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George W. VanDoren

A STUDY OF THE ODES OF JOHN KEATS

ABSTRACT

A number of critics have viewed the odes of Keats as fitting into a neat pattern of thought. Certainly there are common concerns throughout the poems -- such as the gnawing need for the perishable life of this world or the complex pain-pleasure relationship of the joys and sorrows of life. However, it is doubtful that Keats viewed his work as a continuum. One must bear in mind that the poet was young and admittedly quite changeable. That this is a fact is quite clear from the correspondence of Keats. Further Keats, like the rest of us, was moved by a thousand diverse impulses, ideas, and influences, all worked upon by the various catalysts of everyday life. Too often the complexity of the poet is denied by rigid critical theory.

Keats's odes simply cannot be viewed as parts to a highly intellectual jig-saw puzzle. We find that the _Ode to Psyche_ glorifies the human soul in love and makes great use of Classical myth. The Odes _On Indolence_ and _On a Grecian Urn_ both seem concerned, albeit from different viewpoint, with the questions of art and immortality. Yet the former embarrasses most critics in its careless inferiority. _Ode to a Nightingale_ is a hybrid concerning itself with art and with the question of escape. The remaining two odes, _On Melancholy_ and _To Autumn_, may easily be seen as mood pieces, the former celebrating the gloom of the Gothic, and the latter delighting in process and ripeness. Clearly these

works are distinct from each other. Yet, just as clearly there are common threads in all of them. Neither of these points can be neglected if one is to view the Odes of Keats as the products of a complex and growing mind.

A STUDY OF THE ODES
OF JOHN KEATS

by
George W. VanDoren

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

1970

This Thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Oct 28 1970
(date)

Professor in charge

Albert E. Hartung
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ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

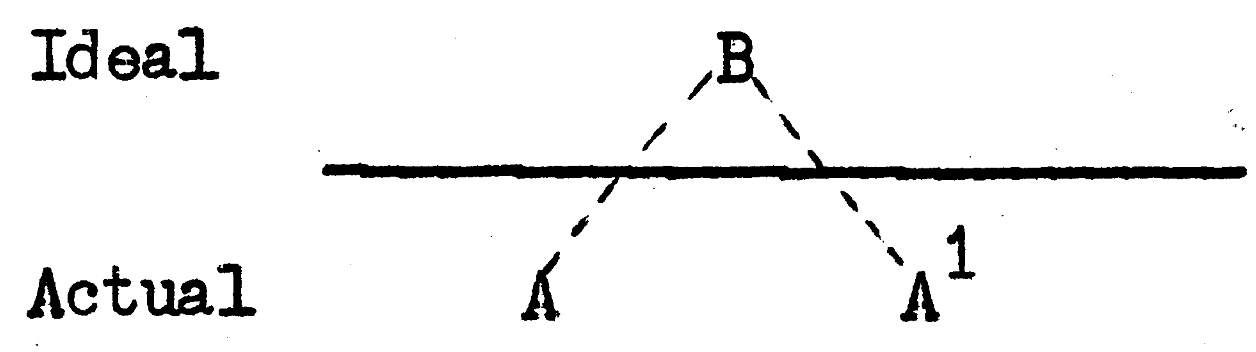
PATTERN OF THOUGHT

The odes of Keats are a long debated subject, and opinions on their meaning and relationship to one another are numerous and varied. There are, however, a few points which nearly everyone agrees on and which form a basis for an accurate, near-consensus view. Most people agree, for instance, that the odes are a metrical experiment. T. E. Conolly suggests that this experimentation comes to its final culmination in To Autumn.[1] However, Keats's growth is not restricted to metrics. Most critics believe that Keats was developing philosophically during this period. Shackford notes the influence of neo-Platonism[2], Allott notes the influence of Hazlitt[3], and others try to trace Keats's development through his correspondences. That Keats is developing during this period is not in dispute. What is in dispute, however, is the direction of that development.

Caldwell, in his book John Keats' Fancy, cautions us from taking too seriously Keats's own declarations of his mental direction. He notes that Claude Lee Finney "conducts him (Keats) along a sequence of philosophies made to flash across his mind like views of streets from a train window: 'Optimistic naturalism' given up in the first days of April, 1817 for 'Neo-Platonism,' modified by autumn to 'empirical humanism,' in turn developed by the end of December to 'negative capability,' this rejected by

March 13 for 'scepticism,' which slips in the next twelve days to 'pessimism,' displaced on precisely the 24th of April by 'Wordsworthian humanitarisnism,' left behind on October 27 for a return to 'negative capability.'"[4]

The letters of Keats can lead the unwary to such a reading. They do, however, show that Keats was as likely as not, to change his mind on a given point on grounds of anything from a change in world-view to a change of mood. Keats, to be sure, was an esthete, but his ideas were shaped, like those of Voltaire's emperor, by constipation and other natural factors. However, some trace, in Keats's thoughts, a more or less steady movement toward what Thorpe calls "philosophic resignation."[5] Keats, many critics point out, is moving from an appreciation of the sensual as an escape from the commonplace to a view of the sensual as philosophically important, and finally to an appreciation of the commonplace as both sensual and philosophically valid. Such a movement may be noted in the great odes and lends itself readily to Keats general poetic scheme:[6]



This movement is present in varying degrees in the odes - from little to a great deal and back to no movement. Such a development may suggest that Keats is coming to grips philosophically with reality in his great odes.

Perhaps Jack Stillinger expresses this view with the most clarity: "... his significant poems center on a single basic problem, the mutability inherent in nature and human life, and openly or in disguise they debate the pros and cons of a single hypothetical solution, transcendence of earthly limitations by means of visionary imagination. If one were to summarize the career in a single sentence, it would be something like this: Keats came to learn that the kind of imagination he pursued was a false lure, inadequate to the needs of the problem, and in the end he traded the visionary for the naturalized imagination, embracing experience and process as his own and man's chief good."[7]

Perhaps this is a proper time to digress a bit to the subject of the usefulness of Keats's letters, or indeed any biographical information, in the analysis of Keats's poetry. It is, as Finney's analysis points out, easy to find contradictions or at least sharp change in attitude in Keats's letters. A fine example is a letter to John Taylor written on the fifth of September, 1819. "Agriculture," Keats writes, "is the tamer of men, the stream of the earth is like drinking their mother's milk. It enervates their natures. This appears the greatest cause of the imbecility of the Chinese."[8] This letter comes only a fortnight before the great celebration of earth process, To Autumn. Keats himself, though, warns us of this possibility. He writes "circumstances are like clouds"[9] and later to Reynolds a more

direct warning:

> To-night I am all in a mist; I scarcely know what's what. But you knowing my unsteady and vagarish disposition, will guess that all this turmoil will be settled by tomorrow.[10]

Certainly one must acknowledge that Keats's letters may reveal clues as to the meaning of his poetry. However, one must proceed with the greatest degree of caution if one is to trace any long-range development. The letters, happily, reveal Keats as too complex a young man to be neatly pigeon-holed.

This view of Keats's work seems to function so smoothly that it perhaps bears further investigation. Perhaps Keats's development is not that easily delineated. What I shall attempt, then, is a look into the letters of Keats to discern where possible the patterns of thought and influences which affected Keats's view of poetry. I shall dwell particularly on the odes, and their meaning and relationship to one another.

