THE ROMANTIC POETS
Graham Hough

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CHAPTER V: KEATS

i. The Realm of Flora

For all our tendency to couple them together, there was no such alliance between Keats and Shelley as there was between Wordsworth and Coleridge. Their qualities were antithetical but not complementary. Shelley was "much disposed to dissect or anatomize any trip or slip" in *Endymion* — or Keats thought he was: and Keats was inclined to deplore Shelley's dissipation of his powers on other objects than pure poetry. Keats writes to Shelley:

> received a copy of the *Cenci* ... . There is only one part of it I am judge of—the poetry and dramatic effect, which by many spirits nowadays is considered the Mammon. A modern work, it is said, must have a purpose, which may be the God. An artist must serve Mammon; he must have 'self-concentration'—selfishness, perhaps. You, I am sure, will forgive me for sincerely remarking that you might curb your magnanimity, and be more of an artist, and load every rift of your subject with ore. The thought of such discipline must fall like cold chains upon you, who perhaps never sat with your wings furled for six months together. (*Letters*, ed. M. B. Forman, 1935, p.94.)

The letter reveals admiration but imperfect sympathy. Some of the reasons for this were irrelevant social ones; but the main reason is indicated above. Keats hardly shared at all in Shelley's political and social passions. He did not see the poet as the trumpet that sings to battle, or the unacknowledged legislator of the world. "An artist must serve Mammon"—that is, his own art rather than humanity: and Keats is, therefore, the first of those in the nineteenth century who wished to carve out a separate kingdom for the arts, and this letter perhaps [157] marks the beginning in England of the doctrine that was later to develop into "Art for art's sake". However, it is only the beginning, and the development belongs to a later story. Keats is never really happy in this belief and never works out its implications to his own satisfaction. Its significance for the study of Keats himself is that it shows him as above all the conscious artist, anxious to load his poetry as fully as possible with its own special kind of excellence. We see the result of it in the devoted critical care he gives to his own poetical development, the constant effort to correct faults in technique and emotional tone, to abandon harmful models and choose better ones, above all to think out the essentials of his own kind of poetry to the exclusion of everything else.

During his short career, therefore, Keats's work is always changing and developing. At his death he seems to have been on the edge of a further stage of growth. If Shelley had lived longer there would have been more Shelley, but probably more of the same kind. We feel of Keats that there was much to come that would have been new and different. It is not much use to speculate on the direction in which he would have moved. There were so many conflicts unresolved at the time of his death. The relation of art, his own kind of art, to human life as a whole was a question that perplexed him from the beginning. What he says to Shelley above can be countered, as we shall see, by passages in which he implies the opposite—that the "magnanimity" of sharing the distresses of humanity is essential to the poet's growth. He lived in an age when a smack of the philanthropist, the "friend to humanity", was expected of liberal and enthusiastic youth; and he began his career in a circle of liberal enthusiasts. Yet he cannot really worry himself about many of the things that worried them; he feels obscurely of a great liberal of the past that he was not quite a "friend to humanity" in the contemporary sense, and we find him wondering "whether Milton's apparently less anxiety for Humanity proceeds from his seeing farther or no than Wordsworth".' He ultimately concludes that "a mighty providence subdues the

mightiest minds to the service of the time being".' But, we nought add, the whole tendency of Keats's work is to show that [158]

Providence does not always do so in the most obvious way, that the artist does not necessarily proceed to the heart of humanity by the plainest and most-trodden route.

We must remember, too, what we all know, but perhaps without feeling it fully, that Keats's artistic intuition is far in advance of his ordinary experience—that at the time of his death the commonest problems of personal adjustment, even of a position in the world, were still, because of illness, because of poverty, not even on the way to a solution.

> His art is happy, but who knows his mind?
> I see a schoolboy when I think of him.
> With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window,
> For certainly he sank into his grave His senses and his heart unsatisfied.
> And made—being poor, ailing and ignorant Shut out from all the luxury of the world,
> The coarse-bred son of a livery-stable keeper—
> Luxuriant song.
>
> (Yeats, "Ego Dominus Tuus")

So Yeats wrote of him a hundred years later. Keats had far fewer advantages of circumstance than any other of the romantic poets. His passion for poetry began at school. A short attempt as a surgeon's apprentice was soon abandoned, and from then he devoted himself entirely to poetry. How he lived is somewhat of a mystery in these days when a poet's first duty is to find a steady job. But at that time even the arts seemed able to subsist in a precarious independence. His introduction to the literary world was through Leigh Hunt, a man to whom it is difficult to be fair. He was a sufficiently sincere political liberal to suffer for his beliefs, and a good minor essayist; but he was a poor minor poet, and an aesthete and professional beauty-lover of a particularly lax and tiresome kind. His was not an age or milieu with any great security of taste. The civilized decorum of the eighteenth century was departing and the Victorian moral responsibility had not arrived to take its place. It was under Hunt's auspices that Keats's first book of poems appeared in 1817.

It is full of echoes of his early poetical enthusiasms. Themes [159] of romance and chivalry, derived mainly from Spenser, are found in Calidore and Specimen of an Induction; one of the poems is an avowed Imitation of Spenser; and a passion for Homer, known through the Elizabethan translation of Chapman, is recorded in the famous sonnet. It is often said that Keats, being ignorant of Greek, drew his knowledge of Greek myth and literature from Lempriere's *Classical Dictionary*: and no doubt Keats, like other boys, read his classical dictionary. His vision of Greece really came to him, however, through Elizabethan and seventeenth-century poetry, soaked like all Renaissance literature in Greek myth and allusions, yet luxuriant, disorderly and mediaevalized. [See n.5.] The country he was really exploring at this time was a legendary fairyland, and whether its ostensible situation was Hellas or Lyonnesse did not make much difference.

The imagery in detail, however, is not literary: it is drawn from a very minute and delicate sensuous observation. Keats, like Gautier, was "un homme pour qui le monde visible existe'\ And the visible world for Keats meant chiefly the world of nature; not nature with all the mystical and moral overtones that Wordsworth found in it, but simply the unanalysed delightfulness of living and growing things. It is the delicacy of the perception that strikes one first. There are many examples in *I stood tip-toe upon a little hill*, the first poem in the book.

> —the sweet buds which with a modest pride
> Pull droopingly,n slanting curve aside,
> Their scantly-leaved and finely-tapering stems. (3)
>
> Here are sweet peas, on tip-toe for a flight
> With wings of gentle flush o'er delicate white,
> And taper fingers catching at all things,
> To bind them all about with tiny rings. (57)

Where swarms of minnows show their little heads,
Staying their wavy bodies 'gainst the stream. (72)

There is nothing here that could not be seen in a summer afternoon on Hampstead Heath, and, most happily, in all Keats's later excursions into the exotic and the remote, this [160] delighted observation of familiar things is allowed its part. His dream-landscapes are always made up out of elements that are actual enough, not out of the starry and cloudy imaginings of Shelley. Nobody who could see actual things with this sort of fresh fineness could ever become entirely lost in luxuriant sentimentalizing; but the beauties of these poems are chiefly in fragments, and there are other fragments of a more unhappy kind.

The verses *On receiving a Curious Shell* and *A Copy of Verses from some Ladies* make one reflect that Keats would have been better off at this stage of his career without so many ladies, or with ladies of a different kind; and some of the familiar sonnets suggest a small and rather silly mutual admiration society. It is not only a question of technical immaturity, or even entirely of emotional immaturity, but of a sort of complacent *schwarmerei*, bred of

T the daily 'Tea is ready',
Snug coterie and literary lady

that Byron so much detested.

Give me a golden pen, and let me lean
On heap'd up flowers, in regions clear and far;
Bring me a tablet whiter than a star
Or hand of hymning angel, when 'tis seen
The silver strings of heavenly harp atween:
And let there glide by many a pearly car
Pink robes, and wavy hair, and diamond jar.

