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# **‘He Sang the Story’**

*Narrative and Poetic Identity in Keats’s  
Work*

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PhD in English Studies  
Durham University  
2011

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## Declaration

No material in this thesis has been previously submitted for a degree at this or any other University. The work is solely that of the author, Huey-fen Fay Yao (姚惠芬), under the supervision of Professor Michael O'Neill. Excerpts from chapters three and four, in an earlier form, have been published as “Old Romance” and New Narrators: A Reading of Keats’s “Isabella” and “The Eve of St. Agnes”, in *Grasmere 2010: Selected Papers from the Wordsworth Summer Conference*, compiled by Richard Gravil (Penrith, Cumbria: Humanities-Ebooks, 2010), pp. 139-48. Another excerpt from chapter six, in a previous version, has been published as ‘Reading Keats’s Imagination: “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, in *Literary and Poetic Representations of Work and Labor in Europe and Asia During the Romantic Era: Charting a Motif Across Boundaries of Culture, Place, and Time*, eds Christopher R. Clason and Robert F. Anderson (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2011), pp. 271-84.

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## Acknowledgements

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## Abstract

### ‘He Sang the Story’: Narrative and Poetic Identity in Keats’s Work

Story-telling is a mode central to the practice and achievement of John Keats. In ‘Sleep and Poetry’, he refers to life as ‘The reading of an ever-changing tale’. This line suggests his sense of the centrality of narrative to human experiences. Yet the Keatsian narrative is as a medium for Keats to investigate the nature and development of his poetic identity. His idea of poetry and of the poet, and his narrative figuring of himself as a poet are my subject, as they are his, when in the phrase the thesis takes for its title Keats writes of a poet in *Endymion*, ‘He sang the story up into the air’ (II, 838).

Recent scholarship has interpreted Keats’s narrative techniques in different ways. Critical approaches have modified the Bloomian concept of the anxiety of influence by using a reader response approach, or have taken on board or swerved from a McGannian New Historicist perspective. In the process Keats’s formal achievement, once celebrated by critics such as Walter Jackson Bate and Helen Vendler, has received comparatively little attention. This thesis, adopting ideas and approaches associated with narratology (including its application to lyric poetry), analyses Keats’s poetic career, focusing on the poetry’s narrative techniques and its treatment of the narrator’s role. My approach might be described as aiming to accomplish a ‘poetics of attention’.

This thesis consists of eight chapters. Chapter one discusses ‘I stood tip-toe upon a little hill’ and ‘Sleep and Poetry’, poems that are crucial in understanding Keats’s use of narrative to explore his poetic identity. In chapter two, concentrating on *Endymion*’s enactment of imaginative struggle, I attempt to show the purposeful function of the poem’s ‘wandering’ and complex narrative structure, which allows Keats space to develop and examine his beliefs about mythology, beauty, and visionary quest. Chapters three and four examine narrative techniques and the narrator’s role in ‘Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil’ and ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ as Keats questions the nature and function of ‘old Romance’, even as he employs it, thus bringing a modern self-consciousness to bear on his task. Chapters five and six are devoted to the narrativity shown in the odes. Such an exploration of the ‘lyric narrative’ seeks to shed new light on our understanding of Keats’s odes. Chapter seven considers the ambivalence that Keats creates in ‘Lamia’. Lamia’s enigmatic identity as a woman and a serpent makes the narrative complex and the narrator

perplexed. Chapter eight analyses 'Hyperion: A Fragment' and 'The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream', arguing that Keats uses these two poems as narratives to explore his idea of poetry and of the poet.

In his short creative life, Keats demonstrates different and various narrative skills. These narrative skills shape his ideas and ideals of poetry as well as of the poet. Via his use of narrative, we are able to see the evolution of his poetic identity. He presents himself as what he recommended a poet should be, a shape-changing figure, who might be best described as a 'camelion Poet'.

## Note on Texts

*The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, first one-volume edn (1958; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001). Abbreviated hereafter as *L*. All references to Keats's letters are taken from this edition.

*John Keats: Complete Poems*, ed. Jack Stillinger (1978; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). Abbreviated hereafter as *CPStillinger*. Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Keats's poems are taken from this edition, with line numbers in parentheses.

*John Keats: The Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (1988; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006). Abbreviated hereafter as *Barnard*.

*The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1970). Abbreviated hereafter as *Allott*.

*The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978). Abbreviated hereafter as *PoemsStillinger*.

*John Keats: Selected Poems*, ed. Nicholas Roe (London: Dent, 1995). Abbreviated hereafter as *Roe*.



## Introduction

### I

Story-telling is a mode central to the practice and achievement of Romantic poets. Thomas Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* revived the ballad form and, in association with its influence, there was a revival of interest in narrative poetry.<sup>1</sup> Robert Southey and Sir Walter Scott wrote romances which drew, in Southey's case, on oriental and mythological materials (as in *Thalaba the Destroyer* and *The Curse of Kehama*), and, in Scott's case, on historical materials (as in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* and *Marmion*). Their poems significantly promoted the use and popularity of verse narratives.

Every major male Romantic poet attempts to tell stories in his poetry, even when apparently writing lyrics. William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* often contain miniature narratives which, on their own and set against one another, invite the reader to reflect on 'contraries' and contradictions. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge narrate their stories via *Lyrical Ballads* but in such a way as to draw attention less to incident than to feeling. Wordsworth narrates, albeit in an individualist and subjective way, his growth as a poet in his epic-like *Prelude*. Narrative is the medium through which Byron works, allowing him, through his accounts of heroes such as Childe Harold or Don Juan, to comment on contemporary society and speak —sometimes in a masked way — of his own feelings. Percy Bysshe Shelley's first major poem, *Alastor*, tells a story of a lonely poet who is

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<sup>1</sup> See Peter Vassallo, 'Narrative Poetry', in *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 350-52. For a detailed account of the romantic verse's history, see Hermann Fischer, *Romantic Verse Narrative: The History of a Genre*, trans. Sue Bollans (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 36-54.

driven by the desire for love of an ideal being.

John Keats, in this context, is no exception. Keats, however, puts ‘story’ to different uses. Unlike Scott who explores the fraught survival of the heroic code into the modern age in his romances, or Byron who boldly demonstrates his individualism, or Shelley who uses allegory to portray the poet’s quest in *Alastor*, Keats conceives life as a narrative, and he tells his life story via his poetry. In ‘Sleep and Poetry’ (1817), he refers to life as ‘The reading of an ever-changing tale’ (91). This line suggests Keats’s sense of the centrality of narrative to human experiences, given that the latter forms ‘an ever-changing tale’.

Two books in particular trace Keats’s development as a narrative poet. The first one is Judy Little’s *Keats as a Narrative Poet* (1975). In this study, Little attempts to examine Keats’s narrative skills from the perspective of his ambition of writing an epic. This study mainly features the longer poems, and Keats’s narrative skills shown in his accomplished odes are not discussed. Moreover, Little does not explore the narrator’s role and perspective displayed in Keats’s poems. The second book is Andrew Bennett’s *Keats, Narrative and Audience* (1994). Bennett’s book is written from the perspective of reader response criticism and discusses the relationship between the poet, the reader, and audience. Taking his cue from, but modifying Harold Bloom’s theory of anxiety of influence, Bennett uses the idea of ‘anxiety of audience’<sup>2</sup> to study Keats’s development as a narrative poet. Bennett’s reading of Keats’s ‘solecism’<sup>3</sup> is a highly sophisticated study commending the ‘scandalous instabilities’<sup>4</sup> of Keats’s poetry. However, the underlying emotional and subtle elements of Keats’s poems which I would like to stress do not seem to receive much

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<sup>2</sup> Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing* (1994; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 4 (cited hereafter as *Keats, Narrative and Audience*).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

attention.

More recently, though there has been much interest in Keats's narrative poems, there still has been a lack of research focusing on the formal and affective aspect of Keats's poetry. Many studies, influenced by and responding to Jerome McGann's ground-breaking historicist reading, 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism',<sup>5</sup> argue that there is a connection between Keats's poetry and the historico-political background of Regency England. Nicholas Roe's two seminal books on Keats, his edited collection *Keats and History* (1995) and his critical study *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (1997), convincingly argue that Keats is not an escapist poet who is merely devoted to the aesthetics of poetry; rather, he is also a politically-minded writer. This view is further substantiated by Jeffrey Cox's stimulating study, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School* (1998). In his book, Cox demonstrates the ways in which the politics and poetics of Hunt and his circle influence the young Keats. Michael Sider's *The Dialogic Keats* (1998), from another perspective, adopts Mikhail Bakhtin's view of language and asserts that Keats's major poems are products of interacting with the cultural discourses of his age. Sider firmly believes that 'a dialogic approach to Keats emphasizes the culturally responsive nature of his poems'.<sup>6</sup> His analysis, nevertheless, does not deal with 'Lamia' and the great odes of 1819. This historicist reading of Keats's poetry extends into the twenty-first century. Richard Marggraf Turley's *Keats's Boyish Imagination* (2004), contends that Keats's 'boyishness' served as a provocative mode designed to challenge and subvert the sophisticated taste of the literary establishment. What

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<sup>5</sup> Jerome McGann, 'Keats and the Historical Method in Literary Criticism', *Modern Language Notes*, 94, 5 (1979), 988-1032. This paper is reprinted in his *The Beauty of Inflections: Literary Investigations in Historical Method and Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 17-65.

<sup>6</sup> See Michael, J. Sider, *The Dialogic Keats: Time and History in the Major Poems* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), p. 4.

Keats's poetry shows is 'the politics of immaturity'.<sup>7</sup> Christoph Loreck, from the angle of epic poetry, discusses the influence of *Aeneid* on *Endymion* in his *Endymion and the "Labyrinthian Path to Eminence in Art"* (2005). He, as I do, finds virtue in Keats's circuitous narrative mode in *Endymion*, but we differ in that his emphasis is finally historicist, while mine, though appreciative of historicism's contribution to our understanding of Keats, is more formalist. Most recently, in *John Keats and the Ideas of the Enlightenment* (2009), Porscha Fermanis investigates Keats's narrative poems from the perspective of the ideas of the Enlightenment. This is an illuminating study of Keats's intellectual history, but not of his literary achievement, on which I focus.

There are other approaches to Keats's narrative poetry and major poems which should be mentioned at this juncture. J. Jakub Pitha applies narrative theory to Keats's poetry in his unpublished thesis 'Narrative Theory and Romantic Poetry' (1999).<sup>8</sup> This thesis does not solely concentrate on Keats; rather, it aligns Keats's poetry with that of Charlotte Smith, William Wordsworth, and Lord Byron. More notably, the chapter on Keats uses Jean-François Lyotard's concept of differend and predominantly centres on 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. According to Lyotard, 'differend' means 'a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments'.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, Pitha discusses the conflicting and contradictory aspect of the two poems. Though he also briefly surveys 'Hyperion: A Fragment' (1819), 'The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream' (1819), 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819), 'Lamia' (1819), and 'To Autumn' (1819), this study does not offer us a complete picture of Keats's evolution of his narrative poetry. Comparatively speaking, Mark

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<sup>7</sup> Richard Marggraf Turley, *Keats's Boyish Imagination: The Politics of Immaturity* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> J. Jakub Pitha, 'Narrative Theory and Romantic Poetry', Diss. (University of South Carolina, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Pitha, 114. This quote is originally from Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. George Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), xi.

Sandy's fine *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley* (2005) is close to my approach because it is a formalist reading of Keats's poetry. Yet Sandy sees Keats's poetry from Nietzsche's theory of subjectivity. Owing to the nature of his research, Keats is constantly compared with Shelley and, in this way, his book does not seek to cover all Keats's poetry in detail. In his *John Keats* (2005), John Whale offers another reading of Keats's epics, odes, and narrative poems that emphasises issues of gender as Whale analyses Keats's poetry from the perspective of masculine sexuality.

In the wake of Little and Bennett, and building on their work, my study aims to concentrate on the formalist achievement of Keats's narrative. In addition, this study is indebted to Karl Kroeber's *Romantic Narrative Art* (1960), J. R. de J. Jackson's *Poetry of the Romantic Period* (1980), and Herbert Tucker's *Epic* (2008) since these three books offer insightful views on narrative elements<sup>10</sup> in Romantic poetry. This thesis will adopt ideas drawn from narratology and analyse Keats's major poems, focusing my close readings on the poetry's narrative techniques and its treatment of the narrator's role. My approach might be described as seeking to accomplish a 'poetics of attention'. I discuss the manner in which Keats tells stories. All writers on narrative are indebted to the greater rigour brought into play by the recent advances in the body of critical theory and practice known as narratology. But I am not applying narratology in a rigid way. I prefer, instead, to allow 'narrative' to be appreciated in less mechanistic ways than is sometimes allowed for by narratology. The sophisticated, subtle, and affective aspect of narrative will be stressed. At the same time, I am aware that such theories have made it possible for us to look more carefully at issues of representation.

My aim is to explore Keatsian narrative modes as the medium for his own

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<sup>10</sup> Jonathan Culler has a clear and succinct introduction of narrative elements. See Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (1997; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 82-93.

investigation into the nature of, and for the development of his own poetic identity. Two poems will serve at this initial stage to illuminate both Keats's idea of poetry and of the poet, and his narrative figuring himself as a poet. The first poem is 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' (1816), in which Keats narrates his discovery of the translation of Homer by the Elizabethan Homerist George Chapman. It is from the celebratory joy of this literary discovery that the sonnet derives its peculiar energy. We are also privy to an experience intimately linked to Keats's identity as a poet:

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

(1-8)

In the octave, Keats vividly expresses his elation at the belated literary discovery. He compares himself to an experienced traveller who, in the end, is able to come to the proper realm ruled by Homer. Chapman's rendering of Homer gives Keats access to what he calls the 'pure serene' – 'serene' serving as a noun suggestive of an absolute essence of serenity. Keats also uses striking similes to expound his notion of the nature of poetry and the role of the poet, such as the 'realms of gold', the 'bards in fealty to Apollo', and Chapman's 'speak[ing] out loud and bold'. Crucially, the discovery of Homer involves much travelling and wandering before he finds what

fully satisfies his imagination. Keats's sonnet acts as a literary travelogue expounding his visits to 'realms of gold' until the sonnet focuses, through powerful images, on the discovery of Homer. For Keats, poetry is gold-like and a poet should be loyal to Apollo as well as be bold to speak as Chapman does. Keats projects his idea of authorship through these lyrical techniques of analogy that imply a narrative of quest.<sup>11</sup> When writing about his literary rendezvous with Chapman's translation, Keats is presenting his image as a poet. He expects to speak out loud and audaciously as Chapman does.

In the second poem, 'On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again' (1818), Keats tells us about his experience of re-reading Shakespeare's *King Lear*. This poem also shows Keats's evolution of his idea and ideal of the nature of poetry and of poetic identity. In the octave, Keats states that he will abandon romance: 'Leave melodizing on this wintry day, / Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute. / Adieu!' (3-5). The reason for his decision is revealed in the sestet. Instead of the 'golden-tongued Romance' (1), he wishes to take up Shakespeare's 'deep eternal' (10) theme, which is shown in *King Lear*. This decision echoes his poetic prospectus which he charts for himself in 'Sleep and Poetry'. Keats expects himself to move from the first realm of 'Flora, and Old Pan' (102-03) to a higher realm, which exhibits 'the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts' (124-25). Such a self-expectation, as Helen Vendler shrewdly observes, is also displayed in his change of the form: Keats replaces the Petrarchan sestet with the Shakespearean one.<sup>12</sup> This change suggests that, for Keats, story-telling does not merely focus on romantic love delineated in Petrarch's sonnets; narrative also needs to accommodate a different aspect, the soul-making and tragical

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<sup>11</sup> Helen Vendler maintains that there is a similarity between narrative poems and lyrics: 'Narrative and lyric sometimes overlap, because most narrative poems include feeling and reflection as well as plot, and most lyric poems have an implied plot of sorts.' See Helen Vendler, *Poems, Poets, Poetry: An Introduction and Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002), p. 108.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Vendler, *Coming of Age as Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 63.

aspect of human life, related by *King Lear*. His re-reading of *King Lear*, in this respect, is a process of learning to experience, more a form of endurance than enjoyment, the ‘bitter-sweet’ (8) philosophy shown in the play. The sonnet holds within itself a narrative about poetic development, that Keats must move from romance to tragedy, with its awareness of the coexistence of pain and pleasure.

Shakespeare is Keats’s foremost literary model because he exemplifies Keats’s ultimate poetic ideal: Negative Capability. Shakespeare is ‘capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’ (*L I*, 193). His mind can encompass every ambiguity and ambivalence because he will not fretfully attempt to use knowledge, or ‘consequitive reasoning’ (*L I*, 185), to prove his opinions. Rather, he negates every subjective view or bias and is open to experience. He can sympathize with his characters and distinctly creates each character. Keats’s drive to tell stories, in this regard, displays his sense that a poet needs to be like Shakespeare. A poet ought not to be insulated or prejudiced against other views or people, but he should be alive to experience, ‘negatively capable’, and to show an awareness of the ambivalence exhibited in human life. As he says in his letter, Keats thinks that poets should ‘open our [their] leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive’ (*L I*, 232). He elaborates his idea of the poet’s character to one of his most sensitive readers, Richard Woodhouse, in the following passage:

As to the poetical Character itself... that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime...it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights



the camelion Poet...A poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body.

(L I, 386-87)

Keats believes that a poet should evacuate his self-hood and use his sympathetic imagination. He should not display Wordsworthian egotism. Instead, he must be ‘continually in for’ and ‘fill some other body’: he should be self-effacing and forget his own individuality and peculiar identity. In other words, he needs to assume the identity of the character which he is going to depict. In this way, he is like a chameleon and can metamorphose according to the individuality and distinctness of his character. Keats accredits such a poetical character to his idea of ‘Men of Genius’: those who ‘have not any individuality, any determined Character’ (L I, 184).

Keats demonstrates such an idea of negative capability in his narratives as two examples will suggest. In his ‘Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil’ (1818), Keats empathetically portrays Isabella’s anxious manners, as John Jones has shown,<sup>13</sup> when digging Lorenzo’s grave:

Then ‘gan she work again; nor stay’d her care,  
But to throw back at times her veiling hair.

(375-76)

This passage is impressive because Keats aptly catches Isabella’s misgivings about and love for Lorenzo through the gesture of her throwing back ‘her veiling hair’. She has no time to keep her hair tidy, but digs single-mindedly since she wants to find out

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<sup>13</sup> See John Jones, *John Keats’s Dream of Truth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), pp. 19-20.

the truth as quickly as possible. Another example is the portrayal of the Naiad in 'Hyperion'. Keats's imagination is empathetic as he effectively manages to create an unbearably silent and still atmosphere, in which even the Naiad, who has nothing to do with Saturn's defeat, feels sympathy for the god's fall.<sup>14</sup>

the Naiad 'mid her reeds

Press'd her cold finger closer to her lips.

(13-14)

Her pressing of her cold fingers on her lips shows her sympathy and also her fear. It seems that a catastrophe is imminent after the Titan king's fall.

In addition to Shakespeare's influence on Keats's narrative skills and his idea of poetic identity, other poets also influence Keats in these aspects. Keats's first extant poem is 'Imitation of Spenser' (1814) and the poem shows Spenser's early power over Keats, a power which would be enduring. In this poem, Keats responds to Spenser's invitation to write in a melodiously sensuous style, as the line, 'And on his [the swan's] back a fay reclined voluptuously' (18), vividly demonstrates. In his later poem 'The Eve of St. Agnes' (1819), though Keats is still sensuous, his style has become sophisticated. He uses elaborate images and successfully manages a medieval aura by using the Spenserian stanza. The casement scene shows the highest sensuous beauty:

A casement high and triple-arch'd there was,

All garlanded with carven imag'ries

Of fruits, and flowers, and bunches of knot-grass,

---

<sup>14</sup> John Jones praises this scene as one full of 'negative-capable pictures'. See John Jones, pp. 89-90.

And diamonded with panes of quaint device,  
Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,  
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings;

(208-13)

In this passage we are fascinated by the beauty of the 'imag'ries' engraved on the stained glass, not only 'garlanded', a word which is naturally associated with flowers' beauty and colours, but made brighter because of the word 'diamonded', even as the word initially indicates shape. The phrases 'stains and splendid dyes' and 'tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings' evoke a sense of touch. In this sense, the glasses appear transparent and colourful. The reader is visually and tactily entertained, and the poem's narrative momentum, not for the first time, seems to pass over into description: 'seems', because the way in which we value the description bears on our final evaluation of the romance in which such description is central. The sensuous aspect deepens and takes on a near-sensual form when we come to the passage which describes the sumptuous feast prepared by Porphyro for Madeline:

a heap  
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;  
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,  
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;

(264-67)

Here the reader seems able to smell the delicacies and allured to wish to taste the feast. Keats successfully synthesizes images of different senses and presents a gorgeous medieval eve of St Agnes. His narrative skills allow him to honour his wish for 'a Life

of Sensation' (L I, 185) and to test it too. For Keats, one function of poetry is to offer beauty and pleasure; another is to explore the value of such offerings.

Coleridge is another significant influence on Keats's use of narrative. His Geraldine in 'Christabel' may influence Keats's characterization of Lamia. Lamia's dual identity as a woman and a serpent creates ambiguity for the plot and makes the narrator aware of the complexity of life and plurality involved in forming judgements. If we juxtapose these two different styles of Keats, that is to say, his style in 'Imitation of Spenser' and that in 'Lamia', we can find that he has developed his narrative skills. His concept of poetry and the imagination grows multi-faceted and self-aware, as the ambivalent characterization of Lamia displays. His sense of poetic identity evolves in accordance with his evolution of different narrative skills. Keats is not only a poet who writes poems out of 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' when being inspired by Spenser,<sup>15</sup> and who possesses 'positive capability', viewing life solely and fixedly sensational as he does in 'Imitation of Spenser'. In 'Lamia', he has emerged as a poet who is able to negate his thoughts and feelings as a narrator and adopts diverse, disparate, and even opposing narrating stances with regard to his characters in order to present the complex facts of life. Keats demonstrates that all perspectives are interrelated and relative; nothing is absolute and definite, but fluid and indeterminate. His assuming such plural roles denotes his multiple and malleable capability. As his tombstone seems to suggest his poetic identity, 'Here lies one Whose Name is writ in Water', he is, in brief, a fluid poet.

## II

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<sup>15</sup> According to Charles Brown, Keats's genius was 'awakened' by Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. See *CPStillinger*, p. 417; and Hyder Edward Rollins (ed.), *The Keats Circle*, 2 vols (1955; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), Vol. II, pp. 55-56.

This section will briefly compare and contrast Keats's narrative style with that of Wordsworth and of Byron in order to allow us to appreciate Keats's poetry.

Keats's narrative style is different from that of Wordsworth. There are three major differences: differences in subject-matter, language, and poetic form. Wordsworth uses humble and rustic people as his heroes and heroines. As he says in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802), these people's passions are less inhibited and are in accord 'with the beautiful and permanent forms of nature'.<sup>16</sup> With this premise, the idiot boy, the huntsman Simon Lee, and the shepherd Michael become his subject-matter. Wordsworth's aim is to delineate the 'elementary feelings'<sup>17</sup> of people. In 'The Idiot Boy', for instance, the reader can perceive the idiot's mother's love as she urgently asks, 'O Doctor! Doctor! where's my Johnny?' ('The Idiot Boy', 262). She was too anxious for her son's whereabouts to remember to ask the doctor to go to her sick friend Susan. Highly personal and affective, and revolutionizing contemporary poetry, Wordsworth does not employ the elaborate poetic forms associated with Neoclassic style, but uses simpler ballad forms along with blank verse. In the same Preface, he stresses that 'a selection of language really used by men'<sup>18</sup> is the language which poets should aim to apply. Owing to Wordsworth's innovative style and subject-matter, which are utterly different from those of Pope's followers, in his *Spirit of the Age*, William Hazlitt perceptively remarks that Wordsworth is the 'most original'<sup>19</sup> living poet. He praises the fact that Wordsworth 'takes the simplest elements of nature and of the human mind, the mere abstract conditions inseparable

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Gill (ed.), *William Wordsworth* (2000; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 597. All references to Wordsworth's poetry and prose are taken from this edition; for poetry, with line numbers in parentheses.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 596-97.

<sup>19</sup> William Hazlitt, *The Spirit of the Age*, ed. P. P. Howe after the edn of A.R. Waller and A. Glover, vol.11 of *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols (London: Dent, 1932), p. 89.

from our being, and tries to compound a new system of poetry from them'.<sup>20</sup> Hazlitt believes that, for Wordsworth, the purpose of narrative is to reflect the common people's life and language.

Keats, like Wordsworth, but unlike Byron, is against the school of poetry associated with Pope. He adopts an alternative strategy, freeing his use of the couplet from the restraints of Augustan poetry, and taking his characters from mythology or medieval lore, for instance, Endymion, Hyperion, and Isabella. Yet even though his subject-matter can appear removed from real life, the themes of his poetry are close to life, for example, the theme of reality and dream, explored from different perspectives in *Endymion* (1818) and in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. His language and poetic form are well-wrought and shun the plainness aimed at by Wordsworth. In harmony with his 'Principle of Beauty' (*L I*, 266), Keats's poems display delicate fancy. Thus Charles Lamb rightly commends Keats's depiction of Lamia as a 'beauteous wreath, with melancholy eyes' (*I*, 84). This line succinctly portrays Lamia's melancholy about her love for Lycius and her identity as a serpent. More impressive is Keats's calling Hermes 'the star of Lethe' (*I*, 81). Lamb extols this metaphor as a 'prodigal phrase' since it is 'a poem in a word'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Keats is a master of compact imagery. In 'Isabella', for another example, Keats depicts the horror of Lorenzo's imminent murder in one word, 'murder'd', as shown in the following lines:

So the two brothers and their murder'd man,  
Rode past fair Florence, to where Arno's stream  
Gurgles through straiten'd banks,

(209-11)

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.86

<sup>21</sup> Matthews, G. M. (ed.), *Keats: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 159.

This prolepsis, lauded by Lamb, is quintessentially compressed and demonstrates Keats's virtuoso narrative technique.

Keats's narrative style is different from that of Byron, but they both challenge the traditional idea of linear development and employ digressions in their narrative. They prize the local energies of art and life, and enjoy transgressing classical ideas and ideals of order. In the entry on 'digression' in *A Handbook to Literature*, William Harmon defines digression as follows: 'The insertion of material often not closely related to the subject in a work. In a well-knit plot, a *digression* violates unity.'<sup>22</sup> In this way, digression disrupts the flow of the narrative and makes its unity discontinuous. The narrative appears broken; it seems to loiter and dwell at the moment and cannot move forward. Digression stands out of the whole structure. But digression adds vitality and variety to the tone. It is a means by which the narrative can take on an unexpected life. In particular, digression can, paradoxically, highlight the issues which the author is concerned about and achieve his purpose more effectively than linear narration.

In *Beppo* and *Don Juan*, for instance, Byron uses digressions in order to satirize the literary practice as well as the moral and socio-political scenes of Regency England. Superficially, owing to the constant transitions and shifts of his moods, tones, and subject-matters, his mockery does not seem serious-minded. But from another perspective, he, implicitly, asks his readers to reflect on the deeper significance of his digressions precisely, because he deviates from the main line of his narrative. The following passage can illustrate this function of the Byronic digression:

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<sup>22</sup> William Harmon, *A Handbook to Literature*, after the editions of William Flint Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, 11<sup>th</sup> edn (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), p. 165.

But to my tale of Laura, — for I find  
Digression is a sin, that by degrees  
Becomes exceeding tedious to my mind,  
And, therefore, may the reader too displease —  
The gentle reader, who may wax unkind,  
And caring little for the author's ease,  
Insist on knowing what he means, a hard  
And hapless situation for a bard.

(*Beppo*, 393-400)<sup>23</sup>

Byron is conscious of his digressions as he says ‘Digression is a sin’. But he does it on purpose since he wishes his reader to ‘insist on knowing what he [Byron the poet-narrator] means’. In part, the very playfulness does the reverse of displeasing; in part, the passage mimics the role of serendipity in poetry. The lines allow us to appreciate the illusion of Byron improvising in our presence, simultaneously lamenting his ‘hapless situation’ and demonstrating his skill as ‘a bard’. That demonstration of skill is significant since it causes us to take pleasure in a poetic performance that suggests life itself is a matter of performance.

Keats adopts this technique of digression in his *Endymion* and ‘Isabella’, and he wins from the technique a different purpose. For Keats, a long poem is unlike a short poem, which can only be enjoyed at one sitting. Rather, a long poem is able to provide plenty of diction, episodes, and images for poetry lovers to relish and to contemplate. He defends himself in these terms when telling his friend Benjamin Bailey about his intention of writing *Endymion*: ‘Do not the Lovers of Poetry like to have a little

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<sup>23</sup> Jerome McGann (ed.), *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, (1986; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). All references to Byron’s poems are taken from this edition, with line numbers in parentheses.



Region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second Reading: which may be food for a Week's stroll in the Summer?' (*L I*, 170). His result is a poetry that can be usefully glossed by comments that Shelley makes in his 'A Defence of Poetry':

The parts of a composition may be poetical, without the composition as a whole being a poem. A single sentence may be considered as a whole though it may be found in the midst of a series of unassimilated portions; a single word even may be a spark of inextinguishable thought.<sup>24</sup>

That is to say, nothing is un-poetical in a poem. A single line, an image, or even a word is as in itself a poem. This idea of Shelley echoes Lamb's comment, as mentioned, on 'Lamia' since he was immensely impressed by Keats's condensed imagery. In addition, Keats believes that if he can write a long poem, it means he is qualified to be a poet. Hence he claimed, 'a long Poem is a test of Invention' (*L I*, 170). He was convinced that the accomplished literary precursors all wrote long poems in order to prove their names (*L I*, 170). Within this discourse, his *Endymion* is a wandering narrative. In 'Isabella', perhaps he was influenced by Byron's *Beppo*,<sup>25</sup> Keats uses narrative interventions. The digressions seem aberrant from the main plot of the love story between Isabella and Lorenzo; but on the other hand, those digressions exhibit the poet-narrator's voice and narrating stance. In so doing, Keats makes himself distinct from the old romancer Boccaccio, whose story 'Isabella' (from

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<sup>24</sup> Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (eds), *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 680.

<sup>25</sup> I make this assumption because there are some connections between these two works. The first connection is the chronological proximity of the two poems: Byron published his *Beppo* in February 1818 (28 February 1818) and it was reissued five more times by April 1818; and Keats wrote his 'Isabella' between February and April 1818. The second and third connections are that both works are written in *ottava rima* and deal with love.

*The Decameron*) is the source of his narrative. In this way, his 'Isabella' is expressive and original. Keats challenges the old conventions of telling a story and gives the traditional story a new life. Because of his digressions, Keats's 'Isabella' imprints itself more firmly on the reader's mind than Boccaccio's linear narrative.

### III

This thesis consists of eight chapters. In chapter one, I discuss 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill' and 'Sleep and Poetry', poems that are crucial in understanding Keats's use of narrative to explore his poetic identity. They demonstrate his poetic hopes and fears, his idea of poetry and of the poet, and his self-representation as a poet. We can see the ways in which Keats develops his narrative power. In 'I stood tip-toe', Keats demonstrates his descriptive power since he perceptively and lively depicts natural beauty. In 'Sleep and Poetry', Keats narrates his experiences of staying in Hunt's study and the desired trajectory of his poetic career. But at the same time, he also shows his fear in his reference to Daedalus (303) and the charioteer (127-54). His comments on Elizabethan poetry and Augustan poetry show his idea of poetry and of the poet. For Keats, good poetry has the power 'To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man' (247), an effect achieved in the line itself, with its strong, calm verbs and rhythms. Moreover, his narrative delineates the need for a poet to have a visionary imagination and susceptibility to beauty, which he exemplifies in 'I stood tip-toe'. These characteristics are embodied for Keats in the work of the Elizabethan poets, who can interpret 'the meaning / Of Jove's large eye-brow', or appreciate the 'tender greening / Of April meadows' ('Sleep and Poetry', 169-71).

But interestingly, the structure in these two poems seems discontinuous or even fluid. There is no apparent story-line in the poems. Keats alternates between

descriptions, narration, and comments. In other words, his lines flow according to what he feels and thinks, and they do not progress in a linear way.<sup>26</sup> He liberates his feelings and his lines are emotion-charged, expressing something which is personal and subjective. The narrative then does not appear successive; it can seem disruptive or digressive as Bennett suggests.<sup>27</sup> But from another point of view, I argue, Keats demonstrates a feeling mind and appears to be a poet of sensibility. He lets his imagination ‘freely fly’ (‘Sleep and Poetry’, 164) rather than curbing it. In this way, he evinces his creative imagination and figures himself as a poet who abides by his poetic principles.

This discontinuity appears more conspicuous in Keats’s *Endymion*, but Keats has his intention. In chapter two, I shall argue that *Endymion*, Keats’s first major endeavour to establish himself as a poet, has been much underrated. Ever since its publication in 1818, critical views have often evaluated *Endymion* as a ‘failure’,<sup>28</sup> be it contemporary criticism in the *Quarterly Review*, or a modern critique such as is offered by Bennett. Bennett argues that Keats’s ‘anxiety of audience’ reveals his lack of narrative skills. *Endymion*’s wandering, seemingly errant form is therefore the major contending point. But among Keats’s contemporaries, Shelley, for one example, held a different view from the Tory commentators. Shelley stressed that the work was ‘full of some of the highest & the finest gleams of poetry’.<sup>29</sup> In this context, I shall lay new emphasis on the significance of a poem often regarded as the work of a poetic novice. Focusing closely on the poem’s enactment of imaginative struggle, I shall seek to show the purposeful function of the poem’s ‘wandering’ and complex narrative structure. I shall argue that this seemingly dilatory structure allows Keats to

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<sup>26</sup> Mieke Bal discusses such an aspect in her *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 38.

<sup>27</sup> See Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, pp. 69, 70.

<sup>28</sup> John Jones, p. 134.

<sup>29</sup> See Matthews, p. 123.

have ample space to develop and examine his beliefs about mythology, beauty, and the visionary quest. The paradoxical interrelations explored in *Endymion* between beauty and truth, vision and reality, as well as self-consciousness and un-selfhood, manifest his imagination's struggles and anticipate his ambivalent feelings about these topics in his later work. Moreover, *Endymion*, as noted, enacts a pursuit for beauty. As such, it is strewn with numerous instances of purposefully beautiful imagery.

Furthermore, Keats's effort in this work impelled him to reflect on the function and nature of poetry.

In chapters three and four, I shall examine narrative techniques and the narrator's role in 'Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil' and 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. Keats questions the nature and function of the 'old Romance' ('Isabella', line 387; 'The Eve of St. Agnes', line 41), even as he employs it, thus bringing a modern self-consciousness to bear.

Recent scholarship has viewed digressions in 'Isabella' as Keats's demonstration of modern consciousness. But they have not been systematically discussed; even Bennett's study of Keats and narrative techniques does not mention digressions. Neither does Bennett say much about the shifting nature of the narrative perspective in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'.

Keats's techniques and the narrator's role in these two poems, I suggest, are antithetical. In 'Isabella', Keats's narrator appears to the fore whereas the narrator in 'The Eve of St. Agnes' appears elusive. In 'Isabella', digressions constitute a vital part. They not only dramatise Keats's authorial intention and presence, but also foreshadow, reinforce, and intensify the plot. Moreover, the ways in which Keats employs rhetorical devices, such as repetitions, parallelisms, and apostrophes, serve to differentiate his romance from that of Boccaccio. But in 'The Eve of St. Agnes', Keats's modernity as a narrator shows in his use of a fluid narrative perspective. He presents a narrator whose identity is ambiguous and whose point of view constantly

shifts. The effect is to allow different interpretations to suspend themselves in the subtly sensuous and enchanted atmosphere of the poem, which at once fosters and undercuts the claims of illusion.

Chapters five and six are devoted to the odes. This study does not see the odes as a sequence. Instead, I treat each ode individually, even though there is a common theme among some odes. I adopt Jack Stillinger's suggestion of the possible compositional time<sup>30</sup> and discuss the odes from this standpoint. The chapters focus on the narrativity, the narrative elements, in the odes, which have not been investigated. However, Kroeber tangentially observes these elements as they are displayed in Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'. But Kroeber does not discuss this subject; rather, he relates the narrative elements to the 'discontinuous structure'<sup>31</sup> exhibited in the ode and analyses it as a 'visionary lyric'.<sup>32</sup> In this context, such an exploration of the 'lyric narrative',<sup>33</sup> as I call it, will shed new light on our understanding of Keats's odes and his poetic identity as a narrative poet.

In chapter five, I discuss 'Ode to Psyche' and 'Ode to a Nightingale'. These two poems are indispensable in exploring Keats's poetic identity because each poem presents a different side of Keats. In 'Ode to Psyche', I explore the poem from two aspects: the figuration of Psyche and Keats as a modern poet. The figure of Psyche reflects Keats's anxiety and ambition while striving for his poetic identity. Keats's personal and expressive stance shown in celebrating Psyche makes him an unconventional poet. At the same time, he also demonstrates his growing consciousness and confidence in his poetic voice as he transforms from a

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<sup>30</sup> *CPStillinger*, 'Preface', v.

<sup>31</sup> Karl Kroeber, *Romantic Narrative Art* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960), p. 58.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Judy Little mentions this term in her chapter: 'Lyric Narration: *The Eve of St. Agnes, La Belle Dame sans Merci, and Lamia*', arguing that Keats uses lyric devices in his narrative poems. But this term has not been associated with Keats's odes yet. See Judy Little, *Keats as a Narrative Poet: A Test of Invention* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1975), p. 88.

self-doubting poet to one who says, 'I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired' (43). In 'Ode to a Nightingale', the poet-narrator exhibits a different attitude. Here the poem's lyric narrator shows an ambivalent attitude when he meditates on the nightingale's song. He shifts his stance three times and, at the end of the poem, the reader cannot clearly say whether the poet prefers the bird's realm to his mundane world or not.

In chapter six, I consider 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' first and then 'Ode on Melancholy', 'Ode on Indolence', and 'To Autumn' as a group. I separate 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' from the other three odes as this ode especially reflects Keats's idea about art or poetry. My discussion of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' departs from the traditional view of seeing the urn pictures, the love pursuit and the townsfolk's procession, as existing in an 'eternal present'.<sup>34</sup> I analyse the poem from the perspective of the power of the mind and suggest that the tableaux are not 'fixed' but dynamic. The urn figures exhibit a transcendental ideal and yet the ideal emphasises the importance of engagement with process. This appears to be a paradox but it is the wisdom gleaned from the paradoxes, the seemingly unattainable love and the ever-moving procession, shown on the urn. The poet's idea of poetic identity is transformed because of his contemplation of the urn world.

In the second part of the sixth chapter, I look at the dialogic elements, which compose a form of narrativity, in 'Ode on Melancholy', 'Ode on Indolence' and 'To Autumn'. This thesis is indebted for the idea of dialogism to the work of Tilottama Rajan. Citing 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' as an example, Rajan maintains that Keats's ode is not a pure lyric. Rather, his odes are 'openly dialogical'.<sup>35</sup> I expand her idea and discuss the poetry's dialogical aspects.

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<sup>34</sup> See Kenneth Burke, 'Symbolic Action in a Poem by Keats', *Accent*, 4 (1943), 30-42, rpt. in *Close Reading: The Reader*, eds Frank Lentricchia and Andrew DuBois (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), p 74.

<sup>35</sup> Tilottama Rajan, 'Romanticism and the Death of Lyric Consciousness', in *Lyric Poetry: Beyond New Criticism*, eds Chaviva Hošek and Patricia Parker (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 206.

My concentration on the dialogic aspect of the odes, it should be noted, differs from the emphasis to be found in the work of Sider. As mentioned, Sider takes up Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and is a Marxist study of the cultural aspect of Keats's poetry. My stress is laid on the narrative technique shown in these odes, for instance, the use of suspense, techniques that have a complexity that resists being explained by a single ideological approach. Keats's use of the narrative perspective reaches a climax in 'To Autumn', a poem in which the reader cannot perceive the presence of the narrator. It is an utterly 'impersonal'<sup>36</sup> lyric narrative.

In chapter seven, this thesis considers 'Lamia'. Keats's 'Lamia' is a poem which revolves round ambivalence. The poem teems with contrarities, paradoxes, ironies, and conflicts. Critics have attempted to discuss the poem's ambiguous aspects, but, seemingly, there is a shortage of critical accounts that centre on its narrative skills. Though he considers the poem's allegories of reading, Bennett does not discuss the narration. More recently, in his *Romantic Poems, Poets, and Narrators* (2000), Joseph Sitterson investigates the relation of Keats and the narrator in 'Lamia', but the question of narrative skills is again ignored. In this chapter, focusing on Keats's narrative skills, I shall re-examine the ways in which the narrator dramatises ambivalence in 'Lamia'.

'Lamia' is a poem which centres on Lamia's love. Lamia's enigmatic identity as a woman and a serpent creates a problem for the narrator. He then has an ambivalent attitude towards Lamia, Lycius, and Apollonius and is engaged in a dialectical and painful process. The narrator strives to present each of his characters from different perspectives in order to find a balance of views. Nevertheless, the more points of view he seeks to take, the more tension and contradiction are involved in his presentation of

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<sup>36</sup> See Geoffrey Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 146.

the story. This makes his narrative complex and him a perplexed narrator. The narrating poet does not know which character to side with. Indeterminacy and ambiguity are disclosed in his story-telling. Each character has his or her good intentions. But each character, when interacting with each other, reveals his or her flaws and such flaws mean that all the characters are subjected to forms of irony; Keats's narrative art even brings his characters close, on occasion, to the tragic.

In the last chapter, chapter eight, the thesis analyses 'Hyperion: A Fragment' and 'The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream'. The two 'Hyperion' poems, I suggest, encompass tension and contradiction. Keats also uses these two poems as narratives to express and explore his idea of poetry and of the poet. In 'Hyperion', his portrayal of Saturn and of Apollo ensure that each serves as a foil (Apollo is also set against Hyperion). These two characters, respectively, represent his idea of 'Man of Power' and 'Man of Genius'. A 'Man of Power', like Saturn, must have a 'proper self' (*L I*, 184) and his strong identity can let him feel his *raison d'être*. He is thus destined for and needs a particular form of narrative. The fallen Saturn has had his narrative script removed and has to start again from a position of bewildering defeat. On the contrary, a 'Man of Genius' does not have a fixed character. He is identity-less and can empathetically identify with his characters. He is open to every kind of experience, be it foul or fair. This idea is illustrated by Apollo's deification:

Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions,  
Majesties, Sovran voices, agonies,  
Creations and destroyings, all at once  
Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,

(III, 114-17)



Apollo, as we can see, is Keats's ideal poet since he accepts everything. Yet the passage is arguably too swift a summary of what an ideal poet needs to know, and Keats tackles the plot of poetic knowledge in a different way in the revised version of the poem. Here the tension and contradiction involved in Keats's vision reach their highest point when the poet-narrator has to confront the goddess Moneta and mounts the 'immortal steps' (I, 117) in 'The Fall of Hyperion'. The conversation between the poet-narrator and Moneta manifests Keats's fundamental concern about his poetic identity.

In his short creative life, Keats demonstrates different and various narrative skills. These narrative skills are based on his ideas and ideals of poetry as well as of the poet. Via his use of narrative, we are able to see the evolution of his poetic identity. He is an embodiment of what he commends: the identity-less poetical character, all that is conveyed by his famous term 'Negative Capability'. Keatsian narrative has a fineness and strangeness that show him to be what he recommended a poet should be, a shape-changing figure, who might be best described as a 'camelion Poet' (*L I*, 387).

## Chapter One

### Narrative Beginnings: 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill' and 'Sleep and Poetry'

In his 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill' and 'Sleep and Poetry', two crucial poems in his debut volume *Poems* (1817), Keats is developing his skills as a narrative poet.

These two poems are significant in the perspective of his evolving poetic identity and the ways in which he imagines himself working towards his status as a poet. Keatsian narrative shows itself at work in these early poems as a vehicle for the exploration of poetic identity. It serves as a medium through which he examines his doubts as to whether he can be a poet. It also serves as a means by which Keats can examine the proper function and the qualities of the poet and of poetry. At the same time, Keats also implicitly figures himself as a poet exploring ideas that are central to him. In this chapter, I shall use approaches suggested by narratology to discuss Keats's poems. I shall discuss Keats's poetic identity from three aspects: first, the arrangement of 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep and Poetry'; second, the narrative methods he employs in the two poems, including his use of epigraphs; and, third, the structure and meaning of 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep and Poetry'.

Both 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep and Poetry' take the form of first-person narratives. This allows the reader to see the thoughts and feelings of the poet-narrator, that is, Keats himself. In both poems, there are autobiographical elements and a strong sense of subjectivity. In 'I stood tip-toe', Keats uses descriptions to narrate his meditations on nature's beauty. In 'Sleep and Poetry', he tells the reader about his experiences of sleeping in Hunt's study and about his views on Renaissance and contemporary poetry.

The first focus will be on the significance of the arrangement of 'I stood tip-toe'

and 'Sleep and Poetry'. This placement allows us to examine Keats's early poetic identity. According to the standard edition of Keats's poetry, *John Keats: Complete Poems* (1978), Jack Stillinger puts 'Sleep and Poetry' ahead of 'I stood tip-toe'. Stillinger compiles the poems based on the approximate dates of composition or completion.<sup>1</sup> Though Keats might have drafted 'I stood tip-toe' before 'Sleep and Poetry',<sup>2</sup> in Stillinger's edition, 'Sleep and Poetry' was completed earlier than 'I stood tip-toe'. But Keats put 'I stood tip-toe' before 'Sleep and Poetry' in *Poems*. He placed 'I stood tip-toe' as the first poem and 'Sleep and Poetry' as the last one in his first collection. This arrangement is meaningful to Keats because it demonstrates his tribute to Hunt.<sup>3</sup> Hunt was the key figure who recognized Keats's poetic talent. He also played the foremost role in formulating Keats's early poetic convictions. From this perspective, *Poems* begins with Keats's first and most revealing vision of his poetic prospects in 'I stood tip-toe' and concludes with his reconfirmed vision in 'Sleep and Poetry'. Moreover, 'Sleep and Poetry' discloses many of his characteristic self-doubts. But owing to the support of Hunt and his circle, this poem ends with a tone of gratitude to them. Placing 'I stood tip-toe' at the beginning and 'Sleep and Poetry' at the end of *Poems* then creates a thematic whole.<sup>4</sup> This arrangement can be seen as a microcosm of early Keatsian obsessions and aspirations.

The second focus of my discussion will be Keats's use of epigraphs. The use of epigraphs in 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep and Poetry' carries a particularly charged importance to Keats, and these two epigraphs may provide a key to understanding his early literary motivation. In Jack Stillinger's definitive edition, *John Keats: Complete*

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<sup>1</sup> See Stillinger, *Complete Poems*, 'Introduction' (xiii) and 'Preface' (v).

<sup>2</sup> See Bate, *John Keats*, p. 123, and Stillinger's endnote in *Complete Poems*, p. 425.

<sup>3</sup> See Sperry, p. 88; Michael E. Holstein, 'His Soul's Decree: *Poems* (1817) and Keats's Poetic Autobiography', *English Studies: A Journal of English Language and Literature*, 62, 4 (1981): 326; Stillinger's endnote in *Complete Poems*, p. 426; Roe, *Culture of Dissent*, p. 92; and Kandl, p. 6.

<sup>4</sup> Holstein considers that the context and order of every poem in *Poems* reflect different aspects of Keats's life. The first collection is as an autobiography of the ideal poet which Keats wishes to be (see Holstein, 326, 324). I merely, nevertheless, discuss the arrangement of 'I stood' and 'Sleep' in *Poems*.

*Poems* (1978), there are only three early poems with epigraphs: ‘I stood tip-toe’, ‘Sleep and Poetry’, and *Endymion* (1818). We may suppose then, that given their infrequent occurrence, the employment of an epigraph suggests a significant import for Keats. I suggest that the two epigraphs intimate Keats’s connection with other poets and his poetic ideas.

In ‘I stood tip-toe’, the epigraph, depicting a bower, is taken from Hunt’s *The Story of Rimini*, III, line 430: ‘Places of nestling green for Poets made’.<sup>5</sup> Keats’s use of this epigraph suggests intertextuality: it connects his poem to Hunt’s narrative in *The Story of Rimini*. It also highlights Keats’s concern about the nature of his own poetry.

The image of the bower is a contentious point for critics. Whilst many scholars agree that the epigraph to ‘I stood tip-toe’ indicates Hunt’s powerful influence on Keats’s initial poetic formation as a poet, they debate the precise nature of the symbolism of the bower. Stuart Sperry argues that the line illustrates the bower as a place of ethereal sensation.<sup>6</sup> Yet John Barnard explains it as a source of poetic inspiration.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, Nicholas Roe convincingly suggests that this line pronounces Keats’s radicalism, which is much influenced by Hunt.<sup>8</sup> Roe considers that the colour green is the colour of the liberal and that it denotes a ‘green’ revival of English poetry.<sup>9</sup> Roe insists that, in this respect, the bower image serves as a temporary resting place in Keats’s search for a ‘humane, historicized imagination’.<sup>10</sup>

In my view, the epigraph to ‘I stood tip-toe’ shows Keats’s early perception of the function and the nature of poetry. He believes that nature provides a haven and

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<sup>5</sup> *CPStillinger*, p. 426.

<sup>6</sup> Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 78, note 5.

<sup>7</sup> John Barnard, *John Keats* (1987; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 20 (hereafter cited as *John Keats*).

<sup>8</sup> Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (1997; Clarendon: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 207 (hereafter cited as *Culture of Dissent*).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

inspiration for poets. The green bower is a place for refreshing and nourishing his imagination. In this sense, though Roe is cogent in arguing Keats's liberal political stance, Sperry and Barnard seem to me to be persuasive on the source of inspiration. I suggest that Keats cited this line since he thought it evoked the sensuous or 'voluptuous'<sup>11</sup> beauty in nature. This is one of Keats's initial poetic beliefs of the nature of poetry. For Keats, the sensation-provoking nature of greenness is an image of a poet's desire for imaginative possession and exercise. Indeed, for Keats, the bower becomes a sanctuary, a place that offers both a refuge and a goal for the quests undertaken in his narrative poetry. In biographical terms, Keats was still bound by his medical career at that time and was 'pent' in the city of London ('To one who has been long in city pent' (1816)). He may have wished to escape from the crowded city and find a haven in the green woods. Hence he could find poetic inspiration in natural beauty. His first published poem 'O Solitude! if I must with thee dwell' (1815/1816)<sup>12</sup> also points to an element of imaginative escapism involved in his narrative and lyrical imaginings, the escapism that is also a form of imaginative transformation as it conducts him into a sanctuary of bowery greenness.

In the epigraph to 'Sleep and Poetry', we can once more see Keats's early poetic idea and Hunt's influence on Keats. Hunt's power over the young Keats is more revealing in 'Sleep and Poetry' than it is in 'I stood tip-toe'. The epigraph to 'Sleep and Poetry' is taken from 'The Flower and the Leaf' and this medieval poem was attributed to Chaucer in his time.<sup>13</sup> The epigraph is as follows:

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<sup>11</sup> See Hunt's comment on Keats: 'The character of his genius is that of energy and voluptuousness'. See Matthews, p. 176. Barnard also makes a remark on Keats's voluptuousness which is shown in 'Sleep and Poetry'. See Barnard, *John Keats*, pp. 19-21.

<sup>12</sup> This poem was shown to Leigh Hunt by Charles Cowden Clarke before Hunt met Keats in October 1816. This and other poems impressed Hunt with Keats's poetic language and Keats's depiction of nature. See Roe, *Culture of Dissent*, pp. 105-06.

<sup>13</sup> *CPStillinger*, p. 425.

“As I lay in my bed slepe full unmete  
Was unto me, but why that I ne might  
Rest I ne wist, for there n’as ertly wight  
[As I suppose] had more of hertis ese  
Than I, for I n’ad sickness nor diseese.”

Chaucer

(17-21)

There are three possible reasons for Keats’s use of this epigraph. First, Chaucer was then regarded as the author of ‘The Flower and the Leaf’. This epigraph then provides another intertextual reference to Keats’s poem and connects him to Chaucer. Keats could, therefore, have had the idea of emulating Chaucer. This hypothesis derives support from the observation that he later celebrated Chaucer and ‘The Flower and the Leaf’ in another poem: ‘This pleasant tale is like a little copse’ (1817). Moreover, in his letter, his ‘Remembrance of Chaucer’ (*L I*, 147) impelled him to continue writing his first long major poem *Endymion*. This once again shows Keats’s love for Chaucer.<sup>14</sup> Second, this epigraph can be linked to Hunt’s influence on Keats’s admiration for Chaucer. Greg Kucich argues that Hunt’s *The Story of Rimini*, a poem on chivalric love, has a great impact on Keats’s admiration for Chaucer’s work, prompting in him a wish to incorporate forms of medievalism in his own poetry.<sup>15</sup> Such Romantic medievalism is, of course, more Romantic than genuinely medieval, and Keats may well have chosen his ‘medieval’ epigraph to suggest Hunt’s influence on his early poetry. Though Keats took Chaucer as one of his literary role models,

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<sup>14</sup> Keats’s references to Chaucer can be particularly seen in Rollins, *L*, I, 147; II, 204, and 234. Greg Kucich has a good comment on the relationship between Keats and Chaucer. See Greg Kucich, ‘Keats and English poetry’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 187-89 (hereafter cited as ‘Keats and English poetry’).

<sup>15</sup> Kucich, ‘Keats and English poetry’, p. 187.

Hunt could have cultivated Keats's fondness for Chaucer.<sup>16</sup> In other words, Hunt probably played a role in Keats's selection of this epigraph, like his choice of Hunt's line from *The Story of Rimini* as his epigraph to 'I stood tip-toe'. Third, Keats's sleeplessness could have ensued from his excitement, an excitement which was related to Hunt. The epigraph is in fact a short narrative about a sleepless night. Keats probably wanted to use this epigraph, this narrative, to hint at his frame of mind. He may wish to draw a parallel between him and the poet of 'The Flower and The Leaf'. Like the poet of 'The Flower and the Leaf', Keats was also an insomniac and tried to understand the reason why he could not fall asleep. Keats presumably considered that, like the poet of 'The Flower and the Leaf', he was not suffering from sickness or disease ('The Flower', 21), but had more ease of heart ('The Flower', 20) than others. Hence what was keeping him awake? The possible answer can originate from his association with Hunt.

Hunt was a prominent figure in Keats's development. His ideas and practice influenced Keats's incipient aesthetic beliefs and his encouragement helped Keats gain momentum with his poetic endeavours. Sperry makes a valid point when he contends that 'Sleep and Poetry', along with 'I stood tip-toe', is 'Keats's epistle' to Hunt.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, 'Sleep and Poetry' is Keats's announcement of Hunt's power over his initial poetic identity. Keats narrates his association with Hunt in lines 312-404: there, he describes how he received the inspiration and support from Hunt and his circle, his access to Hunt's portfolio, and his sleep in Hunt's study. Keats even attributed a part of this poem to the friendly aid of Hunt: 'For what there may be worthy in these

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<sup>16</sup> We cannot be sure when Keats began to read Chaucer because 'Sleep and Poetry' was composed between October and December 1816, though the earliest discussion of Keats's reading Chaucer could be dated from 27 February 1817. See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), p.144ff (hereafter abbreviated as *John Keats*); and Kucich, 'Keats and English poetry', p. 187. It is therefore hard to conjecture the influence of Hunt's literary taste of Chaucer on Keats. Yet one important fact can be emphasized: Keats met Hunt after 9 October 1816 (*L I*, 113). In this regard, we can only assume that Keats possibly began to read Chaucer around this time.

