A Tracing of the Melancholy in the Poetry of John Keats

James J. Zigerell
Loyola University Chicago

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A TRACING OF THE MELANCHOLY IN THE POETRY OF JOHN KEATS

by

JAMES J. ZIGERELL

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VITA

James J. Zigerell was graduated from St. Rita High School, Chicago, Illinois. The Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English was conferred by Loyola University, June, 1940. He has done graduate work at the Chicago Teachers College and the University of Chicago.

During the past two years the writer has been instructor in the Chicago Public Schools.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of his notable chapter called "Romantic Melancholy," Irving Babbitt asks a question which, general and bald though it be, might well be accepted as a starting-point for the problem proposed by this thesis. Professor Babbitt asks:

But does one become happy by being nostalgic and hyperaesthetic, by burning with infinite, indeterminate desire? We have here perhaps the chief irony and contradiction in the whole movement. The Rousseauist seeks happiness and yet on his own showing, his mode of seeking it results not in happiness but in wretchedness.¹

A few lines further Professor Babbitt writes: "No movement has perhaps been so prolific of melancholy as emotional romanticism."²

It must be remembered that Babbitt assigns to Rousseau an exaggerated role of villain in the history of Romanticism. He looked for Jean Jacques under every bed. Then again, Babbitt, as teacher of Romance languages, finds his primary interest and chief focus with the French Romantics. The French, it has become a critical commonplace to remark, have always been much more doctrinaire and explicit than the English in

² Ibid.
their conduct and broadcast of literary movements and theories. As a result, we find much more theatrical attitudinizing among the French Romantics than among the English—that is, until the fin de siècle when the poète maudit, last seen in the tragic figure of Chatterton, invaded London.

It has often appeared to this author that Keats, one of the heroes of the Preraphaelites and the tortured Aesthetics, is a subject to which Babbitt's thesis could be applied in broad outline. There seems to be a kind of progression in the melancholy inhering in the poetry of Keats. This melancholy, having been prepared for and elaborated upon, so to speak, in the early thought and poetry of Keats reaches its thrilling climax in the languorous and meditative odes. This rich orchestration of the melancholic theme makes the organization of a study such as this relatively simple and straightforward. The melancholy can be examined in three stages: the early brooding, the deepening, and finally, the achievement of philosophic despair. To stretch a musical parallel, the organization, like the poetic development of Keats himself, can be thought of as symphonic.

In studying the melancholy in Keats one must keep in mind that melancholy is almost a constant factor in English poetry of all ages. One thinks immediately of the Elizabethan obsession with the melancholic humor. This particular humor, however, we can trace in English literature to Chaucer—one is reminded of the solemn discussion between Chaunticleer and Pertelote—and beyond Chaucer to the ancient physiologists. But, in terms
of this thesis, a consideration of the humor would be merely of antiquarian interest. If, in terms of the focus in this paper, we were to select an earlier example of melancholy as emblematic of Keats's melancholy, we might turn to Hamlet. Hamlet is an embodiment of the melancholy on which so much study and concern were lavished by the Elizabethans. His melancholy and sickness of soul are the results of an intense sensibility.

Before the advent of the great Romantics there was a literature of sensibility acting as a hinge for the swing from Neo-classicism to Romanticism. Much of this literature is steeped in a melancholy, sometimes real, frequently affected—so much so that terms such as "Graveyard School" have been given currency in the effort to aid students in classifying poets of the eighteenth century. The melancholy of this literature, usually called Preromantic, is part of a literature of sensibility. We think of poets like Blair, Young, Gray, the Wartons. When experiencing the usually genteel sadness of these poets the student is reminded of the definition of melancholy given by Burton in that fantastic literary curio, The Anatomy of Melancholy. In the first volume of his long disquisition on melancholy and its causes and symptoms Burton, recognizing that melancholy is a state which haunts the sensitized spirit, defines the condition as "a kind of dotage without a fever, having for ordinary companions, fear and sadness, without any apparent occasion." Much of the eighteenth century literature of melancholy can be interpreted in terms of Burton's analysis.
It is in the eighteenth century that we see the replacement of a poetry of clarity and rationalism by a poetry of passion and imagination. The mystery and wonder of life, magically transformed by the imagination of the man of sensibility, begin to occupy the thoughts of the poets. No longer does poetry aspire to the urbane precision and rational control that were the ideals of the Augustans. It is by means of the intuitive faculties of emotional man that truth and beauty are glimpsed. As one of the Preromantic poets tells us

But some to higher hopes
Were destin'd; some within a finer mould
She wrought and temper'd with a purer flame.
To those the Sire Omnipotent unfolds
The world's harmonious volume, there to read
The transcript of himself. 3

Thus the romantic sensibility advanced alone to meet a sea of troubles. The philosopher, A. N. Whitehead, observes that the Romantic brought to the struggle against the "abstract analysis of science," characteristic of the "whole tone of the eighteenth century," only imaginative and "full concrete experience." 4

Many factors contributed to the making of the eighteenth century literature of melancholy. Among the factors were the renewed interest in nature, the rediscovery, so to speak, of the ruins and origins of past ages, an intense interest in ballads—typified by the publication of

3 Mark Akenside, The Pleasures of Imagination, I, 96-100.
Percy's Reliques in 1765—and the cultivation of sentimentalism culminating in the publication of Goethe's The Sorrows of Young Werther in 1774. One writer on the melancholy of eighteenth-century poetry points to an evolution in the melancholy from "intellectual generalization and restrained sentiment to intensely imaginative subjectivity." With the spread of the evangelical fervor and emotionalism of Wesley much of the melancholy of the poets was religious in origin. This accounts for the sadness and brooding of poets like Young, Blair, and Hervey. All of this melancholy, however, seems to derive from a sensibility to the beauties of nature. Legouis and Cazamian supply an effective summary of this moody feeling toward nature:

Some aspects of nature harmonise with painful emotions; a landscape can be a symbol, just as much as a suggestion, of sadness. The poetical pleasure of experiencing this suggestion shades off, by an easy transition into the paradoxical voluptuousness of a sorrow that is indulged in for its own sake. The poets of Nature, from the first, showed themselves keenly desirous of tender emotions. Already in the opening stages of its new vogue the cult of feeling reaches this stage of psychological inversion—an inversion so constant that it assumes normality—in which a joy is extracted from suffering.

6 Burton devotes much attention to religious melancholy in the third part of the Anatomy. He considers it a division of love melancholy.
Many of the Preromantic poets, suggesting Keats, seem to resign themselves, in a passive state, to the beauties of the seasons and the countryside. The author of one valuable study of eighteenth-century melancholy writes:

In the poetry of the Romantic Movement, melancholy plays a large part, and this melancholy is often communicated through nature description, the poet's mood, whether merely pensive or sad, foreboding, gloomy, or desperate, seeming to arise naturally from the surroundings in which he finds himself.8

The poet transfers to nature his own moods. Since he is pensive and sad in his quiet, passive state of contemplation, he sees pensiveness and sadness in nature. In Preromantic, as well as in Romantic poetry, we see exemplified Ruskin's "pathetic fallacy," the error of attributing feeling to inanimate objects.9

That Keats, like the Preromantics, gave way to the pathetic fallacy needs no proving. One need only read through his poetry and glean instances. Keats, also, like the Preromantic poets of sensibility, was fond of the passive state, as will be indicated later. In addition, Keats extended the pathetic fallacy to an articulate desire for loss of self, as we see, for example, in the Ode to a Nightingale. To give this

9 See Josephine Miles, Pathetic Fallacy in 19th Century, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1942. This study is mostly statistical in its emphases, although the introductory section is interpretive from the standpoint of modern poetic practice.
assertion really concrete meaning we need only quote from one of the letters in which Keats discusses the nature of the poet.

As to the poetical character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian sic or egotistical Sublime; which is a thing per se and stands above) it is not itself—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 sic poet . . .

A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no identity—he is continually in for sic and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's creatures.

It is of little value to consider Keats's melancholy in the light of the literature of melancholy coming from the Preromantics and deriving in a straight line from Il Penseroso. The literature of the Preromantics is too artificial, and much of it too obviously cut from the cloth of Milton, to attract attention in this study. Although Keats, in

10 Letter to Richard Woodhouse, Tuesday 27 October, 1818.
the early stages of his brief career, does use certain of the Preromantic
devices and does show the influence of Milton's *Il Penseroso*, his melan-
choly and pessimism are not, as a rule, artificially induced. A poet like
Thomas Warton, the Younger, who had little to be melancholy about, could
assume the tragic pose and wallow in specious melancholy

O lead me, queen sublime, to solemn glooms
Congenial with my soul; to cheerless shades,
To ruin's seats, to twilight cells and bow'rs,
Where thoughtful Melancholy loves to muse.12

Not so Keats. In him we perceive the "spiritual inertia," the passivity,
and the "sense of uniqueness" that Babbitt finds at the root of Romantic
melancholy.13

The melancholy of Keats takes on special interest when we see
that he stands at a crossroads in the history of English poetry. Before
him and contemporaneous with him was the great Romantic revival; after
him, from Preraphaelitism to *fin de siecle* and decadence, came the great
Romantic breakdown, the effects of which are still with us. The Romantic
movement, a movement which began with naive faith in the soundness of
man's "instincts", evolved into bleak despondency and faith only in the
private and sacrosanct impression.

One may affirm . . . that a movement
which began by asserting the goodness of
man and the loveliness of nature ended by
producing the greatest literature of despair
the world has ever seen.14

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12 The Pleasures of Melancholy, ll. 16-19.
13 Babbitt, op. cit., "Romantic Melancholy."
14 Ibid., p. 307
The seeds of the Romantic breakdown are seen visibly sprouting in Keats. In Keats the Romantic ego becomes a balloon cut loose from its mooring. Keats was ultimately led in his development to a blind love of beauty containing within itself the seeds of self-destruction. Deeper and deeper he was driven into the mire of despondency. Finally a state of mind Keats wistfully longed for was attained. With its attainment came not surcease, but always more profound melancholy.

... Several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.15

To the smug intellect this might seem merely desire for escape.

The purpose of this paper is in no way to establish or to dis-establish Keats as a poet of philosophic property or pretension. This

is a task which has been undertaken by notable scholars. That Keats had a desire for philosophy is unquestionable. A. C. Bradley, in a celebrated essay, remarks that Keats had no

... philosophy in the strict or technical sense. With that he was, apparently, totally unacquainted; yet he always writes as though he had some philosophy of his own, though he hoped for much more. Bradley's view represents the kind of "middle-of-the-road" view we shall accept in this paper.

Keats neither becomes a philosophic idealist nor does he remain a sensationalist purely and simply. Matthew Arnold, with a deep insight, wrote:

The truth is that "the yearning passion for the Beautiful," which was with Keats, as he himself truly says, the master-passion, is not a passion of the sensuous or sentimental poet. It is an intellectual and spiritual passion.

Arnold's view is a sober estimate. It is significant, too, that when speaking of philosophy Keats referred invariably to Milton and Wordsworth,

16 For a work which posits Keats as a philosophical poet developing toward idealism, see H. I'A. Fausset, Keats, A Study in Development, London: Secker, 1922; for a study which considers the philosophical approach to Keats over-inflated, see H. W. Garrod, Keats, Second Edition, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1939.
not to Plato or Aristotle or Kant. In addition, it must be noted that Keats's statements about philosophy can be interpreted according to the predilections of his critics. For example, one German student of Keats bases her opinion of his "philosophy" on one passage in one of the letters. She writes:

Wie stark Keats alle Philosophie, die Anspruch auf Alleingeltung und Absolutheit macht, ablehnt, sagt er in folgenden Worten: We hate poetry (philosophische Gedanken in poetischer Form) that has a palpable design upon us, and, if we do not agree, seems to put its hands into its breeches pockets. ²

We shall consider the philosophical yearnings of Keats only in so far as they affect his melancholy.

The method of this study will be to analyze descriptively the melancholy apparent in Keats's poems. The tools of research will be, for the most part, primary sources. Most critics of Keats have noticed the pervasive melancholy only in limited contexts. Most of the perceptive critics—Arnold, Bridges, De Selincourt, Thorpe, Crawford—have busied themselves with establishing that Keats attempted to progress toward a philosophy. The method of this study will be simply a tracing of the melancholy. The method and the purpose, it will be seen, are roughly identical. A secondary purpose will be to point out how Keats, ironically

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20 All text-references are to The Poems of John Keats, edited by E. De Selincourt, New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1921.
and inevitably, consciously or unconsciously, did arrive at a philosophy of a kind—if his resigned pessimism can be reckoned a genuine philosophy.