This is almost worthy of glorious Technicolor; it is remarkable that a description of such concentrated vulgarity could be produced by the writer of the lines quoted earlier. And it turns out in the end that the occasion of these pantomime splendours is only that the poet has to go home early from a party.

It is customary to blame the badnesses of Keats's early verse on Hunt; but it is a rarely performed act of justice to see what Hunt's poetic vices really were and how far Keats borrowed them. *The Story of Rimini* was at this time Hunt's great claim to notice. It is a handling of the Paolo and Francesca [161] episode from Dante, debased to utter vulgarity by an affectation of colloquial ease and a sort of chatty pertness. He combines this with a cocky sniggering appreciation of feminine charms. The verse, in deliberate reaction to the antithetic regularity of the eighteenth-century couplet, is loose, the sentences ambling easily from one couplet to another; and the vocabulary is common and slovenly. All this is odd, for Hunt wrote some excellent light verse, and was an Italian and Latin scholar of some attainment: but there does seem to have been an essential vulgarity of mind. Keats imitates the slipshod neologisms, and sometimes the cosy familiarity with beauty of the poetry-lover's circle: and a lip-smacking appreciation of obvious sensuous charms. But the emotional tension of his verse is far too high for him to follow the Cockney chattiness of Hunt; and the sometimes excessive richness and luxuriance of his early verse is not like Hunt at all.

The most important poem in the 1817 volume is *Sleep and Poetry*. It is an early attempt to formulate his poetic ideals, and is still written very much in the Huntian manner. (It was actually composed in Hunt's house.) But it contains within itself the reasons why this manner was not to satisfy Keats for long. The central part of the poem describes prophetically what he foresees to be his course in poetry.

First the realm I'll pass
Of Flora and old Pan: sleep in the grass
Feed upon apples red and strawberries,
And choose each pleasure that my fancy sees. (101)

These lines and the twenty that follow describe a phase of delighted communion with nature, and with all the external and obvious beauties of the world. He wonders whether he can ever bear to give up these sensuous ecstasies, but realizes in the same breath that they are only a stage in his progress.

> And can I ever bid these joys farewell?
> Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life
> Where I may find the agonies, the strife
> Of human hearts. (122)

[162]

A sort of vision follows, in which "shapes of delight, of mystery and fear," are seen, coming from the clouds and moving about the earth—symbolical of all the variety and passion of life, all that cannot be apprehended simply as sensuous beauty. This is the earliest statement of the problem that haunts Keats throughout his short life—the attempt to reconcile the loveliness of the world with its transience, its pleasures with its pain, the longing to enjoy the beautiful with the suspicion that it cannot be long enjoyed unless much that is not beautiful is faced. He was never to find a solution to these conflicts, and was never resigned as a modern poet might be, to write poetry of blank conflict: he was entering on a new phase of exploration when he died. The theme recurs in a letter of the next year to his friend Reynolds.

> "Well, I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as 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, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten into it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the 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 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' ... Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them." (*Letters*, I, 156.)

But these utterances are yet largely prophetic, and Keats is [163] Still in the realm of Flora, or the bright chamber of Maiden' Thought. To return to Sleep and Poetry \ the vision of his own development is followed by a short essay in criticism, chiefly interesting for showing the view of the history of English poetry that prevailed in Hunt's circle. In former days the altar of poetry ',shone e'en in this isle"—presumably in Elizabethan days. At that time "the Muses were nigh cloyed with honours": but in the succeeding age all this was forgotten, and a schism

> Nurtured by foppery and barbarism,
> Made great Apollo blush for this his land.
> Men were thought wise who could not understand
> His glories: with a puling infant's force
> They swayed about upon a rocking-horse
> And thought it Pegasus. (182)

—the puling infants being, one supposes, Dryden and Pope, and their exercises on the rocking horse the balanced antithetic couplets in which, for instance, the portraits of Achitophel and Sporus were written. As criticism this is little more than boyish impertinence, but it shows how the dogma of romanticism was already beginning to harden. The Augustan age already appears as an unfortunate interregnum in the history of poetry; and this becomes so much the established orthodoxy that fifty years later Matthew Arnold, a critic of by no means exclusively romantic leanings, can describe Dryden and Pope as "not classics of our poetry, but classics of our prose", in the tone of one who is saying what no one has ever doubted. Keats's attack is conducted with considerable spirit, and with an energy of contempt that makes it almost worthy of the eighteenth century itself: but the view of English poetic history is at least as partial as that which, a hundred years earlier, would have informed us that Mr.

Denham and Mr. Waller were the first refiners of our numbers, and that the sweetness of English verse was never practised before the institution of their reforms.

The major fruit of this period of Keats's tareer is Endymion, which appeared in the next year, in 1818. The preface, however, [164] shows that Keats was dissatisfied with it as soon as it was finished, and that the dissatisfaction was not only with the technique, but with the general state of feeling in which it was written.

> "The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life betwe, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undeci,d, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted: thence proceed mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste in going over the following pages.''

This is a surprising piece of self-criticism for a man of twenty, and disarms in advance almost all that need be said on the matter. The technical signs of the ferment and indecision are chiefly in the handling of the long narrative. It is not that the poem is without a plan—it started with a reasonably clear one; but the transitions are not clearly made, so that it is often difficult to tell what is happening; and the whole is desperately obscured by a profusion of ornament. Keats cannot refrain from chasing any descriptive butterfly that turns up, and the reader finds it genuinely hard to follow him in his ramblings. The classical "schism nurtured by foppery and barbarism" had laid down rules for the conduct of an epic poem, and expected any narrative poem to be planned with lucidity and logic. Many of the rules were arbitrary; but it is unfortunate that when they were thrown overboard the underlying ideal of lucidity often went with them. Antipathy to the "rocking-horse" rhythm of the eighteenth-century couplet was an article of faith in the Hunt circle. This arose partly from blindness to the real energy and variety of eighteenth-century verse, partly from a perfectly just recognition that its bite and sharpness are not the only effects of which the couplet is capable, and a perfectly natural desire to aim at other sensations. *Endymion* is therefore written in the loose Huntian couplet, and this reinforces the effect of laxity produced by the structure.

The theme of the poem is one that is endemic in romantic [165] literature—the pursuit in the world of an ideal love who has been glimpsed dimly in vision. So far it is the same as that of Shelley's *Alastor*. Keats embodies it in a rehandling of the Greek fable of Diana's love for Endymion, a mortal shepherd: but he lays the emphasis on Endymion's love for Diana rather than on hers for him. The goddess visits Endymion in sleep, and when he awakes he resolves to seek her through the world. After numerous confusing adventures he meets an Indian maiden who is sad and homesick, lamenting a lost love. He is sorry for her, and because he is sorry for her comes to love her; and for a time he forgets his goddess. This seems an infidelity, but is not really so, for in the end Diana and the Indian maiden turn out to be the same. That is to say, ideal beauty can only be achieved by love and sympathy for the beauty immanent in human life. The conclusion is quite different from that of Alastor, who, not finding his veiled maid, can only die disappointed. Keats does not accept the blank Shelleyan dichotomy between the world of experience and the world of imagination. Endymion achieves his quest, but only by apparently compromising his love for a goddess by love for a mortal. Keats is recurring here to the idea we have met already in *Sleep and Poetry* in the letter to Reynolds, and that we are to meet again in the second *Hyperion*; the idea that the love of beauty, like other passions, cannot exist fruitfully in isolation, that it can only fulfil itself through participation in the actual conditions of human life. Thus the leading idea of *Endymion* is not something mawkish or undecided, but a quite vigorous existentialist principle that Keats saw clearly from the beginning of his life. The trouble is that he sees it as a principle before he is able to grasp it in any concrete embodiment. Convinced that he must leave the joys of "the realm of Flora and old Pan" for "the agony and strife of human hearts", he still does not know how to do it. The descriptive passages are rich, luxuriant and fertile in invention, but uncertain in purpose. Sometimes they give the impression that he is perfectly content with this catalogue of "luxuries" (a favourite word with Keats at this time), and content to let it obscure the ground-plan of the work; at other times he seems to be chasing through all this loveliness of detail [166] some other kind of loveliness that he is not yet able to grasp. And the presentation of emotion is sentimental and monotonous —simply because

it is unrealized, because Keats has yet had little experience of the divagations of the heart, little time even to look into his own. Perhaps if he had had more he would have found that narrative poetry was not to be the medium in which he was really to express himself most fully.

