THE LABYRINTHIAN PATH

—KEATS'S MELANCHOLY AND HIS 1820 VOLUME—*

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I

Despite the recent publication of an illuminating book on Keats's melancholy and its relationship with his poetry,[1] sufficient attention has not yet been paid to the real importance of the question. This prompts me to reemphasize the point which a Keats critic has already made: "Indeed, though it is not much noted, Keats is the most morbid of the major English Romantics, more so than Byron."[2] In fact, it would be no exaggeration to say that, if Keats had not suffered from "many a bitter fit of hypochondriasm", as his brother George confides,[3] he would have become quite a different poet, or he might not have been a poet at all. As will be evidenced here, whatever the surface end of his poetry, Keats, a doctor and poet, endeavoured—consciously or unconsciously—to cure himself of his "horrid Morbidity of Temperament"[4] by the very act of creating poems. Far more meaning than seems at first sight is, therefore, contained in the poet's statement: "sure a poet is a sage; / A humanist, *physician* to all men" (my italics).[5]

* A part of this essay was read, though thereafter largely revised, at the 13th General Meeting of the Association of English Romanticism in Japan held at Naruto College of Education on 18 October 1987.

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[1] See Donald C. Goellnicht, *The Poet-Physician: Keats and Medical Science* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh P., 1984).

[2] Barry Gradman, *Metamorphosis in Keats* (New York: New York Univ. P., 1980), p. 2.

[3] H. E. Rollins, ed., *The Keats Circle*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1948), I, 284.

[4] H. E. Rollins, ed., *The Letters of John Keats: 1814–1821*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1958), I, 370. All quotations from Keats's letters are from this edition. References by volume and page number to the edition—hereafter referred to as *Letters*—are included in the text.

[5] *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 189–90. All quotations from Keats's poetry are from *The Poems of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1978), ed. Jack Stillinger. This edition is hereafter referred to as *Poems*.

The urge in Keats to attain "a nobler life, / Where [he] may find the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts" (*Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 123–5) causes the poet's self-identification with Apollo, the god of 'light' and 'medicine' as well as of poetry. In this sense it is significant that Keats sees poetry as "A drainless shower / Of light" (*ibid.*, ll. 235–6); he properly compares the *healing* power of "the light of Poesy" (l. 276), which dispels the "gloom" of "sad Despondency" (*To Hope*, ll. 2, 9), to the "heaven-born radiance" of "bright-eyed Hope" (*ibid.*, ll. 21, 23). At the beginning, and undoubtedly till the end, of his short poetic life Keats wished to be "a glorious denizen / Of [Poesy's] wide heaven" (*Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 48–49, 54–55) as the abode of *shining* Apollo:

> . . . yet, to my ardent prayer,
> Yield from thy [Poesy's] 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; or, if I can bear
> The o'erwhelming sweets, 'twill bring to me the fair
> Visions of all places: . . . (*Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 55–63)

Typically here is seen Keats's yearning for those aesthetic experiences in which he can momentarily feel the "ethereal balm" (*To Hope*, ll. 5, 29) of heavenly pleasure, oblivious—or cured—of his habitual melancholy. In such happy moments Keats imagines himself "travel [ling] to the very bourne of Heaven" (*Letters*, I, 224; cf. *Endymion*, I, 295). One should recall how repeatedly in his poetry Keats's "young spirit" experiences many a vision-like "death of luxury". To borrow Keats's own wording, it reflects his continuing efforts to "Guess at Heaven" (*The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 4), the place that might be attained "here after".[1] However, Keats's poetry-making as acts of "Guess[ing] at Heaven" is fated to result in his falling back to severer fits of "sad Despondency" on earth; after pleasure comes sorrow, made the more sorrowful now that the poet has known and then lost the taste of

[1] See Keats's letter to Bailey of 22 Nov. 1817: "... we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated" (*Letters*, I, 185).