The concerns to which Keats addresses himself seem to recur throughout the letters. Three excerpts from the year 1817 indicate the general areas of Keats's literary-philosophic thought. On November 22 he writes concerning world-view, in this case the most famous of all his tentative views:

> 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 ... I have never been able to perceive how anything can be known for

> truth by consecutive reasoning -- and yet it must be. Can it be that even the greatest philosopher arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections? However, it may be, Oh for a life of sensations rather than thoughts! It is 'a vision in the form of youth,' a shadow of reality to come ... we shall enjoy ourselves hereafter by having what we called happiness on earth repeated in a finer tone -- And yet such a fate can only befall those who delight in sensation, rather than hunger after thought.[11]

Here Keats is certainly speaking philosophically. Often, as this example indicates, his philosophy and his esthetics blend. But this passage is more than an indication of the kind of thoughts the poet had. It shows problems with which Keats concerned himself off and on throughout his poetic career. Keats here is trying to come to grips with the problem of how we know what we know. He seizes upon the somewhat Platonic idea that what something in us, the imagination, recognizes as beautiful is that which is true or real. He feels that there must be some way of telling "truth" other than logic. How can, for instance, one "know" what is good, or bright, or even a horse? Keats does not get into Platonic form, but he does feel the need for something beyond logic. In other words, the poet has discovered that logic, in the end, defeats itself; that we can know nothing for certain by logic, only by intuition (and then only in a qualified sense). It is this attitude which makes Keats sound anti-intellectual. Keats had respect for philosophy if it did not base itself solely upon the foundation of logic. What he rejects is the attitude that study will provide the answer, for, as Keats may have guessed and Twentieth century man knows all too well, study only leads to

complete confusion if one is searching for a final answer. At any rate, the theme of philosophical contemplation runs throughout the letters of Keats. He alters his views, and sometimes recants, but the concern is always there scattered throughout the letters.

Another theme which Keats explores from time to time in his letters is that of suffering; a theme which runs counter to the philosophical truth-beauty stance. That same November Keats writes:

> The first thing that strikes me on hearing a misfortune having befallen another is -- "Well, it cannot be helped -- he will have the pleasure of trying the resources of his spirit."[12]

Whether or not Keats thought long on these Panglossian lines is not a matter for discussion here. What is, I think, important, is that Keats is trying to deal with suffering. He will continue to do so and with good reason -- his life was full of it. He does not often complain at his plight, but one cannot help but feel that the suffering he saw flavored his view of the world and made him, in the end, reject the kind of thinking he displays above. Here is an important point. Keats often expresses both sides of the same issue -- so do we all if given time and paper enough. Keats, as some critics seem to neglect, was a normal complex person. His mind changed, his views fluctuated, much as ours do when we have a good day at the office or experience the departure of a dear friend. In assaying the mind of another man, one can never be too tentative. What we may see as Keats revealed by a passage in a letter,

may really be an anthropomorphic version that would not be supported by further reading. Suffice to say that Keats does speak often of suffering and that it is a factor which undoubtedly had influence on the ideas he expresses in his poetry.

A third theme which runs through the letters is that of thoughts on poetry itself. As early as December of 1817, Keats had looked to the role of the poet and developed his theory of "Negative Capability":

> ... that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason ... with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration or rather obliterates all consideration.[13]

Here we see that Keats feels that a poet should get into the character, or, if you will, seize upon the Truth which has shown itself by its Beauty -- regardless of whether or not it is a half truth. Beauty, this feeling for what is in a character or an object, must be the determining factor. An insight into the ugliness of mankind is no less a valid insight because it does not express the full picture of man's nature. Keats, again, appears to contradict his theory by his practice, but more of that later. It is enough that Keats is expressing a concern and taking the position he does. This view, however, can cast some interesting shadows on the great odes, as we shall see later.

A cursory view of Keats's thoughts as expressed in his letters of the year 1818 may give us an indication of both the

poet's mental framework and the changeable nature of his thoughts. In the first month of that year he writes that "a little change has taken place in my intellect lately -- I cannot bear to be uninterested or unemployed, I who for so long a time have been addicted to passiveness."[14] Yet in February he expresses the idea that we should "open our leaves like a flower, and be passive and receptive ... I was led to these thoughts by the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of idleness."[15] Here Keats is expressing a concern for his poetic development as well as for the general tenor of his existence. He is, apparently in a slow period and is debating whether he should forge ahead and force himself to write or should wait with Wordsworth's "wise passiveness" for nature to work upon him.[16] The question seems to be resolved not by any real decision but by the great creative year of 1819. However, Keats characteristically concerns himself with the best use for his time, constantly worries about achieving either fame or excellence, both of which he seeks from time to time. In April, of that year, for example he writes of doing some good for the world and, to that end, turning to "study and thought."[17] Here we see a kind of Miltonic concern for his role as poet.

In May of 1818, a year before he is to write his great odes, Keats writes the well known letter of the mansions of thought. He describes the chamber of infant thought and the second chamber, maiden thought, noting that one sees "that the world is full of misery and heartbreak, pain, sickness and oppression ...

We see not the balance of good and evil."[18] Only a mind which already sees such a balance could make this last comment. However, the tone of the passage indicates that Keats often finds that delicate balance quite difficult to achieve. The pain and suffering of his life once again make their presence felt, as they will in the odes.

In November Keats reiterates the "negative capability" thesis:

> The poetical character is not itself -- it has no self -- it is everything and nothing -- it has no character -- it enjoys light and shade ... it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen.[19]

Here again is the idea that it is not what a poet perceives but the fact that he is capable of perception and development. In effect Keats is saying that if a poet expresses varying viewpoints that is of no importance, it is only necessary that those viewpoints be valid in terms of his insight. As I have mentioned previously, this view will function with the odes of the following year.

CHAPTER I

ODE TO PSYCHE

Keats, in the early months of 1819, continues to ponder over his role. He writes to Haydon "I see by little and little more of what is to be done, and how it is to be done, should I ever be able to do it,"[1] and later he writes that he will not write for the sake of writing but only when he has something to say.[2] Then, in April, the month in which Keats wrote Ode to Psyche, he says in an often-quoted letter to Fanny Keats that he finds relief in "fine weather, and health, and Books, and a fine country, and a contented Mind, and Diligent habit of reading and thinking ... and, please heaven, a little claret-wine cool out of a cellar a mile deep."[3] The passage is often compared to the Ode to A Nightingale and I think we may do well to note that here and elsewhere Keats does not use startling new images in his works, but ideas, images he has mulled over for some time.

The next letter which Keats was to write is the most famous and widely quoted of all his correspondence, that being, of course, his spring letter to George and Georgiana Keats. It encompasses the first of the "great" odes, that to Psyche. Once again one may note his love for claret and his concern with poetry. He debates whether or not to publish anything that he is working on in view of his recent critical failure. He adds, however, that "I have no doubt of success in a course of years if I persevere."[4] There are other indications throughout the letters which indicate the low esteem in which Keats held his own work. We may see a direct forebear of the odes On Indolence and On A Grecian Urn in

the passage concerning Keats's present mood of "laziness ... Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me: they seem rather like three figures on a Greek vase -- a man and two women whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguisement." There is the "vale of Soul--making" section, which strikes again the theme of reconciliation of happiness and pain, and a reiteration of the negative capability theme. There is also a note of an interview with Coleridge and again an indication of the sorrow which Keats faced. These are the things which run through the poet's mind as he prepares his journal-like letter which culminates in the Ode to Psyche. How then does this ode fit within the framework of Keats's correspondence, or does it at all? These are questions which can be answered only by a study of the poem itself.

Stillinger feels that the poet sees glory passing from the earth and that it is up to poets to compensate for "the cruel banishment of fairies, gods, myth, and religion by ... philosophy."[5] Allot agrees with this view as he identifies the gods with poetic experience and the new life with that of science.[6] These critics seem to take the pagan gods in one lump, assume that Keats approves of them, and further assume that the cause of their demise is philosophy or science. I don't think that Keats would agree. In his letter to George and Georgiana Keats says, in the "soul-making" passage that it is the world which acts on the person to create the soul, not any easily identifiable or worshipable deity.[7] He adds in a tone which suggests the folly of any religion: "For as

one part of the human species must have their carved Jupiter; so another part must have the palpable and named Mediator and Savior, their Christ their Oromanes and their Vishnu."[8] It is hardly a secret that Keats opposed organized religion in any of its conventional forms. The ode itself, as I shall point out, makes a careful distinction between Psyche and the other deities.