The three short narratives *Lamia*, *Isabella* and *The Eve of St, Agnes* all belong to the volume of 1820 which also contained *Hyperion* and the Odes. *Isabella* was written immediately after the completion of *Endymion*, and belongs to the same emotional phase. Shortly after it was written the *Quarterly* published a contemptuously abusive review of *Endymion*, concentrating its fire on the style and diction, but more fundamentally offended by the sentiment. After this Keats hesitated for a time over the publication of *Isabella*, He was not, as is often said, particularly distressed by the rough handling he received. He describes Isabella as "a weak-sided poem, with an amusing sober-sadness about it" (Letters, II, 426). and quite good-humouredly recognized that its adolescent sentiment lays it open to the same kind of crude man-of-the-world mockery as had greeted its predecessor. In one sense it attempts more than Endymiony for it tries to deal with grief and passionate love, even to some extent with character. Again we find Keats knowing the direction in which he wants to move before he is actually capable of taking the step. He wants to do something nearer to "breathing human passion" than the love of a mythical shepherd for a goddess, but as he says himself, "There is too much inexperience of life and simplicity of knowledge in it". The sweet and gentle sentiment of the poem is incongruous with the horrible theme, and slips easily into sentimentality. This results often in a weak luxuriance of diction:

> So said, his erewhile timid lips grew bold,
> And poesied with hers in dewy rhyme.

A tender prettiness is the note of the poem, which remains after all an incomplete attempt at exploring one of the passages leading out of the chamber of Maiden-Thought. [167]

Lamia was written after the *Endymion* review, and is a conscious attempt at correcting its technical immaturities. So far from being "snuffed out by an article" Keats was set on by it to a sober attempt at technical improvement. Soon after the completion of *Endymion* Keats also experienced a revulsion against the taste of Hunt and his circle. "Hunt does one harm by making fine things petty and beautiful things hateful." *Lamia* is accordingly written in a much tighter form of couplet, and a much clearer and less sprawling kind of narrative—both being derived perhaps from a study of Dryden, though the verse is not very like Dryden in detail. A rather unhappy attempt at easy, man-of-the-world cynicism in the tone is probably aimed at making the poem less obnoxious to hard-boiled *Quarterly* ridicule. Keats valued it as a break from the sentimental atmosphere of his earlier work, and there is some very fine verse in it; but it remains otherwise a rather purposeless poem, and it looks rather like an exercise in verse-narrative.

Any poet whose work is as continually progressive as that of Keats must make these tentative and unfulfilled explorations. His most completely successful short narrative poem is the one where he remains most completely within the range of decorative romantic experience. This is *The Eve of St Agnes*. It was written in the first flush of his acquaintance with Fanny Brawne, before illness and, perhaps, her lack of real sympathy, had made the hope of an idyllic and happy love impossible for him. It is full of a dreamy sensuous happiness which finds its i expression (and this is typical of Keats) in a rich decorative: pattern rather than in any precise delineation of passion and sentiment. The poetic equivalent for an emotion with Keats is commonly a picture: what he has to say about feeling as such is often quite vague and generalized: even his rhythms are less I acutely responsive to changes of emotional tone than those of many other poets: it is by the precision of his sensuous imagery —bright and clear, yet rich, like the figures in a painted missal —that he commands the response that he wants. This imagery is chiefly visual: (the clear pictorial quality explains his appeal to the pre-Raphaelite painters) but images of sound, of touch, even of taste, also play their part; and the reader who is content [168] to respond simply to the rich sensuous surface of such a poem as The Eve of St, Agnes is in the end likely to understand Keats better than one who is too addicted to philosophical short cuts. The story is slight to the verge of insignificance, the setting is romantic-mediaeval, from Mrs. Radcliffe,

Chatterton and Spenser; but all the senses are alert and their apprehensions touched with the greatest precision and delicacy.

> The silver, snarling trumpets 'gan to chide
> (iv)
>
> Out went the taper as she hurried in;
> Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died.
> (xxiii)
>
> A casement high and triple-arched there was,
> All garlanded with carven imageries
> Of fruit, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,
> And diamonded with panes of quaint device.
> (xxiv)
>
> The arras, rich with horseman, hawk and hound,
> Fluttered in the besieging wind's uproar:
> And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.
> (xl)

With our post-symbolist tastes we are too likely to be unappreciative of this sort of descriptive writing, even while we recognize its aptness. But we should be wrong to think of it as *merely* "decorative". The idea of a lucky love triumphant over obstacles could never express itself in Keats by the rhapsodic anatomizing of sentiment that we find in *Epipsychidion*: this succession of clear, bright images of sight, sound and touch is the only means by which his imaginative life can find its incarnation. The fragment of *The Eve of St. Mark* has the same quality —a fairy-tale theme and setting combined with the most vivid and delicate realization of detail. Keats has been reproved for wishing once for a life of sensations rather than of [169] thoughts: the key to his poetry is that most of the time his sensations were his thoughts, the kind of thought that could not be embodied in sensuous and pictorial form was hardly possible to him.

The lover in *The Eve of St Agnes* wakened his Madeline by playing

> an ancient ditty long since mute
> In Provence called 'La Belle Dame sans Mercy'.

The name appears to have fascinated Keats, and not long afterwards he wrote the poem of that name. It is thus dramatically conceived, and springs out of the atmosphere of *The Eve of St, Agnes.* But it is a far less conscious poem, and springs perhaps from a different layer of the mind. *La Belle Dame* is the fatal woman-figure, like Circe or Tannhauser's Venus, who haunts romantic literature. She is the opposite of the pure and ideal Madeline, and yet the same person; one of the many forms the woman image assumes in the unconscious imagination. The imagery and phrasing have the perfect harmonious strangeness of a dream. If the essence of romantic poetry is to rely on sources of inspiration other than the rational intellect can supply, this poem may be justly considered its quintessence, and its hidden source is shown in the magical compulsive rhythm, less opulent and deliberate than is usual with Keats, more unexplainably haunting.

ii. 'Negative Capability'

So far, the most living thing in Keats's poetry has been the re-creation of sensuous beauty, first as a source of delight for its own sake, then as a symbol of the life of the mind and the emotions. Speculative and philosophical interests always formed the major part of Shelley's experience, and the young Wordsworth for a time was hag-ridden by them; there is almost no trace of this in Keats, The academic education which he never had tends to foster abstract thought; but Keats would never have lived by it whatever his training. He not only cared [170] little for, but positively resented intellectual truths which make demands upon the mind without being verifiable in inunediate experience. "Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses. We read fine things, but never feel them to the full till we have gone the same steps as the author." (*Letters,* I, 154.) Keats almost hates a writer who

tries to force the world and the reader to his own conclusions, and at times he felt that Wordsworth did so. “For the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an egotist … . We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us.” (*Letters*, I, 103.) Argument and dialectic seem to him an offensive self-assertion. “Man should not dispute or assert, but whisper results to his neighbour.” (*Letters*, I, 112) He distinguishes the poetical character to which he belongs from the “Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime’’: its essence is that

> it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion Poet. (ibid. I, 245.)