<sup>17</sup> Sperry, p. 80.

rhymes / I partly owe to him' (349-50). Put differently, his close relationship with Hunt becomes the subject matter of the last quarter of 'Sleep and Poetry'. When sleeping in Hunt's study, in this regard, Keats would connect his poetic career and his poetic knowledge with Hunt. The highly suggestive title of 'Sleep and Poetry' denotes Keats's gratitude to Hunt. That is to say, on the occasion of the sleepless night when sojourning in Hunt's house, Keats may well have meditated on his liaison with Hunt, who esteemed his poems and who formulated his poetic ideas. It may have been Keats's elation at their friendship that kept him from sleeping. Keats then transformed his reflections and they became this poem's subject matter. In this sense, he was perhaps intent upon identifying his literary debts to Hunt in the epigraph to 'Sleep and Poetry'.

The third focus of this chapter is on the structure and meaning of 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep and Poetry'. The structure of 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep and Poetry' are unconventional as narratives. These two poems, as mentioned, are Keats's personal meditations. In this sense, there is no clear-cut story-line and the narrative is not successive, but discontinuous. For instance, in 'I stood tip-toe', the narrator describes what he sees, until what he sees becomes his subject. And he narrates what he sees or envisions, subject after subject. In this way, there is not a thread of plot-connection between his subjects, but a commitment to narrative imaginings. Walter Jackson Bate has already observed this as he says that Keats 'simply relapses into one description after another, a sort of breathless catalogue of rural sights'.<sup>18</sup> And yet the narrative process, for it is a process, is given continuity by the pervading presence of the poet shaping his poetry round his palpable desire to be a poet. The reader cannot but share in the desire that is communicated through the narrative.

In 'Sleep and Poetry', such a discontinuity is more noticeable than that in 'I

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<sup>18</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 123.



stood tip-toe'. Andrew Bennett points out that it is the subject of 'sleep' which does not make the poem a 'linear narrative'.<sup>19</sup> Yet I would suggest that it is the structure of this poem which makes the poem a discontinuous narrative. At the start of the poem, Keats attempts to develop his narrative skills. He uses rhetorical questions and comparisons to arouse the reader's curiosity. He then brings up the subject matter, sleep:

What is more gentle than a wind in summer?  
What is more soothing than the pretty hummer  
That stays one moment in an open flower,  
And buzzes cheerily from bower to bower?  
.....  
What, but thee, Sleep?

(1-4, 11)

Keats uses descriptions and tells us what he thinks of sleep: its gentleness and soothing effect that appeal to people. He repeats such a pattern, a pattern of rhetorical questions and comparisons, when ushering in the subject of poetry. In the mean time, he also valorizes poetry:

But what is higher beyond thought than thee?  
Fresher than berries of a mountain tree?  
.....  
What is it? And to what shall I compare it?  
It has a glory, and nought else can share it:

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<sup>19</sup> Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, p. 71.

The thought thereof is awful, sweet, and holy,  
Chasing away all worldliness and folly;

.....

To see the laurel wreath, on high suspended,  
That is to crown our name when life is ended.

(19-20, 23-26, 35-36)

There is a gradation of comparison involved when Keats compares sleep and poetry together and such a method clearly indicates the superiority of poetry. That is to say, poetry is more gentle and soothing than what sleep can offer us. Moreover, Keats's valorization of poetry is revealed as he says that his thinking of poetry is an 'awful, sweet, and holy' thought. Such an act can make him forget the mundane and foolish aspects of human life, and it can even bring him posthumous fame.

So far, there is a logical connection between these subjects and the narration flows smoothly. Keats introduces the subject of sleep and compares it with poetry. Then he continues the subject of poetry and tells the reader about his aspiration for being a poet:

O Poesy! for thee I hold my pen  
That am not yet a glorious denizen  
Of thy wide heaven—

(47-49)

Again, the reader can perceive Keats's concern for being a poet and his poetic ambition as he expects himself to be a 'glorious denizen' in the realm of poetry.

But in the next verse paragraph, he changes his subject and comments on the

transience of life as he says:

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

(85-87)

This shift of subject makes the thread of narrative broken. There is a jump between his idea of poetry and his viewpoint on the brevity of life.

The rough transition occurs in the following paragraphs and makes his narrative progress in a discontinuous way. For instance, after his comment on the ephemerality of life, he announces the plan for his poetic career (101-02, 122-25). Then he offers his observations about contemporary poetry (181-268). After these observations, however, he swings back to his poetic aspirations once more as he says:

If I do hide myself, it sure shall be  
In the very fane, the light of Poesy:  
If I do fall, at least I will be laid  
Beneath the silence of a poplar shade;

(275-78)

Finally, he concludes with his experience of writing and sojourning in Hunt's study (312-404). Like 'I stood tip-toe', there is no plot in this poem. We can see Keats alternating among descriptions, narration, and aspirations when the poem progresses. The poem, in other words, does not advance in a linear, logical way, but in a fluid one.

Bate has a remark on the fluidity of this poem: '[the poem is] fluid because it consists so entirely of a welter of floating ideals, hopes, ambitions, intentions'.<sup>20</sup> The reader must follow his flow of narration, but there are considerable rewards in doing so.

Though he lacks an evident story for his early narrative, Keats is developing his descriptive power. Keats's early descriptive power, nevertheless, is not appreciated as fully as it deserves. John Jones maintains that 'Sleep and Poetry' 'begins at least as badly as it ends'.<sup>21</sup> But I would suggest that there are impressive lines in his early poetry and his ability to depict scenes and scenery lays a foundation for his later great narratives of 1819. One example from 'I stood tip-toe' will illustrate this point. When he describes the silence of his natural surroundings, Keats delineates it as follows: 'and then there crept / A little noiseless noise among the leaves / Born of the very sigh that silence heaves' (10-12). Keats's use of 'crept' is effective as it suggests that silence enters in a secret and unnoticed way. It instantly accentuates the silence of the surroundings. Moreover, the idea of silence is more highlighted by the paradoxical expression: 'noiseless noise'. Last of all, his use of the sigh heaved by silence is a master's touch. We know that a sigh is close to silence. In this sense, if silence heaves a sigh, the whole natural surrounding appears extremely quiet. Silence is personified as sighing so that its existence becomes a narrative event unfurling before us. This description of silence anticipates the silence and stillness which are shown in the opening scene of 'Hyperion: A Fragment' (1819). The silence in this epic, however, is the aftermath of a defeat, whereas in 'I stood tip-toe', the silence seems to usher in a world budding with life as it is the spring-time, reminding us that Keats's early poetry has its own vitality.

When narrating his personal thoughts and feelings in 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep

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<sup>20</sup> See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 126.

<sup>21</sup> John Jones, p. 42.

and Poetry', Keats exhibits his self-doubts and his initial poetic ideas. My discussion will begin with the core questions, all emerging from or embodied in the poem so that they and the answers to them become the essential story in the poem: why did Keats want to be a poet? What did the title of 'poet' mean to Keats? What circumstances affected his idea of being a poet? How did Keats define the use and the nature of poetry? What did Keats consider the role and the function of the poet? How did Keats approach the prospects of being a poet? And how did Keats develop his skills as a narrative poet?

To be a poet is Keats's ontological concern, that is, the reason for his being; and the title of poet appeals to him. There are two major reasons for his resolution to be a poet. The first is that Keats had a belief in his poetic potential. Bate and Barnard have given shrewd accounts of this possibility. Keats perceived that he had a talent which is greater than that of most men.<sup>22</sup> Barnard argues that Keats also displays his 'prescient sense' of being a poet in 'Sleep and Poetry' (81-84, 96-98).<sup>23</sup> According to Barnard, Keats expected to be like an Atlas who could be sufficiently strong to take up any large-scale and abstract subject (81-83).<sup>24</sup> Keats would also give himself ten years to establish a poetic career (96-98). The second reason, and a more important one, may lie in the support and recognition of Keats's poetic genius by Hunt and his circle. Keats could therefore ignore his snobbish guardian Richard Abbey's malicious comments on his resolve to be a poet as 'Mad', 'absurd', and 'Silly'.<sup>25</sup> Keats's strong ambition which would sustain him through the more snobbish and vitriolic attacks of the Tory journals *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review* is evident as the primary narrative drive in 'Sleep and Poetry'. His 'self-decreed soul'

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<sup>22</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 117.

<sup>23</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 19.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 117.

(98) is completely poetic.<sup>26</sup>

Keats expresses his conception of a poet's essential attributes in 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep and Poetry'. For Keats, both poems stress the primary traits of a poet: visionary imagination and susceptibility to natural beauty. 'I stood tip-toe' is the first significant poem to reveal Keats's conviction of a poet's visionary power. And the vision and the image of the charioteer in 'Sleep and Poetry' shape this belief into an ideal for Keats himself. These poems demonstrate the close relationship between a poet's creativity and the ways in which he looks at nature. They do so through methods whose dealings with narrative repay close attention.

In 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep and Poetry', Keats expounds the view that a poet's first attribute is his visionary power. Yet he does this, less through preaching than through enactment in brief stories of such power. Critics agree on this obvious message conveyed in the poems.<sup>27</sup> Barnard remarks that 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep and Poetry' are 'visionary' poems.<sup>28</sup> Bennett makes a further connection as he observes the equation of 'I/eye' in 'I stood tip-toe'.<sup>29</sup> Bennett equates the poet-narrator's vision with that of Keats himself. These two suggestions are pertinent as Barnard and Bennett accentuate Keats's greatest concern with being a poet. In particular, Bennett's critique evinces Keats's representation of self. In 'I stood tip-toe', the first-person narrative therefore plays an important role in a poet's activity. The narrating poet/Keats participates in the first line and the autobiographical presentation is more clearly understood. Directly stated, 'I stood tip-toe' begins with the word 'I'. The early participation in the poem of the poet-narrator/Keats captures him in a posture of intent expectation, and it is worth noting that the words consciously

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<sup>26</sup> I share Barnard's view. See Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> See Sperry, pp. 81-83, 88; and Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 24.

<sup>29</sup> See Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, pp. 69-70.

‘station’ the poet, to borrow a term that Keats applies praisingly to Milton.<sup>30</sup> Thus the narrator-poet/Keats is capable of a great deal of poetic activity<sup>31</sup> and, in the mean time, is bent on establishing his status as a poet. This act accords with Keats’s poetic ambition and his fundamental criteria for evaluating a poet’s ability: visionary power. In this context, Keats constantly refers to his ‘eyes’: either the physical or the mental eye, and tries to tell us what he, or his autobiographical ‘I’, sees. On the one hand, the autobiographical ‘I’ (27, 54, 55, 93, 123, 209) and the persistent emphasis on vision shown in the expressions of the ‘greediest eye’, ‘to peer’, and ‘gazed’ (15, 16, 23) all display the physical eyes of the poet-speaker/Keats. On the other hand, in respect of the mental eye or imagination, the words ‘to picture’ and ‘my vision’ (19, 26) double Keats’s eagerness to engage himself in creativity. In other words, Keats is figuring himself as a visionary poet.

Keats’s ‘tip-toe’ stance in ‘I stood tip-toe’ offers us a glimpse of his self-evaluation as a visionary poet. His stance invites two interpretations. Barnard makes two points when discussing Keats’s use of the word ‘tip-toe’. First, Keats overuses the word to suggest the limbo state which he is in. Second, ‘tip-toe’ is a daily expression.<sup>32</sup> Marjorie Levinson speculates that standing on ‘tip-toe’ is Keats’s proleptic ‘revenge’ on the Tory critics, who attack Keats’s social disadvantages.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Keats’s marginalia concerning this word in his copy of *Paradise Lost* appears as follows: ‘Milton in every instance pursues his imagination to the utmost—he is “sagacious of his Quarry” he sees Beauty on the wing, pounces upon it and gorges it to the producing his essential verse “So from the root the springs lighter the green stalk” ...but in no instance is this sort of perseverance more exemplified than in what may be called his stationing or statu[a]ry: He is not content with simple description, he must station—Thus here, we not only see how the Birds “with clang despised the ground” = but we see them “under a cloud in prospect” So we see Adam “Fair indeed and tall—under a plantane and so we see Satan “disfigured—on the Assyrian Mount” ...’ [underlined Keats’s]. This quotation is from Beth Lau, *Keats’s Paradise Lost* (Gainesville: FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 142.

<sup>31</sup> Susan Wolfson connects this act of Keats to Addison’s self-absorption when seeing things in nature as Keats and Addison both indulged in natural beauty. See Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), p. 212 (hereafter abbreviated as *Questioning Presence*).

<sup>32</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Marjorie Levinson, *Keats’s Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 239.

There are, nevertheless, two other alternative views on Keats's stance. The views are in relation to Keats's ideas of visionary imagination and to his self-presentation as a visionary poet. In the first place, whereas Levinson contends that the word 'tip-toe' reflects Keats's inferior literary taste<sup>34</sup> since it conveys a sense of vulgarity and irony, I suggest that this stance vividly portrays Keats's boy-like excitement. Keats is enchanted by natural beauty and he stands on tip-toe in order to see farther. From the perspective of a poet's visionary power, this stance can help him take in more scenery in order to enjoy further inspiration. Second, Barnard and Levinson perhaps have ignored the partial echoing of the title in 'sweet peas, on tip-toe for a flight: / With wings' (57-58). This is the only reference within the text that reverberates with 'tip-toe' in the title. The title becomes highly personal and significant since it is related to the stance of the narrating poet/Keats. Given this premise, the title can then be reconstructed as 'I stood tip-toe on a little hill for a flight with wings'.

In the context of the reconstructed title, the key word is 'wings'. This word 'wings' involves Keats's idea of vision and creativity. Keats wishes that his heels could have Mercury's wings; thus enabled, he could fly higher, see further, and create more. Within this framework, in 'I stood tip-toe', he portrays himself as a poet who is refreshed by the early spring's beauty and encouraged to adopt and enter into a 'light, and free' (23) state. Enchanted by the beautiful natural scenery, he seems to have Mercury's wings upon his heels (24-25). He becomes 'light-hearted' (25) and starts to have many visions (26). For Keats, natural beauty inspires a poet's visionary power. From another perspective, and in the ultimate sense, the word 'wings' (58) can stand for imagination as Keats later depicts them as the 'wings of Poesy' ('Ode to a Nightingale' (1819), 33). Inspired by beauty in nature and identifying with nature's

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<sup>34</sup> Levinson considers that the landscape shows 'diminutiveness' as the landscape that Keats sees is 'the little hill, cozy bowers, nestling pleasures' and not something sublime and reflects Keats's 'genteel vulgarity'. See Levinson, p. 236.



‘pleasant smotherings’ (132), the poet-speaker/Keats is transported on ‘luxurious wings’ (131) to write poetry. He presents himself as narrating in this inspired state the mythological tales of Cupid and Psyche, Pan and Syrinx, Narcissus and Echo, and Endymion and Cynthia (141-204).

Critics’ interpretations of those embedded stories vary. Sperry and Bennett argue that ‘I stood tip-toe’ ushers in a new mode of expression. Sperry considers that, for Keats, the mode is ground-breaking as it involves mythological expression, whereas Bennett argues that it involves the presentation of framed stories.<sup>35</sup> Certainly Keats’s use of mythological allusions enhances the narrativity in these two poems, and such intertextual references appear more in *Endymion*. We also see his skills of compression when narrating a story. Take the story of Cupid and Psyche for example:

So felt he, who first told, how Psyche went  
On the smooth wind to realms of wonderment;  
What Psyche felt, and Love, when their full lips  
First touch’d; what amorous, and fondling nips  
They gave each other’s cheeks; with all their sighs,  
And how they kist each other’s tremulous eyes:  
The silver lamp, —the ravishment, —the wonder—  
The darkness, —loneliness, —the fearful thunder;  
Their woes gone by, and both to heaven upflown,  
To bow for gratitude before Jove’s throne.

(141-50)

Keats adopts a third-person omniscient point of view when telling this embedded

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<sup>35</sup> See Sperry p. 81; and Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, p. 70.

story. He seems to rely on his reader's prior knowledge of the story as he does not repeat the story in detail. He uses a series of nouns depicting the story of Cupid and Psyche: 'The silver lamp, —the ravishment, —the wonder— / The darkness, —loneliness, —the fearful thunder'. These nouns are the keywords to the plot of the love story of Cupid and Psyche. The reader, following the thread of Keats's narrative, can easily build up the story by using his imagination. In this way, Keats makes the story artfully compressed. Keats uses the run of phrases and words to invite his readers' participation in the story and he prepares us for the 'poetics of cooperation'<sup>36</sup> which I shall argue is strongly present in *Endymion*.

The poetry's central story, then, emerges as the connection within a poet of his visionary power, imagination, and poetry. Though Barnard remarks that 'the winged poesy' is an 'inherited cliché',<sup>37</sup> I suggest that the symbol of 'wings' makes Keats a visionary poet and reveals his search for 'an immortality' as he says that he 'should proudly see / Wings to find out an immortality' ('Sleep and Poetry', 83-84), and 'find out' makes clear that this is his existential quest.<sup>38</sup> That is to say, this image of 'wings' reinforces Keats's primary concern with poetic vision. It also shows Keats's self-expectation.

Keats impressively delineates the image of wings as a symbol of imagination and its connection with poetry, and such delineation recurs in the last passage of 'Sleep and Poetry'. When celebrating his friendship with Hunt, Keats uses the busts of Hunt's study as his subject matter (381-91). Keats tells us what the busts look like and

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<sup>36</sup> Wolfson has a good discussion of the odes in which she proposes a theory of the 'poetics of cooperation'. She bases her argument on two reasons: first, the speaker's identity in the odes is indeterminate; second, Keats's poetry is compact and conceited. She asserts that Keats's odes are then left to the reader's imagination; and in this way, his poetry needs the reader's participation in order to understand his poems. See Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, pp. 301-05.

<sup>37</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> See Keats's remarks on immortality: 'I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death' (*L I*, 394); and 'If I should die...I have left no immortal work behind me—nothing to make my friends proud of my memory—but I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remember'd' (*L II*, 263).

what features they have. He also describes his thoughts and feelings about the busts. For instance, Sappho's head was meek and she was smiling, whereas Great Alfred seemed to sympathize with the world's woes. Kosciusco was left forlorn and Petrarch looked as if he was still charmed by Laura. Keats released his imagination and composed his poem to Hunt with Hunt's busts as sources of inspiration. In this passage, Keats memorably makes a specific connection of 'wings' or imagination to 'poesy', and in this sense, the 'wings' are the 'wings of Poesy'. From those subsequent lines, we can see the relationship between the busts and his poetic inspiration:

For over them was seen a free display  
Of out-spread *wings*, and from between them shone  
The face of *Poesy*: from off her throne  
She overlook'd things that I scarce could tell.

(392-95, italics mine)

But why does Keats put so much stress on a poet's visionary imagination in the early poems? The answer is because Keats believes that a poet possesses a kind of magical power. A poet's visionary imagination can transcend the human reach and the ordinary perspective. His creative activity will not be confined to 'our mortal bars' but goes beyond 'into some wond'rous region' ('I stood tip-toe', 190-91). Such power and activity are dramatised through the working of the words, through the action of the narrative, which mimes and enacts the longing to enter 'some wond'rous region'. In fact, this 'bursting' ('I stood tip-toe', 190) and transgressing of the mortal boundary is seen earlier in his poem 'To My Brother George' (epistle) (1816). In 'To My Brother George', the poet/Keats visualizes a duel between two knights, though they are

merely the sheets of lightning (26-32).<sup>39</sup> But the most intriguing vision for Keats in these 'visionary' poems is that of the charioteer and of his car in 'Sleep and Poetry'. In addition, for Keats, the charioteer also serves as his ideal poet and this image allegorizes his expectation of his own poetic career.

'Sleep and Poetry' is a poem which most significantly demonstrates Keats's ambition and fear at the same time. And the figure of the charioteer reflects Keats's ambivalent attitude towards his poetic vocation. Keats has a strong conviction of the successful working out of the plot of his poetic development owing to his belief in his talent. He also, nevertheless, shows many misgivings in this poem, notably after the disappearance of the vision of the charioteer. In the beginning of 'Sleep and Poetry', Keats is anxious about how much time he should spend on reaching his goal. That is one reason why he exclaims 'life is but a day' (85); another is his relishing of ephemeral beauty. He expected to strive for his status as a poet for a decade (96). Keats narrated his poetic chart and thought that his progress should begin from the sensual pleasures which are epitomized by the first realm of 'Flora, and old Pan' (102). He would then march to a 'nobler' one, a realm of 'agonies, the strife / Of human hearts' (123, 124-25). This vision for his future is much discussed by critics<sup>40</sup> since it accords with his idea of the chambers of thoughts concerning a poet's human understanding. Keats believed that a poet's empathy with human nature originated from his ability to think deeply. A poet's empathetic understanding would make him proceed from the infant or thoughtless Chamber to the Chamber of the Maiden-Thought. In his famous letter to Reynolds on 3 May 1818, Keats wrote:

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<sup>39</sup> The lines are quoted in full hereafter: 'In air he sees white coursers paw, and prance, / Bestriden of gay knights, in gay apparel, / Who at each other tilt in playful quarrel, / And what we, ignorantly, sheet-lightning call, / Is the swift opening of their wide portal, / When the bright warder blows his trumpet clear, / Whose tones reach nought on earth but Poet's ear' ('To My Brother George' (epistle), ll. 26-32).

<sup>40</sup> See Sperry, pp. 83-88; and Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 210.

The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think...[we] are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle—within us—we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought...this breathing [from going to the second Chamber] is father of is [*sic*] that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing ones nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression.

(L I, 280-81)

Keats has this poetic ambition and his vision of the charioteer becomes significant. But Keats's confidence wavers as he does not know whether he can live up to the ideal expressed in the figure of the charioteer.

The vision and disappearance of the vision of the charioteer compose a vivid narrative shape that takes on near-allegorical suggestions. Critics have suggested four interpretations for the symbolism of the charioteer. First of all, Keats's contemporary critic Richard Woodhouse argues that the charioteer is a personification of the inspired epic poet.<sup>41</sup> Second, Sperry identifies the charioteer as a 'nobler' poetic development, in the exploration of 'the burden of the Mystery' (L I, 281).<sup>42</sup> Third, Barnard explains that the charioteer is Apollo, god of the sun and poetry.<sup>43</sup> Finally, Susan Wolfson contends that it is a vision for Keats's poetic career.<sup>44</sup> Sperry and Wolfson also consider that Keats does not clearly define his poetic progress towards his 'nobler'

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<sup>41</sup> Sperry connects Richard Woodhouse's theory of the 'Epic poet' with Keats's poetic development. See Sperry, p. 85.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> See *Barnard*, p. 576, notes to lines 126-33.

<sup>44</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 209.

prospects or his vision.<sup>45</sup> Wolfson has a theory of ‘visions and evasions’ to comment on Keats’s elusive attitude, which will be addressed in due course.<sup>46</sup>

I would, however, suggest that the charioteer is an embodiment of Keats’s ideal poet. The charioteer not only has visionary imagination to see the unnameable shapes beyond human comprehension, but also he has a mysterious power to invoke them and to communicate with them (136-54). Sperry is convincing when he explains that the mysterious invocation of the charioteer is to probe into ‘the Mystery’ of life, a thing that has always puzzled Keats. But I would connect this to Keats’s idea of the poet and suggest that the charioteer’s ability to invoke is another aspect that he associates with a poet. A poet’s invocative power is one step further than his ability to transcend the ordinary perspective. In this respect, Keats is fascinated by the charioteer’s ability to ‘talk’, to seemingly ‘listen’, and to ‘write’ something incomprehensible (136, 153, 154). The charioteer seems to have access to profound knowledge of the universe owing to his extraordinary vision. We must also notice that the appearance of the charioteer follows the lines on the second realm of a ‘nobler life’ in Keats’s poetic plan. In this regard, the charioteer, according to the arguments of Richard Woodhouse and Sperry, becomes an epic or humanitarian poet. Keats longs for poetic qualities which are embodied by the charioteer. He expects to write human poetry as an epic poet because an epic poet is the ideal image for him. In one of his earlier poems, ‘To Charles Cowden Clarke’ (1816), Keats lauds the epic as ‘the king’ (66) of all forms of writing. Thus it is clear to see the reason why Keats reveres the figure of the charioteer.

If Keats expects to be a charioteer-like poet, and if his ideal is that high, the disappearance of the vision will generate all that much more inner conflict. Keats

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<sup>45</sup> See Sperry, pp. 84-87.

<sup>46</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, pp. 207-10.

narrates his inner conflict in lines 155-59, and it even leads to a kind of existential fear and nihilism, the evocation of which is narrated with a muscular yet fluidly enjambed power:

The visions all are fled—the car is fled  
Into the light of heaven, and in their stead  
A sense of real things comes doubly strong,  
And, like a muddy stream, would bear along  
My soul to nothingness:

(155-59)

The disappearance of the vision of the charioteer brings the ‘doubly strong’ sense of reality. Reality can trap him into the ‘muddy stream’ with no possibility of escape. Consequently, his poetic soul will be depleted to ‘nothingness’.

The disappearance of the vision is another vital point in seeing Keats’s struggle with identity. Critics have different interpretations of the loss of the vision of the charioteer. Jones considers that the disappearance of the charioteer conflicts with Keats’s dedication to the ‘agonies, the strife / Of human hearts’.<sup>47</sup> Sperry argues that the vanishing of the vision becomes a ‘parabolic’ pattern for *Endymion* and the 1819 odes.<sup>48</sup> Levinson, holding a different view, states that the disappearance of the vision is the ‘antidote’ to the loss. This antidote becomes Keats’s insistence on possessing poetry.<sup>49</sup> Those critics make astute observations about the topic of Keats’s endeavours of a poet’s status. An alternative observation can be made. I suggest that the loss of the vision of the charioteer foregrounds the most characteristic Keatsian

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<sup>47</sup> John Jones, pp. 46-47.

<sup>48</sup> Sperry, p. 86.

<sup>49</sup> Levinson, p. 130.

ambivalence: Keats is both confident and doubtful about his status as a poet. In other words, the story of 'Sleep and Poetry' is the story of Keats's developing hopes and fears as a poet.

Keats's apparent ambivalence about his poetic career following the disappearance of the charioteer may show that he does not have confidence, but it also evinces his ability to embody such ambivalence in narrative form. Sperry and Wolfson have already pointed out that Keats does not have a clear plan. He continues to maintain his strong aspirations for achieving a career in poetry. Keats is determined to strive towards the lost vision of the charioteer as he says 'I will strive / Against all doubtings, and will keep alive / The thought of the same chariot' (159-61). In other words, it is his wishful thinking that keeps him yearning for his dream of becoming a poet. There is, nevertheless, no feasible scheme for his poetic ambition. Keats creates a self-contradictory state as his anxieties prevent him from taking action. Keats's misgivings about his goal are more fully disclosed afterwards. His ambivalence reaches another climax in lines 302-04, in the passage with regard to the character Icarus with his Daedalian wings. Keats makes a poetic story out of his self-contradictions. This capacity proves to be a productive aspect of his future narrative poetry.

In 'Sleep and Poetry', the passage referred to Icarus and his wings again highlights Keats's coexistent desire to be a poet and his fear of being a poet. He reassures himself of his grim determination to be a poet. He says, 'If I do hide myself, it sure shall be / In the very fane, the light of Poesy' (275-76). For Keats, to be enshrined in the temple of poetry is what he expects of himself. Such a concern later appears in his dialogue with Moneta in 'The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream' (1819). These two lines echo his belief in poetry and his commitment to be a poet in the beginning of the poem:



*O Poesy! for thee I hold my pen  
That am not yet a glorious denizen  
Of thy wide heaven—Should I rather kneel  
Upon some mountain-top until I feel  
A glowing splendour round about me hung,  
And echo back the voice of thine own tongue?*

*O Poesy! for thee I grasp my pen  
That am not yet a glorious denizen  
Of thy wide heaven; yet, to my ardent prayer,  
Yield from thy sanctuary some clear air,  
Smoothed for intoxication by the breath  
Of flowering bays, that I may die a death  
Of luxury, and my young spirit follow  
The morning sun-beams to the great Apollo  
Like a fresh sacrifice;*

(47-61, italics mine)

In this verse paragraph, he twice expresses the idea that he is becoming a poet. He hopes someday that he can be a 'glorious denizen' of Apollo's realm. For Keats, poetry is also a sacred thing since he uses the word 'sanctuary' to describe poetry. Keats expresses a wish to be a 'sacrifice' to Apollo, the patron god of poetry, and he 'ardently' prays for such a 'death of luxury'. His ambition to be a poet is his 'noble end' (283). Keats's strong desire seems to make him a thirsty man, who is 'thirsty every hour' (283). Hence he is very anxious to get to the 'end and aim' of poetry (293). He also believes that he has the mission to become a poet, and it is as manifest as the

change of seasons (295). There is his poetic calling which rolls like a ‘vast idea’ (291).<sup>50</sup> Due to his great passion for his poet’s status, Keats identifies himself with the mad Lear or Dedalus’ daring son Icarus (301, 303). Yet it is this metaphor of the Daedalian wings that reveals Keats’s ambivalence: what he desires and expects his poetic ambition immediately collapses after this metaphor. What drives the passage forward as poetry is the yearning caught in the opening ‘O’ and the expression of hope in subjunctive constructions, and in rhymes that bring together his wish to ‘follow’ and his admiration for ‘Apollo’.

In addition to the charioteer and his car, the reference to the Daedalian wings, as noted, is crucial in evaluating Keats’s ambivalent poetic identity. Sperry suggests that Keats questions himself whether he is a ‘Daedalian overreacher’.<sup>51</sup> I agree with Sperry and will expand this argument to take in Keats’s aspiration for and fear of his poetic career. Keats compares himself to the daring Icarus. He is courageous to ‘mentally’ fly with his Daedalian wings or the wings of poetry. With his Daedalian wings, nevertheless, Keats forgets that, like the avid Icarus, the sun will melt his wings if he flies too close to it without curbing his ambition (302-04). An irony ensues from the melting of his Daedalian wings: the patron god of poetry Apollo will become a destroyer. Apollo will destroy Keats, instead of protecting him, an apprentice poet and a disciple of Apollo. In other words, Keats’s ambition motivates him to be a poet, but it is also the destructive power of his dream as a poet. He traps himself in great ambivalence. He overreaches like Icarus. Keats neglects the endless ‘toil’ and ‘turmoil’ for his dream of becoming a poet (307-08) but lets his desire soar unrealistically. Yet Keats seems aware of his overreaching. The ‘sense of real things’

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<sup>50</sup> I agree with Sperry on his interpretation. See Sperry, p. 87. But Miriam Allott interprets these lines, lines 306-09, as being ‘on the threshold of experience [which] is like an explorer setting off into the unknown’. See *Allott*, p. 82, notes to lines 306-09. John Kandler interprets it as Keats transfiguring Wordsworth’s poetry. See John Kandler, ‘The politics of Keats’s early poetry’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> Sperry, p. 87.

comes back as he has experienced when the charioteer vanishes. He questions himself about his commitment to poetry. He bids himself to halt (304) and listens to his 'inward frown / Of conscience' (304-05). This self-consciousness elicits grave self-doubts and self-denial as Keats twice utters the word 'Impossible' (311-12). He is considering recoiling from his former commitment to poetry at this point. From this perspective, I suggest that this metaphor of the Daedalian wings allows him to evoke, in his narrative, a greater inner conflict than is depicted in the time after the disappearance of the vision of the charioteer. When the vision of the charioteer vanishes, Keats is disillusioned but he still has a dimly-perceived goal of striving towards his status as a poet. But this metaphor of the Daedalian wings brings an utter destruction by his patron god Apollo. Put differently, for Keats, poetry channels his creativity and provides him with a vision, but poetry is also a devastating source. His desires, fears, doubts, and anxieties at the start of his poetic vocation are distinctively underscored by the allusion.

Fortunately, Keats's poetic ambition outstrips his profound self-questionings in the last part of 'Sleep and Poetry'. His inner conflict in this poem was not so tremendous as to make him break off in mid-line as he did later in his 'Hyperion' project. Instead, his evaporating confidence regains its strength. Keats lifts his spirits after conveying his worries the second time. He relieves the tension generated by his inner struggle in the 'strange assay' (313) and expresses his gratitude to the literary coterie, particularly to Hunt (349-50). Owing to Hunt's recognition, Keats believes in his vision of being a poet because he 'resolves' to 'begin that very day / These lines' (402-03). Keats concludes 'Sleep and Poetry' with a reconfirmed vision of his poetic talent.

The other primary characteristic of a poet, according to Keats, is his susceptibility to the power of nature, a susceptibility which is also a dynamic at work

in the poetry's use of narrative. He has two considerations in exploring the reasons for a poet's sensitivity to natural beauty. These two concerns are connected to his notions of poetry. On the one hand, Keats maintains that natural beauty is a source of poetic inspiration. On the other hand, a poet conveys nature's calming power in his poetry. These two early poems, 'I stood tip-toe' and 'Sleep and Poetry', aptly exemplify Keats's idea of poetry and of a poet. The ambiguity inherent in his poetic identity is also disclosed.

In 'I stood tip-toe', Keats asserts that when a poet is sensitive to natural beauty, he is in a position to create. In this respect, when seeing the moon, the 'Maker of sweet poets' (116), the poet-speaker is inspired. He apostrophizes the moon and begins to exercise his power of fancy. Keats's address to the moon makes his narrative be in a form of a dialogue as he says, 'Thee must I praise above all other glories' (123). There are the subjects of 'thee' and 'I'. Such a dialogic form matures when later he composes the odes. Under the influence of the moon's beauty, however, the narrator knows that he can be like the ancient bards and narrate cheerful tales (124). Sperry is right in alluding to the idea that the narrating poet can also be like the primal poet of mythic stories (184-210).<sup>52</sup> Keats maintains that natural beauty is the origin of mythological and poetic creativity. His own verses support this view as he depicts: 'For what has made the sage or poet write / But the fair paradise of Nature's light?' (125-26), and 'What first inspired a bard of old to sing?' (163). Moreover, Keats holds the view that once a poet's activity is inspired, it will be endless. He thus remarks that 'the sweetest of all songs' will be 'ever new' (181-82). The inspired poet's inexhaustible creativity is like the piper in his 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1819) since the piper is 'For ever piping songs [which are] for ever new' ('Ode on a Grecian Urn', 24). Above all, when a poet is inspired by nature and begins poetic activity, he

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<sup>52</sup> See Sperry, p. 82.

employs his visionary power. He can even conjure the invisible spirits up to bless the mythological character Endymion (185-89) as the charioteer in ‘Sleep and Poetry’.

In considering Keats’s narrative of poetic identity, Wolfson’s theory of ‘self-reference’ provides an appropriate framework for my discussion.<sup>53</sup> Wolfson states that the complexity of poetic activity and the interrogative mode make the poem ‘self-reflexive’ – that is, they refer back to Keats the poet, himself.<sup>54</sup> Her theory bridges the relationship between Keats’s early idea of a poet, Endymion, and the narrating poet/Keats. The paradigm of self-reference and self-identification may help us understand ‘I stood tip-toe’, and later, his ‘The Fall of Hyperion’. In ‘I stood tip-toe’, the narrating poet/Keats identifies with the wanderer in moonlight (185). The narrating poet/Keats and Endymion are both affected by the beauty of nature. The narrating poet/Keats is inspired by the early spring’s beauty, while, for Endymion, by the moonlight’s beauty. For Keats, Endymion has an autobiographical appeal in particular. Endymion is not only a poet because he is a lover of natural beauty, but also because of his quest for the moon, for his love. In this context, Keats may be inspired by Endymion in his endeavours to quest for his poetic identity/immortality.

Keats’s ambivalent poetic identity is conspicuously underscored by the most ambiguous line in ‘I stood tip-toe’: ‘Was there a Poet born?’ (241). This line entails a heated debate,<sup>55</sup> and it also casts intriguing light upon Keats’s ambivalent poetic identity. Sperry argues that this line reflects Keats’s self-questionings of his status as a poet due to his early conviction of visionary experience.<sup>56</sup> Wolfson suggests that this line is self-referential, denoting that Keats makes himself a poet born out of his

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<sup>53</sup> Wolfson has a good discussion of the connection between Endymion and Keats, especially in her chapter on *Endymion*. See Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, pp. 227-52, particularly p. 207.

<sup>54</sup> See Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, pp. 217-19.

<sup>55</sup> There are three possible interpretations: first, was there a poet conceived by Endymion and Cynthia’s bridal night? Second, was there a poet born in the original narrating of the story (ll. 181-241)? Third, was there a poet born in the narrating poet/Keats due to his retelling the story? See *CPStillinger*, p. 426.

<sup>56</sup> Sperry, p. 83.

imagination.<sup>57</sup> John Kandl argues that the verse implies an issue out of the marriage of Cynthia and Endymion, or a poet born out of his poetic attempts.<sup>58</sup>

Wolfson's theory of 'self-reference' again throws special light on this disputed line: 'Was there a Poet born?', and helps us understand Keats's poetic formation. There are two aspects which should be included in our consideration of the line. In the first aspect, the line reflects Keats's high self-expectation. Though Kandl is convincing, I hold a different view. I suggest that this verse can be interpreted as 'Was there a Poet born out of a poet?' This problematic verse follows the celebration of Endymion and Cynthia's wedding (239-40). The child to be conceived, in this regard, will be born to a poet since Endymion is a poet. Moreover, according to this line, 'Was there a Poet born?', the child is expected to be a poet. The original line can be read as 'Was there a Poet, the child-to-be, born out of the poet Endymion?' In this sense, Endymion and the child-to-be are Poet Father and Poet Son. If we apply Wolfson's theory of 'self-reference' to this argument, Endymion becomes Keats's double. Keats projects himself into the story of Endymion and Cynthia. The child to be conceived then becomes an imaginary issue of Keats. In other words, Keats assumes the role of the primal poet of poets.

Second, when interpreting this contentious line, I would suggest that Keats shows his lack of confidence in his formative years. Two other of Wolfson's theories, 'visions and evasions', as mentioned, and the 'liminal closure' in language,<sup>59</sup> can help us examine Keats's evolution within himself. According to Wolfson's theory of 'visions and evasions', Keats has a vision as a poet and he takes on such a role. Keats's identifying with Endymion, that is to say, means that Keats considers himself as a poet. In this respect, what Keats has imagined so far, from line 1 to line 240, is an

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<sup>57</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 219.

<sup>58</sup> Kandl, pp. 10-11.

<sup>59</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 219.

act of a poet. But the situation is reversed at line 241 as he poses the question: 'Was there a Poet born?' This verse seems to contradict his previous poetic effort. More particularly, the subsequent lines seem to deepen Keats's uncertainty of his vision and of his poetic ability as he says, 'but now no more / My wand'ring spirit must no further soar' (241-42). Keats puts to himself the essential question whether he can be a poet but he evades his own question. These lines leave traces of his self-questionings. Again, I would lay emphasis on the poetry's courage and poise in admitting such ambivalence into its narrative vision.

The other theory proposed by Wolfson, that of 'liminal closure' in language, again puts Keats's ambivalent poetic identity in its right perspective. For Wolfson, the 'liminal closure' means the open-ended question form as the question 'signals a temporary cessation rather than an abandonment of inquiry'.<sup>60</sup> In this sense, Wolfson argues that line 241, 'Was there a Poet born?' touches the 'liminal closure' of the language, leaving the disputed line open-ended. I agree with Wolfson's penetrating observation but will present an alternative view on Keats's poetic development. Keats is not confident of his entitlement to the name of a poet. He speaks in a misleading way through this subliminal utterance. He hankers after the title of poet, but he cringes from pronouncing this title loud and boldly. He figures himself as a poet with susceptibility to natural beauty, but he also exhibits his ambivalent poetic identity in equivocal language. This self-representation only brings more inner conflict to his dream of becoming a poet. Keats, in this regard, is like his character Hyperion, who suppresses his desire for a new change but only finds this restraint induces more

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<sup>60</sup> Wolfson argues that this line anticipates the liminal closure of language which is reflected in 'Ode to a Nightingale'. See Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 219. But Garret Stewart, though he shares a similar view as Wolfson on the ambiguity of Keats's language in 'Sleep and Poetry', suggests that the whole poem is Keats's strategic blurring of the border of art and the unconscious. See Garret Stewart, 'Keats and language', in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 138.

tortures for himself ('Hyperion: A Fragment', I, 290-304).<sup>61</sup>

In 'Sleep and Poetry', Keats's narrative conveys his poetic conception and demonstrates his poetic identity more than in 'I stood tip-toe'. I will develop the latter part of this chapter from three angles: first, how Keats is influenced by Hunt in his idea of poetry; second, what poetry means to Keats; and third, how his intention is met, for instance, in 'Sleep and Poetry'.

Hunt was powerful in shaping Keats's incipient aesthetic taste and this Huntian influence is remarkably seen in 'Sleep and Poetry'.<sup>62</sup> Hunt used the case of Keats to promote his ideal of restoring the 'love of Nature',<sup>63</sup> which was shown in Elizabethan poetry. This launched their literary relationship. Hunt's act also eventually engaged Keats in the wrestling with the Tory in poetics and politics.<sup>64</sup> According to Roe and Kandl, there are two basic tenets in Huntian poetics.<sup>65</sup> The first is Hunt's aim to eradicate the contemporary neoclassical style of poetry. Second, Hunt advocates a revival of Nature. For Hunt, the old poetry is 'the finer times of the English Muse'.<sup>66</sup> The old poetry is a poetry of '*thinking* instead of mere *talking*'.<sup>67</sup> Augustan poetry

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<sup>61</sup> The verses are as follows: 'Fain would he have commanded, fain took throne / And bid the day begin, if but for change. / He might not: — No, though a primeval God: / The sacred seasons might not be disturb'd. / Therefore the operations of the dawn / Stay'd in their birth, even as here 'tis told. / Those silver wings expanded sisterly, / Eager to sail their orb; the porches wide / Open'd upon the dusk demesnes of night; / And the bright Titan, phrenzied with new woes, / Unus'd to bend, by hard compulsion bent / His spirit to the sorrow of the time; / And all along a dismal rack of clouds, / Upon the boundaries of day and night, / He stretch'd himself in grief and radiance faint' ('Hyperion: A Fragment', I, 290-304).

<sup>62</sup> Barnard considers that Keats demonstrates less independent thinking concerning the idea of poetry, and this aspect is revealed in 'Sleep and Poetry'. See Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 26.

<sup>63</sup> Matthews, p. 42.

<sup>64</sup> The Tory *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* launched their first attack, 'On the Cockney School of Poetry. No I', in October 1817. Keats mentioned the impact of this article on him and on Hunt in his letter to Bailey (*L I*, 179-80). For a discussion of Hunt's poetic influence on Keats, see the arguments of Sperry and Barnard (*John Keats*). Duncan Wu has a discussion of the Cockney School in 'Keats and the "Cockney School"', in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 42-48. For a discussion of the impact of Hunt's political stance on Keats's poetry, see Levinson; Roe, *Culture of Dissent*, in particular the 'Introduction' and the chapters of "'Soft humanity put on": The Poetry and Politics of Sociality 1798-1818' (Chapter 4), and 'Lisping Sedition: *Poems*, *Endymion*, and the Poetics of Dissent' (Chapter 8); and Kandl.

<sup>65</sup> Kandl also suggests that Hunt's 'Preface' to *The Story of Rimini* (1816) influences Keats's lines in 'Sleep and Poetry' (ll. 181-206). See Kandl, p. 18, note 7.

<sup>66</sup> Matthews, p. 42.

<sup>67</sup> See Kandl, p. 1. The original quote is from Matthews, p. 42.



does not fit in this category, but Keats's poetry does. Keats was seen as a promising son to restore Nature.<sup>68</sup>

Influenced by Hunt's poetics, in 'Sleep and Poetry', Keats suggests two concepts: the equation of nature with poetic inspiration and naturalness in language. For Keats, Elizabethan poetry is the prime example that shows these characteristics. In 'I stood tip-toe', as discussed, Keats believes that a poet's imagination begins with the conception of beauty in nature. In 'Sleep and Poetry', he also affirms that naturalness in language is a means to convey this inspiration. His idea of poetry in 'Sleep and Poetry' has three main aspects. First, Keats sides with Hunt and promotes the style of the old poets, the Elizabethan poets. Second, he commends his contemporary poets like Wordsworth and Hunt. Third, he satirizes the Augustan poets.

The Elizabethan poets exemplify Keats's ideal of the poet. The Elizabethans are renowned for their free and 'high imagination' (163-64) and it comes from their sensitivity to beauty (163-71). The Elizabethan poets let loose their feelings when they are inspired by nature's beauty. Their poetry delineates the open secret of Nature, as is expressed, for example, in 'the small / Breath of new buds unfolding' (168-69), or human passion conveyed by a lover's bended knee (260). Put differently, Elizabethan poetry derives from the poet's susceptibility to beauty and from his heart. Our feelings are then uplifted and smoothed (247) owing to a poet's depth of vision and sincerity. Elizabethan poetry is human poetry and is like a 'friend' and can 'soothe the cares and lift the thoughts' of man (246-47). For Keats, this is a poet's task and the 'great end' of poetry (245). Our troubled minds can be 'eased' by the Elizabethan poets and the poets are 'poet kings' (268, 267).

By contrast, according to Keats's poetic idea, the Augustan poets are not

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<sup>68</sup> John Lockhart satirized Hunt's praise on Keats's poetic promise in his first attack on Keats. Lockhart ironically called Keats 'the Muses' Son of Promise' in his title of 'Cockney School of Poetry No. IV' in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (August 1818). See Matthews, pp. 42, 97.

qualified. The Augustans are not only insensitive to beauty in nature but they write morbid poetry. Keats criticizes their inability to perceive natural beauty: 'Beauty was awake! Why were ye not awake?' (192-93). Moreover, Keats strongly disapproves of their awkward and even macabre poetry. The followers of Alexander Pope, as Keats narrates, evoke a feeling of 'trees upturn, / Darkness, and worms, and shrouds, and sepulchres' (242-43). Keats calls them dismal souls (187) and 'poets Polyphemes' (234) as their poems are gloomy. The Augustan poets and, indeed, contemporary poets such as the Byron of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*<sup>69</sup> cannot inspire us with an uplifting thought, but only offer us a fallen one (241-42). This is against Keats's 'Principle of Beauty' (L I, 266), and yet it might be noted that Keats also expresses, even in these early poems, much doubt, diffidence, and ambivalence. It is arguable that his protest against gloom derives from his own repressed awareness of his susceptibility to darker feelings himself.

In addition to his belief of a poet's sensitivity to beauty, Keats states that naturalness in language is the first step towards good poetry. A natural language can only be achieved by uncurbed, soaring imagination as practised by the Elizabethan poets. The Elizabethan poets let their imagination 'freely fly' (164). Their poetry is devoid of artifice and displays what Hunt calls 'real nature and original fancy'.<sup>70</sup> Hunt's comment was very influential as Keats followed Hunt and developed his poetic axiom. In his 1818 letter to John Taylor, Keats insisted that poetry must come 'as naturally as the Leaves to a tree' or 'it had better not come at all' (L I, 238-39). For Keats, the Elizabethan poets and his fellow poets Wordsworth and Hunt (221-29; 248-50 on Hunt only) write in a natural language. Keats twice expresses his joy of

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<sup>69</sup> Stillinger notes that Keats probably alludes to Byron or the Lake Poets. See *CPStillinger*, p. 425, notes to lines 230-45.

<sup>70</sup> Matthews, p. 42.

knowing that Hunt is reviving Elizabethan poetry as a new school of poetry.<sup>71</sup> Keats describes Hunt as a ‘myrtle fairer’ (248), and Hunt will initiate ‘a fairer season’ (221) of poetry. Barnard explains that Keats’s belief in this new school of poetry is related to his idea of the nature of poetry and of myth, as well as questioning whether he can be a poet.<sup>72</sup> But I suggest that Keats’s preference for Elizabethan poetry corresponds to his poetic prospects adumbrated in the two realms. Keats wants to explore the pleasure found in the beauty of nature in the first realm of ‘Flora, and old Pan’. Then he wishes to probe into human hearts. Keats believes that the Elizabethan poetic style can reflect the truthfulness of the universe and of human nature in an unaffected language.

On the contrary, the language of Augustan poetry is seen as stilted. Keats denounces the Augustan poets (181-206) as they measure their lines with ‘musty laws’ and ‘wretched rule[s]’ (195). They ‘smooth, inlay, and clip, and fit’ their poetry (197). In so doing, Augustan poetry is ‘tallied’ (199). The Augustans are unable to produce ‘sweet and strong’ (232) verses since they cannot write their poetry in a natural way as the Elizabethans. Clearly Keats’s notion of ‘natural’ poetry is an idea that has its own ideological baggage. And yet his poetry seeks to bring out the cost of the pre-determined neatness of Augustan poetry, as he laments that the Augustans put their primary gift, their imagination, in fetters. Their flow of ideas and of strong feelings is inhibited.

There is one more note about Hunt’s influence on Keats’s taste of the Elizabethan poetry. Both Hunt and Keats admire the narrative poetry of the Elizabethans, for instance, Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*. For Keats, *The Faerie Queene*

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<sup>71</sup> Barnard calls Hunt’s endeavours to promote a new poetry as the ‘English revival’ or as Kandl calls it a ‘new English renaissance’, or ‘pre-apostasy Lake School’. See Barnard, *John Keats*, pp. 24-25; and Kandl, p. 8. Barnard argues that the idea of the revival is displayed in lines 223-29 and 267-68. He also argues that Keats believes in this revival as it is related to Keats’s poetic career. See Barnard, *John Keats*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>72</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, pp. 24-25.

gives him much imagination of a mythological world and he uses such intertextual allusions in his early poetry, say, 'To Charles Cowden Clarke'. This helps Keats develop his narrative skills and enhances the tellability of his later poetry. And his love for the Elizabethan narrative is validated by Hunt's promotion and imitation of it.

Though Keats impressively expounds his poetic beliefs through the Elizabethan poets in 'Sleep and Poetry', he does not figure himself as equal to his poetic concepts. That is, Keats's intention is not fully met by the effect which he creates. There is a gap between his intention and effect in his early verse. A typical example of the gap is his depictions of the realm of Flora and Pan in 'Sleep and Poetry'. Critics have complained that this scene is an instance of Keats's Cockney eroticism since he supposedly overdoes the sentimentalism.<sup>73</sup> Barnard argues that Keats 'slips off' and this pure Keatsianism jeopardizes the project of establishing himself as a poet.<sup>74</sup> Roe comments that Keats's apparent disregard for the decorum of the literary Establishment results in his poetry being snubbed by the Tory poet Lord Byron as an example of 'vulgarity'.<sup>75</sup> The Tory commentators also savaged Keats owing to what they saw as the moral impropriety in his poems.<sup>76</sup> A quotation from this scene can illustrate the critics' point:

And one will teach a tame dove how it best  
May fan the cool air gently o'er my rest;  
Another, bending o'er her nimble tread,  
Will set a green robe floating round her head,  
And still will dance with ever varied ease,

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<sup>73</sup> See Barnard, *John Keats*, pp. 19-21; Roe, *Culture of Dissent*, pp. 16-17; and Kandl, p. 8.

<sup>74</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 21.

<sup>75</sup> See Roe, *Culture of Dissent*, p. 17, note 47.

<sup>76</sup> See Lockhart's review in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and John Croker's review in the *Quarterly Review* (September 1818) in Matthews's collection. See Matthews, pp. 97-114.

Smiling upon the flowers and the trees:  
Another will entice me on, and on  
Through almond blossoms and rich cinnamon;  
Till in the bosom of a leafy world  
We rest in silence, like two gems upcurl'd  
In the recesses of a pearly shell.

(111-21)

Keats deflects his intention of the necessary progression which he will undertake for his poetic progress in these lines. This creates a conflict in his vision of a classical and lofty poetic career. As Barnard argues, Keats makes this passage a display of his male sexuality, and Barnard is right to question the final image of two pearls.<sup>77</sup> Keats envisages a development from the first realm of sensual pleasures to the second realm of human understanding; this is his poetic chart. But he overstates in the first realm as seen from this passage. These lines inevitably end in an anticlimactic effect. This verse paragraph, though intended as a necessary stage to a more fully developed emotional and spiritual understanding, is occluded by the evocation of sensual pleasures.

'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill' and 'Sleep and Poetry' play a significant role in Keats's development of his narrative skills and his early poetic identity. They are important in a variety of different ways. We can see Keats developing his descriptive power and narrative skills. We also see Hunt's dominating influence on Keats's literary taste in Elizabethan poetry. Moreover, Keats's poetic ambition, doubts, and ideal are reflected in these two poems. Above all, the ways in which Keats's figuring himself as a poet are equally noteworthy. In these two vital poems, he consistently

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<sup>77</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 20.

defines what the primary poetic attributes are: visionary imagination and susceptibility to beauty. But when he comes to figure himself as a poet according to his poetic ideas, Keats exhibits his inner conflict and ambivalence. He still lacks the confidence and skills necessary to integrate his concept of poetic identity. This represents, however, an indispensable phase towards his poetic maturation. Keats is developing as a poet and the proof that he is a poet is eventually provided by his efforts, especially in his 'The Eve of St. Agnes', the 'Hyperion' poems, and the lyric narratives, the odes, of 1819.

## Chapter Two

### ‘Imagination’s Struggles’: The Quest for Beauty and Poetic Identity in *Endymion*

In his *John Keats’s Dream of Truth* (1969), John Jones argues that John Keats is a poet who writes poetry which depicts what he ‘feels’.<sup>1</sup> This comment offers a penetrating insight into Keats’s first major poem, *Endymion* (1818). In *Endymion*, he states the theme of his poem in the very first opening line: ‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever’ (I, 1). From this perspective, Keats makes his hero Endymion obsessed with a beautiful dream and therefore determined to pursue this vision. Endymion pursues the moon-goddess Cynthia as an object of beauty and as a lover. The line also proclaims Keats’s ideal of the beautiful and his primary belief as a poet. His early big project, nevertheless, was not appreciated by the conservative Tory commentators of *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review*. Rather, they bitterly assaulted *Endymion*’s content and Keats’s Cockney style.<sup>2</sup> Its wandering narrative, the unconventional diction and versification, as well as the Cockney eroticism it displayed were the major points of attack.<sup>3</sup> But among Keats’s contemporaries, Shelley, for one, held a different view from the Tory commentators. In the letter to his and Keats’s publisher Charles Ollier in September 1819, Shelley stressed that the work was ‘full of some of the highest & the finest gleams of poetry’.<sup>4</sup> One year later,

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<sup>1</sup> John Jones, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Matthews and Jeffrey Cox include discussion on this. See Matthews; and Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt, and Their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> See the nineteenth-century Tory commentators John Lockhart’s review in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (August 1818) and in particular John Croker’s review in the *Quarterly Review* (dated April 1818, published in September 1818) in Matthews, pp. 97-114. For twentieth-century critical studies of the Cockney School, see John Bayley, *The Uses of Division: Unity and Disharmony in Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1976), pp. 107-56; Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 4; Roe, *Culture of Dissent*; Cox; and Wu.

<sup>4</sup> See Matthews, p. 123.

he reiterated the same message to William Gifford, editor to the *Quarterly Review*.<sup>5</sup> Shelley did not consider that Keats's *Endymion* was fairly treated. In this context, focusing closely on the poem's enactment of imaginative struggle, I will seek to show the purposeful function of the poem's 'wandering' and complex narrative structure. I will argue that this seemingly dilatory structure allows Keats to have ample space to develop and examine his beliefs about mythology, beauty, and the visionary quest. At the same time, since *Endymion* plays a significant role in his poetic formation, my chapter aims to shed new light on the development of Keats's poetic identity, taking 'poetic identity' to mean both his emergent poetic self and his use of the emergent poetic self as a poetic theme.

*Endymion* is Keats's first major endeavour to establish himself as a poet. Earlier in his 'Sleep and Poetry' (1816), he charted his poetic career and wished to achieve a poetic name in ten years.<sup>6</sup> For Keats, the title of a poet would place him in the 'Temple of Fame' (L I, 170) and enshrine him with the other immortal poets. In his letter to Leigh Hunt on 10 May 1817, Keats remarked, 'I have asked myself so often why I should be a Poet more than other Men, —seeing how great a thing it is' (L I, 139). This is Keats's 'high Idea' (L I, 169) for the meaning of his life. He saw *Endymion* as 'a test, a trial of my Powers of Imagination' (L I, 169-70). Moreover, in a letter to Benjamin Bailey, Keats also explained the reason why he attempted to write a long poem as *Endymion*. Keats argued that writing a long poem was a step towards being a great poet, as he said, 'Did our great Poets ever write short Pieces?' (L I, 170). He exerted his imagination and hoped to fill the 'one bare circumstance' of the mythological story of Endymion with 4,000 lines (L I, 170). Furthermore, critics

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<sup>5</sup> Frederick L. Jones (ed.), *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), Vol. I, p. 252. All references to Shelley's letters are taken from this edition.