In this paper we shall not concern ourselves with details of the life of Keats. Whatever biographic interpretation there is derives, in most cases, from Sir Sidney Colvin's Life of Keats. Sir Sidney's work has been deliberately preferred to Amy Lowell's because of the author's feeling that Miss Lowell as a biographer was far too maternal in her attitude toward the poet, and, further, that because of her deep involvement in one constricted phase of modern poetry she was often led into critical bias. Whenever necessary, excerpts from Keats's letters will be used both to shed light on the text and to aid interpretation. Whenever necessary, too, secondary source materials, drawn from selected critical materials, will be used. Of the outstanding critics, the critic J. Middleton Murry will be used only sparingly, even though his thorough and intimate knowledge makes him an unquestioned authority. It is felt that the gist of much of his criticism is in the direction of mystique rather than of exposition.

Finally, we shall not concern ourselves with problems of chronology. As G. K. Chesterton once wrote, literature can be dealt with in two ways:

It can be divided as one cuts a currant cake or a Gruyere cheese, taking the currants (or the holes) as they come. Or it can be divided as one cuts wood—along the grain; if one thinks that there is a grain. 23

There is a "grain" that we can pursue here. We shall pursue it through its many vagaries to its final expression in the Odes. The Odes themselves, conveniently, will require little comment; they are self-explanatory. In addition, one aspect, or result, of Keats's melancholy, his frequent longing for death ("quiet"), we shall not labor. The obviousness of the death-wish in parts of the text, as well as its adaptability to interpretation in modern psychological jargon, have made of it a critical cliche. Our primary interest will be in tracing the germs of melancholy. "Tracing" is an apt expression because the poems of Keats can figuratively be thought of as forming a tapestry of many-colored sensations and moods, woven, strangely enough, from a fabric of somber hue. Once the melancholy has been traced, the death-wish, when it appears, becomes more meaningful, and a poem like the following, which perhaps epitomizes the spirit of Keats, takes on heightened meaning.

Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell:
   No God, no Demon of severe response,
   Deigns to reply from Heaven or from Hell.
   Then to my human heart I turn at once.
Heart! Thou and I are here, sad and alone;
   I say, why did I laugh? 0 mortal pain!

O Darkness! Darkness! ever must I moan,
To question Heaven and Hell and Heart in vain.
Why did I laugh? I know this Being's lease,
My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads;
Yet would I on this very midnight cease,
And the world's gaudy ensigns see in shreds;
Verse, Fame, and Beauty are intense indeed,
But Death intense—Death is life's high mead.24

In this sonnet we see in seminal form some of the drives that come to a
frightening and repugnant festering in a figure such as Des Esseintes of

A Rebours.

24 March, 1819.
CHAPTER II

THE EARLY BROODINGS

After having received encouragement from Leigh Hunt—who published a sonnet by Keats in the Examiner of May 5th, 1816—and Haydon, Keats found a publisher. In March, 1817, his first volume was published. On the whole, the poems of the 1817 volume are immature and full of promise rather than achievement. Sidney Colvin, discussing this volume, states:

The element in which his poetry moves is liberty, the consciousness of release from those conventions and restraints, not inherent in its true nature, by which the art had for the last hundred years been hampered. And the spirit which animates him is essentially the spirit of delight: delight in the beauty of nature and the vividness of sensation, delight in the charm of fable and Romance, in the thoughts of friendship and affection, in anticipations of the future, and in the exercise of the art itself which expresses and communicates all those joys.¹

As one would expect, the traces of melancholy in the early poems are mostly in the attitudinizing Preromantic vein, conventional devices designed to heighten Romantic mood. One critic, commenting on the early poems, noted:

He admired more the external decorations than felt the deeper emotions of the Muse. He delighted in leading you through

¹ Colvin, op. cit., p. 50.
the mazes of elaborate description, but
was less conscious of the sublime and
pathetic.\(^2\)

The last statement of this evaluation, however, is somewhat inaccurate.
Keats's interests—and melancholy—were not entirely decorative in the
volume of 1817.

The introductory poem is addressed to an inanimate nature.
(Keats's "Hellenic" tendency to personify nature does become manifest in
the first volume, however.) This poem smacks reminiscently of Preromantic
melancholy:

O maker of sweet poets, dear delight
Of this fair world, and all its gentle livers;
Spangler of clouds, halo of crystal rivers,
Mingler with leaves, and dew and tumbling streams,
Closer of lovely eyes to lovely dreams,
Lover of loneliness and wandering,
Of upcast eye, and tender pondering—\(^3\)

The echoes of a delicate, melancholic loneliness are detected. An
exquisite loneliness moves the poet to song:

And on the bank a lonely flower he spied,
A meek and forlorn flower, with naught of pride,
Drooping its beauty o' the watery clearness,
To woo its own sad image into nearness.\(^4\)

Another early poem, Specimen of an Induction to a Poem, clearly
allies Keats with his Preromantic predecessors in its languid delicacy and
somber medievalism. In this piece, as well as in the one which follows,

\(^2\) Judgment by a contemporary of the poet quoted by De Selincourt, op. cit.,
introduction, p. xxiii.
\(^3\) "I stood tip-toe," ll. 116-122.
\(^4\) Ibid., 171-74.
Keats evidences Spenserian intoxication in his nostalgic longing for the chivalric.\textsuperscript{5} With his eye turned to the misty Romantic past Keats asks

\begin{quote}
. . . then how shall I
Revive the dying tones of minstrelsy,
Which linger yet about long Gothic arches,
In dark green ivy, and among wild larches?\textsuperscript{6}
\end{quote}

The Preromantic Spenserianism of such lines requires no comment.

\textbf{Calidore: A Fragment} exhausts over one hundred and fifty lines setting the stage for an action that does not come off. Sir Calidore, Spenser's Knight of Courtesy,\textsuperscript{7} is bathed in the precious light of Keats's exquisite imagination. The setting is Gothic. Calidore rows across a lake, touches a strange island, and sees

The lonely turret, shelter'd, and outworn,

which

\textit{Stands venerably proud;}\textsuperscript{8}

After contemplating a dreamy landscape out of the medieval romance, Calidore paddles on:

\begin{quote}
And now he turns a jutting point of land,
Whence may be seen the castle, gloomy and grand.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

Taken as a whole, this fragment is amateurish, weakened much by jingling verses.\textsuperscript{10} The poem is interesting to us only in that it shows

\textsuperscript{5} Colvin, \textit{op cit.}, writes that the poem is an attempt "to embody the spirit of Spenser in the meter of \textit{Rimini.}"
\textsuperscript{6} Ll. 31-4.
\textsuperscript{7} \textit{Faerie Queene}, Bk. VI.
\textsuperscript{8} Ll. 38-9.
\textsuperscript{9} Ll. 64-5.
\textsuperscript{10} "The lamps that from the high roof'd hall were pendent And gave the steel a shining quite transcendent." (132-3.)
the carefully invoked subdued mood of the early Romantics. The setting is
dreamy, eerie, melancholy-tinged. Reflected are not the ghoulish but the
fragilely somber Gothic trappings. The ending contains a lovely moodiness:

    Softly the breezes from the forest came,
    Softly they blew aside the taper's flame,
    Clear was the song from Philomel's far bower,
    Grateful the incense from the lime-tree flower;
    Mysterious, wild, the far heard trumpet's tone;
    Lovely the moon in ether, all alone;\textsuperscript{11}

This is a cloying melancholy.

The element of brooding in the early poems is explained away by
the influences, so explicitly literary, at work in Keats. These influences,
brooding and Gothic, in no way supply the key to Keats's later development.
These influences must be construed as youthful affectations. Professor
De Selincourt admirably summarizes the embryonic phase of Keats's
development:

    Early in 1815 he came under the spell
    of Chapman's translation of Homer, of the
    early work of Milton, and of the poems of
    Fletcher and of William Browne, whilst his
delight in the seventeenth-century Spenserians
    became inextricably blended with his admira-
tion for the most prominent of Spenser's
    living disciples, the charming and versatile
    Leigh Hunt.\textsuperscript{12}

In the Poem \textit{To Hope}, dated February 15, 1815, the reader is
able to glimpse a pronounced tendency toward real melancholy. The melan-
choly is quite explicit. Since the poem \textit{qua} poem is of little interest,

\textsuperscript{11} Ll. 152-57.
\textsuperscript{12} De Selincourt, \textit{op. cit.}, introduction, p. xxiii.
written with a deadly eighteenth-century artificiality, it is the already-mentioned explicitness of melancholia that makes the poem notable. There is something valid in the gloomy beginning:

When by my solitary hearth I sit,
And hateful thoughts enwrap my soul in gloom.

Throughout the piece the epithets—"sad Despondency," "that fiend Despondence," "Disappointment, parent of Despair," "morbid fancy," "unhappy love," "dark thoughts my boding spirit shroud"—suggest more than shrinking Weltschmerz. In fact, Keats seems to have become engaged in a struggle which involves his real self.

It is significant that in To Hope Keats implies a real and personal dependence upon the beauties of nature.

Whene'er I wander, at the fall of night,
Where woven boughs shut out the moon's bright ray,
Should sad Despondency my musings fright,
And frown, to drive fair Cheerfulness away,
Peep with the moon-beams through the leafy roof
And keep that fiend Despondence far aloof.13

or

Should Disappointment, parent of Despair,
Strive for her son to seize my careless Heart,

Chase him away, sweet Hope, with visage bright,
And fright him, as morning frightens night.14

Dependence upon nature, of course, is a commonplace observation in

13 Stanza 2.
14 Ibid., stanza 3
criticism of Keats. The fact, however, that in a crude early poem a
dependence upon nature is discovered in conjunction with an awakening of
human sympathy is significant. In the maturer development of Keats
immersion in the delights of nature assumes the shape of an escape toward
which his hyperaesthesia drove him, while the interest in and sympathy
with human suffering becomes the second party to a conflict, a conflict
we shall see recurring and recurring in Keats.

The epistolary poems of the formative period indicate also the
growth of sympathy. In the Epistle to George Felton Matthew (November,
1815) there are present two elements detected in To Hope: sympathy and
hyphaesthesia. After a passage singing the delights of nature, Keats
writes:

Yet this vain—O Matthew lend thy aid
To find a place where I may greet the maid—
Where we may soft humanity put on,
And sit, and rhyme and think on Chatterton. 16

And thou shouldst moralize on Milton's blindness,
And mourn the fearful dearth of human kindness
To those who strove with the bright golden wing
Of genius, to flap away each sting
Thrown by the pitiless world. 17

Keats tells Matthew that he intends not just to sing sensations. He would
sing noble humans fallen to the world's cruelties.

Felton! without incitements such as these,
How vain for me the niggard Muse to tease. 18

15 See last three stanzas.
16 Ll. 53-6.
17 Ll. 61-5.
18 Ll. 72-3. Here Keats adapts William Browne's Britannia Pastorals.
Similar broodings of the spirit are carried on in the Epistle to My Brother George. In this poem Keats describes his moments of bleakness and despondency when he is not in the poetic trance.

   Full many a dreary hour have I past,
   My brain bewildered, and my mind o'ercast
   With heaviness;  

His despondency has not been entirely a mere drooping of the spirit; it has, on the other hand, been quickened and deepened by the awakening of human sympathy and sensibility to human suffering. It is in terms of this sensibility that the poet in the Epistle to My Brother George hints at the declarations that come full-blown in Sleep and Poetry. In the Epistle, a thoroughly dull work taken in toto, Keats emphasizes what he considers the mission of the poet:

   These are the living pleasures of the bard:
   But richer far posterity's award.
   What does he murmur with his latest breath,
   While his proud eye looks through the film of death?
   "What though I leave this dull, and earthly mould,
   Yet shall my spirit lofty converse hold
   With after times.  

   All in all, in the work of Keats thus far considered there is a general spinelessness in its style, content, and, particularly, in its melancholic cast. In the early sonnets, to which the admiring student of Keats turns with grateful relief, there is still present a vague, undefined brooding. From the standpoint of our interest in melancholy, Sonnet 7,

19 Ll. 1-3.
20 Ll. 67-73.
"O Solitude", is interesting. In it is embodied Keats's longing for the beauty of nature. It projects the exquisite longing of the one "long in city pent" for the assuaging, succoring influence of nature's beauty. Besides, the sonnet achieves a pathetic melancholy in its cry of loneliness—

O Solitude! if I must with thee dwell,
Let it not be among the jumbled heap
Of murky building; climb with me the steep—
Nature's observatory.