For Keats, the necessary precondition of poetry is submission to things as they are, without trying to intellectualize them into something else, submission to people as they are, without trying to indoctrinate or improve them. (We meet all this again, developed into a whole poetical creed, in Yeats’s early essays.) Keats found this quality at its fullest in Shakespeare.

> “It struck me what quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature—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.” (*Letters*, I, 77.)

This way of feeling grows naturally into a strong active and dramatic tendency, a wish to in the life of others, [171] and an understanding of other people that is everywhere evident in the letters. Often Keats feels that this participation in the life of others, “the agony and strife of human hearts”, ought to be the mainspring of his poetry. But it is not. The dealings with character and emotion are not the most memorable things in Keats’s poetry. There are natures whose passion for life includes, but goes beyond, personality. D. H. Lawrence was perhaps one of these, and there is something of it in Keats. The total impression of the moment, the fusion of his own subjective emotion with sensations from the outside world is the ultimate reality for him; and the most typical and individual remarks in the letters seem to be in passages like the following:

> I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness— I look not for it if it be not in the present hour—nothing startles me beyond the Moment. The setting sun will always set me to rights—or if a sparrow comes before my window ; I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel.” (*Letters*, I, 74.)

Such a nature is not likely to find its best expression in a narrative of character and events, (or, as Keats hoped, in drama). It is at its height in moments of impassioned contemplation, when the life of the spirit is closely bound up with the objects of immediate sensuous experience. It was in some such mood that the *Ode on Indolence* was written. It is the first of the great Odes, written in March 1819; and all of them were written in this year. In the *Ode on Indolence* not Love, nor Ambition, nor Poetry makes it worth while to give up the luxurious enjoyment of the moment: none of them is

> so sweet as drowsy noons
> And evenings steep’d in honied indolence;
> O, for an age so sheltered from annoy,
> That I may never know how change the moons.
> Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

Lines which might have served Matthew Arnold as the text for his sermon on Keats, the relaxed and sensuous man. [172] “But what shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion Poet.”

> My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o’er
> With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:
> The mom was clouded, but no shower fell,
> Tho’ in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;
> The open casement pressed a new-leaved vine,
> Let in the budding warmth and throstle’s lay;

It is all exquisite and all utterly transitory; and out of the knowledge of this is born a longing for a world in which such moments could become eternal. All the Odes are closely bound up with this theme of transience and permanency. Yeats, on the same theme, wrote simply

> Man is in love, and loves what vanishes.
> What is there more to say?

Keats is not capable of this sort of twentieth-century stoicism; he must attempt to reconcile the contradiction. Perhaps this is one of the diflFerences between classical and romantic poetry. It is the classical poet who accepts with resignation the passing of earthly joys and is, therefore, free to gather his rosebuds while he may (Yeats is writing above in an untypically neo-classic moment); the romantic poet tries desperately to find some permanent and unchanging refuge in a world of flux, longing for an age in which he may never know the moon's changes, or for a shadowy isle of bliss where he can forget the beating of the steely sea. Thus for the romantic there is always the element of conflict, either in the poetry, itself or just outside it; and since he is asking questions to which there is no answer, he is little likely to reach a serene conclusion. The best he can do is to find a way of facing a contradiction whose intensity he refuses to minimize; and this is better than saying you don't believe in ghosts while there is one breathing down your neck.

The *Ode to Psyche* seems the farthest away from all this, the most purely fanciful. It would be easy to take it as a piece of [173] lovely decorative mythology: but it is probably something more. Psyche is the soul, not recognized as a goddess in the classic Greek mythology. But neither is she the soul in the Christian sense. The absence of any specifically Christian feeling, indeed of any kind of orientation to Christianity, is remarkable in Keats. His main religious feeling is a longing, perfectly expressed in the fourth stanza of this ode, for the natural piety of antiquity

> When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
> Holy the air, the water and the fire.

Yet Keats still makes the practical distinction between what is believed and what is merely imagined, and is quite unable to attempt to believe in nature-spirits or Olympus' faded hierarchy. Psyche, the last addition to the ancient pantheon, never formally worshipped in the ancient world, is the only one of the old deities who is still real.

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

So the last stanza with its promise to

> be thy priest, and build a fane
> In some untrodden region of my mind,

with its lovely, half-inspired, half-natural imagery, is not merely a piece of fanciful devotion to an obsolete myth; but a recognition by Keats that his own exploration is to be of the interior landscape, that his ultimate devotion is to be neither to the objective world, nor to any power outside himself.

Indolence records a moment when sensuous happiness is complete and sufficient and its own justification. The trouble with such experiences, as the poem implicitly recognizes, is that they are only momentary. To Keats, with his appetite for [174] the immediately experienced, they are the most real and important things in life. "We become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere" of such moments: but among the effects they give rise to is that "of convincing one's nerves that the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and Oppression". At the time he wrote the *Ode to a Nightingale,* Keats needed little reminding of this. It was only a few months after the death of his brother Tom from a painful and distressing illness, and the memory of this is in the third stanza. The poem is not, as is sometimes said, a contrast between his own despondency and the happiness of the bird. It is about the contrast between his own immediately experienced happiness in the bird's song, his

imaginative participation in an untroubled natural life, and a less immediate but more enduring knowledge of sorrow. Happiness is momentary and transient: the only thing certain is

> The weariness, the fever and the fret
> Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
> Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
> Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies,
> Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
> And leaden-eyed despairs.

The heart-ache and the drowsy numbness of the opening lines do not describe mere dejection, but a sort of drugged state, which can only be maintained by further intoxication (Stanza 2). Wine is the traditional soother of men's cares, the traditional means of prolonging a drowsy sensuous enjoyment; and Keats sometimes said he enjoyed claret. But though he had his Anacreontic intervals, they are no real answer for him, and in the fourth stanza he realizes that the only way of escaping to share the happiness of the bird is "on the viewless wings of Poesy". Poetry means first of all imagination—imaginative participation in the bird's life: secondly, it means the actual poetry he is writing—the incantatory loveliness of the fourth and fifth stanzas does make this moment permanent, in a sense: but not in the sense that Keats the living and suffering human being [175] really desires. The only way in which it can really be made eternal is to die at the moment of greatest sensuous happiness. "I have been half in love with easeful death." Much ink has been spilt on the romantic poets' pursuit of death. "Keats's longing for death and his mother has become a by-word among the learned" (W. Empson). Maybe it has; but like the Freudian death-wish which has also become a by-word, it does not mean what is most obvious on the surface. The Freudian death-wish is the desire of the cell to resist the encroachments of outside experience, to remain enclosed in its own kind of contentment. So the romantic poet's desire for death is not a longing for extinction, it is the desire to make a happiness that he Imows to be transient last for ever. And Keats is only half in love with easeful death—the other half of his consciousness knows well enough that this answer is only the negation of any possible answer. But art offers a type of permanence; and by a startling transformation in the seventh stanza the nightingale becomes a symbol of the artist and its song a symbol of art.

It has often been said that this is an audacious paradox, that the nightingale, so far from being immortal, has a considerably shorter life than man, and that its song is only immortal in the sense that through history there have always been nightingales' songs and that they have always had the same power of enchantment. But it is only in this sense that immortality can be predicated of poets; in fact, the poet's position is stronger, for his individual song endures. There is, therefore, no breach in the poetic logic. But the argument is a casuistry none the less, because the special case of poetic immortality is used, or is on the point of being used, as if it offered the kind of enduring happiness that Keats seeks as a man. But it does not, and cannot do so. (It is small consolation to the sorrows of Eohippus, as T. H. Huxley once remarked, that one of his remote descendants is some day to win the Derby.) So the last word of the seventh stanza, "forlorn", recalls Keats the poet who creates, foreseeing a poetic immortality, to Keats the man who suffers, foreseeing only sickness and sorrow and an early death. The song of the nightingale fades, and Keats finishes where, unlike Shelley, he generally finishes, with his feet on the ground. On [176] the level of ordinary human experience there is no solution to the conflict. The poet who creates can offer little consolation to the man who suffers: but on the level of poetic creation the conflict disappears. Transitory human happiness is given permanence in a different sense by being embodied in art.