Ian Jack links Psyche with Keats's other pagan god poems.[9] It may be noted that Keats does, in the classical manner, link poetry with some of the pagan gods, notably Apollo. However, this seems to be the only connection. Keats's other pagan god poems deal with poetry, so does the <u>Ode to Psyche</u>. This link, though, could be championed for a great number of Keats's poems -- including the other odes of 1819. How, then, is Psyche distinct from other gods and how does the poem function as a work about poetry?

Keats begins the poem with a variation on the neo-classical invocation. He tells Psyche that he feels a bit sheepish at revealing her secrets "even to thine own soft-conched ear." What the pleasant sounding epithet "soft-conched" means is not made clear, but the idea is readily accessible. Note also that in the very first line Keats introduces, albeit in a traditional way, the theme of poetry. He describes the poetry as "these tuneless numbers" which are forced out of him at the thought of Psyche unsung. Keats then brings in the theme of imagination, and, I suspect, of indolence, which is more apparent from the letters than from the poem:

> Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see
> The winged Psyche with awakened eyes?
> I wandered in a forest thoughtlessly ...

We may note the similarity of lines five and six with the last lines of the Ode to A Nightingale. Certainly the indication is that of both a dream-like indolent state and the effects of imagination on the mind. The wandering "thoughtlessly" seems to indicate something like the state of passive receptivity of which Keats had written.

Then, from this framework of idleness, we see the effect of stimulation of the imagination. The poet sees the pair and his poetry takes on wings to match:

> I ...
> Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side
> In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof
> Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
> A brooklet, scare espied:
> 'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant eyed,
> Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,
> They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;

Certainly the poet's imagination links the two lovers in lushest terms with nature. The beauty of the scene is nearly overwhelming with the beautiful, synesthetic "cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed" perhaps the finest image of the description. The scene, one feels, comes from a combining of the "actual" event, memory, and imagination. Of course all three are products of the mind of the poet.

Keats then paints the two lovers. They are in a state of tension. They neither kiss nor part. Here the relationship is linked with slumber and the dawn of dawning love, but in Ode on A Grecian Urn, the tension itself is explored. Here it is dropped, almost as an ornament. He goes on to identify the lovers as Cupid and Psyche. The relationship of the human-made-god Psyche and the

son of Love is, I think, extremely important to the poem. Allot notes that Keats was aware of the dual meaning of Psyche as soul and butterfly. He also notes the likelihood that Keats found the Psyche story in Campriere's Classical Dictionary, where Psyche is described as not being worshiped with the ancient fervor -- as she is later in the poem.[10] Psyche was, of course, one of the many mortals made gods out of pity by the old Roman deities. She did not fit into the typical picture of a goddess full of lusts and pettiness. More important than these, however, is the fact that Psyche originally lost her lover due to human weakness and that she gained him back by the ardor of her human love. Hers was not the love of one who could become invisible and tease maidens but the love of a vital human being for whom such an emotion was central to the living experience and fraught with all sorts of overtones -- both pleasant and painful. It is, I feel, the human spirit, that Keats is glorifying in this ode, or as Bloom puts it "the human-soul-in-love."[11]

In the next stanza, Keats tells us that Psyche is "latest born and loveliest" of the "faded" gods. It should be noted that the pagan gods were not eclipsed by philosophy or science, but, as Keats made clear in his letter cited above, a new set of gods -- or rather new sets for the various areas of the old empire. Keats also tells us that the human Psyche is fairer than Phoebe or Vesper, -- the classical equivalents of the ideals of chastity and of love (since Vesper, the evening star, is really the planet Venus.) Possibly Keats would have

been aware of this last identity but he is, after all, telling this girl that she outshines the stars and the moon, in an age-old tradition. However, the implications seem to fit the mood of the poem, and if Keats did not intend them, it is certainly a happy coincidence that they occur. Also note that Keats does not describe Psyche as fairer than the sun, Apollo, the god of poetry. At any rate, Keats wants us to feel that Psyche is prettier than, better than, the old goddesses. Yet, he goes on to tell us, she was not worshiped. He brings in a nice oxymoronic line which he fails to develop:

> Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan

The wonderfully sensual implications of the "delicious moan" clash with and are intensified by the "virgin-choir." However, Keats drops the image. It serves merely as a teasing item in a catalogue of forms of pagan worship.

Keats then does a repetition of the previous twelve lines with some significant variations. He repeats that Psyche is "too late for antique vows, too, too late for the fond believing lyre." Note that now the classical worship is seen as fond or foolish. Harold Bloom notes that Keats does not really regret the loss of the old days, but mentions it to enforce his own brand of worship.[12] Certainly here he undercuts what he had been ostensibly praising before. He goes on to establish the holiness of ancient time when the gods were frequent visitors on earth -- some, indeed, the inhabitors of earth:

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

Keats brings in the old "elements" to emphasize the extent of the holiness of which he speaks. What he means is, I think, something far different than a cursory reading will give. He is saying that in the days of foolish belief, when men depended on gods and not their human soul, there was a great cult of mythic culture -- a cult which completely missed the point and worshiped perverted idealizations of real human traits. Keats then says that even in the nineteenth century, a time far removed from the easy acceptance of myth, he can see among the "faint Olympians" the glory of Psyche, the one deity which represented the soul. When he sees her, he is inspired, not by the awe or the peacefulness of the old beliefs but "by my own eyes inspired", by his own creative imagination. He then goes on to say he will worship Psyche. It is significant that many of the terms he uses to describe his worship fit the role of the artist, or the poet. He says he will be "thy choir ... thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe ... thy oracle, thy heat of pale-mouthed prophet dreaming." If the old (and I think the new, also) myths are to be replaced by the human soul the mindless worship of the "fond believing lyre" must be replaced by a new poetry based on the creative imagination.

In the final stanza, Keats vows to be Psyche's priest. Douglas Bush notes that "what should be a climactic vision of the imagination's creative power does not rise above lush reverie."[13] It is perhaps in the last stanza that this criticism strikes home. After stating his theme, Keats is now going to describe this new imaginative worship. He writes:

> Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
> In some untrodden region of my mind
> Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
> Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:

He builds vegetation imagery in his mind or imagination similar to that associated with the two lovers in the earlier part of the poem. He drops in another undeveloped oxymoron, "pleasant pain," by which he probably means that pain which is the accompaniment of any growth of the soul in the "Vale of Soul-making." However, he is not very precise about its actual meaning and once again he drops the image. Harold Bloom notes Keats's fondness for the oxymoron[14] and one can imagine the young poet including such a line much as one would include a checkered vest in one's wardrobe, but the picture is disappointing.

