



Let me not think, soft Angel! shall it be so?  
 Say, beautifullest, shall I never think? (IV, 302-5)

He veers between goddess and mortal, 'my daintiest Dream' whose airy voice can 'cheat me to the shore of tangled wonder' (much like the later voice of the Nightingale) and 'My Indian bliss! My river-lily bud' (whose sad song anticipates Melancholy) (IV, 654-6, 663-4). Phoebe overcomes the Maiden in sleep, as the Maiden outpresences Phoebe in the waking world. As the moon rises, Endymion embraces the Indian:

Despair! Despair!  
 He saw her body fading gaunt and spare  
 In the cold moonshine. Straight he seized her wrist;  
 It melted from his grasp. Her hand he kissed,  
 And, horror, kissed his own – he was alone. (IV, 506-10)

Keats said of his struggle to turn the myth of Endymion and the moon to his own purposes, 'As I proceeded my steps were all uncertain'; and the poem showed 'inexperience, immaturity ... [adolescent] mawkishness'.<sup>2</sup> Certainly the unquestioning confidence of the familiar Induction, that 'A thing of beauty is a joy forever ...', as guaranteed by 'the moon, The passion poesy' (I,1, 28-9), is diminished as the poem proceeds. It is diminished, or reassessed, partly by the localized ironies which spring, sometimes oddly, out of the text, which exert a force upon further parts of the tale.

Of these examples, which admittedly are selective, the first refers to the *Arabian Nights* story of the handsome young prince of the Black Isles who was marble from the waist down.<sup>3</sup> It anticipates the sterility of Endymion's quest, the irony underscored by the quirky rhyme, 'marble man/ Arabian'. (One may sense here, too, a forward link to the unconsummated loves of the 'marble men and maidens' on the Grecian Urn.) The embrace in Book II, so tiredly sentimentalized, intimates the self-indulgence of the dreamer, and this is recognized in the poet's sarcastic plea for a small jet from the fountain Hippocrene over the 'sorry' encounter. The devaluing personification suggests what kind of flow he had in mind. But the lines carry forward too to Endymion's fanciful encounter with the streamy lovers Alpheus and Arethusa, who 'outgushed' (II, 918) on

either side of him, and so question their appropriateness as analogy for the mortal Endymion's love.

Endymion's jerkily incomplete refusals to 'think' in Book IV – not think about what? never think again? – for which he seems to seek the Maiden's agreement, are doubly ironic because he unconsciously swears to her by the very deity he protests he will not consider more – 'by Phoebe, no!'. The Maiden would hardly have been impressed. Had he thought of the relationship between earthly love and the moon-goddess of poetry, as eventually he has to do, the unexpected miracle with which the poem ends would have been achieved; for it is only when he does ponder upon this apparent choice that the miracle comes about. Meanwhile, as his slip suggests, he confuses which love belongs to which world. Thus, when he attempts to embrace the Indian Maid in the moonshine (recalling earlier dreamed embraces with Phoebe), she becomes ludicrously insubstantial. (The lines recall the Tom Lehrer song, 'I hold your hand in mine, dear, I press it to my lips. I take a healthy bite, from your dainty fingertips. My joy would be complete dear, if only you were here. But still I hold your hand, as a precious souvenir'.) The ironic voice of the poet, explicit in the earlier example of embrace, is present here in the repetition, in the jingling internal rhyme of 'own/alone', in the tone.

Such ironies were no doubt intended partly as correctives to the 'mawkishness' Keats detected as he continued work on *Endymion*. At the same time they reinforce its increasing purpose, the humanizing awareness that quest must turn into journey home, that dreams of otherness must turn to awareness of self, however disturbing. Book II contains the realization that:

when new wonders ceased to float before,  
And thoughts of self came on, how crude and sore  
The journey homeward to habitual self!

But this must replace

A mad pursuing of the fog-born elf,  
Whose flitting lantern, through rude nettle-briar,  
Cheats us into a swamp, into a fire,  
Into the bosom of a hated thing. (II, 274-80)

The 'hated thing' is 'The deadly feel of solitude' (II, 284). The attitude here is that to be explored more deeply in the 'Ode to a Nightingale', at the end of which the thought of 'fairy lands forlorn' serves

To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
 Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
 As she is fabled to do, deceiving elf. (ll. 70-4)

But in *Endymion* it is Keats's free adaptation of the Ovidian tale of Glaucus, Scylla and Circe, largely occupying Book III, that begins this exploration. The episode is intended to show Endymion that love of the enchantress leads to destructive penalties but that restoration of Glaucus and Scylla, and all mortal lovers, is in the power of the poet. The symbolic drowning and aging of Glaucus, the deaths of Scylla and other mortal lovers, are reversed by the double strength of Glaucus's exploration of 'all forms and substances Straight homeward to their symbol-essences' and Endymion's untangling a thread and reading from a blank shell, which is one assumes a token of poetry (III, 699-700, 755-65).<sup>4</sup> The victims of the enchantress (who, in anticipation of Lamia, is called a bewitching 'gordian snake', III, 494-5) are then released to home and proper selfhood.