Sonnet 9, "Keen, fitful gusts are whispering here and there," is expressive of a sorrow weakened by ineffective literary allusiveness. The octave describes rather delicately, and in terms of a brooding nature, the poet's loneliness and melancholy. The sestet, in its "prettiness" of expression, suggests the ivory tower so familiar to modern poets.

For I am brimful of the friendliness
That in a little cottage I have found;
Of fair-hair'd Milton's eloquent distress
And his love for gentle Lycid drown'd.

Sonnet 10, "To one who has been long in city pent," strikes a note of Goethean Weltschmerz, reminding one of Young Werther. In addition, this sonnet strikes a chord which later, in the mature poetry, becomes dominant. In point of fact, this chord, heard clearly in the sonnet, becomes a leitmotiv in the great poems. The theme, full of pathos, is raveled from the transiency of beauty. The poet who has left the city for the "fair and open face of Heaven"—

Fatigued he sinks into some pleasant lair
Of wavy grass, and reads a debonair
And gentle tale of love and languishment.
But at night

He mourns that day so soon has glided by,
E'en like the passage of an angel's tear
That falls through the ether silently.

In this early work just quoted the note of melancholy at the passing beauty of the world is disquieting and strangely thrilling. Later this same awareness of fleeting beauty becomes a disillusionment that operates with a centrifugal force upon the mind and ego of the poet. Now, however, early in the poetic career, the realization, though nonetheless genuine, is fleeting and tenuous. The imagery of the last three lines quoted above seems to echo for the reader some of the exquisite imagery Shakespeare called up in moments of brooding melancholy. Paul Elmer More, for that matter, in a noteworthy essay likens Keats to the later Elizabethan dramatists in their mutual awareness of the transiency of beauty. Having in mind both Keats and the later Elizabethans (More does not mention Shakespeare), he writes:

Of their thirst for beauty there is no need to give separate examples; nor yet of their constant brooding on the law of mutability. They cannot get away from the remembrance of life's brevity. More in a striking phrase calls attention to "the same music wrung from the transience of lovely things." Putting the issue rather fancifully and elaborating upon the musical figure supplied by More, the reader

22 Ibid.
of Keats recognizes, as he reads further and further, the fugue-pattern built up on the ever-recurring and variously expressed melancholy induced at the thought of the ephemeralness of beauty.

In Sonnet 17, "Happy is England",—a poem undistinguished except for the last lines—Keats expresses a sorrow that derives from his characteristic hyperaesthesia. Although he desires contentment with the simple beauties of his native England, there is that within him which cries out for more and more beauty. Besides, his intellect requires a more permanent beauty. Resolving the sestet he writes:

Yet do I often warmly burn to see
Beauties of deeper glance, and hear their singing
And float with them about the summer waters.

The artificiality, characteristic of all creative immaturity, leaves Keats soon. A melancholy, genuine and significant, appears. The melancholic vein of the immature poetry—a vein stemming from Il Pensoroso, is displaced by a deeply felt sadness and sorrow. The mind of the poet becomes aware of riddles in the universe. Contrary to sophomoric notions, Keats did not turn his back on the problems that plagued him. There was nothing of the shrinking or the effeminate in him; he struggled to sharpen his sensibilities with the steel of philosophy.

The most significant of the early poems, and the early poem most rewarding to the student of Keats, is Sleep and Poetry, a virile, manifesto-like poem in which Keats announces his intention to dissolve his derivativeness and chart his own development. Sleep and Poetry, too, indicates a throwing off of the debilitating influence of Leigh Hunt.
The interest of our study, however, lies in the fact that *Sleep and Poetry* is a turning of the screw in the tightening of Keats's melancholy. De Selincourt writes that after Keats had thrown off the shackles of Hunt's influence "there was indeed a vein of melancholy within him which made it impossible for him to remain

*A laughing school-boy without grief or care*
*Riding the springy branches of an elm.

However much he might delight in the impression of the senses as an escape from the broodings of his mind, they could never satisfy his whole nature." In the same perceptive essay De Selincourt, positing a reaching by Keats toward philosophic idealism, writes:

> And though to the mind which craves for beauty there is an inherent shrinking from all that seems to combat it, yet, as his feeling for beauty deepened from sensation to emotion, and from emotion to a passion which embraced his whole moral and intellectual being, the conviction grew upon him that the artist, if only for the sake of his art, must be ready to open his heart and mind to receive all impressions that the world has to offer, even those that are in themselves unlovely.  

The mood of *Sleep and Poetry* is largely compounded of melancholy. *Vita brevis est* is the feeling that lurks behind each line.

Stop and consider! life is but a day;
A fragile dew-drop on its perilous way
From a tree's summit; a poor Indian's sleep

24 Ibid.
While his boat hastens to the monstrous steep
Of Montmorenci. Why so sad a moan?
Life is the rose's hope while yet unblown;
The reading of an ever-changing tale;
The light uplifting of a maiden's veil;
A pigeon tumbling in clear summer air;
A laughing school-boy, without grief or care,
Riding the springy branches of an elm. 25

The gist of the poem, despite the sensation-loaded lines just quoted, is not in the carpe diem vein. Keats here is not playing the pallid aesthete, like the followers of Pater, dedicated to the fleeting pleasures of the sense. On the contrary, with admirable masculinity and strength of will he sets a task for himself that will lead him through the cheerless moors of human suffering and sorrow and their inevitable concomitants in the hypersensitized mind—melancholy. Keats says adieu to the titillation of the senses:

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: 26

In Sleep and Poetry there is evident the emergence of struggle in the mind of Keats, a struggle destined to sear his mind and lead him through sorrow and melancholy to either complete emancipation in the possession of the mystery or to breakdown and spiritual defeat. Already in the earlier, less substantial work the struggle is pressed. In "I stood tip-toe" Keats hinted at a quest for the ideal in his mention of

25 Ll. 85-95.
26 Ll. 122-5.
Endymion. 27 Now in *Sleep and Poetry* Keats shows himself to be in hope of attaining a more stable plane in his pursuit of beauty. In this early stage the real and permanent beauty so hotly pursued remains a taunting vision fugitive. And always in place of the vision

A sense of real things comes doubly strong,
And, like a muddy stream, would bear along
My soul to nothingness. 28

But Keats, as implied above, has dedicated himself to a task—

O for ten years, that I may overwhelm
Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed
That my own soul has to itself decreed. 29

Later on in the poem Keats tells us that a "vast idea" has gripped him. This same idea is the genesis of the struggle that has begun in him: the struggle between sensation and ideal. In connection with this growing struggle it is interesting and compulsory to turn to the letters of Keats. One oft-quoted and oft-interpreted letter gives an inkling of Keats's early rooting in sensationalism—a state many readers and earlier critics of Keats say he never transcended. The letter reads:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affections, and the truth of the 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 . . . The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream:

27 See "I stood tip-toe", ll. 190-204.
he awoke and found it truth. I am zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for certain by consecutive reasoning—and yet it must be. Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections. However, it may be, 0 for a Life of Sensations rather than of thoughts.30

In the same letter Keats tells Bailey that "who would exist partly on sensation partly on thought—to whom it is necessary that years should bring the Philosophic Mind." Keats in writing this letter surely was aware of a problem which saddened him always, the need for "the philosophic Mind". In Sleep and Poetry he is quite explicit about the problem and the melancholy it occasions.

But off Despondence! miserable bane!
They should not know thee, who athirst to gain
A noble end, are thirsty every hour.
What though I am not wealthy in the dower
Of spanning wisdom; though I do not know
The shiftings of the mighty winds that blow
Hither and thither all the changing thoughts
Of man; though no great ministering reason sorts
Out the dark mystery of human souls
To clear conceivings; yet there ever rolls
A vast idea before me, and I glean
Therefrom my liberty; thence I've seen
The end and aim of Poesy.31

Concerning the significance of this passage one critic of Keats states:

But what, it may be asked, was this vast idea? Nothing more and nothing less than the conception of poetry as a distinct and separate

30 Letter 31, To Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817.
31 Ll. 280–293.
mode of attaining that final truth which can only be described in language borrowed from Keats himself, as the truth of the soul, which comprehends and reconciles the partial truths of the heart and the mind. 32

In Sleep and Poetry itself, from line 101 ("First the realm I'll pass/ Of Flora, and old Pan") to line 154, Keats outlines, with remarkable clarity and pathetic foresight, his lines of development. In this connection Robert Bridges draws attention to parallel developmental lines in Wordsworth's Tintern Abbey. 33 The parallel, of course by now a commonplace one, is instructive, even though this study does not concern itself with the influence of Wordsworth. But in so far as Keats's interest in and sympathy for humanity—and his consequent sorrow—can be said to stem at least partially from Wordsworth, Wordsworth is of interest. Keats himself in a justly famous letter—one indispensable in any study—makes illuminating remarks. Because of their importance and the light they throw on the struggle gathering in Keats, passages from this letter must be quoted at some length.

My Branchings out therefrom have been numerous; one of them is the consideration of Wordsworth's genius and as a help, in the manner of gold being the meridian line of worldly wealth,—how he differs from Milton. And here I have nothing but surmises, from


an uncertainty whether Milton's apparently less anxiety proceeds from his seeing further or no than Wordsworth; And whether Wordsworth has in truth epic passion, and martyrs himself to the human heart, the main region of his song—In regard to his genius alone—we find what he says true as far as we have experienced and we can judge no further but by larger experience—for axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses: We read fine things but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the author . . . Until we sink, we understand not.34

One writer on Keats, referring to the letter from which quotations have just been given, speaks of the poet's capacity for Einfullung.35 As is borne out by the passages just quoted, this comment is well grounded, for Keats achieved not only sympathy for suffering but also, in keeping with his highly sensitized nature, an exquisite empathy.36

To form a still firmer picture of the young Keats preparing to engage in his sorrowful struggle we must turn again to the letter to Reynolds quoted above. This letter shows neatly the poet's vacillations between reason and emotion.

You are sensible no man can set down Venery as bestial or joyless thing until he is sick of it and therefore all philosophizing on it would be mere wording. Until we are sick, we understand not; --in fine, as Byron says, "Knowledge is Sorrow", and I

34 Letter 64, To J. H. Reynolds, 3 May 1818.
36 Empathy is one of the factors that makes valid a likening of Keats to Shakespeare.
go on to say that "Sorrow is Wisdom"--and further for aught we can know for certainty "Wisdom is folly." . . . And to be more explicit and to show you how tall I stand by the giant, Wordsworth I will put down a simile of human life as far as I now perceive it; that is, to the point to which I say we both have arrived at--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 time, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, 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 bal lance sic of good and evil. We are in a Mist. We are now in that state--We feel the "burden of the Mystery", . . . Your third Chamber of Life shall be a lucky and a gentle one--stored with the wine of love--and the Bread of Friendship.37

Crawford in discussing Keats's transition from immaturity to maturity writes:

37 Letter 64.
Now that the joys of nature and the delights of sensuous beauty were failing him, and the burden of life resting heavily upon him, he turns his thought eagerly to philosophy and the pursuit of truth.\textsuperscript{38}

This same critic summarizing the early achievement and indicating the future line of development remarks that

By the turn of the year 1818-19, then, Keats was well into the greatest crisis of his career in his thinking and his poetry as well as in his spiritual life. There can be traced in this period a growing dissatisfaction with the previous achievements, and with his spiritual and intellectual condition. His rich nature may now be seen in revolt against the aestheticism and sentimentalism of his earlier dreams. He had by this time exhausted all the values romanticism held for him, and was feeling his way to the expansion of his intellectual and spiritual outlook.\textsuperscript{39}

Another critic interprets Keats's struggle in the direction of intellectual broadening in the following sentences:

A philosophy of life, as distinct from a mathematical system of thought, the work of the metaphysician, is the whole concern of a great poet. Without such a central principle, implicit in all his feeling, a poet can only weave pretty patterns, versify moral sentiments, or twitter like a bird.\textsuperscript{40}

A consideration of \textit{Sleep and Poetry} and Letter 64 indicates that Keats indeed in these utterances felt an acute desire to leave behind the "pretty patterns" and the "twitterings" of his early brooding.