An image that is developed is that of the vegetation. In this lush setting the Dryads, classical nymphs of the trees, will be lulled to sleep, a situation which will allow the poet to be free of their influence in "this wide quietness." The vegetation imagery continues with "the wreath'd trellis of a working brain," which H. Pettit tells us is an accurate description of the period's conception of how a brain actually functioned, a phenomenon of which Keats would, no doubt, have been aware due to his medical studies.[15] Regardless of its source, the image does work nicely with that "gardener Fancy." The poet once again makes it clear that it is the imagination which makes it possible for him to worship Psyche, to see the glories of the human spirit. His ending, however, is weak:

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

He seems to be saying that all the joys the imagination can devise will be laid before Psyche by the poet. However, he then equates the Psyche-Cupid myth to these delights. Perhaps he is suggesting that even the original mythologies which for so long held people in thrall were a product of the imagination. Perhaps he is trying to achieve a symmetry by returning to the myth. Perhaps one should look more to the "Love" in the poem and remember that Keats was at this time in love and living near Fanny Brawne. One should note also that it is the "bright torch" which, because of the drop of wax which wakes Cupid, ends their love for a time and that the "casement ope at night" was the means by which Cupid came to Psyche before the wax incident to fulfill their love. This seems to bring up yet another possibility, that the imagination as a part of her humanity is really the source of both Psyche's pain and her joy. Whatever Keats is saying in the last stanza, he does not do a very good job of conveying his meaning to the reader. Indeed, as Bush suggests, there is, here and throughout the poem a bit too much "reverie" and too little "vision."[16]

While this reading of the poem is hardly the last word on Psyche, it does, I believe, help to clarify a few things. First of all, it suggests that Keats reflects not only the pondering of an intense mind, but also the impact of such influences as

lovely scenery, his girl friend, and the like. Secondly, we can see Keats dealing with suffering, although in a rather vague fashion. We shall see throughout the odes that the coexistence of pain and pleasure is a theme that recurs. Thirdly, we may note that this is not a poem that is trying to escape this world, but one that is very much concerned with it in terms of "soul-making", the imagination, and poetry. We shall see again that Keats can never escape this world in his thinking, and indeed, never tries to in the Odes -- except as a means of emphasizing the impossibility of such an escape. Lastly, we may see that Ode to Psyche is a cut below the other 1819 odes, not because it is part of his pagan-god poetry, or because it fails to reject the ideal world, but because it is a poem marred by confusing images which are not developed and in which the line of thought is sometimes subordinated to the lushness of language in which Keats shows, to be sure, tremendous skill.

CHAPTER II

ON INDOLENCE AND TO A NIGHTINGALE

It is interesting to note that in the month of May, when Keats produced four of his great odes in a flurry of creative activity, there are very few indications in his letters of the kind of pondering and self-analyzing which we find earlier. The only real pronouncement on any of his usual poetic and philosophic concerns comes in a letter dated May 31, which would be after the odes were completed. He writes to Miss Jeffrey that "I must choose between despair and Energy -- I choose the latter."[1] Apparently his questings have found their answer in work.

There is little written on the Ode On Indolence. Stillinger rejects it because of its "obvious inferiority as a poem."[2] Bloom, too, feels it is inferior.[3] Also, it is not included in the 1820 edition of Keats's poems -- which does include all the other odes.[4] However, there are a few points about the ode worth mentioning. First of all, it is in the Ode on Indolence that Keats states the figure-urn imagery which he is to use in the Ode on a Grecian Urn in almost the exact form in which the subject appears in his letter to George and Georgiana. Also, Keats expresses a wish for oblivion not unlike his love with "easeful death" of the Ode to a Nightingale. One may also note the half-waking world of the poem which is seen often in the odes. However, the interesting developments for me are those which concern Keats's attitude toward life and art.

As he recognizes the figures in the third stanza, he notes Poetry especially.

> The last, whom I love more, the more of blame
> Is heap'd upon her, maiden most unmeek,--
> I knew to be my demon Poesy.

Here we see that Keats is disturbed by the vision that Poetry forces upon him. Yet he loves Poetry and he can not escape her -- or Love or Ambition. Again there is the duality that is experience for Keats. The last image is powerful and accurate. Poetry is Keats's demon. He must have it but he wants to escape all care -- a situation which Poetry makes impossible. This certainly is a part of the pain-pleasure stream which runs through the odes. In fact, we may note that in his indolent state "pain had no sting, and Pleasure's wreath no flower." Only in non-indolence, in normal life are pain and pleasure inevitably linked.

In the third stanza, Keats is even more explicit about his desires:

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

When the figures leave, Keats, because of his indolent state, can not follow them. However, he wants to, even though he knows there is no joy in them. He longs for "an age so sheltered from annoy" that he may escape the pains of reality and the burden of poesy.

In Ode on Indolence he is in a state of oblivion through sleep and a drowsy indifference. We must note again that here the solution is unsatisfactory because even in his present state Keats cannot really be as indifferent as he would like to be. Although he says that

> "Ye cannot raise my head cool-bedded in the flowery grass; For I would not be dieted with praise,
> A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!"

and bids poetry leave him, he cannot mean what he says. He won't be a poet and live on praise like a pet-lamb, yet he is writing in spite of his claims that he can't and won't. The poem, in fact, brings to mind a sort of happy version of Coleridge's Dejection: an Ode. Coleridge's poem is, I think, more powerful, but Keats is pursuing the same line -- the inability to write. The poem fits into no pattern of thought and is not of itself lofty either in theme or in execution. It seems to have been justly passed over in treatments of the odes.

In the Ode to A Nightingale, Keats, according to Stillinger,[4] finds that his past conception of art was not really related to human experience. The nightingale belongs to fairy land, not to the world of men.[5] Various other critics approximate this view. Janet Spens sees Keats trying to escape from this world to one of true happiness.[6] Fogle sees it as an attempt to balance Beauty and mortality.[7] Crawford notes that the "constructions of the imagination are doomed to perish" in this poem.[8] Keats seems to be suggesting with his movement from reality to ideal and back again that the ideal can never serve as a substitute for reality,

at least not for men of this world. In the first stanza, Keats tells us that he feels dull and drugged. His heart aches because he is too happy with the nightingale's song "of summer in full-throated ease." Here we have, I think, the essence of Keats's pain-pleasure images revealed. The pleasure is the original reaction -- the song is beautiful. Then, however, almost spontaneously, Keats intellectualizes and begins to ask questions. Does beauty not contradict the reality of the world? How, indeed, can one reconcile such beauty with the rest of life? The rest of the poem is, I believe, a fleshing out of this skeletal re-action: first, Keats reacts, then questions, then rejects the answer of the nightingale. The idea is, for Keats, an old one. On March 25, 1818 he writes in a verse epistle to Haydon:

> ...Oh, never will the prize,
> High reason, and the love of good and ill,
> Be my award! Things cannot to the will
> Be settled, but they tease us out of thought;
> Or is it that imagination brought
> Beyond its proper bound, yet still confined
> Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind,
> Cannot refer to any standard law
> Of either earth or heaven? It is a flaw
> In happiness, to see beyond our bourn,
> It forces us in summer skies to mourn,
> It spoils the singing of the nightingale.[9]

This passage contains the seed for both Ode to a Nightingale and Ode on a Grecian Urn. It indicates that Keats did not come to these odes with a sense of discovery, but rather after a good deal of thought on the subject. One should not forget in reading the poem, that Keats is proceeding according to plan, giving us

feelings he has felt, not merely thinking in verse. He carefully controls the tension between the real and the ideal and works skillfully at undercutting the ideal while he is making it appealing. It should be noted that Keats, as early as the first stanza identifies the Nightingale with the Dryads, the wood nymphs which he rejected in Ode to Psyche.

The second stanza is often seen as showing an attempt to escape the world through the opiate of wine. However, the imagery Keats uses suggests that it is not wine alone that he is escaping to.

> O, for a draught of vintage! ...
> Tasting of Flora and the country green,
> Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!
> O for a beaker full of the warm South,
> Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene ...

The "vintage" taste of Flora, classical goddess of flowers and spring. The dance and song images further bring us into a pastoral setting. The very wine itself is from Hippocrene, the ever flowing spring on Mount Helicon, sacred to the muses.[10] Even the balm of drink becomes escape into the land of the classical gods, a land of warmth and stability, yet one of fiction, a time Keats has rejected, save for Psyche herself, in his Ode to Psyche.

Keats's desire to escape the world brings to mind a sharp picture of the thing he wishes to escape. He does not show us that it is folly and even impossibility to try such an escape, but the picture of the real world is there:

> Here, where men sit and hear each other groan:
> Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
> Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin and dies;
> Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
> And leaden-eyed despairs,
> Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes
> Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

The poetic language is strong, moving, and one cannot help but think of the hardship and death that the young poet knew both as a medical student and as a brother of one who did grow pale and thin and die. Here again Keats underscores his basic dilemma. To think is to be full of sorrow and despair. The world is one of flux. Beauty grows old rapidly. Love is inconstant, uncaring. Men are ever so mortal.

