing outward like the honey of the honeycomb in the previous stanza – but now colder, and “oozing” rather than o’er-brimming, crushed rather than spontaneously rich. The figure who watches the oozings is in repose, but the repose that comes at the end of the activity of harvesting.

What has happened, then, as the stanza has progressed? The first stanza showed the spontaneity of growing things, and introduced animate creatures towards the end of the stanza in the bees working the flowers. These most georgic of creatures lead us into the

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57 We are reminded of the “Girl who bore a Pitcher on her head” in Book XI of the 1805 *Prelude*, next to a mountain pool. The situation is very different: a hostile, windy surrounding. But the image is arrestingly similar, combining as it does the notion of forward movement and the notion of balance, as though movement is frozen into tableau, or tableau articulated into movement. This concatenation of space and time is typical of Wordsworth’s idea of “spots of time,” of which the girl with the pitcher is presented as an example: see my comment on Faulkner, above. It is of course unlikely that Keats knew the Wordsworth passage.
second stanza in which, if there is activity at all, it is at first mere movement of the wind, mere nodding of poppies. But we have moved here from plants and insects to people – to the human agents of the harvest. At first, we are asked to imagine them as personifications of autumn, but as the stanza progresses, it is increasingly clear that these figures are really agents of autumn, human figures who might be construed as the personification of autumn, as though the spirit of autumn inhabits them. One of the remarkable features of the stanza is the fact that even at the point of sharpest personification, the trope, the rhetorical device, seems to drain out of the scene. I have mentioned before Keats’s penchant, as in Nightingale, for moving from painful images into personification: here we have the reverse – an almost imperceptible movement from an idealized and passive richness to a sparer and earned repose. Autumn is not exactly a gleaner: she is like a gleaner. The load that she carries, though, is like a later and more sober version of the load borne, spontaneously, by the vines in the first stanza: it is a blessing, but a blessing that is earned. Even in the stillness, the lack of activity, of the second stanza, there is an awareness of a job done, of toil completed.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they? Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, --
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

“Ou sont les neiges d’antan?” The echo of the medieval ubi sunt tradition, the lament for passing glories, echoes in our ears. The opening of the third stanza, with its questions reminiscent perhaps of earlier questions in earlier odes, seems directed not so much at an external figure as at the internal dialogue that we have recognized as so characteristic of Keats. Ostensibly, the questions are directed at the shadowy figure of Autumn, but she has almost disappeared into the suspended rural activity of the second stanza. The two questions, some critics say, seem to come from two different parties: the speaker addressing Autumn and Autumn replying with a further question, the speaker then turning to answer his own question with a directive to Autumn. If that is ostensibly the movement of the lines, it is a mere feint: the voices are the voices of the poet himself, at first fully internalized (“Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?”), then directed at our shadowy Autumn (“Think not of them, thou hast thy music too”).

The songs of spring? Perhaps the onomatopoeia of the word “oozings,” like the sound of the word “forlorn” in Nightingale, tolls the speaker back to his sole self – but this time the sense of isolation is put aside, not because of a refusal to confront it, but because the season itself carries within it an image that can fix and define the emotion. The sounds of
summer – the bees among the flowers, the hum of a summer day – are replaced now with a different set of sounds, clearer, more precise, more spare.

But not before the landscape itself changes. The sounds are superimposed not on the landscape of the first or second stanza, full of the richness of autumn, but on a landscape that supercedes what has gone before. This landscape shows the fields gleaned, their rough stubble transformed by the “soft-dying” day. The day is “bloomed” by barred clouds, clouds that “bloom” like flowers, suffused with the “rosy hue” of a dying sun. Critics have pointed out that it is not the clouds that touch the stubble-plains, but the refracted light of the sun – and indeed the unequivocal richness of the flowers blooming to feed the bees in stanza one is here replaced by the altogether more ambiguous and mediated cloudiness of the end of an autumn day (the clouds gathering as the mist had drifted away in the early morning at the beginning of the poem). The richness of the color, the perfection of the scene, is the direct result of its emptiness: empty fields made “rosy” by the sky, the falling temperature contributing to the brightness of the sunset, but the fields suffused with a warm glow. “How beautiful the season is now – How fine the air,” Keats writes to Reynolds on September 21, 1819, “A temperate sharpness about it.”

Really, without joking, chaste weather – Dian skies – I never lik’d stubble fields so much as now – Aye better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm – in the same way that some pictures look warm – this struck me so much in my Sunday’s walk that I composed upon it.