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p. 31.
\textsuperscript{40} Hugh I' A. Fausset, \textit{Keats, A Study in Development}, London: Secker, 1922, p. 7.
CHAPTER III

THE QUEST FOR PHILOSOPHY

In Endymion, Hyperion, and Lamia Keats enters into what we may call his Hellenic period. Shelley said about Keats's handling of the legends of the classical past: "He was a Greek." Shelley's famous pronouncement, however, has an exuberance and enthusiasm which must be tempered. In general terms, it has been pretty well established that Keats's classicism—or love for classical antiquity, more accurately—and his grasp of the classical mode of thought are the result of his reading in the Elizabethans. Professor C. L. Finney has demonstrated rather sensibly how the apparent touches of neo-Platonism (apparent to this writer, at least) in the poetry of Keats are "received through Elizabethan channels from Greek literature and philosophy."1

From the standpoint of the guiding principle of this paper the melancholy of Endymion, Hyperion, or Lamia is not really Hellenic. Irving Babbitt, whose opinion on matters classical is worthy of notice, states in his chapter on Romantic melancholy that the melancholy of the ancients "is even more concerned with the lot of man in general than with their

personal and private grief." The grief of Endymion, Hyperion, and Lamia is an egocentric grief.

It has been agreed by most critics of Keats that Endymion is wholly or partially allegorical. Claude Finney, for example, finds in Endymion a neo-Platonic allegory. Implicit in Endymion, according to Finney, is the neo-Platonic philosophy of beauty, the essence of which is "a belief in a principle of unity that transcends the eternal flux of the material world." The same critic, in a summarizing statement, interesting because it establishes Keats as a philosophic rather than the trite poet of sensations of introductory English courses, writes that Endymion contains all the significant elements of neo-Platonism:

... the principle of unity that transcends the flux of matter (Plato's problem of the one and the Many), the principle of beauty that links all things together in an ascending chain of perfection from the lowest forms of spirit, the principle of love as the vital force of the universe, the neo-Platonic quest of immortality, by which man rises from a love of beauty in material things to a love of ideal beauty, the neo-Platonic ecstasy, in which ideal beauty is experienced, and the problem of beauty and truth.

This neo-Platonism, Finney in his article attempts to show, is derived indirectly from Spenser and the Elizabethans.

2 Babbit, op. cit., p. 313.
3 Finney, op. cit., Phil. J., p. 2
4 Ibid., p. 19
5 See above.
Although the interpretation holding that Endymion is straight allegory, or, in parts at least, adumbrates allegory, seems obvious to most of the later critics, there are those who take exception. The most notable of the dissenters is Amy Lowell, the tender biographer of Keats. Miss Lowell in her biography insists that in Endymion there is only a harmless and rather touching eroticism.

I am perfectly sure that Endymion was a product of day by day imagination, meandering where it would, or could, with no guide but 'the principle of beauty in all things' and superimiently in sexual love. Miss Lowell insists that reading Keats in terms of allegory is gross, not even ingenious, misinterpretation. Miss Lowell, it must be mentioned, is not alone in seeing Endymion as a projection of what the unsentimental psychologist would call the erotic daydreaming of the adolescent. A quite recent critic comments:

Briefly stated, this theme of Endymion is Endymion's quest of an everlasting eroticism (an immortality of passion, as Cynthia unabashedly describes it.)

Whether Endymion is allegory or erotica is not quite to our purpose. In our analysis, no matter what the meaning of the poem be, a variety of melancholy broodings remains. There are parts that betray the Elizabethan love of melancholy for its own sake. This statement perhaps is too bald as it stands. One perhaps might better say that some

6 Lowell, op. cit., I, pp. 359-60.
of the brooding and melancholy in *Endymion* is the result of the Elizabethan awareness of melancholy as a source of pleasure. As one author puts it, "Keats came to feel that his joys were not at the full until they were sharpened into pains." To indicate this predisposition toward what might be styled "aesthetic" sorrow one might quote such lines as the following:

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Apollo's upward fire
Made every eastern cloud a silvery pyre
Of brightness so unsullied, that therein
A melancholy spirit well might win
Oblivion, and melt out his essence fire
Into the winds:
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Or, again, one might cull other lines to trace an attitudinized melancholy bearing further testimony to the magnitude of the Miltonic influence. At the end of the first book *Endymion*, after having told Peona of his dream and his subsequent waking to a deprivation of Cynthia, says:

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And come instead demurest meditation
To occupy me wholly, and to fashion
My pilgrimage for the world's dusky brink.
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All in all, in parts of *Endymion* Keats still shows a penchant for the Preromantic Gothic types of melancholy. Another splendid example of this kind of melancholy is found in the thrilling "subtle cadenced" lines describing Peona's playing of the lute to assuage the grieving *Endymion*.

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9 *Endymion*, I, 95-100.
10 Ibid., 975-77. De Selincourt comments interestingly on these lines: "It is impossible not to detect in these lines the spirit of Milton's *Il Penseroso*, with the conception of Melancholy, described by Milton as demure, which in contrast with the more thoughtless pleasures of his earlier life, is to be the guide of his closing years." (Op. cit., Notes, p. 429.)
'Twas a lay
More subtle cadenced, more forest wild
Then Dryope's lone lulling of her child;
And nothing since has floated in the air
So mournful strange.  

We are looking in *Endymion* not for mere surface touches of melancholy. Our thesis is perhaps partly contingent upon the establishment of allegorization and philosophic probing in *Endymion*. And it does seem that the figure of Endymion really symbolizes the spirit of the poet involved in a search for the idea. Lines such as the following, despite Miss Lowell, seem specific in their allegorical content. These lines, which in spite of their lengthiness must be quoted, are not easily explained away in terms of a rather vulgar erotic yearning. Besides these lines relate themselves to the poet's melancholy.

Wherein lies happiness? In that which beck
Our ready minds to fellowship divine,
A fellowship with essence; till we shine,
Full alchemiz'd, and free of space. Behold
The clear religion of heaven! Fold
A rose leaf round thy finger's taperness,
And soothe thy lips; hist, when the airy stress
Of music's kiss impregnates the free winds,
And with a sympathetic touch unbinds
Aeolian magic from their lucid wombs:
Then old songs waken from enclouded tombs;
Old ditties sigh above their father's grave;
Ghosts of melodious prophecyings rave
Round every spot where trod Apollo's foot;
Bronze clarions awake, and faintly bruit,
Where long ago a giant battle was;
And, from the turf, a lullaby doth pass
In every place where infant Orpheus slept.

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11 I, 495–97.
Feel we these things?—that moment have we stept into a sort of oneness, and our state is like a floating spirit's. But there are richer entanglements, enthrallments far more self-destroying, leading, by degrees, to the chief intensity: the crown of these is made of love and friendship, and sits high upon the forehead of humanity. All its more ponderous and bulky worth is friendship, whence there, ever issues forth a steady splendour; but at the tip-top, there hangs by unseen film, an orbed drop of light, and that is love: its influence, thrown in our eyes, genders a novel sense, at which we start and fret; till in the end, melting into its radiance, we blend, mingle, and so become a part of it. 12

These lines, spoken to Peona by Endymion, although of little value from the purely poetic standpoint, are of deep significance, and, in significance, tie themselves immediately to the letter to Reynolds already quoted. 13 The lines, which serve as commentary upon the confusing adventures of Endymion, contain the "apartments" within the "Mansion" of life.

Keats in Endymion is concerned with the problem of happiness. Happiness must be pursued. Thus Endymion throughout all four books pursues his ideal. The multiplicity of incidents and the intricacy of detail make the poem tedious and hard to follow. Yet, at the close a central meaning has emerged. The hero, although sidetracked from the pursuit of his ideal by his instant surge of love for the earthly Indian Maiden, finds a

12 I, 777-810.
13 See Letter 64 quoted in Chapter II above.
reiteration of the sovereign power of love when he sees, after his strange adventures on earth, in the stratosphere, and under the water, the figures of the Indian Maiden and Cynthia fuse, the former becoming an emanation, a type, a phantom of the latter. Or, putting it another way, in the words of perhaps the greatest of the biographers of Keats:

Let a soul enamoured of the ideal—such would seem the argument of Endymion—once suffer itself to forget its goal, and to quench for a time its longings in the real, nevertheless it will be still haunted by that lost vision; amidst all intoxications, disappointment and lassitude will still dog it, until it awakes at last to find that the reality which has thus allured it derives from the ideal its power to charm—that is after all but a reflection from the ideal, a phantom of it. 14

Getting back to the important lines from the poem, however, Professor De Selincourt supplies a neat schematization. He states concerning the lines, which can with every justification be called "meaty",

The gradations of happiness thus appear to be, (1) the sensuous delight in nature and romance, (2) the pleasures of friendship and human sympathy, (3) love, which feeds upon itself and is of its essence self-sacrificing. This stage is all-sufficient for most men. (4) Communion with the ideal—in itself higher than them all, yet only to be gained by one who passed through them all. The pursuit of this ideal is the subject of the whole poem, and the development corresponds with the plan here laid down. . . . His conception is thus a somewhat crudely expressed, but intensely interesting

14 Colvin, op. cit., p. 104.
foretaste of the sketch of the progress of the poet's soul presented in the Fall of Hyperion. 15

Endymion's quest is the quest for ideal beauty, guided and unified by love. Endymion, like the Romantic poet, gropes and feels for the way, led only by his intuitive faculties. Endymion deserts the ideal for the real, only to be led somehow back to the ideal. As a German student of Keats writes:

Fur Keats konnte ein Wahrheitsbegriff im rein logischen Sinne keine Bedeutung haben. Wahrheit ist ein Sinne eines letzten Prinzip der Welt, eines Nicht-weiter-Ableitbaren gemeint, dem in religiosen Ausdrucksweise die Gottheit entspricht. Da Keats dem Intellekt die grosse Skepsis entgegenbrachte, so konnte er zum letzten Prinzip nicht durch logisches Folgen verdringen, sondern allein durch Intuition in einem glücklichen Augenblick. 16

J. Middleton Murry, in a customarily unprecise fashion, has noted in Endymion what can be called a spiritual advance and withdrawal. 17 He calls attention to the "Cave of Quietude" episode in Book IV, to the lines beginning

The man is yet to come
Who has not journeyed in this native hell
But few have ever felt how calm and well
Sleep may be had in that deep den of all. 18

15 De Selincourt, op. cit., Notes, p. 428.
18 Ll. 522-25.
Endymion and the Indian Maiden have been borne aloft and are racing through the stratosphere carried by "two steeds jet-black." Sleep comes to Endymion and his companion as they float upon the clouds. Endymion dreams, sees Diana, and wakes to see Diana. Nonetheless, Endymion turns to the lovely flesh-and-blood maiden and is forced by love and passion to kiss her, despite his devotion to the goddess. The goddess disappears. Endymion in his agony cries:

Bright goddess, stay!
Search my most hidden breast! By truth's own tongue,
I have no daedale heart: why is it wrung
To desperation? Is there nought for me,
Upon the bourne of bliss, but misery?

In a moment Endymion and the Indian girl are off once more on their flight through the starry expanse. Endymion turns to the maiden once more—this time only to find her dissolving. The steed on which the fading Indian Maiden is riding falls to the earth "hawkwise". In agony, Endymion is propelled to the "Cave of Quiétude". Then follows a passage, quoted in part above, which according to Murry, seems to contain the key thought in Keats's poetic complex. The passage deserves quotation in full.

There lies a den,
Beyond the seeming confines of the space
Made for the soul to wander in and trace
Its own existence, of remotest glooms.
Dark regions all around it, where the tombs
Of buried griefs the spirit sees, but scarce
One hour doth linger weeping, for the pierce
Of new-born woe it feels more inly smart:

19 IV, 457-61.
And in these regions many a venom'd dart
At random flies; they are the proper home
Of every ill: the man is yet to come
Who hath not journeyed in this native hell.
But few have ever felt how calm and well
Sleep may be had in that deep den of all.
There anguish does not sting; nor pleasure pall;
Woe hurricanes beat ever at the gate,
Yet all within is still and desolate.
Beset with plaintive gusts, within ye hear
No sound so loud as when on curtain'd bier
The death-watch tick is stifled. Enter none
Who strive therefore: on the sudden it is won.
Then it is free to him; and from an urn,
Still fed by melting ice, he takes a draught—
Young Semele such sickness never quaff
In her maternal longing! Happy gloom!
Dark Paradise! where pale becomes the bloom
Of health by due; where silence dreariest
Is most articulate; where hopes infest;
Where these eyes are the brightest far that keep
Their lids shut longest in a dreamless sleep.20

Murry, whose judgment of Keats one must respect, writes that these lines

... describe a peculiar mood, or
rather a peculiar experience, which was
recurrent in Keats' brief life, and which
was to receive perfect expression in the
vision of Moneta in the Fall of Hyperion.