Endymion's release is still to come. The conclusion of the poem turns to a more structured, even dramatic, irony for this purpose. It shifts gear from the lush, the mawkish pastoral mode of 'poetic romance', and in doing so values the whole as the Induction could not do. Endymion realized that he has been

a butterfly, a lord  
 Of flowers, garlands, love-knots, silly posies,  
 Groves, meadows, melodies, and arbour roses.

His responsibilities await his homeward turn, for 'My kingdom's at its death', and 'in all this We miscall grief, bale, sorrow, heartbreak, woe, What is there to plain of?' (IV, 937-43). (The lines foreshadow the world 'Here, where men sit and hear each other groan' in 'Ode to a Nightingale', ll. 23ff., which neither Queen-moon nor nightingale ever know.) The ending seems to be catching at late Shakespearian transformations or revelations.

Endymion accepts the dark and mortal Indian Maiden. When he does so she is transformed, ironically and miraculously, to the golden-haired goddess. Her face is lighted 'as from a silver flame' (that is, moonlight), but this is a moon in full light, not dream: 'in her eyes a brighter day Dawned blue and full of love' (IV, 982-7). Endymion's apotheosis follows, in a reversal of what he had expected to be the result of his choice. The last line of the poem turns to Peona, now as much prototypical baffled literary critic as sister and guide, with a note of offhand dismissal the reader may well understand; 'Peona went Home through the gloomy wood in wonderment' (IV, 1002-3).

Keats's early intention was to make *Endymion* a test of his powers of imagination and invention, 'by which I must make 4000 Lines of one bare circumstance and fill them with Poetry' (8 October 1817). The 'bare circumstance' – the ending is done very economically – must be that it is the acceptance of mortality, of transience, which paradoxically leads to the ideality of poetry, and not the delusion that the world can be by-passed. This is the theme of the great Odes, including the 'Ode on Melancholy'.

As *Endymion* was preparing for the press Keats was looking to an intenser poetry of what he called knowledge, or experience, which would bring sensation together with watchfulness and judgment. His ironic impulse developed along with this aim. There is of course a sense in which the unfinished *Hyperion*, with its focus upon the fallen gods and the echoing of Milton's debate in Hell, is an impossible attempt at an ironic recension of a part of *Paradise Lost*, failing because Milton's language itself swamped the undertaking. But as that attempt petered out Keats turned another way, from 'poetic romance' to the romance medievalism of *The Eve of St. Agnes* and to a deliberate ironizing of the tale. St Agnes was a fourth century virgin who had been preserved miraculously by thunder and lightning from being 'debauched in the common stews' before her execution; she was only executed. Some days after her death her parents saw a vision of her with angels and a snow-white lamb. The belief grew up that on the eve of her anniversary, fasting virgins could dream of their future husbands.<sup>5</sup>

In Keats's version the images of sterile forms of worship and

ceremony and the skilfully insinuated erotic richness, designed to by-pass early nineteenth-century taboos, generate a tension between traditional religious and social observances and human, sensuous love. (It is worth remarking that the two schools of criticism which have grown up around the poem seem to stress either the 'metaphysical' or the erotic aspects.) That tension is caught too in situations representing Keats's opposition between Phoebe and the Maiden, honeyed delusion and life experienced, dream and waking. Madeline's initial confusion at discovering the living Porphyro beside her is caught in such a moment; she might well have uttered the questions ending the 'Ode to a Nightingale' which the whole Ode answers.<sup>6</sup>

For Keats, then, the virgin must be feasted and not fasted, deceived into awareness of truth, debauched in order to be saved from a kind of death, taken into the storm in order to be freed from martyrdom. The text of the poem commonly printed is that effectively censored by Keats's friend and his publisher, Woodhouse and Taylor; his apparently preferred version shows his attitudes more strongly.<sup>7</sup>

In the opening lines (1-18, 34-6) the old Beadsman earns his pittance by praying for the release from purgatory of his noble employer's forbears, freeing the living for more indulgent rituals. He exists, barely, in a monochrome environment of cold, silence, stillness and death. Outside, birds and beasts can neither make sounds nor move freely; inside the chapel, even the chill dead seem to ache from cold. He tells his rosary before the unmoving effigies, 'carved angels' and 'sculptured dead' enclosed in 'Dumb orat'ries' and 'black, purgatorial rails', and before 'the sweet Virgin's picture'; in this context presumably the virgin Agnes with lamb, thus associated with his world.