" heaven and its mysteries " (*Ode*, l. 22), as described in the lines: " all the pleasant hues / Of heaven and earth had faded " (*Endymion*, I, 691–2).[1]

It is this " journey homeward to habitual self " (*Endymion*, II, 276) accompanied by "A sense of real things " (*Sleep and Poetry*, l. 157) that makes Keats increasingly aware that " the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression [i.e., ' bodily or mental uneasiness or distress ' (*OED*)] " (*Letters*, I, 281), the cause of his worsening melancholy, and so makes him wish all the more to be " a miserable and mighty Poet of the human Heart " (*Letters*, II, 115). Notwithstanding his occasional lapses into indolence, Keats sustained the will to build himself up both physically and mentally to face the realities of life in the manner of Wordsworth:

> We are in a Mist—*We* are now in that state—We feel the " burden of the Mystery," To this point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote ' Tintern Abbey ' and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark Passages. Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them. he is a Genius and superior [to] us, in so far as he can, more than we, make discoveries, and shed a light in them—
>
> (*Letters*, I, 281)

One striking aspect of Keats's greatness as a poet of " the human Heart " is the firmness of his determination to see life not merely in its happy phase of momentary bliss but in its painful phase of lasting melancholy. What is more, for Keats melancholy is something so pernicious that it even reminds him of the Devil, Satan:

> . . . truth is I have a horrid Morbidity of Temperament which has shown itself at intervals—it is I have no doubt the greatest Enemy and stumbling block I have to fear—I may even say that it is likely to be the cause of my disappointment. How ever every ill has its share of good—this very bane would at any time enable me to look with an obstinate eye on the Devil Himself— (*Letters*, I, 142)

[1] This pattern shows more or less the similar emotional curve which has attracted critics' attention. See Mario L. D'Avanzo, *Keats's Metaphors for the Poetic Imagination* (Durham, N. C.: Duke U. P., 1967), p. 173; Miriam Allott, " ' Isabella ', ' The Eve of St. Agnes ', and ' Lamia ' ", in *John Keats: A Reassessment* (Liverpool: Liverpool U. P., 1969), ed. Kenneth Muir, pp. 48–9; Jack Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois P., 1971), pp. 101–6.

Certain it is that much of Keats's best poetry is devoted to his efforts to find in his own melancholy " its share of good " and prove its enduring value " upon [his] pulses " (*Letters*, I, 279), not to escape from human miseries into the visionary world of beauty and bliss. (The whole process of the psychological drama displayed in Keats's 1820 volume will later be examined in more detail.)

We see Keats's melancholy at its worst in such a later poem as *What can I do to drive away* (see *Poems*, pp. 492–4), written shortly after *To Autumn*, when he was desperately in love with Fanny Brawne without much hope for the future of their love. The poem (ll. 30–45) gives a clear picture of Keats's " hell " where the devil Melancholy wields his power—" There flowers have no scent, birds no sweet song, / And great unerring Nature once seems wrong "—the sheer opposite to that Elysian world of *Ode to a Nightingale* or *Ode on a Grecian Urn* where " the nightingale doth sing / Not a senseless, tranced thing, / But divine melodious truth; / Philosophic numbers smooth; / Tales and golden histories / Of heaven and its mysteries " (*Ode*, ll, 17–22). Interestingly, Keats in this extremity seeks " some sunny spell ", which no doubt suggests " the light of Poesy ", as well as " [his] lady bright " (l. 47), as a healer of his love-melancholy. Keats at the end of the poem shows himself at his weakest, an escapist poet longing for " the sweetness of the pain " (l. 54) of love. But it should be remembered that always from this lowest point does Keats resume undauntedly his attempts to disclose " the dark mysteries of human souls " (*Sleep and Poetry*, l. 289). In this way Keats, the poet of " the human Heart ", is inevitably forced to carry the burden of the double mysteries, those of ' heaven ' and ' hell-melancholy ' closely following each other:

> Heart! thou and I are here sad and alone;
> Say, wherefore did I laugh? O mortal pain!
> O darkness! darkness! ever must I moan,
> To question heaven and hell and heart in vain!
> (*Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell*, ll. 5–8)