In addition,

Marvelously, he Keats says, the soul
contains this seldom discovered "Cave of
Quiétude" which has the virtue of receiving
into it and regenerating the whole of the
pain-tormented human being.22

What brings about the regeneration of the "pain-tormented" human
soul? Is the attained state of quietude described by Keats in the lines

20 IV, 512-542. Italics not in original.
22 Ibid.
just quoted similar to the mystic's recompense after the bleak, dark night of the soul? Hardly, since the result of Endymion's psychological excruciation is a loss of identity, a submersion of the romantic ego not in the all-inclusive Being, but, ironically, in sleep or swoon. To use a cliche drawn from modern psychology, Keats in Endymion manifests the presence of the death-wish, a drive which later attains delicious and haunting expression in the *Ode to a Nightingale*—"I have been many times in love with easeful death." 23

Mr. Murry, in the course of his comment on the key passage from *Endymion* quoted above, makes inevitable reference to the letter wherein Keats calls the world "a vale of soul-making." This letter because of its importance and relevance in the tracing of Keats' melancholy should be quoted at some length.

---The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is '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". Then you will find out the use of the world (I am speaking now in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal which I will here take for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which has struck me concerning it) I say 'Soul making'—Soul

23 In this connection one thinks of the flowering of the death-wish in modern ultra-Romantics such as Rimbaud and Hart Crane.
as distinguished from an Intelligence--
There may be intelligences or sparks of
the divinity in millions—but they are not
Souls till they acquire identities, till
each one is personally itself. Intelligences
are atoms of perception—they know and they
see and they are pure, in short they are
God—How then are Souls to be made?
How then are these sparks which are God
to have identity given to them—so as ever
to possess a bliss peculiar to each one's
individual existence? How, but by the
medium of a world like this? This point I
sincerely wish to consider because I think
it a grander system of salvation than the
christian sic religion—or rather it is
a system of Spirit-creation—This is
effected by three grand materials acting
the one upon the other for a series of years.
These three Materials are the Intelligence—
the human heart (as distinguished from
intelligence or Mind) and the World or
Elemental space suited for the proper action
of Mind and Heart on each other for the pur-
pose of forming the Soul or Intelligence
destined to possess the sense of Identity.
I can scarcely express what I but dimly
perceive—yet I think I perceive it—that
you may judge the more clearly I will put
it in the most homely form possible—I will
call the world a School instituted for the
purpose of teaching little children to
read—I will call the human heart the horn
Book used in that School—and I will call
the Child able to read, the Soul made from
that School and its hornbook. Do you not
see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles
is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul?
A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in
a thousand diverse ways! Not merely is the
Heart a Hornbook, It is the Minds Bible, it is
the Minds experience, it is the test from which
the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity.

24 Letter 123, To George and Georgiana Keats, April, 1819. Italics
are in the original.
Keats in this letter is struggling with the Wordsworthian "burthen of the Mystery." Mr. Murry states:

The passions of the heart . . . are sacred. If loyally obeyed they will lead a man to—what? That is hard to say, and no doubt Keats (at least when he wrote *Endymion*) did not know. They were to be trusted, and by trusting them a man would reach the highest whatever the highest might be. But what if the passions of the heart are contradictory?  

Murry in further discussing the passage refers to an earlier letter to Bailey. In this letter Keats mentions the possibility of becoming "self-spiritualized into a kind of sublime misery." Mr. Murry identifies the "Cave of Quietude" with this "self-spiritualization".

It seems to be fairly certain that this "self-spiritualization into a kind of sublime misery" is the same condition which he is describing in the Cave of Quietude; and I think that very probably 'the venom'd darts which fly at random' there are those thoughts of human misery which affect the unselfish man . . . And perhaps the 'new-born woe' may be that 'sublime misery' into which every man may be 'self-spiritualized', and may proceed precisely from the consciousness of the spiritual torpor which can no longer respond to sorrow or to joy.  

It is interesting to note that prerequisite to the fulfillment received in the Cave of Quietude is agony. *Endymion*'s suffering is the

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26 Letter 26, To *Benjamin Bailey*, October, 1817.
27 Murry, "The Meaning of *Endymion*," op. cit., p. 41.
result of a struggle between love for the real and love for the ideal. In *Endymion* the struggle appears to remain unresolved. The ideal does not fade but merges—perhaps unsatisfactorily—at the end with the real. Keats, however, struggles against complete surrender to the real.

Thou wast the charm of women, lovely Moon! O what a wild and harmonized time My spirit struck from all the beautiful! On some bright essence could I lean, and lull Myself to immortality: I prest Nature's soft pillow in a wakeful rest. But, gentle orb! there came a nearer bliss— My strange love came—Felicity's abyss! She came, and thou didst fade, and fade away— Yet not entirely, no thy starry sway Has been an underpassion to this hour. 28

Keats's search in *Endymion*, as in all his great work, could be summed up in terms of a search for the permanent. Does he find a permanency? If one turns to the high point of *Endymion*, the exquisite roundelay, *The Ode to Sorrow* in Book IV, an answer of a kind can be found. (We must remember, too, that sorrow is the open sesame of the Cave of Quiétude.)

The Indian Maiden sings,

Come then, Sorrow! Sweetest Sorrow! Like an own babe I nurse thee on my breast. I thought to leave thee: And deceive thee But now of all the world I love thee best.

There is not one, No, no, not one But thee to comfort a poor lonely maid; Thou art her mother And her brother Her playmate, and her wooer in the shade. 29

28 III, 169-79.
29 IV, 278-90.
Keats finds sorrow in life. All throughout *Endymion* there is contradictoriness:

There never liv'd a mortal man, who bent  
His appetite beyond his natural sphere,  
But starv'd and died.  

In *Endymion* the conflict in poetic vision remains unresolved. The Ode to Sorrow expresses a tentative conclusion. De Selincourt calls this masterful piece an expression

in varying keys of emotion of a mind  
which has loved the principle of beauty  
in all things, and seeks in a world of  
change and decay, among the flittering  
forms of loveliness, for something per­manent and eternal.

The struggle of *Endymion* reflects a growth in the mind of Keats. *Endymion* yearns for the ideal and is pulled down by the real. One critic, after noting that *Endymion* fails in its purpose: synthesizing the ideal and the real, suggests that for Keats "the poetry of sensation is equal to philosophical poetry." When one keeps in mind the outcome of *Endymion*, the reiteration of the value of the real, this seems a sober estimate.

In addition, when one keeps in mind that Keats always had aspirations toward philosophy, the estimate loses its element of paradox. In April, 1818, we find Keats writing:

30 IV, 646-8.  
31 De Selincourt, op. cit., introduction, p. LX  
I was purposing to travel over the north this summer—there is but one thing to prevent me—I know nothing—I have read nothing and I mean to follow Solomon's direction of 'get wisdom—get understanding'—I find cavalier days are gone by—I find that I can have no enjoyment in the world but continued drinking of knowledge—I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good for the world—some do it with their society—some with their wit—some with their benevolence—some with a sort of power of conferring pleasure and good humour . . . there is but one way for me—the road lies through application study and thought. I will pursue it and to that end purpose retiring for some years. I have been hovering for some time between an exquisite sense of the luxurious and a love for philosophy—were I calculated for the former I should be glad—but as I am not I shall turn all my soul to the latter. 33

Here in Keats' own words we have dramatized for us the struggle dramatized in Endymion: "an exquisite sense of the luxurious" opposed to "a love for philosophy." Feeling the "luxurious" would constrict his poetic vision and restrict him to the first of the "apartments" of the "Mansion" of life, Keats turned to philosophy. Hyperion and the Fall of Hyperion are his most serious incursions into the realm of philosophy. 34 In these poems, one critic says,

Keats recognized the place and purpose of knowledge, and its superior power. He

33 Letter 62, To John Taylor, 24 April 1818.
34 It would seem that for Keats the terms "philosophy" and "knowledge" were synonymous.
was coming to see that only through
knowledge can the intellectual and ethical
problems of life and of the world be solved.35

Hyperion, of course, was written under the shadow of Milton, a
shadow that Keats soon found antithetical to his natural poetic bent. The
poem originally was intended to be an epic in ten books. Most critics
feel that it is the poem that they would most want to see completed. The
reading of Hyperion comes as a welcome relief from the disjointed, rambling,
imperfectly projected Endymion. The fragment is notable in its clearness
and precision of outline, as well as in its often Miltonic grandeur and
clarity of diction.

With a few slips and inequalities, and
one or two instances of verbal incorrectness,
Hyperion, as far as it was written, is indeed
one of the grandest poems in our language, and
in its grandeur seems one of the easiest and
most spontaneous.36

And

... though Keats sees the Greek
world from afar, he sees it truly. The Greek
touch is not his, but in his own rich and
decorated English way he writes with a sure
insight into the vital meaning of Greek
ideas. For the story of the war of Titans
and Olympians he had nothing to guide him
except scraps from the ancient writers,
principally Hesiod, as retailed by the
compilers of classical dictionaries. ... But as to the essential meaning of that
warfare and its result—the dethronement

35 Crawford, op. cit., p. 154.
36 Colvin, op. cit., p. 157.
of an older and ruder worship by one
more advanced and humane, in which ideas
of ethics and of arts held a larger place
beside ideas of nature and her brute
prowess. 37

The purpose of the poem, if it had reached completion, was to chronicle
the war between the Titans and the Olympians. The central episode was
to be the overthrow of Hyperion by Apollo; symbolically, the overthrow
of brute strength by beauty made radiant by knowledge. In Keats's own
terms, Hyperion signalizes the progress to the second chamber of thought.
Such progress is the mark of the Apollonian man.

Central to the meaning of Hyperion is the feeling that beauty
and sorrow are reverse sides of a coin. In a description of Thea, the
wife of Hyperion, Keats, betraying his recurrent obsession with sorrow,
writes,

How beautiful, if sorrow had not made
Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty's self. 38

Apollo, too, is sorrowful, even though he is triumphant.

O why should I
Feel ours'd and thwarted, when the liegeless air
Yields to my step aspirant? 39

Apollo is beauty and knowledge:

Knowledge enormous makes a God of me. 40

37 Ibid., pp. 155-56.
38 I, 35-6.
39 III, 90-2.
40 III, 113.
It is significant that the Titans, representatives of the old order, fall to a superior beauty. The superior beauty is beauty made more beautiful (ideal) by knowledge. In Book II Oceanus makes a speech before the dejected Titans, a speech in which he tells the Titans why they have fallen. From the brutism of the Titans, says Oceanus, there has been bred a higher beauty.

So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,
A power more strong in beauty, born of us
And fated to excel us. 41

We are (such) forest-trees, and our fair boughs
Have bred forth, not pale solitary doves,
But eagles golden-feather'd, who do tower
Above us in their beauty, and must reign
In right thereof; for 'tis the eternal law 42
That first in beauty should be first in might.

There is a temptation to take lines like those just quoted and posit a steady progression in Keats from the realness of sensuous beauty to an ideality of spiritual beauty. 43 Such an approach, intriguing as it is, is at most based on half-truth. After all, Keats in his greatest

41 II, 212-14.
43 Hugh I'Anson Fausset, op. cit., does this. On the other hand, R. D. Havens in an article, "Unreconciled Opposites in Keats," Philological Quarterly, XIV, (1935), calls attention to the fallacy of the steady real-ideal progression in Keats. Havens insists that "it is essential for a sound understanding of Keats to realize that he passed rapidly from one position to another almost its opposite, ... and that he felt and expressed the opinions of the moment as if they were the inalterable convictions of a lifetime." (p. 290.).
work—the Odes—seems to take an anti-intellectualist stand. But a middle view appears to be more realistic. The fact is that Keats did not desert entirely his quest for philosophy, even though philosophy, as he knew it, not only did not assuage his sorrow but also, ironically, heightened it. Not long before his death we find Keats returning to the Hyperion myth. As one writer of the poet \(\ldots\) writes with a display of insight,

\[
\ldots \text{in the new Hyperion the poet has got well beyond the poetry of the sensuous imagination, and is making his last great effort to embody in noble epic form his final conceptions and ideals of poetry and life.}^{45}
\]

Keats all throughout his career was wrapped up in a pursuit of beauty in all its forms. One of the first critics to stress the developmental aspects in the thinking of Keats, S. J. M. Suddard, gives a remarkable summary statement of Keats's grappling with the ideal:

Keats's unfeigned indifference to achieving aught but the final truth gradually concentrated his powers more and more upon one form of the truth, beauty in art \(\ldots\) all the ordinary interests of humanity were to him unknown. Religion, without scepticism

\[44\] In Keats we see in seminal form the strain of anti-intellectualism that is the substratum of the poetry of the fin de siècle. This anti-intellectualism, which is ironically the antithesis and reductio \textit{ad absurdum} of Romanticism, a desire to drown the ego, appears to this writer to be the backwash of Romanticism. Certain critics would question this point of view, however.

\[45\] Crawford, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 157
or hatred, he simply ignored. Philosophy, to whose charms he was far from indifferent, never stirred his curiosity far enough to divert him for a moment from art. All the 'terrier-like resoluteness', conspicuous even in the schoolboy, was bent on the pursuit of poetry—'the best sort of poetry, all I live for, all I care for'... It led him to shut himself up in a 'tower of ivory' where he might live out his life in sensation and thought rather than in action.