<sup>6</sup> See the lines in *CPStillinger*: 'O for ten years, that I may overwhelm / Myself in poetry; so I may do the deed / That my own soul has to itself decreed' ('Sleep and Poetry', ll. 96-98).



suggestively propose that *Endymion* may be Keats's answer to the solitary wanderer portrayed by Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, Book IV, and particularly Shelley's *Alastor*. They suggest that Keats seems to advocate a love for the community.<sup>7</sup> All these reasons discussed may serve as plausible after-the-event explanations of Keats's purposes in writing the poem.

But when embarking on this grand task, Keats was also aware of his disadvantages. In his published Preface to *Endymion* (1818), he apologised to the reader that this work was a 'feverish attempt'. His imagination, he explained, was still in the 'space of life between' boyhood and manhood. Keats considered that *Endymion* was an immature work. In addition, he revealed his concern about whether he had engaged with the mythology of Endymion 'too late'. In this Preface Keats disclosed two crucial preoccupations: his uncertainty regarding his status as a young poetic novice and his latecomer complex.<sup>8</sup> His poetic ambition, compounded with these two preoccupations, has invited much debate. The most heated debates centre on four questions: first, why is the form of *Endymion* highly labyrinthine? Second, what is the function of mythology? Third, what is the significance of the visionary quest in this poem? Fourth, how is the pursuit related to Keats's belief in the idea of beauty?

*Endymion*'s seemingly wandering narrative has been a major point of contention. In line with the nineteenth-century Tory reviewers, modern critics also disapprove of the apparently dilatory structure. Stuart Sperry comments on *Endymion*'s labyrinthine

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<sup>7</sup> The critics who discuss the influence of Shelley's *Alastor* on Keats are A. C. Bradley, Miriam Allott, Stuart Sperry, and John Barnard. The other critic who suggests both the influence of Shelley's *Alastor* and Wordsworth's *The Excursion* on Keats is Susan Wolfson. See A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909; London: Macmillan, 1962), pp. 227-28, 241-44; Allott, p. 117; Sperry, pp. 94-95; Barnard, pp. 584-85; and Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, pp. 234-35.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Jackson Bate and Harold Bloom discuss Keats's latecomer complex. See Walter Jackson Bate, *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971); and Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973) (hereafter abbreviated as *Anxiety of Influence*). The most recent critics who discuss this complex are Martin Aske, Andrew Bennett, and Grant Scott. See Aske, *Keats and Hellenism: An Essay* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 'Introduction', pp. 1-7; Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, 'Introduction', p. 4; and Grant Scott, *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis, and the Visual Arts* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1994), 'Introduction', pp. 24ff.

form in terms of Keats's self-expectation of having a 'little Region' to wander about.<sup>9</sup> Martin Aske and Andrew Bennett, by contrast, read the poem from the perspective of Keats's psychology as a belated poet.<sup>10</sup> Bennett even explores the poem with respect to Roland Barthes's theory of '*espace dilatoire*'.<sup>11</sup>

Yet there is a paradox in *Endymion*'s seemingly wandering structure. Though the form appears to be errant, it also reflects Keats's imagination's struggles and creative power. It seems related to Keats's status as a neophyte poet and his design for the poem. Keats, as discussed, showed that he was perfectly conscious of his 'inexperience, immaturity' in his published Preface. He was merely twenty-two years old and he did not dodge the issue of his being a young novice. Instead, he boldly admitted it to the public. He seemed to think that his youth and apparently unpractised skills would inhibit him from having an 'accomplished' deed. Moreover, as Sperry argues, Keats aims to offer images of a fine excess for the reader to ramble about, to 'pick and choose' (*L I*, 170) in his poetic garden and then to muse over the gathered symbols. This intention is echoed in his letter to John Hamilton Reynolds on 19 February 1818. In it Keats reasserted his idea of mental 'wandering':

a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner—let him on any certain day read a certain Page of full Poesy or distilled Prose and let him *wander* with it, and muse upon it, and reflect from it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it—

(*L I*, 231; italic mine)

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<sup>9</sup> Sperry, p. 90.

<sup>10</sup> See Aske's and Bennett's arguments (Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*).

<sup>11</sup> Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, p. 72.

Keats repeated the word 'wander'. He seemed to believe in a poetics deriving from all that he invested in this word. He considered that a poem, read for pleasure and bringing out the feelings akin to those supplied by a pleasant walk, can put to productive and expressive purposes the possibilities associated with the wandering form. In this respect, for Keats, the errant form is not necessarily defective.

Keats's principle of beauty may also contribute to the poem's seemingly meandering structure. The central topic for *Endymion* is 'beauty'. Throughout this long poem, Keats consistently and continually tries to demonstrate his idea of the beautiful. His effort can be seen in his letter, dated on 9 April 1818, to Reynolds. In the letter, Keats remarks on his rejected Preface to *Endymion* (1818)<sup>12</sup> and protests that he wrote for art's sake. He stated that he did not write to please the public, but for the 'Principle of Beauty' (L I, 266). Within this discourse, he brings in new episodes or novel images for his hero Endymion and these interludes are beautifully delineated. For example, in Book II, Endymion is fascinated by the magnificent diamond balustrade (II, 597-626). The 'spouting columns' (II, 606), hit heedlessly by his spear, would weave a magic watery kaleidoscope before him. They can turn into 'shapes of curtain'd canopies, / Spangled, and rich with liquid broideries / Of flowers, peacocks, swans, and naiads fair' (II, 618-20). The reader is invited to share Keats's and his hero's delight in local imaginative felicities, 'liquid broideries.' Later, in Book III, Keats depicts Endymion as charmed by the exquisite embroidery on Glaucus's cloak. The fabric is:

O'erwrought with symbols by the deepest groans  
Of ambitious magic: every ocean-form  
Was woven in with black distinctness; storm,  
And calm, and whispering, and hideous roar,

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<sup>12</sup> See the rejected Preface in *Barnard*, Appendix 2, pp. 506-07.

Quicksand and whirlpool, and deserted shore  
Were emblem'd in the woof; with every shape  
That skims, or dives, or sleeps, 'twixt cape and cape.

(III, 198-204)

The passage serves as an emblem of Keats's view of the purposes of words in their symbolic capacity; they direct us to instances of beauty, sending us back with heightened awareness to 'every shape / That skims, or drives, or sleeps, 'twixt cape and cape'. Keats takes every opportunity to catch the multifaceted form of the beautiful, be it natural or human-made. Often he composes a new view and decomposes an old one in order to usher in another plane of beauty. For *Endymion*, every scene is a wonder; each vignette is another beautiful new world. Hence the quest for *Endymion* is a quest for the beauty which is embodied most fully in the figure of *Cynthia*. A poetics of improvisation<sup>13</sup> also declares itself as Keats catches up the possibilities of rhyme, and the effect is turned into a theme in these lines, say, describing *Endymion*'s entrance into the Cave of Quietude, where the narrator initially addresses the hero directly:

a grievous feud

Hath led thee to this Cave of Quietude.

Aye, his lull'd soul was there, although upborne

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<sup>13</sup> Angela Esterhammer has a good discussion of the poetics of improvisation. She uses the case of the Della Cruscan poets, in particular Mary Robinson, to illustrate that the Della Cruscan poets composed on 'spontaneity', in order to respond to other poets. Esterhammer argues that the Della Cruscan poets' 'impromptu' poems play a significant role for the Romantics, especially Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, and Byron. Her idea, in some way, echoes Sperry's theory of associationism, but approaches it from another perspective. Sperry maintains that in Keats's early poetry, Keats composes poems according to his association of ideas. See Angela Esterhammer, 'Spontaneity, Immediacy, and Improvisation in Romantic Poetry', in *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, ed. Charles Mahoney (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 321-36; and Sperry, pp. 72-74.

With dangerous speed: and so he did not mourn  
Because he knew not whither he was going.

(IV, 547-51)

In the best sense, *Endymion* holds the attentive reader by virtue of seeming not to know ‘whither [it is] going’. Often the writing finds and feels its way forward, trusting to the chances of rhyme, in Charles Tomlinson’s phrase,<sup>14</sup> to guide it to its destination, which in a sense, it reaches through the very act of questing.

Keats’s latecomer complex possibly also affects the spacious form he adopts in the poem. His original creative power and his ‘love of beauty’ (*L I*, 373), conversely, are made more impressive. As Keats confidently declared to Bailey, *Endymion* was ‘chiefly’ his invention (*L I*, 169). The poem, combined with diverse literary sources,<sup>15</sup> not only shows Keats’s creativity but also prolongs the plot. His choice of the persona Endymion provides a good example for seeing the interrelations between his originality as a belated poet and the apparently dilatory structure he chose. Grant Scott argues persuasively that this figure gives Keats ample space for creation as Endymion is an insignificant character in the Greek mythology.<sup>16</sup> Keats makes Endymion undergo trials under the ground, in the sea, and in the air. If these trials lengthen the narrative, they also display Keats’s rich imagination. One passage taken from Endymion’s trial in the sea can allow us to admire Keats’s exceptional imaginative power. Under the moonlight, Endymion is spellbound by the beautiful sea world and the dawn; therefore,

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<sup>14</sup> See ‘The Chances of Rhyme’ in Charles Tomlinson, *Selected Poems, 1955-1997* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 82-83. For Tomlinson, finding the correct rhyme is like a quest: ‘The chances of rhyme are like the chances of meeting — / In the finding fortuitous, but once found, binding: / They say, they signify and they succeed, where to succeed / Means not success, but a way forward / If unmapped, a literal, not a royal succession’ (1-5).

<sup>15</sup> See *Allott*, pp. 116-17; and *Barnard*, pp. 584-85.

<sup>16</sup> See Scott, p. 24.

he stay'd

His wandering steps, and half-entranced laid  
His head upon a tuft of straggling weeds,  
To taste the gentle moon, and freshening beads,  
Lashed from the crystal roof by fishes' tails.  
And so he kept, until the rosy veils  
Mantling the east, by Aurora's peering hand  
Were lifted from the water's breast, and fann'd  
Into sweet air; and sober'd morning came  
Meekly through billows: —when like taper-flame  
Left sudden by a dallying breath of air,

(III, 107-17)

In the same letter to Gifford in November 1820, Shelley lauded these arresting images, which include Aurora's hands uncovering the mantle of darkness from the sea.<sup>17</sup> He unreservedly expressed his recognition of Keats's 'promise of ultimate excellence'.<sup>18</sup> Shelley indeed offers a perspicacious comment. Keats's verbs, such as 'fann'd' or the gerund 'dallying', also contribute to the dynamic precision of his images. The language is alert and creative, as is shown in the frequently mimetic stress-shifts; thus, the voice alights with particular force on 'Mantling' and 'Meekly'.

When making Endymion's story the basis for his original narrative, Keats seems to merge himself with his protagonist Endymion,<sup>19</sup> whether his theme is the pursuit

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<sup>17</sup> Frederick Jones, Vol. I, p. 252.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> See Sperry, p. 97; Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 32, 24, 47-49; and Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 232.

of poetic fame or of a beautiful vision. Susan Wolfson helpfully calls Keats's Endymion a 'double',<sup>20</sup> while Barnard suggests that Keats makes the poetic romance of *Endymion* 'highly personal'.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Keats projects his image and concerns about his poetic convictions onto the character of Endymion.

Three examples illustrate this merging. One is the statement that Keats and Endymion are both on 'the path of love and poesy' (II, 38). In this sense, Keats seems to make Endymion an implicit poet, given a status similar to that of his creator. For another example, both suffer from the 'flame', be it the flame of creativity or the flame arisen out of passion. In 'Sleep and Poetry', Keats describes the ways in which he spent his sleepless night composing this very poem. He says, 'but more than that there came / Thought after thought to nourish up the flame / Within my breast' (397-99). The flame is the flame of creative activity, a flame which inspires him to write poetry and which arrives, as a rhyme-word, aptly on the heels of 'came'. In a different sense, this image of 'flame' finds an echo in *Endymion*. In the poem, suffering from his passion for the vision of Cynthia, Endymion cries, 'Within my breast there lives a choking flame' (II, 317), where there is a characteristic tension between 'lives' and 'choking'. The third example is that both Keats and Endymion display misgivings about their chosen path. In Book I, Keats, as the poet-narrator, states his writing plan and discloses his anxiety about embarking on his early major task, referring to 'My uncertain path' (I, 61). Endymion, at the outset, appears as a young and doubting shepherd prince because he wanders in 'uncertain ways' (II, 48). Keats and Endymion, as these instances reveal, come close to fusing their identities.

Endymion's visionary quest suggests Keats's implicit representation of himself. Endymion demonstrates the ways in which a young wanderer is obsessed with

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<sup>20</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 232.

<sup>21</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 36.

visionary longing. His quest entails many anxieties and self-questionings. This corresponds with Keats's figuring of himself as a doubting poet in his two earlier poems 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill' and 'Sleep and Poetry'. From this perspective, still questioning his status as a young apprentice poet, Keats seems to, as discussed, project an image of a self-questioning poet onto Endymion. Endymion and Keats both pursue an ideal, which bears great import to the pursuer: for Endymion, his Cynthia; and for Keats, his poetic identity. They are driven to examine the value and significance of their quest. In his letter to Benjamin Bailey on 22 November 1817, about one week before he completed *Endymion*, Keats summarized his thoughts about the gist of *Endymion*: 'It is "a Vision in the form of Youth" a Shadow of reality to come' (L I, 185). This is an important comment on his own work because it exhibits Keats's early belief in visionary imagination and the idea of the beautiful. It also indicates, in the word 'Shadow', an element of misgiving about poetry's capacity to embody the writer's intimations of 'reality'.

In discussing Endymion's visionary quest and the idea of beauty, there are diverse interpretations. Jones argues that the work is 'a failure'<sup>22</sup> because there is 'no rich continuation' and the quest is of 'characterless and sheer vacuity'.<sup>23</sup> More positively, though not without qualifications, Sperry, Leon Waldoff, and Wolfson all read *Endymion* from the perspective of Keats's imaginative self-realization.<sup>24</sup> Barnard contends that Keats wishes to rework the images and ideas of Greek mythology from the perspective of a later poet and to redefine the 'religion of beauty'.<sup>25</sup> According to Barnard, the mythological figures and the embedded stories are means for Keats to re-explore the idea of beauty and truth, and thus to recreate the

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<sup>22</sup> John Jones, p. 134.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> See Sperry, p. 102; Waldoff, p. 36; and Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 236.

<sup>25</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 39.



beautiful Greek mythology.<sup>26</sup> These critics offer ways of viewing *Endymion* from the viewpoint of its concern with ‘beauty’, taking seriously Keats’s high valuation of the aesthetic. Building on their work, I shall explore how the narrative of *Endymion* communicates the idea of the beautiful.

The idea of the beautiful is central to Keats’s vision of art and life. It is noticeable that he does not so much discuss ‘beauty’ as seek to call it into being through his poetry. At the outset of *Endymion*, as noted, he remarks that ‘a thing of beauty is a joy forever’. He believes that it is ‘the beautiful’, which binds our souls to the earth (I, 7, 31) and which keeps us alive. Otherwise, according to Keats, we ‘[spiritually] die’ (I, 33). As Jones argues, this conception of beauty revolves round the word ‘feel’. He suggests that the word ‘feel’ is Keatsian.<sup>27</sup> This point is valid when one considers the question posed by Keats for himself and his readers: ‘Feel we these [beautiful] things?’ (I, 795). For Keats, who in some moods wished to believe in ‘a Life of Sensations’ rather than of thoughts (*L I*, 185), the power of ‘feel’ dominates much of his work.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, Keats expounds the idea of ‘the beautiful’ as the ‘essence’ (I, 25) of the universe. He not only advocates that we should search for beauty (I, 11) and have ‘fellowship’ with it (I, 779), but he enacts, in the unwinding of his couplets and rhymes, the idea of ‘wreathing / A flowery band to bind us to the earth’ (I, 6-7). In the connected sounds of ‘band’ and ‘bind’, Keats makes clear that his notion of beauty is grounded in the ‘earth’, not located in some transcendent sphere. For him, as he will say later, such fellowship is ‘divine’ (I, 778) and involves a ‘fellowship with essence’ (I, 779), yet this essence is more sensuous quintessence than metaphysical abstraction. Put differently, the fellowship with beauty composes what

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>27</sup> John Jones, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> In *Endymion*, there are 37 words of ‘feel’. See *A Concordance to the Poems of John Keats*, eds Michael G. Becker, Robert J. Dilligan and Todd K. Bender (New York: Garland, 1981), pp. 182-83.

Keats calls ‘the clear religion of heaven’ (I, 781). Beauty, within this discourse, becomes Keats’s religion. We can see this conviction in his letter to Bailey, dated on 3 November 1817. This letter is one of the three letters addressed to Bailey before he finished *Endymion*. It bears great significance when interpreting this early major project.<sup>29</sup> In the letter, Keats also seems to elevate beauty to the status of a religion. He believed that only two things were the solutions to the world’s wrong: they were ‘the great Consolations of Religion and undepraved Sensations. of the Beautiful’ (L I, 179). From the perspective suggested by this letter but advanced on in the poem, Barnard’s description of Keats’s concept of the beautiful as a ‘religion of beauty’ is tellingly germane.

Having this firm belief in beauty, Keats adds many compelling scenes for *Endymion*’s visionary quest. This conviction eventually leads the reader to understand his conception of happiness in life. In this way, the significance of beauty for Keats is elucidated. Keats believes that there is a relationship between the beholder and the object, he then makes *Endymion* struck with the ‘loveliest’ moon (I, 592), the embodiment of ‘that completed form of all completeness’ (I, 606). *Endymion* clings to this beautiful vision and desires to validate the authenticity of his imagination; he quests. Using Paul Ricoeur’s theory, Bennett comments that in *Endymion* the narrative force results from Keats’s ‘anxiety of authorship’ precisely and paradoxically because

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<sup>29</sup> Stillinger says that Keats finished his first draft of *Endymion* on 28 November 1817. See *CPStillinger*, p. 430. In Rollins edition of letters, there are four extant letters written from Keats to Bailey in October and November 1817. Each letter bears great import to the significant life incidents and the frame of mind of Keats. The first letter was written on 8 October and it reveals Keats’s intention of writing *Endymion*. The second one was written on 28 to 30 October in which Keats told Bailey about Tom’s deteriorating illness. The third one was written on 3 November. In it Keats stated his idea about the solutions to the world’s problems, that is, religion and the idea of the beautiful. More especially, Keats criticized the first attack from the Torys on Hunt and he predicted that the second article would aim at him. Last of all, the letter was written on 22 November, about one week earlier before Keats finished *Endymion*. It contains the two most memorable and important ideas of Keats on ‘the authenticity of the imagination’ and ‘Adam’s dream’. In short, the first and fourth letters are directly connected to Keats’s creative activity in *Endymion*.

Keats has not mastered the use of narrative tenses yet.<sup>30</sup> I would suggest that the dynamic force animating the narrative derives from Endymion's visionary belief, figured as a 'paly flame of hope' (I, 984) of finding Cynthia. In this belief, Endymion persists in his pursuit, and the pursuit is abundant with numerous beautiful adventures.

Even when these episodes and images dealing with and embodying Keats's idea of the beautiful assume a discontinuous character,<sup>31</sup> Keats's underlying principle of beauty binds them together and allows us to reconsider the notion that Keats's narrative is fragmented. First, Keats never betrays his principle of the beautiful. Rather, he makes an effort to link every interlude to his idea of the beautiful. In this context, in Book II, Keats seems to digress from speaking about Endymion and the unknown goddess's encounter to writing about the birth of a poem (II, 827-50). But, from another angle, what Keats wishes to do, I would argue, is to connect the making of poetry with the discovery of ideal beauty. We can make a connection between this passage in *Endymion* and 'I stood tip-toe' (163-80) and the connection throws light on Keats's intention: both poems relate the birth of myths and stress the significance of a poet's imagination. Both poems address Keats's concern for poetic identity.

Shelley greatly commended Keats's ability to suggest the intimate connection between a poet's imagination and the birth of a poem (II, 833ff).<sup>32</sup> Some lines are quoted here from the passage to which Shelley refers in order to illustrate Keats's high imaginative power:

as 'tis a ditty

Not of these days, but long ago 'twas told

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<sup>30</sup> Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, pp. 62, 68-69.

<sup>31</sup> Bennett comments that the disconnected narrative is 'broken-off'. See Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, p. 65.

<sup>32</sup> See Shelley's letter to William Gifford in Frederick Jones, Vol. I, p. 252.

By a cavern wind unto a forest old;  
And then the forest told it in a dream  
To a sleeping lake, whose cool and level gleam  
A poet caught as he was journeying  
To Phoebus' shrine; and in it he did fling  
His weary limbs, bathing an hour's space,  
And after, straight in that inspired place  
He sang the story up into the air,  
Giving it universal freedom.

(II, 829-39)

In this passage, there is a transmission of images and harmonious inter-rhyming. For example, from lines 834 to 836, the sound 'ing' connects the three lines: 'journeying', 'fling' and 'bathing'. This sound suggests the relatedness of the ways in which an image triggers a succession of images and thus a poem is born. Moreover, this sound is interrelated with the sound 'sang' as the consonant 'ng' occurred in '-ing' and '-ang' strings them together. This passage reads mellifluously as it glides through 'journeying', 'flinging', 'bathing', and then 'sang'. Furthermore, the sound '-ing' and '-ang' naturally produces a resonant sound, and it suggests the echoing of the ditty or the poem created by Keats or by the passenger poet will remain in our hearts. In addition, the enjambment also contributes to the transmission of the story. We can easily get the sense that the story is passed in a succession via the forest, the dream, the lake, and it finally finds an outlet, that is, the poet's verse. Another touch of coordination and correspondence in this paragraph is supplied by the fact that the poet's patron god is Phoebus and the poet, on his way to pay tribute to Phoebus, is inspired by the place and writes a poem. The last couplet indeed again resonates with

the echo of the ditty or of the poem since the story is disseminated and given ‘universal freedom’, where a political concept – that of ‘universal freedom’ – is transferred to an aesthetic evocation. Keats’s conscious phrasing and rich imagination are on show in this passage.

Keats invites the reader to participate in his narration and that is the reason why he sometimes curtails his story. In this way, due to the nature of such suggestiveness, the form of *Endymion* appears digressive.<sup>33</sup> In his *Dream of Truth*, Jones observes that Keats uses an ‘end-stopped’ style;<sup>34</sup> that is, Keats tends to be concise and his style seals up its effects within itself as Jones comments that ‘Keats’s creative act is a closed circuit’.<sup>35</sup> Barnard also makes a similar remark in his Preface to *John Keats* (1987): ‘Keats preferred a half-truth if it intimated a partly realised truth of greater importance’.<sup>36</sup> It seems that Keats likes to leave space for the reader to ‘wander’ mentally. In this regard, Wolfson’s notion of a ‘poetics of cooperation’<sup>37</sup> can help us understand and appreciate *Endymion*. She argues that the reader is expected to engage with the poet-narrator while reading Keats’s poetry. From this perspective, if the reader can ‘participate’ in the poem, the audience can know that in Book II, the eagle (II, 658) is a necessary prop for Endymion. Owing to this *deus ex machina*, Endymion can meet the unknown goddess. This encounter can also make us know the power of beauty as Endymion is immediately fascinated by the beautiful goddess without questioning. It further anticipates Endymion’s later inner conflicts between dream and reality, between his former commitment and later betrayal, as well as between his powerless self and a determined soul. All these conflicts and inner debates can be seen in the light of Endymion’s quest for beauty and love, which come to a climax and

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<sup>33</sup> Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>34</sup> John Jones, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>36</sup> See Barnard, *John Keats*, ‘Preface’, ix.

<sup>37</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 301.

final resolution (of sorts) in Book IV when he has to choose between the moon goddess and the Indian Maid.

When discussing the visionary quest and the conception of beauty, Keats developed his idea of a 'Pleasure Thermometer'. For Keats, no doubt influenced by his medical training in finding an image for intensified forms of pleasure, there are different forms or 'gradations' of happiness (*L I*, 218). In his letter to John Taylor, he elaborated this concept and termed it the 'Pleasure Thermometer' (*L I*, 218). In *Endymion*, Keats grades various kinds of happiness, ranging from natural beauty to erotic love, and the top one is love (*I*, 777-811). With this conviction, he makes Endymion take the path of love because Cynthia is the symbol of beauty. Endymion's pursuit is after 'beauty-love', which makes clear that 'beauty' involves the quester and process of quest just as deeply as it pays tribute to the object of the quest. Endymion has to pursue the moon goddess, become one with her (*I*, 796, 810-11, 833), or as discussed, enter into 'fellowship with essence' in order for him to attain the highest pleasure in life.

But many critics do not hold a positive view of Endymion's visionary quest in terms of Keats's theory of 'Pleasure Thermometer'. They do not consider that Keats has elucidated this concept well. Waldoff cites Glaucus's episode in Book III and argues that Glaucus has a 'fear of castration' from Circe, the demon goddess.<sup>38</sup> Wolfson contends that the Indian Maid's episode in Book IV is a counter-argument against Keats's pleasure theory. She says that Endymion's choice of the Maid leads him to inner conflicts, not to the fullest exultation.<sup>39</sup>

Waldoff's and Wolfson's theories seem inadequate when evaluating Keats's concept of a Pleasure Thermometer. In the first instance, Waldoff seems to neglect one

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<sup>38</sup> Waldoff, p. 54.

<sup>39</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 245.

crucial fact: Glaucus's love for Circe is a false love. His true love is Scylla. In this regard, it would be inappropriate to interpret the false love in terms of Keats's idea of the happiness ladder. What Keats consistently advocates throughout *Endymion* is true love, as it brings the ultimate joy to our existence. For Keats, love is the highest human touch, the richest 'entanglement' (I, 798), mixed or 'commingled' (I, 833) by two different identities. The two identities have to 'destroy' their individuality (I, 799)<sup>40</sup> or any 'determined Character' (L I, 184), but to leave only the quintessential part. As love is the highest ideal, it can reach the most intensity in life (I, 800). Endymion, in this context, must undergo numerous trials before he can finally unite with his true love, the moon goddess.

In the second instance, I disagree with Wolfson and would suggest that there is no contradiction between Keats's belief in the pleasure ladder and the encounter between Endymion and the Maid. Though she has her reasons for disguising herself, the moon goddess's different forms genuinely test Endymion. She first assumes identity as an unknown goddess (Book II) and later as the Indian Maid (Book IV). In the Indian Maid's episode, if we merely focus on the anti-climatic denouement of Book IV, Wolfson seems persuasive because the plot appears to contradict Keats's conception of the pleasure thermometer. But from the opposing view, I would argue that once her real identity as the moon goddess is disclosed, the Maid's disguise brings more joy to Endymion. The Maid's role, that is to say, is to accentuate Endymion's dilemma more markedly. When there are more trials for Endymion, he will feel more delighted in the end.

Though one can savour different pleasures by degree, opposing forces can spring from the visionary quest. From this arise two specific issues. On the one hand, there is

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<sup>40</sup> Allott and Barnard argue that one has to subdue one's subjectivity in order to harmonize with the object. See *Allott*, p. 155, note to line I, 799; and *Barnard*, p.592, note to line I, 799.

the problem of conflict between vision and reality. Endymion's fascination with his dream and confrontation with his sister Peona (to be discussed) are the salient examples. On the other hand, there is an issue ensuing from the relationship between beauty and truth, from which two questions emerge: why does Keats equate these two terms, and what is his belief in terms of the equation of beauty-truth?

In *Endymion*, the issue of conflict between dream and reality is the central plot and the plot is grounded on Endymion's conviction of the beautiful. This dream-vision, or 'empyrean reflection' (L I, 185), nevertheless, is an abstract to be believed in and Endymion is questioned and dissuaded by Peona. The figure of Peona is Keats's creation and functions as a facilitator<sup>41</sup> for Endymion to examine the purpose of his quest. She also challenges the motivation behind his pursuit. As Sperry and Wolfson suggest, Peona's answer serves as a counter-argument to Endymion's vision.<sup>42</sup> This impels Endymion to examine his vision. In this sense, when Endymion relates his despondency and his longing for the dream-vision as he 'truly' believes in it (I, 850), Peona chides him by calling the "visions, dreams, / And fitful whims of sleep" (I, 748-49) unbelievable. Moreover, she considers that they do not carry any weight with one's consciousness since they are "more slight / Than the mere nothing" (I, 755-56). Instead, Peona asks him to revert to the 'high and noble life' (I, 758), which befits a prince. Peona seems to see everything pragmatically and arbitrarily. She fundamentally refutes any form of vision and believes that no truth exists in the visionary imagination. For Peona, reality is the truth, whereas a dream carries elements of falsehood. In other words, she acts as a spokeswoman for reality. Her words attacking Endymion's seemingly misleading fantasies create tension.

The tension mounts when Endymion is prompted to validate the truthfulness of

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<sup>41</sup> Bennett argues that Peona facilitates the plot of *Endymion* and more narratives are produced between her and Endymion. See Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, p. 78.

<sup>42</sup> See Sperry, p. 99; and Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, pp. 242-43.



his imagination. Though Endymion is persuaded to yield the ‘shadow of a dream’ (I, 857), he still cannot help clinging to its possible truth. For Endymion, the power of the beautiful vision is great and he craves for the vision. His quest then brings up the issue of Keats’s fundamental belief in beauty and in truth. Newell Ford has a valuable study of Keats’s treatment of these two abstract terms,<sup>43</sup> citing various passages related to truth and beauty from *Paradise Lost* and analysing the influence of Milton on Keats in *Endymion*.<sup>44</sup> Ford argues that Keats is much convinced by Milton’s association of the two terms and does likewise. According to Ford, Keats believes that ‘the imagination functions when it creates “truth” out of “beauty”’.<sup>45</sup> Ford’s observation is a valid viewpoint. As Keats said in his letter to Bailey concerning his concept of ‘the authenticity of the Imagination’ (L I, 184), he used Adam’s dream (L I, 185) to consolidate his point. Keats makes Endymion another Adam and believes in what he sees. Endymion prefigures the beautiful persona Cynthia and expects her appearance. All the time, Keats tests and hopes to prove his conviction that ‘What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth’ (L I, 184).

Such a prefigurative conviction in the equation of beauty and truth can, by analogy, allow us to understand Keats’s poetic identity. As Endymion is Keats’s double, in parallel, Keats has a strong belief in the identification of beauty and truth. This accords with his confidence in himself as a poet. Beauty, as noted, is as Keats’s religion. In the same letter to Bailey, on 3 November 1818, Keats further expounded that the beautiful is ‘the poetical’ in all things (L I, 179). This is a perspicacious statement of his association of the beautiful and the poetical, and as mentioned, of the beautiful and the truthful. It also explains his intention of setting Endymion and

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<sup>43</sup> See Newell F. Ford, *The prefigurative imagination of John Keats: a study of the beauty-truth identification and its implications* (1951; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-19.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

himself as the poet-speaker on 'the path of love and poesy'. Moreover, this equation also foretells what he later emphasizes in 'Ode on Indolence' (1819) since this poem focuses on three figures, representing Love, Ambition, and Poesy. In Keats's poetic career, these words, such as beauty, truth, love, and poesy, are virtual synonyms; and each word has a particular significance to Keats. That is the reason why Keats, via the figure of Endymion, is in search of the idea of the beautiful and of the poetic.

Endymion's pursuit for beauty is enlightenment to him since it produces a sense of community and of complementarity. Endymion is made aware of the importance of the community. He is also made to know his lack of a fully satisfying 'self' and that what his 'self' requires for its fulfilment is 'beauty'. That is the reason why Endymion is enthralled by the unknown goddess or the Indian Maid. In the first case, there is an implicit characteristic common to Endymion and his immediate love-objects: he and the two figures share a similar fate of being solitary. In addition, his unrequited love and sufferings help him understand the 'agonies, the strife' ('Sleep and Poetry', 124) of lovers. Endymion therefore develops a love for the community, for example, his sympathy for the cursed Glaucus in Book III. Second, the unknown goddess and the Maid are embodiments of beauty. From this perspective, his pursuit accords with his idea of the 'fellowship with essence'. The beautiful vision makes Endymion live in the present and relish every moment of it. Endymion will "count, and count / The moments, by some greedy help that seem'd / A second self" (I, 657-59). It is that 'second self' that will enable to him fully to realize the potential of his own identity.

The vision and the quest, however, also produce conflicts for Endymion. Endymion's inner struggles result from his immediate passion for the unknown goddess or the Indian Maid. He seems to project the vision onto different figures instead of remaining loyal to the vision of the moon goddess. His identity, in this respect, seems problematic. He longs for the vision but he is easily tempted by

another figure at the same time. He is trapped in his passion and has to debate with himself about which lover to choose. These self-debates suggest that his consciousness is divided. Margaret Fitzpatrick uses John Locke's theory of 'unity of consciousness'<sup>46</sup> to comment on Endymion's loss of identity. She explains Locke's theory of the incompatibility of two consciousnesses, of which one appears by day, and the other, 'the second consciousness', appears by night via sleep or dreaming. This incompatibility explains the existence in a single individual of a multiple consciousness. Fitzpatrick contends that Locke's idea of the second consciousness explains Endymion's loss of self. That is to say, his passion overwhelms his ability to sustain a clear and unified consciousness of which lover to choose. His greatest conflict occurs in Book IV.<sup>47</sup> Fitzpatrick's point is persuasive and provides a valuable perspective from which to analyse Endymion's disintegrated self.

Keats's narrative strategies are designed to show the way in which Endymion's divided consciousness reflects his struggle for selfhood. His passion drives him and his soul is 'powerless' (II, 702) to extricate him from the predicament. In this sense, his pursuit seems to become a pursuit for passion, not only a pursuit for beauty. His passion becomes more overpowering when he is alone to contemplate what has passed. The gnawing feelings of sadness and solitude grip him and he becomes more preoccupied with these sufferings. A passage can aptly substantiate this point: 'There, when new wonders ceas'd to float before, / And thoughts of self came on, how crude and sore / The journey homeward to habitual self!' (II, 274-76). The language combines a characteristic blend of sympathy and detachment. Keats allows us to feel his hero's gnawing sense of loss as 'new wonders ceas'd to float before', a way of putting it that captures the floating of those 'new wonders' in the immediate past. At

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<sup>46</sup> See Margaret Ann Fitzpatrick, 'The Problem of "Identity" in Keats's "Negative Capability"', *Dalhousie Review*, 61, 1 (1981), 43-45.

<sup>47</sup> Fitzpatrick, 46.

the same time, a more disillusioned note enters the poem in the next line's reference to 'The journey homeward to habitual self', where the narrator sounds unmistakably more aware than the hero who is undergoing the 'journey homeward'. Though Endymion may be a double for Keats, this does not mean that he or his narrator can be identified with Endymion. When the surrounded beautiful scenes or wonders signify nothing to him, Endymion fears the relapse of the 'habitual' or 'old' feelings of solitude. The habitual feelings of solitude are those he has before when he first sees the beautiful dream-vision, which occurs in Book I. Thus he wishes to take refuge in his passion. In addition, the old 'habitual self' (II, 276) is inadequate, but the 'new self' which he has after seeing the moon is an aspiration for him. He wishes to develop a new subjectivity. Put differently, Endymion has been fascinated by the 'completed form of all completeness', and feels unsatisfied with his present life. This mental outlook anticipates that of the poet-narrator who loathes returning to his mundane world after his imaginative journey with the bird in the 'Ode to the Nightingale' (1819).<sup>48</sup> From this angle, we can understand the reason why Endymion decides to quest for the vision because he wishes to 'complete' his life. But during the quest, he projects his passion upon the beautiful figure he immediately sees and imagines her as the persona of the moon goddess. Though he questions the figure's identity, that of the unknown goddess (II, 753) or that of the Indian Maid (IV, 623), he still succumbs to his passion.

In Book IV, being greatly driven by his passion, his identity becomes the most disintegrated and he appears to lose a sense of proportion. Keats is able here, through his quickening of pace and narrative complications, to show his hero as agonizingly perplexed by his passion for the moon goddess and the Maid. He is aware of his

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<sup>48</sup> Allott connects the loss of identity of Endymion to the narrator's mindset in the 'Ode to a Nightingale' (ll. 71-72). See *Allott*, p. 155, note to line I, 799.

dilemma and of a possible betrayal of his dream-vision. His identity becomes a ‘triple soul’ (IV, 95). He expresses the escapist wish that he were dead in order not to be in such a quandary. The following passage reflects Endymion’s crisis:

“Why am I not as are the dead,  
Since to a woe like this I have been led  
Through the dark earth, and through the wondrous sea?  
Goddess! I love thee not the less.....  
.....  
.....  
I have a triple soul! O fond pretence—  
For both, for both my love is so immense,  
I feel my heart is cut for them in twain.”

(IV, 89-97)

He cries in frustration as he utters ‘fond pretence’ (IV, 95) instead of ‘love’ and this indicates that he is deeply divided against himself. His passion, from this perspective, seems to lack balance. Such an imbalance is earlier seen in his dialogue with Peona concerning his longing for the moon. His subjectivity does not seem integrated. He even questions his identity as he utters: “‘What is this soul then? .../ It does not seem my own, and I / Have no self-passion or identity’” (IV, 475-77). Owing to his ruling passion, his consciousness indeed has become divided.

There are two aspects to Endymion’s disproportionate passion. First, Endymion seems afraid of missing the ‘kernel of his hopes’ (II, 146). He avidly falls in love with a beautiful figure who appears in sight without questioning. His selfhood seems to come to a dead end. In this way, there appears a paradox. What Endymion falls in love

with may not be his true love, no matter how anxious he is to fall in love. This resembles the ways in which Keats describes a traveller's futile journey (II, 142-59). The traveller is impatient to reach his destination, but paradoxically, if he is too keen on it, he will miss it (II, 142-46). The connection between this description and Keats's procedure in the poem is engaging. His mode of narration requires us to recognise that too ardent a pursuit may lead to disappointment and that to find our way we must be prepared to lose it.

The second aspect is that Endymion appears to be simply led by his vision and by circumstances. Keats's letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon is helpful here:

*in Endymion I think you may have many bits of the deep and sentimental cast—the nature of Hyperion will lead me to treat it in a more naked and grecian Manner—and the march of passion and endeavour will be undeviating—and one great contrast between them will be—that the Hero of the written tale being mortal is led on, like Buonaparte, by circumstance; whereas the Apollo in Hyperion being a fore-seeing God will shape his actions like one.*

(L I, 207; italics mine, referring to Keats's comment on *Endymion*)

In the poem, Endymion is spurred on by his conviction of the beautiful vision. He exemplifies Keats's belief in 'sensations' and is a product of this belief since passion utterly dominates Endymion's self-consciousness. Circumstances also help shape Endymion's fate. His self is incapable of disentangling himself from the trap of passion for the beautiful.

The collapse of Endymion's identity, by analogy, also relates to the disintegrated identity of the poet-narrator Keats. Keats seems to explore what he

senses to be his lack of accomplished skills via Endymion in a skillful way. In this respect, in Book I, Endymion's debates with Peona on the truthfulness of his dream can help us understand Keats's divided self-consciousness, and eventually, his immature skills which are shown in Book IV. In fact, those questions might be regarded as metapoetic, as involving self-presentation by Keats about his vision of being a poet. Paradoxically, such self-inquiry and self-doubt are the basis for his poetry's imaginative power. Keats projects such queries onto Endymion's quest. In Book I, Peona's appearance may be connected to Keats's self-doubts. Keats seems to use her as a reality check to his ambition. Peona criticizes Endymion's dream-vision, and in parallel, she appears to ventriloquize Keats's interrogation of the feasibility of his plan of a poetic career. Peona's pragmatism, that is to say, seems to be another consciousness of Keats. She enhances Keats's concerns and inner conflicts with his poetic identity in *Endymion*.

Keats's preoccupations with his status as a poet and his imagination's struggles, nevertheless, are revealed most evidently in Book IV. In this book, great tension exists in Endymion's choice between the moon goddess and the Indian Maid. The denouement becomes dramatic. Critics all agree that the conclusion is problematic as Keats merges the Moon goddess with the Indian Maid. Sperry reads the denouement as an anticlimactic and '*dea ex machina*' conclusion;<sup>49</sup> and for Wolfson it is an abrupt end.<sup>50</sup> Barnard observes that this merging is confusing.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the revelation scene baffles the reader. Sperry explains that Keats was tired after seven months of writing,<sup>52</sup> whereas Bennett suggests that, as noted, Keats demonstrated instability in narrative owing to the tense problem in Book IV.<sup>53</sup> But the revelation scene, I would

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<sup>49</sup> Sperry, pp. 111, 115.

<sup>50</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 250.

<sup>51</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 35

<sup>52</sup> Sperry, p. 111.

<sup>53</sup> Bennett, pp. 80-81.

suggest, warrants a positive critical response in that it enacts both the sense of confusion and the trust in a positive outcome which give the poem its remarkably vital originality. The scene also reaffirms Keats's belief in his Principle of Beauty, the equation of beauty and truth as well as the veracity of the visionary imagination.

We can, nevertheless, read Endymion's choice and the merging as highly symbolic acts from the perspective of Keats. Sperry, Waldoff, and Wolfson interpret Endymion's choice from the perspective of Keats's distrust of the visionary quest.<sup>54</sup> Sperry also comments that Keats's aesthetics matured in the end.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, he and Barnard see Endymion as a 'down-to-earth' lover.<sup>56</sup> Their interpretations may provide a helpful clue to our understanding of Keats's creative use of narrative. Barnard argues that Endymion prefers the Indian Maid to the moon goddess because the Maid is an embodiment of the mundane world. According to this reading, Keats is an earthly poet because he may be aware of the lack of substantiality in the purely imaginative vision. For Keats, the dream object can be elusive and protean like the moon goddess, the unknown goddess, or the Indian Maid. The moon goddess, predominantly, represents one of Keats's key words 'beauty' or 'Sensations', while the Indian Maid, mainly, represents his idea of 'truth' or 'Thoughts'. Endymion's choice strengthens Keats's awareness of the problems posed by the visionary imagination. Yet from another point of view, this merger, symbolically, is Keats's desire for the coalescence of beauty and truth. The narrative complications, put differently, reflect the fact that Keats is showing Endymion as he is in pursuit of beauty and truth. The pursuit is consummately embodied by the merging as it symbolizes the fusion of beauty and truth. In this regard, in Book IV, Keats makes Endymion return to the earth, become aware of his illusory pursuit, and choose the

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<sup>54</sup> See Sperry, p. 113; Waldoff, 'most serious doubt', p. 57; and Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 242.

<sup>55</sup> Sperry, p. 113.

<sup>56</sup> See Sperry, p. 110; and Barnard, *John Keats*, pp. 40-41.



earthly Indian Maid. The following verses illustrate Endymion's transformed view of his former visionary longing: "I have clung / To nothing, lov'd a nothing, nothing seen / Or felt but a great dream!" (IV, 636-38). Endymion expresses his disappointment with his dream-vision. That is the reason why Endymion abandons his visionary quest for the moon goddess and chooses the Indian Maid instead. Endymion further utters, "gone and past / Are cloudy phantasms" (IV, 650-51). He wishes to bid farewell to dreams, saying "Adieu, my daintiest Dream!" (IV, 666). This motif of dream-vision and reality foretells the scene in 'Ode to a Nightingale' as the poet-narrator, determinedly, also bids farewell to the 'deceiving' fancy three times ('Ode to a Nightingale', 73-75).<sup>57</sup> Endymion expects the down-to-earth Indian Maid to 'redeem' (IV, 649) him from his visionary longing, and to give him the sense of reality since he hankers after 'one sigh of real breath' (IV, 665). He assumes a desired at-oneness with nature, finding maturity in the act of awakening from dream and stepping into reality. Keats, however, organizes his narrative to suggest that in many ways dream is part of reality. And if his ending has the effect of a wish-fulfilment, it also points up the likely schism and unlikely but desired connection between dream and reality.

Though Barnard suggests that Keats entered a 'purgatory blind'<sup>58</sup> as he had an intellectual crisis after finishing *Endymion*,<sup>59</sup> Sperry and Wolfson argue that Keats had learned positively from composing *Endymion*. Sperry says that Keats learned the coexistence of pain and pleasure,<sup>60</sup> whereas Wolfson uses Keats's own words and explains that Keats expects to compose 'with judgment hereafter' (L I, 374).<sup>61</sup>

Yet Keats's imagination's struggles for questioning his poetic identity seem to

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<sup>57</sup> The text of 'Ode to a Nightingale' is as follows: 'Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf. / Adieu! adieu!' (ll. 73-75).

<sup>58</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 55.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>60</sup> Sperry, p. 114.

<sup>61</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 251.

involve more than his promise to the reader in the published Preface. He seems to show an ambivalent attitude via his narrative towards his striving for poetic identity as it requires the reader's response to *Endymion*. In his published Preface to *Endymion*, Keats promises his readers that he will improve his 'immature' skills. He seems to respect his readers. But in his rejected Preface, Keats shows two antipodal attitudes towards the reading public. First he said that 'I have written....for a love of fame',<sup>62</sup> and this indicates that he wishes to have the reader's recognition. But in the same preface, he also exhibits the opposite side of his idea of readership, towards whom he was dismissive.<sup>63</sup> His dismissive attitude may shed light on his will to become a poet. Two examples from the rejected Preface can illustrate Keats's distrust of his readership. First, Keats employs the case of Thomas Chatterton to criticize that poet's unappreciative readers. Keats said in the Dedication of the rejected Preface:

**'INSCRIBED, / WITH EVERY FEELING OF PRIDE AND REGRET/ AND WITH  
'A BOWED MIND', / TO THE MEMORY OF/ THE MOST ENGLISH OF POETS  
EXCEPT SHAKESPEARE, / THOMAS CHATTERTON'**. For Keats, Chatterton is as important as Shakespeare. But Keats recognized that when Chatterton was alive, his great poetic genius was neglected by his readership and he therefore died young.<sup>64</sup>

Second, Keats does not seem satisfied with the reception of his debut volume

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<sup>62</sup> See *Barnard*, p. 507. The rejected Preface was originally written on 19 March 1818 and was sent to the publishers on 21 March 1818.

<sup>63</sup> See *Barnard*, p. 506; and Keats's letter (*L I*, 266-67).

<sup>64</sup> See Keats's lament over Chatterton in 'Oh Chatterton! how very sad thy fate' (1815): 'Oh Chatterton! how very sad thy fate! / Dear child of sorrow! son of misery! / How soon the film of death obscur'd that eye, / Whence genius wildly flash'd, and high debate! / How soon that voice, majestic and elate, / Melted in dying murmurs! O how nigh / Was night to thy fair morning! Thou didst die / A half-blown flower, which cold blasts amate. / But this is past. Thou art among the stars / Of highest heaven; to the rolling spheres / Thou sweetly singest—nought thy hymning mars / Above the ingrate world and human fears. / On earth the good man base detraction bars / From thy fair name, and waters it with tears!'; in 'To George Felton Mathew' (1815): 'And sit, and rhyme and think on Chatterton' (l. 56); in 'Sleep and Poetry' (1816): 'To some lone spirits who could proudly sing / Their youth away, and die?' (ll. 218-19); and his special comments on Chatterton's poetic genius in his letters: 'I always somehow associate Chatterton with autumn. He is the purest writer in the English Language. He has no French idiom, or particles like Chaucer['s]—'tis genuine English Idiom in English words' (*L II*, 167), and 'The purest english I think—or what ought to be the purest—is Chatterton's' (*L II*, 212).

*Poems* (1817). Perhaps he thought that his contemporary readers did not appreciate his first collection and this made him anxious. He disclosed such an authorial anxiety<sup>65</sup> through the reception of his first volume in the following passage:

About a twelve month since, I published a little book of verses;<sup>66</sup> it was read by some dozen of my friends who lik'd it; and some dozen whom I was unacquainted with, who did not. Now, when a dozen human beings are at words with another dozen, it becomes a matter of anxiety to side with one's friends...I fought under disadvantages.<sup>67</sup>

Keats's anxiety of authorship and of his anxiety about being a popular author reinforces his ambivalent feelings about his readers. He seems to criticize his unappreciative readers but he also craves their approval. His scepticism regarding the reader was revealed in his letter to Reynolds of 9 April 1818, one day earlier than his published Preface. Keats honestly shared his thought about the reason why he detested writing a preface: 'a Preface is written to the Public; a thing I cannot help looking upon as an Enemy, and which I cannot address without feelings of Hostility' (*L I*, 266-67). He refuses to please the reader because he hates 'the idea of humility to them' (*L I*, 267), and he proclaims that 'I never wrote one single Line of Poetry with the least Shadow of public thought' (*L I*, 267). But, ironically, these remarks to Reynolds contradict what he writes in his rejected Preface. In the Preface, about three weeks earlier than his letter to Reynolds, Keats asserted, 'I have written to please

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<sup>65</sup> Nicholas Roe has a paper discussing Keats's authorial responsibilities in terms of 'prospective' and 'former' selves in his rejected Preface, but he does not discuss the question of authorial anxiety. See Nicholas Roe, 'John Keats and George Felton Mathew: Poetics, Politics, and the *European Magazine*', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 49 (2000), 45.

<sup>66</sup> This means Keats's first collection: *Poems* (1817).

<sup>67</sup> See *Barnard*, p. 506.

myself and in hopes to please others.’<sup>68</sup> Keats shows opposing feelings in his poetic identity.

Keats’s unappreciative readership perhaps makes him more sympathetic to Chatterton. Keats probably projects his unpopularity among the general unappreciative readers onto those of Chatterton.<sup>69</sup> In addition, Keats perhaps associates his being a poetic novice with the similar background of Chatterton: both have poetic genius, both are striving to establish their status as poets despite being young and inexperienced latecomers, and both are seeking recognition from the reading public. This self-projection is made clear in his remark on the possible questioning from his prospective critical readers of *Endymion* since Keats defended himself, ‘Should any one call my dedication to Chatterton affected I answer as followeth, “Were I dead, sir, I should like a Book dedicated to me”’.<sup>70</sup> Keats seems to make an accurate prediction of his being remembered because later Shelley dedicated his *Adonais* to Keats. Shelley’s dedication to Keats results from the scathing criticism of Keats’s unappreciative readers.

*Endymion* is a work about the quest for beauty and truth. In his ‘A Defence of Poetry’, Shelley contended that ‘to be a poet is to apprehend the true and the beautiful’. In *Endymion*, Keats exemplifies this eternal mission of a poet via his protagonist Endymion. Endymion’s pursuit for beauty and his verification of the truthfulness of the imagination are central motifs in the poem and in Keats’s later poetry, albeit attended by qualifications. Far from being defective, the poem’s spacious form is ‘creative of essential Beauty’ (*L I*, 184).

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<sup>68</sup> Barnard, p. 507.

<sup>69</sup> Wolfson also argues that Keats is afraid that he may have the same fate like that of Chatterton. See Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 229.

<sup>70</sup> Barnard, p. 507.

## Chapter Three

### Digressions in 'Isabella': Keats as a Modern Narrator

'Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil' (1818) is a significant poem in Keats's development as a poetic narrator conscious of writing in a new, modern way. Since its publication in 1820, 'Isabella' has invited antithetical reviews. The *Monthly Review* commented on it as 'the worst part'<sup>1</sup> in Keats's last volume *Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems* (1820), whereas Charles Lamb considered that it was the 'finest thing' of the collection.<sup>2</sup> The Victorian chief literary critic Matthew Arnold disapproved of the vacuity of its poetic actions, but commended the exquisite language exhibited in 'Isabella'.<sup>3</sup> From the perspectives of feminism, historicism, Marxism, or psychoanalysis,<sup>4</sup> twentieth-century critics mainly focus on the thematic oppositions between the capitalist brothers and the innocent young lovers and the historico-political background. Except for Susan Wolfson's holistically cogent argument about its digressions,<sup>5</sup> there is inadequate discussion of the function of digressions in 'Isabella'. In this chapter I shall argue that digressions constitute a vital

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<sup>1</sup> This was an unsigned review in *Monthly Review* (July 1820). See Matthews, p. 162.

<sup>2</sup> This comment was an unsigned review by Charles Lamb, which appeared in *New Times* (19 July 1820). See Matthews, p. 157.

<sup>3</sup> This comment appeared in Matthew Arnold's Preface to his first edition of *Poems* (1853) in 1853. See Matthews, pp. 326-27.

<sup>4</sup> A feminist approach is offered by Kelvin Everest, 'Isabella in the market-place: Keats and feminism', in *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 107-26; historicist approaches can be found in Greg Kucich, 'Keats's literary tradition and the politics of historiographical invention', in *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 238-61, and Michael Sider, 'Isabella and the Dialogism of Romance', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 22, 3 (2000), 329-56; the Marxist papers are by Daniel P. Watkins, 'Personal Life and Social Authority in Keats's *Isabella*', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, 11, 1 (1987), 33-49, and Michael LaGory, 'Wormy Circumstance: Symbolism in Keats's *Isabella*', *Studies in Romanticism*, 34, 3 (1995), 321-42; and the psychoanalysis paper is by Diane Long Hoeveler, 'Decapitating Romance: Class, Fetish, and Ideology in Keats's *Isabella*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 49, 3 (1994), 321-38.

<sup>5</sup> Susan Wolfson, 'Keats's *Isabella* and the "Digressions" of "Romance"', *Criticism*, 27, 3 (1985), 247-61 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Keats's *Isabella*').

part in 'Isabella'. Superficially, its digressions are aberrations or even violations of generic conventions, but paradoxically, digressions in 'Isabella' highlight Keats's unique imagination as a modern poet, a poet who is different from his neo-classic predecessors or earlier literary masters by employing narrative strategies that are alert to the poet's belatedness, his sense of coming after other poets and having to find a new and appropriate idiom.

In order to grasp what is at stake in the poem's use of digressions, we need to examine Keats's distinctive imagination in 'Isabella', which is reflected in his management of details. The early twentieth-century poet Edward Thomas lauds 'Isabella' as 'a masterpiece'.<sup>6</sup> He claims that 'there had been no such layer upon layer of richness, corporeal and incorporeal, since Spenser'.<sup>7</sup> This alertness to the co-existence of the 'corporeal and incorporeal' is more relevant to an understanding of the poem's achievement than Jack Stillinger's judgement that 'Isabella' is Keats's 'last large poetic failure'.<sup>8</sup> Keats shows virtuoso skills in managing the whole effect of the poem, manifesting an imaginative power that is arresting and singular. This singular power shows itself in his use of single words. Foreshadowing tragedy in the phrase 'quiet glooms' (152), for instance, he repeats the word 'gloom' another three times: 'drowsy gloom' (273), 'spangly gloom' (326), and 'cypress glooms' (439). Each time the word carries a suggestive and profound darkness as it connotes a charged if calculatedly obscure power. In this way, the dreariness seems to permeate the whole stanza and deepens the sadness of the plot. Keats's management of the gloomy atmosphere is remarkable, and may explain why Thomas considers that 'Isabella' is a 'very still' poem.<sup>9</sup> The word 'gloom', however, also anticipates the description

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<sup>6</sup> Edward Thomas, *Keats* (1916; Cheltenham: Cyder Press, 1999), p. 48.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>8</sup> Jack Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 31 (hereafter abbreviated as *Hoodwinking of Madeline*).

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, p. 49.

‘verdurous glooms’ (40) in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (1819). It suggests the lushness and perennality of the bird’s realm and serves as a sharp foil to the poet-narrator’s mutable human world. Keats’s choice and management of detail shows his design for the poem, so do his digressions in ‘Isabella’.