However, it seems unlikely after all that Keats has succeeded in obtaining any definite answer to this haunting question. To make things more complicated, Keats's heaven is not a completely different thing from his hell. The " Cave of Quietude " lines of *Endymion* (IV, 512–48), for example, depict the way " this native hell " of melancholy is changed into

" Dark paradise " or " Happy gloom " where " anguish does not sting; nor pleasure pall "; one interesting characteristic of the " Cave " is that " Enter none / Who strive therefore: on the sudden it is won ". These lines symbolically portray the unusual occasions when the " sorrow's mysteries " (*Ode on Melancholy*, l. 8) can deepen sufficiently to bring a " happy spirit-home " to the poet. Keats's melancholy is, as it were, the hellish region where rare glimpses of heaven are miraculously gained when the poet manages to sustain himself long enough in the midst of " a grievous feud ". The problem is that by nature this " Dark paradise "—the earth-bound heaven—is only allowed short duration, the fate of an aesthetic experience of such peculiarity as Keats's melancholy has. Hence comes the poet's indecision when he tries to evaluate the potential power of his melancholy as a healing, not killing, experience. The present essay will attempt to show how Keats's " morbidity " could be a cause not just of his misery but also of his glory, the drama of the poet's joy and sorrow mysteriously intertwined, by putting his 1820 volume in the new light of melancholy.

II

Reading the 1820 volume poems in terms of the theme of melancholy illuminates the essential quality of Keats's poetry. In reading the volume as a whole, we must keep in mind that Keats, who had had a severe hemorrhage on 3 February 1820, five months before the publication of the volume, meant it to be a sort of epitaph summing up his life as a poet. Keats writes to his friend, Brown, on about 21 June 1820: " This shall be my last trial; not succeeding, I shall try what I can do in the Apothecary line " (*Letters*, II, 298). Another noteworthy fact is that Keats at the time of preparing the volume was, more than ever, a victim of melancholy; he says in the letter of 14 February 1820:

> When I have been or supposed myself in health I have had my share of them [" hypochondriac symptoms "], especially within this last year. I may say that for 6 Months before I was taken ill I had not passed a tranquil day—Either that gloom overspred [sic] me or I was suffering under some passionate feeling, or if I turn'd to versify that acerbated the poison of either sensation. (*Letters*, II, 260)

Under these miserable circumstances Keats devoted himself to the ex-

hausting task of creating, reviewing, revising, and compiling all the *Lamia* volume poems for the press. We have sufficient evidence to show that Keats himself oversaw the printing of the *Lamia* collection from the beginning until at least just before his second hemorrhage of 22 June 1820, in spite of Brown's pessimistic prediction: " Poor Keats will be unable to prepare his Poe⟨e⟩ms for the Press for a long time " (*Letters*, II, 273).[1] The volume was published on 1 or 3 July that year with the "Advertisement " dated 26 June attached to it. Despite the publishers ' apology in the advertisement for the inclusion of *Hyperion* in the volume and Keats's offended comment on it: " This is none of my doing—I w[as] ill at the time ",[2] I think with Neil Fraistat that " Keats not only may have consented to admit *Hyperion*, but may even have decided on its placement ".[3] The very choice and arrangement of the *Lamia* volume poems provide indubitable evidence for Keats's deep involvement in the printing of the collection, as the following argument will show. The whole volume is governed by the poet's strong ' will ', the will to reassess his poetry and make clear its value not only with his completed work but also with that left undone though purposed. For this reason the 1820 volume in its present form may safely be called Keats's ' intellectual ' tour de force, intended to represent his life in its totality in terms of *Sollen* rather than *Sein*.[4]

The general direction Keats, the ' critic ' of his own poetry, seems to have wished his 1820 volume to take is correctly, though only roughly, described by Jack Stillinger as " a progressive abandonment of the ideal and acceptance of the natural world, and a gradual movement from irresolution to resolution ",[5] or more specifically by Fraistat as " a progression from evasion to confrontation, from fancy to imagination,

[1] For Keats's deep involvement in the printing of the 1820 volume, see *Poems*, pp. 10, 12–3, 15; Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*, pp. 2, 116–7; Neil Fraistat, *The Poem and the Book: Interpreting Collections of Romantic Poetry* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina P., 1985), pp. 97–9; *Letters*, II, 276, 286, 294, 298, 300.