The Beadsman's observances make possible the contrasting 'argent revelry' of the proud feast within the castle, with its 'thousand guests' and 'music, yearning like a God in pain'; though these rich celebrants are only 'Numerous as shadows haunting fairly The brain'; they have no greater claim to life (28-40). Madeline meanwhile is preparing her 'ceremonies due', avoiding the revelry in the hope of a different 'vision of delight And soft adorings'. She will fast, 'sleep supine' (that is, in the

same posture as the effigies of the cold dead) in order to look to heaven for her release (46-54). A suppressed stanza Keats interpolated here foretells her lord's seeming dream-appearance, the feast and the song which Porphyro is to supply, and then intimates the outcome Keats intended:

More pleasures follow'd in a dizzy stream  
 Palpable almost: then to wake again  
 Warm in the virgin morn, no weeping Magdalen. (54/5)

The morning is virgin, not Madeline; and to miscall her Magdalen underlines this without censure. Even in the received text which follows there is a hint (which the interpolation would have strengthened) when we read that Madeline was

Hoodwinked with fairy fancy – all amorn,  
 Save to St. Agnes and her lambs unshorn,  
 And all the bliss to be before tomorrow morn. (70-3)

The suggestion of the shearing of the lambs of innocence may carry a sexual connotation; certainly she is to be fleeced, duped. In being about to be 'Hoodwinked' through her observances Madeline is like Beadsman and Baron in theirs, save that she then escapes the cold and deathly worlds of chapel and castle.

The fourth of the simultaneous ritual actions follows from Porphyro's stealthy arrival at the castle of the Baron, his traditional enemy, seeking to worship Madeline. Imagery of secular and sacred adoration plays between these actions. Porphyro is in a situation pointedly comparable to that of Romeo among the Capulets; and like Romeo finds help from an old nurse, who tells him 'My lady fair the conjuror plays This very night. Good angels her deceive!'. In recognizing deception by the good the nurse seems to anticipate the 'stratagem' that 'in his painèd heart Made purple riot' (124-5, 137-9). She also makes Porphyro kneel in prayer (as he is to kneel later) before, like Juliet's nurse, insisting on wedlock. He is then smuggled a secret way to Madeline's closet or inner chamber, in one variant a 'purgatory sweet', from which he is to be released to heaven or hell. Madeline's room reflects her virginity in images borrowed from the Beadsman's world, 'silken, hushed, and chaste' (187). Almost immediately she is compared to a 'tongueless nightingale'

(206), with the erotic implication of the rape of Philomel. (A little later, l. 340, Porphyro denies robbing her nest, although by then the evidence seems against him.) Madeline's disrobing follows, she appearing 'like a saint ... a splendid angel newly dressed ... for Heaven' (222-4) and believing herself purified by prayer. Before 'this paradise' Porphyro has more human responses. She 'unclasps her warmèd jewels one by one; Loosens her fragrant bodice; by degrees Her rich attire creeps rustling to her knees'. Keats obviously took some pains over this erotic irony of watcher and watched; the more modest 'fragrant bodice' replaced earlier readings including 'bursting boddice' and 'her Boddice and her bosom bare' (228-30 and var.). As she enters her 'soft and chilly nest' Porphyro chooses his moment, that of 'a slumbrous tenderness' indicating her dream is about to begin (235-47). As he sets out his feast, intending to break actual and virginal fast, its presentation is accompanied by reminders of the other rituals. He hears briefly the sound of revelry, the 'festive clarion', and is himself 'thine eremite' to enter her heaven (258, 277). The hermit warmed to life is a minor literary trope; here, he is in contrast to the frozen Beadsman. Porphyro embraces the sleeping figure and is able to wake her from the 'icèd stream' of her sleep by singing and playing 'La Belle Dame'. As she wakes, he sinks deceptively to his knees to be like one of the chapel effigies, 'pale as smooth-sculptured stone'. In an ironic Adam's dream – she awakes and finds it truth (cf. 22 November 1817) – Madeline 'still beheld, now wide awake, the vision of her sleep', and is reduced to 'witless words' (297-9, 303). I take the implication to be that while Madeline was content to dream her seduction, Porphyro's real presence means he must be seen by her as 'pallid, chill and drear' (311). She must learn otherwise.