Digression is intimately connected with form and the role of the author. In an influential essay, Northrop Frye expounds that the unity of a work of art ‘has form, and consequently a formal cause’.<sup>10</sup> He considers that the artist is primarily ‘its efficient cause’.<sup>11</sup> In fact, Byron has a similar view. In Byron’s *Don Juan*, he mockingly says that ‘But let me to my story: I must own, / If I have any fault, it is digression’ (III, 857-58). In this excerpt, he shows the essential relationship between form and the poet. On the surface, Byron appears to assert that the form of digression is faulty. But fundamentally, as an author, he seems to justify the use of digression, implying that he can express something freely and truly in digressions in a way that would be prohibited were he to adhere to the major narrative line. By doing so, digressions add colours and dimensions to the story. In his *Don Juan*, Byron uses digressions to comment on the contemporary scenes in a humorous and satirical way. In this context, I would argue that in ‘Isabella’, Keats’s use of digressions is not a fault but has its particular function. The use strongly ties with his role as a modern narrator.

We can understand ‘Isabella’ in light of the history of digression. Digression has its tradition in the classical literature and it is a rhetorical figure. For the Greeks, the word *parecbasis* has two senses: it either refers to the moral transgression as in the *Oresteia* and in Aristotle’s works, or a deviation from a formal subject, a sense which

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<sup>10</sup> Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1963), p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

is also employed by Aristotle.<sup>12</sup> In ancient Roman time, the Greek word *parecbasis* has certain variations, such as *digressio*, *excursus*, and *egression*. It means a ‘digressive or interpolated tale’.<sup>13</sup> According to Cicero, it is used in oratory and rhetoric and it may function as a formal transition. Such a function is later used by the medieval and Renaissance preachers.<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub* is in this literary tradition. In this work, there are many digressions: five sections out of twelve in the *Tale* are digressions.<sup>15</sup> And they serve as transitions between the main story and his comments on society. Swift is mockingly aware of the significance of digressions as he, in particular, entitles his Section VII as ‘Digression in Praise of Digression’.

Keats seems to have read *A Tale of a Tub* and to have been influenced by Swift’s form, as is suggested by his remark on Hazlitt’s criticism of *A Tale of a Tub*. He attended William Hazlitt’s lecture<sup>16</sup> and in the lecture, Hazlitt especially commented on Swift’s Lord Peter and Rabelais’s Friar John: ‘there is some resemblance between Lord Peter in the Tale of a Tub, and Rabelais’ Friar John...’.<sup>17</sup> In his letter of 21 February 1818 to his brother and sister-in-law, Keats commented that Hazlitt gave ‘a very fine piece of discriminating criticism on Swift, Voltaire And Rabelais’ (*L I*, 237).

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<sup>12</sup> Anne Cotterill, *Digressive Voices in Early Modern English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 31.

<sup>15</sup> The word ‘digression’, in fact, appears in many sections of *A Tale of a Tub*. For example, Section III is with the title, ‘A Digression Concerning Critics’; Section V, ‘A Digression in the Modern Kind’; Section VII, ‘A Digression in Praise of Digressions’; Section IX, ‘A Digression Concerning the Original, the Use, and Improvement of Madness in a Commonwealth’; and Section X, ‘A Farther Digression’.

<sup>16</sup> The lecture took place on 17 February 1818. See Rollins, *L*, p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> The passage concerning this part is as follows: ‘there is some resemblance between Lord Peter in the Tale of a Tub, and Rabelais’ Friar John; but in general they are all three authors of a substantive character in themselves. Swift’s wit (particularly in his chief prose works) was serious, saturnine, and practical; Rabelais’ was fantastical and joyous; Voltaire’s was light, sportive, and verbal. Swift’s wit was the wit of sense; Rabelais’, the wit of nonsense; Voltaire’s, of indifference to both.’ See William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets and a View of the English Stage*, ed. P. P. Howe after the edn of A.R. Waller and A. Glover, vol.5 of *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, 21 vols (London: Dent, 1930), p. 112 (hereafter abbreviated as Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*).



In addition, the lecture date is very suggestive as it coincides with the compositional time of 'Isabella'. According to the definitive text of Keats's poetry, *John Keats: Complete Poems* (1978), Stillinger suggests that Keats perhaps composed 'Isabella' between February and April 1818.<sup>18</sup> Keats might have been influenced by Hazlitt's discussion of Swift's wit and satire and he then adopted the digressive style in his 'Isabella'.

Equally relevant to Keats's adoption of digressions may be his reading of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. This influential work shapes Keats's understanding of what it is to be a modern writer.<sup>19</sup> Keats seems impressed by *Tristram Shandy* because he cited the work in his letters twice (*L I*, 160; *I*, 245). We should also note that in his letter to John Hamilton Reynolds in March 1818 (*L I*, 245), the time again coincides with that of the compositional time of 'Isabella'. Though Keats's 'Isabella' is a poem and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is a prose work, there is something in common in these two works. Keats uses *ottava rima* and the tradition of this poetic form connects these two authors together. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*,<sup>20</sup> *ottava rima* was used for heroic poetry in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; and later Byron, when employing this poetic form, added elements of comedy, mock-heroic irony, and seriousness in his *Beppo* and *Don Juan*. In the 'Introduction', I suggest that Keats might have been influenced by *Beppo* when adopting *ottava rima* in 'Isabella'. In this regard, the tone in this romance shows the characteristics of the poetic form, as I will develop later. Like *A Tale of a Tub*, the narrative in *Tristram Shandy* is not linear but deviates from its subject. And *Tristram Shandy* has more digressions. Sterne is aware of his digressive style as he defends

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<sup>18</sup> *CPStillinger*, p. 441.

<sup>19</sup> See also Wolfson, 'Keats's *Isabella*', 252.

<sup>20</sup> See *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*  
<<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/434804/ottava-rima>>, accessed on 19.16.11.

himself in the book: 'By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too, —and at the same time'.<sup>21</sup> The explanation here, as ever in Sterne, has an element of agile mockery. In Keats, this tone passes into a more self-watchful if gravely humorous self-awareness about writing romance. That said, the plot of 'Isabella', like that of *Tristram Shandy*, goes forward and backward owing to its digressions.

In 'Isabella', digressions are a complex issue. Wolfson, in line with Stillinger, argues that Keats is 'anti-romance'<sup>22</sup> or even 'meta-romance'.<sup>23</sup> She argues that Keats digresses in 'Isabella' as he wishes to redefine the medieval romance presented by Boccaccio as a modern narrator.<sup>24</sup> Yet Diane Long Hoeveler sees Keats's digressions as a 'mockery' of Boccaccio.<sup>25</sup> In this poem, I would argue, Keats's allusions to Boccaccio do not function as mockery of his medieval literary predecessor. Rather, as Wolfson has observed, Keats is self-conscious about his status as a modern poet and wishes to differentiate himself from Boccaccio. I would thus develop this point further. Moreover, if we put 'Isabella' and *Endymion* (1818) together and discuss 'Isabella' from the perspective of continuation from *Endymion*, the stance of adopting digressions may be more complex than it seems to be. We can also have a better vantage point of understanding the digressions in 'Isabella'.

After *Endymion*, 'Isabella' is Keats's first long narrative poem and there are links between these two works. They can be related in three areas: both are romances;

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<sup>21</sup> Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, ed. Howard Anderson (New York: Norton, 1980), p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> Wolfson's theory accords with Stillinger's. See Wolfson, 'Keats's *Isabella*', 250-51; and Stillinger, *Hoodwinking of Madeline*, pp. 31-45, for the original discussion.

<sup>23</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 285.

<sup>24</sup> Wolfson particularly discusses the redefining of a romance in relation to this idea of being a 'modern poet'. See Wolfson, 'Keats's *Isabella*', 250-53, 257-59.

<sup>25</sup> Hoeveler, 337.

both are criticized for their digressions; and both show Keats's authorial art as deliberate and original. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a romance is 'often overlaid with long disquisitions and digressions'.<sup>26</sup> In this regard, though *Endymion* is much attacked owing to its wandering form, Keats, from another perspective, is fulfilling his role as a romance poet. His intention of having a 'little Region to wander' (L I, 170) for his readers also confirms his idea of the form of a romance. In 'Isabella', though the poem has a more compact narrative texture than *Endymion* does, he still digresses.

Critics have different views concerning the grouping of digressions in 'Isabella'. Miriam Allott, however, does not use the term 'digression' to indicate Keats's intentional change of the subject. Instead, she uses the term 'insertions' and she says that there are four 'insertions' in 'Isabella'. They are stanzas 12 to 13, 16 to 20, 49, and 55 to 56.<sup>27</sup> Yet Wolfson has a different grouping. For Wolfson, stanzas 12 to 13, 19 to 20, 49, 55 to 56 and 61 are the digressive stanzas.<sup>28</sup> In my view, there are two kinds of digressions — the major and the minor digressions — and they perform different roles. The major ones, which include stanzas 19, 20, and 49, clearly display Keats's proclamation of his stance as a contemporary poet. The poet's authorial presence, the first person point of view, is strongly to the fore in these stanzas. The minor digressions, stanzas 12 to 13, 16 to 18, 55 to 56, and 61,<sup>29</sup> have their own functions: these include foreshadowing and reinforcement of the plot, and emotional intensification. Like the major digressions, they 'intrude' into the text and indirectly underline Keats's status as a modern teller.

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<sup>26</sup> See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (1989). Print. The definition of a 'romance' is as follows: 'II 3. A fictitious narrative in prose of which the scene and incidents are very remote from those of ordinary life; esp. one of the class prevalent in the 16th and 17th centuries, in which the story is often overlaid with long disquisitions and digressions. Also occas., a long poem of a similar type.'

<sup>27</sup> See Allott, p. 332, note to lines 89-104.

<sup>28</sup> Wolfson, 'Keats's *Isabella*', 249-50.

<sup>29</sup> See Allott, p. 332, note to lines 89-104; and Wolfson, 'Keats's *Isabella*', 249-50.

In 'Isabella', Keats, implicitly or explicitly, shows his authorial design and assurance in his digressions. By doing so, Keats demonstrates autonomy as a modern writer. In his published Preface to *Endymion*, Keats explicitly discloses his feelings of belatedness and anxiety of influence as a young poet. But in 'Isabella', he explicitly describes his purpose in writing 'Isabella'; and, implicitly, he demonstrates a kind of authorial assertiveness.<sup>30</sup> This kind of authorial confidence appears as an apology, but, paradoxically, this apologetic modesty accentuates his confidence as a modern poet.<sup>31</sup> The first major digression, stanzas 19 and 20, will serve as an example:

19

O eloquent and famed Boccaccio!

Of thee we now should ask forgiving boon,

And of thy spicy myrtle as they blow,

And of thy roses amorous of the moon,

And of thy lilies, that do paler grow

Now they can no more hear thy ghittern's tune,

For venturing syllables that ill beseem

The quiet glooms of such a piteous theme.

20

Grant thou a pardon here, and then the tale

Shall move on soberly, as it is meet;

There is no other crime, no mad assail

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<sup>30</sup> See Kurt Heinzelman, 'Self-interest and the Politics of Composition in Keats's *Isabella*', *Journal of English Literary History*, 55, 1 (1988), 174.

<sup>31</sup> LaGory also has a similar view to mine. He suggests that Keats's invocation to Boccaccio is 'an expression of personal identity'. See LaGory, 337.

To make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet:  
But it is done—succeed the verse or fail—  
To honour thee, and thy gone spirit greet;  
To stead thee as a verse in English tongue,  
An echo of thee in the north-wind sung.

(145-60)

In stanza 19, he purposely diverts from his storytelling of the opposition between the capitalist brothers and the young lovers. But he interpolates his invocation to Boccaccio: ‘O eloquent and famed Boccaccio! / Of thee we now should ask forgiving boon’. In this way, he breaks the sequence and alerts the reader to his authorial presence.<sup>32</sup> In addition to the conventional request for Boccaccio’s pardon, Keats conveys a sense of his own poetic voice and introduces his design for the poem. He wishes to challenge Boccaccio since he attempts to re-write Boccaccio’s story in the English language. In this respect, his syllables are ‘venturing’ not only because he wishes to redo an Italian romance but also to ‘stead’, to substitute, Boccaccio’s narrative in the English tongue. Moreover, he expects that his new fashioning will make the old romance in modern language sweeter. His ambition is obvious in this poem as he assures himself that such a reformulating of the original story is ‘no other crime, no mad assail’. In the act of seeming to pay homage to Boccaccio, whether he succeeds or fails in the romance, Keats shows an assertive authorial autonomy in these digressive stanzas and his daring spirit displays his purpose. In effect, his self-assurance is earlier seen in his fair copy where he describes his topic in ‘Isabella’ as a ‘daring theme’ (*PoemsStillinger*, 152).<sup>33</sup> The ambition shown in ‘Isabella’ is

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<sup>32</sup> Barnard discusses those authorial interpolations as gaps between Boccaccio and Keats. See Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 78.

<sup>33</sup> *PoemsStillinger*, p. 250, note to lines 151-52.

completely opposite to his misgivings when he embarked on *Endymion*. The experimental spirit, nevertheless, is the same. In his letter to James Hessey of 8 October 1818, when *Endymion* was denigrated, Keats protested that he had written the work ‘independently’ (L I, 374). He would not, therefore, be affected by any ‘Praise or blame’ (L I, 373). In ‘Isabella’, full of the ‘form-seeking’ spirit which Arnold ascribes to his style,<sup>34</sup> he adapts Boccaccio’s tale to his needs by consciously foregrounding his stance as a narrator.

Yet when adapting the old romance to his new tale, Keats encounters difficulty: there is the question of inclusion. But paradoxically, such a difficulty accentuates his status as a contemporary writer. In stanza 49, another major digression, the story swerves. It abruptly breaks off from the narrative of the graveyard scene and the poet poses questions about which details to include:

Ah! wherefore all this wormy circumstance?

Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?

O for the gentleness of old Romance,

The simple plaining of a minstrel’s song!

Fair reader, at the old tale take a glance,

For here, in truth, it doth not well belong

To speak: —O turn thee to the very tale,

And taste the music of that vision pale.

(385-92)

In these lines Keats’s narrative voice intrudes again: ‘Ah! wherefore all this wormy

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<sup>34</sup> In his letter of around 1 March 1849, Arnold calls Keats ‘a form and style seeker’. See Matthews, p. 326.

circumstance? / Why linger at the yawning tomb so long?'. Keats seems perplexed; he affects to hesitate over the ways in which he should recount the story. Hence he initiates a debate within himself concerning what is expected in the old romance and in the new story. This creates a dramatic effect and emphasizes Keats's self-consciousness. First he acknowledges the simplicity of old romance because he notes in it 'the gentleness of old Romance' and '[t]he simple plaining of a minstrel's song'. As he indicates in stanzas 19 and 20, he questions the nature of 'old Romance' and wishes to challenge its conventions in stanza 49. He then considers his story may not be appropriate for the modern reader because he wishes to include the grotesque details, the 'wormy circumstance'. He then reveals his doubts by saying 'in truth, it doth not well belong / To speak'. This statement, I would suggest, is an affected apology. Keats desires to include grotesque details in his modern romance, even if they were not present in the original. He wishes to differentiate his romance from Boccaccio's old tale, and yet allows for the beauty of that old tale as he asks his 'fair reader' to 'taste the [his] music of that vision pale', referring to Boccaccio's work.

There are different views on Keats's narrative problem and his address to the reader in stanza 49. Andrew Bennett maintains that this stanza denotes Keats's double anxiety: his anxiety of audience and of narrative.<sup>35</sup> Kelvin Everest argues that Keats's address to his readers reveals his neurosis and lack of self-assurance.<sup>36</sup> What I would suggest, by contrast, is that Keats may be anxious about the narrative details, yet such a concern will not impede us from realizing the ambition and scope involved in his modern poetic identity. In stanza 49, he not only demonstrates his authorial assurance again but also a kind of dramatic capacity. He appears engaged with his audience. Keats shows his awareness of his readers, addressing them as 'Fair reader[s]'. Perhaps

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<sup>35</sup> See Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, pp. 90-91.

<sup>36</sup> See Everest, p. 108.

he is influenced by Sterne as in *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne uses ‘Sir’, ‘Madam’, or ‘Gentle Critick’ to address his readers. Moreover, ‘Fair reader[s]’ perhaps can be associated with Keats’s consciousness of women readers. Yet Keats uses this mode of address in order to show his concern for fairness and balance in response both to his and Boccaccio’s endeavours, as well as in the process of deciding whether the merchandizing brothers’ deed is fair to the lovers or not. Keats invites the reader’s participation in his tale. Moreover, in accord with his comment on ‘Isabella’ to Richard Woodhouse, he ‘enters [enter] fully into the feeling’ (*L II*, 174) of his characters and into the plot. Furthermore, there is Keats’s insistence on giving his readers a different version of Isabella’s story. These aspects deepen Keats’s self-awareness as a contemporary poet. Keats’s authorial intention and narrative skills as a modern storyteller are further substantiated by the rhetorical devices which he employs in his minor digressions, namely, stanzas 12 to 13, 16 to 18, 55 to 56, and 61. As mentioned, the minor digressions foretell, reinforce, or intensify the plot. The most salient rhetorical devices in these minor digressions are repetitions, parallelism, interjections, apostrophes as well as questions. These rhetorical devices create a dramatic effect among stanzas and between lines. They help to underscore his status as a modern poet. Prior to his composition of ‘Isabella’, in the end of January 1818, Keats began to read *King Lear* again (*L I*, 212). He may be influenced by his readings of Shakespeare<sup>37</sup> or of other Elizabethan poets<sup>38</sup> because he started to employ repetitions and parallelism in his poetry. These two devices are the characteristics of Elizabethan poetry. In addition to such devices, in ‘Isabella,’ Keats uses apostrophes and interjections, which he also employs when writing *Endymion*. Moreover, he uses

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<sup>37</sup> Walter Jackson Bate remarks that the rhetorical devices, which include repetition, parallelism, alliteration, and antithesis, of the Shakespearean sonnets seem to find their places in Keats’s poetry. See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, pp. 298-300.

<sup>38</sup> Allott notes that Keats’s use of repetition may be influenced by Spenser and perhaps also by Fairfax’s translation of Tasso’s *Gerusalemme liberata*. See Allott, p. 328, note to line 3.



rhetorical questions to distinguish his status as a modern poet. In effect, we have already seen Keats's use of this technique in stanza 49, at the point when he asks 'wherefore all this wormy circumstance?' Yet in his minor digressions, Keats uses rhetorical questions on a more significant scale, especially in stanza 16.

Stanzas 12 and 13 are the first minor digressions and they serve as foreshadowing of the plot. In the story, the narrator is like the Greek chorus.<sup>39</sup> He comments on and anticipates the plot while narrating the story. Yet if the narrator changes his directions, it means that he wishes to bring something into focus. At the outset of the story, the narrator concentrates on the love between Lorenzo and Isabella. Their love story continues for eleven stanzas before Keats veers in stanza 12. He poses a rhetorical question: 'Were they unhappy then?' (89), and in this way alerts the reader that something is going to happen to the young lovers. The following lines show this:

Were they unhappy then? —It cannot be—  
Too many tears for lovers have been shed,  
Too many sighs give we to them in fee,  
Too much of pity after they are dead,  
Too many doleful stories do we see,  
Whose matter in bright gold were best be read;  
Except in such a page where Theseus' spouse  
Over the pathless waves towards him bows.

(89-96)

The stanza both turns away from and swerves towards tales of 'unhappy lovers', as

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<sup>39</sup> I hold the same view as Heinzelman. See Heinzelman, 174.

though Keats were compelled to bring to mind an unhappiness he would prefer not to mention, yet cannot but bring to mind since he invokes unhappy lovers to describe the lovers' happy love. That is to say, he uses his classical allusions to the sad and abandoned lovers, Ariadne and Dido, to describe Isabella. The reader is invited to contrast Isabella's and Lorenzo's love with those of Ariadne and Dido. Yet the writing also prompts the reader to wonder whether there are any tears, sighs, or pity involved in their love, or whether Lorenzo and Isabella's story is a 'doleful' one. In this way, Keats aptly hints that their love is going to face an imminent catastrophe.

This foreshadowing of the coming disaster for the young lovers is more elaborated in stanza 13:

But, for the general award of love,  
The little sweet doth kill much bitterness;  
Though Dido silent is in under-grove,  
And Isabella's was a great distress,  
Though young Lorenzo in warm Indian clove  
Was not embalm'd, this truth is not the less—  
Even bees, the little almsmen of spring-bowers,  
Know there is richest juice in poison-flowers.

(97-104)

In this stanza, the first two lines: 'the general award of love, / The little sweet doth kill much bitterness' strongly suggest that the lovers will face a challenge. Its positive inflection cannot wholly ward off the possibility of 'bitterness'. Their love is too happy and it cannot last forever. This foreshadowing is further reinforced in the last two lines: 'Even bees, the little almsmen of spring-bowers, / Know there is richest

juice in poison-flowers'. From this description, the reader is made aware of the impending tragedy for the young lovers — and yet also that there is something of value ('richest juice') in what will ensue.

Though it is the first abrupt transition, stanza 12 displays the importance of the narrator's role and Keats's technique. On the one hand, the reader is conscious of the author's voice. Instead of a statement, Keats makes a comment on the lovers by posing a question, 'Were they unhappy then?'. Even though it is a rhetorical question, this may produce an alien feeling for the reader since he is not prepared to take the narrator's question. It is especially abrupt for the reader to see the incongruity in the narrative sequence as this stanza is the first digression. Keats, as noted, repeats this technique in stanza 49. On the other hand, the use of two other rhetorical devices, parallelism and repetition, intensifies the questioning and further complicates the rough transition. Though Kurt Heinzelman contends that the qualifiers, 'too many', 'little', and others in stanzas 12 and 13, are as 'a mawkishly overdetermined play of quantifying signifiers',<sup>40</sup> I would argue that the stylistic strategies, the repetition of 'Too many' and the parallel structure in lines 90 to 93, reinforce the sense of the question. A look at stanza 12 can illustrate my point about the function of the rhetorical devices:

Were they unhappy then? —It cannot be—

*Too many* tears for lovers have been shed,

*Too many* sighs give we to them in fee,

*Too much* of pity after they are dead,

*Too many* doleful stories do we see,

(89-93; italics mine to emphasize the repetition and parallel structure)

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 180.

The reader will be conscious of the mounting intensity reflected in stanza 12 and be impressed with the complexities of attitude present in a poem that seeks to avoid adding itself to a catalogue of ‘doleful stories’, yet recognizes the likelihood that, for all its jaunty bravura, it will end up in such a catalogue.

When developing the narrative, stanzas 14 to 18 invite a critical debate. Maurice Ridley argues that stanzas 14 to 18, including the omitted stanza, which will be discussed, ‘contribute nothing relevant to the actual story’.<sup>41</sup> His observation seems arbitrary. I would suggest that each stanza has its role in the poem. Though stanzas 16 to 18 are minor digressions, stanzas 14 to 18 depict the greed of Isabella’s two brothers, and they are parts of the main story.

In stanzas 16 to 18, the minor digressions, the narrator’s voice is again distinct. But like stanzas 12 and 13, stanzas 16 to 18 do not, semantically, blend with their neighbouring stanzas. Moreover, stanzas 16 and 18 begin with a rhetorical question. Keats, seemingly, wishes to focus on the issue of the story: the contrast between the capitalist brothers and the innocent lovers. In stanza 16, he questions the brothers’ pride; and in stanza 18, the brothers’ discovery of Lorenzo and Isabella’s ‘stolen love’.<sup>42</sup> In stanza 16, he shifts his focus from delineating the brothers’ wealth, which happens in stanzas 14 and 15, to their pride. We might pause over the following example:

14

With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt,

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<sup>41</sup> Maurice R. Ridley, *Keats’ Craftsmanship: A Study in Poetic Development* (1933; London: Methuen, 1963), p. 29.

<sup>42</sup> Giovanni Boccaccio, *The novels and tales of the renowned John Boccaccio, the first refiner of Italian prose: containing a hundred curious novels, by seven honourable ladies, and three noble gentlemen, framed in ten days*, fifth edition (London: printed for Awnsham Churchill, 1684), p. 183.

Enriched from ancestral merchandize,  
And for them many a weary hand did swelt  
In torched mines and noisy factories,  
And many once proud-quiver'd loins did melt  
In blood from stinging whip; — with hollow eyes  
Many all day in dazzling river stood,  
To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.

15

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,  
And went all naked to the hungry shark;  
For them his ears gush'd blood; for them in death  
The seal on the cold ice with piteous bark  
Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe  
A thousand men in troubles wide and dark:  
Half-ignorant, they turn'd an easy wheel,  
That set sharp racks at work, to pinch and peel.

16

Why were they proud? Because their marble founts  
Gush'd with more pride than do a wretch's tears?—  
Why were they proud? Because fair orange-mounts  
Were of more soft ascent than lazar stairs?—  
Why were they proud? Because red-lin'd accounts  
Were richer than the songs of Grecian years?—  
Why were they proud? again we ask aloud,

Why in the name of Glory were they proud?

(105-28)

Stanza 16 is an anomalous stanza in this set as it does not continue the narrative of stanzas 14 and 15. This again appears abrupt in transition and highlights Keats's modern consciousness as a narrator.

The form in stanza 16, however, is especially outstanding. In addition to being a stanza dominated by questions, the stanza uses the same rhetorical devices: parallelism and repetition, and in this way, the questioning is intensified. This time these rhetorical devices in this stanza function more than those in stanza 12. They assume something of the power to be found in the ballad. Such a stylistic change demonstrates Keats's growing consciousness of his readers and his maturing narrative skills. We may look at this stanza and see its function:

*Why were they proud? Because their marble founts*

.....

*Why were they proud? Because fair orange-mounts*

.....

*Why were they proud? Because red-lin'd accounts*

.....

*Why were they proud? Again we ask aloud,*

*Why in the name of Glory were they proud?*

(121-28; italics mine)

Keats employs simple and repetitive phrasing, 'Why were they proud?' in the stanza, and repeats it five times. In this way, it generates a mounting intensity and produces a

dramatic effect. It also increases the reader's impression of the question and highlights the issue—the issue of understanding the capitalist brothers' obsession with money, which Keats intends to focus. It may seem that the technique threatens to topple over into bathos in the final couplet, and yet this effect of near-absurdity startles the reader into sharing the narrator's sense of the inexplicability of human imperfection.

Though stanza 17 is a minor digression, thematically, it is not that irrelevant if we take the context of stanzas 14 and 15 into consideration. In other words, this stanza can be seen as a stanza delineating the two brothers' avarice. Keats wishes to emphasize the brothers' greed, then to explore it from another perspective. A look at stanza 17 can better illustrate this point:

Yet were these Florentines as self-retired  
In hungry pride and gainful cowardice,  
As two close Hebrews in that land inspired,  
Paled in and vineyarded from beggar-spies;  
The hawks of ship-mast forests—the untired  
And pannier'd mules for ducats and old lies—  
Quick cat's-paws on the generous stray-away, —  
Great wits in Spanish, Tuscan, and Malay.

(129-36)

The 'hungry pride and gainful cowardice' of the two brothers vividly resonate with the stanzas 14 and 15, the stanzas which stress the brothers' avarice. Keats may use this digression to accentuate his satire on the merchandizing society, which is reflected by the capitalist brothers.

Actually, there is another stanza which follows stanza 17 and precedes stanza 18.

This cancelled stanza is indeed a digression; it is very irrelevant to what Keats has delineated so far:

Two young Orlandos far away they seem'd,  
But on a near inspect their vapid Miens—  
Very alike, —at once themselves redeem'd  
From all suspicion of Romantic spleens—  
No fault of theirs, for their good Mother dream'd  
In the longing time of Units in their teens  
Of proudly-bas'd addition and of net—  
And both their backs were mark'd with tare and tret.

(*PoemsStillinger*, cancelled stanza)<sup>43</sup>

Keats tries to trace the birth of the two greedy brothers in order to explain the reason why they are greedy. All these descriptions seem to be far-fetched and Keats may have deleted the lines because of this. By doing so, the text appears tidier and more concentrated on the brothers' greedy nature. Certainly, however, the tone of satire is present in the published version, and this cancelled stanza shows Keats's inclination to subject the brothers to withering scorn through particular details that mimic their compulsive greed.

Though stanza 18 is also a minor digression, thematically, it has its place in 'Isabella': it involves Keats's design for this poem. Keats, as indicated, wishes to differentiate himself from Boccaccio; therefore, he modifies the original plot. In stanza 18, Keats describes the brothers' discovery of Lorenzo and Isabella's secret love and criticizes their 'covetous and sly' vision (141). It also foreshadows the

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<sup>43</sup> *PoemsStillinger*, p. 250.



brothers' plan for Isabella in stanza 21 and the murder in stanza 22. We can take a look at stanza 18 to get a sense of Keats's foreshadowing:

How was it these same ledger-men could spy  
Fair Isabella in her downy nest?  
How could they find out in Lorenzo's eye  
A straying from his toil? Hot Egypt's pest  
Into their vision covetous and sly!  
How could these money-bags see east and west?—  
Yet so they did—and every dealer fair  
Must see behind, as doth the hunted hare.

(137-44)

The brothers 'spy' Isabella and, from what they detect in Lorenzo's eyes, they know they have to nip off the young love. This imminent disaster is foretold in the last two lines: 'every dealer fair / Must see behind, as doth the hunted hare'. Here Keats again gives a sense of the brothers as driven by compulsion; 'dealer fair', if implied, to them is in ironic contrast to the earlier reference to 'Fair Isabella' since there is a strong suggestion that they are anything but 'fair' in their business dealings. Yet the simile momentarily likens them to 'the hunted hare'. It is as though their pursuit of money means that they are victims as well as perpetrators of wrong. This medley of effects typifies Keats's narrative complexity in the poem. Though this stanza is digressive, interestingly, it echoes the thrust of the last two lines of stanza 13, another digressive stanza: 'Even bees, the little almsmen of spring-bowers, / Know there is richest juice in poison-flowers'. We must also remember that these last two lines of stanza 13 ultimately reverberate with what is intimated in stanza 11: 'Ah! better had it

been for ever so, / Than idle ears should pleasure in their woe' (87-88). Keats's digressive stanzas appear digressive, but from another viewpoint, the digressive stanzas have some relevance with the other digressive stanzas and even with the major narrative line. They reinforce the plot.

Stanzas 55, 56, and 61 are the last minor digressions. They serve as emotional intensifiers and make a detour from the context, which is mainly on Isabella's obsession with the pot of basil and which forebodes her coming death. In 'Isabella', the narrator has a distinct and sympathetic tone when narrating his story, and the tone is clearly reflected by interjections and apostrophes. They are particularly seen in stanzas 55, 56, and 61. Keats is not as detached and objective as Boccaccio, who adopts the omniscient third-person narration in the story. Rather, the first-person, either singular or plural, point of view, strongly dominates the story. In stanza 19, the reader can perceive the emotionally charged perspective, 'we' when the narrator invokes Boccaccio to grant him a pardon. In effect, from the very first line, the reader can immediately be aware of subjectivity: the narrator's voice and profound sympathy for Isabella is apparent as he comments, 'Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!' (1). He begins the story with an interjection. Keats uses this rhetorical device again to lament Isabella as a 'Poor Girl!' (229). This device becomes prominent in stanza 55 as there are three interjections (433, 434, and 436) in the stanza, denoting the narrator's strong sympathy for Isabella:

O Melancholy, linger here awhile!

O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!

O Echo, Echo, from some sombre isle,

Unknown, Lethean, sigh to us—O sigh!

(433-36)

Ralph Pite argues that Keats's interjection 'registers the distance between the supposed simplicity of his medieval source...and what he regards as a modern demand for quasi-scientific accuracy'.<sup>44</sup> But I would suggest that the use of interjection is as an emotional intensifier. It displays the narrator's sympathetic stance and tightens the dramatic effect in this poem. An interjection, moreover, is not related to any scientific accuracy but is to manifest Keats's feelings for the lovers.

If an interjection emotionally intensifies the plot, so does an apostrophe. Having the same function as an interjection, an apostrophe also reflects the narrator's compassion for the suffering Isabella. As the story unfolds, he shows more and more sympathy, and such sympathy is seen in the use of apostrophes. In stanzas 55, 56, and 61, the personas Melancholy, Music, and Echo enact an opera of woe, directed by the 'sad Melpomene' (442). These figures, inherently, evoke a sense of tragedy. It deepens the pathos as the narrator apostrophizes:

O Melancholy, linger here awhile!

O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!

O Echo, Echo, from some sombre isle,

Unknown, Lethean, sigh to us—O sigh!

(433-36)

In stanza 61 (481-84), with a slight variation of phrasing, Keats makes the apostrophes to the dramatis personae again. In his discussion of 'Apostrophe' in *The Pursuit of Signs* (1981), Jonathan Culler argues that:

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<sup>44</sup> See Ralph Pite, 'The Watching Narrator in *Isabella*', *Essays in Criticism*, 40, 4 (1990), 295-96.

...to apostrophize is to will a state of affairs, to attempt to call it into being by asking inanimate objects to bend themselves to your desire. In these terms the function of apostrophe would be to make the objects of the universe potentially responsive forces: forces which can be asked to act or refrain from acting, or even to continue behaving as they usually behave. The apostrophizing poet identifies his universe as a world of sentient forces.<sup>45</sup>

In this sense, apostrophe serves to 'call into being' the narrator's depth of feelings for Isabella and makes the poem more appealing to the reader. The pathetic effect is reinforced and culminates at the end of the poem, pointing up, through repetition, the narrator's sympathy.

Apart from the apostrophes, as shown, Keats uses the rhetorical devices, repetition and parallelism, to intensify the tragic atmosphere in stanzas 55 and 61. The parallel structure impresses the reader with the tone of woe, in particular the lamenting interjection 'O'. Like stanza 16, these two stanzas also mimic the effect of the ballad form. Yet stanzas 55 and 61 heighten the effect of a ballad even more. On the one hand, the effect owes to the stanzas' inherent short and pithy phrasing, or to be precise, to their naming of the three figures, 'O Melancholy', 'O Music', and 'O Echo' (432-34; 481-83). On the other hand, the lament 'O' resonates with the sad ditty of Isabella's story, which is at the close of the poem: 'O cruelty, / To steal my basil-pot away from me!' (503-04). In this way, it reinforces the pathetic effect. A look at the two stanzas is relevant here:

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<sup>45</sup> Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (London: Routledge, 1981), p. 139.

55

*O Melancholy*, linger here awhile!

*O Music, Music*, breathe despondingly!

*O Echo, Echo*, from some sombre isle,

*Unknown, Lethean, sigh to us—O sigh!*

*Spirits* in grief, lift up your heads, and smile;

(433-37; italics mine, emphasizing the parallel structure and repetition with stanza 61)

61

*O Melancholy*, turn thine eyes away!

*O Music, Music, breathe despondingly!*

*O Echo, Echo*, on some other day,

From isles *Lethean, sigh to us—O sigh!*

*Spirits* of grief, sing not your ‘Well-a-way!’

(481-85; italics mine, emphasizing the parallel structure and repetition with stanza 55)

These stanzas anticipate the repetition and the parallel structure of ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ (1819), especially its first two stanzas. In ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’, the first two stanzas begin with ‘O what can ail thee, knight at arms?’ (1, 5), and each varies in its phrasing to suggest a gloomy atmosphere. The stanzas in ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ also show the effect and the form of a ballad.

Keats’s use of repetition and parallelism is notable in the digressive stanzas; it also finds its counterpart in the non-digressive stanza. In ‘Isabella’, there is, as mentioned, a distant echo between the main narrative and the deviating stanzas. In

this regard, the plot is reinforced. Stanza 53, for instance, is composed of repetition and parallelism:

*And she forgot* the stars, the moon, and sun,  
*And she forgot* the blue above the trees,  
*And she forgot* the dells where waters run,  
*And she forgot* the chilly autumn breeze;  
She had no knowledge when the day was done,  
And the new morn she saw not: but in peace  
Hung over her sweet basil evermore,

(417-23; italics mine, emphasizing the repetition and parallel structure)

It, too, brings to mind the ballad form, as also happens in the digressive stanzas 16, 55, and 61. The repetition and parallelism, ‘And she forgot’, suggest Isabella’s undue obsession with Lorenzo’s head, which is buried in the pot of basil. Moreover, it sets the pathetic keynote for stanzas 55 and 61 when describing Isabella’s tragedy. This stanza portrays Isabella’s emaciation markedly and successfully suggests the strange, uncanny pathos of her predicament.

There is one note concerning Keats’s narrative when adapting Boccaccio’s original story. The note is on the motive of the brothers’ murder of Lorenzo.<sup>46</sup>

Stillinger says that there are nine differences between Boccaccio and Keats.<sup>47</sup>

Stillinger offers an insightful comparison, but, strangely enough, he seems to neglect

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<sup>46</sup> Herbert Wright compares the Italian version of Boccaccio’s story and the 1684 English edition. He says that in Boccaccio’s original text, the text is ‘frankly sensual’ and the brothers were ‘enraged’ owing to their discovery of Lisabetta’s [later Isabella’s in Keats’s poem] night visits to Lorenzo. In this sense, Boccaccio seems to suggest such a motive for the brothers’ murder. See Herbert G. Wright, *Boccaccio in England from Chaucer to Tennyson* (London: University of London The Athlone Press, 1957), p. 397.

<sup>47</sup> *CPStillinger*, pp. 443-45.

one aspect. Except for Lorenzo's low birth and the brothers' displeasing sight at the young lovers,<sup>48</sup> he states that Boccaccio 'assigns no motive for the murder'.<sup>49</sup> But in the English translation, the 1684 edition—Keats's original source for 'Isabella', it strongly suggests a motive for the brothers' murder.<sup>50</sup> In addition to their displeasure at Lorenzo and Isabella's stolen love, the brothers were afraid of a scandal. The brothers let the young lovers' love 'proceed on...that no scandal might ensue to them or their Sister, no evil Act being (as yet) committed...awaiting for some convenient time...they might safely break off this stolen Love, which was altogether against their liking'.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, I hold a different view from Stillinger.

In 'Isabella', Keats seems to reach a poetic understanding and growth. Within one week of his completion of 'Isabella',<sup>52</sup> on 3 May 1818, he was able to have a philosophical discussion with Reynolds concerning his idea of the 'Mansion of Many Apartments' (L I, 280). He had learned the 'Burden of the Mystery' (L I, 277, 281) and understood Wordsworth's greatness (L I, 281), a greatness which is based on Wordsworth's profound understanding of human sufferings. At this time, Keats thought that he had a 'grand march of intellect' (L I, 282). This reverberates with his mindset which he had in late January 1818, sometime before he started to write 'Isabella'.<sup>53</sup> He said that a 'gradual ripening of the intellectual powers' (L I, 214) was taking place. On the one hand, probably his reading of *King Lear* at that time triggers his intellectual maturation. This play may contribute to his sophisticated

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 443.

<sup>49</sup> See *CPStillinger*, p. 442.

<sup>50</sup> As discussed, Wright asserts that Boccaccio's original text is 'frankly sensual'. See Wright, p. 397.

<sup>51</sup> See Boccaccio, p. 183; and *CPStillinger*, p. 443, note to lines 161-72.

<sup>52</sup> According to Keats's letter, he seems to finish 'Isabella' around 27 April 1818. See Rollins, *L, I*, 274-75.

<sup>53</sup> Walter Jackson Bate conjectures that Keats began his 'Isabella' around the early February 1818. Keats may be motivated by Hazlitt's lecture (see Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 310) and that is the reason why he wrote 'Isabella'. On 3 February 1818, in Hazlitt's lecture on Dryden and Pope, Hazlitt remarked that: 'I should think that a translation of some of the other serious tales in Boccaccio...as that of Isabella...if executed with taste and spirit, could not fail to succeed in the present day'. See Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, vol. 5, p. 82; and see also *CPStillinger*, p. 441.

understanding of the sad humanity, for instance, his sympathetic depictions of Lorenzo and Isabella's tragedy.

Oddly enough, Keats did not have a positive view of 'Isabella'. He criticized 'Isabella' as a 'mawkish' (*L II*, 162), 'smokeable', (*L II*, 174), and 'weak-sided' (*L II*, 174) poem. He thought that there was 'too much inexperience of live [*sic*], and simplicity of knowledge' in it (*L II*, 174). Keats, nevertheless, does not do justice to himself. He made this comment about one and a half years later, in September 1819, when he saw 'Isabella' from a different perspective. Yet a more pertinent reason is that Keats is not the best critic of his own poetry. His friend Reynolds, a fellow poet, is more accurate when he expresses his admiration for the poem, opining that in it there is 'simplicity and quiet pathos, which are of sure sovereignty over all hearts' (*L I*, 376). Woodhouse, another good critic of Keats's poetry, also holds that 'Isabella' is better than his 'The Eve of St. Agnes' (1819) (*L II*, 162).

In 'Isabella', digressions reflect Keats's modern consciousness. If it is the case that the Romantic or modern poet displays 'autonomous, original and expressive' characteristics,<sup>54</sup> then in 'Isabella', Keats indeed demonstrates his autonomy, originality, and expressiveness. He modifies Boccaccio's story according to his intention and design for the poem. He participates in the story and expresses his viewpoints on the wretched lovers and the 'money-bags' brothers. The digressions also exhibit Keats's status as a modern poet. He executes 'Isabella' with a kind of lively spirit, a spirit which reveals the author's stance and dramatic engagement with his readers. Keats makes 'Isabella' a modern story in the Romantic vein.

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<sup>54</sup> See Andrew Bennett, *The Author* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 56 (hereafter abbreviated as *Author*).



## Chapter Four

### Narrator and Narrative in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'

'The Eve of St. Agnes' (1819) is a romance suffused with dramatic elements, rich narrative details, and Spenserian imagery. In his *Life of John Keats* (1887), William Rossetti remarked that the plot of 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is so 'meagre as to be almost nugatory'.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, in an unsigned review in 1820, 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is described as consisting 'merely of one scene',<sup>2</sup> that is, the love scene between Madeline and Porphyro. But this poem is captivating because of its pictorial details. The pictorial effect results, in part, from Keats's use of the Spenserian stanza, which is self-contained and offers an image in each stanza. Rossetti therefore commends Keats's narrative power of 'turning words into pictures' and considers the poem '*par excellence* the poem of "glamour"'.<sup>3</sup> Before Rossetti, Charles Lamb had already appreciated its 'almost Chaucer-like painting'.<sup>4</sup> So did Leigh Hunt in his comment on 'The Eve of St. Agnes'.<sup>5</sup> He regarded the poem as 'rather a picture than a story'.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is a poem which exhibits Keats's accomplished narrative skills in a dramatic sense. In his letter to his publisher John Taylor, Keats said that 'The little dramatic skill I may as yet have however badly it might show in a Drama would I think be sufficient for a Poem—I wish to diffuse the colouring of St

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<sup>1</sup> John Spencer Hill (ed.), *Keats: The Narrative Poems* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 63. It was originally published in W. M. Rossetti, *Life of John Keats* (London, 1887), pp. 182-84.

<sup>2</sup> This is an unsigned review in *Edinburgh Magazine, and Literary Miscellany* (*Scots Magazine*) (August and October 1820). See Matthews, p. 214.

<sup>3</sup> Hill, p. 64.

<sup>4</sup> This is an unsigned review by Charles Lamb in *New Times* (19 Jul 1820). See Matthews, p. 157.

<sup>5</sup> Hunt's original comment is as follows: 'This is a verse in the taste of Chaucer, full of minute grace and truth'. See Leigh Hunt, *Imagination and Fancy* (1844; London: Routledge/Thoemmes, 1995), p. 335.

<sup>6</sup> Hunt's review on Keats was originally published in *The Indicator* (2 & 9 Aug 1820). See Matthews, p. 172.

Agnes eve throughout a Poem in which Character and Sentiment would be the figures to such drapery' (*L II*, 234). By means of his use of a narrator, Keats gives 'The Eve of St. Agnes' something of a 'dramatic' quality. In this context, my chapter will examine the narrator's role and Keats's narrative skills in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. I shall argue that in 'The Eve of St. Agnes', Keats deploys unconventional ways of presenting his romance and that the narrator has a fluid perspective as well as having an indeterminate role. Keats demonstrates his sophistication as a poet through the way in which he controls narrative tempo and perspective.

In 'The Eve of St. Agnes', the narrator's identity and presence are ambiguous. Robert Kern argues that the narrator assumes a traditional, all-knowing stance,<sup>7</sup> but other critics have more complex ideas about the narrator's identity and role. Susan Wolfson calls the narrator, not the poet-narrator Keats, but 'Keats's narrator'.<sup>8</sup> James Chandler says that the poem 'offers no explicit persona, no first-person singular narrator to whom to attribute motives or ideas'.<sup>9</sup> Yet he observes that in stanza five, the perspective employed is that of the 'first-person plural'.<sup>10</sup> Wolfson and Chandler summarize the common problems when reading this narrative poem. 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is unlike *Endymion*. In *Endymion*, we can see that Keats the narrator merges with Endymion. Neither is it like 'Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil' since in that poem we constantly perceive the authorial intrusions and the narrator's sympathy for the heroine. By contrast, in 'The Eve of St. Agnes', any narratorial or authorial subjectivity and presence become implicit, even fluid. We cannot say that the narrative voice is that of Keats the poet-narrator, nor can we speak of Keats's narrator. Neither can we pin down the narrative perspective: that is, is the narrative told solely

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Kern, 'Keats and the Problem of Romance', in *Critical Essays on John Keats*, ed. Hermione De Almeida (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990), p. 79. This article was originally published in *Philological Quarterly*, 58 (1979), 171-91.

<sup>8</sup> See Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, pp. 289, 295.

<sup>9</sup> See James Chandler, 'Romantic Allusiveness', *Critical Inquiry*, 8, 3 (1982), 484.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

in the first-person point of view? The third-person one? Why, in the poem, does the narrating stance seem constantly shifting? Does it adopt a singular viewpoint? Or a plural one? Moreover, if the story is in the legendary present, why does it change into the historic past in the last stanza, stanza 42? However, neither can we allege that the narrator is always overt and present nor that he is invariably implied and invisible. In addition, Keats problematises the question whether the narrator is omniscient or has only a limited narrating stance.

Precisely because the narrator's identity is unclear and the perspective persistently shifts, 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is a more richly satisfying poem than *Endymion* and 'Isabella'. A typically Keatsian intelligence shows in his choice and use of form. Walter Jackson Bate argues that Keats appears to challenge Mary Tighe's and James Beattie's romances by using the Spenserian stanza in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'.<sup>11</sup> Greg Kucich maintains that Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is a form of revisionary Spenserianism.<sup>12</sup> Both critics accurately acknowledge Keats's ambition. In their wake, I shall argue that Keats is modifying the conventions of romance.

The poetic form, the Spenserian stanza, has two effects: visual and aural. Visually, as mentioned, each Spenserian stanza is self-contained and, as used by Keats, it is like a picture. Aurally, the Spenserian form is noted for its mellifluous style. The interlocking rhyme and other metrical features make the stanza an organic whole. In 'To Charles Cowden Clarke', Keats tells his joy of reading *The Faerie Queene*: 'Spenserian vowels that elope with ease, / And float along like birds o'er summer seas' (56-57). Stanza one illustrates the poetry's relish for audio-visual effects and the ways in which the narrative develops:

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<sup>11</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 441.

<sup>12</sup> See Greg Kucich, 'Spenserian Versification in Keats's *The Eve of St. Agnes*', *Michigan Academician*, 16, 1 (1983), 105 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Spenserian verification'); and his *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991), pp. 199-200.

St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!  
The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold;  
The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass,  
And silent was the flock in woolly fold:  
Numb were the Beadsman's fingers, while he told  
His rosary, and while his frosted breath,  
Like pious incense from a censer old,  
Seem'd taking flight for heaven, without a death,  
Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith.

(1-9)

At the outset of the poem, the appearance of the Beadsman sets the story in a religious frame. Indeed, a contemporary reviewer also asserts that 'a soft religious light' is cast over the entire story.<sup>13</sup> Certainly there are suggestions of much that is soft and religious, though these suggestions are themselves subjected to irony on occasions. From the first line, 'Ah, bitter chill it was', we can be aware of Keats's or Keats's narrator's point of view. The narrator uses 'Ah', an interjection, to tell us what he thinks of the cold. It thus conveys a dramatic sense since he tries to make the reader feel the cold by uttering his thought. Wolfson argues that this word 'Ah' is a romance convention and is melodramatic.<sup>14</sup> But I would suggest that this exclamation shows the narrator's participation in the story. It is like the first line in 'Isabella': 'Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!'; in both cases the exclamation allows us to recognize the narrator's sympathy. In 'The Eve of St. Agnes', the dramatic sense deepens as the

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<sup>13</sup> This is an unsigned review, originally published in *New Monthly Magazine* (1 Sep 1820). See Matthews, p. 218.

<sup>14</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 289.

narrator tries to catch the owl's shivering in the cold by using the expression 'a-cold'. The expression is apt since it is a kind of colloquial mimicking of the shivering. This makes the picture vivid. Another good example is the description of the limping hare crossing the icy field. As Michael O'Neill suggests, in line 3, the rhythm 'limps in sympathy' with the poor hare.<sup>15</sup> In lieu of an iambus, Keats uses a spondee in the second foot to depict the trembling creature's movement: 'The hare limp'd trembling through the frozen grass'. When the scene zooms in from the distant, outside, and cold — the owl, the hare, and the flock — to the near, inside, and the warm, to the Beadsman's praying and his 'frosted breath', the poet's imagining of the wintry St Agnes's Eve is made complete. A picture of two contrasting worlds coexists. Hunt comments appositely that all the circumstances in the opening frame are 'fit to open a quiet and gentle'<sup>16</sup> poem, and yet what results is full of tension.

Aurally, the Spenserian stanza is interconnected because of its intrinsic nature. Two vowels, short vowel 'i' (such as 'bitter', 'chill') and the double vowel 'I' (examples include 'silent', 'while') interweave and lend the stanza its distinctive music. A different, more mellifluous style is given the stanza by its internal rhymes. The assonance '-old', along with the interlocking rhyme, connects lines 2, 4, 5 and 7 in the words 'cold', 'fold', 'told', and 'old'. This assonance is important as it creates an organic whole for the stanza: it links two quatrains together. Furthermore, two patterns of alliterations, 'f' (except the first and last lines) and 'l' (every line), are interspersed throughout the poem and make the rhythm consistent, regular, and reverberating. Finally, the alexandrine line: 'Past the sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith', is the climax of the stanza. It is also an important coda of the poem. We must remember that the Beadsman is a religious man. He says his prayer and his

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<sup>15</sup> Michael O'Neill, 'Keats and the "Poetical Character"', in *Placing and Displacing Romanticism*, ed. Peter J. Kitson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 158.

<sup>16</sup> Hunt, p. 331

prayer is for a peaceful life. In this regard, the couplet's rhyming words, 'death' and 'saith', are significant. This stanza is turned into an organic unit because of the rhyming couplet: the first eight lines and the last line, the ninth line, *liaise*. That is to say, the first eight lines work together to build up the climax in the final line: the Beadsman says his prayer. If the Beadsman begins this poem, it is also he who ends the poem.<sup>17</sup> He prays in the cold wintry night, St Agnes's Eve, and he also dies praying in this cold night: 'The Beadsman, after thousand aves told, / For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold' (377-78). There is an irony which we hardly expected at the start involved here as the Beadsman cannot save himself from death even if he prays; he simply wastes his breath by praying. Keats seems to criticize the religious asceticism. The narrator controls his story and makes the beginning and the end of the poem echo each other, whilst also shaping them into an ironic contrast.

The pattern of interconnectedness and contrasts among stanzas begun in the opening pervades the romance and often motivates its powerful images. For instance, in stanza two, the narrative begins with the latter half of the last line, the ninth line, of the first stanza: 'His prayer he saith' (10). In this sense, stanzas one and two are intimately linked. The narrator continues this image which he purposely begins in the first stanza and develops into the following one. This skill goes on as stanza three develops the Beadsman's church service and it also ushers in music, which will be developed in stanza four. This image of the music is crucial as it anticipates the appearance of the heroine Madeline in stanza five. It also brings in a sharp contrast in stanzas seven and eight: in those stanzas, Madeline is inattentive to the music, even though the music in the form of 'the snarling trumpets' (31) yearns 'like a god in pain' (56). In this way, from stanza four to stanza eight, two contrasting worlds appear again: states of noise and silence, states that are solitary and sociable. The stanzas are

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<sup>17</sup> I hold the same view as John Barnard. See Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 90.

also related to each other because of the image of the music.

Stanza five is an important stanza not only because of its introducing of Madeline but also because of the narrator's perspective. It is the only place where we can clearly see the narrator's point of view. In this stanza, the narrator uses the first-person plural, 'us' (41), as though he wished the reader to identify with him. This shift of perspective, nevertheless, happens imperceptibly. As the narrative unfolds, the transition among the first five stanzas is natural and smooth. Keats also changes his narrative perspective indiscernibly in the rest of his poem.

Stanza five is also an essential stanza to the plot since it explains the thrust of this story: what happens to Madeline, or what Madeline hopes will happen to her, on this St Agnes's Eve. As the narrator begins, 'These let us wish away, / And turn, sole-thoughted, to one Lady there' (41-42), Madeline's characterization is vividly put before the reader's eyes. She is portrayed as a girl 'hoodwink'd with faery fancy' (70) because she is 'sole-thoughted', preoccupied by the legend without any doubt. The possibility of having a 'vision of delight' (47) of her future husband by observing the ritual obsesses her.

There is some critical debate about Madeline's ritual as described in the 1820 volume. According to Richard Woodhouse, in Keats's revised draft, there is an 'additional' stanza between stanzas six and seven of the published version (*L II*, 162). Keats thought that this stanza could 'make the *legend* more intelligible, and correspondent with what afterwards take place, particularly with respect to the supper and the playing on the Lute' (*L II*, 162). He then added it. But it was deleted by his publishers.<sup>18</sup> Critics such as Earl Wasserman,<sup>19</sup> Jack Stillinger,<sup>20</sup> and Heidi

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<sup>18</sup> According to his second volume of his manuscripts of Keats's poems, Richard Woodhouse says that 'K. left it [his manuscript of 'The Eve of St Agnes', including his subsequent revisions of it] to his Publishers to adopt which [readings] they pleased, & to revise the Whole'. See *Poems Stillinger*, p. 628.

<sup>19</sup> Earl R. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats's Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1953), p. 113.

Thomson<sup>21</sup> all consider that this stanza should be included. Basing her argument on synaesthesia, Thomson contends that ‘all senses are covered in this stanza: vision in the appearance of the future lord, smell and taste in the feast, hearing in the music, and touch in the “pleasures”’.<sup>22</sup> But Christopher Ricks, though admitting that the deleted stanza makes the story explicit, holds that it should not be included in the final manuscript. He believes that ‘much of the beauty and suppleness of the poem comes from the courtesy extended to the legend’.<sup>23</sup> In my view, though the present text displays Keats’s narrative art of suggestion, the 1820 volume seems slightly truncated. The reader will be confused when he comes to stanzas 30, 31, and 33, which are elaborations of the added stanza. This cancelled stanza is a ‘missing link’ for the three stanzas:

‘Twas said her future lord would there appear  
Offering, as sacrifice—all in the dream—  
Delicious food, even to her lips brought near,  
Viands, and wine, and fruit, and sugar’d cream,  
To touch her palate with the fine extreme  
Of relish: then soft music heard, and then  
More pleasures follow’d in a dizzy stream  
Palpable almost: then to wake again  
Warm in the virgin morn, no weeping Magdalen.

(*PoemsStillinger*, additional stanza)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Heidi Thomson, ‘Eavesdropping on “The Eve of St. Agnes”: Madeline’s Sensual Ear and Porphyro’s Ancient Ditty’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 97, 3 (1998), 341.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 341-42.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher B. Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (1974; London: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 130.

<sup>24</sup> *PoemsStillinger*, p. 301.



As Keats said, this additional stanza explains the reason why there is the sumptuous feast (stanzas 30 and 31) and the lute-playing (stanza 33). He seems conscious of the possible problem which might arise owing to his inadequate narration of his first version. But, on the other hand, the publishers were probably aware that if Keats had kept this stanza, as Ricks observes,<sup>25</sup> Madeline would have to eat the food. The tone of this stanza would appear too explicit or even too coarse; and that is the reason why the stanza was abandoned. Yet the stanza possesses a note of mockery of 'the dream', which suggests that, in revising the poem, Keats adopted the perspective of an ironic spectator of his own poem: a stance observable in other revisions he introduced (including stanzas 35 and 36, and the last stanza). Such revisions threaten to destabilise the delicate balance between immersion in the dream and implicit qualification of the romance observable in the first finished version, which was, in fact, the version that was published in 1820.