In the next stanza, Keats makes another plea for escape. This time he will fly on the "viewless wings of Poesy." It is however the same type of fairy world he is escaping to. It is a world governed by the "Queen-Moon ... clustered around by all her starry Fays." It is quite definitely a world of feeling which denies the intellect, the "high reason" of his letters to Reynolds. It is the "dull brain which perplexes and retards," and it is a world in which there is no light. Light, I hesitate to mention, has a long tradition of association with knowledge and reason.

It is this lack of light, of the power of thought if you will, which keeps the poet from recognizing the beauties of a very real world which he describes in the fifth stanza. The "darkness" of his escape is "embalmed" -- dead, cold, devoid of

humanity. The world however is one of beautiful life. He speaks of specific flowers, of hawthorn, eglantine, and the musk-rose. Here we see the beauty of the real world -- a beauty that one who forsakes the real world cannot partake of, because he refuses to partake of the pain and frustration which is inherent in that world. After all, the musk-rose, like Beauty, and Love, and Man grows old and dies. But still the poet holds to his acceptance of the fairy world of art.

In stanza six, the poet seeks death while he is in the height of his bliss in his world of the imagination. It is, I would imagine, a kind of melodramatic wish that flashes across the mind of many an artist. What could be more appealing than the thought of a man ending his connection with this sordid world when he is farthest from it, when he is ensconced in a world of images, feeling, creative genius. But even this wish causes Keats, who cannot shake the duality of his nature, to ruminate upon death itself. The poet has taken us to the ultimate escape from this world.

Keats notes in the next stanza that the nightingale was not born for death -- both as a species and as a representative of the world of art. Keats, in contrasting the immortality of the bird to the mortality of man, finds himself able to accept the world, which has long been pressing in on his poetic dream world.

> No hungry generations tread thee down;
> The voice I hear this passing night was heard

> In ancient days by emperor and clown:
> Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
> Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
> She stood in tears amid the alien corn;

It is clear from this passage of contrast that there is really no difference betwen the nightingale and man. There still are, after all, emperors and clowns, or at least their equivalents, in the same way that there is a nightingale for all ages to hear. Man, as well as the bird, exists as a species. Also the nightingale, the artistic invention, is no more eternal an art form than the story of a sad and beaten exile, Ruth. Here, the poet realizes that the fairy land is indeed "forlorn." It is devoid of the real and the human.

In the final stanza, Keats completes his reality-ideal-reality cycle. He denounces the fancy as a cheat -- the fancy who was once the keeper of Psyche's garden. The birds' "anthem" becomes "plaintive." He then questions whether there has even been a real nightingale there singing. Perhaps he has dreamt it all. It seems that in this ode there is a clear affirmation of at least the beauty of the real world. It is, however, an uneasy one because the poet is aware of the pain that the world holds in balance to its beauty. Yet, we have seen in the letters, pain is necessary in a "vale of soul-making," it is a challenge to man.

In terms of poetry, Keats seems to be saying in this ode, that mere beauty, mere fancy, is worthless. There is to be, for him, no art for art's sake. The beauty of poetry and the imagination must indeed contain truth, truth that is applicable to man

in this temporal world. He appears to be accepting Psyche as "the human-soul-in-love,"[11] but rejecting a form of worship which places Psyche as an ideal hidden by fancy in the dark reaches of the mind.

CHAPTER III

ON A GRECIAN URN

Stillinger suggests that the Ode on A Grecian Urn shows the poet accepting art for what it can be to man and not as a replacement for reality.[1] Again, there are a number of writers who agree with this basic view, although this ode seems to be most perplexing to a number of scholars. Murry sees Keats as moving toward an ordered view of life.[2] Crawford feels, much as Stillinger does, that throughout this entire year Keats is pondering the "relation of poetry and philosophy."[3] Jacob Wilgod sees Keats becoming aware that objects of joy and love must be ever-changing to retain their vitality and charm.[4] However, one can find a great variety of views. Ian Jack, for example sees the ode as "the most memorable outcome of the debate about the relation between poetry and the visual arts."[5]

It should be noted that Keats, here and elsewhere, was not an extremely original author by modern standards. Gittings reminds us that the odes were begun largely because Keats had been reading Dryden and, in particular his Ode to Mrs. Anne Killegrew.[6] He also cites the influence of Burton and of the anonymous author of The Flower and the Leaf.[7] And one should not forget, as Bush and many others point out, the influence of Hazlitt's lectures on much of Keats's poetry. "Many other influences can be traced, but his immediate reading of Burton and Dryden is stamped all over the thought and the verbal expression of this ode."[8] Burton suggested the philosophic solution to Keats's dilemma.[9] Ian Jack tries to trace the various extant vases which, by the descriptions in

the ode, must have been used in eclectic fashion, by Keats.[10] Perhaps what I am trying to get at is that Keats was trying to solve problems that had long placed themselves before men of letters and serious thinkers in general. His approach is slightly different but the problem of, as Bush puts it, "man's movement out of the world of illusion into the world of reality,"[11] is a timeless one. Bush makes yet another remark concerning Keats's eclecticism which is noteworthy both for its accuracy and its charm: "When Keats mixes three sounds in his thought they become, not a fourth sound, but a star."[12] This reminds us that sources can have meaning only insofar as they enlighten us on the actual content of a passage, otherwise the author may well justify his borrowed sounds if he can forge them into a new and exciting form.

In the first stanza Keats establishes the urn as a classic work of art. It is a mystery, a "still unravished bride of quietness," with a sweet tale to tell, but one that will not tell itself. Earl Wasserman notes that the urn is an "unravished bride" and "foster child" because it has taken on the qualities of "quietness, silence, slow time" but has resisted destruction and change. He feels, however, that the adjective "still" implies that the urn may yet be ravished by quietness.[13] This, in the physical sense is true -- the urn may be broken and becomes no more than a smattering of dust, not even dust which will grace a forest floor but dust on the floor of a lifeless though life preserving museum. However, the urn as art will remain always unravished, to use "still" in

its older meaning of which Keats was no doubt aware. This use of double meaning shows up later in the ode but with none of the nice oxymoronic overtones we find in this passage. Keats turns then to speculation about the things represented on the urn. He questions whether the figures are men or gods, and goes to some length to blur the two. He sees the location as either Tempe, the favorite earthly haunt of the gods, or Arcady, where men achieved their closest approximation of the godlike state in classical mythology.[14] This again functions as an oxymoron: either the figures are all powerful, immortal gods, or they are men as weak as we elevated only by an artist's hand to a state of immortality that depends on the eternal longevity of a vase. Yet there is another function of this passage. Men are introduced. The tension between real and ideal, mortal and immortal, life and art is already being established by the poet.

The tension, established in the first stanza is developed in the second. Here Keats begins a series of paradoxical thoughts brought about by his imagination's dwelling on the urn. He speaks of "unheard melodies" which are melodies one can only imagine -- a Bach for example exposed to the realm of polytonal jazz. The songs, however, sweet as they are, can never be heard, and the youth who plays them can never leave the trees which shall be forever in a state of springtime green. The lover, too, can never win completely his love, although she will never lose her fairness.

These same concerns are dealt with in the next stanza. The

poet feels that the stasis is good because no flaw can ever come to such happiness. The lovers will remain as they are:

> For ever warm and still to be enjoyed,
> For ever panting, and forever young;
> All breathing human passion far above,
> That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
> A burning forehead and a parching tongue.

Here we see that the poet looks upon the lovers on the urn as far superior to earthly lovers because they can never lose their joy. But, as we (as well as the poet) are aware, there is no fulfillment in the world of the urn. Stasis is not the human condition. The suggestion is that one must pay the price of sorrow for his joy, of death for the vitality of human experience. This theme occurs strongly in Ode on Melancholy.