[2] See *Poems*, p. 737.

[3] Fraistat, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

[4] Basically my view agrees with Jack Stillinger's: " . . . each of Keats's volumes constitutes a separate literary work in which the arrangement of the pieces within the volume in a sense represents one more stage of composition. . . ". Jack Stillinger, *The Texts of Keats's Poems* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U. P., 1974), p. 284.

[5] Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems*, p. 116.

from solipsism to community, from romance to epic".[1] Much to be regretted is that their insightful statements both fail to bring the theme of melancholy within the scope of argument. Though Keats critics have consistently neglected this crucial theme, this essay emphasizes the important role melancholy must have played when Keats decided on which poems to select and in what order to place them in his last poetic enterprise.

It is interesting that all the title poems of the volume—*Lamia*, *Isabella*, and *The Eve of St. Agnes*—deal with heroes' or heroines' love-melancholy; moreover, *Lamia* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* even have their sources in the third partition of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, titled "Love-Melancholy".[2] The reader may recall Lamia's "melancholy eyes" (I, 84), those lines in *Isabella* singing of "Melancholy" (ll. 433–40, 481–8), and Porphyro's "heart, Love's fev'rous citadel" and his "sad eyes" (*The Eve of St. Agnes*, ll. 84, 310). From our point of view, the three poems depict how melancholy lovers momentarily taste the sweets of their dreamy love-visions and fall thereafter back to the "eternal woe" (*The Eve of St. Agnes*, l. 314) due to "a painful change, that nigh expell'd / The blisses of [their] dream so pure and deep" (*ibid.*, ll. 300–1), though the concluding atmosphere of each poem is subtly different, from the tragedy of *Lamia* to the seemingly happy ending of *The Eve of St. Agnes*.[3] However, it is undeniable that the conclusion of *The Eve of St. Agnes* is not entirely optimistic about the future of the lovers; "the storm" into which "These lovers fled away" (l. 371) may not be "an elfin-storm from faery land, / . . . a boon" (ll. 343–4) but the storm raging over the human world, where—as we foresee in "palsy-twitch'd" Angela's ugly death (ll. 375–6)—"palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs, / . . . Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow" (*Ode to a Nightingale*, ll. 25, 29–30). In all these romances the power of love as an effective means of overcoming melancholy appears to be denied in one way or another; ironically, the happy moments of human love sharpen, not

[1] Fraistat, *op. cit.*, p. 139.

[2] See Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (London: Dent, 1972), Pt. III, pp. 46–7, 180–1.

[3] It is worth noting that Keats places high value on *The Eve of St. Agnes* as a 'dramatic' poem (see *Letters*, II, 234). He once described "the Drama" as "the playing of different Natures with Joy and Sorrow [i.e., melancholy]" (*Letters*, I, 218–9).

lessen, the keenness of ensuing woe. The lovesick poet subsequently turns from the human miseries to the ideal beauty of nature and art in the two immediately following odes, so that he may " leave the world unseen " " on the viewless wings of Poesy " (*Ode to a Nightingale*, ll. 19, 33) and enter " Tempe " or "Arcady " in the spiritual world where sweet " ditties of no tone " will be piped " Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd, / . . . to the spirit " (*Ode on a Grecian Urn*, ll. 7, 13–4), and where " more happy, happy love " than his will be " For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd " (ll. 25–6). Did Keats, then, manage to sustain this otherworldly ' heaven ' long enough by his poetic imagination? The answer is in the negative; the last lines of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (ll. 49–50), to say nothing of those of the " Nightingale " ode, seem to me not so much the poet's affirmation of the victory of the ideal over the real as his forced, self-defensive outpourings. Keats is well aware of the state of human existence in which ' beauty ' is not necessarily ' truth ', ' truth ' not ' beauty '. Therefore, he can never avert his eyes for any length of time from the realities " on earth " where " but to think is to be full of sorrow [i.e., melancholy] " (*Ode to a Nightingale*, l. 27). Keats is afraid that ' imagination ' may at any moment turn to ' fancy ' as a " deceiving elf " (l. 74).