... Fits of dejection, crises of despair in which the ideal was for a moment half-forsaken he was continually passing through.46

In Hyperion and the Fall of Hyperion, we see Keats struggling for the truth, fighting for an ideal that is not "half-forsaken". Keats in these two poems stands at the opposite pole from Pater's renowned, climactic expression of the Keatsian influence in nineteenth century poetry:

Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. How may we see in them all that is to be seen in them by the finest senses? How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?

To burn always with his hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.47

Perhaps it is Oscar Wilde, at the end of the century, who gives pathetic

utterance to the defeat that Keats met in the philosophic grappling in Hyperion and the Fall of Hyperion—that is, perhaps it is Wilde who expresses the meaning of Keats's response to the obstacles of philosophy when he writes

To drift with every passion till my soul
Is a stringed lute on which all winds can play,
Is it for this that I have given away
Mine ancient wisdom, and austere control? 48

In Hyperion the oracular Oceanus announces that a new epoch has begun with the advent of a superior knowledge. Oceanus is reconciled to his own loss of realm to Neptune:

I saw him on the calmed waters scud,
With such a glow of beauty in his eyes,
That it enforc'd me to bid sad farewell
To all my empire. 49

Professor Thorpe's comment on this text is enlightening. He writes:

The 'glow of beauty in his eyes' is the light from that higher knowledge that is to take possession of the earth in the new evolutionary order. Had Keats gone on with the poem, there would have been presented the spectacle of the deposition of the blazing, effulgent sun-god, not by one more brilliant in physical beauty but by one with more understanding and glorious god-like knowledge. 50

It is in the Fall of Hyperion that we see Keats returning to the problem of the acquisition of knowledge and the development of sympathy for human

48 "Helas".
49 II, 236-39.
50 Thorpe, op. cit., p. 144.
misery. This problem is the self-same one that lies at the core of Hyperion, Endymion, Sleep and Poetry, and the famous letter to Reynolds of May 3, 1818 (quoted above). It is a problem that is perhaps the leitmotiv of Keats's work.

The Fall of Hyperion opens with the poet in a characteristic state, the passive state of the swoon. In a lush garden he has eaten and drunk and fallen into the swoon. He awakens in an "old sanctuary" to see an altar which he immediately approaches. A voice is heard challenging him to ascend the marble steps leading to the altar:

If thou canst not ascend
These steps, die on that marble where thou art.

The Dreamer attempts to ascend the stairs, but finds the ascent difficult. Finally he achieves the first step—"life seem'd/ to pour in at the toes."

Then the Prophetess Moneta tells the Dreamer:

"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."

The Dreamer asks why he is in the shrine. The answer comes:

Only the dreamer venoms all his days,
Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve.

It will be noted that the poet has gone through three steps in

51 This is an example of Keats's "Negative Capability". See Letter 32, quoted in Chapter I above. See also Walter Jackson Bate, op. cit.
52 I, 107-8.
53 I, 133-34.
54 I, 147-49.
55 I, 175-76.
the *Fall of Hyperion*. The Garden, the "old sanctuary", and the altar are three stages in the poet's attainment of the ideal. Professor De Selincourt interprets the poet's progression for us in the following terms. The garden can be equated to nature and art. The poet eats his fill and drinks something deeper and more satisfying—a kind of intellectual beauty. He is rendered passive and thereby receptive to poetic influences. Then,

His mind is awakened, and his feelings of mere sensuous delight are changed into a profound and often melancholy sense of the infinity and mystery of the world about him.56

Keats is in the temple of knowledge. He gains the lowest stair.

And having reached it he learns that further progress cannot be made by imaginative sympathy alone; the selfish life of artistic isolation will profit him nothing, he must henceforth live in the world about him, making its sorrows his sorrows. Even so, he must realise the superiority of the practical life over the life of the dreamer; and though by reason of his temperament such a life can never be his, he must reverence it at its true worth.57

In the *Fall of Hyperion* Keats emphasizes the function of the dreamer. His dreamer is not a dreamer in the ordinarily connoted sense of the word. Professor Thorpe insists that Keats attempted to classify the function of the dreamer in the *Fall of Hyperion*. In an interesting passage Mr. Thorpe asserts:

I believe that Keats knew only one way to the deepest truths of life and the highest realities of the realms that lie

56 De Selincourt, *op. cit.*, Notes, pp. 516 ff.
57 Ibid.
beyond the consciousness of this and the super-world, and that was through the power of the penetrative imagination—the soul of man reaching out to the great all-soul. There is, however, always this qualification: the soul that is to see far must have its lessons; it cannot be one of those contented beings, who, no matter how wise and good, no matter how much they love their fellows . . . still . . . seek no wonder but the human face. No music but a happy-noted voice. F of H., I, 163–64 It must rather be that of a dreamer who strives to see beyond the limits of earthly things into the vast empyrean mists, and yet knows well the "giant agony of the world," knows in fact, that it is only through the discipline of this world of misery that the imagination can be strengthened for the higher flights.58

Keats had set quite a lofty goal for himself and had chosen rather wispy means to the goal: to arrive at ultimate truth by means of romantic sensibility. This is part of Keats's uniqueness and is part of his melancholy. With respect to the melancholy apparent in both Hyperion and the Fall of Hyperion the following comment of Professor Babbitt's is provocative:

In its purely personal quality romantic melancholy is indeed inseparable from the whole conception of original genius. The genius sets out not merely to be unique but unique in feeling, and the sense of uniqueness in suffering—on the principle no doubt laid down by Horace Walpole that life, which is a comedy for those who think, is a tragedy for those who feel.59

58 Thorne, op. cit., pp. 144–45.
59 Babbitt, op. cit., p. 314.
Another part of the melancholy is the awareness of Keats—an awareness suffused by Hyperion and the Fall of Hyperion—that the sphere of philosophic tranquility is beyond his reach. As De Selincourt writes in his commentary on the Fall of Hyperion,

Allowance must be made, as Mr. Colvin has pointed out, for the growing note of despair, for the fact that whereas before Keats had felt the goal to be within his ultimate reach he now belittles his own endeavours to attain it.60

The "goal" of which Keats despaired is expressed aptly in the words of Oceanus:

Now comes the pain of truth, to whom 'tis pain;
O folly! for to bear all naked truths,
And to envisage circumstance, all calm,
That is the top of sovereignty.61

For some reason these lines remind one of the "calm of mind, all passion spent" of Milton's preface to Samson Agonistes. Yet Keats through the Hyperion design did not attain a catharsis. His leaving both versions in a fragmentary state is profoundly significant. Miss Lowell, who certainly explored the convolutions of Keats's mind, says that in Hyperion Keats is being dishonest and speaks in a voice not his own. Miss Lowell calls the Fall of Hyperion "an autochthonous utterance,"62 dictated by his own

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60 De Selincourt, op. cit., Notes, p. 516.
61 Hyperion, II, 202-205.
62 Lowell, op. cit., vol. II, pp. 346-48. Miss Lowell apparently does not use the term "autochthonous" in its psychological meaning of ideational fixation—although she might have from the point of view of the major stresses she finds in the poetry of Keats.
imaginative bent. Miss Lowell, however, a modern poet herself of an impressionist tendency, finds that the Hyperion theme in Keats is not representative of original inspiration and therefore is of little importance in a consideration of Keats, who is above all an exciter of modernism in poetry. In her words,

What Keats tried to do in Hyperion
Milton did better; what he tried to do in La Belle Dame Sans Merci, in the Eve of St. Agnes and the Eve of St. Mark, diverse as these poems are to one another, no one has ever approached.63

Another critic, not so sanguine as Miss Lowell in her handling of the problem, indicates that Keats abandoned the Hyperion theme because he was unable to solve the problem that continually beset him: the relation of visionary to humanitarian (ideal to real).

Again and again does Keats, as we have seen, carry us to this opposition of two kinds of poetry—and shrink back from his own conclusions. I will not say that Hyperion remains, and was bound to remain, the fragment that it is, merely because Keats cannot bring himself to point the moral which he has so far drawn. That fear of himself, that uneasiness operates. But it is part of a wider perplexity. I should prefer to conceive that Keats, pursuing his epic of the Revolutionary Idea, trailing, as went, clouds of indeterminate allegory, was held by that death-shriek, or birth-shriek, of his own Apollo; that he was startled into misgiving; that some disquiet of the creating imagination assailed him;

63 Ibid., p. 347
that he felt himself brought up sharply against the need of defining, the need of clarifying his own conception.  

Keats was unable to achieve the catharsis that brings a philosophic calm enabling one to say with Terence, Homo sum et nil alienum a me puto.

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CHAPTER IV

THE ATTAINMENT

It would seem that when Keats turned to the composition of his greatest works—Lamia, the Eve of St. Agnes, the fragmentary Eve of St. Mark, and the Odes—his philosophic trend or leaning was in process of dissipation. To speak of philosophic leaning, however, is too unspecific. Keats in Endymion, Sleep and Poetry, Hyperion, and the Fall of Hyperion had attempted to come to terms with an idealism. His attempt, we have noted, was accompanied by melancholy. In his nature there persisted a conflict that ultimately forced him to devote all his efforts to the abstraction of a principle of beauty from the things of the senses. The principle of beauty, which perhaps is most beautifully projected in the Ode on a Grecian Urn, was, however, built upon a paradox and stemmed from ephemera.

We have already noted that in 1818 we find Keats writing in a letter to John Taylor:

I have been hovering for some time between an exquisite sense of the luxurious and a love for philosophy—were I calculated for the former I should be glad—but as I am not I shall turn all my soul to the latter.¹

¹ Letter 62. Quoted in Chapter III above.
In view of Keats's mature development it would seem that the last-quoted statement was merely youthful yearning. Quite soberly, as has been suggested already, it can be argued that an anti-intellectual strain which heralds the *reductio ad absurdum* of the Romantic movement becomes increasingly obvious in the final work of Keats. One, in a close study of Keats, cannot escape the conclusion that the lush, overpowering sensuousness of his nature was the real shaping force of his development. There is at the present time an unfortunate tendency among critics of Keats to close their eyes to the sensuous elements in Keats, fixing, instead, their critical glances only on his idealistic passages. Such practice is the kind of research that knows its result at the inception of study. A wider view of Keats finds an extreme melancholy as the end-product of the recurring conflict in the poet's mind between the real and the ideal. We have noted already that one able critic of Keats has pointed out that the mind of the poet must be understood in terms of "unreconciled opposites."²

It is important to note too that Keats's feeling for the imagination as the instrument for the acquisition of truth undoubtedly helped to dictate his final submersion in the sensuous and the languorous. An excerpt from one of the famous letters supplies commentary on this point. This passage, although often violently ripped from its context, suggests forcefully the poet's grounding in the things of the senses.

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of the Imagination—what the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—

Despite the fact that it is unwise to accept statements in the letters as settled convictions, it does seem that the excerpt just quoted can be validly used in an over-all interpretation of Keats. It is interesting to note that Ernest De Selincourt, certainly one of the best of the critics of Keats, uses two phrases from this letter to sum up, as it were, the genius of Keats. De Selincourt calls "the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination" the "two cardinal points of his Keats's faith."

The volume of 1820 illustrates Keats's obsession with the "holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination." De Selincourt, again, in connection with his judgment just quoted, calls attention to Keats's mature obsession with love and death. At the basis of this fixation, one feels, is the notion of mutability. We have already noted that Paul Elmer More, in a striking passage, compares Keats to the later Elizabethan dramatists—Webster, for example. More notes in Keats a "constant association of the ideas of beauty (or love) and death."