Note that the two lines on the sky and the fields are inserted into the final stanza almost in passing, as a deft reminder that the landscape is different. For the principal subject of the final stanza is not the vegetation of stanza one nor the suspended labors of stanza two, but the songs of autumn – gnats, lambs, crickets, a robin, swallows. The mood is elegiac: the gnats sing in a “wailful choir,” their sound taking us back to, and contrasting with, the sound of the bees in the first stanza, and their movement, in undulating swarms, “borne aloft / Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies,” carrying us back to the similar movement of the wind through Autumn’s hair and across the granary floor. They are “among the river sallows,” the willow trees that grow along the banks of a slow-flowing river – a river like time, a river like forgetfulness. And they are a “wailful choir,” their requiem (as opposed to the requiem of Nightingale) and their mourning appropriate to the season.

If our eye is focused on the river, at the center of the scene (a river that reminds us of the less delineated “brook” of the previous stanza), the “hilly bourn” rises at its edge, obscured by the willows. (A bourn is a boundary – “That undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveler returns” – here the point where the cultivated fields give way to the downland, the pasture for sheep.) From these uplands invisible at the edge of the carefully constructed scene come the loud bleats of “full-grown lambs,” an odd turn of phrase that suggests that the songs of autumn are really variations on the songs of spring, transformed and transposed by time. The “hilly bourn” resembles, in softer form, the “wild ridged mountains” of Psyche: it shifts the landscape of the plain (slow rivers of the kind that sustain willows) to contain it within the more arduous and demanding landscape
of the hills. Here, “Hedge crickets sing,” continuing their summer song into the
darkening night with unheeding enthusiasm.

No surprises here, we might add. Lambs are common fare of pastoral, of course; these
lambs, rendered as full-grown, suggest a kind of pastoral contradiction, a suspended and
unresolved paradox. Grasshoppers, too (if that is what Keats means by “hedge crickets”),
are common inhabitants of rural scenes, but now at the other end of summer. The
grasshopper, a moral lesson (*multum in parvo*, Kitty Scoular calls it) waiting to be
understood, was a favorite of seventeenth-century poets and emblematisists. Whitney, for
example, following Aesop, tells us about the ant and the grasshopper, the one diligent in
his preparation for winter and the other singing on without a care until it is too late:
turning to the ant for food, he is refused. We note, by the way, that while the small
gnats *mourn* in *waifful choir*, the hedge-crickets, oblivious, simply *sing*. One wonders, in
fact, whether the mid-seventeenth-century poet Richard Lovelace’s grasshopper was in
Keats’s mind as he wrote: “Oh thou that swing st upon the waving haiRe / Of some well-
filled Oaten Beard.” Or Cowley’s: “Man for thee does sow and plow; / Farmer he, and
landlord thou!”

Keats is particular about his choice of terms here, if entomologically confusing. A
cricket, in common parlance is (to quote the OED at its most poetic) “any saltatorial
orthopterous insect of the genus Acheta or of the same tribe” – a category that includes
grasshoppers, commonly referred to as *crickets*, at least in southern England. The true
English cricket is generally known as a field cricket (not a hedge cricket), but field
crickets and grasshoppers are readily lumped together by those less interested in fine
distinctions. In an early (and impressive) sonnet dating from 1816, Keats makes a
distinction between the grasshopper (or field cricket) and the cricket (or house cricket),
the *gryllus campestris* and the *gryllus domesticus*, as the ever-curious Rev. Gilbert White
of Selborne explains in an earlier and more exact comparison of these “congenerous
animals” 60. Here is Keats:

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.
The poetry of earth is ceasing never.
On a lone winter evening, when the frost

58 *Natural Magic: Studies in the Presentation of Nature in English Poetry from Spenser to Marvell*
59 On seventeenth-century grasshoppers, see Scoular, pp. 108-112. For Whitney, see Geoffrey Whitney, *A
60 Letters XXXV and XXXVI in *White’s Natural History of Selborne*, ed. W.T. Williams and G.H. Vallins
Has wrought a silence, 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.\textsuperscript{61}

To refer to the “hedge-cricket” is to bring to mind its opposite, the house-cricket, and so this singing creature, soon to die, will be echoed in its domestic cousins until the next spring. But if lambs and grasshoppers, at the year’s beginning and at its end, are common enough, the final lines are different:

and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

The British robin, of the genus \textit{Erithacus}, as generations of American teachers of Keats have patiently explained, is a smaller and quite different bird from the American robin, \textit{turdus migratorius}. The robin, a solitary and non-migratory bird, continues to sing all winter long, a common emblem of continuity and changelessness. Another early poem, probably by Keats (it may possibly be the work of George, or of both of them), dating from 1815 or 1816, anticipates this later description of the robin’s song:

Stay, ruby-breasted warbler, stay,
And let me see thy sparkling eye,
Oh brush not yet the pearl-strung spray
Nor bow thy pretty head to fly.