Naturally, the following poem, *Ode to Psyche*, places more emphasis on the power of " mind ", " thoughts ", or " a working brain " (ll. 51, 52, 60), reversing Keats's early statement: " O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts! " (*Letters*, I, 185). However, it is also to be noted that *Ode to Psyche* restores due respect for ' fancy ', once rejected in *Ode to a Nightingale*. The poet endeavours to get " warm Love " (l. 67), not feverish, melancholy love, in " some untrodden region of [his] mind " (l. 51) in collaboration with " the gardener Fancy " (l. 62). Keats here is apparently determined to resort more to his " thoughts " than " sensations ", though he does not exclude completely the visionary power of fancy or poetic imagination. That the poem was an ' intellectual ' attempt to cope with his melancholy is clear from Keats's comment on it: " This I have done leisurely—I think it reads the more richly for it and will I hope encourage me to write other thing[s] in even a more peacable [sic] and healthy spirit " (*Letters*, II, 106).[1] As the poem's title suggests, *Ode to Psyche* is the product of the

[1] For *Ode to Psyche*'s melancholy tone, see Leon Waldoff, *Keats and the Silent Work of Imagination* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois P., 1985), pp. 106–7.

poet who forces himself to face and unravel " the dark mysteries of human souls ", not of that escapist poet who yearns to " fade away into the forest dim " (*Ode to a Nightingale*, l. 20).

The next poem *Fancy*, which celebrates " Fancy, high-commission'd " (l. 27), not fancy as a " deceiving elf ", is virtually a revision of the preceding ode with emphasis shifted from 'mind' to 'fancy'. The following lines exactly correspond with lines 58–63 of *Ode to Psyche*: " Let, then, winged Fancy find / Thee a mistress to thy mind " (ll. 79–80). *Fancy* has its companion poem *Ode*, both of which Keats called " a sort of rondeau " (*Letters*, II, 26). Keats in *Ode*, the poem " on the double immortality of Poets " (*Letters*, II, 25), stands exactly halfway between 'heaven' and 'earth'. While he guesses at the typically Keatsian heaven as dead poets' happy home (ll. 5–22), he claims at the same time that those poets' " earth-born souls " will " Teach us, here [on earth], the way to find [them] " (ll. 26, 29). In no sense does Keats put heaven before earth; both are equally esteemed.

Nevertheless, the two following poems, *Lines on the Mermaid Tavern* and *Robin Hood*, point to Keats's growing concern with the earth. The one implies that the merrymaking on the earth could be the archetype of heavenly pleasure: earth comes first, not heaven; the latter may function as an introductory poem ushering in the following pair odes, *To Autumn* and *Ode on Melancholy*, because of its deep involvement in human miseries on earth. *Robin Hood*, subtitled " To a Friend ", was originally dedicated to Keats's friend, Reynolds. Yet it is quite probable that Keats later changed the dedicatee from Reynolds to his love, Fanny Brawne.[1] If our guess is right, the last two lines of the poem carry more meaning than seems: " Though their days have hurried by / Let us two a burden try ". The last line originally read: " You and I a stave will try ",[2] " a stave " signifying 'a stanza or verse'. But the revised line allows us a twofold reading: " a burden " can mean at once 'a refrain or chorus of a song' and 'a heavy load of life'. The reader should remind himself of " the burden of the Mystery " which Keats says he feels in a mist of existence. The " Robin Hood " poem may well be Keats's poetic manifesto that he should " be as patient in illness and as believing in Love as [he is] able " (*Letters*, II, 294).

[1] When preparing the 1820 volume, Keats seems to have been offended by the Reynoldses for their malice against Fanny Brawne. See *Letters*, II, 292–3.

[2] See *Poems*, p. 230*n*.