In the fourth stanza, Keats turns his conjecture to the scene of sacrifice. This is a fitting contrast to the earlier images of spring, newness, and love. He speaks of the little peaceful town from which those in the procession have come. The town, he speculates, will be continually desolate, silent, unpopulated. The mood here is not that of sadness. It is a "pious morn." However, there is a hint in this stanza that the static state is not always desirable even within itself. There is beauty in a lover forever near his love, forever ready to kiss, but the need for fulfillment is there in the human species. In the town we have an even more cogent need for fulfillment, for what is a town when it is devoid of its population. A town is defined by the human intercourse that goes on within it. Bush notes that in

the town "the eternity of joy and beauty" becomes an eternity of joyless desolation. The town of the urn is a mere skeleton.

As in Ode to a Nightingale, he completes his reality - ideal cycle by returning to the real. In the final stanza, Keats praises the urn, but he qualifies his praise by a realization that the urn lacks human warmth:

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

Note that the urn has a "brede" or design, braid of men indicating that the men on the urn are subordinate to the "Attic shape." Also the homonym "breed" suggests that the urn is portraying men who are un-natural, indeed along with their marble bodies comes a life of inaction, a life which lies in a curious balance between perfect content and perfect frustration. Yet, the urn, lifeless though it is, allows man to exercise his imagination. It exhausts man's thought as does the notion of eternity. There are so many possibilities for the silent figures on the urn. Keats continues in this vein to the theme of the poem. He makes it clear that from this cold pastoral which will outlive us all there are lessons to be learned.

However, the last two lines of the poem have created quite a bit of critical confusion:

> Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty, -- That is all
> Ye know on Earth, and all ye need to know.

As printed here, the lines represent the ending as the poem appeared

in the January, 1820 publication of the <u>Annals of the Fine Arts</u>.[15] The lines appear thus in a consensus reading of four Keatsian manuscripts:

> Beauty is Truth, -- Truth Beauty, -- that is all
> Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

They also appear as follows in Keats's 1820 <u>Lamia</u> volume:

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

This leaves us to guess whether Keats intended the lines to come from 1) poet to reader 2) poet to urn 3) poet to figures on the urn 4) urn to reader.[16] After one solves that problem, one can go on to what exactly such an epigram means.

I believe the only sensible way to view these lines is to assume they come from the author to the reader, or rather from the urn, filtered by the author's choice of detail, to the reader. The question which appears unresolvable is that of who is saying what. Are the words on the urn "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty" -- a fit tidy phrase to place on an urn, or do the words on the urn include all of the last two lines. I feel that it is the former case. However, I don't see how one can argue the point except on his own opinion of exactly what Keats was intending to do with these final lines.

The disputed lines represent the message which the urn, and art in general, holds for man. The message itself is not very clear and many critics have expounded on it in completely differing directions. However, a sensible consensus may be seen. The lines indicate an attempt on the part of Keats to fit together

the ideas of truth, which is often sad if not brutal, and beauty in all truth (or reality, if you like). This reality, this truth, the urn teaches us is ever changing and not like the urn. It is but one aspect of beauty. What I think Keats is attempting to do is to affirm all of life -- to say that there is a kind of over-riding philosophical view which can justify both the pain and the pleasure in life, simply because they are human and vital. Saito notes that the beauty-truth relationship of which Keats speaks is not all that man need know on earth. "Still it is all-in-all that artists know, and the most important thing of all that they should know."[17] One feels that Keats's viewpoint in the ode reflects his idea of negative capability. If there is beauty in all truth, then an Iago truly is as artistically valid as an Imogen, then any insight regardless of its content is worth relating if it has relevance to man.

However, it appears to me that Keats failed at one aspect of the poet's task namely to make his meaning clear to a reasonably acute reader. One infuses too many of his own ideas with those of Keats in any attempt to explain these last epigrammatic lines. This is the case because the poet simply did not make his thoughts clear enough. Perhaps he was attempting, as I have suggested to affirm all of life, in which case, he has simply not left enough space for the job. An epigram, by its very nature, explains about its subject everything and nothing at the same time. Perhaps this was intended as a final crowning oxymoron -- that even the "truth" which the urn gave to man while it appears transparent

is really unfathomable. However, Jacob Wilgod expresses a more likely explanation: "I believe the poet tries to say too much."[18]

CHAPTER IV

MELANCHOLY

In the Ode on Melancholy, Keats abandons his "flight and return pattern"[1] of taking us away from this world and then reasoning back to a new view of reality. Here, Stillinger suggests, Keats tells the reader to "seize and experience the beauty of the transient natural and human world as fully as one can."[2] He goes on to note the importance of the linking of pain and pleasure:

> The pleasures and pains of life are inextricably bound up together: beauty must die, joy and the simultaneous fading of joy, 'aching Pleasure' and its instant turning to poison -- all are inseparable and one either accepts the pleasure-pain complexity or renounces life altogether.[3]

In Ode on Melancholy, Keats, according to Stillinger, is very near a total acceptance of this complexity. The poem, however, belies such a theory.

The first stanza urges against suicide as a remedy for the grip of melancholy. One senses that the list of lethal liquors is there merely for the dramatic effect, an indication of the Romantic taste for horror in a manner not dissimilar from that of the Gothic novelists. Nevertheless, the poet urges that ... the murder of self is wrong "for shade to shade will come too drowsily and drown the wakeful anguish of the soul." Here we are not very much assured. The implication seems to be that the "wakeful anguish of the soul" is to be preserved, even, perhaps, that it is pleasant and sensual.

In the second stanza Keats offers a solution: look to the natural universe, to the living, to hills, and flowers, and seas,

and to the love of man for woman. Yet these are all presented in a mysterious light. Keats likens "the Melancholy fit" to a rain cloud which "hides the green hill in an April shroud." One should note both that Keats carries over the imagery of death from the first stanza and that he sees melancholy as an "April" phenomenon, one which comes when things are otherwise growing and fresh. Then he goes on with a list of ways to feed one's sorrow. The rose is common enough, but the image of "the rainbow of the salt sand-wave" is lush and contains a hint of mystery. Then, after mentioning the "wealth of globed peonies," which reminds one of Wordsworth's "host of golden daffodils," he talks of the mistress. She is mysterious. Her anger is rich and the lover is to "let her rave, and feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes." The last phrase certainly blends the ideas of mystery, sex, the notion of life, and the hint of the Gothic.

The last stanza is begun with the pronoun "she" and it is unclear whether it refers to the mistress or Melancholy. I think that Keats may be inviting the confusion, playing with the notion of the mystery woman as in <u>La Belle Dame Sans Merci</u>.

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

It is in the very arms of his mistress that melancholy dwells.

or is, by the poet's vagueness and mystery, his mistress really Melancholy? At any rate, the point seems to be that man neither can escape melancholy and sorrow nor wants to. In fact, it is only the man who has the strength to "burst Joy's grape against his palate fine" who can taste the might of melancholy. Here melancholy is seen as a corollary to joy. There is no other choice except death, or, if the possibility exists, a life devoid of emotions. However, I cannot take very seriously Keats's point. Bush suggests that the poem gives us "a purely and thinly sensuous aestheticism."[4] I do not object in particular to the joys which Keats has delineated for us. They are all, rather than the most sensuous, the most fleeting of life's joys, or at least those which literary convention has long associated with the snows of yesteryear: a flower, a rainbow, a woman. What bothers me about the poem is that Keats's aim of saying something seems to be overridden by his aim of presenting us with a Gothic mood piece. The ode, with its death imagery and lush mystery, seems much more akin to _La Belle Dame Sans Merci_ or the _Eve of Saint Agnes_ than to the rest of the odes. He seems to be much more interested in the masochistic aspects of the pain-pleasure relationship here than elsewhere in the odes. The thought of "aching Pleasure nigh, Turning to Poison as the bee-mouth sips" is almost too sensual, too erotic to relate to the larger philosophic problem of the pains and pleasures which are present in the real world. To be sure, as Stillinger mentions, there is the affirmation of the real world, but it is the real world as the

poet chooses to view it -- in this case in terms of the sensual, mysterious, and Gothic. I do not agree with Bush that the poem is inferior to the other odes. It is merely different. It presents more of a mood than a thesis and will not carry the weight that some of us may place on it. The poem is a fine example of the mind of Keats not being bogged down into a single track. It is a work which makes categorizing difficult.