Stay while I tell thee, fluttering thing,
That thou of love an emblem art,
Yes! patient plume thy little wing,
Whilst I my thoughts to thee impart.

When summer nights the dews bestow,
And summer suns enrich the day,
Thy notes the blossoms charm to blow,
Each opes delighted at thy lay.

So when in youth the eye’s dark glance
Speaks pleasure from its circle bright,
The tones of love our joys enhance
And make superior each delight.

And when bleak storms resistless rove,

\textsuperscript{61} Leigh Hunt re-published this poem, along with one of his own, which particularly emphasizes the distinction between summer grasshopper and winter cricket, in \textit{The Examiner}, 21 September 1817. The two poems had been written on December 30, 1816, in one of the light-hearted sonnet-writing contests between the two poets (see Wu, “Cockney School,” pp. 45-46.)
And every rural bliss destroy,
Nought comforts then the leafless grove
But they soft note – its only joy –

E’en so the words of love beguile
When Pleasure’s tree no flower bears,
And draw a soft endearing smile
Amid the gloom of grief and tears.

The solitary and enduring robin (the only single creature in the final stanza of To Autumn, the successor perhaps to the single figure of autumn in the second stanza) is contrasted with the gathering and departing swallows, Keats’s line echoing their swarming song, and the birds in their movement recalling the movement of the gnats among the sallows (where you have gnats, you are likely to have swallows: the latter feed on the former). Learned critics have told us that gathering swallows are not necessarily preparing to migrate, but that is surely the implication here: the restless swallows (they twitter but they also gather) are contrasted with the resolutely English robin that sings perched on some twig in a “garden-croft.” As Sperry points out at the conclusion of his discussion of To Autumn, the final stanza “elaborates a music that is entirely earthly and natural, yet filled with further implications.”62 The songs of spring, the visions of gods and goddesses, the memories of literary nightingales past, the sublime artifacts of vanished civilizations, even the richness of Latinate language – all these have left us in this image of the tiny English bird, and behind it, arrayed against a darkening sky, the swallows bound for the south.

A croft is a small patch of arable land generally attached to a cottage; this is a “garden-croft,” as if emphasizing this attachment, presumably carrying us back to the cottage of the first stanza.

Swallows and martins, the bulk of them I mean, have forsaken us sooner this year than usual; for on September the 22nd they rendezvoused in a neighbour’s walnut tree, where it seemed probable they had taken up their lodgings for the night. At the dawn of the day, which was foggy, they rose all together in infinite numbers, occasioning such a rushing, the strokes of their wings against the hazy air, as might be heard to a considerable distance.

So writes the ever-observant Gilbert White (p. 71) about the swallows at Selborne in 1771, citing a date in the year three days later than that of Keats’s poem....

It is hard, then, to see the final, delicate image of the poem as anything other than the tug of departing autumn against the increasingly bare landscape. But in the other odes, such tension would result in rupture, in a breaking-apart of song and landscape, as it does so emphatically in the final stanza of Nightingale. It is helpful to see To Autumn as a response to the earlier poem, the successful discovery of a far less exalted image (robin rather than nightingale) that brings closure, that provides a fit, for the wrenching

experience of the earlier poem. Robins are not nightingales, their richness of song notwithstanding. But they are firmly rooted in the here-and-now of everyday experience, available to those who are not slaves to the exotic and who can appreciate a different, less tumultuous environment. “Where are the songs of spring?” -- they are there in the earlier odes, and they do not serve.63

“Autumn is clearly a mood as well as a season,” Geoffrey Hartman observes64. Critics have pointed out that this is a quintessentially English landscape, of the kind particularly appreciated by the painters of Keats’s own day. Such appreciation of the English scene comes, as Ann Bermingham convincingly points out, at a time when the landscape itself is endangered. Writing of Constable, Bermingham explains:

The historical moment in which Constable’s personal obsession with landscape unfolded was one of the most eventful periods in the history of the English countryside, spanning the agricultural boom years of the Napoleonic wars, the post-Waterloo depression, and the passage of the great Reform Bill of 1832. During Constable’s lifetime England was transformed from an agricultural economy to an industrial one.65

As Bermingham points out, the transformation came gradually, and the old ways persisted, even in the midst of the unprecedented enclosure movement of the late eighteenth century. Indeed it was accompanied by the development of an ideal of simple living that appealed to both right and left – the left as an alternative to the alienating forward march of industrialization and as an idealization of a threatened England, the right as a way of containing rural unrest. The late eighteenth century saw the creation of numbers of country villages, built by landowners to house their workers displaced by enclosure, on principles derived from ideas of the picturesque and from beliefs in the need to provide one’s employees with the conditions that would retain their employment, particularly if they possessed needed skills. Scott-James (p. 26) quotes a 1797 Account of a Cottage and Garden near Tadcaster, by Thomas Bernard:

Two miles from Tadcaster, on the left-hand side of the road to York, stands a beautiful little cottage, with a garden that has long attracted the eye of the traveller. The slip of land is exactly a rood, inclosed by a cut quick hedge; and containing the cottage, fifteen apple trees, one green gage, and three wine-sour

63 M.H.Abrams, contrasting Keats’s poem to Collins’s Ode to Evening (with which Keats does indeed seem to carry on a dialogue) sees the poem as winding down in another sense: “It is notable,” he writes, “that To Autumn ends not in a decisive closure, but on a triple suspension – in syntax, meaning, and meter.” The result is a kind of suspension rather than closure in the emphatic sense. Abrams points out, for example, the repeated use of present participles, the sense of process. Stevens’s “ambiguous undulations” (see above) at the end of Sunday Morning are a more than casual comment on the delicate incompleteness of Keats’s ending. See M.H.Abrams, “Keats’s Poems, the Material Dimensions,” in Ryan & Sharp, Persistence, pp. 36-53.


plum trees, two apricot-trees, several gooseberry and currant bushes, abundance of common vegetables, and three hives of bees; being all the apparent wealth of the possessor.

Such modest contentment found its supporters in all positions on the political spectrum. It reified and distinguished the idea and ideal of simple country life, of a kind soon to be embarked upon by Dorothy and William Wordsworth at the former Dove and Olive Branch Inn outside Grasmere, rebaptized Dove Cottage before the following century was out, and it also transformed and institutionalized the relationship between rural employer and employee, leading, by steps slow and not so slow, to the Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832. Paulin, in his book on Hazlitt, as we have noted, following Jeffrey Baker

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sees shadows of the Peterloo Massacre, of August 16, 1819, in the “stubble plains” of the last stanza of To Autumn: as I have suggested, Peterloo perhaps casts a shadow on the poem, for Keats seems to have been deeply affected by its bloodshed; indeed Keats was not alone: the event itself, far from marginalizing discontent, helped move it, and the issue of parliamentary reform, into the liberal mainstream (on Peterloo see Coote 1995: 265, 275-56, and Motion 1997: 452-57).

Keats’s cottage scene, then, constituted a kind of literary and political topos of the day – a set of images round which an abundance of received ideas could readily congregate. The ideal on the ground was reinforced by the ideal on canvas: pastoral nostalgia took on a certain topical actuality in the presentation of timeless countryside caught in the sunshine and clouds of Constable’s distinctive style, and such scenes appealed to a particular kind of moneyed sensibility. The style itself had its roots quite firmly in the eighteenth century, fed by a notion of landscape as possession: to paint it was to enclose it, and so many of the paintings of the mid-eighteenth century were depictions of the possessions of the patrons who commissioned them. Constable and his contemporaries floated free of such pecuniary alliances, holding to the forms but not the occasions of the earlier era, and enclosing the land not for the landowner but for a particular strain of aesthetic sensibility. To the owner of a cottage, enclosure took on another meaning: the great tracts of land attached by parliamentary enclosure drove the commoners who used the land away, but the garden-croft, with its quick-set hedges and tiny walks, re-enclosed a plot of land that kept the landowner at bay through an alliance of interests: the nightingale of the cultured nobility became the robin of the cottager. Such interests lacking, as in the story told in Wordsworth’s The Ruined Cottage (a poem with disconcerting parallels to Keats’s poem, not least in the elegiac birdsong at its conclusion), the result was the ruination and abandonment of rural life.