In stanza nine the poem brings in Porphyro and the narrative begins to be dynamic. With the shift of focus to Porphyro, Madeline seems to fade out for the moment. She appears as a figure in a tableau because she 'linger'd still' (74), and yet the tableau is a living one as the word 'linger'd' implies a state of in-betweenness. Conversely, Porphyro appears to be a man of action: he has a 'heart on fire' (75) for Madeline and desires to 'gaze and worship' (80) or possibly even to 'speak, kneel, touch, kiss' (81), where the run of verbs shortens the distance between the narrator and Porphyro.

More dramatic elements are introduced when Keats presents the character Angela, Madeline's old nurse. Her appearance connects Porphyro and Madeline and advances the narrative line, Porphyro and Madeline's love story. More especially, her

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<sup>25</sup> See Ricks, p. 130.

interactions with Porphyro widen the dimensions of the narrative and intensify the dramatic sense. Within this framework, before we proceed further to the plot, we must ask three questions: why does Keats use dramatic elements in ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’? What does it have to do with Keats’s idea of romance? In ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’, what is Keats’s attitude towards romance?

In his influential book *The Hoodwinking of Madeline* (1971), Stillinger contends that Keats, as he is in ‘Isabella’,<sup>26</sup> is anti-romance. This anti-romantic view, according to Stillinger, even deepens into scepticism in ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’.<sup>27</sup> Wolfson argues that Keats is in an interrogative mode in the poem with regard to the function of romance. She also claims that Keats’s self-consciousness as a modern poet<sup>28</sup> permits him to find the middle ground by presenting ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ in a dramatic way.<sup>29</sup> Kucich also observes scenes of dramatic intensity in ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’.<sup>30</sup> But Miriam Allott does not think that Keats shows any dramatic potential in this poem.<sup>31</sup>

In my view, though questioning the function of romance, Keats is modifying romance as a modern narrator and the dramatic elements of the poem is a means of achieving this modification. Keats, as Wolfson argues, adds dramatic elements to highlight his stance as a modern teller, skillfully alternating his plot of the lovers with the narrator’s observations. His presentation combines a highly poetic style and a conversational one. However, the transition between the two is unobtrusive. Take stanzas 11 to 20 for example, when Porphyro comes for Madeline on St Agnes’s Eve

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<sup>26</sup> See the chapter of ‘Keats and Romance: The “Reality” of *Isabella*’ in Stillinger, *Hoodwinking of Madeline*, pp. 31-45, especially pp. 31, 37.

<sup>27</sup> See the chapter ‘The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Skepticism in *The Eve of St. Agnes*’ in Stillinger, *Hoodwinking of Madeline*, pp. 67-93.

<sup>28</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, pp. 274-75.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>30</sup> Kucich, ‘Spenserian Versification’, 103-04.

<sup>31</sup> Miriam Allott, ‘*Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Lamia*’, in *John Keats: A Reassessment*, ed. Kenneth Muir (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1969), p. 46.

and the ways in which he devises a ‘stratagem’ (139) to win him a ‘peerless bride’ (167) by soliciting Angela for help. I will discuss this example in the following paragraphs.

Before analysing the dramatic elements in the narrative, we need to note that in stanza 11, the narrative perspective changes again. This time the perspective in ‘Ah, happy chance!’ (91) recalls that established first line of ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ when the narrator utters ‘Ah, bitter chill it was!’. This stanza, stanza 11, stretches into stanza 12 when Angela asks Porphyro to flee from Madeline’s castle as he is an enemy to Madeline’s kinsmen. Angela’s cross-stanzaic remark suggests that she has many anxieties for Porphyro, so many that she is impelled beyond the stanza division:

“Mercy, Porphyro! hie thee from this place;  
They are all here to-night, the whole blood-thirsty race!

12

“Get hence! get hence! there’s dwarfish Hildebrand;  
He had a fever late, and in the fit  
He cursed thee and thine, both house and land:  
Then there’s that old Lord Maurice, not a whit  
More tame for his gray hairs—Alas me! flit!  
Flit like a ghost away.”—“Ah, Gossip dear,  
We’re safe enough; here in this arm-chair sit,  
And tell me how”—“Good Saints! not here, not here;  
Follow me, child, or else these stones will be thy bier.”

(98-108)

This technique of a cross-stanzaic remark intensifies the dramatic effect. It also echoes the cross-stanza break in 'Isabella' when Isabella is emaciated by her lovesickness for Lorenzo. She is withered by and withering within the stretch of time which runs from the last line of stanza 32 to the first line of stanza 33: 'By gradual decay from beauty fell, / Because Lorenzo came not' ('Isabella', 256-57). Both cross-stanza breaks are telling. In 'The Eve of St. Agnes', stanza 12 is then impregnated with much dramatic power. Not only does it highlight the issue of Porphyro's intention of coming to Madeline's castle, but also it sharpens the focus of two opposing forces: fear and courage, escape and entrapment as well as death and life. Stanza 12 is also a stanza purely composed of conversation. There are no descriptions, or 'stage directions', in this stanza, even as the stanza can be deemed as a response in a play, rather than a descriptive part of a poem. Keats repeats such a technique in stanzas 14, 17, and 20. These stanzas are either Angela's or Porphyro's direct speeches. In this respect, they convey a strong dramatic sense since they serve as dialogues in a play.

The transition between stanzas 14 and 15 is a good example of Keats's alternating between a conversational and a descriptive style:

14

"St. Agnes' Eve!

God's help! my lady fair the conjuror plays

This very night: good angels her deceive!

But let me laugh awhile, I've mickle time to grieve."

15

Feebly she laugheth in the languid moon,

While Porphyro upon her face doth look,  
Like puzzled urchin on an aged crone  
Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book,  
As spectacl'd she sits in chimney nook.  
But soon his eyes grew brilliant, when she told  
His lady's purpose, and he scarce could brook  
Tears, at the thought of those enchantments cold,  
And Madeline asleep in lap of legends old.

(123-35)

In stanza 14, Keats presents Angela's response to Porphyro's inquiry after Madeline's whereabouts. This conversational style blends into the poetic descriptions of the following stanza by the image of 'laughing'. The archaic word 'mickle'<sup>32</sup> of stanza 14 anticipates the archaic language in stanza 15, which includes 'laugheth', 'keepeth', and 'wond'rous'. The medieval ambience is deepened. In addition, Keats uses the 'languid moon' to enhance the poem's poetic style. Yet the most poetic description in this stanza is 'And Madeline asleep in lap of legends old'. In this line, by replacing the draft's relatively banal expression, 'among those',<sup>33</sup> with the more alliteratively suggestive 'in lap of', Keats touches Madeline's sleep with a semantically charged aura. Hunt rightly lauds the verse for revealing Keats's 'highest imaginative taste'.<sup>34</sup> According to Hunt, this line depicts Madeline's sleep in her bed, 'but', as he puts it, 'she is also asleep in accordance with the legends of the season; and therefore the bed

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<sup>32</sup> According to *Oxford English Dictionary* (1989), the word 'mickle' means '1. = GREAT a. with reference to size, bulk, stature'. It is Old English and first appeared in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (c. 731/732).

<sup>33</sup> *Poems Stillinger*, p. 304, note to line 135.

<sup>34</sup> See Hunt, p. 334.

becomes *their* lap as well as sleep's'.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, in stanza 15, there are two narrative perspectives. Though the narrator is delineating Porphyro and Angela, he also puts himself in Porphyro's position and imagines what Angela looks like to Porphyro. In this regard, Porphyro is a 'puzzled urchin', who is looking at Angela, 'an aged crone / Who keepeth clos'd a wond'rous riddle-book'. Hence the narrative perspective becomes double: we see Angela by means of the narrator's depictions and Porphyro's eyes. This stanza becomes multi-dimensional and dramatic. One more note is involved: there is the reality check which occurs between what Porphyro sees and who Angela really is. This note implies the central question of reality and romance, which is what Keats is concerned about and which is what he has been probing in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'.

Keats's presenting 'The Eve of St. Agnes' in a dramatic way is certainly influenced by his admiration for Shakespeare.<sup>36</sup> Kucich asserts that Keats learns from Spenser and displays 'The Eve of St. Agnes' theatrically,<sup>37</sup> but I would argue that Shakespeare is the primary precursor for Keats to emulate. When he set out to write his first long poem, *Endymion*, he called Shakespeare his 'Presider' (*L I*, 142), and Shakespeare's influence shows in Keats's desire to exhibit '*Negative Capability*': 'the capability of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason' (*L I*, 193), a quality exemplified, for Keats, by Shakespeare. In this regard, it is not surprising that Keats spoke of his ambition of writing a few fine plays (*L II*, 234). The constant shifts of perspectives in 'The Eve of St. Agnes' may be seen as Keats's attempt to emulate a Shakespearean negative capability, and 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is modelled to a considerable sense on Shakespeare's *Romeo and*

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> John Kerrigan also argues that Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* might have influenced Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. See John Kerrigan, 'Keats and *Lucrece*', *Shakespeare Survey*, 41 (1988), 103-18.

<sup>37</sup> Kucich, 'Spenserian verification', 103-07.

*Juliet*.<sup>38</sup> Thus Porphyro and Madeline are Keats's version of Romeo and Juliet; Angela, Juliet's old nurse; and the family feud is in the background.

We gain an insight into Keats's narrative techniques via Coleridge's discussion of Shakespeare's poetic power in *Venus and Adonis*. In his *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge praises Shakespeare's intuitive and 'un-participating' narrative power:

It [Shakespeare's poetic power] is throughout as if a superior spirit more intuitive, more intimately conscious, even than the characters themselves, not only of every outward look and act, but of the flux and reflux of the mind in all its subtlest thoughts and feelings, were placing the whole before our view; himself meanwhile unparticipating in the passions... His "Venus and Adonis" seem at once the characters themselves, and the whole representation of those characters by the most consummate actors. You seem to be *told* nothing, but to see and hear every thing...the utter *aloofness* of the poet's own feelings, from those of which he is at once the painter and the analyst...<sup>39</sup>

Coleridge's remark on Shakespeare's quality of being '*myriad-minded*'<sup>40</sup> coincides with Keats's idea of negative capability.<sup>41</sup> More importantly, Coleridge touches on

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<sup>38</sup> Allott, p. 451. For a complete list of the influence of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* on Keats's 'The Eve of St. Agnes', see Allott's notes of this poem.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, in 2 vols, eds James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 16 vols, gen. ed. Kathleen Coburn (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 21-22 (hereafter abbreviated as *Biographia Literaria*).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>41</sup> Though Stillinger and Beth Lau connect Keats's 'Negative Capability' letter to Coleridge's discussion of Shakespeare's poetic power in *Biographia Literaria*, they have not connected Shakespeare's narrative techniques with those of Keats. See Beth Lau, *Keats's Reading of the Romantic Poets* (1991; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 104 (hereafter abbreviated as *Keats's Reading of the Romantic Poets*); and Jack Stillinger, *Romantic Complexity: Keats, Coleridge, and Wordsworth* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006), pp. 57-59, which was originally published in a Festschrift honouring Walter Jackson Bate in *Coleridge, Keats, and the Imagination: Romanticism*

two Shakespearean narrative techniques and these are also Keats's as we can see them employed in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. The first of Shakespeare's narrative skills is that he merely presents stories. He does not take a part in his tale but keeps a distance. He seems to be an implied and invisible narrator. The reader cannot perceive the narrator's authorial presence and stance, let alone his personality and preferences. Second, Shakespeare lets his characters speak to us. Since Shakespeare remains detached from his subject, the reader must participate in the scene in order to comprehend Shakespeare's plays themselves. Coleridge states that when reading Shakespeare's plays, there is a 'perpetual activity of attention required on the part of the reader'.<sup>42</sup> In many passages of 'The Eve of St. Agnes', Keats seems to be like Shakespeare, presenting his story without making us aware of his presence. He appears to expect the reader to come to an understanding or even a conclusion of his own, a technique which will be addressed.

'The Eve of St. Agnes' is not the only romance which is presented in a theatrical way. Earlier in 'Isabella', the poet-narrator, Keats, engages in a dialogue with his predecessor Boccaccio. In one authorial interpolation, the narrator addresses Boccaccio directly: 'O eloquent and famed Boccaccio! / Of thee we now should ask forgiving boon' (145-46). This apostrophe makes the romance dynamic, self-aware, and metapoetic. Though 'The Eve of St. Agnes' does not have any authorial intrusions, it represents, as I have shown, a continuation of this dramatic skill. This skill makes Keats's romances unconventional. He modifies the conventions of a romance as a modern poet.

The topic of romance and reality bears on the narrator's role, as a discussion of Porphyro's gaze will bring out. When narrating the gaze, in stanza 22, the narrator's

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and *Adam's Dream*, eds J. Robert Barth, S.J., and Johan L. Mahoney (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1990), pp. 24-26 (hereafter abbreviated as *Romantic Complexity*).

<sup>42</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Vol. II, p. 22.



perspective alters again. This time the narrator employs a mode of direct address to his character, asking Porphyro to be ready for his intention, the surreptitious gaze, as he says: ‘Now prepare, / Young Porphyro, for gazing on that bed’ (196-97). In his *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, Andrew Bennett contends that ‘The central narrative impulsion that draws together the frictions of Keats’s fiction is Porphyro’s desire for the vision of Madeline (her sight and the sight of her; Porphyro’s visual vision of Madeline and her visionary vision of him; his seeing and her unseeing eyes; he unseen and she seen).’<sup>43</sup> Though Bennett has a good discussion of the paradoxical relationship between Porphyro’s and Madelines’s seeing and vision, he does not take the narrator’s role into consideration. In this context, I would suggest that in the gazing scene, we cannot clearly perceive whether the narrator sides with Porphyro, the voyeur, or not. The narrator seems to present the scene as the tone sounds neutral. Nor can we state with confidence that the narrator simply narrates the scene. We must remember that though it is Porphyro who wishes to gaze at Madeline ‘all unseen’ (80), it is a gaze of the desiring eye. We also have to note that the narrator assumes the third-person omniscient perspective and his omnipresence, naturally, guarantees him the gaze as well. Perhaps the narrator’s gaze is also a gaze of the desiring eye. In other words, it is hard to say that the narrator has no desire involved in this scene. There is an ambiguity in this scene and the narrator’s role is indeterminate. The narrator seems to have an ambivalent narrating stance because while maintaining his objectivity of narration, he is also seemingly caught up in and subject to the very desire he ascribes to Porphyro. However, he hides his subjectivity well since he still tells the story with objectivity, as in the following line, ‘perchance speak, kneel, touch, kiss’ (81). The narrator presents from Porphyro’s point of view, and knows that Porphyro may wish to approach Madeline.

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<sup>43</sup> Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, p. 97.

The casement in the chamber, in stanza 24, is fraught with Spenserian opulence and is fused with romance and reality. Porphyro's most significant use of the watching gaze takes place in Madeline's chamber, a chamber that offers visionary beauty and also creates a dreamy atmosphere:

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

(208-16)

The narrator displays this stanza from a third-person omniscient stance. A quintessentially medieval atmosphere, involving an atmosphere of religion and chivalry, permeates the whole stanza. At the start of this stanza, 'A casement high and triple-arch'd there was', the narrator situates the story in a perspective of actuality. The verb 'was', a verb of being, bespeaks a sense of reality. Yet the Spenserian imagery, romance conventions such as fruits and flowers, stains and dyes, as well as saints and queens and kings, make the casement scene romantic. Keats adeptly uses three verbs, 'garland', 'diamond', and 'blush', to associate with those romance trappings. Each verb intrinsically illustrates its subject and echoes the other images. For instance, the 'shielded scutcheon' 'blush'd' because of the queens' and kings'

blood. More particularly, it resonates with the image of the ‘twilight saints’: the word ‘twilight’ is a rosy colour, and in this context, suggests the blood’s colour. The image implies saints’ martyrdom. The setting is full of ‘*couleur de rose*’<sup>44</sup> and it evokes a dreamy ambience. In this stanza, the narrative blurs truth and dream. The setting is in accordance with the poem’s theme: Madeline’s visionary dream. This blurring is reminiscent of Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’. In Part II of this poem, when the bard tells his vision, the narrative becomes ambiguous about dream and reality. Stillinger and Lau, among other critics, strongly suggest that ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ is influenced by Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’<sup>45</sup> since both poems deal with the issue of vision and truth. Keats and Coleridge explore the ambivalence of illusion and reality, but Coleridge accentuates ethical and emotional issues with the murky depths of the human psyche, whereas Keats implicitly prompts mixed feelings in the reader about Madeline’s willing suspension of disbelief and her commitment to dream and superstition.

In stanza 25, the narrative emphasis focuses on Madeline’s characterization as an idealised dream maid. Madeline is depicted as a saint (222), an angel (223), and an immaculate figure (225):

on her hair a glory, like a saint:

She seem’d a splendid angel, newly drest,

Save wings, for heaven:...

...so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

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<sup>44</sup> Revd. George Gilfillan’s comment on Keats’s technique in ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ was published in *A Gallery of Literary Portraits* in 1845. See Matthews, p. 305.

<sup>45</sup> See the chapter ‘Keats’s Reading of Coleridge’ in Lau, *Keats’s Reading of the Romantic Poets*, pp. 69-114; and the chapter ‘Keats and Coleridge’ in Stillinger, *Romantic Complexity*, pp. 41-61. Though Michael O’Neill does not discuss the intertextuality between Coleridge’s ‘Christabel’ and Keats’s ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’, he offers a stimulating discussion of the two authors’ treatment of romance. See the relevant pages in Michael O’Neill, ‘Poetry of the Romantic Period: Coleridge and Keats’, in *A Companion to Romance from Classical to Contemporary*, ed. Corinne Saunders (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 312-13, 317-19.

(222-25)

This portrayal shows Madeline's purity and dreaming quality. She believes in the legend and makes her indeed a St Agnes's maid. Moreover, her commitment to the superstition makes her a St Agnes's martyr since she is going to lose her virginity.

The undressing scene in stanza 26 is the climax of this part of the poem and it exhibits Keats's consummate narrative skills. Keats's poetic sensibility makes the common scene, the undressing, a sensuous spectacle. As Ricks well comments, this stanza is 'characteristic of Keats's honourable hedonism'.<sup>46</sup> It is a stanza of pleasurable synaesthesia.<sup>47</sup>

Of all its wreathed pearls her hair she frees;  
Unclasps her warmed jewels one by one  
Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees  
Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees:  
Half-hidden, like a mermaid in sea-weed,

(227-31)

Visually, Keats makes us see the 'wreathed pearls' and jewels and we can picture the jewelry's luster and beauty. Aurally, he makes us hear the sound of Madeline's silk dress's gradual falling down to the ground through the use of words such as 'creep' and 'rustle'. Moreover, the word 'rich' adds a touch of luxury to the disrobing. Most artfully is the image of Madeline's 'warmed jewels'. Hunt is the first one to extol this master's stroke.<sup>48</sup> Keats adroitly uses the past participle of 'warm' and conveys the

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<sup>46</sup> Ricks, p. 91.

<sup>47</sup> I hold the same view as Bennett. See Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, pp. 107-08.

<sup>48</sup> Hunt, p. 336.

warmth of the jewels to the reader, which is transmitted by Madeline's body temperature. Furthermore, we are made to smell Madeline's fragrance because of her 'fragrant boddice'. The 'fragrant bodice' is another good place to see Keats's virtuoso skill. He modified this image five times, from 'the boddice from her', 'her bursting', 'her Boddice lace string', 'her Boddice; and her bosom bare', 'her' to 'her fragrant boddice'.<sup>49</sup> The whole disrobing is culminated by the final image of comparing Madeline as a mermaid standing in her disrobed attire which is sea-weed like. This is a pertinent comparison as the metaphor immediately brings forth an image of a beautiful and enchanting figure.<sup>50</sup> Though he originally uses 'Syren',<sup>51</sup> Keats substitutes his former draft with 'a mermaid'. As Ricks suggests, after Bate, Keats is perhaps conscious of the inappropriate association prompted by 'Syren'.<sup>52</sup> This stanza, in brief, reveals Keats's accomplished skills in converting words into a picture. The reader is so impressed with the image and Keats's narrative techniques that it is hard for the reader to decide which one is superior; as John Scott in 1820 said, 'we know not whether most to admire the magical delicacy of the hazardous picture, or its consummate, irresistible attraction'.<sup>53</sup>

In stanza 28, the ambiguity of Keats's narrating stance appears once more. We are unable to say assuredly whether the narrator is omniscient and objective or whether his viewpoint is limited. It is also hard to say that he purely adopts the first-person narration. The narrator addresses Porphyro and seems to identify with Porphyro: he sees Madeline via Porphyro's eyes. In this respect, two perspectives are combined. For instance, when he utters 'And 'tween the curtains peep'd, where

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<sup>49</sup> *PoemsStillinger*, p. 310, note to line 225.

<sup>50</sup> Mary Arseneau has a good discussion of the relationship between Madeline and the mermaid. See Arseneau, 'Madeline, Mermaids, and Medusas in "The Eve of St. Agnes"', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 33, 3 (1997), 227-43.

<sup>51</sup> *PoemsStillinger*, p. 310, note to line 231.

<sup>52</sup> Ricks thinks that the word 'Syren' will evoke an unpleasant feeling. See Ricks, p. 92.

<sup>53</sup> This is an unsigned review, which appeared in *London Magazine* (Baldwin's) in September 1820. See Matthews, p. 224.

lo!—how fast she slept’ (252), we know that the narrator and Porphyro are both looking at the sleeping Madeline because the word ‘lo’ shows the narrator’s feeling and participation in the story. The following idea can explain the narrator’s stance: ‘It frequently happens that “this” is selected rather than “that,” “here” rather than “there,” and “now” rather than “then,” when the speaker is personally involved with the entity, situation or place to which he is referring or is identifying himself with the attitude or viewpoint of the addressee’.<sup>54</sup> In this scene, there is the context of ‘this, here, and now’ and the narrator seems to merge with Porphyro and thus he can see how deeply Madeline sleeps. The narrator forsakes his objectivity of narration and identifies with his addressee. Within this discourse, there is an ambiguity in narrative perspective. But Marian Cusac argues that the ‘lo’, the exclamation, has a similar function as ‘ah’ (1, 118).<sup>55</sup> She seems to see that the narrator’s perspective is the first-person point of view and offers no alternative perspective. Though I agree with her observation as it accords with my earlier discussion of the narrator’s stance when he utters the word ‘Ah’, I suggest that the exclamation ‘lo’ creates a problem for the reader. When considering narrative objectivity, we cannot be sure of the narrator’s stance in this scene but are confused by it. The narrator appears very elusive.

The awakening scene, lines 295-306, is much debated as it involves Keats’s idea of dream and reality. Most major critics agree that the awakening scene is based on Keats’s idea of ‘Adam’s dream’: ‘The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream—he awoke and found it truth’ (*L I*, 185).<sup>56</sup> In this context, when Madeline

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<sup>54</sup> This statement is originally from John Lyons, *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 677; and is quoted in Sylvia Adamson’s ‘Subjectivity in Narration: Empathy and Echo’, in *Subjecthood and Subjectivity: The Status of the Subject in Linguistic Theory*, ed. Marina Yaguello (Paris: Ophrys, 1994), p. 197.

<sup>55</sup> Marian Hollingsworth Cusac, ‘Keats as Enchanter: An Organizing Principle of *The Eve of St. Agnes*’, *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 17 (1968), 117.

<sup>56</sup> For example, Bayley, p. 147; John Jones, p. 238; Patricia Parker, ‘Keats’, in *Critical Essays on John Keats*, ed. Hermione De Almeida (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1990), p. 109, which originally appeared in her book, *Inescapable Romance: Studies in the Poetics of a Mode* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); and Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 91.

awakes, she finds Porphyro and what she imagines becomes the truth. John Barnard, writing in this vein, states that Madeline's dream is 'a paradigm of transforming nature of the creative imagination'.<sup>57</sup> But Patricia Parker, Lucy Newlyn, and Nancy Rosenfeld argue that 'Adam's dream' (*Paradise Lost*, Book VIII) is not the appropriate text for Madeline's dream but 'Eve's dream' (*Paradise Lost*, Book V).<sup>58</sup> They believe that when Madeline wakes up from her dream, she does not experience a happy feeling, as it happens when Adam finds Eve. Rather, Madeline registers a 'painful change' (300).

Indeed, 'The Eve of St. Agnes', like *Endymion*, is another story which enacts the conflict between dream and reality, and ambivalence accompanies this conflict. Though being convincing in their interpretation of 'Eve's dream', Parker, Newlyn, and Rosenfeld do not explain the underlying philosophy of Madeline's painful change. In 'The Eve of St. Agnes', Madeline prefigures her dreaming of Porphyro. She appears completely hoodwinked by her fancy. Stillinger calls her a 'foolish victim' of Porphyro's plot and her self-duplicity.<sup>59</sup> Lau even equates Madeline with Austen's Emma Woodhouse because both indulge in their fancies.<sup>60</sup> In my view, Madeline is not a foolish maid as later she is caught between dream and reality: she fears the consequences of reality. When Madeline wakes up, however, instead of being a happy Magdalen, she becomes a weeping virgin. She appears 'painful' (300) and the pain 'nigh expelled / The blisses of her dream so pure and deep' (300-01). How Madeline reacts is contradictory to what the legend says. I would suggest that though Porphyro fulfills her wishful thinking and enacts her vision, Madeline is emotionally distraught.

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<sup>57</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 91.

<sup>58</sup> See Lucy Newlyn, *Paradise Lost and the Romantic Reader* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 177-80; and Nancy Rosenfeld, "'Eve's Dream Will Do Here": Miltonic Dreaming in Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes"', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 49 (2000), 47-66.

<sup>59</sup> Stillinger, *Romantic Complexity*, p. 121.

<sup>60</sup> Beth Lau, *Fellow Romantics: Male and Female British Writers, 1790-1830* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 181-92.

She is still a virgin and has not made love with Porphyro yet. She then wants to indulge herself in her dream-vision since she begs Porphyro to ‘Give me [her] that voice again’ (312). Moreover, she (at any rate implicitly) beseeches Porphyro to have sexual intercourse with her or she will be in an ‘eternal woe’ (314-15). Critics debate whether Madeline is fully awake or she is still asleep. Stillinger believes that Madeline is still in the dream,<sup>61</sup> whereas John Jones states that Madeline, though awake, still wishes to believe in her dream.<sup>62</sup> I hold the same view as Jones. I would argue that she is awake and she would pretend that she is in a dream, her willing self-deception, so to speak, because she still looks ‘so dreamingly’ (306). More importantly, she is afraid that what she dreams of may be untrue. From this perspective, we can understand the reason why she wishes to consummate her relationship with Porphyro right away. She wishes to seize the vision immediately before it disappears. But when Porphyro tells her that it is not a vision but the truth, Madeline is not relieved and happy. Instead, she is plunged into more anxieties: ‘No dream, alas! alas! and woe is mine!’ (329). She is even more afraid of losing Porphyro if it is reality. As we know that Porphyro is her family’s enemy, Madeline is now worried about Porphyro’s life since he may be killed. The situation becomes more subtly complex, especially as they achieved the ‘Solution sweet’ (322) of sexual consummation. Now Madeline’s happiness does not hinge on whether she can have a vision of her husband or whether her vision is true or not. A paradoxical truth and ambivalence are embroiled in Madeline’s misgivings. This stage of the poem, after the love-making, implies a deep level of psychological realism. That is the reason why Madeline’s characterization appears appealing to us. But the conflict for Madeline is not unsolvable. Keats arranges an elopement for the young lovers, and yet, though this

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<sup>61</sup> Stillinger, *Hoodwinking of Madeline*, p. 88.

<sup>62</sup> John Jones, pp. 239-40.



is a good resolution, we are made aware that it happens in work that is presented, explicitly in the final stanza, as a romantic fiction. Keats's narrative method ensures that we explore his puzzlement when it comes to dream and reality, and recognize the difficulty of differentiating between dream and truth. One will and perhaps must, as the poem suggests, easily get trapped in ambivalence in attempting any such differentiation.

From stanzas 29 to 34, the narrative perspective changes. It is clearly the third-person omniscient viewpoint and is no longer the ambiguous first- or third-person narration. This shift of perspectives happens very swiftly because merely one line away, the narrating stance is different in another stanza. That is to say, in the last line of stanza 28, where the word 'lo' is uttered, the narrator employs a different point of view. In stanza 29, he no longer identifies with Porphyro but presents the scene in an objective way, as he, in the beginning of stanza 29, describes 'Then by the bed-side, where the faded moon / Made a dim, silver twilight' (253-54). This swift shift highlights the freedom and fluidity of the poem's narrative perspectives. The narrator stays aloof from the scene; he is un-participating and simply presents the scene. The reader is made to see the sumptuous feast and hear the lute playing without awareness of the authorial presence. Owing to the narrator's complete objectivity, the reader can focus on and take delight in the scenes, particularly in the splendid feast in stanza 30. The Spenserian opulence has reached its climax here. This scene is, like Madeline's disrobing, another stanza of synaesthesia:<sup>63</sup>

A heap

Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;

With jellies soother than the creamy curd,

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<sup>63</sup> Wasserman, p. 115.

And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;  
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd  
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,  
From silken Samarcand to cedar'd Lebanon.

(264-70)

The narrative strategies ensure that the reader not only feasts with his eyes, but also seems to taste the soft texture of the creamy curd as well as smell the cinnamon's scent. Hunt commends the 'lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon' as another master stroke since the reader has to 'read the line delicately, and at the tip-end, as it were, of one's tongue'.<sup>64</sup> This image vividly arouses palatal pleasure. Allott and Leon Waldoff associate this sensuous stanza to the feast in Adonis's chamber in *Endymion*.<sup>65</sup>

Though both passages highlight sensuous pleasures, the depictions in 'The Eve of St. Agnes' are much more refined than those in *Endymion* because of the synaesthetic effect.

In representing Porphyro and Madeline's love between stanzas 35 and 39, the narrator's perspective and role switch again. This time the narrator makes the characters, Porphyro and Madeline, speak for themselves. As with the interactions between Porphyro and Angela, the reader is presented with direct statements, a more dramatic method than is involved in comments by the narrator. In stanzas 35 and 38, for example, we can strongly feel Madeline's emotions and fears as well as Porphyro's love for Madeline since they are direct speeches. Madeline cries

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<sup>64</sup> Hunt, p. 337.

<sup>65</sup> See Allott, p. 470, note to lines 262-75; and Waldoff, pp. 76-79.

The passage is from *Endymion*, II, 440-53: 'So recline / Upon these living flowers. Here is wine, / Alive with sparkles—never, I aver, / Since Ariadne was a vintager, / So cool a purple: taste these juicy pears, / Sent me by sad Vertumnus, when his fears / Were high about Pomona: here is cream, / Deepening to richness from a snowy gleam; / Sweeter than the nurse Almathea skimmed For the boy Jupiter: and here, undimm'd / By any touch, a bunch of blooming plums / Ready to melt between an infant's gums: / And here is manna pick'd from Syrian trees, / In starlight, by the three Hesperides.'

desperately to Porphyro, 'Oh leave me not in this eternal woe, / For if thou diest, my love, I know not where to go' (314-15). Porphyro addresses Madeline affectionately by calling her 'My Madeline! sweet dreamer! lovely bride' (334) as he is 'After so many hours of toil and quest, / A famish'd pilgrim, — saved by miracle' (338-39). The narrator, in this sense, is invisible but implied.

This impersonality continues until stanza 42, the concluding stanza, when the narrator has to change his narrative tense. The narrator presents his story from the legendary present to the historic past. Such a change alerts us to his presence as the lines show: 'And they are gone: ay, ages long ago / These lovers fled away into the storm' (370-71). Wolfson argues that this conclusion reflects the indeterminacy of romance.<sup>66</sup> Newlyn holds that the end is ironic since Keats is contemplating reality and art.<sup>67</sup> Kern and O'Neill interpret the poem from the function of romance: the inconclusiveness makes us aware that we are reading a romance.<sup>68</sup> And Porscha Fermanis remarks that the last stanza 'demonstrates the progress of the human mind from dependence, servitude and superstition towards a more cultivated understanding associated with the emergence of civil society'.<sup>69</sup> Though she has an interesting interpretation, Fermanis's argument seems to illustrate what happens when an ideological frame is forced upon a poem. Her view ignores the poem's evident regret for the world of 'old romance' which it is leaving behind. Kern's idea of the limitation of romance and O'Neill's concept of a self-conscious poem are close to my reading of this poem. I would, however, suggest that Keats seems to alert the reader to his status as a modern narrator at the end of the poem. The shift of tense signals to us that this is

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<sup>66</sup> This is the whole gist of Wolfson's argument as her subheading indicates: 'The Eve of St. Agnes: Romance as Enigma'. See Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, pp. 288-96.

<sup>67</sup> Newlyn, p. 182.

<sup>68</sup> Kern, pp. 73-74, 84; and Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 197 (hereafter abbreviated as *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*).

<sup>69</sup> Porscha Fermanis, *John Keats and the Ideas of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 63.

a story and the narrator tells it to us. In other words, the narrator seemingly wishes us to notice his presence and even to remember him. But his technique is very subtle. This purposeful alienation of the reader's involvement in the story is reinforced by the concluding images of Angela's and the Beadsman's deaths. Keats seems to use their deaths to create a sense of alienation between the reader and the characters. As he told Woodhouse, he amended the last three lines in order to leave on the reader 'a sense of pettish disgust' (*L II*, 162-63):

Angela went off  
Twitch'd by the palsy: —and with face deform  
The Beadsman stiffen'd—'twixt a sigh and laugh,  
Ta'en sudden from his beads by one weak little cough

*(PoemsStillinger, 375-78)*<sup>70</sup>

Sperry asserts that these alterations destroy the balance of 'The Eve of St. Agnes' and leaves a sense of ambivalence.<sup>71</sup> Sperry indeed has a perspicacious analysis. The beauty of 'The Eve of St. Agnes' would be marred because of this 'Change of Sentiment' (*L II*, 163). In this context, we cannot help questioning Keats's intention of revising these lines. Perhaps Woodhouse is right: Keats does not seem serious with his readers, as he 'had a fancy for trying his hand at an attempt to play with his reader & fling him off at last' (*L II*, 163). Keats, in this regard, seems to have an ambivalent attitude towards his readers. But, from another perspective, he appears to show his status as a modern narrator who prefers a change of sentiment at the end of the poem.

'The Eve of St. Agnes' is a compelling narrative. In it Keats demonstrates his narrative power by achieved Spenserian images and dramatic intensity. More

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<sup>70</sup> *PoemsStillinger*, p. 318.

<sup>71</sup> Sperry, pp. 219-20.

importantly, the narrative is made sophisticated and dimensional because of the indeterminate narrator's role and constant shifts of narrative perspectives.

## Chapter Five

### Lyric Narratives I: 'Ode to Psyche' and 'Ode to a Nightingale'

The thesis has so far discussed Keats's development as a poet who exploits the devices of narrative in original ways. In this and the next chapter I shall be exploring how narrative functions in Keats's major lyrics, his odes. These poems use the full resources of lyric poetry: metaphor, invocation, rhythm, and so on. But they also tell stories, stories that bear on the central narrative driving Keats, which might be summed up in the question, what kind of poet am I?

The circumstances of his own life were composing their own kind of increasingly beleaguered narrative. Before his decision to abandon his medical career, the idea of becoming a poet had been an aspiration for Keats. This self-expectation had been much challenged when blasting attacks were hurled at him by *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* and the *Quarterly Review* in the autumn of 1818. It was the time when he was in one of his direst situations in life. In addition to the attacks, his sibling Tom Keats was becoming worse with tuberculosis. More especially, there was his creative sterility resulting from his abandoning 'Hyperion: A Fragment' (begun in 1818 and abandoned in 1819). In this troubling time, though Keats's imagination and creativity had halted in the epic-sublime 'Hyperion', short lyric forms, like the ode, gave him an emotional and creative outlet.<sup>1</sup> Yet Keats also adds narrative elements in these odes in order to show his idea of poetry and his poetic identity. In this chapter, I shall discuss two odes, 'Ode to Psyche' (1819) and 'Ode to a Nightingale' (1819), and examine the narrative effects which are contained in these lyrics.

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul D. Sheats, 'Keats and the Ode', in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 87.

## I

‘Ode to Psyche’, serving as a prologue to the great spring odes, is an ode expressing Keats’s idea of a poet. More than this, it offers in lyric form the story of how he imagines himself developing into a modern poet, one who accepts the burden of belatedness, in Harold Bloom’s phrase,<sup>2</sup> and takes pride in being able to explore the new territory he calls ‘some untrodden region of my [the] mind’ (51). How does Keats tell this story? Well, he does so with some sophistication. First, he depicts himself having had the experience of stumbling upon Cupid and Psyche. Initially, the major difficulty seems to be that of identification, only for that to be resolved immediately when he identifies one of the characters as ‘His Psyche true’ (23). However, it soon becomes apparent that the true story of the poem is of a different kind, not one that is a question of wandering ‘in a forest thoughtlessly’ (7) and coming across mythological figures, but one that is anticipated in the very opening of the poem where the poet apologizes for his poetry. And this story is the story of Keats’s modernity as a poet, one who is obliged to dwell in a different kind of forest, a forest made up of ‘branched thoughts’ (52). Indeed the poem’s branchings are fascinating to track. As Kenneth Allott and John Barnard have observed, the critical trend seems to underestimate ‘Ode to Psyche’.<sup>3</sup> Allott even calls ‘Ode to Psyche’ the ‘Cinderella’ of Keats’s great odes.<sup>4</sup> But in viewing Keats’s establishing his poetic identity, ‘Ode to Psyche’ is a vital poem.

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<sup>2</sup> Bloom has a good discussion of Keats’s latecomer complex. See Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*. The most recent critics who discuss this aspect are Aske and Bennett, who uses the theory of ‘anxiety of audience’ to expound Keats’s self-awareness of his belatedness in the poetic tradition. See Aske, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1-7; and Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1-14.

<sup>3</sup> See Kenneth Allott, ‘The “Ode to Psyche”’, in *John Keats: A Reassessment*, ed. Kenneth Muir (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1959), pp. 74; and Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 104.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Allott, p. 74.

Keats tells a story about what kind of a poet he wishes to be through the image and the story of Psyche. He adapts and reworks in lyric form a narrative to be found in Apuleius, and in condensed form in Lemprière; it had also been the subject of Mary Tighe's relatively conventional narrative poem, *Psyche*. Critics noticed Keats's borrowings from Tighe, for example, 'untrodden forests' (I, 4), 'paths untrodden' (III, 129),<sup>5</sup> or 'fainting with delight' (VI, 384). But they have not commented extensively on Keats's internalization of the erotic quest described by Tighe. What 'Ode to Psyche' offers is an artfully organized poem that communicates Keats's anxiety and ambition while striving for his poetic identity. In my discussion of 'Ode to Psyche', I shall attempt to explore the ways in which Keats depicts himself as a poet who is transformed from self-doubt into reaching an authentic voice. I shall relate my study of what I call the poem's 'lyric narrative' to two aspects: the figuration of Psyche and Keats as a modern poet.

The image of a poet who is inspired to creative activity generated by the poet's visionary imagination is crucial to Keats's search for poetic identity. In his *The Author* (2005), Andrew Bennett reminds us of the importance to Romanticism of the vatic tradition of the poet as seer.<sup>6</sup> For the Romantics and for Keats in particular, a poet must have a visionary imagination. And the image of the naturally inspired poet is already prominent in Keats's early poems, such as 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill' and *Endymion*. It also appears in his later work 'Ode to Psyche'. Barnard argues that William Wordsworth's *The Excursion* IV (687-756, 840-81) serves as a prototype for Keats's image of a poet whose inspired vision is triggered through its interaction with

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Jackson Bate has made these observations. See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 493. For Mary Tighe's edition of poetry, see Harriet Kramer Linkin (ed.), *The Collected Poems and Journals of Mary Tighe*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2005). All references to Tighe's poems are taken from this edition.

<sup>6</sup> Bennett, *Author*, pp. 3, 36.



nature.<sup>7</sup> Yet such an image of a wandering eye/I that interacts with natural beauty and the power of fancy had been expounded earlier by William Godwin in his *Pantheon*, a book which was much read by the young Keats.<sup>8</sup> According to Godwin, one can enjoy nature's beauty most when one's 'imagination becomes a little visionary'.<sup>9</sup> In this context, Keats's 'Ode to Psyche' reflects the interrelationship between the visionary imagination and beauty in nature. By wandering in the forest 'thoughtlessly', the poet-narrator 'sees' (5) the dove, a creature from nature, while at the same time his visionary power also sees the dove as an embodiment of Psyche the goddess.

Keats's visualization of Psyche allows him to project his authorial intention onto the figure of Psyche. Though Helen Vendler reads the poet's 'thoughtless wandering' as an indication that Keats is in the 'infant or thoughtless Chamber',<sup>10</sup> I hold a different view. I would suggest that the poet-narrator's 'thoughtless' wandering is a 'thoughtful' act intended to assert a new poetic identity: Keats associates his status as a latecomer and unestablished modern poet with that of the undefied Psyche.

Keats and Psyche are similar in their status and background. They are connected in three ways. The first connection between Keats and Psyche involves the idea that they are both forgotten or unestablished in the canon of the gods in one case and the canon of literature in the other. Keats may be drawn to Psyche because they both are uncanonized. He then makes his protest and expresses his self-expectation via the image of Psyche: though he is an uncanonized poet, he has the potential to be a poet, like Psyche who is to be established as a goddess eventually. This frame of mind is revealed in his letter to the George Keatses of 30 April 1819. In the letter, he declares that: 'I am more orthodox that [than] to let a hethen [heathen] Goddess be so

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<sup>7</sup> See Barnard, 'Appendix I', pp. 499-502.

<sup>8</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 39.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 58 (hereafter abbreviated as *Odes of John Keats*).

neglected' (*L II*, 106). Keats defends Psyche and thinks that she should be revered as a goddess. That is to say, if Psyche can be celebrated by Keats, this means that Psyche can be canonized as an 'orthodox' goddess. She already has the attributes of a goddess. Within this framework, in 'Ode to Psyche', Keats unfolds Psyche's story and expresses his lament for his heroine: you are 'fairer' (he says) than Phoebe and Vesper (26-28), but why do you have no 'temple', no 'altar heap'd with flowers', and no 'virgin-choir to make delicious moan / Upon the midnight hours' (28-30) to honour you, he asks? Though in different phrasing, he questions Psyche's status as a neglected deity and makes a protest on her behalf two more times in a parallel form: she has 'No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet / From chain-swung censer teeming' (32-33) to celebrate her, and she has 'No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat / Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming' (34-35) to worship her. Each repetition accentuates the protest on behalf of the unworshipped goddess. Repetition is a dominant motif in narrative, involving a 're-seeking' that invites us to see how a former perspective has given way to one that has matured or changed, and such a maturing, involving a breakthrough or discovery, is at work in this stanza.<sup>11</sup>

Second, the legend of Psyche can be related to Keats's philosophy of the 'vale of Soul-making'. Critics like Miriam Allott, Leon Waldoff, Daniel Watkins, and Kris Steyaert have observed this aspect.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Psyche's trials, as her name 'Soul' connotes, are trials of soul-making. But interestingly, Keats does not write about Psyche's trials in his ode. Steyaert has particularly pointed out Psyche's underworld

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<sup>11</sup> Though concentrating on the technique of repetition in the seven novels, J. Hillis Miller's study of repetition is inspiring. See J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982).

<sup>12</sup> See Allott, p. 515; Waldoff, pp. 106-08; Daniel P. Watkins in 'History, Self, and Gender in *Ode to Psyche*', in *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 96-97; and Kris Steyaert, 'Poetry as Enforcement: Conquering the Muse in Keats's "Ode to Psyche"', *Romanticism on the Net* 1 (1996), ed. Michael Eberle-Sinatra, <<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/psyche.html>>, accessed on 30.10.05.

journey and argues that this deprives us a chance of seeing Psyche's individuality.<sup>13</sup> Steyaert, nevertheless, does not relate the meaning of Psyche's journey to the underworld and Keats's philosophy of the 'vale of Soul-making' (*L II*, 102). In this context, I would suggest an alternative perspective since this aspect seems to be ignored: the significance of Psyche's journey in Hades in relation to Keats's 'vale of Soul-making' philosophy. Though Keats does not write about Psyche's underworld journey, I believe that Psyche's journey into Hades may have an impact on Keats's mindset, which is shown in his journal letter. That is to say, Psyche has to undergo trials in the underworld, travelling in the dark before she is admitted into the hierarchy. Keats draws a parallel between Psyche's situation and his. Again, the poem absorbs into its workings what is an archetypal plot, the descent into the underworld; we only half-glimpse such a journey when Keats associates the mindscape of the final stanza with 'dark-clustered trees' (54) and 'wild-ridged mountains' (55).

Psyche is the Soul and Keats is using this figure to confirm to himself his capacity for soul-making and identity-acquiring. The personification of Psyche may also help Keats accept failures, attacks, or any unexpected blows, as his letter to his brother and sister-in-law of 21 April 1819 illustrates:

Call the world if you Please "the vale of Soul-making' ...they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself? ...Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?

(*L II*, 102)

Like Psyche, who needs to undergo trials in the underworld, or in the dark, Keats is

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<sup>13</sup> See Steyaert.

also groping in the dark, both emotionally and professionally. His journal letter to the family of George Keats of 19 March to 15 April 1819 reflects his worry and fear: ‘I am however young writing at random—straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness—without knowing the bearing of any one assertion of any one opinion’ (*L II*, 80). The darkness could have been overwhelming for Keats as he stresses this loss of mental light again: ‘I write quite in the dark’ (*L II*, 82). At this point Keats feels ennui for life as he questions man’s perfectibility, contemplating the idea that man is a ‘poor forked creature’ (*L II*, 101). Writing in the dark means not knowing where you are going, and part of the power of Keats’s poem is how it enacts the process of trial and error, until the poet comes across his true role – cut off from a world in which ‘Holy were the haunted forest boughs’ (38), yet able to assert, ‘I see, and sing, by own eyes inspired’ (43).

The third and last aspect of the similarities between Keats and Psyche are their belatedness in canonization. This results in Keats’s celebration of Psyche and this celebration also has to do with Keats’s later transformed poetic voice. Stuart Sperry comments that Keats’s canonization of Psyche is a difficult task due to the burden of the past.<sup>14</sup> But I would suggest that Keats is innovative in creating for Psyche a place in the pantheon. Psyche’s belatedness does not result from her lack of qualifications, as Keats portrays Psyche as a ‘fairer’ goddess than the others (28). Rather, Psyche’s uncanonized status is attributed to her lack of a place in the hierarchy. Psyche is originally a mortal and she cannot be deified until she has been granted immortality by Jupiter. Similarly, Keats suffers for the same reason as Psyche: he is an unestablished latecomer, despite his qualification as a poet. But Keats has to strive for his status as a poet since there is no Jupiter to grant him any poethood.

As a belated poet, Keats faced more conflicts, doubts, and expectations for his

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<sup>14</sup> See Sperry, p. 255.

poetic identity than his literary predecessors. In other words, Keats was highly conscious of the past glory of his literary precursors and anxious about his right to claim a title as a newcomer poet. That is why Richard Woodhouse tried to encourage Keats not to give up writing poetry when he complained to Woodhouse that he could not find any original subjects or new beauty in poetry. Woodhouse thus wrote: ‘I believe most sincerely, that the wealth of poetry is unexhausted & inexhaustible’ (L I, 380). It is, perhaps, this fear of having come too late to the vocation of the poet that draws him to the figure of Psyche. Though Psyche is the ‘loveliest vision’ (24) and the ‘brightest’ (36) among the Olympian goddesses, owing to her not being canonized, she has to become the ‘latest born’ (24) deity. Her belatedness is first delineated in line 36, ‘though too late for antique vows’, and twice the word ‘late’ is stressed: ‘too, too late for the fond believing lyre’ (37). In Keats’s case, he is aware of his status (or lack of it) as a late-comer and worries about this fact. Keats’s misgivings about being a latecomer and unestablished poet is doubly emphasized. But a turn in the later part of the poem, beginning from line 43 ‘I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired’, ushers in a new transformed voice, a voice of self-confidence and of authorship.

How do we reach this all-important turn in the poem and in Keats’s career, as a result of which we broach a major topic for discussion: Keats as a modern poet?<sup>15</sup> We reach it through the poet’s location of himself in ‘days so far retired / From happy pieties’ (40-41), a way of putting it which sounds full of loss, but which shows Keats bringing an awareness of himself as, in Bennett’s characterization of the modern author, ‘autonomous, original, and expressive’<sup>16</sup> and gifted with a visionary imagination. The poem has two plots on the go: one is a tale of loss and separation

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<sup>15</sup> Major Keats scholars all share the same view of Keats’s being a modern poet. See Sperry, p. 248; Waldoff, p. 118; Barnard, *John Keats*, pp. 102-03; Watkins, pp. 88-106, and Sheats, pp. 87-91. But Timothy Clark considers Keats as a post-modern poet. See Timothy Clark, *The Theory of Inspiration: Composition as a crisis of subjectivity in Romantic and post-Romantic writing* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 265-69.

<sup>16</sup> Bennett, *Author*, p. 56.

from 'happy pieties'; the other, related to it, is the story of the poet's incarnation as a figure who is 'autonomous' and 'original'. In 'Ode to Psyche', Keats persuades the former can turn into the latter through seeming to stumble, like someone telling a story whose plot-twists are intricate but whose outcome is happy, on an enabling way forwards.

When discussing Keats's 'modern' authorship, there are two aspects to this issue: first, the imagination of Keats in 'Ode to Psyche' is related to the question of gender and autonomy.<sup>17</sup> There is a difference between Psyche and Keats on this point. Psyche, a female mortal before she was apotheosized, has the attributes of a woman's silence and passivity.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, she has no one to sing for her. Keats sees this, sympathizes with Psyche, and lauds her. By doing so, Keats adopts a poet's position. He is able to build Psyche 'a fane' (50) and so establish her rightful position in the pantheon. In this respect, 'I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired' is the most powerful line in the authorship-construction in 'Ode to Psyche': a construction which is the central narrative in the poem. Though Waldoff, Steyaert, and Paul Sheats are all aware of Keats's assurance in this line, they have not argued from the perspective of authorship.<sup>19</sup> This line, I would argue, suggests that Keats assumes a poet's identity and responsibility. He exhibits his authorial control and autonomy. Keats uses his visionary imagination to create a place, a name, and a history for Psyche. At the same time, Keats also celebrates himself and makes for himself a poetic career.

The second aspect of the interpretation of Keats as a modern author involves his personal and expressive stance. Sperry suggests that Keats makes himself an

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<sup>17</sup> Steyaert and Watkins include discussion on this point.

<sup>18</sup> See also Steyaert; and Watkins, p. 99.

<sup>19</sup> Waldoff makes a comment on this line about the question of the tone. See Waldoff, p. 107. Steyaert interprets it from the gender politics. See Steyaert, <<http://users.ox.ac.uk/~scat0385/psyche.html>>. Sheats explains it as revealing Keats's command of the historical present. See Sheats, p. 89.

appealing modern poet through his 'inwardness and subjectivity' in the ode.<sup>20</sup> Barnard argues that this poem reveals a modern author's self-consciousness of isolation.<sup>21</sup> I would suggest a different view: Keats is making Psyche a 'modern' goddess as a parallel to the 'modern' poet that he perceives himself to be. Keats will use his rich imagination, 'the wreath'd trellis of a working brain' (60), and build for Psyche a 'modern' temple. The shrine is built up not on stones, nor in a certain place, but in an 'untrodden region' of a modern poet's mind. Psyche becomes a personal goddess to Keats. Moreover, the flowers for Psyche will always be different, since Fancy the gardener (62) or Keats's imagination, his 'shadowy thought' (65), will compose and decompose all the time. In this respect, Keats's evocation of Psyche's temple naturally separates Psyche from the traditional celebration of a goddess and makes Psyche a 'modern' deity. This modernity in Keats's imagination, once more, indicates Keats's growing authorial consciousness and assurance in his poetic voice.

In 'Ode to Psyche', authorial voice is a key theme in the evolution of Keats's poetic identity. Sperry observes Keats's growing modern authorial consciousness especially at the beginning of stanza four.<sup>22</sup> Sheats even calls Keats an enthusiastic rebel in his narrative techniques. Sheats holds that Keats expresses authorial command in his celebration of Psyche.<sup>23</sup> Both critics have pertinent remarks on Keats's narration. In this poem, I would suggest that the authorial assertiveness of Keats's poetic identity is parallel to the upward tone which progresses from stanza two and culminates in stanza four. At the outset of the poem, the poet-narrator Keats is unsure of himself, which is particularly reflected in his vision of Psyche. Barnard contends that the dream-vision is an act of questioning the authenticity of a vision.<sup>24</sup> I

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<sup>20</sup> Sperry, p. 255.

<sup>21</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 103.

<sup>22</sup> Sperry, p. 255.

<sup>23</sup> Sheats, pp. 87, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 101.

would argue that the vision can best be understood from the perspective of the transformation of Keats's poetic identity. Keats is either timid or self-doubtful, he therefore euphemistically proposes that he will sing a song for Psyche. As if he would profane the goddess, the poet-narrator asks for pardon (3) for such an act. This timidity results in some doubts with regard to his vision. Hence the poet-narrator questions himself about whether he has seen Psyche or not: 'Surely I dreamt today, or did I see / The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?' (5-6). The power of vision, as noted, is a poet's essential attribute. If a poet doubts his visionary imagination, it means that the poet is unsure of his poetic identity. In this context, these two lines intimate Keats's self-doubts. But his faltering tone eventually disappears and a more assertive voice emerges. Moreover, his self-assertion demonstrates his evolution of a modern poetic psyche. The move from stanza one to stanza two, as Sperry maintains, is a 'most' salient example in Keats's odes because it 'marks the exchange of innocence for knowledge and experience'.<sup>25</sup> Keats, that is to say, forsakes the perspective of mythology but adopts a historical, a modern view in narration. Unlike what he did in *Endymion* by simply employing the mythological tales, Keats attempts to re-define the mythological canon and give Psyche a proper place in 'Ode to Psyche'. In this way, though being a belated poet, Keats makes himself a different narrator from his literary predecessors. His worship of Psyche allows him to assert his own poetic voice and gives the figure of Psyche a modern sense according to his knowledge and experience. In stanza two, while expressing his commiseration on Psyche's unworshipped fate, the poet's voice appears distinct since it conveys his profound sympathy for Psyche; and the poet's authorial voice begins henceforth. Stanza three adds more confidence in tone, as the line 'I see, and sing, by own eyes

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<sup>25</sup> Sperry adopts Kenneth Allott's idea of seeing Keats move from the perspective of mythology to the historical perspective. See Sperry, p. 252.



inspired' displays, and his self-commitment to the goddess Psyche 'So let me be thy choir' (43) double this assurance. In stanza four, Keats's assertiveness reaches the highest as he pronounces 'Yes, I will be thy priest' (50). This line denotes Keats's authorial assumption and confidence as a *vates*, because Keats identifies with the 'pale-mouth'd' prophet (49). The first word 'Yes' in particular exhibits Keats's self-determination to assume the role of Psyche's priest and in some sense his own priest.

In 'Ode to Psyche' Keats presents himself as a narrative poet with a visionary imagination. At the same time, Keats projects his anxiety of being a belated and uncanonized poet upon the persona Psyche. But by the end of the poem, Keats has assumed the role of author and acquired a poetic identity by celebrating Psyche. Keats's authorial assertiveness is highly significant because 'Ode to Psyche' is the first of the great odes. 'Ode to Psyche' meets Keats's self-expectation and it also motivates him to write other poems (*L II*, 106). Equipped with this authoritativeness in his poetic voice, Keats culminates his craftsmanship in 'To Autumn' (1819).

## II

If 'Ode to Psyche' manifests Keats's search for and attainment of an assertive poetic voice, in 'Ode to a Nightingale', conversely, he shows a tone of indeterminacy. The image of the nightingale evokes increasing emotional turmoil in Keats. The narrative element in this lyric therefore concerns itself, in displaced and condensed form, with the poet-narrator's recognition of his ambivalent poetic identity.

Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' has been described as a form of 'symbolic

debate',<sup>26</sup> a description I would add to by saying that the poet-narrator's inner debate constitutes the central part of the ode. The debate revolves round his response to the nightingale since, for the poet-narrator, the bird is an emblem of the ideal, permanence, or of art/music.<sup>27</sup> It is the debate, in other words, which sustains the poem and explains its swerves of direction. Traditionally, critics have applied the idea of 'subtractive process'<sup>28</sup> to argue how the poet-speaker becomes aware of his inner conflicts and attempts to find a more appropriate option for himself. But one fundamental aspect seems to be ignored: the differences in the poet-speaker's attitude, his 'stance', as I shall call it, towards the entwined subjects of the nightingale's song and its meanings, and his own inner desires. A sharp contrast in stance occurs as the ode evolves. In this sense, I would suggest that there are three distinctive shifts in the poet's stance and they reveal the poet-narrator's transformation; yet nevertheless, the ode concludes with the poet-narrator's poetic identity remaining elusively ambivalent.

The first stance is relatively single-minded. It shows the poet's longing to exist within the nightingale's world, and to flee from the earthly ills of his own. He finds the bird's realm superior to his own and expresses his sense of the differences between the two realms in the first six stanzas. The second stance is a dualistic one. It is latent from the start but it emerges fully in stanza seven, and it shows the poet's transformed mind. The poet's thinking at this stage evolves into a transcendental view; he sees his world and the bird's as separate entities and his world is not necessarily inferior to the bird's one. The stance shifts a third time in the last two lines of the ode, exposing the poet's ambivalence towards his poetic identity. This transformation

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<sup>26</sup> I quote it from Fred V. Randel's paper, 'Coleridge and the Contentiousness of Romantic Nightingales', *Studies in Romanticism*, 21 (1982), 55. It originally appeared in David Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 299. Perkins thinks that Keats is a major predecessor of modern poetry because he uses a 'symbolic debate' in his poetry.

<sup>27</sup> Most major critics such as Sperry, Vendler, and Waldoff include discussion on this topic.

<sup>28</sup> Randel, p. 52, and his note (note 34) on Wasserman's comment, which appears in Wasserman, pp. 178-223.

serves as a sharp contrast to the poetic identity he possessed in the beginning. While this major change has occurred, the poet himself engages himself in another self-conflict, revealing that his quandary remains unresolved.

The relatively single-minded stance is best seen in stanzas one and two. The poet, as mentioned, longs to be in the bird's world and to escape his unintelligible world at this initial stage. The stance in the first stanza indicates the poet's dissatisfaction with the mundane world which he is in. Employing a narrative technique associated with epic, the poet begins the poem *in medias res*. Helen Vendler sees this technique as a sign, revealing the poet's refusal to remain silent, and thus his decision to speak out suddenly.<sup>29</sup> Yet I would suggest that this technique denotes the poet's impatience to connect to the bird's territory, because he seems to have merged himself into the bird's world before he makes any utterance. He does not have any preconceptions or any presuppositions of the bird's world. Rather, the speaker appears single-minded as he is in love with the bird's world from the outset. The fact that the poet starts *in medias res* suggests that there is something also epic about his imaginative struggle to comprehend the impact on him of the nightingale's song. And like an epic hero (Aeneas, say), he struggles to define exactly what his true feelings are ('Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness' (5-6)). At the same time, like an epic hero he has a destiny, in his case the compulsion to identify with the 'happiness' sensed in the nightingale's song, as result of which both bird and poet can or in the latter's case hope to be able to sing 'of summer in full-throated ease' (10).

The poet opens with: 'My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense' (1-2). He shows no signs of resistance. But he easily surrenders into the bliss which the nightingale provides. The opening three words might seem to suggest that

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<sup>29</sup> See Vendler, p. 97.

the poet is depressed,<sup>30</sup> and the following clause indicates that he is ‘pained’. But the full plot of his feelings discloses itself in the following lines. His emotional transformation leads into a kind of opium-like reverie (2-3). The speaker uses an ambivalent expression to show his feelings, ‘’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness’. One can see that he feels happiness, which is induced by the bird’s song. From another perspective, however, he also feels sadness from the bird’s song as it reminds him of his world, which lacks such happiness. There is a dual impulse and coexistence of pain and pleasure. We note that the speaker needs to define his feelings carefully, as though there were the possibility of confusion, as though one mood might turn out, disturbingly and yet revealingly, to conceal or pass into another mood. The ambivalent remark to the contrast between worlds sharpens the intensity of the statement.

The poet’s longing for the bird’s realm can be seen through his narrative skills, that is, through interjection and parallelism. In stanza two, the bird’s song brings forth another longing: the longing for the warm South through the image of drinking. The poet opens the second stanza with the interjection ‘O’, in lines 11 and 15, to show his longing for something or wanting, as observed by Leon Waldoff.<sup>31</sup> But ‘O’, seemingly a simple word, serves to initiate a complex exploration of the poet’s wish to merge into the bird’s world. In addition to the word ‘O’, the parallel structure of this stanza underlines the poet’s yearning:

*O, for a draught of vintage! That hath been...*

*O for a beaker full of the warm South...*

(11, 15; italics mine)

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<sup>30</sup> See also O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, pp. 188-89.

<sup>31</sup> Waldoff has a formalist interpretation of this interjection. See Waldoff, p. 121.

We can perceive the poet's earnest desire to integrate into the bird's world, since the bird's song now causes him to forget his troubles in his mundane world. Moreover, and here a complex counter-narrative emerges in the lyric, the wish to forget the 'real world' leads paradoxically to the lines about 'sunburnt mirth' and so on into a heightened appreciation of the sensuous beauty of which it is capable.

Special consideration needs to be given to the word 'throat' in the first stanza because it relates to Keats's poetic identity. F. Matthey offers a thoughtful discussion of this word, arguing that 'the image of the song escaping freely from the bird's throat changes to that of drinking wine. The two lines suggest that same total abandonment and deep relief. Both do it through the image of the throat'.<sup>32</sup> Expanding upon the 'throat' piece, I would also suggest that the word 'throat' can be associated to Keats's idea of a poet. As Vendler contends, the nightingale is as a 'natural poet' and serves as a model for the human poet. Its voice is the 'voice of pure self-expression'.<sup>33</sup> The bird's singing inspires in the poet-speaker a power to articulate. It is singing 'in full-throated ease', something that suggests, by a process of transference, the unfettered fancy and imagination of the poet, a power that is envied and craved by Keats the poet. This line 'Singest of summer in full-throated ease', in this sense, reminds us of the most powerful line concerning a poet's identity in 'Ode to Psyche': 'I see, and sing, by own eyes inspired' (43). In 'Ode to Psyche', a poet's visionary imagination is highlighted as it is the essential attribute of a poet. Yet in 'Ode to a Nightingale', Keats stresses another attribute of a poet: the articulate power of a poet. A poet must be like the nightingale and able to fully and freely express himself.

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<sup>32</sup> See Beth Lau, 'Keats, Associationism, and "Ode to a Nightingale"', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 32 (1983), 59, note 21 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Keats, Associationism'). She quotes it from F. Matthey, 'Interplay of Structure and Meaning in the *Ode to a Nightingale*', *English Studies*, 49 (1968), 308. The 'two lines' mean line 11: 'a draught of vintage' and line 10: 'of summer in full-throated ease'.

<sup>33</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 81.

But in his mundane world, Keats the poet-narrator cannot find such an articulate power as that of the bird. Thus the poet wishes to ‘fade’ (20) away from his unhappy, and even cold realm, but to dwell in the bird’s territory, or even to ‘dissolve’ (21) there. The words associated with the bird’s realm, such as ‘summer’, ‘sunburnt’, and ‘warm South’ (10, 14, 15), suggest the contrary states of the poet’s world.

The poet’s dissatisfaction with his mundane world is evident in his narratively expressed stanza three. Waldoff claims that this is the ‘most haunting’ stanza of the poem because it depicts the poet’s painful observations about his world.<sup>34</sup> Indeed Keats tells stories about his thoughts and feelings about his world. This stanza is full of narrativity. In his mundane world, he does not hear of any happiness. By contrast, he is compelled to hear only men’s groans since his world is subject to sickness and death:

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;

(24-26)

Each line, here, encapsulates a tragic scenario: in the first he imagines our impotent awareness of one another’s sufferings; in the second, he imagines the end of life; in the third, he conjures up the kind of terrifying unfairness that condemns youth to grow ‘pale, and spectre-thin’, before dying. His world lacks the liveliness and the intriguing dynamics of happiness and freedom represented by the bird and its world. In addition, love and beauty recede over time into despair and transience as Keats says: ‘Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow’

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<sup>34</sup> Waldoff, p. 122.

(29-30).

Keats's lament broadens as he bemoans a crucial fact which segregates the bird's realm from his: the unavoidability of the thinking principle. The world of the nightingale does not have this principle, but man's world does. The poet-narrator in this stanza is in the 'Chamber of Maiden-Thought' (*L I*, 280-81). That is to say, he is in the chamber of thinking principle. The thinking principle makes one aware that 'the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression' (*L I*, 281). For the poet-speaker, to think is to be 'full of sorrow / And leaden-eyed despairs' (27-28) and have painful sensations. In this regard, he does not want to be in this chamber. But he wishes to tarry in the bird's realm, which represents the Infant or Thoughtless Chamber (*L I*, 280). In the bird's world, he does not have to think about human sufferings. Instead, he can enjoy the freedom and happiness, which are symbolized by the bird. The poet in this stanza appears anguished, repudiating his world and dreaming to escape his mundane world.

The poet's reactions to the bird's song in this phase, however, are contradictory to his ambition which he charted for his poetic career in 'Sleep and Poetry'. In 'Sleep and Poetry', Keats wishes to progress from delineating the rustic simplicity and happiness of the realm 'Of Flora, and old Pan' (102), to the realm which delineates 'the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts' (124-25). But now, as an overwhelmed poet, he searches for an escape from the sadder humanity.

The poet's impatience for entering the bird's territory is earnest and it is again reflected in stanza four. There are two aspects that show the narrator's aspiration for merging into the bird's world. First, the narrator twice utters the word 'Away' to accentuate his earnest wish as the line, 'Away! away! for I will fly to thee' (31) denotes. Second, his aspiration is highlighted by the abrupt line in 'Already with thee!' (35). Paul Sheats sees this phrase as a change to the typical beginning of a

sublime ode.<sup>35</sup> Yet I would suggest that it demonstrates Keats's power in narrative. This line compresses time and space, and it transports the poet to the bird's realm in merely three words.

Stanza four also concentrates on the symbol of the nightingale as a poet and it is related to the poet-narrator's identity. The bird, as mentioned, is as a natural poet, and the human poet, the poet-narrator, can only communicate with the bird via poetry. In line 33, the poet gains access to the bird's domain 'on the viewless wings of Poesy'. This line shows the narrator's poetic identity and his imaginative power.

In the bird's realm, nevertheless, there is no light in the bird's world as line 38 indicates: 'But there is no light'. Victor Lams, Jr., and Waldoff see this line as Keats's description of Wordsworth's exploration of the dark passages in the human heart.<sup>36</sup> Yet Sheats argues that it is 'a radical loss of existential bearings'.<sup>37</sup> But I would suggest that it symbolizes the poet's groping in the dark, that is to say, the poet's search for the ideal that the nightingale represents. This aspect can link us, as I have argued, to Keats's possible intention of alluding to Psyche's groping in the dark before she is granted her immortality in 'Ode to Psyche'. Both poems display the poet's conscious search for poetic identity.

Line 38, I would also suggest, is the first symbolic clue to the second stage of the poet's transforming mind. The crucial word in this line is 'But'. This word evokes a sense of reality. Moreover, the phrases 'verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways' (40) have initially negative connotations because of the words 'glooms' and 'winding'. These two words suggest a labyrinth and painstaking groping for the poet if he wishes to explore the bird's world. At the same time, the 'glooms' hold open 'verdurous'

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<sup>35</sup> See Sheats, p. 91.

<sup>36</sup> See Victor J. Lams, Jr., 'Ruth, Milton, and Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale"', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 34 (1973), 426; and Waldoff, p. 122.

<sup>37</sup> See Sheats, p. 91.



possibilities. The entranced reverie, however, still dominates him and he continues his imaginative flight.

The poet-speaker's relatively single-minded view of the bird's realm continues in stanza five, though another sense of reality sets in. In this stanza, the poet is still enchanted by the bird's world as it is a world of 'soft incense' (42) and of

White hawthorn and the pastoral eglantine

Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;

And mid-May's eldest child,

The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,

(46-49)

Crucially the stanza offers another perspective on time and process. The poet moves from describing what is at hand to intuiting through senses other than sight what is to come, the unfolding narratives of the seasons. Sperry sees this stanza as a successful synesthesia of images.<sup>38</sup> On the surface, I would suggest, Keats vividly creates a Shakespearean garden.<sup>39</sup> But, at the level of deep-structured meaning, his fantasy is broken a second time as a sense of reality intrudes. The line 'The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves' (50) at the end of the depictions of the sensual summer night serves as a second symbolic clue to Keats's later disillusionment. Vendler argues that the flies' murmurs indicate that the poet is at the end of the 'paradisaal illusion'.<sup>40</sup> I see it as a sign of reality. The murmurs of the flies spoil the scene, creating a stark contrast to the previous lines. The influence of the flies' murmurs is significant as it

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<sup>38</sup> Sperry, p. 265.

<sup>39</sup> Keats may be influenced by Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II, i 249-52. See Allott, p. 528, note to lines 46-49.

<sup>40</sup> See Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 92.

implies that the world of the nightingale is imperfect. Moreover, the word 'haunt' (50) intensifies a sense of unpleasantness. But, for the moment, the poet still disregards this second clue to his disillusionment. Still being single-minded, he chooses to sojourn in the nightingale's world.

The poet's imaginative identification with the bird reaches its climax in stanza six: the bird's world evokes a death wish for the narrator. The death wish once more highlights the antithesis of the bird's world and the poet's one. The poet appears disillusioned with his imperfect mundane world, thus he chooses to have a euphoric death: to 'cease upon the midnight with no pain' (56). His wish of 'easeful Death' (52) does not occur at the very moment when he is listening to the bird. But the bird's song reminds him of the death wish because the poet has 'called' the name of death 'in many a mused rhyme' (53). The bird's song brings to the surface a death wish, which he has buried inside for ages. His death wish intensifies with the following line, 'Now more than ever seems it rich to die' (55). He is no longer 'half in love' (52) with death, but yearns for death wholeheartedly. The pinnacle contrast concerning his death wish lies in the last two lines: 'Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain— / To thy high requiem become a sod' (59-60). The nightingale's song makes the poet become a 'sod' (60), and its song, an elegy (60). The last line again reflects the poet's dissatisfaction with his existence in his very world. The line compresses time and space, echoing his earlier impatience in 'Already with thee!'. His impatience to unite with the bird loses its beneficial integrity. His sense of reality increasingly sets in ultimately, providing the poet-narrator to a new vision of the bird's world. Stanza seven, in this sense, serves as a turning point to the poet's transformed mind. A new stance for the poet emerges in the poem.

The poet comes to have an organic or transcendental view of the bird's realm in stanza seven; this is the second shift in the poet's attitude. At the outset of this stanza,

the poet still continues to praise the symbol of the bird. The ‘evolving’ bird, as Sperry calls it,<sup>41</sup> has become an emblem of immortality. The ‘immortal Bird’ (61) is immune to death, and to any ‘treading down’ of the ‘hungry generations’ (62) which the speaker has known. The bird’s song passes through the boundaries of history and geography, and breaks the social barriers between the high and low. It also eliminates the prejudices between the orthodox and the heathen and blurs the existence of faery lands and of the real world (63-70). The bird also connects him to the larger human story. That is to say, the bird strings all the communities in one thread: its song. Its singing reminds the poet that death is inevitable and is for everyone. Everyone will ultimately partake in the same fate. As Lams and Vendler insightfully argue, there is a brotherhood in the nightingale’s song.<sup>42</sup> Everyone is also like Ruth — as Michael O’Neill suggests, a symbol of archetypal homelessness<sup>43</sup> — who exists in an ‘alien’ (67) place and longs for ‘home’, either a physical or metaphysical home. Here we can see Keats’s great narrative skills shown in this lyric: he condenses the poet’s reflection on the bird’s song in merely three lines. His technique is like a novelist:

Perhaps the selfsame song that found a path

Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,

She stood in tears amid the alien corn;

(65-67)

Ruth’s story is our story as these lines make the stanza convey a deeply human feeling to us. Moreover, everyone will eventually return to the eternal home, death. With this

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<sup>41</sup> Sperry, p. 263.

<sup>42</sup> See Lams, 432; and Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 94.

<sup>43</sup> Michael O’Neill, ‘Second-generation Romantic Poetry 2: Shelley and Keats’, in *The Cambridge History of English History*, ed. Michael O’Neill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 539.

view, the poet may be aware that he is now in an 'alien' place, in the bird's place through his imagination. He connects geographically to the mythical world. The poet again assures himself of one fact: the nightingale's song is also heard in fairylands as the words 'the same' (68) and 'oft-times' (68) denote. The last two lines: 'Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn' (69-70) then serve as a bell which impels the poet completely into the second stage. Beth Lau considers that the terrifying realm depicted in these two lines is the landscape once visited by Endymion.<sup>44</sup> Vendler approaches it from the perspective of brotherhood, and sees there is no human being behind the windows.<sup>45</sup> Lams argues that the lines evoke a sense of utmost deep grief for the poet.<sup>46</sup> I agree with Lams because the poet now realises that in fairylands there is also sorrow. I would also argue that the two lines call to mind a sense of lurking dangers. Perhaps the fairy people also have great troubles or pains as the diction of 'perilous seas' and 'forlorn' in the poem imply this. The poet starts to understand that troubles and pains exist in every world, and his world is not the sole one.

Stanza eight comprises the dualistic and ambivalent stances which appear at the second and third stages in the poet's transforming mind. The powerful word 'forlorn' in stanza seven brings back the poet to his former self: 'Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self' (71-72). The poet is, to use Vendler's apt epithet, an 'earthbound poet'.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, he cannot flee his mundane world no matter how much he aspires to be in the bird's realm; he must return to his earthly world. It is also his 'sole' self that can solve the problem of his quest for the meaning of life. With this understanding, the poet decisively bids

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<sup>44</sup> Lau, 'Keats, Associationism', 61.

<sup>45</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 94.

<sup>46</sup> Lams, 431.

<sup>47</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 83.

farewell to the fancy: ‘Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf’ (73-74), which has beguiled him from the beginning of the poem until the last stanza. He casts his former relatively single-minded vision away and begins to see things dualistically, no longer wishing to live in the bird’s world. He recognizes that his world and the bird’s world are two disparate ones. The nightingale cannot partake in his sufferings, or in his ultimate end, death. The bird, in this respect, is indifferent to his feelings. Hence the poet says goodbye to the bird two more times. The words ‘Adieu! adieu!’ (75) serve as a powerful emotional booster to the poet’s determination. He lets the nightingale fly away, without feeling any remorse. Metaphorically speaking, he profoundly wishes to ‘bury’ away his former and immature vision of the bird and its world at stage one and regains a new self. The diction of ‘plaintive anthem’ (75) and ‘buried deep’ (77) associated with the bird can reflect the poet’s intention of casting his old self away. This time the poet does not want to ‘fade’ (75) with the nightingale but allows the bird to ‘fade’ away itself. The bird flies off across the meadows, the stream, the hills, and the valley-glades (76-78) before it disappears. Thomas McFarland argues that this familiar landscape contains no meaning and it is better to omit them.<sup>48</sup> But Jack Stillinger suggests that these geographical descriptions indicate the poet’s return to the real world.<sup>49</sup> Stillinger seems to propose that, as Vendler has observed, the poet-narrator prefers his earthly world. In this sense, a new dimension of thinking, I would suggest, occupies the poet’s mind in lines 79-80 and it brings the poet-narrator to a new stance: a wavering mind and an ambivalent vision.

The poet-narrator is in a conflict: he debates which perspective to choose for his

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<sup>48</sup> Thomas McFarland argues his point in his *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin: Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Modalities of Fragmentation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 235-36. McFarland’s point is quoted in John Baker, ‘Dialectics and Reduction: Keats Criticism and the “Ode to a Nightingale”’, *Studies in Romanticism*, 27 (1988), p. 119.

<sup>49</sup> See *CPS Stillinger*, p. 469.

poetic identity. He becomes indecisive and this ambiguous state of mind makes the poet change his stance a third time. The poet questions himself whether the imaginative flight is true or not: ‘Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: —Do I wake or sleep?’ (79-80). If it is true, should he take what he has learned from the trip and gain an organized or transcendental ‘vision’ as William Blake posits in his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience*? Or should he remain the same as before and dismiss the entranced visit as a ‘waking dream’? The poet is engaged in a metaphysical debate and the debate is dialectical. This polarity in decision-making is emphasized again by the next line: ‘Do I wake or sleep?’. For the poet, what he has been vacillating in his mind at present is not the physical sensation between dream/sleep or awakening, but a question concerning the meaning of his existence. He has self-doubts and apparently has not internalized what he has learned from the visionary journey. If he had integrated the dualistic view of the second stage, he would be very happy to remain in the world without bringing up this concluding couplet. But the poet-speaker does not seem to be satisfied with the dualistic tone. He still thinks about the relatively single-minded view of the first stage. He thus laments: ‘Fled is the music’ (80) in the first part of this line. That is to say, his mind lingers in the realm of the bird and he still reflects on the bird’s song.

This ‘tarrying’ with the music may be illuminated by his letter to Benjamin Bailey on 22 November 1817.<sup>50</sup> In this letter, Keats says, ‘have you never by being surprised with an old Melody—in a delicious place—by a delicious voice, fe[l]t over again your very speculations and surmises at the time it first operated on your soul’ (*L* I, 185). Keats tells Bailey how powerful the impact of music may affect him. In ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, the last line, ‘Fled is the music: — Do I wake or sleep?’, depicts a similar quandary, which the poet-narrator is in. The poet should forgo the first vision

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<sup>50</sup> I owe this connection of the letter to Lau’s paper. See Lau, ‘Keats, Associationism’, 48.

and chooses the second one. But the poet has been too much engrossed in the nightingale's melody and the idealistic imagery that the nightingale has evoked. He disregards the two instances of the darkness (stanza four) and the flies' murmurs (stanza five), even though he senses the imperfectability of the bird's world, which is shown in these two stanzas. With this view, the fled music is not to let the poet abjure his cast of mind that is reflected at the initial stage and the second stage. On the contrary, it produces a new problem for himself: his stance in the last two lines brings up the question of an ambivalent identity for the poet.

One factor may be added to explain the poet's wavering identity: the factor of time. The time may be at midnight (56). This is a highly stressful hour for one to make a decision. The poet's indecisiveness makes his stances be at variance. The poet's mind is, in one word, confused. His mind is transformed and is transforming. His identity is evolving and regressing. The 'waking dream' aptly indicates his ambivalent state of mind and of poetic identity: if that is a dream, then the poet is not waking; if he is waking, certainly he is not dreaming. But the poet-speaker is caught between these two distinct and incompatible states. Metaphorically, he is deciding whether he should choose the bird's world or his world. He cannot be in the bird's world but he does not like his world. There is no middle ground. The only choice for him is to keep debating. Hence, in the end, the poet-narrator can only conclude by saying 'Do I wake or sleep?' (80). He, apparently and ultimately, has not known his true poetic identity yet.

Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' is an ambiguous poem because the poet-narrator changes his stances three times. There are even two changes in the final stanza. The poet-narrator longs for the bird's world and is against his mundane world. But he also finds that the bird's realm is not as perfect as he thinks. He is in an ambivalent state of mind and the poem ends in a stance of perplexity. The question concerning Keats's

poetic identity as reflected by his narrative skills remains open and is left to other  
spring odes to answer.



## Chapter Six

### Lyric Narratives II: 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Ode on Melancholy', 'Ode on Indolence', and 'To Autumn'

In his 'Ode to Psyche' and 'Ode to a Nightingale', Keats uses narrative devices to enhance his lyrically subjective explorations. In this chapter I shall discuss how he explores the experience of interpreting narratives, whether those composed by history ('Ode on a Grecian Urn'), or by states of feeling ('Ode on Indolence' and 'Ode on Melancholy'), or by nature ('To Autumn'). In the former chapter, Keats narrates the script of lyric consciousness; in this chapter, Keats appears as the reader of the narratives presented to him by an art-work, moods, and a season. Of course, these antitheses can be interrogated: Keats does make us aware of his own subjective involvement (or wish not to be involved in 'Ode on Indolence') in the four odes examined in this chapter as he does in the two odes looked at in the last chapter. But the key point is that he does so obliquely, not straightforwardly, in poems that work less by putting to the fore the 'sole self' ('Ode to a Nightingale', 72) or 'some untrodden region of my mind' ('Ode to Psyche', 51) and more by questioning and responding to what seems beyond the control of the narrative-shaping mind of the poet. In 'Ode to Psyche' and 'Ode to a Nightingale', narrative is at the service of lyric subjectivity. In the four odes looked at in this chapter, narrative, stories, lie, or seem to lie, outside the self and require the poet to act as a reader, an interpreter, asking (for example) 'Who are these coming to the sacrifice?' ('Ode on a Grecian Urn', 31) or asserting 'She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die' ('Ode on Melancholy', 21). Keats sees the Grecian urn, the moods of melancholy and indolence, and the season autumn as materials for stories. He presents the materials and conveys his thoughts

and feelings in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' (1819), 'Ode on Melancholy' (1819), 'Ode on Indolence' (1819), and 'To Autumn' (1819).

## I

Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' has always attracted much debate about the nature of his imagination, as reflected in the poem. The controversy focuses on the issues of art, love, or the 'larger mystery'<sup>1</sup> of life, and, especially, on the concluding couplet. When discussing the tableau of the young lover wooing his lover or of the people processing towards their destination, major critics tend to concentrate on the 'fixed' quality of the transcendental aspect of the scenes.<sup>2</sup> As Kenneth Burke remarked in the 1950s, the pictures articulate an '*eternal present*'.<sup>3</sup> My reading of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' departs from this traditional interpretation of the love pursuit and of the townsfolk's procession. I aim to provide a reading of this poem in the light of the power of the mind in order to rethink Keats's conception of poetic identity. I suggest that, for the poet, the tableaux are not 'fixed' but dynamic. The poet imagines that the figures depicted on the urn display a transcendental ideal, but he discovers that this ideal stresses the importance of engagement with process.

Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' begins with paradoxes. The poet-speaker appears confused by this ambivalence.<sup>4</sup> For the speaker, the love scene shown on the urn and delineated in the second half of the first stanza seems unconsummated. This recalls the fact that the urn is described as 'still unravish'd' (1). And the frenzied pursuit also

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<sup>1</sup> Waldoff, p. 139.

<sup>2</sup> In 1950s, Burke and Cleanth Brooks both analysed 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' from this perspective, and this perspective is still prevalent. See Burke, pp. 72-87; Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (1947; San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975); and Klaus Hofmann, 'Keats's Ode to a Grecian Urn', *Studies in Romanticism*, 45, 2 (2006), 251-84.

<sup>3</sup> Burke, p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> I share the same view as Helen Vendler. See Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 118.

appears to be in a sharp contrast to the ‘quiet’ bride (1) and the ‘silent and slow’ lover (2), as well as to the historian’s disinterestedness, which is suggested by the ‘Sylvan’ urn (3). Tension seems to exist here. Moreover, at this stage, the urn presents a tale which seems ‘sweeter’ than the poet’s human tales; it ‘express[es] / A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme’ (3-4). This stanza, in this sense, appears fraught with ambiguities as no anguish is exhibited from the unrequited love. It is not a sad story, but ‘a flowery tale’ and is even ‘more sweet[ly]’.

Critical interpretations of the first stanza differ widely. Stuart Sperry argues, with Burke and Cleanth Brooks, that the opening stanza’s love pursuit is perpetually unattainable and paradoxical.<sup>5</sup> David Bromwich speculates that this stanza begins a plot which might be related to the influence on Keats of William Hazlitt’s lecture, ‘On Poetry in General’.<sup>6</sup> Helen Vendler contends that Keats rewrites ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ in order to find a satisfactory answer to the problem of ‘creation, expression, audience, sensation, thought, beauty, truth, and the fine arts’, which is already posed in the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ (1819).<sup>7</sup> But Andrew Bennett focuses on the relationship of the poem’s ‘efficacy of language’ and the transcendentalist art shown on the urn.<sup>8</sup> Though each critic has analyzed ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ in depth, their comments do not, in my judgement, place sufficient emphasis on Keats’s view of the imagination when this view is placed in the context of the Romantic idea of the power

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<sup>5</sup> The three major critics on ‘Grecian Urn’ all hold the same point of view about the paradoxical aspect reflected in the poem. See Burke, p. 75; Brooks, pp. 155-56; and Sperry, pp. 268-69.

<sup>6</sup> David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 391. In spring 1818, William Hazlitt delivered a lecture on ‘On Poetry in General’, and Bromwich argues that the following passage might have influence on the plot of ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’: ‘Painting embodies what a thing contains in itself: poetry suggests what exists out of it, in any manner connected with it. But this last is *the proper province of the imagination*. Again, as it relates to *passion*, painting gives the event, poetry *the progress of events: but it is during the progress, in the interval of expectation and suspense, while our hopes and fears are strained to the highest pitch of breathless agony, that the pinch of interest lies...*’ [italics are mine, in order to highlight Bromwich’s speculation on the possible influence of Hazlitt’s lecture on Keats’s ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’]. This passage is quoted from Hazlitt’s lecture. See Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>7</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 116.

<sup>8</sup> See Andrew Bennett, ‘Enticing Conclusion: John Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”’, *Word & Image*, 5, 4 (1989), 311 (hereafter abbreviated as ‘Enticing Conclusion’).

of the mind.

Keats's imagination in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' demonstrates its power in exploring paradoxes. As Vendler and other critics argue, Keats intends to seek an answer to life and to art. The unconsummated love pursuit, therefore, engages the poet-speaker in a dialectical debate, like that in 'Ode to a Nightingale', with himself and eventually transforms his naïve perspective into a transcendental one. By 'naïve', I mean 'initial or superficial'. By 'transcendental', I mean 'thoughtful or profound', possessing the self-awareness that Schiller associates with the 'sentimental'.<sup>9</sup> In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', I suggest, Keats's evolving conception of poetic identity goes beyond the visual aspect of the circumscribed love scene. By the end of the poem, this scene presents itself as dynamic, one involving progress.

In stanza one, there is a gap existing between the poet's first impression and his later view of those who might be called the urn people. At the outset of the poem, the poet is fascinated by the apparently idealistic pictures reflected on the urn. The urn seems to be the embodiment of permanence, beauty, and love, all caught for ever in the figures fixed on it. No mortality or transience will affect the urn's world.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the love scene implies a vernal and idyllic setting, and a tableau of pastoral happiness is evoked since the poet uses 'Sylvan' and 'flowery' to describe the urn. The urn seems to entice him to stay in its realm, and it makes the speaker believe that, as mentioned, the urn's world is better than his. Hence the speaker questions the origin of the urn figures because he wishes to learn the answer to the 'larger mystery' of life. But taking a closer look at the urn figures, the poet starts to doubt his initial impression and views the urn in a detached way. He is no longer subjective but

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<sup>9</sup> See Schiller's discussion of the concept of 'sentimental poetry' in Friedrich Schiller, *On the Naive and Sentimental In Literature*, trans. Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly (Manchester: Carcanet, 1981).

<sup>10</sup> Major Keats scholars, such as Burke, Brooks, Sperry, and Vendler in particular, all share this same view.

intends to understand the lesson presented by the urn. His mindset of the world begins to take another direction.

The poet-speaker is now puzzled by the unconsummated love scene. For the speaker, it seems that if the urn people are immortals, their love should be consummated. But the 'bold lover' (17) apparently has not consummated his relationship with his lover since the bride, like the urn, is not ravished yet. Moreover, the young lover does not seem frustrated by this. He is still 'mad' (9) for the girl and is in a 'wild ecstasy' (10). Furthermore, the bold lover appears to be encouraged by the 'pipes and timbrels' (10). In this regard, the poet cannot help questioning these paradoxical scenes.

The poet's earnest questionings make him more convinced of the reality presented by the urn figures. In addition to Bennett's argument over language's efficacy as revealed in the questions, critics also debate the seriousness of the poet's questions. Leon Waldoff considers that there is a 'mounting intensity' in the questions.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, Thomas Schmid disagrees with this view as he contends that the poet is not serious about the answers.<sup>12</sup> Susan Wolfson comments that the questions are open questions and do not refer to the poet's attitude.<sup>13</sup> But I suggest that the poet's questions, which reveal the poem's narrative power owing to its use of a questioning narrator, aim to help him out of his quandary about the urn's paradoxical scenes. If there were an answer found from the urn's world, he would want to change his attitude. Thus he questions earnestly. His perspective shifts from the superficial, first impression to a one that is more reflective. The poet also narrows his focus from the urn people to the lovers. He asks seven short, consecutive questions

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<sup>11</sup> See Waldoff, p. 138.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas H. Schmid, 'Silence and Celebration: Pastoral Dialogism in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 44 (1995), 78.

<sup>13</sup> Wolfson remarks that the questions are open ones and do not refer to the poet's attitude. See Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 302.

about the urn people's identity and their actions, focusing on two essential questions. First, who are the urn figures? Second, why does the urn lover appear so happy even though he has not yet obtained his girl? The speaker is groping for the precise language to describe the figures. The poet asks:

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

(5-10)

He alternates between 'deities' or 'gods', 'mortals' and 'men', or 'of both'. The poet cannot name them properly because he is confounded by this dilemma of incompatibility. That is to say, the urn figures seem to come from a realm different from the poet's transient world, because they seem to prevent the passing of vernal beauty and establish permanence on the urn. But strangely, as already noted, their love is not consummated. For the poet-speaker, the urn's realm is perhaps not as idealistic as he originally sees. Its figures seem to be like his fellow mortals, in that they also experience a frustration of desire.

The poet's interrogation, consequently, challenges his conception of the meaning of life and his idea of self-consciousness. The 'still happy' urn lover teaches the poet-speaker that the process towards the ideal is more important than the ideal itself. Such a view allows one to know the ways when facing frustration, degeneration, and

death that originate from 'the fact of process' itself.<sup>14</sup> With this view, the poet makes two enlightening recognitions: first, the 'bold lover' (17) must come from man's world because his wish is not fulfilled. He is not a god. The second recognition is that the young man is not saddened by the unfulfilled wish. Rather, he sees beyond the anxiety which pursuit engenders. In other words, the lover appears to enjoy the process as he is ever-moving towards his ideal. But he does not know when he can embrace his lover. Facing the unknown, the lover still enjoys the progress of events. He appears to take control of his thinking and transfigures the disappointment created by his agonizing pursuit. For the poet-speaker, the youth, in this sense, seems to project his happiness, happiness of winning the girl, upon the process. The lover then remains cheerful and happily pursues his goal.

The continuity of the plot in stanzas two and three invites much critical debate about their role in the ode. There are two contentious points. First, should stanzas two and three be deleted since there are numerous repetitive and empty words, such as 'ever' and 'happy'? Second, if these stanzas are retained, what effect do they produce? Critics still debate fiercely about their deletion or retention. Walter Jackson Bate suggests that stanza two and particularly stanza three are 'a digression', and he even intimates their cancellation: 'We have only to apply the simple test of omitting them both, or else the third alone, and we find that what remains will still make a complete poem, though admittedly less rich'.<sup>15</sup> David Bromwich makes a similar comment, but the stanzas he proposes are stanzas three and four. Bromwich considers that this omission will make the ode a 'well-managed sublime' and 'more perfect' poem. Yet he also acknowledges that 'it [if the omission occurred] would move us less'.<sup>16</sup> Jason Mauro uses David A. Kent's theory and contends that the repetition of stanza three is

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<sup>14</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 126.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 514.

<sup>16</sup> Bromwich, p. 388.

ucial' and serves as another side of the coin because it makes the action in stanza two progress.<sup>17</sup> Vendler does not indicate her stance on their deletion, but with Bate and Bromwich, holds a negative view on stanza three, and considers that it is 'a form of babble'.<sup>18</sup> Yet Michael O'Neill suggests stanza three dramatizes Keats's feelings of 'increasing desperation'.<sup>19</sup>

In my view, stanzas two and three contribute a valuable significance to the poem. When re-examining Keats's imagination, I would argue that the repeated words of 'ever' and 'happy' emphatically valorize their function in the ode. These words reaffirm Keats's shifting perspective of the urn figures' belief in the infinite. On the other hand, it also exhibits his conviction of the superiority of the figures on the urn. The poet carries this transcendental idealism gained from stanza one to stanzas two and three. In this respect, when viewing the piper, the poet-speaker begins to rivet his attention to the enjoyment of the process.

In stanza two, the poet-speaker can see the wooing scene from a fresh point of view. There are two aspects involved in his meditation on the urn piper. The first aspect is that the lines 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard /Are sweeter' (11-12) delineate the poet's longing for a 'sweeter' world. But he also understands that the continuous piping, the progress of the event, is the key to a sweeter melody. That is to say, what the piper pipes is 'sweet', but he must keep piping in order to produce a 'sweeter' melody. If the piper stops, his music will no longer be 'sweeter', but merely 'sweet'. The poet, in this sense, encourages the piper to keep piping for the 'ditties of no tone' (14). He believes that the 'sensual ear' (13) of the mortal world will not appreciate the piper's music as much as the other world does. Moreover,

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<sup>17</sup> See Jason Mauro, 'The Shape of Despair: Structure and Vision in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 52, 3 (1997), 293-94.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, p. 193.



mortal men perhaps would make the piper feel smug about his producing more lovely music. But the ditties of no tone come from a world which transcends the 'breathing human passion' and 'a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd' (28-29). Within this framework, the piper will not be affected by the sensory experiences of the human world. Instead, he will continue piping beautiful music. Furthermore, the word 'sweet' intrinsically connotes one simple fact: the piper must be happy in order to produce 'sweet' music. He must enjoy his piping or he will be wearied (23), and cannot forever pipe new (24) and newer music.

Second, the piper serves as a parallel to the bold lover. Like the young man, the piper also enjoys the progress of events. The piper's song, as suggested, may be seen as an encouragement to the wooing lover. The piper will be always there, and his song will never stop. His music will forever encourage the lover to court the lady. In this context, the poet-speaker is *now* able to see beyond the pursuit. The poet will not pity the young man. Even though he initially fears that the lover can 'never, never' (17) kiss his bride, he develops the view that the wooing is an indispensable stage towards the consummated love, which will happen. Hence the poet also participates in the ever-reaching process and affirms the lover, 'yet, do not grieve' (18), as the lady will not fade away either (19) but will be there. The poet then takes this new mental outlook of transcendental idealism onto stanza four.

Stanza four is seen as an ambiguous stanza in Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and it invites much discussion about his view of the imagination. Critics agree on one point: there is no dramatic conflict in the sacrificial scene, why do the urn pilgrims abandon their 'peaceful' town (36, 39-40)? They ask two fundamental questions: first, is there a procession depicted on the urn? Waldoff denies that there is such a tableau,

but argues that it is a ‘dream within a dream’.<sup>20</sup> Bennett does not directly answer this question, but points out that there is a technical problem involved for the audience. He contends that the viewers cannot see the two scenes, the love pursuit and the procession, at the same time.<sup>21</sup> The second question concerns the identity and the destination of the townspeople, whose destination is more disputed than their origin. And this question leads to a debate on Keats’s view on art. Jack Stillinger points out that ‘the perpetual midwayness of the procession’ makes the poet aware of the limits of art and favours his earthly life.<sup>22</sup> But Bromwich, commenting on the desolate town, argues that Keats tries to defy the limits set by the urn: ‘No soul can return...except someone like Keats, a poet who does not accept the limits of the picture-making historian’.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, stanza four is an ambiguous stanza. But if the procession is seen from the transcendental perspective, the reason for the townsfolk’s forsaking their peaceful town seems justified. We can also see Keats’s power of the mind as a poet and his transcendental view of art. In other words, we do not have to argue about whether there is such a tableau or not. Nor do we have to debate about the townsfolk’s background and their destination. Rather, we can appreciate that ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ is Keats’s demonstration of his creative power. In ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, for the poet, the urn people are like the valiant lover and the happy melodist. Their piety makes them head for the sacrifice. They believe that they will reach their destination, the holy place. In this belief, on the ‘pious’ morn (37), the urn people leave their town, following the ‘mysterious’ priest (32), and move towards the unknown green altar (32). For them, their marching towards the altar is approaching a ‘sweeter’ end. That

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<sup>20</sup> See Waldoff, p. 140.

<sup>21</sup> Bennett, ‘Enticing Conclusion’, p. 302.

<sup>22</sup> Stillinger, *Hoodwinking*, p. 108.

<sup>23</sup> Bromwich, p. 395.

is to say, if they stay in their peaceful town, they are merely in a 'sweet' realm. But if they move forward, even though there might be troubles lurking ahead, they will be 'more' sweetly rewarded. The peaceful town is solely a stopover for their spiritual journey. In addition, the townsfolk seem to leave their town with a cheerful heart and it intimates that they have prepared themselves for the procession. From their dressing of the heifer 'with garland' (34), an attitude of cheerful devoutness is implied. From this perspective, even their peaceful town is abandoned and left 'desolate' (40), they will not feel any remorse. In other words, there is no stop in midway and no fulfillment as Stillinger argues. And yet the poet clearly feels, conveyed in the phrase 'emptied of this folk' (37) and in the direct address to the 'little town' (35) that follows, the pathos of its vanishing. The real people whose forms are copied on the surface of the urn have gone for ever, along with the real town which Keats imagines them as coming from and inhabiting; but art will survive. The poet, as suggested, imagines a transcendental philosophy which is shown by the urn. The urn, in this context, does not show the limits of art but conveys that art is transcendental.

The 'mysterious' priest can also illustrate Keats's complex trust in transcendental idealism. The priest is like the personification of the Wordsworthian wisdom.<sup>24</sup> In his letter to John Hamilton Reynolds on 3 May 1818, Keats had been meditating on life and poetry. He reflected on the 'burden of the Mystery' (*L I*, 281) and asserted that Wordsworth was deeper than Milton when exploring the dark passages of the mind in his 'Tintern Abbey'. The enigmatic priest, in this regard, might have that kind of mission to lead the townspeople to an unknown land, symbolizing the exploration of the mystery of life or of art. They have to be courageous to face the unknown future and to explore the mystery of life. They must also enjoy the fact of process like the bold lover, and not recoil out of fear, fear of failure and death before they reach their

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<sup>24</sup> Sperry, p. 269.

destination. At the same time, Keats recognizes that a 'sacrifice' is involved in the explorations of art. People have to live and die in order to make possible its achievements, which seem to stand beyond life and death. The procession scene, in other words, evokes a transcendental ideal, and this scene also depicts man's striving for art. This bucolic picture, displayed on the marble urn, thus makes the poet address the urn as 'Cold Pastoral' (45).

If stanza four is ambiguous, stanza five arouses the strongest clash of opinions about the workings of Keats's imagination. The two most disputable issues which always tease critics out of thought are: first, who the speaker of the final lines and their audience are, and what the lesson is.<sup>25</sup> The second and more disputed issue is the equation of beauty-truth.<sup>26</sup> Stillinger demonstrates that the intrinsic ambiguity in the ode's end ensues from the poem's punctuation. It is an ambiguity inherent in the triangular relationship of the urn, the poet, and the viewer.<sup>27</sup> We are therefore unable to specifically identify the addresser and the addressee. When discussing the identity of the speaker, Vendler and O'Neill among many others argue that that the concluding aphorism is uttered by the urn.<sup>28</sup> Vendler also makes another differentiation by contending that the poet says the last line.<sup>29</sup> She considers that the poet situates himself within three tenses: the past, present and future; and, in this way, he has a broader view than the urn's vantage point.<sup>30</sup> Paul Sheats also seems to suggest that the urn is the speaker, and the viewer is the poet.<sup>31</sup> I agree with this view, but when

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<sup>25</sup> The headnotes or endnotes of *Allott*, *CPStillinger*, and *Barnard* all have a brief summary of the commentary on 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'.

<sup>26</sup> Bennett has an excellent summary of the maxim: 'parallelism, chiasm, aphorism, paradox, enigma'. See Bennett, 'Enticing Conclusion', p. 309.

<sup>27</sup> Stillinger summarizes the existing debates on the punctuation of the last thirteen words in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. According to Stillinger, there are four possible interpretations of the speaker and of the listener: (1) poet to reader; (2) poet to the urn; (3) poet to the urn figures; and (4) the urn to reader. See *CPStillinger*, p. 470.

<sup>28</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 134; O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, p. 195.

<sup>29</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 134.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Sheats, p. 94.

referring to the last line and its speaker, I hold a different view from Vendler's argument of the poet-speaker's stance. I would argue that the poet does not encompass more perspectives than the urn. By contrast, I suggest that it is the urn which is more accommodating in time than the poet. From the perspective of the transcendental view of art, the urn's wider perspective of time or history gives the poet more food for thought and makes him aware of his mundane existence and mutability. In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', the poet laments the brevity of the human life and lauds the permanence of art as he pensively comments: 'When old age shall this generation waste, / Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe / Than ours' (46-48). According to these lines, the urn offers wider vistas than the poet. That is to say, the poet can merely meditate on the three tenses, whereas the urn suggests the triumph of art over time.

The urn's wider capacity exhibited in stanza five makes the poem's intrinsic message to the reader more convincing. Vendler suggests that this ode concludes with Keats's belief of the company of beauty and truth, and of sensation and thought.<sup>32</sup> Waldoff, developing Burke's idea of '*the eternal present*', remarks that this poem evinces a 'process of becoming'.<sup>33</sup> Grant Scott contends that there is an escapist wish as the male poet fears the emasculation by the feminine urn.<sup>34</sup> Sperry and O'Neill argue from the angle of the mind's power. Sperry commends Keats's imaginative power shown in this stanza, but he also sees the limits of Keats's imagination.<sup>35</sup> O'Neill, taking a step further than Sperry, considers that this stanza proposes a 'possible transcendence' of the imagination's limits.<sup>36</sup>

Stanza five is a stanza of transcendence. In stanza five, I suggest that the

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<sup>32</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 150.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>34</sup> Scott comments that the concluding lines reflect an escapist wish and exhibit the 'unsettling implications of feminine power and thwarted male sexuality'. See Scott, p. 121.

<sup>35</sup> Sperry, p. 275.

<sup>36</sup> O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, p. 194.

poet-speaker declares a firm belief in transcendental idealism. This conviction is not a 'possible' transcendence but a genuine one. This stanza also implies Keats's belief in the infinite. In this sense, when being inspired by the urn to have a transcendental view on his mundane world, the poet admires the urn's 'eternity' (45) and its immunity to the devouring time. He also believes that the urn can be a friend to later generations on the lesson about beauty and truth (48). The marble urn presents a world which is beyond the poet's mundane world. It will not be affected by the human sufferings, by the 'burning forehead, and a parching tongue' (30), but offers an ideal for the poet. The poet's creativity makes him philosophize beyond the limited view of his mortal existence. He utters: 'When old age shall this generation waste, / Thou shalt remain in midst of other woe / Than ours'. The poet's imagination, in summary of his creative activity, formulates his poem and takes control of it. The poet's creative power connects him to the present and the past, and also gives him a vision of the future.

On the issue of the equation of beauty-truth, though critics see the circularity of the aphorism, the debate still goes on. Sperry argues that the motto is a 'paradox' as it is both 'a proposition and a conclusion'.<sup>37</sup> Vendler and Wolfson both agree on the nature of the couplet as self-referential and circular.<sup>38</sup> Waldoff, however, suggests that its circularity indicates Keats's difficulty in elucidating beauty and truth.<sup>39</sup>

Though critics seem to be persuasive on the couplet's 'circularity' and 'self-referentiality', I would argue that this does not denote that Keats's imagination is circumscribed by this speciously problematic motto. Conversely, I suggest that the urn's epigram speaks for the poet-speaker's transcendental ideal. Vendler comments, from the aesthetic point of view, that Keats attempts to find an answer to art and to

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<sup>37</sup> Sperry, p. 274.

<sup>38</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 133; and Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 327.

<sup>39</sup> Waldoff, p. 145.

creation in the ode. I suggest that, nevertheless, the poet's way of thinking is transformed after his viewing of the urn. Owing to the unconsummated pursuit and the procession, the poet's knowledge of objectivity has matured; and he will be able to narrate from another perspective. Eventually he is aware of the imperfectibility of the urn world and understands it as a true fact of life as the two tableaux suggest unknown threats, frustration, and mysteries. There is no smoothness guaranteed in the progress of events for the urn figures. In other words, the urn's world does not necessarily appear superior to the poet's mundane world. But the urn people appear able to eliminate all the 'disagreeables' (L I, 192) of life and move forward.<sup>40</sup> They seem to concentrate on the present and are not irritated by the unforeseeable difficulties. Their acceptance of this imperfectibility is, for the speaker, beautiful. Thus the poet composes the aligning formula, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' (49), to conclude this stanza.

Stanza five also reveals Keats's idea of the imagination and of poetic identity. Vendler argues that 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', aesthetically, manifests Keats's 'extreme test of his negative capability'.<sup>41</sup> But I suggest that the urn people exhibit what he advocates for a poet's supreme identity, '*Negative Capability*' (L I, 193). The figures transcend the uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts for the past and the present, but hold a vision beyond. That is to say, their striving combines both sensual experiences and a transcendental philosophy. What the urn tableaux exhibit is a process of becoming. They are not 'fixed', but a dynamic process enacted. This process is also not an escapist wish, but endless endeavours made towards the ideal. The urn world is a present continuous tense. This is the urn's lesson to the poet-speaker.

In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', Keats appears as a reader of the tableaux presented to

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<sup>40</sup> I hold the same view as Vendler. See Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 135.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

him by the urn. The result is a subtle form of narrative lyric poetry; questions are asked; suspense is created; scenarios are explored; and finally a resolution that only seems to provide closure is supplied. He demonstrates a transcendental idealism by his creative power. His mind creates the urn world and envisages a transcendental philosophy from the scenes. In this poem, Keats's imagination accords with what he expects of himself as a poet: 'That which is creative must create itself' (*L I*, 374).

## II

In an essay discussing Romantic lyric poetry, Tilottama Rajan cites 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and argues that Keats's ode is not a pure lyric. Rather, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is 'openly dialogical'.<sup>42</sup> A dialogue between self and soul appears in this lyric. Indeed, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', as discussed, is developed from the poet's questioning consciousness of the urn figures. This aspect of dialogism, an element of narrativity, confers on Keats's lyric practice a narratorial dimension. This aspect not only applies to 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', but also it can be applied to the other odes. For example, 'Ode to a Nightingale' is a poem built on the poet-narrator's inner dialogue. The other three odes, 'Ode on Melancholy', 'Ode on Indolence', and 'To Autumn', which are to be discussed in the latter part of this chapter, also manifest dialogism. What I mean by 'dialogism' is different from the idea which Mikhail Bakhtin expounds in his *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). From the perspective of the discourse in the novel, Bakhtin expounds that there is a dialogue between literary texts and authors. In this way, there is no monologue but everything is interrelated.<sup>43</sup> My definition of 'dialogism' refers to the rhetoric strategy, that is, the dialogue or inner debate within

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<sup>42</sup> Rajan, p. 206.

<sup>43</sup> See Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).



the poems. I shall explore this idea of dialogism in these odes.

‘Ode on Melancholy’ begins with an abrupt exhortation: ‘No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist / Wolf’s-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine’ (1-2). The poet appears to dissuade the auditor from suicidal thoughts and offers his advice. Dialogism is immediately established. But this dialogue involves a question: who is the addressee? James O’Rourke argues that this is the first example of this ode’s ‘pronominal imprecision’.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the auditor appears unspecified. The poet seems to be conducting an internal dialogue with himself. Or he addresses an imaginary person or the reader.<sup>45</sup> Apart from exhorting the auditor from committing suicide, the poet also advises the auditor to look beyond his melancholy, so as to keep the soul ‘wakeful’ (10) even though the soul is ‘anguish[ed]’ (10).

This mental outlook of ‘looking beyond’ and ‘looking alternatively’ is more stressed in the second stanza. The poet-speaker appears as an interpreter of the mood of melancholy and offers his view on what to do when one is struck by melancholy. His exhortation to the auditor, as Stillinger suggests, exhibits Keats’s idea of the coexistence of pain and pleasure:<sup>46</sup>

But when the melancholy fit shall fall  
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,  
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,  
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;  
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,  
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,

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<sup>44</sup> James O’Rourke, *Keats’s Odes and Contemporary Criticism* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 96.

<sup>45</sup> Walter Jackson Bate states that the addressee is an imaginary person. See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 521. Bennett suggests that the addressee is the reader. See Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience*, p. 133.

<sup>46</sup> *CPStillinger*, p. 471.

Or on the wealth of globed peonies;  
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

(11-20)

The poet carries the dialogue on and points out the interrelatedness of joy and sorrow as well as melancholy and happiness. One must ‘glut thy sorrow on a morning rose’ (15) instead of bemoaning the April rain (13). In this way, one can use melancholy to attain a richer sense of life’s complex intertwining of pleasure and pain.

In the third stanza, the poet tells the addressee about the nature and intensity of the mood melancholy. It is an elaboration of the essence of the second stanza, and yet one which breaks free from exhortation to offer reflective and compelling statements which serve as a form of implicit advice. In stanza three, the poet expands his observation about the interpenetration between melancholy and joy. Hence he exhorts:

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:

(21-24)

In this passage, the pronoun ‘She’ creates a syntactic problem. We are not sure whether it refers to the mistress who appears in line 18 or it refers to the Goddess Melancholy, which appears in line 26. Recent scholarship does not answer this question. John Barnard and O’Neill both consider that those two different readings are

possible.<sup>47</sup> I would suggest, from the internal logic of this stanza, that ‘She’ refers to the goddess Melancholy. This reading, a prospective reading, of the mythological figure’s identity, however, shows a narrative element in the poem: suspense. The process of moving to immediate recognition is postponed and tension is created; narrativity is thus achieved. In this stanza, the poet continues to advise the addressee about the interconnectedness among beauty, transience, delight, and melancholy. The poet uses ‘dwell’ to highlight the mortality of beauty as beauty cannot last long but will be superseded by melancholy. The word ‘dwell’, intrinsically, reminds the addressee (and poet) of the presence and inevitable vanishing of beauty. The poet achieves the paradoxical effect of freezing ephemerality when he depicts Joy as a person ‘whose hand is ever at his lips’ even as he asserts that Pleasure will soon turn into poison. O’Neill comments that this passage is ‘one of Keats’s most concentrated blendings of presence and absence, of tragic greetings and farewells’.<sup>48</sup> Keats indeed makes the images appear most compact, intense, and paradoxical. When one starts to enjoy Joy and Pleasure, Joy and Pleasure are already departing and melancholy immediately follows. We must also notice that Joy is ‘ever’ bidding farewell, and this not only stresses the temporality of Joy, but its strange permanence. In addition, the poet advises the addressee that Pleasure is ‘aching’. This word ‘aching’ connotes the interpenetration of pain and pleasure. His advice on the interpenetration and intensity of the experience of feeling melancholy reaches its highest point when the poet says ‘Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy’s grape against his palate fine’ (27-28). Melancholy will come to one when one has the most intense feelings of joy.

The poem concludes with a new narrative cameo, a different metaphorical story,

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<sup>47</sup> See Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 114; and O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, p. 208.

<sup>48</sup> O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, p. 208.

one revolving round the figure who ‘bursts Joy’s grape against his palate fine’. He might be a double for the narrator himself. But his fate opens up a new region of emotions. He is both an active quester, as Helen Vendler argues,<sup>49</sup> whose ‘soul’ tastes ‘the sadness of her might’ (29) and the near-passive victim of melancholy, ‘among her cloudy trophies hung’ (30). This figure uses the senses (taste) to go beyond the senses; it is his ‘soul’ that tastes ‘the sadness of her might’. He recognizes that melancholy’s might, its dominion, has about it a ‘sadness’, by which Keats means high seriousness as well as latent tragedy. Having tasted this sadness, the soul is immediately subject to conquest, its arms being taken as trophies or spoils. Throughout, Keats has maintained an air of knowing assurance, for all the sadness of his poem’s message. But, in the poem’s final twist, the soul of the narrator’s double discovers that it is subject to melancholy, not in control of it.