The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* rakes up the thought of the seventh stanza of the *Ode to a Nightingale.* De Selincourt suggests as its motto a phrase of Leonardo's: *Cosa bella mortal passa e non d'arte* — Mortal beauties pass away, but not those of art. It is a much more objective and descriptive poem than the Nightingale. It is too often forgotten that Keats's imaginative glimpse of Greece was derived not only from translated literary sources, but also from actual Greek plastic art, and that he had had more chance of experiencing it at first hand than earlier and more learned neo-classical connoisseurs; for the Elgin marbles had been recently acquired by the British Museum, and Keats had been profoundly

impressed by them. Indeed the imagery of the ode seems to have been suggested more by these sculptures than by any individual vase-painting. The urn is taken as a type of enduring beauty; and again the immortality of art is only a quasi-immortality; for though ceramics last longer than most things they are not in any metaphysical sense more indestructible than mere human clay. There is no real analogy between the loves and pastoral felicities on the urn and "breathing human passion"; the contrast between the permanence of the one and the transience of the other is another poetic casuistry. But this time it is directed to a different end. The poet's momentary emotional state enters less into the poem. He is concerned to establish at least one enduring value below the sphere of the moon, and he finds it in the existence of the beauty of art. It is the only way in which human feeling and natural loveliness can be given lasting significance. The happy boughs that cannot shed their leaves and the lover who can never kiss, but whose love can never fade, are types of the only earthly paradise that exists; and the fact that it is not quite of the kind that men are looking for is not now in the foreground of consciousness.

The last two lines of the poem have been much discussed. [177] That beauty is truth, truth beauty is not all that we know on earth, and certainly not all that we need to know. In the days when it was the custom to take romantic modes of expression simply at their face value these lines were often read as the expression of a profound philosophy. Dr. Richards has taught his disciples to laugh at this reading of them, that the statement is conceptually meaningless and is only there for its value in communicating and organizing emotion. Neither of these views is particularly helpful. The lines must be read in their context, and in the context of the other odes. They are of course in the first place the expression of a moment of rapturous recognition of a beautiful object, and so far are equivalent to an exclamation of joy and reverence. But the sensuous resources of Keats's verse are so rich that he has no need to disguise his emotions of this kind as philosophical statements, unless he also means them in some sense to be so. And he says the same thing in prose: 'T never can feel certain of any truth, but from a clear perception of its Beauty" (*Letters*, I, 281). In this context, where transience and permanence are the two poles of the argument, "truth,' means "that which has lasting value". (The truth is great and shall prevail. What is true all the week is "truer" than what is true only on Monday morning.) Keats is saying that beauty is "truer" than love, pleasure and other forms of value, because they pass away while beauty can be embodied in a lasting quasipermanent form. When poets say "ye" they are often addressing themselves or other poets. That beauty is truth and truth beauty is all that the artist, as artist, knows, and all he needs to know for the practice of his art.

> *Tout passe: I"art robuste*
> *Seule de l'eternité.*

Again, Keats finds a solution to his conflict valid for the artist, but leaving the suffering and experiencing man exactly where he was.

In the *Ode on Melancholy* and the *Ode to Autumn*, the problems of the artist are in abeyance, and Keats returns to ordinary human experience, to the problem of happiness in life. [178] The *Ode on Melancholy* recognizes that sadness is the inevitable complement of the moments of intense sensuous happiness that so far has been the peaks of his experience.

> She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die,
> And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips,
> Bidding adieu.

It is therefore as vain to attempt to escape from this inevitable pain as to expect a light not to cast shadows. Melancholy springs from the transience of joy, and the transience of joy is a part of its nature. But the note of the poem is not that of Carpe dieniy or Gather ye rosebuds while ye may. They suggest an eager grasping at pleasures that are soon to be snatched away. The whole movement and vocabulary of the Odes suggest a rich, slow brooding over beauty and joy, with a full realization both of beauty and the pain that its disappearance will bring, but with an enjoyment of such intensity and depth that it makes the moment eternal, in quality if not in duration.

The Ode to Autumn is pre-eminently the record of such an experience. It is in a sense a return to the mood of the Ode on Indolence —making the moment sufficient to itself. It is the most perfect in form and detail of the Odes, and also the most difficult to penetrate below the surface, for it is apparently the most purely objective and descriptive. The emotion has become completely fused with the object, and expresses itself completely through it. There are no questions and no conflict in the poem: the season of ripeness and fulfilment is seen as though it is quite final. Autumn as a poetical symbol is commonly the prelude to winter. Keats sees it as a still pause in time, when everything has reached fruition and ripeness is all. The old question almost raises its head in the last stanza:

> Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?
> Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.

But it is immediately stilled, and the poem ends with the quiet relapse of consciousness into the soft natural loveliness that surrounds it. [179]

It would be idle to try to turn the Odes into great philosophical poems. They come to no conclusion and make no synthesis. Keats does not wholly avoid confusion between *permanent value and value permanently accessible to the individual*. His temperament, with its eager love of life, would have been satisfied with a speculative solution like Yeats's belief in reincarnation: but he would surely have dismissed it as too fantastic: or like that of Mr. Dunne, whose New Immortality, if I have not misunderstood it, suggests that after death a kind of consciousness persists, that is in permanent possession of its past experience.

> These metaphysics of magicians
> And necromantic books are heavenly.

But theirs was not the kind of speculation to which Keats was prone. Yet the Odes are not merely decorative and descriptive poems, as parts of them appear to be; nor yet poems of luxurious self-abandonment; nor yet mere manipulations of feeling. The deep conflict from which they spring is both emotional and intellectual; yet they proceed solely by the methods peculiar to poetry, not by the aid of the speculative intelligence. They are in fact supreme examples of Negative Capability, "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".

Keats found his real medium here, far more than in the narrative poems. They are the summit of his achievement, for Hyperion was only the beginning of a phase that he did not live to complete. More than any other poet of his age he had the power of externalizing his experience, of finding adequate outward symbols for his experiences, instead of merely talking about them. This does not necessarily mean that he had the dramatic gift: indeed, his knowledge of human character and actions had hardly gone far enough for this to be possible. Sensuous beauty and meditation on sensuous beauty was the central experience of his life. It is in the Odes that he explores this most fully, and perhaps for the time exhausts it. It is not likely that he would have rested in this phase. Fighting against [180] it all the time was the active and dramatic tendency we have noticed above, the desire to make "the agony and strife of human hearts'' the material of his verse. We must trace his further movement in this direction in the two versions of *Hyperion*.

iii. The Two Hyperions

Hyperion exists in two versions, the second being a revision of the first, with the addition of a long induction in a new style which makes it into a different poem. The chronology of the composition is obscure, since it was contemplated long before it was begun. Keats worked on it at intervals, and neither he nor his correspondents distinguish between the two versions in their letters. Without discussing the evidence in detail, for which the reader must be referred elsewhere [see note 18], we may say that the first version was written mostly before the great odes, the second mostly after them; and that the two

extend, on and off, over Keats's greatest creative period, until increasing illness and despair finally made it impossible for him to work at all.