Not only did painterly landscape float free (or at least float freer, since there was always work to be done) of the depiction of vast possessions: it also floated free of a kind of

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inkhorn imitation of the classical roots of the painterly tradition. No classical mythology haunts the paintings of Constable, as it had done those of Claude a century and a half before, or even those of Gainsborough more recently. Indeed, Constable contributes to what might be described as the myth of England, a myth that has its origins in legends of Britain as the Fortunate Isles (we think of Marvell in the mid-seventeenth century reinvoking this myth). The myth nurtured the home thoughts from abroad of countless builders of empire and their supernumeraries, and mutated gradually into the poetry of Rupert Brooke and the reinvention of rural England as English Heritage and the National Trust.

What was true of painting was, in its way, true of poetry. The georgic peregrinations of the eighteenth-century gave way to the wanderings of a Wordsworth through landscapes appropriated as much by the poet himself as by any landowner (Wordsworth family connections notwithstanding: Wordsworth père worked for the Earl of Lonsdale, principal landowner in the Lakes and his son followed in his footsteps). The measured and literary delight in the natural world displayed by James Thomson in The Seasons in the middle of the previous century leads directly to its transformation at the hands of Keats (and it is paralleled also by a growing interest in the lives of simple villagers). Much quoted, for example, is Thomson’s description of Autumn, dating from 1730:

When Autumn scatters his departing gleams,
Warned of approaching Winter, gathered, play
The swallow-people ...
They twitter cheerful, till the vernal months
Invite them welcome back – for, thronging, now
Innumerable wings are in commotion all...

Thomson’s description is echoed by Richard Jago in 1758, in The Swallows: An Elegy, in which “the swallow-people” have become “the swallow-race” (Gilbert, incidentally, calls them variously “the swallow-tribe” and “the swallow-kind”) and we are called on to observe “yon twitt’ring flock” (Crane 825). Scholars have found echoes of Il Penseroso and other poems of Milton in Keats’s poem, and, before him, of Spenser’s Mutability Cantos. Vendler, rightly, has added Shakespeare’s sonnets (“How like a winter hath thine absence been,” and “That time of year thou mayst in me behold”). Others point to Wordsworth, particularly the Immortality Ode. But the most immediate inspiration is surely Coleridge, most particularly Frost at Midnight, composed twenty years before, a meditation on the poet’s upbringing and on the promise of his new-born son: “Dear babe, that sleepest cradled by my side...”

Therefore all seasons shall be sweet to thee,
Whether the summer clothe the general earth
With greenness, or the redbreast sit and sing
Betwixt the tufts of snow on the bare branch
Of mossy apple-tree, while the nigh thatch
Smokes in the sun-thaw; whether the eave-drops fall
Heard only in the trances of the blast,
Or if the secret ministry of frost
Shall hang them up in silent icicles,
Quietly shining to the quiet moon.

Keats reproduces not only the image clusters of Coleridge’s remarkable poem, but also the mood – elegiac in its way, but also optimistic. This is not the first time, we note, that Keats reveals his internalization of the poetry of the elder poet.

In the odes, then, Keats taps in to several different traditions. The very form that he chooses – that of the ode, redefined in a measure by its eighteenth-century practitioners – suggests a certain continuity with the eighteenth-century past and ultimately with the distant classics (and I have not spoken at all of poetic form, a subject worthy of study if we are fully to appreciate the varied movement of the odes). If his reading of Coleridge is everywhere present, his reading of Spenser and allegory emerges in *Indolence*; a new/old mythology dominates *Psyche; Nightingale* veers between a vision of the south and an English garden; *Grecian Urn* dwells on a distant classical world caught in the forms of art. But in *To Autumn* most of this is swept away. Just enough like the generalized notion of odes to qualify, *To Autumn* is not so named: it is *To Autumn, tout court*. Yet the straitened vision is full of richness, and it continues a firmly established English landscape tradition. One is perhaps reminded of similar tensions beneath the surface of Spenser, the Irish countryside and southern narrative pulling this way and that, or of Shakespeare, where Wat the hare vies for attention with Venus and Adonis. Hartman has pointed out the almost complete absence of words of Romance origin in the final stanza: short Anglo-Saxon words dominate. He suggests that the primary movement of the poem is from the poetry of dawn, the *aubade*, Eastern, ornamented, redolent of bright color and opiates, toward the *Hesperian* poetry of evening, sparer, emptier, northern European. In the same letter to Reynolds in which he mentions the stubble-fields, Keats praises the poetry of Chatterton: “He is the purest writer in the English Language. He has no French idiom, or particles like Chaucer – ’tis genuine English Idiom in English words” – an observation that he repeats a few days later in a journal letter to George and Georgiana.