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3 This is the extrapolated closing of the Ode on a Grecian Urn.
4 Letter 31. Quoted in Chapter II above.
6 Ibid.
7 More, op. cit., p. 114.
"They cannot get away from the remembrance of Life's brevity," More puts it. He goes on to assert that

but for the tedium of repetition
one might go through Keats's volume
of 1820, and show how completely the
pattern of that book is wrought on the
same background of ideas. 8

More, with felicitous insight, points to "the same music wrung from the transience of lovely things" that permeates the volume of 1820.

In Lamia we see exemplified what Allen Tate calls the "'imaginary dilemma' or conflict in Keats's experience." 9 The problem in Lamia is the reconciliation of love on the plane of the real with love on the plane of the ideal. The problem is left unresolved; the poem ends in a mood of bleak despondency. When Lamia disappears, after having been literally seen through by Apollonius, Lycius is destroyed. The lines describing the death of Lycius have an exquisitely melancholic ring—

And Lycius' arms were empty of delight,
As were his limbs of life, from that same night. 10

Love as presented in Lamia is an attraction as well as a repellent. Mr. Tate calls the figure of the snake-woman Lamia

...a symbol which permits Keats to objectify the mingled attraction and repulsion which his treatment of love usually contains. 11

Keats himself at one time indicated the nature of the antinomy between

8 Ibid.
9 A. Tate, "A Reading of Keats," American Scholar, XV, (1945), No. 1, 60.
10 Lamia, II, 307-08
11 Tate, op. cit., American Scholar, XV, No. 2 (Spring), 192.
real and ideal in an annotation to his copy of Burton's *Anatomy of Melan-
choly*, from which the tale of Lamia is taken.

Here is the old plague spot, the pestilence, the raw scrofula. I mean there is nothing disgraces me in my own eyes so much as being one of a race of eyes nose and mouth beings in a planet call'd the earth who all from Plato to Wesley have always mingled goatish winnyish lustful love with the abstract adoration of the deity. I don't understand Greek—is the love of God and the Love of women express'd by the same word in Greek? I hope my little mind is wrong—if not I could—Has Plato separated these lovers? Ha! I see how they endeavour to divide—but there appears to be a horrid relationship. 12

There is a good deal of agony in *Lamia*. The agony is the result of a struggle between reason, embodied in the person of the sophist Apollonius, and emotion, figured by the love of Lycius for Lamia. De Selincourt calls *Lamia* "a morbid expression of conflict." 13 He feels that Keats

... as he follows the fate of his hero represents the agony of the struggle in the soul of a man who clings to the false at the same time that he desires the true, who aspires after the ideal even whilst he is unable to relax his hold of those very shadows, not realities, which he knows well enough to despise. 14

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12 Cited by Tate, *ibid*.
Besides, one senses that in Lamia Keats excruciatingly repudiates the philosophic ideal.\(^{15}\) He admits that he is bound inescapably and inextricably to the real of the senses. The emphasis in Lamia is upon earthly—one is tempted to say earthly—love.

Let the mad poets say whate'er they please
Of the sweets of Fairies, Peris, Goddesses
There is not such a treat among them all

As a real woman.\(^{16}\)

But the really disturbing thought is that there is obviously an unreconcilable conflict between emotion and reason. When Lycius muses, listening to the trumpets sounding outside the walls of their palace of love, Lamia is perturbed—

and she began to moan and sigh
Because he mused beyond her, knowing well
That but a moment's thought is passion's passing.\(^{17}\)

At the wedding feast of Lycius and Lamia the pleasures are riots of the senses. But Apollonius, the tutor of Lycius, arrives—uninvited by Lycius—and expresses a withering scepticism. Apollonius is reason ("consecutive reason"), and at his touch the pleasures are turned to dust.

Do not all charms fly
At the mere touch of cold philosophy?
There was an awful rainbow once in heaven;
We know her woof, her texture; she is given
In the dull catalogue of common things.
Philosophy will clip an angel's wings,
Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,

\(^{16}\) I, 328-31.
\(^{17}\) II, 37-9.
Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine—
Unweave a rainbow, as it erewhile made
The tender-person'd Lamia melt into a shade. 18

Apollonius, the poem would have us infer, saves Lycius only to destroy him. Reason and emotion are mutually antagonistic and Keats is agonized.

A retrogression in the thinking of Keats—that is, from the point of view of the philosopher—is pushed still further in Isabella. One critic, who is quite sceptical of Keats's philosophical pretensions, calls Isabella the best comment on his philosophizing. 19 In his words both Isabella and the Eve of St. Agnes

represent, as it were, a kind of relapse into sense and luxury, the relapse of a temperament laboriously aspiring towards harder and sharper effects, the realities of thinking and suffering, aspiring towards those unsustainable heights, but forever falling back upon 'the shadows of the mind.' 20

Isabella, like Lamia, is a poem expressing the tragedy of love. 21 The tale of the unfortunate lovers, taken from Boccaccio, is delicately elaborated upon and given a Gothic horror and a haunting despair. In this poem we see Keats, the Romantic, finding joy in melancholy:

O Melancholy, linger here awhile!
O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!
O Echo, Echo, from some sombre isle,

18 II, 229-38.
19 Garrod, op. cit., p. 43.
20 Ibid., p. 52
21 No comment is made on the love of Keats for Fanny Brawne. Whether this love was debilitating or stimulating is a matter of allegiance—to Sidney Colvin or to Amy Lowell.
Unknown, Lethean, sigh to us--O sigh!
Spirits in grief, lift up heads, and smile;
Lift up your heads, sweet Spirits, heavily,
And make a pale light in your cypress glooms,
Tinting with silver wan your marble tombs.22

In Isabella, too, there is the sensuousness and listlessness, the static pictorial presentation, that are so characteristic of one strain of Keats's talent. The melancholy in this poem is given what we might call a decadent twist. Here the melancholia is not superimposed, nor is it the result of real grief, but it seems to be explored for its own sake. In describing Isabella's exhumation of Lorenzo, and in devoting such lushness of detail to the macabre atmosphere surrounding the planting of the head of Lorenzo in the basil-pot, Keats seems to adumbrate the necrophilia of Poe and Baudelaire. After Isabella has frantically recovered the head of her lover and has taken it to her home in secrecy,

She calm'd its wild hair with a golden comb,
And all around each eye's supulchral cell
Pointed each fringed lash;
. . . and still she comb'd, and kept
Sighing all day--and still she kiss'd, and wept.23

This Gothic strangeness carries over into the unfinished Eve of St. Mark. The indeterminate, vague melancholy of the setting anticipates Rossetti and the Pre-raphaelites. The eerieness and static pictorial representation--yearningly preternatural--in the description of Bertha--

All was silent, all was gloom,
Abroad and in the homely room:
Down she sat, poor cheated soul!22 Stanza 55.
23 Stanza 51.
And struck a lamp from the dismal coal;
Lean'd forward, with bright drooping hair
And slant book, full against the glare. 24

could have been created by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

There is a thrilling Gothic quality in the Eve of St. Agnes.
This poem, however, despite its superficial kinship with Lamia and Isabella,
must stand as rather an anomaly. The Eve of St. Agnes is a picture of
amor victoria, even though it is a love steeped in Gothic creepiness. Love
in Lamia and Isabella comes bearing sorrow; yet in the Eve of St. Agnes
the lovers win out. Nonetheless the poem is closely connected in mood
with Lamia and Isabella in that in it there is a giving way to the
luxuriousness of the senses—so much so, that after repeated reading the
poem takes on a two-dimensional Oriental quality in its staticism and
surfeiting sensory richness. 25 The total effect of the poem comes perhaps
in a feeling of having experienced a vaguely sad, haunting distillation of
earthly beauty. Sir Sidney Colvin calls the Eve of St. Agnes

that unsurpassed example—nay, must
we not rather call it unequalled?—
of the pure charm of coloured and
romantic narrative in English verse. 26

Furthermore, it must be noted carefully, that the Eve of St. Agnes
represents the kind of poetry that Keats ultimately desired to write.

24 Ll. 68-73.
25 One is reminded of certain phases in modern poetry—Imagism, for
example,—where there is the two-dimensioned representation analogous
to Japanese poetry.
26 Colvin, op. cit., p. 160.
Thorpe writes,

The Eve of St. Agnes, beautiful, melodious, luxuriant in sensuous imagery, was looked upon by Keats merely as a finger exercise in preparation for the high tasks to follow. 27

Keats, as Thorpe points out in a thoughtful passage, desired to

diffuse the colouring of St. Agnes Eve throughout a poem in which character and sentiment would be figures to such drapery. 'Two or three such poems, if God should spare me, written in the course of the next six years would be a famous gradus ad Parnassum altissimum.' 28

Despite Keats's momentary optimism concerning the composition of the Eve, the ending of the poem still voices a feeling of misgiving always not far from his consciousness: the heart-breaking transiency of love and beauty.

And they are gone: ay, ages long ago 29
These lovers fled away into the storm.

De Selincourt, with his seemingly unerring judgment on matters concerning Keats, writes

The Eve of St. Agnes expresses, as perfectly as Keats could express it, the romance and the delight of a love satisfying and victorious. But side by side with it he gave the picture of a love which is at once a fascination and a doom, delineated in the same medieval atmosphere, with the same passionate conviction, and

27 Thorpe, op. cit. pp. 201-02
28 Ibid. Quotation from Keats's letters is from Letter 166, To John Taylor, 17 November, 1819.
29 Stanza 42.
with even deeper significance in its reflection upon actual life.  

La Belle Dame Sans Merci, which in its perfection is inevitably considered along with the Eve of St. Agnes, is, as one critic asserts, really "that epitome of the romantic temper." Colvin, whose judgment is usually acute, considers the poem perhaps Keats's masterpiece.

Keats's ballad can hardly be said to tell a story; but rather sets before us, with imagery drawn from the medieval world of enchantment and knight-errantry, a type of the wasting power of love, when either adverse fate or deluded choice makes of love not a blessing but a bane.

Robert Bridges, who was much interested in the technique of versifying at all times, writes in an essay that in La Belle Dame Keats "brought all his genius to 'spend its fury in a song'."

Too much could easily be said about La Belle Dame Sans Merci. There is no question, of course, as to its extreme melancholy. The last stanza trajects unforgettable despair of spirit--

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

The despair, most critics would agree, is very real despair, devoid of any German Romantic artificiality. The ballad tends to give real point

31 Garrod, op. cit., p. 54.
32 Colvin, op. cit., p. 166.
33 Bridges, op. cit., p. 72.
to a summary statement of Professor Babbitt, a statement that at first glance seems calculated for epigrammatic effect. Babbitt contrasts Keats with Dr. Samuel Johnson by saying, "Johnson . . . is wise without being poetical, and Keats poetical without being wise." 34 No matter whether La Belle Dame be given interpretation in biographical terms or in terms of vague philosophic quest, there is a glaring and melancholy lack of wisdom. 35 To say that Keats is merely expressing despondency at his own ensnarement by Fanny Brawne is gratuitous. It is equally gratuitous to say with Crawford that

Keats had come to believe that the catastrophe of devotion to the poetry of enchantment was not merely disillusion and bitter disappointment, but actual tragedy and poetic death,—death of the real purpose of poetry, which was not to please with imaginative objects of beauty, but to console men in their spiritual endeavours and aspirations. 36

All that emerges from La Belle Dame is, as Babbitt implies, Keats’s always present proclivities toward the beauty of the sorrowful real. La Belle Dame and the Odes are visible links with the fin de siècle. One of the high priests of aestheticism and symbolism wrote concerning Keats:

John Keats, at a time when the phrase had not yet been invented, practised the theory of art for art’s sake. The theory

34 Babbitt, op. cit., p. 360.
35 Compare La Belle Dame with Tennyson’s "The Lady of Shalott." Tennyson, who, of course, was much influenced by Keats, possessed a wisdom unknown to Keats.
36 Crawford, op. cit., p. 136.
is almost infallible; it is certain that a poem must be written for the poem's sake simply . . . Keats had something feminine and twisted in his mind, made up out of unhealthy nerves—which are not to be found to the same extent in Baudelaire—which it is not the fashion to call decadent.

There is an element of truth in Symons's statement, of course, if we discount the assumption of effeminacy. Keats, as is evidenced in the Odes, seems to have been compelled to abstract from what he found about him a beauty without Platonic or idealistic prototype. The height of his faith is to be found in the sad resignation of

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," that is all
Ye know on earth; and all ye need to know.