In ‘Ode on Melancholy’, the poem seems to be an expositional poem, rather than a lyric. Instead of letting the auditor express his thoughts and feelings about being melancholy, the poet gives the auditor injunctions about what to do and what not to do when melancholy strikes. Dialogism is displayed in the poet-speaker’s exhortation. Dialogism shows as well in the way that the poem shifts from being a series of injunctions to being a poem which discovers its meanings through unfolding metaphors that act on the reader’s mind like a series of mini-plots.

### III

Like ‘Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil’, ‘Ode on Indolence’ has invited antithetical views and the negative view predominates. Traditionally, ‘Ode on Indolence’ is deemed an

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<sup>49</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, pp. 179-80.

unsuccessful<sup>50</sup> or even ‘disappointing’<sup>51</sup> poem. Stillinger argues that ‘Ode on Indolence’ does not have the dramatic tension and sharp imagery prevalent in the other odes.<sup>52</sup> But recent scholarship suggests that this poem is underrated.<sup>53</sup> Vendler and O’Neill point out its artistic value and assert its significance.<sup>54</sup> These two trends focus on the formalist study of the ode, and have not explored the aspect of dialogism in this ode. In this context, I shall discuss the dialogism shown in this poem. In ‘Ode on Indolence’, the poet poses questions for himself and engages himself in an inner dialogue with himself about his thoughts and feelings about indolence.

From the start, Keats appears to have ambivalent feelings about indolence. In stanza one, the three figures on the urn seem ‘strange’ (9) to the poet. The poet does not recognize them and this creates suspense, an element of narrativity which has already been discussed in ‘Ode on Melancholy’. The reader wonders why the poet does not recognize them and what the identity of the three figures are. The poet’s puzzlement over the three figures is more revealed in stanza two. In this stanza, superficially, the poet seems to question the urn figures, but at a deeper level, he poses questions for himself, as occurs in ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. In this way, he engages himself in a self-dialogue. He first asks: ‘How is it, shadows, that I knew ye not? / How came ye muffled in so hush a masque?’ (11-12). The poet continues to question the identity of the three figures and he also questions his understanding of them. This questioning consciousness continues when he further interrogates:

Was it a silent deep-disguised plot

To steal away, and leave without a task

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<sup>50</sup> Stillinger, *Hoodwinking of Madeline*, p. 178.

<sup>51</sup> Sperry, p. 286.

<sup>52</sup> Stillinger, *Hoodwinking of Madeline*, p. 178.

<sup>53</sup> O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, p. 202.

<sup>54</sup> See Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, pp. 15-39; and O’Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, pp. 202-06.

My idle days?

(13-15)

In this passage, we can find that the poet questions whether there is a 'plot' made against him in order to make him indolent. The very idea of a 'plot' suggests that the poet is able to see how experience presents itself as something potentially designed and shaped as well as something without purpose. Narrativity – here centred on his own state of mind – presses its claims on the lyric poet, who emerges as self-divided. He seems to be against indolence. But interestingly, in the following examples, he seems to have opposite feelings. He uses a positive expression, 'Ripe was the drowsy hour' (15), to describe the coming of indolence, where 'Ripe' takes an expressively firm emphasis. He further describes its arrival as a 'blissful cloud of summer-indolence' (16), seeming to welcome indolence. This contradicts his former attitude to indolence. In the latter part of this stanza, however, his negative feelings about indolence return when he poses another question: 'O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense / Unhaunted quite of all but —nothingness?' (19-20). He wishes indolence would melt away and would not haunt him any more.

In stanza three, Keats's mixed feelings about indolence emerge more notably when the identity of the three figures is revealed: they are Love, Ambition, and Poesy (25, 26, 30). These figures are significant to Keats as they are related to his poetic identity; and they are introduced in such a way that we would wish to assent to Harold Bloom's account of them as Keats's fates.<sup>55</sup> Among the three figures the last figure, Poesy, is the most significant to Keats. He has opposing feelings about this figure as

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<sup>55</sup> Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company*, revised and enlarged edn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 420.

he loves it and yet blames it the most (28). He reproves it even more as he calls it ‘my demon Poesy’ (30). But when he recognizes the three figures, Keats seems to forget his indolence and wishes to pursue them as he says: ‘to follow them I burn’d / And ached for wings, because I knew the three’ (23-24). These lines show his yearning for the three figures and fulfil a narrative desire to define the previously obscure.

Keats may long for the three figures, but he also has mixed feelings about them. His ambivalence about indolence and about the three figures reaches its highest point in stanza four. Longing continues as he says ‘I wanted wings’ (31). But another sense also arises after this statement: he engages himself in a debate about his other feelings about the three figures. He appears to mock himself about his feelings about the three figures, exclaiming ‘O folly!’ (31). More self-questionings follow and we notice that Keats becomes more critical about his three fates. In this sense, Keats again contradicts his former feelings about the three figures. Asking ‘What is Love? and where is it?’ (32), Keats seems to deny the importance of this figure to him. Then he comments on Ambition and delineates it as ‘poor’ (33). Once more, Keats appears to negate this figure’s significance. But the most self-mockery comes from his remark on Poesy. He uses ‘no’ (35) to deny its importance to him and he considers that Poesy offers him no joy (35). Owing to this inner dialogue, in the latter part of the stanza, we can see that Keats changes his stance. He no longer wishes to burn for wings to follow the three figures but appears a subject to indolence. Indolence to him is now ‘honied’ (37). And he wishes to shelter himself in indolence as he says:

O, for an age so shelter’d from annoy,

That I may never know how change the moons,

Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

(38-40)

He does not wish to have any annoyance resulting from his pursuit of the three figures; a sense of escapism arises. His opposing feelings about the three figures and about indolence are more revealed due to this escapism.

This sense of escapism is disclosed more in stanzas five and six. In these two stanzas, Keats chooses indolence and bids farewell to the three figures. When the figures come by the third time, he does not wish to pursue them but questions their purpose (41). His resolution is decidedly shown in his taking leave of the three figures three times (49, 51, 57). This reminds us of the poet's resolution to bid farewell to the bird in 'Ode to a Nightingale' (also three times). But there is a difference between these two odes. In 'Ode to a Nightingale', the poet wishes to come back to reality. By contrast, in 'Ode on Indolence', the poet wishes to take refuge in indolence and forgets his earthly aspirations and duties. He even declares 'I would not be dieted with praise, / A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!' (53-54). The poet does not wish to strive for his poetic fame; he therefore will not be a 'pet-lamb' in the literary community. He is not prepared to play a sickly part in a pre-prepared 'sentimental' script; again, the poet shows an interest in defining his own narrative lines. Keats addresses the three figures, modulating in his terms from 'shadows' (49), 'ghosts' (51), and then to 'phantoms' (59).<sup>56</sup> Each time the three figures become more and more disembodied and their significance to the poet become less and less. And yet their significance for him is that he knows they are likely to return to haunt him; here the poem's hidden story is at odds with its overt declaration of farewell. In short, the whole narrative, prompted by his indolence, discloses the inner debate of Keats's wavering poetic identity.

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<sup>56</sup> Vendler also has these observations. See Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 22.



#### IV

In his critical biography *John Keats* (1963), Walter Jackson Bate says that in ‘To Autumn’ ‘The poet himself is completely absent; there is no “I”, no suggestion of the discursive language that we find in the other odes’.<sup>57</sup> He elaborates that there are no ‘dramatic debate, protest, and qualification’<sup>58</sup> in the poem. Geoffrey Hartman also observes such an aspect as he remarks that the poem is of the voice of a ‘true impersonality’.<sup>59</sup> But Vendler observes that there is a ‘dialogue of the mind with itself’ in the poem.<sup>60</sup> For Vendler, there is a poet-speaker and the poet engages himself in an inner dialogue. These two responses attend to different aspects of the poem. I would suggest that, like Vendler, there is a poet-speaker in the poem. Yet the speaker does not demonstrate any narrative subjectivity. The poet-speaker seems self-effacing and he appears to be an onlooker. Narrative seems to lie outside of the self and the poet remains detached when he is narrating his thoughts and feelings about the season autumn. He becomes an interpreter, a reader of the season. Even if he poses rhetorical questions for himself in stanzas two and three, however, he seems to do it in a disinterested way.

At the outset of the poem, a tone of disinterestedness has already been established. The poet narrates a beautiful season to us and he does it in an objective way:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness

Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;

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<sup>57</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 581.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Hartman, p. 146.

<sup>60</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 252.

Conspiring with him how to load and bless

With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;

(1-4)

The poet seems to be like the third-person omniscient narrator as there is no lyric subjectivity displayed in these lines. Such a characteristic permeates the whole poem.

In stanza two, the inner dialogue of the mind with itself appears, but objectivity still remains. In this stanza, the poet poses a question for himself: 'Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?' (12). This is the first place which allows us to perceive the poet's presence as dialogue with another starts to emerge. The poet-speaker answers the question by telling us what he sees in the autumnal scene. He uses 'sometimes' (13, 19) and 'or' (16, 21) to tell us about the four figures: the winnower, the reaper, the gleaner, and the patient figure who watches the cyder-press (13-22). His description of the four figures makes the stanza objective and they also make the poet appear completely removed from the scene:

*Sometimes* whoever seeks abroad may find

Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,

Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;

*Or* on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,

Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook

Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers:

And *sometimes* like a gleaner thou dost keep

Steady thy laden head across a brook;

*Or* by a cyder-press, with patient look,

Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours.

(13-22; italics mine)

This is totally different from the self-questioning which is disclosed in the first stanza of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'. In this poem, the poet-speaker asks earnestly about the identity of the figures and the end of the pursuit:

What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?

What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?

What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

('Ode on a Grecian Urn', 8-10)

We can strongly perceive the speaker's presence and his wish to find an answer to his questions. But in 'To Autumn', we cannot discern such self-consciousness of the poet-speaker.

In stanza three, the poet poses other rhetorical questions: 'Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they?' (23). Choosing not to answer them, he brings the 'songs of spring' into play, only decisively to move away from them: 'Think not of them, thou hast thy music too' (24). This statement manifests the poet's calm acceptance of the passing of spring. There is no overt sadness in the tone, but an affirmative attitude.<sup>61</sup>

When the poet narrates his feelings about autumn, we notice that there are elements of narrativity in the poem. Words implying temporality, such as 'while, then, and now' (25, 27, 31), unfold a new kind of lyric narrative in lines such as these:

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<sup>61</sup> I hold the same view as Stillinger because he comments that 'To Autumn' is 'unambiguously affirmative'. See Stillinger, *Hoodwinking of Madeline*, p. 110.

*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 shallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;  
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;  
Hedge-cricket sing; and *now* with treble soft  
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;  
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

(25-33; italics mine)

Vendler remarks that these words show a syntactic balance.<sup>62</sup> I agree with her and I would suggest that this syntactic balance underpins the poet's calm acceptance of the season autumn. For example, the poet will find the barred clouds blooming as the day is dying; and though the gnats seem to be a 'wailful choir', their sounds carried by the light wind indicate that there is life. This calm acceptance, in other words, involves a continual process (and here we detect the poet-narrator's involvement) of finding compensation. This finding of compensation reminds us of 'Ode on Melancholy'. In 'Ode on Melancholy', as mentioned, instead of being melancholic, the poet is advised to 'glut thy sorrow on a morning rose' (15), or to appreciate his mistress's 'rich anger' (18). The calm acceptance is also reminiscent of Keats's words when he related his intention of composing 'To Autumn': 'I never lik'd stubble fields so much as now—Aye better than the chilly green of the spring' (*L II*, 167). For Keats, even though the spring brings back new life to the world, it is 'chilly green'. But the autumn's stubble fields seem to suggest a scene of completion, abundance, and reward

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<sup>62</sup> Vendler, *Odes of John Keats*, p. 253.

as farmers have reaped what they sowed earlier in the year. And the colour of stubble fields brings forth a sense of warmth, restfulness, and maturity.

In these four odes, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', 'Ode on Melancholy', 'Ode on Indolence', and 'To Autumn', the poet appears as a reader of stories presented by the urn, the moods, and the season of autumn. He narrates the stories and engages in self-dialogue in order to tell the reader about his thoughts and feelings. Hence the reader learns the poet's transcendental idealism, his acceptance of his melancholy, his complex escapism in choosing indolence, and his affirmative attitude to the autumn.

## Chapter Seven

### The Perplexed Narrator in 'Lamia'

'Lamia' (1819) is John Keats's last narrative poem. In this poem, Keats demonstrates his unique imagination by dramatising ambivalence. The poem teems with contrarities, paradoxes, ironies, and conflicts. The motifs of reality and illusion as well as reason and passion, which dominate *Endymion* (1818), recur in the poem. Critics have attempted to discuss the ambiguous aspects in 'Lamia', but there seems to be a shortage of critical accounts that centre on the narrative skills in relation to the ambivalence displayed in the poem.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter, I shall focus on these narrative skills and re-examine the ways in which the narrator dramatises ambivalence in 'Lamia'. The narrator appears to be divided in his attitudes towards the characters and his finding a balance in his attitude generates ambivalence.

'Lamia' is a poem which is much influenced by Dryden's style and uses Dryden's heroic couplets. This formal medium makes the poem swiftly-paced and vigorous.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as Walter Jackson Bate suggests, Keats imitates Dryden's balance and antithesis.<sup>3</sup> Hence Lamia is portrayed as 'Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard / Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barr'd' (I, 49-50). Each image is distinct and memorable because of the balance in structure. One will also be struck by the antithesis of the adjectives, for instance, presented in Lamia's transformation as

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<sup>1</sup> The only paper which covers the function of the narrator is by Joseph C. Sitterson, Jr. The paper is entitled 'Narrator and Reader in *Lamia*', *Studies in Philology*, 79, 3 (1982), 297-310; and he reworks this paper into a chapter in his *Romantic Poems, Poets, and Narrators* (Kent, OH: Kent State University, 2000); pp. 110-36. William Curtis Stephenson also has some discussion of the role of the narrator in 'The Fall from Innocence in Keats's "Lamia"', *Papers on Language & Literature*, 10, 1 (1974), 35-50.

<sup>2</sup> See also Michael O'Neill, 'Lamia: "Things Real—Things Semireal—and No Things"', in *The Challenge of Keats*, eds Allan C. Christensen, et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), p. 125 (hereafter abbreviated as 'Lamia'); and John Whale, *John Keats* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 546.

she 'Wither'd at dew so sweet and virulent' (I, 149).<sup>4</sup> This builds up the ambivalence which is characteristic of this poem. Furthermore, the beginning of 'Lamia' owes Dryden a debt. As Miriam Allott and Michael O'Neill observe, the beginning of 'Lamia' reminds one of 'The Wife of Bath Her Tale' and 'Absalom and Achitophel'.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as discussed, Keats has his unique imagination. Though he is influenced by Dryden, in 'Lamia', Keats develops his own style.

Putting 'Lamia' in the larger context of Keats's development in narrative skills, one can find that there is a complex pattern. Unlike *Endymion*, the form in 'Lamia' is not meandering but has a focused main narrative, namely, Lycius and Lamia's love. This technique is reminiscent of the focused narrative which is displayed in 'Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil' and 'The Eve of St. Agnes' because both stories also centre on the young lovers in the story. In 'Lamia', though he does not use digressions, which is employed in 'Isabella' to highlight his modern consciousness, Keats uses authorial asides to make comments. Like 'The Eve of St. Agnes', the point of view in 'Lamia' shifts, creating a fluid perspective. In 'Lamia', however, the reader can clearly and consistently perceive the author's presence. It is different from 'The Eve of St. Agnes' as sometimes the narrator is imperceptible. I shall discuss these points in due course.

The narrator's identity needs some discussion. Critics have different views concerning this question. Susan Wolfson directly calls the narrator 'Keats's narrator'.<sup>6</sup> But most critics agree that the narrator is Keats himself.<sup>7</sup> Charles Patterson observes

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Allott, p. 616, note to lines i 1-6; and O'Neill, 'Lamia', p. 125. Allott glosses Dryden's 'The Wife of Bath Her Tale' (ll. 1-4) as 'In days of Old when *Arthur* filled the Throne, / Whose Acts and Fame to Foreign Lands were blown; / The King of Elfs and little Fairy Queene / Gamboll'd on Heaths, and danc'd on ev'ry Green...'. O'Neill cites the first two lines from 'Absalom and Achitophel': 'pious times e'er Priest-craft did begin, / Before *Polygamy* was made a sin'.

<sup>6</sup> See Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 333.

<sup>7</sup> See Wasserman, p. 171; Morris Dickstein, *Keats and His Poetry: A Study in Development* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 236; and Donald Pearce, 'Casting the Self: Keats and *Lamia*', *Yale Review*, 69, 2 (1980), 222. Neil Fraistat implies that the narrator is Keats. See Neil Fraistat, *The Poem and the Book: Interpreting Collections of Romantic Poetry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), p. 110.

that 'John Keats in effect ...never establishes separate identity or position in the piece for the narrator'.<sup>8</sup> This is not to say that the narrator and the poet-narrator merge together as in *Endymion*. Rather, the narrator has a distinct voice when he utters from the first-person perspective. His views are constantly changing and they are sometimes contradictory to each other; ambivalence thus ensues. One can perceive that the narrator has difficulty in maintaining a consistent view. In this way, he controls the reader's feelings about and attitude towards the three characters, Lamia, Lycius, and Apollonius.

'Lamia' is a poem which is mainly narrated in the third-person perspective. For instance, the narrative begins with 'Upon a time' (I, 1). It is a traditional beginning of a fairy tale and it offers an omniscient third-person point of view. Such a view does not change until the reader comes to the line, 'Ah, what a world of love was at her feet!' (I, 21). Then the reader is aware that the story shifts from the un-participating third-person narrating stance to the one which offers the narrator's personal view. Yet the shift happens subtly and in a fluid way.

Keats's voice and attitude as a narrator shows as the story develops. The word 'Ah', as mentioned, draws the reader's attention to the narrating poet's point of view and it reminds the reader of the opening line in 'The Eve of St. Agnes': 'St Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!' (1). Both narrators participate in the story and offer their observations and comments. In this context, I would argue that the narrator's delineation of Hermes as 'ever-smitten' (I, 7) is a subjective feeling. Keats seems to make fun of Hermes and this creates a comic effect. This comic effect, as O'Neill suggests, again appears in the line 'So Hermes thought' (I, 22).<sup>9</sup> One must notice that the point of view changes from the speaker's first-hand participation to his assumed

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<sup>8</sup> Charles I. Patterson, *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970), p. 207.

<sup>9</sup> O'Neill, 'Lamia', p. 128.



understanding of Hermes's inner self, and this creates a fluidity in the narrative perspective. In addition, the phrase is in what narratologists call the 'free indirect style',<sup>10</sup> that is, a type of discourse which represents the character's thoughts or utterances.<sup>11</sup> Hermes, in this respect, appears to project his jealousy upon the world of Satyrs and Tritons (I, 14-15) because of his love for the nymph. This comic effect exhibits Keats's irony of the ever-smitten Hermes.

The narrator, however, is a complex figure. From his depictions of Lamia, he shows an ambivalent narrating stance. His mixed feelings about Lamia, in the beginning, are related to Lamia's dual identity as both a serpent and a woman. This recalls the reader to Coleridge's 'Christabel'. In 'Christabel', Geraldine's identity is enigmatic: she appears to be a serpent woman. As critics have proposed, Keats's characterization of Lamia may be influenced by Coleridge's Geraldine.<sup>12</sup> But in 'Lamia', Keats does more than Coleridge: he presents Lamia's indeterminate identity, and also shows his feelings for her. That is to say, he suggests Lamia's potentially sinister nature, and at the same time, is sympathetic with Lamia. First he uses the words of probability to hint at Lamia's daemonic characteristic as she 'seem'd, at once, some penanced lady elf, / Some demon's mistress, or the demon's self' (I, 55-56). These depictions portend danger for anyone who loves Lamia. They also reflect the narrator's equivocating tone. Then he describes Lamia's dual identity. It is here the reader unquestionably perceives the narrator's complex feelings about Lamia:

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<sup>10</sup> H. Porter Abbott glosses free indirect style as 'Third-person narration in which a character's thoughts or expressions are presented in the character's voice without being set off by quotation marks or the usual addition of phrases like "he thought" or "she said" and without shifting into grammatical first-person discourse: "It was a hot day. What on earth was she doing lugging stones on a day like this?"'. See H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2002; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 234.

<sup>11</sup> See Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska, 1987), pp. 34-35.

<sup>12</sup> Beth Lau has a valuable chapter on the possible influence of Coleridge on Keats. She also compiles the critical papers which discuss the echoes and allusions of Coleridge's poems in Keats's poetry. For example, she lists the fact that James Routh, Douglas Bush, and Stillinger are the critics who analyse the possible influence of Coleridge's characterization of Geraldine on that of Lamia. See Lau, *Keats's Reading of the Romantic Poets*, p. 95.

‘Her head was serpent, but ah, bitter-sweet! / She had a woman’s mouth with all its pearls complete’ (I, 59-60). The epithet ‘bitter-sweet’ bears out the narrator’s opposing feelings about Lamia: Lamia can evoke the feeling of bitterness as she is a serpent, but she can also be as sweet as a woman. His ambivalence can also be seen through the following examples. His description of Lamia’s beautiful eyes: ‘what could such eyes do there / But weep, and weep, that they were born so fair?’ (I, 61-62) aptly brings forth sympathy for Lamia in the reader via this image. The sympathy deepens into pity as the narrator immediately alludes to Proserpine’s weeping, ‘As Proserpine still weeps for her Sicilian air’ (I, 63). Lamia, like Proserpine, becomes a figure of innocence and vulnerability. The narrating poet again manifests his mixed feelings about Lamia in the following lines: ‘Her throat was serpent, but the words she spake / Came, as through bubbling honey, for Love’s sake’ (I, 64-65). In this portrayal, Lamia also, like the narrator, becomes a puzzling figure. She possesses two possibilities because she is both evil as a snake and her ‘honey-like’ words indicate that she can have a sweet nature. But, paradoxically, this part of her sweet nature may become weird: Lamia is also capable of turning the honey-like words into a trap because she is a snake.

Lamia’s ambiguous character is more fully revealed in her interactions with Hermes. She shows her sweet nature since she protects the nymph, whom Hermes is looking for, from being molested by Satyrs and Tritons. She says to Hermes:

I took compassion on her, bade her steep  
Her hair in weird syrops, that would keep  
Her loveliness invisible, yet free  
To wander as she loves, in liberty.

(I, 106-09)

Her bargain with Hermes, nevertheless, by asking him to transform her into a woman denotes that she is not a wholly sweet figure, but may be a calculating one. Yet, her passion for Lycius, on the other hand, displays her single-mindedness:

I was a woman, let me have once more  
A woman's shape, and charming as before.  
I love a youth of Corinth—O the bliss!  
Give me my woman's form, and place me where he is.

(I, 117-20)

She is obsessed with her love for Lycius; therefore, she asks Hermes to change her from a snake into a woman. Yet her obsession forebodes her doom in the end.

In fact, the narrator foretells the possible catastrophe for Lamia in his comment on the love between Hermes and the nymph. Issues of mortality and immortality as well as dream and reality are involved in this relationship. Keats says that 'Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass / Their pleasures in a long immortal dream' (I, 127-28). He associates a realized dream with the immortals and a mere dream or illusion with the mortals. In this sense, Hermes and the nymph can have a happy love, but Lamia cannot. Lamia and Lycius' love is going to be an illusion as Lycius is a mortal. Such a theme already exists in Keats's first major poem *Endymion*. In *Endymion*, Endymion finally has to reach a status of immortality at the end of the story in order to unite with Cynthia, his immortal lover. In contrast to this immortal love between Endymion and Cynthia is the story of Venus and Adonis in Book II. Though there is no catastrophe in the relationship between Venus and Adonis, they cannot be as happy as Cynthia and Endymion: Adonis is a human being and he has to

fall into sleep in winter.

Critics have long debated the function of the Hermes episode. Earl Wasserman considers that it is a thematic failure as it is not integrated into the whole poem. For him, Hermes and the nymph are ‘irrelevant to the subsequent action’.<sup>13</sup> David Perkins holds the same view. He remarks that there is ‘no necessary, organic connection with the story that follows. In a rather artificial way, it is used to introduce the main story. But it is then dismissed.’<sup>14</sup> Conversely, Bate proposes that the episode has two functions: it helps the reader see the contrast of the love between Hermes and the nymph and the love between Lycius and Lamia. Moreover, it makes the reader see Lamia’s complex characterization.<sup>15</sup> Stuart Sperry also maintains this view because the interlude is ‘vital to our understanding of the whole drama’.<sup>16</sup>

The Hermes episode, in my view, is not irrelevant to the whole story. On the contrary, it has its place in the development of the plot. As Bate and Sperry argue, the reader can be aware of Lamia’s ambiguous characterization via this episode. This episode is also crucial because Hermes is the facilitator of Lamia’s metamorphosis. If there is no Hermes, Lamia cannot transform herself into a woman. She does not have the autonomous power to change her form and she needs Hermes’s help.

Lamia’s transformation is also a much discussed issue. Literally, it is Lamia’s metamorphosis from a snake into a woman. But metaphorically, as Richard Fogle and Sperry have suggested, Lamia can be a symbol of poetic imagination.<sup>17</sup> And the whole transformation, as Sperry holds, is a somewhat disenchanting emblem of the

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<sup>13</sup> Wasserman, p. 158.

<sup>14</sup> David Perkins, *The Quest for Permanence: The Symbolism of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 265.

<sup>15</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, pp. 553-54.

<sup>16</sup> Sperry, p. 295.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Harter Fogle, ‘Keats’s *Lamia* as Dramatic Illusion’, in *Nineteenth-Century Literary Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Lionel Stevenson*, eds Clyde de Ryals, John Clubbe and Benjamin Franklin Fisher (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1974), pp. 66-67; and Sperry, p. 299.

creative process.<sup>18</sup> A look at Lamia's change can give one a better idea of this allegorical interpretation:

Left to herself, the serpent now began  
To change; her elfin blood in madness ran,  
Her mouth foam'd, and the grass, therewith besprent,  
Wither'd at dew so sweet and virulent;  
Her eyes in torture fix'd, and anguish drear,  
Hot, glaz'd, and wide, with lid-lashes all sear,  
Flash'd phosphor and sharp sparks, without one cooling tear.  
The colours all inflame'd throughout her train,  
She writh'd about, convuls'd with scarlet pain:  
A deep volcanian yellow took the place  
Of all her milder-mooned body's grace;  
And, as the lava ravishes the mead,  
Spoilt all her silver mail, and golden brede;  
Made gloom of all her frecklings, streaks and bars,  
Eclips'd her crescents, and lick'd up her stars:  
So that, in moments few, she was undrest  
Of all her sapphires, greens, and amethyst,  
And rubious-argent: of all these bereft,  
Nothing but pain and ugliness were left.

(146-64)

The nature of imagination, as represented by Lamia's transformation, is erratic (the

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<sup>18</sup> Sperry, p. 298.

image of 'her elfin blood in madness'), ambivalent ('sweet and virulent'), and intense as well as eruptive (the image of volcano). Keats is keen on every detail as he progresses from the inside ('her elfin blood') to the outside (Lamia's mouth, eyes, train, her body, and her mail), from her head to her body, and from part to the whole. The whole imaginative process, in this way, seems to take a long time. In his calmly detached attention to the changes and final destruction of colour, Keats is like a poetic chemist inspecting and reporting the stages of a grotesque laboratory experiment. Each depiction fully presents the painful and repulsive transformation which Lamia is undertaking. And each stage succeeds the former and suggests more anguish and deformity. For example, Lamia 'writh'd [writhes] about, convuls'd with scarlet pain' as her train is 'all inflame'd'; and her agony does not stop here but 'a deep volcanian yellow' follows and it destroys her former grace evoked by the image of a 'beauteous wreath' (I, 84). There is no beauty implicated in the process 'but pain and ugliness'. Yet paradoxically speaking, the metamorphosis must be painful and ugly in order to have a beautiful product in the end, as Lamia, finally, becomes a beautiful woman.

Reading Lamia's transformation allegorically, one can find that there is a gap in Keats's idea of the imagination. It is contradictory to what Keats extols in his letter. In his famous letter to Benjamin Bailey on 22 November 1817, Keats says that 'I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth...for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty' (L, I, 184). In this letter, he believes that what the imagination seizes must be truth, as what it seizes is beauty. In Lamia's metamorphosis scene, what Keats's imagination delineates, though truth (as Lamia is becoming a woman), is no beauty at all; there is only ugliness and pain. Keats's imaginative power—as discussed in the letter—a passion to him, does not create any beauty, let alone

‘essential’ beauty. What Keats does in *Lamia*’s transformation is different from his earlier notion of the imagination.

One thing to note is that the transformation scene is reminiscent of Keats’s view of ‘*Lamia*’. His view can help one understand the opposing elements in ‘*Lamia*’. In his letter to George and Georgiana Keats, Keats states that, ‘I am certain there is that sort of fire in it which must take hold of people in some way—give them either pleasant or unpleasant sensation. What they want is a sensation of some sort’ (*L II*, 189). Keats wants a ‘sort of fire’ put in his poetry. Perhaps that is the reason why he makes *Lamia*’s transformation a sensational scene, a scene mingled with pain and ugliness while she is becoming a beautiful woman.

After the recounting of *Lamia*’s metamorphosis, the reader can perceive a strongly buoyant narratorial presence. Keats uses rhetorical questions to indicate his presence and this displays his modern consciousness. In effect, in ‘*Isabella*’, he also uses rhetorical questions to highlight his status as a modern poet. In ‘*Isabella*’, however, his rhetorical questions are to create a dramatic effect and to alert his readers to the poem’s swerve of direction. For instance, in stanza 49, the rhetorical question ‘wherefore all this wormy circumstance?’ (385) immediately makes the reader aware of a digression from the main narrative. But in ‘*Lamia*’, Keats’s rhetorical questions are not as intrusive as those in ‘*Isabella*’. Rather, the rhetorical question ensues from the main narrative. After *Lamia*’s transformation, for instance, the narrator asks ‘Whither fled *Lamia*, now a lady bright, / A full-born beauty new and exquisite?’ (*I*, 171-72). This rhetorical question helps to expand the story. Another rhetorical question, ‘Why this fair creature chose so fairily / By the wayside to linger’ (*I*, 200-01) is also unobtrusive and serves a similar function. This demonstrates Keats’s accomplished narrative skill as he has the ability to establish different relations with his readership in the two poems: in ‘*Isabella*’, he teases; in ‘*Lamia*’, he beguiles.

The poet's presence is also reflected in the transition of the story. He narrates, 'But first, 'tis fit to tell how she could muse / And dream, when in the serpent prison-house' (I, 202-03). The reader is aware of the narrator because of the word 'But' (I, 202). The transition is delicate as it follows the rhetorical question: 'Why this fair creature chose so fairly / By the wayside to linger' (200-01). Owing to this transition, the narrative begins the flashback of the way in which Lamia comes to love Lycius and the reader can better understand her complex characterization. The narrator's presence can also be felt in other transitions. The word 'Now' (I, 220) and the phrase 'He did' (I, 247) indicate his participation in the story. It also exhibits Keats's sophisticated narrative skill as the transition is unobtrusive.

When narrating the poem, Keats shows his contradictory idea about love and such a view is manifest by Lamia. That is to say, 'Lamia' is a poem which centres on female experience. It is based on a woman's feelings about love. Keats's sophisticated characterization of Lamia indicates his shifting feelings about love. We may take one of Keats's early poems 'And what is love? —It is a doll dress'd up' (1818) to analyse his idea of love before discussing his treatment of love in 'Lamia'.

In 'And what is love?', Keats appears ironical and even satirical about love. For Keats, love is nonsense which one cannot escape. It is also an ambivalent feeling. A look at the passage below can throw light on Keats's concept of love:

And what is Love?—It is a doll dress'd up  
For idleness to cosset, nurse, and dandle;  
A thing of soft misnomers, so divine  
That silly youth doth think to make itself  
Divine by loving, and so goes on  
Yawning and doating a whole summer long,



(1-6)

Keats uses the metaphor: 'love is like a doll dress'd up' to tell the reader that he thinks that love is frivolous. One does not have to treat love very seriously; one only needs to 'cosset, nurse, and dandle' love. But ironically, love is also a 'divine' thing. For the person who is in love, love can make him feel holy but the person may appear foolish to us.

Keats is more ironical as he tries to depict the anguish ensuing from love. If love is an absurdity, then one should dispel love. But one is agonized by it instead. The following excerpt can illustrate this idea:

Fools! if some passions high have warm'd the world,  
If queens and soldiers have play'd high for hearts,  
It is no reason why such agonies  
Should be more common than the growth of weeds.

(11-14)

One cannot get rid of agonies when one is in love. Such agonies may be more than 'the growth of weeds' and make one's life miserable. Keats mocks at this ridiculous aspect of love as love creates such ambivalence.

As these lines reveal, however reluctantly, Keats is aware of the power of love and the complexity intrinsic to it. His treatment of Lamia's love for Lycius exemplifies his awareness of such perplexity. Lamia and Lycius' first encounter will serve as an example. For Keats, love is a form of imagination. He lets Lamia dream of love and then her passion for Lycius displays the doubtful side of being in love. When Lamia sees Lycius, she begs him to look back at her and not to forsake her. Lamia

appears vulnerable and pitiable, as she says, ‘will you leave me on the hills alone? / Lycius, look back! and be some pity shown’ (I, 245-46). Keats depicts the ironical aspect of being in love: when being in love, Lamia is enthralled by her passion for Lycius; she becomes a victim of her passion. If Lycius does not turn back but ignores her words and her presence, Lamia will suffer. But it is Lamia who takes the initiative and she makes herself suffer from love.

Keats has a more sophisticated treatment of love as the narrative develops and ambivalence is more fully revealed. In addition, his treatment illuminates Lamia’s complex characterization. Lamia seems to understand Lycius’ psychology well. She knows that Lycius loves her at first sight as he is captivated by her singing (I, 249) and then by her beauty (I, 251-53). He is much fascinated by her because he immediately begs her not to disappear: ‘For pity, do not melt!’ (I, 271). Then Lamia starts to work upon Lycius’ feelings. She flirts with him and pretends that she cannot condescend to his level:

If I should stay,  
...here, upon this floor of clay,  
And pain my steps upon these flowers too rough,  
What canst thou say or do of charm enough  
To dull the nice remembrance of my home?  
Thou canst not ask me with thee here to roam  
Over these hills and vales, where no joy is, —  
Empty of immortality and bliss!

(I, 271-78)

She implies that she is an immortal and is unable to mingle herself with a mortal. The

mortal world cannot satisfy her but sullies her existence. In this way, she makes herself unapproachable for Lycius. But she also makes Lycius crave for her more. Lamia manipulates him to the utmost degree when she threatens to leave him after flirting with him:

Thou art a scholar, Lycius, and must know  
That finer spirits cannot breathe below  
In human climes, and live: Alas! poor youth,  
What taste of purer air hast thou to soothe  
My essence? What serener palaces,  
Where I may all my many senses please,  
And by mysterious sleights a hundred thirsts appease?  
It cannot be—Adieu!

(I, 279-86)

This passage denotes Lamia's complex character: she is mixed with expectation and fear. She longs for Lycius' love yet she would also torment Lycius as she pretends to leave him. There is a sense of insecurity in Lamia. She would not give herself away until she is sure of Lycius' love for her.

The narrator displays Lamia's elusive characterization more in the following scene. After Lamia's threatening to leave him, Lycius falls into a loving swoon and suffers from his love for her (I, 289). But at this moment when she sees Lycius suffer for her, Lamia kisses Lycius: she 'Put her new lips to his, and gave afresh / The life she had so tangled in her mesh' (I, 293-94). She is no longer a 'cruel lady' (I, 290) as the narrator had criticized her for being. Lamia's kiss contradicts her earlier act to Lycius. She appears an inconstant and fickle figure.

Though her characterization is ambivalent, at the same time, Lamia also shows that she is in love with Lycius. This makes her characterization more appealing to the reader. Lamia's being in love makes her human and she reminds the reader of human beings, of us. She is no longer an unapproachable figure like a goddess but she is just an ordinary woman. The following passage indicates that Lamia is a woman in love and who is anguished by love:

And then she whisper'd in such trembling tone,  
As those, who, safe together met alone  
For the first time through many anguish'd days,  
Use other speech than looks; bidding him raise  
His drooping head, and clear his soul of doubt,  
For that she was a woman, and without  
Any more subtle fluid in her veins  
Than throbbing blood, and that the self-same pains  
Inhabited her frail-strung heart as his.

(I, 301-09)

She suffers from lovesickness since she 'whisper'd' in a 'trembling tone'. She is also 'anguished' and has a 'frail-strung heart'. These are typical symptoms of a person who is in love. She is not manipulating Lycius at this moment. But she is assuring Lycius of her love for him as she is truly in love with him.

The encounter also helps the reader understand Lycius' characterization. Keats depicts Lycius according to Burton's description in *Anatomy of Melancholy*: 'The young man, a philosopher, otherwise staid and discreet, able to moderate his passions,

though not this of love'.<sup>19</sup> This description suggests that Lycius is enthralled by his passion for Lamia and his critical faculty will be put aside. Indeed, in the story, Keats makes Lycius meet Lamia at the evening hour. It is the time when he was 'thoughtless' (I, 234) and 'His phantasy was lost, where reason fades / In the calm'd twilight of Platonic shades' (I, 235-36). Lycius is under a spell (I, 296, 345) by Lamia and falls in love with her immediately. He appears 'blinded' (I, 347) by his passion, and his passion later becomes his tragic flaw.

At the end of Book I, the reader will come to an authorial aside. This aside is not intrusive as those in 'Isabella; or, the Pot of Basil' (1818). In 'Isabella' and 'Lamia', the reader is aware of the narrator's presence and of his views on the lovers. But in 'Isabella', the authorial interpolations deliberately digress from the main plot. Yet in 'Lamia', the aside is interwoven in the poem and is directly linked to the storyline. The aside, in this respect, discloses Keats's mocking attitude towards Lycius' blind love for Lamia:

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,  
Hunters of cavern, lake, and waterfall,  
As a real woman, lineal indeed  
From Pyrrha's pebbles or old Adam's seed.

(I, 328-33)

As John Barnard and O'Neill suggest,<sup>20</sup> Keats seems to adopt a would-be Byronic

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<sup>19</sup> See *CPStillinger*, p. 359.

<sup>20</sup> See *Barnard*, p. 694, note to lines I, 328-33; and O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem*, pp. 131-32.

attitude, a worldly attitude, and comments on their love. For Lycius, a real woman is more important than any imaginary woman or any fairy, Peri, or goddess. Lycius will be passionate for Lamia since she is approachable and loveable as a woman.

As the narrative unfolds, Lycius also becomes an indefinite character. His seeing Apollonius in the street displays his ambivalent characterization. Lycius, as discussed, is blinded by his love for Lamia. But deep in his heart, Lycius still has his instinct and reason, and they will not appear unless the right circumstance happens. His encounter of Lamia lets him suspect that Lamia is not a woman but an immortal as he uses 'Goddess' (I, 257), 'Naiad' (I, 261), a dryad (I, 263), and 'Pleiad' (I, 265) to address her. He seems to sense that there is something unusual or even mysterious about Lamia's identity. When walking with Lamia on the street, he muffles his face (I, 362) in order to avoid Apollonius' sharp and quick eyes (I, 364, 374). Lycius' instinct tells him that Apollonius can ruin his dream, that is, his love for Lamia as he cries 'he [Apollonius] seems / The ghost of folly haunting my sweet dreams' (I, 376-77). In this way, Lycius appears caught between fear and desire, reason and passion as well as reality and dream.

Part II begins with the narrator's would-be Byronic and satiric tone again. Robert Gittings remarks that the tone is of 'the onlooker's wisdom of the old Oxford don'.<sup>21</sup> But most critics consider that it is the Byronic style, and I agree with this view.<sup>22</sup> This time the tone is more satirical than mocking:

Love in a hut, with water and a crust,

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Gittings, *John Keats: the Living Year, 21 September 1818 to 21 September 1819* (1954; London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 168.

<sup>22</sup> Claude Finney and Douglas Bush are the earliest critics who associate Keats with the Byronic tone. See Claude Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936), II, p. 696; and Douglas Bush, *Selected Poems and Letters of John Keats* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), p. 354. Both bibliographies are taken from Lau, *Keats's Reading of the Romantic Poets*, p. 127.

Is—Love, forgive us!—cinders, ashes, dust,  
Love in a palace is perhaps at last  
More grievous torment than a hermit's fast: —

(II, 1-4)

The narrator's worldly tone lets him participate in the story since he remarks on the disillusioned love. He also prophesies that Lycius and Lamia's love is disillusioned and doomed. The satirical tone and the sense of doom deepen when he comments further:

Had Lycius liv'd to hand his story down,  
He might have given the moral a fresh frown,  
Or clench'd it quite: but too short was their bliss  
To breed distrust and hate,

(II, 7-10)

The reader learns that Lycius and Lamia's love does not last long, though it is a happy one. Implicitly the passage takes an ironic view of the function of narrative, pointing out that the one who tells the tale is the person who gets to point out the 'moral'.

The foreshadowing of Lycius and Lamia's doomed love tells the reader more about Lycius' and Lamia's complex character. The narrator repeats the omen for their love: 'For all this came a ruin' (II, 16). Lycius and Lamia live happily in the palace and will not have any 'ruin' if the 'thrill of trumpets' (II, 27-28) does not happen. A sense of reality, the symbol of the thrill of trumpets, creeps in their love and ushers in the motif of illusion and reality. It also helps the reader understand

Lycius and Lamia better. Criticism has always focused on the idea that it is Lycius who wishes to marry Lamia in public.<sup>23</sup> But I would suggest that Lycius' desire of holding a public wedding ceremony is, in fact, prompted by Lamia's reactions. When the thrill of trumpets makes Lycius start and muse beyond Lamia, Lamia is worried about this. That is the reason why she moans and sighs (II, 37). Her sense of insecurity, as mentioned, makes her question Lycius' love for her:

You have deserted me; —where am I now?  
Not in your heart while care weighs on your brow:  
No, no, you have dismiss'd me; and I go  
From your breast houseless: ay, it must be so.

(II, 42-45)

That is to say, she poses a challenge to Lycius. In this respect, he wishes to marry Lamia in public in order to prove his love for her. He tries to assure Lamia of his love:

My silver planet, both of eve and morn!  
Why will you plead yourself so sad forlorn,  
While I am striving how to fill my heart  
With deeper crimson, and a double smart?  
How to entangle, trammel up and snare  
Your soul in mine, and labyrinth you there  
Like the hid scent in an unbudded rose?

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<sup>23</sup> For example, recent critics like Barnard and O'Neill analyse the reason why Lycius wishes to marry Lamia in public. See Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 125; and O'Neill, '*Lamia*', p. 136.



His love for her even develops into a sense of vanity and that is the reason why he wishes to show Lamia off: 'What mortal hath a prize, that other men / May be confounded and abash'd withal' (II, 57-58). O'Neill remarks that Lycius' intention of wedding Lamia publicly is related to his sense of insecurity.<sup>24</sup> This may be true and there is, I would suggest, also his obstinacy. One can find this in the narrator's criticism of Lycius: he is a 'perverse' (II, 70) man. That is the reason why he would take delight in Lamia's sorrows (II, 73-74) and becomes more 'cruel grown' (II, 75) to Lamia even when she pleads with him not to have such a ritual. His obstinacy then turns into 'mad pompousness' (II, 114), a sure sign of his vanity. In this respect, he will not change his mind for anything even if he loves Lamia.

Part II again exhibits Lamia's ambiguous characterization. In Part I, she is a very determined if pleading figure as she asks Hermes to give her a woman's form and to place her where she can meet Lycius. She even flirts with Lycius and exploits his feelings. Contrary to Part I, Lamia becomes relatively passive and she lets Lycius get his way. When Lycius forces her to accept his proposal of marrying her in public, she even 'lov'd the tyranny' (II, 80). Keats appears ironical here. Keats seems to satirize women's passivity and he thus depicts Lamia as a passive figure as he tells Richard Woodhouse that, 'Women love to be forced to do a thing, by a fine fellow—*such as this*' (L II, 164). In this regard, Lamia's characterization is ambivalent.

The narrator's stance, as noted, controls the reader's view of the characters. There are two main pieces of evidence for one to see the way in which the narrator

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<sup>24</sup> O'Neill, '*Lamia*', p. 136.

dramatises the ambivalence and how this influences the reader's view in his narrative. The first is his comment on Lycius and Lamia's love: 'That purple-lined palace of sweet sin' (II, 31). In this line, the narrator puts 'sweet' and 'sin' together. Though the two words create an opposing feeling, their love appears un-reproachable. Instead, the narrator seems sympathetic to their love, as their love, though a sin, is sweet. The second is the narrator's equivocation when he utters, 'Ha, the serpent! certes, she / Was none' (II, 80-81). William Curtis Stephenson considers that this line is 'perfectly ambiguous' as 'it can be taken straight because Lamia has not played the serpent with Lycius, but it can also be taken very ironically because she is about to reassume her serpentine nature'.<sup>25</sup> This line indeed is highly ambiguous. It is also an irony as the reader knows that Lamia is a serpent. The narrator seems to tell a lie. The reader may wonder the reason why the narrator does so. Perhaps the narrator feels for Lamia. He would want his readers to believe that Lamia is no longer a serpent but a woman and she would not harm Lycius.

The narrator's opposing feelings about his characters are also revealed in Lycius' determination to marry Lamia publicly. As the narrator is sympathetic with Lycius and Lamia's love, he condemns Lycius' decision of making their love known to the public. For the narrator, Lamia is not a cruel lady any more but a victim. The narrator is on the side of Lamia and hopes that Lycius and Lamia's secret love will not be divulged. He rebukes Lycius:

O senseless Lycius! Madman! wherefore flout  
The silent-blessing fate, warm cloister'd hours,  
And show to common eyes these secret bowers?

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<sup>25</sup> Stephenson, 46-47.

The narrator's accusation of Lycius is very strong because he uses 'senseless Lycius' and 'Madman' to delineate Lycius. One can perceive the narrator's strong disapproval of Lycius' conduct. The attack has an undertow of the kind of over-statement common in self-accusation. Actually, in his excerpt of 'Lamia', sent to John Taylor his publisher for a sampling of this poem, Keats has a more virulent criticism of Lycius:

O senseless Lycius! Dolt! Fool! Madman! Lout!  
 Why would you murder happiness like yours,  
 And show to common eyes these secret bowers?

(cancelled lines to Taylor in his letter)<sup>26</sup>

The narrator heaps insults on Lycius, who is 'senseless', a 'Dolt', a 'Fool', a 'Madman', and a 'Lout'. He even attacks Lycius' act as a kind of 'murder'. One can immediately feel Keats's stronger protest in these discarded lines than his published version. However, Keats did not keep these lines. Perhaps he might be afraid that the narrator's reproach of Lycius is no 'sensation'; on the contrary, it would irritate the reading public. In addition, a too vehement attack on Lycius would upset the balance of ambivalence in the poem. Keats wished his 'Lamia' to please his readers, as mentioned, and probably that is the reason why he omitted these lines.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See Rollins, *L*, II, 158.

<sup>27</sup> There is no direct evidence to show the reason why Keats cancelled these and other lines. According to Richard Woodhouse, he said that Keats originally wrote fifty-nine lines, but only forty lines (they are lines 142-62 of the published version of 1820) were revised for publication: 'They contain 59 lines—of which only [ll. 142-62] are printed in the Poem as revised for Publication' (*L* I, 157-58, note 6).

Though Keats the narrator has mixed feelings about Lamia and Lycius, he does not do so to the wedding guests, or as O'Neill proposes, to the 'readers, critics, consumers',<sup>28</sup> if we read the guests metaphorically. Rather, he has a very consistent view on them: he mocks the guests. Georgia Dunbar points out that there is sarcasm in his depictions of the guests.<sup>29</sup> Keats's descriptions of the guests as the 'gossip rout' (II, 146) and 'the herd' (II, 150) disclose his contempt of the guests. His mocking tone reaches the highest when he satirizes the Glutton who indulges his pleasure in eating and 'Then makes his shiny mouth a napkin for his thumb' in his deleted lines.<sup>30</sup>

In the wedding banquet, the symbol of wreaths can also intimate the narrator's feelings about the characters. The narrator commiserates with Lamia but is critical of Lycius. In particular, he seems to have difficulty in finding a balanced view of Apollonius. The narrator's answer to his rhetorical question: 'What wreath for Lamia?' (II, 221), is the leaves of willow and of adder's tongue (II, 224). Allott notes that these plants carry the symbol of grief and sorrow.<sup>31</sup> The reader, in this respect, can perceive the narrator's sympathy for Lamia. The wreath for Lycius is thyrsus (II, 226) and it suggests Lycius' intoxication<sup>32</sup> as his 'watching eyes may swim / Into forgetfulness' (II, 226-27). The narrator sounds ironical here. He seems to satirize Lycius' detachment from reality. Lycius appears as a person who would rather forget the world and Lamia's words concerning Apollonius and be drunk and be in the illusion of a happy wedding banquet. For Apollonius, the wreath is made of spear-grass and thistles (II, 228) and they 'War on his temples' (II, 239). The plants are symbolic because spear-grass resembles a spear whereas a thistle has

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<sup>28</sup> O'Neill, 'Lamia', p. 140.

<sup>29</sup> Georgia S. Dunbar, 'The Significance of the Humor in "Lamia"', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, 8 (1959), 22.

<sup>30</sup> See Rollins, *L*, II, 159.

<sup>31</sup> Allott, p. 645, note to ii 224.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 559.

prickly leaves. Indeed, Apollonius' eyes are like spears (II, 300) and he pierces through the appearance of Lamia as a snake in disguise in a 'keen, cruel, percept, stinging' (II, 301) way. His association with thistles implies that his character may be as 'prickly' as thistles and is not welcome. In effect, Keats suggests Apollonius' character in his description of thistles: they are 'spiteful' (II, 228). In this sense, Apollonius is a spiteful person. One must also remember that Apollonius comes to the wedding banquet uninvited (II, 165). He insists on his coming uninvited and he does not feel ashamed of it as he tells Lycius that 'yet must I do this wrong / And you forgive me' (II, 168-69). Moreover, spear-grass suggests 'victory'; and a thistle, 'vindictiveness' and 'misanthropy'.<sup>33</sup> The wreath then implies Apollonius' imminent victory over Lycius and Lamia and his cruelty to them. There is also another association: Apollonius is a belligerent character because of the word 'war'. Apollonius, in this regard, appears to be a person who will bring up conflicts rather than making peace. But interestingly, Keats uses the word 'sage' (II, 222, 227) to address Apollonius.<sup>34</sup> That is to say, Keats seems to have an ambivalent attitude towards Apollonius.

As the banquet goes on, the narrator no longer has mixed feelings about Apollonius, but has a consistently unfavourable view of him. The narrator associates 'cold philosophy' with Apollonius and this association characterizes him as a severe character. John Jones argues that Apollonius represents 'consequitive reasoning',<sup>35</sup> whereas Sperry points out that Apollonius' world is a world of analysis and science.<sup>36</sup> Both critics observe the analytical part in Apollonius' nature:

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Parry, 'Keats's *Lamia*', *Explicator*, 59, 4 (2001), 179.

<sup>34</sup> One might compare the use of 'sage' here with the 'sagacious eye' (366) of the 'wakeful bloodhound' (365) in 'The Eve of St. Agnes'.

<sup>35</sup> John Jones, p. 255.

<sup>36</sup> Sperry, p. 308.

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,

(II, 229-35)

Apollonius is the emblem of cold philosophy, reason, and reality. His principle is 'by rule and line' (II, 335), the analytical and scientific aspect. For him, no matter how beautiful the appearance is, it still needs to be seen via the lens of reality and reason. In this respect, Keats satirizes Apollonius and thinks Apollonius is unimaginative. Apollonius does not see the beauty of the rainbow but analyses it as part of the 'dull catalogue of common things'. This passage anticipates Apollonius' coldness and lack of sympathy in the reversal scene.

In the reversal scene, the conflict between illusion and reality as well as passion and reason is dramatised by Lycius and Apollonius. Lycius is a believer in illusion and passion whereas Apollonius is a believer of reality and reason. In Part I, Lycius goes after his heart and tries to avoid Apollonius, who appears to haunt his sweet dream of being with Lamia. In Part II, Lycius attempts to expel the haunting by directly confronting Apollonius, 'Begone, foul dream' (II, 271). Apollonius is no longer his 'trusty guide / And good instructor' (I, 375-76), but a demon-like figure. Lycius' denunciation of Apollonius before the Corinthian guests: 'his lashless eyelids stretch / Around his demon eyes' (II, 288-89), as Wolfson and O'Neill argue,

makes Apollonius appear a snake-like person.<sup>37</sup> Apollonius is now as sinister as a snake and is capable of harming Lycius. There is an irony here. More irony is to come as Apollonius' principle of reason and reality does not preserve his pupil's life but kills him. Apollonius calls Lycius a 'Fool' three times (II, 291, 295). Apollonius' stern character is more fully demonstrated when the narrator portrays him as 'his eyes still / Relented not, nor mov'd' (II, 295-96). He insists on divulging Lamia's secret to Lycius as a serpent even though Lamia wishes to silence him (II, 303):

from every ill  
Of life have I preserv'd thee to this day,  
And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?

(II, 296-98)

Apollonius appears a very headstrong and unfeeling man. It is his principle which ruins Lycius and Lamia. He and Lycius hold opposite beliefs and their beliefs are incompatible; the conflict is therefore irreconcilable.

But who is to blame for the catastrophe which happens to Lamia and Lycius? And who deserves our sympathy? Critics have long debated these issues and there is no final answer. Is Apollonius to blame? Apollonius seems responsible for Lycius' and Lamia's death, but he means no harm for Lycius. Rather, his intention is good. As Lycius' mentor, he wishes to protect Lycius from falling prey to Lamia. His insistence on reality and reason thus ruins Lycius. Then is Lamia the culprit? This is a tricky question. Lamia is a serpent and she loves Lycius. Like Apollonius, she also means no harm for Lycius: her menacing character as a snake does not mean that she will harm

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<sup>37</sup> Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, p. 342; and O'Neill, '*Lamia*', p. 141.

Lycius. If she wants to harm Lycius, she would harm him early rather than tarry with Lycius. Is the fault Lycius'? Lycius seems to be the person who is responsible for the ruin. His characterization as an obstinate person can easily lead to this conclusion. That is to say, had he decided not to make the marriage public, the disaster would not have happened. But the disaster happens and it is not wholly Lycius' fault. One must not forget his decision of marrying Lamia publicly is prompted by Lamia's distrust of his love. In addition, Apollonius comes uninvited. Lycius cannot prevent that. He has taken Lamia's request and did not invite his trusty guide. All the three characters' relationships are interconnected and become very complex and ambivalent. At the end, no one is a winner but everyone seems to be a loser. It is not easy to say who is to blame. Everyone seems to have a share. But from another point of view, it is nobody's fault. Every character simply realises his or her dream or does his duty.

Apart from the narrator's doubtful attitude towards the three characters, the ending in 'Lamia' is also ambiguous. John Whale believes that Lamia is dead.<sup>38</sup> But Fogle equates the ending in 'Lamia' with that in 'The Eve of St. Agnes' as both are open-ended. In 'Lamia', Fogle contends, Lamia perhaps only vanishes and she may resume a serpent's form again.<sup>39</sup> Fogle is right since the ending is very dubious. One cannot be sure where Lamia disappears. Her disappearance is like her indeterminate identity and makes the reader puzzled. The unresolved ending in 'Lamia' is, again, reminiscent of Coleridge's 'Christabel'. In 'Christabel', the reader does not know whether the poem concludes or not. Coleridge seems to leave the conclusion open. Keats, like Coleridge, tends not to make things close-ended but prefers ambiguity.