After the publication of *Endymion*, in 1818, Keats went on a summer tour in Scotland, during which he studied Dante, and severely injured his health by exposure. He returned to nurse his brother through his last illness, it was apparently during this period, in September, that *Hyperion* was begun. About the same time, Keats first met Fanny Brawne, with whom he was soon to be so hopelessly and disastrously in love; and he composed The Eve of St. Agnes in the first flush of new emotion. Work on Hyperion, therefore, cannot have been continuous. But by April 1819 the complete MS (or all there is of it, for the poem is a fragment) was in the hands of Woodhouse, literary adviser to Keats's publishers. The Odes and *La Belle Dame* occupy the next two months; and in the later summer' Keats took up the poem again, presumably at work on the second version. In September, the month in which the Ode to Autumn was written, he writes that he has given *Hyperion* up; though he appears actually to have worked further on it in the winter of [181] 1819, when his love for Fanny, increasing in intensity as it was frustrated by illness, was gradually wearing him out. The period covered by *Hyperion*, then, is the period of Keats's most intense experience, both of joy and sorrow, in actual life; and of his most rapid development: and it is not surprising, therefore, that the second version shows great changes from the first.

The idea of another poem on a mythological theme was in Keats's mind before he had finished *Endymion*, and he soon decided on the subject, the Fall of Hyperion. The theme of the war between the Titans, or earlier generation of gods, and the later Olympians who dispossessed them is often referred to in Keats's favourite literature, and he could have found the outlines of his story without referring to Lempriere for aid. The specific theme, the supplanting of Hyperion the old sun-god by Apollo the new, is Keats's own. Apollo is also the god of poetry, and as Endymion had symbolized the fate of the lover of beauty in the world, so the story of Apollo and Hyperion was perhaps going to symbolize the fate of the poet as creator. Since the poem is unfinished, we cannot know. What is immediately clear is how much the design owes to Milton. The poem opens in the regular epic manner, in the middle of the story. We find the Titans, like Milton's fallen angels, already outcast and shorn of their power. Hyperion alone is not yet overthrown, and, like Milton's Satan, he is the one hope of further resistance. The opening scene is followed by a council to discuss the regaining of the lost dominions, in which Enceladus, like Moloch, pronounces his sentence for open war, and Oceanus, like Belial, stands for more moderate measures. Externally, at least, this is modelled on *Paradise Lost*, and marks a clear break with the meandering structure of *Endymion*, The first two books look like the opening of an epic, and it seems that Keats's original design (we are told so by Woodhouse and the publishers [*Poems*, ed. de Selincourt, 487]) was a poem of epic scope, in which the war in heaven would have been narrated, as in *Paradise Lost,* in the form of an episode. But it seems likely (and the more likely from the desultory composition of the work) that the plan changed, and that the two books we have are not a fragment of what should have been ten, but of a more contracted design. Definite evidence is [182] wanting, and the situation must remain obscure. We cannot avoid speculation, however: in spite of its fragmentary condition, *Hyperion* remains Keats's most imposing piece of work, and the student of Keats must wish to know both why it was discontinued and how it would have gone on.

The publishers tell us that the reception of *Endymion* discouraged the author from proceeding. But this is untrue, and we have the evidence of chronology and a note from Keats himself to prove it. (*Poems*, 487). Keats said that he gave it up because of the excessive Miltonism of the style.' (*Letters*, II, 419)—but he says it almost casually in a passage where he is discussing other things; and there is not the slightest need to suppose that this was the only reason, or even the most important. Let us look at the poem as it stands.

The first book gives us a picture of the fallen Titans, with Saturn as the central figure, but Hyperion as the only one who remains even potentially active. The second book shows them in council, and the vital part of it is undoubtedly the speech of Oceanus. It is here that we begin to see the poem in a new perspective. The burden of his speech is as follows:

My voice is not a bellows unto ire,
Yet listen, ye who will, whilst I bring proof
How ye, perforce, must be content to stoop:
And in this proof much comfort will I give,
If ye will take that comfort in its truth.
We fall by course of Nature's law, not force
Of thunder, or of Jove. (II, 176)

Saturn was not the first power in the universe, and cannot expect to be the last. Chaos and darkness produced light; light brought heaven and earth and life itself into being, and the Titans were the first-bom of life. Heaven and Earth are more beautiful than chaos and darkness:

So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,
A power more strong in beauty, bom of us
And fated to excel us. (II, 212)

[183]

The Titans are not to repine or envy their successors:

for 'tis the eternal law
That first in beauty shall be first in might. (II, 228)

The simple Clymene follows and confirms Oceanus by testifying to the beauty of the young Apollo's music, which she has heard. What does this mean for the poem as a whole? It means that Hyperion is not after all to be a poem of epic conflict in the old sense—it is to be a poem of evolution, of the supersession of lower forms by higher; and the successors are to prevail because they are superior in beauty.

In the fragment of Book III the interest shifts from the Titans to the young Apollo. Mnemosyne (Memory) alone among the Titans has formed relations vrith the younger gods. She has watched over the childhood of Apollo, and now she finds him wavering and uncertain of his course. In speech with her he finds the consciousness of his destiny and assumes his newfound godhead. At this point, the poem breaks off.

What has happened? It seems that what began as an epic poem about a mythological conflict has become a symbolical poem of a different kind. But in the process new difficulties have arisen. The conventional epic conflict would have afforded a wealth of scenes and incidents, outlined in Woodhouse's sketch of the proposed development of the poem. (*Poems*, ed. de Selincourt, 486.) The new scheme, of an evolution in beauty, presents far greater problems. It could hardly be embodied in events and actions, and would, therefore, not afford material for anything like the ten books originally proposed. Perhaps there were other difficulties as well. We have seen repeated evidence of a conflict in Keats's life between the longing for a state of changeless happiness—

That I may never know how change the moons—

and on the other hand an urgent sense of the necessity for change and development, the necessity to emerge from the chamber of Maiden-Thought. But it is one thing to realize the need for change, quite another thing to effect it. We are perpetually finding that a certain kind of experience is exhausted, or [184] about to be exhausted, without knowing what is to take its place. We are on the threshold of a new development, but the door is still shut. So it is with Keats. The thing that had been most real to him up to now was an impassioned sensuous contemplation, enjoyed in self-contained, timeless moments; and the longing to make them eternal. He can talk about leaving the realm of Flora, but he does not know the way out. He knows intellectually that the kind of beauty he has lived with up to now must be superseded by another kind—

Shapes of delight and mystery and fear—

But he can only see it in uncertain glimpses. So, faced with his poem about development and change, he can take us to the threshold of the new life, but he can go no further. And he is not happy with such a theme, for his deepest experience up to now has been of states that seem, while they last, to be timeless. The young Apollo assumes his god-like knowledge, and his mind is filled with

> Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions,
> Majesties, sovran voices, agonies.
> Creations and destroyings. (III, 114)

But in Keats's own mind this knowledge is only potential; he is not yet in secure possession of it. And the poem remains unfinished because he does not know how it is to go on. (See note 22.) When he comes to revise it he knows no more than before how it is to go on. So *Hyperion* as it stands is not continued: the second version ends as the first did. But he adds to it an induction, making his ultimate purpose clearer. He cannot finish the poem, but he can show the direction in which it was to move. He does not do this by describing a distantly seen goal. Truths were not truths to Keats till they were proved upon the pulses, and he works now as ever, by giving poetic embodiment to the actual state of his mind. The new induction is one of the most remarkable pieces of writing in Keats's work, and it is the beginning of a development of which he was not to see the end. However, we cannot appreciate it fully without some further examination of the technique of the poem. [185]