As Madeline calls for dream to return, the statue comes to life, and the Beadsman's world is gone:

he arose,  
 Ethereal, flushed, and like a throbbing star  
 Seen mid the sapphire heaven's deep repose;  
 Into her dream he melted, as the rose  
 Blendeth its odour with the violet,  
 Solution sweet. (317-22)

'Solution', it has been pointed out, can mean fusion. Keats's revised draft (which included the prophecy of 'More pleasures ... in a dizzy stream') makes clearer how Madeline's plea was answered:

See, while she speaks his arms encroaching slow,  
Have zon'd her, heart to heart, – loud, loud the dark winds blow!  
(314/22 var.)

'Zon'd' recalls Venus's zone, or cestus, which excited love. The meaning was obvious enough to Woodhouse and Taylor, the former writing that Porphyro 'acts all the acts of a bona fide husband ... it will render the poem unfit for ladies', and the latter refusing to publish unless the passage was left alone.<sup>8</sup> It has been argued that it is the passion of the dream which is regained. Rather, Madeline is now in a waking dream, which is truth. She is aware of the storm, with its familiar symbolism, which comes 'Like Love's alarum', and aware that 'St. Agnes' moon hath set'; and Porphyro is to assure her that 'This is no dream, my bride, my Madeline!', that he is 'famished pilgrim – saved by miracle' (323-4, 326, 339). On that realization the lovers can fly into the 'boon' of the storm, leaving behind the other rituals. As they leave, the Baron's rituals have ended in nightmare. Angela is to die; so too is the Beadsman, the worth of his observations placed by the closing lines:

The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,  
For ay unsought for slept among his ashes cold. (377-8)

In the original tale the martyred saint was saved from being debauched by a providential storm. In Keats's ironic reworking, it is because Agnes's follower is seduced that she and her Romeo-like pilgrim are released into a storm of feeling and life which removes them from the false worlds of Baron and Beadsman. That miracle begins in mortal love and wakefulness (or waking dream), as in *Endymion*.

The spring odes of 1819 followed closely on *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Each has an ironic shaping. In the 'Ode to Psyche' one is first led into an indulgent world of popular classical myth, a celebration of Psyche with Cupid on her deification. But as the myth is pursued, the tone of the poem changes. That is not to say

merely that 'the poem opens badly but warms up rapidly after a weak start';<sup>9</sup> the change is deliberate. The version of the myth Keats drew on, in Lemprière, recounted that Psyche was deified by Jupiter at Cupid's request only after she had jealously been condemned to death by Venus. Because of her late elevation, Keats stressed, 'she was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour' (30 April, 14 February–3 May 1819). In being human made goddess after suffering, she resembles the Indian Maiden. Her name meant the soul, or mind, originally symbolized as a butterfly; Keats extends this to make Psyche the thinking principle, the new goddess of a new poetry. As such she is 'Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-regioned star, Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky' (26-7), than the moon-goddess or Venus, who is ridiculed. Her fane will be found not in the world of the first stanza, not as some classical altar from the 'happy pieties' of an anthropomorphic past, 'When holy were the haunted forest boughs, Holy the air, the water, and the fire' (38-41). Rather, to borrow Wordsworth's phrases and their humanizing context from poems Keats deeply admired, it will be found by looking 'Into our Minds, into the Mind of Man – My haunt and the main region of my song'. This 'untrodden region' as Keats called it, Wordsworth's 'picture of the mind',<sup>10</sup> will contain 'branchèd thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain, Instead of pines' (51-3), and at its centre

the wreathed trellis of a working brain,  
 With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,  
 With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,  
 Who breeding flowers will never breed the same: (60-4)

Such imagery derives from Keats's early medical studies of the branching patterns of neural structures and their growth.<sup>11</sup> It suggests not what he called 'consequitive reasoning' but (using Wordsworth's phrase) 'the philosophic Mind' (22 November 1817), creative thought 'never ... the same' from the Renaissance gardener of Fancy, or the imagination. In such a sanctuary of the mind the celebrant is the poet, not a 'pale-mouthed prophet' (35), whose role is to restore the new goddess to this landscape from the indulgences of the first stanza. There will be 'a casement ope at night, To let the warm Love in!'. Keats is then re-casting the old myth to affirm the discovery, or

rediscovery, of the romantic imagination: the poem is not, to borrow Wordsworth's phrase for the invocation to Pan in *Endymion*, 'a pretty piece of paganism'.