CHAPTER V

TO AUTUMN

There is a gap of nearly four months between these May odes and the last of the "great odes," To Autumn. In the interim, we may see Keats's vacillating: he is serious, gloomy, frustrated on the one hand, on the other he is cheerful, even glorying in the idle state. On June 9, 1819 he writes to Miss Jeffrey that "you will judge of my 1819 temper when I tell you that the thing I have most enjoyed this year has been writing an ode to indolence."[1] This passage has been used to date the Ode on Indolence to the first week in June.[2] Of that we cannot be sure, but we can be sure that the letter shows Keats in a pleasant mood and one in which his own indolence is taken lightly. One must add, however, that Miss Jeffrey was not as close to Keats as most of the other correspondents. This fact, probably altered the nature of the things the poet would write to her. His letter to Fanny Brawne on July first shows a different mood and indicates the undercurrent of sorrow that sweeps through Keats's life: "I have never known any unalloy'd happiness for many days together: the death or sickness of someone has always spoiled my hours."[3] I cannot help but think that this sort of sorrow led Keats to some of his views -- to the "vale of Soul-making" by way of rationalization, to his close linking of pain and pleasure, and eventually to a position of accepting the diverse experience of the world as an inescapable whole. Of course, other currents must have had their influence.

but the personal sorrow of the poet as opposed to his own illness, seems to be underplayed by most critics.

Keats expresses a more craftsman-like approach to poetry in his July 12 letter to John Hamilton:[4]

> I have of late been moulting: not for fresh feathers and wings: they are gone and in their stead I hope to have a pair of patient sublunary legs. I have altered, not from a Chrysalis into a butterfly, but the contrary, having too little loopholes, whence I may look out into the stage of the world: and that world on our coming here I almost forgot. The first time I sat down to write I c'd scarcely believe in the necessity for so doing. It struck me as a great oddity. Yet the very corn which is now so beautiful, as if it had only took to ripening yesterday, is for the market: so why should I be delicate.

Here Keats shows a desire to write professionally. He hints at it in other letters, but to his confidant Reynolds he is straightforward. One can only conjecture on the achievements of a mature Keats who, in Miltonic fashion, had schooled himself to a point where his artistic skill was unparalleled. Nevertheless, there is indication in Keats 1819 letters that he was indeed contemplating writing as a full-time occupation -- not merely as something to be done when one is in the proper mood and feels the need. A letter to Fanny Brawne, however, shows that the poet is vacillating on this point. Keats writes that he cannot say when he'll have his volume ready. He says he can't write merely for the press and may indeed give up the idea. However he concedes that the poems may appear by Christmas. He then adds a charming commentary on poetry and poets:

> ... for Poems are as common as newspapers and I do not see why it is a greater crime in me than in another to let the verses of an half-fledged brain tumble into the reading rooms and drawing room windows.[5]

Even if Keats does not feel easy about poetry on the publish or perish level, he certainly seems to be ready to let his poems float into the hands of the public.

Perhaps the clearest insight into Keats's decision to write for the public or not is found in an August letter to Reynolds;[6]

> The more I know what my diligence may in time effect; the more does my heart distend with Pride and Obstinacy - I feel it in my strength to become a popular writer - I feel it in my power to refuse the poisonous sufferage of a public.

Here is the problem. Keats would like very much to be popular, but because he both distrusts the tastes of the public and fears its censure, he refuses to put any stock in a reputation. This kind of problem crops up throughout the letters and writings of Keats. Keats himself sums it up: "I admire human nature but I do not like man."[7] In essence, this is the duality of life which confronts Keats and indeed all of the Romantics. The unity of man and nature, the "vale of soul-making," the brotherhood of all men are concepts which tend to either buckle under the strain of the real world or become so inclusive as to be mere truisms. The real brotherhood of man means that Keats, the poet fabled to have been killed by a bad review, must actually love a stinking, swearing laborer. For the "Soul-making" hypothesis to work, one must really be pleased to have one's courage tested by, for instance, death of a brother. These are the kinds of problems with which Keats seems to concern himself. They are a part of his vacillation. In his poetry one finds the unmistakable tension between the world of the ideal, of escape, and the world of reality where pain is

also real even if it comes on the heels of pleasure.

However, Keats does not concern himself in any real way, with these problems in the last of his great odes. Walter Jackson Bate notes of the Ode To Autumn that it is filled with many different kinds of resolution in a short space. Stillinger also notes its affirmative nature:

> From the beginning to the end it celebrates the world
> Of process -- of 'Maturing,' 'ripeness,' 'budding' ..
> not with innocent delight in the beauties of nature,
> but rather with a mature understanding that (to quote
> Wordsworth) this is "the very world, which is the world
> Of all of us -- the place where, in the end,
> We find our happiness, or not at all!"[9]

I feel that Keats does exhibit some of this awareness, yet one should not neglect the impact of the season on the poet. On September 21, two days after the poem is composed, Keats writes both to Reynolds and to George and Georgiana Keats. In both letters he speaks of the beauties of autumn:[10]

> How beautiful the season is -- How fine the air. A
> temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking,
> chaste weather -- Dian skies -- I never liked stubble
> fields so much as now -- Aye better than the chilly green
> of Spring. Somehow a stubble-plain looks wan -- in
> the same way that some picutres look warm. This struck
> me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed it.[11]

The indication seems to be that while Keats does express an apprecia-tion of process, it is a good deal more connected with the feelings aroused in the poet by an autumn walk than with any culminating stream of thought. Keats is appreciative of process throughout his career, -- from time to time expressing it, and, from time to time questioning the good of it all. Saito cites an 1818 poem as an example of Keats's acceptance of process, the sonnet The Human

Seasons.[12] Here Keats describes man's autumn as a time when man is "contented so to look on mists in idleness," and notes that man must bear his winter "or else he would forego his mortal nature." Certainly this is the same kind of idea expressed tactily in To Autumn. The latter poem, however, succeeds because the poet is not telling us. The acceptance of process is there underlying the poem, but the poem is on the surface a very beautiful description of autumn, into which the author never intrudes.

In the first stanza autumn is associated with the sun and with ripeness. These two "conspire how to load and bless ... the vines ... and fill all fruit with ripeness to the core." The images of ripeness are lush, even to the point of suggesting further growth. The sun and the season again conspire to make the late-blooming flowers bud even in the fall so the bees will "think warm days will never cease, for Summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells." Lovell notes, as I have mentioned, that the poet is absent here and throughout the poem.[13]

In the next stanza autumn is pictured in various ways. The effect is quite like that of a late eighteenth century nature poet's description of the season. Autumn is seen "sitting careless on a granary floor ... or on a half reap'd furrow sound asleep ... while thy hook spares the next swath and all its twined flowers." This is a lovely touch and makes autumn seem very leisurely, very willing to let the swelling gourd live on an hour longer. Lovell notes the "ideas of leisure and of nature, unhurried achievement,"[14] in the poem. Another image which emphasizes the leisureliness of

Autumn is the description of the season sitting by a cider press and watching "the last oozings hours by hours." Not just hour by hour, but as though Autumn would spend all his sweet time wringing the last drop of vital juice from the apples.