The Miltonic influence is as obvious in the verse and diction of the first Hyperion as it is in the design. Keats had been "feasting upon" Milton in April 1818, (*Letters*, II, 149) shortly after the completion of Endymion, and the influence, mingled attraction and repulsion, goes on intermittently for the next eighteen months, On the Scotch tour, immediately before the writing of *Hyperion*, he studied Dante in Cary's translation. Thus he came under the spell of two austerer masters in poetry than any he had known before. If there is anything Dantesque in *Hyperion*, it is in the later rather than the earlier version; but perhaps the remote effect of a reading of Dante can be seen throughout in the greater clarity and definiteness of the pictures. Keats was by now in strong revulsion from the bathos and vulgarity of the Huntian manner, and it is natural, therefore that he should turn to Milton, the obvious master of a style of assured and conscious grandeur—above all, of an imitable style. It is relatively easy, as the history of blank verse since the seventeenth century shows, to achieve something of Milton's dignity by imitating his verbal habits; and this Keats does. There is no need to exemplify the Miltonic echoes in detail. The most careless reader can hardly help noticing the constant use of inversions ("stride colossal", "rest divine") typical of Milton's Latinized style, but not so far much used by Keats. Especially noticeable is the trick of sandwiching a noun between two adjectives ("gold clouds metropolitan"). There are other fragments of classical sentence-structure too:

> save what solemn tubes,
> Blown by the serious Zephyrs, gave of sweet
> And wandering sounds. (I, 206)

And a passage such as the following leaves us in no doubt of its provenance:

> So ended Saturn; and the God of the Sea,
> Sophist and sage from no Athenian grove,
> But cogitation in his watery shades,
> Arose, with locks not oozy, and began. (II, 167)

[186]

Yet the Miltonisms are detachable, not organic: the basis of the verse is not Miltonic: it is still the verse of Keats, but immensely purged and strengthened by contact with a severer master. Some of the most beautiful images in their delicacy and precision are utterly unlike Milton's generalized verbal grandeur, and indeed could be by nobody but Keats.

> No stir of air was there
> Not so much life as on a summer's day

Robs not one light seed from the feathered grass.
But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest. (1 7)

The Miltonisms of the style seem to have been a worry to Keats. In one of the letters, after praising Chatterton, rather oddly, as "the purest writer in the English language", he goes on to say, "I have given up *Hyperion* —there were too many Miltonic inversions in it—Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful, or rather artist's humour. I wish to give myself up to other sensations. English ought to be kept up". (Letters, II, 419.) But the discomfort of the Miltonic externals is more than compensated in other directions.

The imagery and description are shorn of redundancies, and are far finer for being kept within bounds: and there is an enormous gain of dignity and force in the presentation of emotion. Indeed, *Hyperion* is Keats's most serious and considerable essay in the dramatic presentation of emotion—for the Titans are conceived in human terms, and their sorrows are human sorrows. There is far greater power, too, of discourse, of argument in verse, than ever before: there is no parallel in the earlier work to the speech of Oceanus; and Keats seems to be discovering, as Yeats did later, how useful this sheer rhetorical power can be, even to a poet whose aims are normally in another direction.

That part of the second Hyperion which is merely a rehandling of the first does not present any very profound changes, though they are fairly numerous. They are mostly in the direction of removing Miltonisms and other dispensable [187] ornaments. Keats sacrifices some of his best lines in the process, and though he evidently wanted the greater bareness of style to fit in with that of the new opening, we mostly feel that the sacrifice is too great. This accounts for the myth that he undertook the revision of the poem in the decline of his powers. But it is hard to see how any one can have believed this on reading the new induction. After the Odes, it is surely Keats's greatest verse; and it is so in an entirely new way. There is nothing like the first three hundred lines of the new *Hyperion* in Keats's earlier work, and I know of nothing like it in English blank verse at all. The new notes in blank verse since Milton are not very numerous: there are innumerable Miltonics; there are the vital but rather graceless colloquial rhythms of Browning, and the almost too professional mellifluousness of Tennyson. This is different from any. The rapidity and directness remind one of Dante—though whether the Dantesque influence or Jacobean blank verse is really at work is hard to say. Both in reflective and descriptive passages the verse seems to stride instead of to linger, as Keats's verse has mostly done hitherto. And the newfound decision of style reflects a new decision, in the handling of ideas.

The second *Hyperion* is cast in the form of a dream, and the added opening describes this dream and its setting. It begins with a short prologue which affords an excellent example of the new tense and muscular verse.

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave
A paradise for a sect; the savage, too.
From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep
Guesses at heaven; pity these have not
Traced upon vellum or wild Indian leaf
The shadows of melodious utterance.
But bare of laurel they live, dream, and die;
For poesy alone can tell her dreams;
With the fine spell of words alone can save
Imagination from the sable chain
And dumb enchantment. Who alive can say,
"Thou art no poet, may'st not tell thy dreams?"

[188]

Since every man whose soul is not a clod
Hath visions and would speak, if he had lov'd,
And been well nurtured in his mother tongue.
Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse
Be poet's or fanatic's will be known
When this warm scribe, my hand, is in the grave.

This is an attempt to define the position of poetry. The poet has his dreams in common with other men, but he alone is able to secure them from oblivion. (Again, the thought of the *Ode to a Grecian Urn*—only art can endure.) And the poet's dream differs from the fanatic's, because it is for the world, the fanatic's only for a sect. We pass on to the dream itself, which begins in a wood—not a wild and gloomy one like Dante's, but a pastoral scene with a meal of fruits set out, of which the poet eats, then drinks from a cool vessel of transparent juice. He falls into a deep sleep and awakes to find that the scene is changed, that he is in a vast shrine, at the western end of which are steps leading up to an altar, with a gigantic image and a priestess ministering to the sacred flame. As he approaches, the veiled priestess addresses him:

> If thou canst not ascend
> These steps, die on the marble where thou art.
>
> (1.107)

A stifling numbness overcomes him, and he is unable to move; then new life is poured into him; he draws nearer to the altar and asks the priestess to explain the mysteries.

> None can usurp this height, returned that shade,
> But those to whom the miseries of the world Are misery, and will not let them rest.
> All else, who find a haven in the world
> Where they may thoughtless sleep away their days,
> If by chance into this fane they come.
> Rot on the pavement where thou rotted'st half.
>
> (1.147)

[189]

This is the theme, already familiar in *Sleep and Poetry* and in the letters—that the poet must not rest in poetical dreams but must share the sorrows of humanity. In the following lines, it is carried further. The actively virtuous are not to be found in the shrine—they are working in the world. The poet is here because of his weakness, because he is a dreamer, and is afforded this one chance to save himself. An obscure passage follows (I, 187-210), possibly meant for deletion, since a few lines of it are repeated later on; yet apparently necessary to complete the idea. [See note 25.] In it the prophetess qualifies her condemnation of "the dreamer tribe,', and distinguishes further between the poet and the mere dreamer:

> The one pours out a balm upon the world,
> The other vexes it.

She then reveals that the temple is Saturn's, the only remaining shrine of the old gods, and she is Moneta, the sole remaining priestess, Moneta is the Latin name of Mnemosyne, who occurs, of course, in the Hyperion story itself. She is, as it were, another avatar of Mnemosyne, performing the same function for Keats as Mnemosyne had done for Apollo. Then Moneta unveils herself, and is described, in verse of a sere, burnt-out splendour that exceeds anything else in Keats.

> Then I saw a wan face.
> Not pined by human sorrows, but bright-blanch'd
> By an inunortal sickness which kills not;
> It works a constant change, which happy death
> Can put no end to; deathwards progressing
> To no death was that visage; it had past
> The lily and the snow; and beyond these
> I must not think now, though I saw that face.
> But for her eyes I should have fled away. (I, 256)

The poet asks to be shown the hidden story that lies behind the survival of the mysterious temple: she consents to reveal it to him—and the story of Hyperion and the Titans, much as we had it before, then begins.