The argument above has clarified the reason why Keats, omitting such good poems as *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and others, selected four rather mediocre poems from *Fancy* through *Robin Hood*, and placed them in the present order, giving them a central section of the 1820 volume. They indicate, when read sequentially as one group, the shift of Keats's interest from 'heaven' above to 'hell'—or, 'heaven in hell'—down on earth.[1] This may also explain why *Ode on Indolence* was left unrevised and excluded from the *Lamia* collection; Indolence's is a sham heaven from which the fainthearted poet tries to expel "demon[s]" or "three ghosts" (ll. 30, 51)—"Love", "Ambition", and "Poesy"—the cause of his melancholy. The second pair odes of the volume, *To Autumn* and *Ode on Melancholy*, the first being *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, treat the earthly "Beauty that must die" (*Ode on Melancholy*, l. 21), not the kind of "Beauty [that] is truth" existing somewhere in "the terra semi incognita of things unearthly" (*Letters*, I, 255). At first sight *To Autumn* appears to stand farthest from the stock subject of autumnal melancholy. Keats's autumn is called "Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, / Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun" (ll. 1–2). But the last stanza of the poem, which abounds with such melancholic words as "soft-dying", "wailful", "mourn", "sinking", and "dies", implies that the ode would have ended in an outright elegy on the dying, not "maturing", season if the poet had gone further on in composing the poem. The poet's heart becomes "high-sorrowful", secretly sinking "Lethe-wards", at the close of the "Autumn" ode. For this reason does *Ode on Melancholy* begin with that strong-willed line: "No, no, go not to Lethe, . .". No better place than this could have been given to the "Melancholy" ode, the poet's attempt to prevent his "mournful Psyche" (l. 7) from "drown[ing] the wakeful anguish of the soul" (l. 10). In addition, the poem, placed immediately before *Hyperion*, leads the whole 1820 volume towards "the shady sadness of a vale" (*Hyperion*, I, 1), that is, "The vale of Soul-making" which provides the Titans with "a World of Pains and troubles" to "school an Intelligence and make it a soul". Keats in the last stage of the volume tries to find his 'heaven' not "here

[1] On this point my opinion differs from John Barnard's: "The inclusion of these weaker poems may be due to Keats's own undependable taste, that of his publisher, or the simple need to fill out pages, but they jostle against the major odes". John Barnard, *John Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. P., 1987), p. 99.

after " nor in " the terra semi incognita of things unearthly " but ' here and now ' in the midst of hell-melancholy, which is nothing other than his effort to establish " a grander system of salvation than the chryst‹e›ain religion " (*Letters*, II, 102).

Ode on Melancholy as such shows one of those apogees the poet can only rarely attain, where he temporarily finds " this native hell " altered into " Dark paradise ". As has already been mentioned, Keats's peculiarly mysterious, aesthetic experience is characterized by the suddenness and transiency of its visitation (hence the expression " the dark mysteries of human souls " or " sorrow's mysteries "):

> 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;
> (ll. 11–4)

These lines hint in imagery that " Melancholy " could be a dweller of both heaven and hell. Read with stress on " from heaven ", " the melancholy fit " seems to be a divine blessing; yet, when read with the emphasis shifted onto "*fall* . . . from heaven " (my italics), it is to be seen as the Devil's gift. The same thing is suggested by the ambiguous coexistence of life- and death-imagery subtly interlaced in the above lines. What emerges is that for Keats the goddess Melancholy of the ode is not an entirely different thing from his habitual Devil-Melancholy. The whole poem seems to claim that the best way to find ' heaven ' on earth is not to escape the realities of life but to " look with an obstinate eye on the Devil himself ", " bear[ing] all naked truths " (*Hyperion*, II, 203). Within the context of the poem it appears that in this way the poet successfully catches a glimpse of the goddess Melancholy, though his symbolical death at the end (ll. 29–30) leaves ambiguity about the true meaning of his ' aesthetic ' experience.