In the last stanza, Keats makes us aware that he is not just happily drinking in the scenery. Here we see autumn as the harbinger of winter and we have the assertion that even as it is it is unequivocably good. The question is asked, "Where are the songs of Spring?" And the answer comes strongly, "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too." Stillinger sees no hint of death in the third stanza[15] and Bate feels that there are only two images which are peculiar to autumn in the stanza; those of the "stubble-plains" and the "full-grown lambs."[16] However, it appears to me that Keats does express the darker side of autumn with an assurance that nonetheless this is good and natural and beautiful. He describes the music of autumn:

> While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day
> And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
> Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
> Among the river sallows, borne aloft
> Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
> And full grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
> Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
> The red-breast whistles from garden croft;
> And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

To begin with there are clouds on the horizon -- not particularly foreboding, but they are present. The choir of gnats is "mournful" and the day is "soft-dying." Perhaps this last metaphor fits the whole stanza, or even the whole poem. The day and the season are softly dying, passing peacefully out of the picture only to be born

again in a new day or in a future spring, and the death is motivated by the mystical cyclical nature of the warm life that autumn represents. The wind too "lives or dies" and the "full grown lambs" are ready for the slaughter. Even as we hear the redbreast whistle the "gathering swallows" warn us that migration is coming and with it winter. Certainly this is no bleak picture of autumn, but we are, very gently, made aware of autumn's position in the seasonal life of the world. The affirmation comes from accepting that life is good and seeing both the momentary joys of autumn and the enduring joy of the miracle of the earth's life-cycle. I think it is significant that this is the one ode in which Keats really approaches negative capability. He is completely excluded from the poem and he gives us his philosophy by indirection. The subtlety and power of this beautiful ode make it, to my mind, the greatest of the great odes. The direction in which Keats seems to be headed, although I hasten to say "seems" because, as I have noted, one can never be too sure which course Keats's mind will follow, is toward a realization of negative capability. If this last ode is any indication of the potential Keats had in that area one can only wish the poet had lived to achieve poetic maturity.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

[1] T. E. Conolly, "Sandals More Interwoven and Complete: A Re-Examination of the Keatsian Odes," *Journal of English Literary History*, XVI (1949), 299.

[2] M. H. Shackford, "Keats' Philosophy of Beauty," *Philological Quarterly*, V (1926), 3.

[3] Kenneth Allott, "Keats' 'Ode to Psyche,'" *Essays in Criticism*, VI (July, 1956), 286.

[4] J. R. Caldwell, *Keats' Fancy: the Effect on Keats of the Psychology of his Day* (Ithaca, 1945), p.5.

[5] Clarence D. Thorpe, *The Mind of John Keats* (London, 1926), p. 88.

[6] Jack Stillinger, "Introduction: Imagination and Reality in the Odes of Keats," *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Keats' Odes*, (Englewood Cliffs, N. J. 1968), p. 2. Hereafter this Introduction will be referred to as Stillinger.

[7] Stillinger, p. 2.

[8] Maurice B. Forman, *The Letters of John Keats*, (London, 1931), II, 412. Hereafter this work will be referred to as *Letters*.

[9] *Letters*, II, 340.

[10] *Letters*, II, 419.

[11] Earle Weller, comp. *Autobiography of John Keats* (Stanford 1934), p. 49.

[12] *Autobiography of John Keats*, p. 50.

[13] *Autobiography of John Keats*, p. 62.

[14]Autobiography of John Keats, p. 77.

[15]Autobiography of John Keats, p. 89.

[16]Walter J. Bate, "Negative Capability," Keats, A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Walter J. Bate (Englewood Cliffs, 1964), p. 58.

[17]Autobiography of John Keats, p. 109.

[18]Autobiography of John Keats, p. 115.

[19]Autobiography of John Keats, p. 194.

CHAPTER I

[1]Letters, II, 300.

[2]Letters, II, 307.

[3]Letters, II, 315.

[4]Letters, II, 318.

[5]Stillinger, p. 5.

[6]Allott, "Keats' 'Ode to Psyche'," p. 290.

[7]Ian Jack, Keats and the Mirror of Art (Oxford, 1967), p. 206.

[8]Letters, II, p. 364.

[9]Jack, p. 204.

[10]Allott, p. 283 and 289.

[11]Harold Bloom, "The'Ode to Psyche'and the 'Ode on Melancholy'" Collection of Critical Essays, p. 92.

[12]Bloom, p. 93.

[13]Douglas Bush, John Keats (New York, 1966), p. 13.

[14]Bloom, pp. 94 and 95.

[15]H. Petit, "Scientific Correlatives in Keats' 'Ode to Psyche,'" Studies in Philology, XL (1943), p. 563.

[16]Bloom, p. 94 and 95.

CHAPTER II

[1]Letters, II, 373.

[2]Stillinger, p. 5.

[3]Douglas Bush, "On Melancholy," Collection of Critical Essays, p. 147.

[4]Lord Gorell, John Keats: The Principle of Beauty (London, 1948), p. 78.

[5]Stillinger, p. 7.

[6]Janet Spens, "A Study of Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale,'" Review of English Studies, New Series III (1952), 235.

[7]R. H. Fogle, "A Note on Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale,'" Modern Language Quarterly, VIII (1947), p. 81.

[8]Alexander W. Crawford, The Genius of Keats (New York, 1932), p. 108.

[9]Letters, II, p. 73.

[10]Sir Paul Harvey, ed. Oxford Companion to English Literature (Oxford, 1967), p. 389.

[11]Bloom, "'Ode to Psyche'", p. 92.

CHAPTER III

[1]Stillinger, p. 8.

[2]John Middleton Murry, Studies in Keats (London, 1930), p. 81.

[3]Crawford, p. 74.

[4]Jacob D. Wilgod,"Keats' Ideal in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" Publications of the Modern Language Association, LXXII (March,1957), 116.

[5]Jack, p. 214.

[6]Robert Gittings, John Keats: The Living Year (Cambridge, 1954), p. 125.

[7]Gittings, p. 136.

[8]Bush, John Keats, p. 65.

[9]Gittings, p. 137.

[10]Jack, pp. 214-225.

[11]Bush, John Keats, p. 15.

[12]Douglas Bush, "Keats," Collection of Critical Essays, pp. 26-27.

[13]Earl R. Wasserman, "The Ode on a Grecian Urn," Collection of Critical Essays, p. 115.

[14]Earl R. Wasserman, The Finer Tone (Baltimore, 1953, 1967), p. 17.

[15]Bush, John Keats, p. 140.

[16]Jack Stillinger, "Appendix: Who Says What To Whom at the End of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,'" Twentieth Century Interpretations, pp. 113-114.

[17]Takeshi Saito, Keats' View of Poetry, (London, 1929), p. 38.

[18]Wilgod, "Keats' Ideal," p. 119.

CHAPTER IV

[1]Stillinger, p. 8.

[2]Stillinger, p. 9.

[3]Stillinger, p. 9.

[4]Bush, John Keats, p. 147.

CHAPTER V

[1]Letters, II, 375-376.

[2]Gittings, p. 142.

[3]*Letters*, II, 382.

[4]*Letters*, II, 388.

[5]*Letters*, II, 390.

[6]*Letters*, II, 406.

[7]*Autobiography of John Keats*, p. 211.

[8]Walter Jackson Bate, "The Ode 'To Autumn,'" *A Collection of Critical Essays*, p. 156.

[9]Stillinger, "Introduction," p. 9.

[10]*Letters,* II, 418 and 461.

[11]*Letters*, II, 418.

[12]Saito,p. 72.

[13]E. J. Lovell, "The Genesis of Keats' 'Ode To Autumn,'" *Studies in English* (University of Texas) XXIX (1950), 205.

[14]Lovell, p. 207.

[15]Stillinger, p. 9.

[16]Bate, "The Ode 'To Autumn,'" p. 158.

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