The later spring odes, the 'Nightingale' and the 'Grecian Urn', are, more forcefully, poems of debate: poem and speaker compete with each other for a right reading through ironic ambiguity, allusion, paradox and pun. The 'Nightingale' opens with ambiguity: is it the poet who does not feel 'envy' (jealousy) but is 'too happy', thus identifying with the bird in his wish to 'leave the world unseen'; or is this emotion attributed to the bird (envy as possessiveness), who is associated with the Queen-Moon and apart from the poet's world 'Here, where men sit and hear each other groan' (st. I-III)? Other significant ambiguities follow (for example, that arising from the allusion to Milton's blindness in the sixth stanza, which opens with an echoing of the invocation in *Paradise Lost* Book III), until we reach their resolution. This is that 'The fancy cannot cheat so well As she is famed to do, deceiving elf' (the 'fog-born elf' of *Endymion*, not the gardener of 'Psyche'); and so the bird itself, the false classical emblem of poetry, is 'buried deep' (st. VIII).

In the 'Grecian Urn', the ironic shaping depends even more upon the suspension of paradox and pun. It is not until the closing lines that the significance of the opening, 'Thou still unravished bride of quietness', is completed. The silent urn – conventional pretty poem, 'flowery tale', and 'Attic shape' (4, 41) is ravished into speech by the poet as bridegroom. It then declares, famously, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' – only to be rounded upon by the poet with 'that is all Ye know ...'. To reach this, we traverse the familiar paradoxes of unheard song, the arrest of the seasons, and unrealizable love. The last in particular is so heavily mocked in the over-insistence of 'More happy love, more happy, happy love! ... All breathing human passion far above' (25-8) (which recalls *Endymion* 'as dead still as a marble man'). The puns opening the fifth stanza are similarly functional: the 'brede of marble men and maidens' wrought over the surface of the urn cannot breed because their overwrought state ('For ever panting') is frozen in time; and these puns lead to the oxymoron of 'Cold pastoral!' Paradox and pun are resolved

completely only by the final savage turn. That may remind us that for all the poem-urn's claims to immortality on the outside, its real function was to contain the ashes of the mortal dead.

It is in the 'Ode on Melancholy' (which has had the roughest passage from the critics) that Keats most fully exploits paradox. The poem picks up allusively much of the imagery of the earlier Odes, and more generally casts back over his major work to this point. The claim of the 'Ode to Psyche' is developed, and the temptations and false paths and hopes of the odes between, 'some dull opiate', 'winding mossy ways', love 'For ever warm and still to be enjoyed', are openly rejected. If neither escape to the supposedly everlasting world of art of the Queen-Moon nor the seemingly timeless work of art itself offer relief to the knowledgeable priest of the new goddess Psyche, how then to proceed? 'Melancholy', the shortest of these odes, faces the question in the first ode addressed directly to the self as a series of dramatized counsels rather than as debate. Rather than exhibiting a voluptuous and decadent sensationalism similar to that of 'Psyche', or alternatively a thinly sensuous aestheticism,<sup>12</sup> the whole poem asserts the health of the mature and mortal imagination.

With Keats's early studies again in mind, one might read the ode almost clinically, as a kind of case history of 'the melancholy fit' (11), or fever: warning against unhealthy remedies, diagnosis of symptoms, prescription, cure and recovery. Do not, now or in future, seek a cure in oblivion or drugged depression or late eighteenth-century poetry, which lead only to closure of perception (Keats's 'knowledge') and death of the inquiring spirit. When new growth seems blocked, paradoxically feed on the cause; thus the true relationship between melancholy and joy will be realized and creativity enshrined. Such a paraphrase at least brings out the coolly diagnostic nature of the structure, in tension with the passion of much of the imagery.

The first stanza rejects vigorously the drugged world of the opening of the 'Nightingale': 'No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine'. While this follows from the last line of the cancelled opening stanza, 'Dreameth in any isle of Lethe dull', it also looks back to the

earlier symptoms ('Nightingale', 1-4). Painful awareness is needed; and until this becomes explicit at the end of the stanza it is suggested by the insistency of the warnings to the self: 'No, no ... neither ... Nor ... Make not ... Nor' (1-6). Keats would have known that wolfsbane, yielding aconite, was poisonous, like the nightshade yielding belladonna and the deadly yew which follow. In less than lethal quantities, the first two were prescribed as a depressant and as a powerful relaxant; the last was the most deadly poison when distilled.

'Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kissed By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine' (3-4) strikes us by the use of the passive term, the suggestion of death's kiss, and the dark humour of belladonna as the wine of the queen of the underworld. In some traditions Proserpine was identified or associated with the moon, a coupling Keats had profitably exploited earlier when he made Endymion take the one dark figure for the other (I, 943-4 and ff.). There is a similar dark joking in 'Make not your rosary of yewberries' (5). Traditionally yews grow at the entrance to the graveyard;<sup>13</sup> the small dark red berries would thus make beads on which to tell death rather than hope of salvation.

These lines, then, warn against the solution the nightingale proposed, 'Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget ... To thy high requiem become a sod' ('Nightingale', 21-60). Psyche is next introduced to replace Proserpine as the goddess of 'sorrow's mysteries'; but she is not to be symbolized by further graveyard imagery:

Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be  
 Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl  
 A partner in your sorrow's mysteries; (6-8)

The insect is probably the death-watch beetle, known for destroying the timbers of churches. The death-moth has on its wings the markings of a skull: Psyche, as we have noted, originally meant butterfly, so the moth, like the beetle a creature of corruption, is her anti-type. The owl is not Pallas Athene but a churchyard creature of the night associated with the moon. In Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard', for example, 'The

moping owl doth to the moon complain'; and this is within a few lines of his mention of a beetle and of the yew-tree's shade (7, 10, 13). We recall too that the Beadsman was attended by the downy owl: 'The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold' (2).

This gathering of rejected symbols and their associations mounts to the assertion 'For shade to shade will come too drowsily, And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul' (9-10). Shade as soul, or mind, will be overtaken by shade as oblivion and be too drugged to resist death in the waters of Lethe of the first line. Better to be aware, to accept that 'but to think is to be full of sorrow' and 'Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes' ('Nightingale', 27, 29) and then squeeze strength from this sorrow and transience. 'Anguish' thus opposes the passive 'suffer', as 'wakeful' opposes the sedative, relaxant and poison.

The second stanza opens with the richly paradoxical suggestion of the fit of melancholy being gift rather than punishment, heaven-sent and

like a weeping cloud  
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,  
And hides the green hill in an April shroud; (12-14)

(Oddly, Leavis calls this simile 'purely formal'.<sup>14</sup>) The 'weeping cloud' suggests oppressive circumstance bearing down on life. In his long journal-letter of 14 February-3 May 1819, having heard of an unexpected death Keats wrote on 19 March, 'Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting'. He continued with an image which relates also to the first stanza: 'While we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of events ... it sprouts [it] grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck'. But here the rain 'fosters', for a while, the beauty that otherwise would die. 'April shroud' verges on a pun. The word we would expect with April and after 'cloud' is the near-homonym 'shower'. But this is, like the darkening of the sky at Calvary over the 'green hill' of F. C. Alexander's hymn, a shroud leading to further life. The image seems to have developed through the poetry, perhaps starting from the January 1817 sonnet 'After Dark Vapours'. (The sonnet closes with 'fruit

ripening ... autumn suns ... quiet sheaves' (10-11), so foreshadowing also the 'Ode to Autumn'.) When Endymion is returned to earth after hearing Diana's prothalamion without realizing it is also his own, he lands miserably on 'the green head of a misty hill' (IV, 613). And in *The Fall of Hyperion*, as the still puzzled poet approaches Moneta's incense-clouded altar, the east wind shifts and

the small warm rain  
Melts out the frozen incense from all flowers,  
And fills the air with so much pleasant health  
That even the dying man forgets his shroud. (I, 98-101)

In what follows the poet does not die but after anguishing ascent attains the veiled Moneta's sanctuary, to be acknowledged as more than a dreamer. In the Ode we are shown how the shrine of Melancholy is to be attained:

Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,  
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,  
Or on the wealth of globèd peonies; (15-17)

The lines may recall the strange world of the fifth stanza of 'The Nightingale', but now the nature of beauty is seen clearly. The rose which will fall is 'fostered' by melancholy so that melancholy may be glutted and made well. So with the rainbow colours diffracted by the ridged patterns in damp sand, which will be covered and reshaped by the next tide. So too, spend in pleasure the richness of the opulent peonies rather than long for them not to fall. ('Wealth' works punningly on its literal and figurative senses.) 'Glut', 'spend' and, later, 'feed' on what Keats called in his sonnet 'On Visiting the Tomb of Burns' the 'real of beauty', rather than be overcome by 'that dead hue [of] sickly imagination'; for 'pain is never done' (8-11).