Hyperion, the last poem of the 1820 volume, relates how the fallen gods—" the families of grief " (*The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 461)—endure the pains and sorrows in their " melancholy realms " (*ibid.*, II, 7), and at the same time how young Apollo—a melancholy youth (see *Hyperion*, III, 5–6, 86–9)—comes very near to obtaining his godhead. Apollo does this by witnessing the older gods ' sufferings with the help of Mnemosyne, the goddess of ' memory ' ,who obviously symbolizes " a

working brain" (*To Psyche*, l. 60), the power of the poet's 'mind' or 'intellect'. In this sense *Hyperion* deals with melancholy as *felix culpa*, the fault that eventually enables not only the fallen gods but Apollo to regain "new" heaven on earth (cf. I, 132; II, 201, 280; III, 67, 79). For all its appearance and even its title, the real protagonist of *Hyperion* is Apollo, Keats's double in some sense, as far as the existent fragment goes. This "young Apollo anguish[es]" (III, 130), reminding the reader of "the wakeful anguish of the soul" (*Ode on Melancholy*, l, 10), while he goes through the process of "D[ying] into life" (III, 130) at the very end of the whole volume. Here again, as in the end of the "Melancholy" ode, it is doubtful whether the poet-Apollo could manage to survive his deadly melancholy experience. For our argument it is important that Keats finally revised the original conclusion of the epic, which read "He was the God! / And god like",[1] into the present one: "Apollo shriek'd;—and lo! from all his limbs / Celestial" (III, 135–6). After this are printed only two rows of asterisks. No definite mention is made on Apollo's apotheosis except the ambiguous word "Celestial". Thus ends the 1820 volume. The uncertain and fragmented nature of the end of the volume, as well as that of *Hyperion*, suggests the extent to which Keats thought he could—or could not—achieve "the great end / Of poesy" to be "a friend / To soothe the cares and lift the *thoughts* of man" (*Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 245–7. My italics). It is rightly said that what Keats could finally present to the reader as a means of overcoming melancholy is no more than mystical aestheticism, too ephemeral to solve the momentous moral question of how to live in the midst of human miseries.[2] Keats, the 'editor' of

[1] See *Poems*, p. 356*n*.

[2] As critics have pointed out, Keats tries to explain the origin and operation of his poetic or aesthetic experience by the analogy of chemical science. The scene describing Apollo's metamorphosis into a "Celestial" being (*Hyperion*, III, 124–30) provides a good example, where Apollo ('the raw material') "dies into life" ('is sublimated, etherealized or spiritualized into a new, processed substance') "with a pang / As hot as death's" ('through a chemical reaction caused by heat') by the help of Mnemosyne ('the experimenter'). Keats's use of rather mysterious imagery of chemistry in explaining this "sorrow's mysteries" may be a reminder of Keats's incompetence in explicating Apollo's apotheosis "by consequitive reasoning" (*Letters*, I, 185). If so, this gives the essential reason for his abandonment of the "Hyperion" poems after his protracted struggle with them. For Keats's frequent use of chemical words, see R. T. Davies, "Some Ideas and Usages", in *John Keats: A Reassessment*, pp. 124–38; Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton U. P., 1973), pp. 33–49; Goellnicht, *op. cit.*, pp. 48–83.

the *Lamia* volume, must have realized that he could have travelled in his exploration of " those dark Passages " much shorter distance than he had expected when writing the above cited letter to Reynolds on 3 May 1818 (see *Letters*, I, 281). For Keats, about a month after the publication of the volume, could not help writing to Fanny Brawne thus:

> A person in health as you are can have no conception of the horrors that nerves and a temper like mine go through . . . . The last two years taste like brass upon my Palate . . . . If my health would bear it, I could write a Poem which I have in my head, which would be a consolation for people in such a situation as mine. (*Letters*, II, 312)[1]

There is no doubt the poem which Keats had in mind and thought " would be a consolation for people in such a situation as [his] " should be of the *Hyperion* kind, a moralistic poem rather than an aesthetic one, as suggested in his attempt at *The Fall of Hyperion*.[2] Since Keats himself was dissatisfied with his accomplished work, the 1820 volume as a whole may paradoxically be said to be *completed* in its incompleteness or fragmentariness.