*To Autumn*, then, is experience filtered through the poetic line, and, most particularly, through the visual image. Fond of the rural scene, attracted by the repose of rural England, Keats was yet a poet of London: his sense of the natural world came to him in the received context of the creative and aesthetic life of the city. It has always struck me as surprising how little of Keats’s trip to the Lakes and Scotland, undertaken with Brown just the year before, rubbed off on the poetry. What to Wordsworth would have been an inspiration was to Keats a trip. It is true that he was not well, true also that the sight of Staffa or of the mountains stayed with him as he labored at *Hyperion*, but the experience that produced the greatest of his poetry was mediated above all by his miraculous and transformative uses of literature, art and music. It is direct experience that flashes “upon that inward eye / Which is the bliss of solitude” for Wordsworth: Keats’s images tend to be mediated by literature rather than experience.
And what of his illness? Is the elegiac mood of this ode-to-autumn-turned-ode-to-evening a recognition not only of his own mortality but of the shortness of his time? We are always quick to point out that Keats, of all people, trained in medicine and witness to the deaths by consumption of a mother and a brother, knew the course of this disease. But the great crisis that came upon him the ensuing weeks and months had its most immediate cause in the anxiety of his inability to find work and provide for George and Georgiana. It was not until his return from London, immediately after the composition of *To Autumn*, that the spells of extreme fatigue and occasional fevers marking the onset of the disease pushed him towards any clear conviction of his condition. Yes, behind his great poem hangs a set of fears for the future, of nagging doubts and persistent concerns, but we romanticize the mood of the poem if we identify it with the rosy bloom of the consumptive, and with the winter emptiness of death. What matters here, at the end of the poem, is that the robin sings on, a nightingale transformed; but his nightingale, as Psyche was his Psyche. And it sings in an England that is his England.

The very cultural mindset in which Keats was writing, that of high romanticism, stresses the finite nature of human life, and flirts with death. In his sonnet “When I have fears that I may cease to be,” written in early 1818, Keats is already worried about his early demise, and presenting his poetic inspiration in autumnal terms, himself his own poetic landscape:

> When I have fears that I may cease to be
> Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
> Before high-piléd books, in charactery,
> Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;
> When I behold, upon the night’s starred face,
> Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
> And think that I may never live to trace
> Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;
> And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
> Never have relish in the fairy power
> Of unreflecting love; then on the shore
> Of the wide world I stand alone and think
> Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

It was Walter Jackson Bate himself who remarked of *To Autumn*, “for no other poem of the last two centuries does the classical critical vocabulary prove so satisfying.” Perhaps that is why it has been analyzed and reanalyzed, every nook and cranny explored. Helen Vendler’s seventy pages of close analysis notwithstanding – and notwithstanding the work of a hundred other critics – the poem sustains itself as a complete and self-contained artifact. We perceive in it all manner of echoes from the earlier poems – Ruth the gleaner (rewarded, we note, for her gleaning), Psyche’s buds and bells, the drowsy fullness of *Indolence* – but the poem expresses perhaps more powerfully than any of the other poems that sense of distance that Keats sought, that sense of distinterestedness that he described as “negative capability.” There is no irritable reaching after fact – only a
succession of images leading from spring to fall, from dawn to dusk, a segment of linear
time held in a kind of tenuous cyclicality – promise and resignation. As Ian Jack remarks
(p. 235), “This is not a poem about Keats: it is a poem about Autumn.” It is also a poem
about undiscovered countries, now more like those of the meditating Hamlet (“that
undiscover’d country from whose bourn / No traveler returns...”) than those of
Chapman’s Homer, but the movement of the poem is similar.

*To Autumn* was written on September 19. Two days later, Keats finally abandoned his
effort to rewrite *Hyperion* as *The Fall of Hyperion*, and his writing career came
essentially to an end. Illness gradually came on, hitting him in full force in the following
February. A year later he died.