There are still two things to discuss. The first is the reason for the story from Burton being placed at the end of 'Lamia'.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps Keats wishes to highlight his

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<sup>38</sup> Whale, p. 88.

<sup>39</sup> Fogle, p. 69.

<sup>40</sup> See John Keats, *Lamia: 1820* (Oxford: Woodstock, 1990), pp. 45-46.



modern consciousness as a narrator and he places Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, his original source for the story of 'Lamia', at the end of his poem. Put differently, Keats's 'Lamia' points out that his paratext is a passage from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. But Keats has adapted it and transformed it with his imagination. He seems to wish his readers to make a comparison of his poem with that of Burton. That is the reason why he places Burton's text in the end of his poem. In other words, Keats probably expects his readers to notice that his poem, which is a modern sophisticated narrative, is different from Burton's old and unimaginative descriptions. Moreover, Keats seems to defend his poem and his imagination, and offers a final if undeclared defence of the imagination.

The second is on the position of 'Lamia' in the 1820 volume. 'Lamia' is the first poem in the collection and its being the first poem is something to ponder. It involves the reception of 'Lamia', that is to say, what Keats, Woodhouse, and his publisher Taylor think of Lamia and the ways in which it will affect the selling of this volume. As Jack Stillinger notes, Keats wanted to make 'Lamia' a popular poem and thus he could make money out of it.<sup>41</sup> In this regard, Keats seems to tailor 'Lamia' to the reader's taste. His favourable view on 'Lamia' can reflect his intention. He considers that, as discussed, 'Lamia' has a 'sort of fire' and it will engage the reader. In fact, when he finished the first 400 lines in July 1819, he told John Hamilton Reynolds that 'I have great hopes of success, because I make use of my Judgment more deliberately than I yet have done' (*L II*, 128). This statement corresponds with his later statement when he compared 'Lamia' with 'Isabella'. Keats thought that in 'Isabella' there was 'too much inexperience of live [*sic*], and simplicity of knowledge' (*L II*, 174). But he said 'There is no objection of this kind to Lamia' (*L II*, 174). Woodhouse also likes 'Lamia'. In his letter to Taylor, Woodhouse said that Keats read 'Lamia' to him and he

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<sup>41</sup> *CPStillinger*, p. 474.

‘was much pleased with it’ (*L II*, 164). Woodhouse is in particular impressed with Lamia’s transformation. He commented that Lamia’s metamorphosis ‘is quite Ovidian, but better’ (*L II*, 164). But Taylor did not seem to be fond of ‘Lamia’. The following passage shows his attitude towards ‘Lamia’:

How strange too that he should have taken such a Dislike to Isabella—I still think of it exactly as you do, & from what he copied out of Lamia in a late Letter I fancy I shall prefer it to that poem also.—The extract he gave me was from the Feast: I did not enter so well into it as to be qualified to criticise, but whether it be a want of Taste for such Subjects as Fairy Tales, or that I do not perceive true Poetry except it is in Conjunction with good Sentiment, I cannot tell, but it did not promise to please me.—

(*L II*, 183)

Taylor prefers ‘Isabella’ to ‘Lamia’ and he questions Keats’s judgement. He seems to dislike ‘Lamia’ because he considers that there is ‘a want of Taste’ and it is ‘no true Poetry’. If, however, all these three people’s views are taken into consideration, then one question arises: who decided to put ‘Lamia’ as the first poem in the volume? According to Stillinger, Taylor consulted Woodhouse when determining the contents of the 1820 volume. But it is not clear whether Taylor made a decision for the final selection or the order of the poems.<sup>42</sup> One must also remember that though Keats liked ‘Lamia’, he wished ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ to be the first poem in the collection. Charles Brown’s letter to Taylor tells us about Keats’s decision: ‘the volume to commence with St Agnes’ Eve’ (*L II*, 276). In this context, Keats’s wish does not seem to be granted. Perhaps, I would suggest, Woodhouse influenced Keats and

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<sup>42</sup> Jack Stillinger, *The Texts of Keats’s Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 67.

Taylor to change their mind. That is the reason why 'Lamia' becomes the first poem in the collection.

'Lamia' is a poem which revolves round ambivalence. Keats the narrator attempts to present the truth from different perspectives. But the more points of view he adopts, the more perplexed he becomes. His narrative is fraught with tension and contradiction. He appears divided in his attitudes towards the characters and his attempts at finding a balance of judgment only generate further ambivalence. The narrator's shifting stance shows the difficulty of being an objective story-teller and the complexity of looking at life. He is caught in a situation which bears out the truth of Louis MacNeice's sense that 'World is crazier and more of it than we think, / Incurably plural' ('Snow', 5-6).<sup>43</sup> But in this perplexity lies the story's suggestiveness and power.

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<sup>43</sup> See Louis MacNeice, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber, 1979).

## Chapter Eight

### Narrating a Romantic Epic: 'Hyperion' and 'The Fall of Hyperion'

#### I

In his letter to Benjamin Robert Haydon, Keats told Haydon that he would write a narrative which is straightforward and 'undeviating': 'in *Endymion* I think you may have bits of the deep and sentimental cast—the nature of *Hyperion* will lead me to treat it in a more naked and grecian Manner—and the march of passion and endeavour will be undeviating' (*L I*, 207). Indeed, compared with his first major long poem *Endymion*, his last project, the 'Hyperion' poems, has a more compressed style. It is no longer a wandering narrative, but a narrative which focuses on the Titan gods and their story in 'Hyperion: A Fragment' and on the poet's ordeal in preparing to tell and in telling this story in 'The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream' (1819). In this style, his narrative finds ways of accommodating tensions and contradictions. In this chapter, I shall discuss these related aspects and in what ways they are connected to Keats's idea of poetry and of a poet.

From the beginning of 'Hyperion', Keats presents a vivid picture of a defeated king Saturn to the reader. According to epic convention, Keats narrates from the third-person omniscient point of view and begins the poem *in medias res*. It immediately sets the tone of dethronement. As in 'The Eve of St. Agnes', Keats successfully manages to evoke an atmosphere — this time not a medieval aura but a mood of silence, stillness, and lifelessness:

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale

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

(I, 1-14)

In these fourteen lines, almost a blank-verse sonnet on the notion of immobility, Saturn appears a lone figure in the universe. His loss of power is highlighted by Keats's narrative techniques. Sound effects, for instance, reinforce sense. The 's' sound in the first five lines: 'shady', 'sadness', 'sunken', 'star', 'Sat', 'stone', 'still', and 'silence' creates an impression of silence. The lines which refer to 'forest on forest' and 'cloud on cloud' suggest heaviness and darkness and they deepen the power of silence.

Here the narrative seems frozen or immobilized because of such an atmosphere. The story does not seem to move on. This creates a paradoxical state: Keats begins a story but the narrative does not seem to unfold. It appears to be a story of immobility. The immobility seems to linger due to the following lines and Saturn's defeat is more

perceived:

Upon the sodden ground  
His old right hand lay nerveless, listless, dead,  
Unscptred; and his realmless eyes were closed;  
While his bow'd head seem'd list'ning to the Earth,  
His ancient mother, for some comfort yet.

(I, 17-21)

As a dethroned king, Saturn is 'unscptred', 'realmless', and 'bow'd'. In his *Keats's Craftsmanship* (1933), M. R. Ridley considers the word 'realmless' as Keats's 'crowning touch'.<sup>1</sup> Keats improves the image of the defeated Saturn by revising the expression from 'ancient' and 'white-brow'd' to 'realmless'.<sup>2</sup> Douglas Bush also considers that this revision is 'richly imaginative and emotional'.<sup>3</sup> Both critics' comments are germane. Saturn is 'realmless' because he has lost his territory, his kingdom. He does not have his former identity as a king. In other words, he has lost his sense of purpose; he has no narrative as a king. His defeat is again accentuated when Keats delineates Saturn's right hand as 'nerveless, listless, dead' (18). The word 'right' carries a double meaning. Traditionally, a king will carry a sceptre in his right hand. But now Saturn is defeated, and he does not have the sceptre in his right hand any more. On the other hand, 'right' also means one's power to do something. Now Saturn has lost his sceptre and, in this regard, he has lost his power to his throne as the word 'dead' indicates. The image of an impotent Saturn becomes very clear. These depictions demonstrate Keats's details of attention when telling a story.

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<sup>1</sup> Ridley, p. 71.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Bush, *John Keats: His Life and Writings* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), p. 104.

Thea's appearance, however, breaks the immobility and creates a tension in the scene. Her words addressed to Saturn are impregnated with tension:

There was a listening fear in her regard,  
As if calamity had but begun;  
As if the vanward clouds of evil days  
Had spent their malice, and the sullen rear  
Was with its stored thunder labouring up.

(I, 37-41)

These descriptions serve as a sharp contrast to and yet they also complement the stillness and lifelessness of the opening. There will be more tension when Saturn bemoans his fate. But the stillness seems to outweigh the tension at this moment. Keats makes the narrative focus on the stillness and silence: story seems to give way to lyrical evocation as an epic simile takes centre-stage:

As when, upon a tranced summer-night,  
Those green-rob'd senators of mighty woods,  
Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars,  
Dream, and so dream all night without a stir,  
Save from one gradual solitary gust  
Which comes upon the silence, and dies off,  
As if the ebbing air had but one wave;  
.....  
And still these two were postured motionless,  
Like natural sculpture in cathedral cavern;

This passage depicts the silence and stillness in a compelling way. Walter Jackson Bate says that this delineation is ‘one of the finest descriptive passages in English blank verse’.<sup>4</sup> Bate’s comment is appropriate because Keats, as he does in the opening lines, effectively imprints an image of silence on the reader’s mind. The words ‘tranced’ and ‘charmed’ work closely with the word ‘dream’ since these two words reflect the hypnotic or sleep-like state. The expression ‘without a stir’ echoes ‘one gradual solitary gust’. We know that, in Keats’s draft, he changes ‘sudden momentary’<sup>5</sup> into ‘gradual solitary’. Such an alteration makes the whole image integral and the silence conspicuous. In particular, the word ‘gradual’ accords with the word ‘ebbing’, while the word ‘solitary’ resonates with ‘one wave’. The image of silence and stillness is more noticeable when Keats portrays Saturn and Thea as cathedral statues. Cathedral statues do not move but stand still. And such an expression chimes with the word ‘motionless’. This image is reminiscent of the descriptions of the statues in ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’. In this poem, Keats delineates the sculptures as ‘The sculptur’d dead, on each side, seem to freeze, / Emprison’d in black, purgatorial rails’ (14-15). The statues are delineated as dead and freezing ones and in this way they echo the lifelessness and cold of the winter. Moreover, the expression ‘black, purgatorial’ enhances the medieval religious aura. In ‘Hyperion’ and ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’, that is to say, Keats employs different narrative techniques and each image aptly harmonizes with the setting and, in this way, it reflects his memorable story-telling.

Tension is involved when Saturn bemoans his defeat. Saturn’s words break the

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 394.

<sup>5</sup> *Poems Stillinger*, p. 331, notes to I, 76.



stillness and make the narrative start to gain force. He asks, 'Who had power / To make me desolate? whence came the strength? / How was it nurtur'd to such bursting forth, / While Fate seem'd strangled in my nervous grasp?' ('Hyperion', I, 102-05). He questions his loss of power because he still cannot accept his defeat. Saturn's inability to accept his fate creates a tension in the narrative. The tension reaches its highest point when Saturn cries:

"I am gone

Away from my own bosom: I have left

My strong identity, my real self,"

(I, 112-14)

Saturn appears a disintegrated self, that is to say, he does not have an identity. He loses his identity after the defeat. Critics like Miriam Allott, John Barnard, and Nicholas Roe remark that Saturn, as a Titan, must possess an identity in order to have power.<sup>6</sup> These observations are penetrating. Allott also comments that Saturn is like what Keats says about the 'Men of Power' in his letter, and Saturn serves as a sharp contrast to the 'Men of Genius', which is represented by the Olympian god Apollo,<sup>7</sup> who appears in Book III. Allott offers an insightful comment and I will continue this thread and examine the comparisons of 'Men of Power' and 'Men of Genius' in order to discuss Keats's idea of the poet.

Keats believes that a poet must be identity-less. Hence he can empathize with people and identify with them. In this sense, Keats states that 'Men of Power' have 'a

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<sup>6</sup> Allott, p. 403, note to lines i 113-16; Barnard, p. 635, note to lines I, 113-16; Roe, p. 303, note to I, 112-16.

<sup>7</sup> Allott, p. 403, note to lines i 113-16. Her view is developed by Sperry. See Sperry, pp. 163-64.

proper self' (*L I*, 184) whereas 'Men of Genius' do not have such. Keats asserts that 'Men of Genius' are 'as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect—by [but] they have not any individuality, any determined Character' (*L I*, 184). A 'Man of Genius', put differently, should have a fluid identity. And he is Keats's ideal poet. This idea of 'undetermined character' corresponds with his later idea of the poetical character:<sup>8</sup>

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 or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet...A poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body...the poet has none; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures.

(*L I*, 386-87)

For Keats, a poet has 'no self', 'no character', and 'no Identity'. A poet must not be egotistical and he cannot have an identity. Rather, he must be able to take 'in' the other's identity. Actually, Keats offers his own example to illustrate this idea. He says:

When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on

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<sup>8</sup> Allott also has this idea. See *Allott*, p. 403, note to lines i 113-16.

creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to press upon me that, I am in a very little time anhilated [*sic*]—

(L I, 387)

This kind of self-annihilation, or evacuation of selfhood, is what Keats sees as essential for a poet to experience.

In ‘Hyperion’, Saturn is defeated and he has lost his identity, his power. That is the reason why he wants to call for revenge and he hankers after a victory: ‘Saturn must be King’ (I, 125). His strong desire for victory, for power, is manifest in his self-questioning about his loss of identity: ‘where is Saturn’ (I, 134). Here we have to notice that in Keats’s manuscript, he altered ‘where Am I’<sup>9</sup> to ‘where is Saturn’. This is a significant alteration. A name is one’s identity and is thus invested with power. When one questions his name, this act means that he questions his identity. He would even question his purpose of life and his *raison d’être*. For instance, when Lear questions himself: ‘This is not Lear: / Doth Lear walk thus? speak thus? Where are his eyes?’ (*King Lear*, V, sc iv, 217-18). He not only comments on his not being himself from his gait and appearance, but also, fundamentally, he questions his identity as a king, as King Lear. He has lost his name, and become nobody. Similarly, Saturn’s self-questionings suggest that he has lost his identity. He has lost his name and his power as the Titan king. Moreover, he has no purpose in life and his *raison d’être* becomes a question.

Saturn’s inability to accept his defeat and his strong identity are seen more fully when the narrative develops. From the following passage, we can see an agitated

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<sup>9</sup> See *PoemsStillinger*, p. 333, note to I, 134.

figure:

This passion lifted him upon his feet,  
And made his hands to struggle in the air,  
His Druid locks to shake and ooze with sweat,  
His eyes to fever out, his voice to cease.

(I, 135-38)

Keats objectively and engagingly portrays a fallen king by telling us what his hands, hair, eyes, and voice are like. All these descriptions present a nearly-deranged Saturn. Saturn's strong identity is more revealed when he utters five consecutive questions:

“But cannot I create?  
Cannot I form? Cannot I fashion forth  
Another world, another universe,  
To overbear and crumble this to nought?  
Where is another Chaos? Where?”

(I, 141-45)

As in ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, there is a mounting intensity in these questions. On the one hand, the intensity fully reveals Saturn's anger with the defeat and a strong desire to defy his fate. He still believes that he has the power to re-fashion another universe, a new world, from chaos and to ‘overbear and crumble’ his enemies to nothing. But, on the other hand, deeply in his heart, he also knows that the glorious days are gone as he twice gravely doubts ‘Where is another Chaos? Where?’. He is disoriented and cannot begin a new narrative any more.

Saturn's wretched state naturally evokes our sympathy. Saturn is no longer a powerful king but appears a weak figure. In fact, Keats humanizes the defeated king earlier, in the scene when Thea approached the Titan king. Saturn is delineated as a god with 'the human heart' (I, 43). In this respect, Keats seems to show his sympathy for the fallen king. His empathy is more disclosed when he depicts the fallen Titans, which will be discussed in due course.

After Saturn's story, the narrator focuses on Hyperion. In the beginning, Hyperion, like Saturn, appears a strong figure. But because of his unfallen status, Hyperion's strong identity is more reflected than that of Saturn. There is dynamic power in his movements:

He enter'd, but he enter'd full of wrath;  
His flaming robes stream'd out beyond his heels,  
And gave a roar, as if of earthly fire,  
That scar'd away the meek ethereal Hours  
And make their dove-wings tremble.

(I, 213-17)

Keats makes Hyperion a powerful figure but this portrayal serves as a stark contrast to his later self. Like Saturn, Hyperion questions his fate and he cannot accept his fate either: 'Saturn is fallen, am I too to fall?' (I, 234). He also wishes to fight back and then restore Saturn to power (I, 248-50). His unyieldingness even makes him want to violate the law of the sacred seasons (I, 293). However, he cannot do so. He has to yield to the natural law. In this regard, Hyperion is 'phrenzied with new woes, / Unus'd to bend, by hard compulsion bent / His spirit to the sorrow of the time' (I, 299-301). Here Keats creates a powerful image and we can feel the underlying tension.

There is an image of an unyielding Titan, who, reluctantly, has to resign himself to the natural law. Hyperion then appears to have great inner conflict and, by this means, Keats again brings forth sympathy from the reader. Hyperion does not appear as strong and powerful as before, but, like Saturn, is as weak as a mortal. He is also a suffering figure.

In the end of Book I, Keats's narrative displays Hyperion's suffering in a lyrical way. When Coelus asks Hyperion to join the other fallen Titans on the earth, Keats writes of the stars at which Hyperion gazes before descending to earth, 'And still they were the same bright, patient stars' ('Hyperion', I, 353). Keats shows considerable narrative skills here because of the way he describes the stars. The stars were 'bright, patient' since Keats makes Hyperion project his thoughts and feelings on them. In *Oxford English Dictionary*, the noun 'patience', in its Latin etymology, means 'endurance, endurance of pain, forbearance, tolerance, persistence'.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the stars seem to tell what Hyperion needs to do: he has to endure his sufferings. This endurance is more stressed because of the word 'still'. 'Still' carries two senses: 'as yet' and 'motionless; not moving'. The word 'still' has these two meanings, and in this regard, it intimates that Hyperion must be doubly enduring to face his imminent fall; he has no other choice.

In Book II, Keats's compassion for the Titans is revealing. Bate points out that Keats 'whether intentionally or not' sympathizes with the Titans as he humanizes them.<sup>11</sup> Though he does not indicate his stance, Jack Stillinger also points out that there is such a question of whether Keats sympathizes with the Titans.<sup>12</sup> I would argue that Keats shows his sympathy for the Titans. In the beginning of this book,

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<sup>10</sup> 'Patience'. Etymology, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 3rd edn (November, 2010). <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/138816>>, accessed on 13.01.11.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 397.

<sup>12</sup> *CPStillinger*, p. 461.

Keats is not an objective epic narrator; rather, he takes sides. He describes the Titans' den as a den 'where no insulting light / Could glimmer on their tears' (II, 5-6). He projects his personal feeling when delineating the Titans' setting. His later portrayals of the Titans, as Bate explains, evoke our sympathy because of his humanization of the gods. The Titans, for instance, not only feel great pain after the defeat, as they are 'heaving in pain' (II, 27), but one Titan, Clymene, even 'sobbed' (II, 76). Keats has made them appear mortal and, like Saturn and Hyperion, they become vulnerable figures instead of mighty gods.

The humanization of the Titans is more displayed when the reader comes to Oceanus' speech. The indomitable gods, like the unfallen Hyperion, have to yield to the natural law. Oceanus' words: 'We fall by course of Nature's law' (II, 181) indicate that the gods have to accept the truth, even though it is the painful truth (II, 202). He states further: 'A power more strong in beauty, born of us / And fated to excel us' (II, 213-14). Oceanus' speech manifests a calm acceptance of the inevitable. He deeply knows that there is no way out for the Titans but acceptance.

Oceanus' words not only exhibit the Titan's fate but also Keats's view on human history. In the letter to his brother and sister-in-law, Keats says that 'All civilized countries become gradually more enlighten'd and there should be a continual change for the better' (L II, 193). Keats believes in the law of progress and he makes Oceanus' speech indicative of this philosophy. But if we see 'Hyperion' from a larger perspective and relate it to Keats's feelings for the Titans, there is a contradiction.

Keats is inconsistent in his portrayal of the Titans and his progressive view. His depictions of the Titans denote that he sympathizes with the old generation, or with the old regime.<sup>13</sup> But Oceanus' words about progress contradict Keats's stance since

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<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Bate also discusses such a view, but he analyses this view in the passages related to 'The Fall of Hyperion'. See Jonathan Bate, 'Keats's Two *Hyperions* and the Problem of Milton', in *Romantic Revisions*, eds Robert Brinkley and Keith Hanley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

Oceanus' speech intimates that Keats favours the law of evolution. Perhaps Keats was aware of this incompatibility and that is one of the reasons he could not complete 'Hyperion' and left it a fragment.

In Book III, the narrative changes its style. Critics have observed that the style in this book is different from Books I and II.<sup>14</sup> Book III does not have the objectivity of an epic and its imagery is reminiscent of *Endymion*.<sup>15</sup> Bate also notices that there is no action in Book III.<sup>16</sup> There is indeed no dynamic in this book; there are only descriptions about Apollo's entry and his dialogue with Mnemosyne. Keats also appears to go back to his earlier style as he, for example, uses the interjection 'O' again. He repeats this word three times: 'O leave them, Muse!', 'O Muse!', and 'O Delos' (III, 3, 7, 24). This utterance makes Book III highly personal and carries a sentimental quality. In addition, his diction in this book is lyrical. The following example allows us to have a glimpse of the vocabulary used in Book III:

Let the rose glow intense and warm the air,  
And let the clouds of even and of morn  
Float in voluptuous fleeces o'er the hills;  
Let the red wine within the goblet boil,  
Cold as a bubbling well;

(III, 15-19)

This passage, beautiful as it is, does not impress us so much as he objectively and tellingly depicts the stillness and silence of the forest of Book I when Saturn appears.

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1992), pp. 335-36.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the discussion by Walter Jackson Bate (*John Keats*, p. 403) and Sperry (p. 193)

<sup>15</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 403.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



Keats was probably aware of the incongruity of these two different styles of these books; 'Hyperion' then breaks off in mid-sentence.<sup>17</sup>

The narrative also changes its focus. The Titan gods fade into the background and Apollo is the focus. In this book, Apollo is seen weeping. Apollo weeps because he is saddened by the 'painful vile oblivion' (III, 87). For Apollo, this is a state of darkness. He wishes to understand himself and the world around him. He then asks Mnemosyne for answers and guidance. He does not want to be 'in aching ignorance' (III, 107) but to understand himself and gain knowledge of the universe. Keats's depiction of Apollo presents a figure who, though frustrated, is able to take action. Here we need to remember Keats's plan of depicting Apollo because he contrasted Apollo with Endymion: '...and one great contrast between them will be—that the Hero of the written tale being mortal is led on, like Buonaparte, by circumstance; whereas the Apollo in Hyperion being a fore-seeing God will shape his actions like one' (L I, 207). Keats makes Apollo a figure of action.

Apollo, as mentioned earlier, is also a 'Man of Genius'. He possesses the undetermined character, or, as Roe points out, he is the embodiment of 'negative capability'.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, he is able to take in all the forms of different identities because he is identity-less. This is seen in his deification since he utters:

“Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.  
Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions,  
Majesties, Sovran voices, agonies,  
Creations and destroyings, all at once  
Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Jackson Bate also observes this. See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, pp. 408-09.

<sup>18</sup> *Roe*, p. 303, note to lines I. 112-16.

And deify me...”

(III, 113-18)

Apollo is deified because his mind is open to all things and everything, including the opposites, that is, creations and destroyings. His mind can accommodate both at the same time.

But Apollo’s deification requires suffering. Kenneth Muir and John Barnard both consider that Apollo needs to have the knowledge of suffering in order to assume his godhead.<sup>19</sup> Muir, in particular, connects Apollo’s suffering to Keats’s idea of ‘Soul-making’. Muir argues that the climax of Apollo’s apotheosis is not the apotheosis itself, but his acceptance of suffering.<sup>20</sup> Muir makes a good connection. In his letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, Keats tells Reynolds that he agrees with Byron’s remark of ‘Knowledge is Sorrow’ (*L I*, 279). But Keats goes on to say that ‘Sorrow is Wisdom’ (*L I*, 279). This elaboration allows us to understand Keats’s characterization of Apollo. Keats makes Apollo undergo the deification. The deification is in the form of suffering and that suffering is like death. It is, as Keats describes Apollo’s apotheosis, like ‘the struggle at the gate of death’ (III, 126). Apollo must ‘die into life’ (III, 130) and he can become a god. In other words, Apollo has to suffer first in order to obtain ‘knowledge enormous’, that is, the knowledge to sympathize with those who suffer, and he thus gains wisdom as it is the outcome of his godhead.

Oddly enough, the title character of this poem is Hyperion, but this poem does not appear to focus on Hyperion. Bate remarks that ‘Hyperion’ is ‘Apollo’s poem’.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Kenneth Muir, ‘The Meaning of “Hyperion”’, in *John Keats: A Reassessment*, ed. Kenneth Muir (1958; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1969), pp. 109-111; and Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 65.

<sup>20</sup> Muir, p. 111.

<sup>21</sup> See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 394.

Sperry also questions the reason why Keats does not entitle the poem as ‘Apollo’ but ‘Hyperion’.<sup>22</sup> I hold the same view as these two critics. Though he dominates the second half of Book I, Hyperion only appears briefly in Book II. There are only forty-six lines out of 391 lines depicting his appearance in Book II. And Hyperion does not appear in Book III; instead, Apollo is the protagonist. In this sense, there is a disproportion of Keats’s characters. Maybe Keats was conscious of such an imbalance and that is the reason why he abandoned this poem. Moreover, probably owing to this reason, he was unsatisfied with his first ‘Hyperion’, and Keats reworked it into ‘The Fall of Hyperion’.

## II

‘The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream’ is a poem which clearly exhibits Keats’s preoccupation with his status as a poet and the idea of poetry. In ‘Sleep and Poetry’ (1817), Keats shows his concern about his being a poet and his idea about his poetic career. In ‘The Fall’, Keats demonstrates more about his notions of the attributes of a poet and the function of poetry. But his concepts presented in the poem may not be consistent. The poet’s dialogue with Moneta is an example. In the following paragraphs, I shall discuss such contradictory views of Keats.

The narrative skills in ‘The Fall’ are different from those of ‘Hyperion’ as Keats casts ‘The Fall’ in the framework of a dream-vision. Judy Little argues that Chaucer influences Keats in this way.<sup>23</sup> But most critics, which include Bate, Allott, and Barnard, agree that Dante’s *Commedia Divina* is the answer.<sup>24</sup> In the beginning of the

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<sup>22</sup> See Sperry, p. 188.

<sup>23</sup> See Little, p. 120.

<sup>24</sup> See Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 588; Allott, p. 656; and Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 129.

poem, the word ‘Methought’ (I, 19)<sup>25</sup> immediately suggests a personal narrative. Yet ‘The Fall’ is not a narrative presented from the third-person omniscient point of view as in ‘Hyperion’; instead, ‘The Fall’ is told from the first-person perspective. This perspective and the framework allow Keats to articulate his idea of poetry from a subjective stance.

At the outset of ‘The Fall’, Keats reveals his ambivalence. The first eighteen lines, or the ‘sort of induction’ as Keats calls it (*L II*, 172), shows his doubts and self-assertion of himself as a poet. He discusses three kinds of people: fanatics, savages, and poets. He pities the first two because they do not keep a record of experience in writing. For Keats, those people lead a futile life as they ‘live, dream, and die’ (I, 7). But poets do not lead such a life. Rather, they actively record their imagination and, by this means, make their life meaningful. After this comparison, Keats then defends himself as a poet as if he were challenged by someone about his qualification. He asserts that he ‘hath visions’ and he is ‘well nurtured in his mother tongue’ (I, 14-15). But, at the same time, he is also unsure whether his poem, ‘The Fall’, will be passed on to posterity:

Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse  
Be poet’s or fanatic’s will be known  
When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave.

(I, 16-18)

This passage exhibits Keats’s mixed feelings about his status as a poet. He has self-doubts about his poetry: is it of a ‘poet’s or [a] fanatic’s’? He is afraid that he

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<sup>25</sup> Anita O’Connell discusses the word ‘methought’. See Anita O’Connell, ‘A Place of Vision: Romantic Dream Poetry and the Creative Imagination’, Diss. (University of Durham, 2006), 196.

might be seen as a fanatic but he wishes to be seen as a poet. The last line, a powerful line, ‘When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave’, suggests that he takes pride in being a poet and he will strive until he dies since he wishes to leave a name to the later generations. This line echoes his earlier self-expectation when he says to his brother George Keats, ‘richer far [is the] posterity’s award’ (‘To My Brother George’ (epistle) (1816), 68).

‘The Fall’, as mentioned, is remodelled as a dream-vision, and this vision carries a symbolic import. The poet first enters an Eden-like garden as a latecomer<sup>26</sup> to a feast. The garden is Eden-like as Keats depicts a paradisaical setting and the reference to Eve (I, 31) makes the setting symbolic. His eating and drinking in the garden are seen as sacramental,<sup>27</sup> and, as Bate proposes, such acts connect the poet to the past.<sup>28</sup> This is a significant comment because when he began to write *Endymion* (1818), Keats had been conscious of his belatedness in the literary tradition. Nevertheless, in ‘The Fall’, even though he is belated, his being able to liaise with the literary past indicates that he is part of the tradition. This liaison, eating and drinking, makes Keats fall into a slumber and have a vision. He has a vision of himself coming to an old sanctuary. There are two symbolic meanings related to this location: first, the disappearance of the Eden-like garden and the appearance of the old temple symbolize that he cannot stay in the paradise but has to descend into the human realm. He must face a dark reality, as represented by the sanctuary. Second, the temple is august and eternal (I, 62, 71), and this image suggests that it is hard to be approached, as the ‘Temple of Fame’ (L I, 170), which I shall discuss as follows.

The poet’s encounter with Moneta in the temple is the major narrative in ‘The

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<sup>26</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 590.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Fall'.<sup>29</sup> In this narrative, there are symbolic scenes. The poet's entering the temple is the first symbolic scene. He enters the temple and approaches the shrine 'sober-pac'd' (I, 93) because he is afraid that he may profane the place. We must remember that the shrine's priestess is Moneta and she is the mother of the Muses (progenitor of poetry) and the mentor of Apollo (guardian of Apollo, who is the patron god of poetry). In this sense, the shrine, symbolically speaking, is as the shrine of poetry. The temple is as the temple of poetry, the place where Keats wishes his fame to be consecrated. Such a symbolic meaning is made explicit when Moneta asks the poet to mount the steps: 'these immortal steps' (I, 117). The steps are immortal since, for Keats, it is the highest achievement which a poet will have. This idea of attaining an immortal fame, is, shown earlier in his 'Sleep and Poetry', as Keats says 'see / Wings to find out an immortality' (83-84). The wings, as discussed, are wings of poetry.

The second symbolic scene is the poet's mounting the steps and it is as *rite de passage*. Critics see the mounting as a purgatorial act.<sup>30</sup> This is a valid point because the poet is given the choice between life and death: 'If thou canst not ascend / These steps, die on that marble where thou art' (I, 107-08). The poet chooses to mount the steps as he wishes to be qualified as a poet and he strives hard. He gains the lowest step one minute before his death and he is able to live again (I, 133). This is a symbolic death and rebirth for the poet-narrator, which is like Apollo's apotheosis in 'Hyperion'.

The poet's dialogue with Moneta displays Keats's idea about poetry and the poet. After successfully ascending the stairs, the poet asks Moneta the reason for his survival. Moneta answers him because she classifies the people into two types:

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<sup>29</sup> Ralph Pite has an illuminating study of Dante's influence on the Romantic poets, especially on Coleridge and Keats. See Ralph Pite, *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante's Presence in English Romantic Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994).

<sup>30</sup> Muir, p. 114; Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, p. 598; and Barnard, *John Keats*, p. 129.

humanitarian poets and dreamers or visionaries. For Moneta, the highest type is the humanitarian poets. The humanitarian poets are 'those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest' (I, 147-48). The humanitarian poets can sympathize with their fellows and they can strive for the benefits of their fellows (I, 156-159, 162-64). But the poet-narrator is a dreamer, 'a dreaming thing' (I, 168). He does not labour for his fellows, but is an escapist. Moneta then wants the poet to 'think of the earth' (I, 169). Moreover, a dreamer does not regulate his emotions or feelings properly, but 'venoms' (I, 175) the pain and joy. He bears more woe than all his feelings permit. In other words, he has undue feelings and cannot appropriately feel for joy and human suffering. Here we can see Keats's idea of the poet. For Keats, a poet needs to be humanitarian and can sympathize with people.

This view of seeing the poet as a humanitarian poet is again elaborated in Moneta's dialogue with the poet. When the poet-speaker tries to defend the dreamer poets, he repeats the view and says that 'a poet is a sage; / A humanist, physician to all men' (I, 189-90). Such a view, once more, appears in Moneta's words when she tries to distinguish the humanitarian poets from the dreamer ones. She says that the poet and the dreamer are 'opposite antipodes' (I, 200). The poet cares about mankind and pours out a balm upon the world, whereas the dreamer vexes it (I, 201-02). Moneta's remark echoes Keats's earlier idea of poetry in 'Sleep and Poetry'. In this poem, Keats says that 'the great end / Of poesy, that it should be a friend / To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man' (245-47). These two poems manifestly express Keats's belief in the function and nature of poetry and the quality of the poet.

Moneta's grouping the poet-narrator as a dreamer, nevertheless, causes textual contradiction. This contradiction occurs between lines 187 and 210. As Stillinger has pointed out, Keats does not have an integrated view of the poetic and non-poetic

types.<sup>31</sup> If the poet-narrator is a dreamer and the sheer opposite of a humanitarian poet, then he is not qualified to be a poet. But the poet-narrator is admitted into the garden and the temple of poetry. This means that he must have the attributes of a poet; in particular he has passed the test of the stair-mounting. If he did not pass the test, he would completely rot on the pavement. But the narrating poet does not rot entirely, he almost rots (I, 153). In this sense, the narrating poet is not the dreamer poet, the opposite antipode of the humanitarian poet. Moreover, as Moneta describes, the narrating poet, though he cannot feel joy and sorrow properly and even perceives more woe than the humanitarian poet, can still share his fellows' happiness (I, 177). This again proves that he is not a dreamer poet, but is a poet between a humanitarian poet and a dreamer poet. Furthermore, after learning Moneta's attack on himself as a dreamer poet, the narrating poet's criticism of the 'mock lyrists, large self-worshippers, / And careless hectorers' (I, 207-08)<sup>32</sup> also proves that he must not be a dreamer poet. If he is a dreamer poet, he has no right to criticize those poets. The narrating poet thinks that those poets are inferior to him, and those poets should die before him. These lines reveal Keats's grave self-doubts, which are projected on the poet-narrator. We cannot be certain whether the narrating poet is a dreamer poet or a non-dreamer poet. The disputed lines have created a crux and this is the most conspicuous contradiction, which appears in the 'Hyperion' poems. They also reflect Keats's intensely personal meditation on his role as a poet.

In addition to the disputed lines, the other parts of the dialogue between Moneta and the poet-narrator also disclose Keats's deep self-doubts. For instance, the

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<sup>31</sup> *CPStillinger*, p. 478.

<sup>32</sup> Stillinger suggests that the poet referred to here is Byron; see *CPStillinger*, p. 478, note to lines 207-08. Yet Jeffrey Cox has a more specific annotation. Cox summarizes that the hectorer in 'proud bad verse' is Byron; Leigh Hunt and Tom Moore are seen as the 'mock lyricist[s]'; and if Keats's comment on the 'wordsworthian or egotistical sublime' is taken into consideration, the 'self-worshipper' may allude to Wordsworth. See Jeffrey N. Cox (ed.), *Keats's Poetry and Prose* (New York: Norton, 2009), p. 503.



poet-narrator would say 'I am favored for unworthiness' (I 182) and this statement demonstrates Keats's profound self-questionings of his worth as a poet. It also evinces that he does not regard himself highly as a poet. This unfavourable view of himself is repeated when the poet-narrator conceives himself as a non-humanitarian poet and compares himself to a vulture, in contrast to the eagle, the representation of the humanitarian poet (I, 191-92). Keats's questioning of his poetic identity reaches a climax when the poet-narrator utters 'What am I then?' (I, 193). This exhibits his existential doubts and anxieties.

What follows the dialogue between Moneta and the poet-narrator is Moneta's recounting of the Titans' story. Keats alternates Moneta's recalling of the past with the narrator's thoughts, feelings, and observations. This makes the narrative in 'The Fall' subjective, echoing the personal tone, which is set by the framework of the dream-vision. In 'Hyperion', for instance, the narrative begins with an epic grand opening: 'Deep in the shady sadness of a vale', but in 'The Fall', the opening is sandwiched between the poet's personal feeling and the geographical descriptions:

No sooner had this conjuration pass'd  
My devout lips, than side by side we stood,  
(Like a stunt bramble by a solemn pine)  
*Deep in the shady sadness of a vale,*  
*Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,*  
*Far from the fiery noon, and eve's one star.*  
Onward I look'd beneath the gloomy boughs,  
And saw, what first I thought an image huge,  
Like to the image pedestal'd so high  
In Saturn's temple.

(I, 291-300; italics mine)

The focus of the narrative shifts from the narrator's comparison of his stature with that of Moneta to Saturn's story. It then shifts back to the narrator's view of Saturn's temple. The reader will not be impressed with any epic-sublime quality of 'The Fall' as the scale of the story has been deliberately reduced to the human level: the poet-narrator can stand with the Titan goddess Moneta 'side by side'. In addition, the new narrative is suffused with more subjectivity.

Like Apollo in 'Hyperion', who reads a lesson from Mnemosyne's face and learns what suffering is, the narrator learns the attribute of sympathy from Moneta's face. At first the narrator is scared of Moneta's veil and thus she parts her veil and reveals her face:

Then saw I a wan face,  
Not pin'd by human sorrows, but bright blanch'd  
By an immortal sickness which kills not;  
It works a constant change, which happy death  
Can put no end to; deathwards progressing  
To no death was that visage; it had pass'd  
The lily and the snow;

(I, 256-62)

Michael O'Neill argues that Moneta is like a Christ figure and embodies human suffering.<sup>33</sup> From this perspective, Moneta's face initiates the narrator into knowing

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<sup>33</sup> Michael O'Neill, "'When this warm scribe my hand": writing and history in *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, in *Keats and History*, ed. Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 160-61.

what suffering is. Like Apollo's initiation into godhead, the poet-narrator is also inducted into the god-like knowing: 'Whereon there grew / A power within me of enormous ken, / To see as a God sees' (I, 302-04). In this regard, the poet-narrator is as Apollo, and he starts to have the knowledge of suffering and wisdom.

The poet-narrator's knowledge of suffering makes him able to sympathize with the fallen Titans' pain and sorrow. When Moneta tells how Saturn and Thea have suffered from the defeat, the poet greatly sympathizes with them and he even has a death wish and curses himself:

the three fixed shapes

Ponderous upon my senses a whole moon.

.....

And every day by day methought I grew

More gaunt and ghostly. Oftentimes I pray'd

Intense, that death would take me from the vale

And all its burthens. Gasping with despair

Of change, hour after hour I curs'd myself:

(I, 391-92, 395-99)

He grows 'gaunt and ghostly' as he deeply feels for the Titan's fall and his own predicament as a poet is cursed rather than blessed with the gift of the imagination. He wishes that he were dead, and he would not have to face the cruel reality which the Titans face. His empathy and sympathy for the Titans makes him curse himself for having to face their fall.

Critics have different views of the revisions in 'The Fall'. Traditionally, Keats's 'The Fall' is considered inferior to 'Hyperion' because of the revisions. Ernest de

Sélincourt argues that the revisions exhibit Keats's failing poetic power<sup>34</sup> and the second version is 'hardly comparable with the first'.<sup>35</sup> Sidney Colvin also asserts that Keats's reworking of the 'Hyperion' lines is 'in almost all cases for the worse'.<sup>36</sup> But Muir, in line with John Middleton Murry and Ridley,<sup>37</sup> does not consider that 'The Fall' is less remarkable than 'Hyperion'. Rather, Muir argues that Keats's alterations improve the images in 'The Fall',<sup>38</sup> for instance, the revision of the famous simile of the trees.<sup>39</sup> He also contends that Saturn's speech is another place for the reader to see Keats's improvement of the first version.<sup>40</sup> Muir has insightful analysis of Keats's alterations, and I would like to highlight Saturn's speech in 'The Fall' as there is still something more to be said.

Saturn's speech is the most salient revision in 'The Fall' and he is more humanized in 'The Fall' than the first version. Keats compresses the former version from 41 lines into 30 lines and makes another vivid image of a dethroned king. The following are the two versions of Saturn's speech

In 'Hyperion':

O tender spouse of gold Hyperion,  
Thea, I feel thee ere I see thy face;  
Look up, and let me see our doom in it;  
Look up, and tell me if this feeble shape  
Is Saturn's; tell me, if thou hear'st the voice

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<sup>34</sup> Ernest De Sélincourt (ed.), *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Methuen, 1905), pp. 515-16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 523.

<sup>36</sup> Sidney Colvin, *Keats* (London: Macmillan, 1921), p. 187.

<sup>37</sup> Muir, p. 115.

<sup>38</sup> See the comparisons of 'Hyperion' and 'The Fall of Hyperion' in Muir, pp. 115-23.

<sup>39</sup> Muir, p. 117.

<sup>40</sup> Muir, pp. 119-21.

Of Saturn; tell me, if this wrinkling brow,  
Naked and bare of its great diadem,  
Peers like the front of Saturn. Who had power  
To make me desolate? whence came the strength?  
How was it nurtur'd to such bursting forth,  
While Fate seem'd strangled in my nervous grasp?  
But it is so; and I am smother'd up,  
And buried from all godlike exercise  
Of influence benign on planets pale,  
Of admonitions to the winds and seas,  
Of peaceful sway above man's harvesting,  
And all those acts which Deity supreme  
Doth ease its heart of love in.— I am gone  
Away from my own bosom: I have left  
My strong identity, my real self,  
Somewhere between the throne, and where I sit  
Here on this spot of earth. Search, Thea, search!  
Open thine eyes eterne, and sphere them round  
Upon all space: space starr'd, and lorn of light;  
Space region'd with life-air; and barren void;  
Spaces of fire, and all the yawn of hell.—  
Search, Thea, search! and tell me, if thou seest  
A certain shape or shadow, making way  
With wings or chariot fierce to repossess  
A heaven he lost erewhile: it must—it must  
Be of ripe progress—Saturn must be King.

Yes, there must be a golden victory;  
There must be Gods thrown down, and trumpets blown  
Of triumph calm, and hymns of festival  
Upon the gold clouds metropolitan,  
Voices of soft proclaim, and silver stir  
Of strings in hollow shells; and there shall be  
Beautiful things made new, for the surprise  
Of the sky-children; I will give command:  
Thea! Thea! Thea! where is Saturn?

(I, 95-134)

The version in 'The Fall':

Moan, brethren, moan; for we are swallow'd up  
And buried from all godlike exercise  
Of influence benign on planets pale,  
And peaceful sway above man's harvesting,  
And all those acts which deity supreme  
Doth ease its heart of love in. Moan and wail.  
Moan, brethren, moan; for lo! the rebel spheres  
Spin round, the stars their antient courses keep,  
Clouds still with shadowy moisture haunt the earth,  
Still suck their fill of light from sun and moon,  
Still buds the tree, and still the sea-shores murmur.  
There is no death in all the universe,  
No smell of death—there shall be death—Moan, moan,

Moan, Cybele, moan, for thy pernicious babes  
 Have chang'd a god into a shaking palsy.  
 Moan, brethren, moan; for I have no strength left,  
 Weak as the reed—weak—feeble as my voice—  
 O, O, the pain, the pain of feebleness.  
 Moan, moan; for still I thaw—or give me help:  
 Throw down those imps, and give me victory.  
 Let me hear other groans, and trumpets blown  
 Of triumph calm, and hymns of festival  
 From the gold peaks of heaven's high-piled clouds;  
 Voices of soft proclaim, and silver stir  
 Of strings in hollow shells; and let there be  
 Beautiful things made new for the surprize  
 Of the sky-children."—So he feebly ceas'd,  
 With such a poor and sickly sounding pause,  
 Methought I heard some old man of the earth  
 Bewailing earthly loss;

(I, 412-41)

In 'Hyperion', Saturn's speech is addressed to Thea since Thea is present and she is therefore the listener. In 'The Fall', Saturn does not address Thea but his 'brethren', the fallen Titans. But interestingly, the fallen Titans are not present but Thea. Muir says that this alteration is because Thea's sympathy would not help Saturn.<sup>41</sup> Yet I would suggest that this address deepens the tragic sense communicated in 'The Fall'. Saturn no longer bemoans the fall from his point of view, but he includes the

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<sup>41</sup> Muir, p. 120.

perspective of his fellow Titans. In 'Hyperion', Saturn says that 'I am smothered up / And buried from all godlike exercise / Of influence benign on planets pale'; but in 'The Fall', Keats alters the line to 'we are swallow'd up'. This change makes the focus of the Titans' tragedy shift from a one-person tragedy, Saturn's, to the tragedy of a tribe. The narrative, in this sense, is amplified from the microcosm into the macrocosm. The word 'moan' and the many repetitions of it (thirteen times) increase the tension in the narrative and reveals Saturn's strong emotions. In this way, the narrative in 'The Fall' shows more of Saturn's inner conflict than the first version. He is seen more agitated and unable to accept the defeat. His inability to accept the fall is more revealed when he curses, 'there shall be death'. He wishes death for the universe and this manifests his anger and desperation. Here we notice that in the first version, as mentioned, Saturn demonstrates much self-questioning about his power and identity as a king and laments his disintegrated self. But in 'The Fall', Keats concentrates on the emotional aspect of Saturn. Keats wishes to evoke more of the reader's sympathy for Saturn; he then uses the metaphors and similes which suggest Saturn's pitiable state. For instance, Saturn calls himself 'a shaking palsy'. He also describes himself as being as 'weak as the reed'. These two comparisons present a vulnerable and pitiable Saturn. The most pitiable image of Saturn, however, is seen in the narrator's remark on Saturn after Saturn's lamentation of his fate: 'Methought I heard some old Man of the earth / Bewailing earthly loss'. Saturn is no longer seen as a powerful god, but an old man of the earth. He is humanized and is an impotent figure. In this sense, if we compare the two 'Hyperion' versions, we can find that Keats's modifications in 'The Fall' make the humanization of Saturn more distinctive.

Such changes, on the other hand, accords with the style in 'The Fall'. The style in 'The Fall', as discussed, is the first-person point of view and is subjective. Those alterations in Saturn's speech make the narrative more emotional and humanized.



Keats's recast of 'The Fall', however, was not satisfactory to him. Owing to his ambivalent feelings about Milton, Keats had to abandon the 'Hyperion' project. He could not eliminate Miltonic echoes in his poem. Such an act displays that Keats had mixed feelings about Milton. In 'Hyperion', he expresses his admiration by imitating Milton's style. But in 'The Fall', he intends to get rid of Miltonic reminiscences. From his letters, we can see his opposing feelings about Milton. When he revised 'The Fall' in August 1819, he wrote to Bailey and Reynolds, respectively, and esteemed Milton greatly. In his letter to Bailey on 14 August 1819, Keats wrote:

I am convinced more and more every day that a fine writer is the most genuine Being in the World—Shakespeare and the paradise Lost every day become greater wonders to me—I look upon fine Phrases like a Lover.

(L II, 139)

Ten days later, he repeated his appreciation for Milton to Reynolds once again:

I am convinced more and more day by day that fine writing is next to fine doing the top thing in the world; the Paradise Lost becomes a greater wonder.

(L II, 146)

But strangely enough, in less than one month, on 21 September 1819, he told Reynolds:

I have given up Hyperion—there are too many Miltonic inversions in it—

(L II, 167)

Keats is against Milton now. He considers that Milton's language is a corruption of the English language (*L II*, 212). He further says 'I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me' (*L II*, 212). There is a contradiction in his attitude towards Milton and this may result in his abandoning of 'The Fall'.

The 'Hyperion' poems are poems which allow us to see Keats's different narrative skills and his idea of poetry and of the poet. In 'Hyperion', we see the epic narrative presented from the objective point of view, whereas in 'The Fall of Hyperion', we see a dream-vision narrated from the first-person perspective. Taken together, they are a magnificent and far-reaching achievement, one that demonstrates his significance as a narrative poet.

## Conclusion

When Keats set out for the Isle of Wight in 1817, he was, in fact, embarking on a quest for his poetic identity. On his journey there, he provided his brothers with a lively description of what he saw:

I did not know the Names of any of the Towns I passed through—all I can tell you is that sometimes I saw dusty Hedges—sometimes Ponds—then nothing—then a little Wood with trees look you like Launce's Sister 'as white as a Lilly and as small as a Wand'—then came houses which died away into a few straggling Barns—then came hedge trees aforesaid again. As the Lamplight crept along the following things were discovered—'long heath broom furze'—Hurdles here and there half a Mile—Park palings when the Windows of a House were always discovered by reflection—One Nymph of Fountain—*N. B. Stone*—lopped Trees—Cow ruminating—ditto Donkey—Man and Woman going gingerly along—William seeing his Sisters over the Heath—John waiting with a Lanthen [*sic*] for his Mistress—Barber's Pole—Docter's [*sic*] Shop—However after having had my fill of these I popped my Head out just as it began to Dawn—

(L I, 128)

This passage vividly presents us with a young aspiring man who shows his poetic promise, demonstrating perceptive observations and impressive narrative skills. The reader seems to watch a film, narrated by Keats, of a typical nineteenth-century English rural landscape. Each phrase is as a snapshot. Hence the reader knows that Keats's carriage went slowly as 'the Lamplight crept along'. And it moved along in

the countryside full of trees and heath, with only some houses and barns scattered around. More notably, Keats's references to Shakespeare's plays make his account rich and deep. The reader is then able to picture the colour and the height of a tree as it is 'as white as a Lilly and as small as a Wand',<sup>1</sup> and absorb the image of the long heath furze.<sup>2</sup> This connection to Shakespeare not only displays Keats's imagination but also his love for Shakespeare, a figure who shaped Keats's idea of poetry and of the poet as well as his self-definition as a poet. In short, the letter typifies the ways in which his letters, as Timothy Webb and John Barnard among other critics assert, serve as narratives of the life of a particular Romantic poet and the formation of his poetic identity.<sup>3</sup>

The reader of Keats's poetry often has to infer Keats's concepts of poetry and of the poet. In his letters, however, the reader can see Keats's formulation and open discussion of the function and nature of poetry and of the poet. And Keats employs his poetry to prove his poetics. For Keats, a foremost principle is his 'Principle of Beauty' (*L I*, 266) and this word 'Beauty' becomes a proper noun as he capitalized it.<sup>4</sup> He

<sup>1</sup> This quotation is from Shakespeare's *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, II. iii. 22f.

<sup>2</sup> This quotation is from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, I. i. 70f.

<sup>3</sup> See Timothy Webb, "'Cutting Figures': Rhetorical Strategies in Keats's *Letters*", in *Keats: Bicentenary Readings*, ed. Michael O'Neill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), p. 146; and John Barnard, 'Keats's letters', in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 121.

<sup>4</sup> Keats nearly capitalizes the word 'Beauty' in every instance when he discusses his idea of beauty; the exceptions are in the ninth and twelfth examples. All his discussion of beauty is as follows: 1) 'I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty' (*L I*, 184); 2) 'the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth—Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout' (*L I*, 192); 3) 'with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration' (*L I*, 194); 4) 'In poetry I have a few Axioms, and you will see how far I am from their Centre...<sup>2nd</sup> Its touches of Beauty should never be half way therby [*sic*] making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the Sun come natural [*sic*] too [*sic*] him—' (*L I*, 238); 5) 'I have ever been too sensible of the labyrinthian path to eminence in Art (judging from Poetry) ever to think I understood the emphasis of Painting. The innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of Beauty' (*L I*, 264-65); 6) 'the Principle of Beauty' (*L I*, 266); 7) 'I have for the Beautiful even if my night's labour should be burnt every morning and no eye ever shine upon them' (*L I*, 388); 8) 'The mighty abstract Idea I have of Beauty in all things stifles the more divided and minute domestic

believes that ‘with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration’ (*L I*, 192). In his ‘Sleep and Poetry’ and ‘I stood tip-toe upon a little hill’, he narrates the poet-narrator’s, or Keats’s, love of natural beauty. The chief lover of beauty, is, unsurprisingly, Endymion. In *Endymion*, Endymion dreams of Cynthia, and he pursues this beautiful vision. Cynthia’s appearance, as mentioned, embodies Keats’s belief of the equation of beauty and truth, and this Keatsian conviction is further explored and substantiated by the urn in ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’. Keats’s poetic ideal, his belief that ‘the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth’ (*L I*, 192) is pithily summarized in the ode’s final line as ‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty’.

Endymion’s quest for Cynthia brings up another major Keatsian concern: that is, his concern with the relationship between dream and reality, which is explored in his poetry. Cynthia is a dream-vision, and the pursuit of her causes a conflict with reality. Keats once remarked that ‘every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer—being in itself a nothing’ (*L I*, 242). Endymion’s visionary belief makes him an ardent pursuer of his dream, and the narrative is to depict his quest for love and beauty. The vision may be ‘in itself a nothing’, yet Endymion’s persistence becomes a form of reality to him. In ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’, the conflict between dream and vision is represented by Madeline. Hoodwinked by the old

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happiness...I feel more and more every day, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds—’ (*L I*, 403); 9) ‘with the yearning Passion I have for the beautiful, connected and made one with the ambition of my intellect’ (*L I*, 404); 10) ‘I never can feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its Beauty—and I find myself very young minded even in that perceptive power—which I hope will encrease [*sic*]—A year ago I could not understand in the slightest degree Raphael’s cartoons—now I begin to read them a little—and how did I lea[r]n to do so? By seeing something done in quite an opposite spirit—I mean a picture of Guido’s in which all the Saints, instead of that heroic simplicity and unaffected grandeur which they inherit from Raphael, had each of them both in countenance and gesture all the canting, solemn melo dramatic mawkishness of Mackenzie’s father Nicolas’ (*L II*, 19); 11) ‘my love of Beauty’ (*L II*, 126); 12) ‘If I should die, I have left no immortal work behind me—nothing to make my friends proud of my memory—but I have lov’d the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remember’d’ (*L II*, 263).

romance, Madeline, like Endymion, ardently believes in her vision. Though Madeline and Endymion have inner struggles, their dreams are still fulfilled at the end. But in 'Lamia', Lycius makes himself a victim of such inner conflict. He wishes to live in the illusion, created by Lamia, and to escape from the truth, from reality; but Apollonius 'clips' his dream.

Keats's discussion of Shakespeare's 'Negative Capability' in his letter can be related to the multiple narrative perspectives which are shown in 'Lamia'. The narrator is able to assume different roles and present alternative points of view. In this way, this story is, as is also the case in 'Ode to a Nightingale' and the 'Hyperion' poems, fraught with tension and contradiction. Yet from these poems, the reader can perceive the underlying philosophy of Keats's narrative: to re-present and unflinchingly confront the ambivalence, plurality, and contraries of human life. The reader, however, can also appreciate Keats's sympathetic imagination when he narrates Isabella's and Saturn's manners and frame of mind when facing catastrophes. Keats empathises with his characters and describes what he imagines (*L I*, 200). His 'complex Mind' (*L I*, 186) prompts and enables him to 'live in a thousand worlds' (*L I*, 403). Keats's resulting poetic narrative art, as this thesis has sought to demonstrate, is rich, appealing, and sophisticated, revealing his poetic identity to be one that genuinely challenges comparison, as other critics have noted, with Shakespeare.

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