The verbs in these lines of the Ode have a physical, near-sexual force which leads into the closing lines of the stanza:

Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
Imprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes. (18-20)

Perversity, masochism, even sadism, have been found here by some readers. Such strange responses assume that the mistress

is merely, if not Fanny Brawne (who has been made to answer for so much), a 'real' lover whose passing distress is to be lasciviously contemplated instead of averting the gaze and passing a gentlemanly handkerchief. While the figure is as immediate as the blooms and sand-waves (and 'rich' links with 'wealth', and carries the old pun of spending), at the same time she is to be associated with the Psyche of the first stanza who replaced Proserpine as 'partner in your sorrow's mysteries' (8). Her fine anger, 'wakeful anguish', should be seized, her eyes adored, just because she is the new goddess of the mortal poet.

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. (21-4)

The opening pronoun relates to the mistress, and so to Psyche; but it also belongs to the goddess Melancholy, in the kind of double grammatical structure Keats had already used in the first stanza of the 'Nightingale'. To read in this way not only bypasses the embarrassed critics but is much more relevant to the poem's meaning. It should be remarked too that while there would be some strain in saying of an actual mistress that she 'dwells' with passing Beauty, Joy, Pleasure, there is no strain in saying it of a symbolic mistress. The double figure of Psyche /Melancholy dwells always with these personifications of transience, for it is 'in the very temple of Delight Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine' (25-6). 'Sovran' includes the sense of powerful remedy.

The 'peerless eyes' of the mistress now becomes not just hyperbole: the eyes, though now veiled, are unequalled because they are those of the goddess. (We remember the 'awakened eyes' in 'Psyche', the 'brighter day' of the translated Maiden's eyes at the end of *Endymion*.) The poet must attain this shrine. He must dare with his 'strenuous tongue', an image which is at the same sensuous and a token of the language of poetry, to 'burst Joy's grape against his palate fine' (27-8). He must actively accept and delight in transience, rather than suffer the deathly kiss of Proserpine's grape.

Sexual suggestiveness becomes stronger through the poem.

The first stanza suggests Psyche as 'partner'; the second offers her as 'mistress'. In the third, 'aching Pleasure nigh, Turning to Poison' (23-4) alludes to the proverbial wisdom that poisonous flowers yield the best nectar to imply *post coitum homo tristis*. There is the implication of sexual release in 'Burst Joy's grape', following the suggestion of the body as temple of delight. But this suggestiveness serves the fuller symbolism of the Ode, is an achievement of the 'complex mind which brings together sensation and thought' (22 November 1817). The sexual imagery works together with the imagery of the resurrection at the beginning of the second stanza.

This is the 'complex mind' which will 'taste the sadness of her might, And be among her cloudy trophies hung' (29-30). The sad might of 'Veiled Melancholy' may be better understood by looking again at the veiled Moneta of *The Fall of Hyperion*. She is Saturn's priestess, that is the fallen god. The struggle of the 'dreaming thing, A fever of thyself' to reach her, to be cured into waking poet, 'A humanist, physician to all men', has needed 'sharp anguish' to overcome 'Numbness ... Slow, heavy, deadly' (I, 169, 190, 126, 128-9). When her veils are lifted, her face shows 'an immortal sickness' yet her eyes a 'benignant light' (I, 258, 265). In the Ode, Melancholy seems to be a foreshadowing of the Moneta figure and at the same time Psyche; the joy of Psyche is the other face of the sadness of Moneta. The poet's strenuous tongue enables him, or his poetry (there is little distinction for Keats, as for Coleridge) to be hung among her temple's 'trophies'. They are 'cloudy' because, like the restorative 'weeping cloud' and this curative Ode, they share in the double nature of joy and sorrow to express 'the real of beauty'. The unifying irony of the Ode is, then, to bring together Psyche and Melancholy through love, the mistress; at the same time it brings together the preceding spring Odes.