As Paul Elmer More points out, these climactic lines are

but a partial glimpse of the reality. Had he been sufficiently a Greek to read Plato, he might have been carried beyond that imperfect view; even the piteous incompleteness of his own life might have laid bare to him the danger lurking in its fair deception. As it is, his letters are filled with vague yearnings for a clearer knowledge; he is, he says, as one "writing at random, straining after particles of light in the midst of a great darkness." 39

Matthew Arnold, before More, saw in Keats the same "piteous incompleteness."


38 A study of the life of Keats reveals that he was decidedly masculine.

Arnold, who recognized the intellectual grappling of Keats, remarked:

For the second great half of poetic interpretation, for that faculty of moral interpretation which is in Shakespeare, and is informed by him with the same power of beauty as his naturalistic interpretation, Keats was not ripe.40

Some critics41 regard Lamia and La Belle Dame as representative of a period in Keats's life when the struggle between the sensuous and the intellectual was at its bitterest. This period of intense conflict is to be considered the prelude to arrival at "very clear intellectual canons of truth."42 J. Middleton Murry, whose study of Keats has been profound, even if often obscurantist, feels that these works show a desire to cast off the mantle of romanticism and adopt the sympathy and Einfullung of Shakespeare.43 In any event or interpretation, one fact remains unmistakable: Keats gives himself over to a beauty which is based on forms of the transient. It is possible that if Keats had lived a full life he would have found securer mooring for his hyperaesthetic perception. What he would have done, however, is idle and worthless conjecture. What is important is what the Odes, his greatest work, contain.

In studying the melancholy of the great odes—Ode to Melancholy, Ode on a Grecian Urn, Ode to Indolence, and To Autumn—an irony is to be discovered. Whether we assume that Keats developed steadily toward a

40 Arnold, op. cit., p. 115.
41 A. W. Crawford, for example.
42 Crawford, op. cit., p. 75.
43 See Murry, Studies in Keats and Keats and Shakespeare, and Bate, Negative Capability, works already cited.
philosophy (which it is not the purpose of this thesis to establish or to disestablish), or whether we assume that in his intense internal conflict the sensuous won out over the intellectual, an irony is perceptible. If Keats did gravitate toward a philosophy he found one that failed to perform the functions of an acceptable philosophy; to explain the meaning of reality; If Keats veered away from a philosophy, driven by his own "luxurious" instincts, he, nonetheless, arrived at a philosophy of a kind: a philosophic pessimism.

The Ode on a Grecian Urn, a poem of variegated and manifold interpretation, is built, partly at least, upon an irony. In Stanza 2 the lover on the urn, who is frozen in the act of kissing his beloved, is told

Yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair.

The lover finds a permanence—as does Keats in art—yet his permanence implies a sorrowful lack of fulfillment. The permanence of the urn (art) becomes for the poet the very distillate of sorrow.

This ode has a sculpturesque quality reflected in the coldness and consequent profundity of the sorrow it occasions. More precisely, it is the heart-rending immobility of the figures wrought on the urn that

gives the poem a stinging kind of sorrow. Allen Tate, who believes that the culmination of the ode—"Beauty is truth, etc."—is an extrapolation not organically related to the poem's development, calls attention to stanza 4 as the source of meaning. It is in Stanza 4 that Keats imagines the "little town" from which the people of the urn have come. Tate writes:

With the 'dead' mountain citadel in mind, could we not phrase the message of the urn equally well as follows: Truth is not beauty, since even art itself cannot do more with death than preserve it, and the beauty frozen on the urn is also dead since it cannot move.45

The truth Keats arrives at is the limited truth of art. The truth, which it must be remembered is told to the poet by the urn, is founded upon an unstable foundation.46 Mr. De Selincourt remarks,

In the Ode on a Grecian Urn, the mutability of life finds its contrast with the immortality of the principle of beauty expressed in art.47

Inherent in Mr. De Selincourt's dictum is a serious contradiction. The art of the Grecian Urn is motion arrested and preserved. It is beauty detached from a life-principle. Where there is no life, there can be no immortality. Professor Babbitt considers such equations of beauty and

45 Tate, op. cit., American Scholar, No. 2, 197.
46 See Brooks, op. cit., Mr. Brooks makes the point that since the urn speaks the final lines to the poet the lines have dramatic propriety and truth.
truth as meaning

in practice to rest both truth and beauty upon a fluid emotionalism. Thus to deal aesthetically with truth is an error of the first magnitude, but it is also an error, though a less serious one, to see only the aesthetic element in beauty.48

Keats's solution to the problem of the Grecian Urn is the estheticism that results in anti-intellectualism.

It is in the Ode to a Nightingale that one facet of Keats's incipient anti-intellectualism becomes painfully apparent. This Ode presents Keats as crushed beneath the weight of Wordsworth's "burthen of the Mystery." The pressure of the world is so great that the death-wish becomes apparent.

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves has never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here where men sit and hear each other groan.

Professor Thorpe, in a valuable chapter, writes that Keats "was constantly, earnestly striving to find a solution to the 'Mystery'." By "Mystery" is meant the age-old problem of evil, illness, and suffering. At the time of the writing of the Ode to the Nightingale Keats was especially despondent. One of the solutions to the "Mystery"—his Catullus-like love for Fanny Brawne, the death of brother Tom, his search for the nature of truth—is given in the poem—

48 Babbitt, op. cit., p. 207.
and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death.

In an oppressive world beauty (the Nightingale) is illusive and elusive--

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music;--Do I wake or sleep?

In the Ode on Melancholy one senses again the elusiveness (or
illusiveness) of Keats's beauty. Robert Bridges states that in this ode
the "perception is profound." Bridges points to "the paradox that melan-
choly is most deeply felt by the organization most capable of joy . . ."49

Once again, in the words of Paul Elmer More, the beauty is "wrung from the
transience of earthly things."50 Keats's mistress
dwells with Beauty--Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu;

It is here that we recognize one of the greatest dangers in the aesthe-
ticism of the Romantic ego. The aesthesia of the Romantic is compounded
largely of unhappiness. Because he is taken up solely with the transitory
he is led to unhappiness by the recurrent thought of decay--

and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy was her sovran shrine.

Later poets, inspired partly by Keats, we see wallowing in the mire of
melancholy.

To Autumn recapitulates one of the chief motives of the Odes:

49 Bridges, op. cit., p. 57
50 Cited above.
the excruciating transiency of beauty. Autumn, a season of luscious beauty—Keatsian beauty, one feels—is the harbinger of wintry decay. Keats is acutely conscious of the beauty that is passing.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they? Think not of them, thou hast the music too,—

These two lines betray a note of resignation based on the permanency of change. Thorpe in discussing the Odes calls the period of the Odes, March to September, 1819, which includes the Ode to Autumn, "the period of Keats's nearest approach to philosophic resignation."51

The Ode to Indolence, though not as great as the odes just considered, brings us back to the aspect of Keats's genius which, perhaps, found fulfillment in the death-wish of the Ode to a Nightingale. Mr. De Selincourt says of this ode that "its whole time is eminently characteristic of one side of Keats's genius."52 Keats in this poem spurns Love, Ambition, and Poesy—

So, ye three Ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise
My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;

Here once more is the passivity so beloved by Keats—the drowsy, brooding state discernible as early as Sleep and Poetry and the "Cave of quietude" episode of Book IV of Endymion.

The odes we have considered briefly seem together to recapitulate so succinctly and explicitly the structure of Keats's melancholy

51 Thorpe, op. cit., p. 88.
52 De Selincourt, op. cit., Notes, p. 530.
that very little comment is necessary. After having gone through a large part of the poetic output of Keats, there would seem to be a need for some kind of summation. If a summation is possible, it is best found in Keats's own work. Paul Elmer More calls attention to the sonnet, "When I have fears that I may cease to be." More, of course, mentions that there is great perturbation in this sonnet—perturbation at the brevity of life. Beyond this, however, he remarks that at the close of the sonnet there is

the nearest approach in Keats to that profounder vision of disillusion which separates the Elizabethans from him. 53

And when I feel, fair creature of the hour!
That I shall never look upon thee more
Never have relish in the faery 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.

Here is the quivering pathos of a solitary Romantic in a changing world.

We have already indicated that the literature of the eighteenth century approach to Romanticism was a movement from the Augustan obsession with the ego of the poet. 54 The literature of melancholy of the eighteenth century, with its pathetic fallacy, is the first step on the road to the eventual breakdown of the Romantic ego. Although, as we have pointed out, the affinities between the Preromantics and Keats are superficial and of little consequence, the melancholy of Keats is the harbinger of the breakdown that was to come with the French Symbolists and the British

54 See Chapter I above.
Aesthetes at the end of the century. As Legouis and Cazamian point out, the Ode to Melancholy anticipates Les Fleurs du Mal.\(^5\) The authors of a recent critical study of English literature commenting on this same ode, and inferentially, on Keats himself, state the "Melancholy is a subtle Baudelairian expression of the mood in which sensuous beauty is most deeply realised."\(^6\)

In tracing the melancholy in the poetry of Keats we noted a constantly recurring struggle in the mind of the poet. The struggle, of course, is one typically Romantic: the conflict between emotion and reason. One is tempted to say after reading the great odes, which stand as climax to the amazing poetic career of Keats, that reason was completely vanquished. Yet, in customary indictments of the Romantics we are wont to except Keats. First, Keats died at so early an age that we cannot be sure what any further line of development might have been. Second, the lushness of his verse, devoid of Shelleyan zeal or Wordworthian smugness, and his ability, second only to Shakespeare's in English literature, to literally think in lush pictorial images free Keats from inclusion with those to whom Jacques Barzun refers as the "detested Romantics."\(^7\)

As Professor Whitehead writes, "Keats is an example of literature untouched

\(^5\) Legouis and Cazamian, op. cit., p. 155.
by science." Wordsworth was able to resolve the conflict between the mechanism of scientism and the traditional man-centered universe. Wordsworth was aware of the "presences" overshadowing nature. The beauties of nature were not things in themselves--

To me the meanest flower that blows can give Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.

Shelley welcomed science with an adolescent enthusiasm, and was able to make of it the stuff of poetry. Coleridge was able to lose himself in a turgid German philosophizing. Keats had only a hypersensivity with which to face the "burthen of the mystery".

Perhaps we must turn to the philosophers for interpretation of literary analyses. One philosopher in writing of the Romantic movement in general makes an evaluation that applies very well to Keats. His evaluation stresses the element that is causal in the melancholy of Keats. George Mead notes that with the Romantic Movement came the further discovery, not only of the old world but of the self. Men had gotten the point of view from which to look at themselves, to realize and enjoy themselves. That is, of course, the attitude which we find in the romantic individual, in the romantic phases of our own existence. We come back to the existence of our self as the primary fact. That is what we exist upon. That is what gives the standard to values. In that situation the self puts itself forward as its ultimate reality. This is characteristic of the romantic attitude in the individual . . . .

58 Whitehead, op. cit., p. 83
Keats, as we have seen, was thrown more and more upon himself. The result, ironically in one who struggled to attain a philosophy, was a philosophic pessimism. Keats, in his reliance upon the self, was forced more and more to court the passiveness of spirit his mind required for creation. Besides, he was forced to depend more and more upon poetry for sustenance. M. Maritain comments upon this attitude, which he calls a "deadly error." With respect to the first aspect, the passiveness, Maritain notes that "Demonologists are well aware that every passive condition into which man puts himself is a door opened to the devil." As for the second aspect, absolute dependence upon poetry, Maritain states:

Poetry (like metaphysics) is spiritual nourishment, but the savour of it is created and insufficient. There is only one eternal nourishment. Unhappy you who think yourselves ambitious, if you whet your appetites for anything less than the three divine Persons and the humanity of Christ.

It is a deadly error to expect poetry to provide the supersubstantial nourishment of man. The quest of the absolute, of perfect spiritual liberty, combined with the lack of any metaphysical and religious certitude, has caused many of our contemporaries, after Rimbaud, to fall into this error. In the midst of a despair whose occasionally tragic reality ought not to be overlooked, they expect from poetry alone an improbable solution of the problem of their lives, the possibility of an escape towards the superhuman.  


61 Ibid., p. 79.
Rimbaud represents the flowering of the despairing, melancholic struggle we see in Keats.
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The thesis submitted by James J. Zigerell has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

October 13, 1918
Date

James J. Young
Signature of Adviser