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This is Keats's last attempt to define the place of the poet in the world. It is not an exaltation of the poet, like Shelley's *Defence*. The poet is less than the man of active virtue, and Keats is still absorbed by the contrast between the realm of Flora and the other kingdom that he suspects to lie beyond it« He has still not crossed the boundary, but he knows more of what to expect on the journey. It is notable how much of Keats's poetry is about poetry, its function, its glories and its limitations. It is as though he is perpetually trying to find a bridge between art and life, but is perpetually led back to art itself. Perhaps the solution for the artist is not to try to escape from the domain of art, but to explore it more closely. In *Hyperion*, as always, Keats makes no attempt to march straight forward to an intellectual conclusion; he shows us the steps and stairs of the mind by which a yet unseen conclusion may be reached. And he draws two ,stinctions—one between the practical and the visionary mind; and one between the creative visionary, the poet, and the mere dreamer who "vexes" the world with visions that he can do nothing to transmute into reality. At this point, Keats's experience stops; and disease and an unhappy love were to cut short the possibility of further exploration.

He wrote little after this: the *Ode to Autumn* was composed towards the end of 1819; in 1820 he seems to have written almost nothing, except the pathetic "Bright star" sonnet, written into a blank leaf of Shakespeare's poems on the eve of his departure for Italy. Among the fragments of his verse were found these terrible lines, probably addressed to Fanny Brawne.

> This living hand, now warm and capable
> Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
> And in the icy silence of the tomb.
> So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
> That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
> So in my veins red life might stream again.
> And thou be conscience-calmed—see here it is—
> I hold it towards you.

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This seems to be the solitary outcrop of a reef that otherwise runs underground; it reveals an intensity and dramatic force that is like that of a Jacobean tragedy—but not like anything else in Keats. It is possible that he reached his full maturity in this dark period when he had not power to express it. Perhaps this new-found power would actually have led to drama. This is what Keats hoped himself; we find him talking, late in 1819, of "the writing of a few fine plays' (*Letters*, II, 481) as his greatest ambition.

We cannot tell; there remains a real element of mystery about Keats's later work. Would he, if he had lived longer, have remained within the bounds of the purely aesthetic experience which had so far been most real to him: or would he have obeyed his continual prompting towards an interpretation of more general human experience: and is the latter an essential part of his nature, or is it simply a lingering relic of the endemic English Puritanism, with its suspicion of non-utilitarian beauty? It is certainly the Keats of *La Belle Dame* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* who has produced the most numerous poetic progeny—the early Tennyson and the pre-Raphaelites being among them. The pre-Raphaelites indeed are his most obvious successors; and that, considering the narrowness of the pre- Raphaelite scope, is as much as to say that the work of Keats has never yet made its full impact on English poetry. Perhaps if he had reached maturity the pre-Raphaelite movement would have been a less abortive affair than it

was, would have reached something of the dimensions of French symbolism. For myself, I find it easier to see him developing in this direction than towards the dramatic interpretation of life that he foresaw towards the end of his career.

In any case he has reached a further point of insight into the nature of the poet's problems than any other of the writers of his day. A whole new territory of poetic possibilities had been opened up by the romantic imagination. The rarity of complete and rounded achievement in Romantic verse, the fact that the Romantic poets "did not know enough", as Arnold complained, is accounted for by the extent and the difficulty of the country they were exploring. Coleridge had asserted the primacy of the imagination; but had shown only in a few brilliant flashes how [192]

it could combine the creative freedom of a dream with truth to some of the deepest facts of human experience. Wordsworth had exercised his power almost entirely on the bond between man and nature; and his strong grasp of the actual made him in many ways more akin to the eighteenth century than to the coming age. For the most part it was left to the second generation of Romantic poets to work out a relation between the actual and an imaginative ideal. Shelley leaves the dichotomy between the two almost unresolved. Byron frankly gives up the struggle and achieves his greatest successes on a lower level of insight altogether. It is to Keats if anyone that we must look for a solution of the Romantic conflict, and his solution is incomplete. And this is not merely due to the accident of an early death. It is impossible to say how much we have lost by the fact that the later Romantic poets died young—even Byron, the oldest, before the age at which we should expect an ordinary man of the world to reach his full powers. It is possible that we have not lost much, for Wordsworth and Coleridge too died young—as poets. It is in the nature of the romantic imagination that its achievements should be incomplete. It is also in the nature of human life; in spite of all the Horatian precepts,

> Be sure the reach of your own powers to know,
> How far your genius, taste and learning go

and all the rest of it, men do persist in attempting more than they can perform; and in some periods there is nothing else for them to do. It is possible to have an equal but different admiration for the classic who succeeds by knowing human limitations and the romantic who fails by trying to transcend them. We cannot now return to the uncritically accepted romantic dogma of the last century; but we need not be bamboozled by the rootless critical neo-classicism of the inter-war years. Mr. Eliot said in one of his earlier unguarded moments that there may be a place for romanticism in life, but there is no place for it in art. It was indeed necessary in the 'twenties to rehabilitate wit, intelligence and technical control; but there was surely something exaggerated and un-Augustan [193] in the contemporary exaltation of the Augustan virtues; and those who felt that the Romantic poets were attempting something more than their immediate predecessors were after all right. There is no inevitable progress in the arts, but there is, as long as they remain alive, a continually growing tradition: and if we are to possess that tradition in our own age we must be prepared to absorb the romantic experience. There was a few years ago a real danger that the Romantic age would come to be regarded, as the eighteenth century once was before it, as an unfortunate interregnum in our poetic history. Keats's fragmentary lines to Fanny Brawne can bear a wider interpretation than their author intended. The Romantic movement does hold out a living hand to us, and not to grasp it is a kind of intellectual and emotional treason. We can perhaps see the results of the deliberate refusal of the romantic experience in this century in the present decay of creation, and the desiccation of much of our criticism. However much more final is our disillusionment with the actual world than any that was known to the Romantics, however much our historical experience exceeds theirs in painfulness and intensity, we have not in fact got far beyond their mode of interpretation. It is a mistake to tie up our wounds with the rags of Romanticism while denying the value of the whole cloth: and the difficult reabsorption of nineteenth-century values is one of the things that is needed for the mental health of the twentieth.

NOTES

1. Keat's *Letters*, ed. M. B. Forman (1935); p.94.
2. ibid. I, 153.
3. ibid. I, 157.
4. Yeats, *Ego Dominus Tuus*.
5. The Greek influence on Keats has been vastly exaggerated. He neither knew nor cared anything about Greek history and civilization. He was fascinated by legend and mythology, and what he knew of Greek plastic art; but the world of Plao and the world of Pericles were alike closed to him. Besides Homer, transmitted via Chapman, the major influence at work is [194] the mythologizing Ovid. To regard this as representing Greece would be rather like omitting Goethe, Kant and Beethoven and representing Germany by Wagnerian opera and Grimm's fairy tales.
6. Sonnet: 'On leaving some friends at an early hour'
7. Letters, I, 156.
8. ibid. II, 426.
9. ibid. I, 273.
10. ibid. I, 154.
11. ibid. I, 103.
12. ibid. I, 112.
13. ibid. I, 245.
14. ibid. I, 77.
15. ibid. I, 74.
16. ibid. I, 281.
17. I had written this when I found a not quite similar but confirmatory suggestion in Ridley, Keats' Craftsmanship, p. 4: "I would suggest in passing that if in most places where Keats uses the word 'truth' (with its connotation of 'correspondence') we substitute the word 'reality', we are likely to come nearer to his meaning".
18. V. de Selincourt's edition of the *Poems*; M. Murry, *Keats and Shakespeare*; Ridley, *Keats' Craftsmanship*. Amy Lowell's biography is certainly wrong on this matter.
19. V. *Poems*, ed. de Selincourt, 487.
20. Letters, II, 419.
21. *Poems*, ed. de Selincourt, 486.
22. All this is not very different from what Mr. Murry is saying in Keats and Shakespeare: but he insists that the poem is finished, because the poet had at the time no more to say. I do not understand this use of the word "finished".
23. Letters, II, 149.
24. ibid. II, 419.
25. The status of this passage remains uncertain; v. de Selincourt, Murry and Ridley, who all discuss it.
26. Letters, II, 481.