In recent years a great deal has been written about the nature of 'irony' but the attempt to reduce it to definition has been – with some irony – self-defeating. A major study of English romantic irony concludes of Keats's Odes that 'Because the debate is not resolved ... these Odes are almost perfect examples of romantic irony' (what would perfect examples be?). Of *Endymion*, it is

argued that 'his acceptance of the Indian Maiden condemns childish romantic quest'; and of *The Eve of St. Agnes* that the irony works because Keats had two ideas in his mind at the same time, the romantic and the erotic, and so the poem remains open-ended.<sup>15</sup> I have suggested that it is because the Odes do reach resolution that their ironies succeed; that *Endymion* does not condemn the quest but turns it, paradoxically, into a 'journey homeward'; that *St. Agnes* brings the two ideas into one. There seems no way of coping with Keats's creative flexibility in these poems other than to read them closely and as a developing whole. But it is still a body of poetry in which apparent opposites come into one and apparent unities are split apart: Moon and Maid, erotic deception and romantic truth, Psyche and Melancholy, on the one hand, and on the other, dream and waking reality, beauty and truth. An earlier theory may serve as conclusion: that irony is 'the most general term we have for the kind of qualifications which the various terms in a context receive from that context'.<sup>16</sup> Keats's context was 'the Mind of Man'.

## NOTES

- 1 I, 403-6. Keats's poetry is quoted from *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott (London, 1970). The 'definitive edition', ed. Jack Stillinger (London, 1978) and the Penguin edition, ed. John Barnard (Harmondsworth, 1973) have also been consulted, the former particularly for the text of *The Eve of St. Agnes*. The letters are quoted from *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford, 1970, rev. 1975).
- 2 From the two Prefaces to *Endymion*.
- 3 Allott, p.137n.
- 4 Cf. Wordsworth's story of the Arab with the stone and shell in Book V of *The Prelude*: could Keats have heard of this, perhaps from Coleridge?
- 5 Allott, p.450, notes that Keats may have come across the tale and superstition in Henry Ellis's 1813 edition of John Brand's *Observations on Popular Antiquities* (1777). I have consulted Ellis, who gives several versions, including a mildly scurrilous verse by Jephson which may have prompted Keats to his approach.
- 6 See my "'Do I Wake or Sleep?": Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*', *Sydney Studies in English*, 11 (1985-6), 40-50, for a fuller discussion.
- 7 The issue is complex. Briefly, there are four extant MSS: Keats's original draft, two transcriptions by Woodhouse, and a transcript by

## SYDNEY STUDIES

George Keats. Keats revised the original draft in a now lost fair copy and Woodhouse recorded the variants on one of his transcripts. George Keats transcribed the fair copy, perhaps with some errors. The fair copy probably became printer's copy but only after further editing by Woodhouse and Taylor (and possibly, grudgingly by Keats). The crucial issue is their editing out, doubtfully with Keats's approval, of some revisions: in particular of the stanza after l. 54, the alterations to 314-22, and the alterations to the last stanza. Keats seems to have thrown up his hands in the face of their moral and religious disapproval. Stillinger, *The Poems*, 625-9, on which this summary is based, gives the position fully. For many years he argued for the restoration to the text of what were Keats's clear intentions. Those arguments remain convincing: see in particular his *The Texts of Keats's Poems* (Cambridge Mass., 1974). However, in editing *The Poems* he kept to the 'received' text, that approved by Woodhouse and Taylor after Keats had thrown up his hands over the matter. His reasons for doing so are less convincing; he seems to have followed Keats's example. In any case Keats's preferred version should guide our critical reading of the poem.

- 8 See Allott, pp.474-5.
- 9 Kenneth Allott, "The "Ode to Psyche"", repr. *John Keats: Odes*, ed. G. S. Fraser (London, 1971), p.204.
- 10 *Prospectus to The Excursion*, 40-1, and *Lines Composed A Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*, 61: *Poetical Works*, ed. E. de Selincourt (Oxford, 1952-8), II, 261 and V, 4.
- 11 See C. W. Hagelman jr., 'Keats's Medical Training and the Last Stanza of the "Ode to Psyche"', *Keats Shelley Journal*, XI (1962), 73-82.
- 12 Douglas Bush, *John Keats: His Life and Writings* (London, 1966), pp.147-8. The history of such judgments goes back to Keats's first major editor, Houghton, in 1848.
- 13 Cf. Tennyson's 'Old Yew, which graspest at the stones That name the underlying dead', *In Memoriam A. H. H.*, II, 1-2.
- 14 F. R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London, 1936, Pelican edn. 1972), p.243.
- 15 Anne K. Mellor, *English Romantic Irony* (Cambridge Mass., 1980), pp.81, 89-90.
- 16 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York, 1947), p.191.