III

Though it may seem somewhat simplistic, yet the reading of the Lamia volume illustrated above surely has this advantage: it gives us an overall picture of the ideal poet and poetry Keats aimed at throughout his life. However, it must also be admitted that the reading has at the same time a serious shortcoming: it has a tendency to ignore the intrinsically ambiguous quality characterizing the best of Keats's poetry. To see the 1820 volume solely from the viewpoint provided by the poet's " thoughts " rather than his " sensations " cannot but be a shortsighted reading, because Keats not only consistently wished to be " a miserable and mighty Poet of the human Heart ", the ' thoughts '-oriented humanitarian poet, but was in essence also a poet of the " Nega-

[1] Note the similarity of imagery between this passage and *Hyperion* (I, 188–9).

[2] To know Keats's nature, it is interesting that as late as in *The Fall of Hyperion* (see I, 1–18) he still attempts to " guess at heaven ", " rehears[ing] "—the verb probably intended to mean both ' to recite ' and ' to have rehearsal of '—his dream which he predicts will be known either to be " Poet's or Fanatic's " " When this warm scribe [his] hand is in the grave [i.e., " here after "] ".

tive Capability ", the ' sensations '-oriented aesthetic poet: " . . . axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses " (*Letters*, I, 279). In fact, almost all of Keats's finest poems are the products of this " capability ":

> . . . at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare posessed [sic] so enormously—I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge . . . . with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration. (*Letters*, I, 193–4)

The *Lamia* volume poems begin to " tease us out of thought " about the real state of the poet's growth as both man and poet as soon as we set ourselves to read them rearranged in the chronological order of composition; in which the " Mermaid Tavern " poem (written in February 1818) and *Robin Hood* (February 1818) come first, followed by *Isabella* (March-April 1818); then come *Fancy* (December 1818) and *Ode* (December 1818) preceding *Hyperion* (September 1818-April 1819), *The Eve of St. Agnes* (January-February 1819), and the four spring odes of 1819; and at last comes *Lamia* (June-September 1819) with *To Autumn* (September 1819). Especially noteworthy here is that *Ode to Psyche*, which comes in the volume after the " Nightingale " and the " Grecian Urn " odes, was actually written earlier than all other spring odes, and that *Ode on Melancholy*, placed in the volume immediately after the "Autumn " ode, was in reality composed a few months before its companion ode. What a labyrinthian path Keats seems to have been obliged to take in creating his poems, forcing the careful reader to follow the same puzzling path! Such is the fate of the poet who bids himself be ' negatively capable ':

> 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—
>
> (*Letters*, I, 264–5. My italics)

No other passage of Keats's letters could throw more revealing light on where and how were born those typically Keatsian, self-revising, ambiguous forms of expression which may rightly be called oxymoronical, ironical, paradoxical, or even palinodical.[1] The above passage suggests that Keats's " Negative Capability " is not in the least the kind of ability that from the start guarantees the poet " a sort of mental Cottage of feelings quiet and pleasant " or " a sort of Philosophical Back Garden " (*Letters*, I, 254), but rather such a capability as is only obtainable when the poet can remain tough-mindedly in " uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts ", the results of his intellect's " irritable reaching after fact & reason ". Not until he has had enough of the painful experience of his ' intellect '—the intellectual " revolv[ing] " and " bickering " after a truth (*Letters*, I, 243)—does the poet become able to secure his " Negative Capability " and enter " a proper philosophical temper ". Such a capability provides the poet with very rare moments of the mental as well as emotional equilibrium where his " sense of Beauty " eventually " overcomes every other consideration ". As long as this capability continues to work, " all consideration " seems at least outwardly to be " obliterated "; yet, inwardly there are potential struggles incessantly going on between the poet's " thoughts " and " sensations ". The most important, though often overlooked, aspect of Keats's " Negative Capability " is that it is in constant danger of collapsing even at the moment when it seems most secured. At the very moment when the " Capability " has reached its highest it begins to collapse, aiming at restoring a still more intensified state of equilibrium. The whole process of this building-up and collapsing is destined to repeat itself endlessly in the arena of the poet's ' intellect '. This is how the Keatsian dialectic works between the two opposing vectors— " thoughts " and " sensations " —though a growing emphasis is to be placed on the former by the maturing Keats.

The spring odes of 1819, occupying the important part of the *Lamia* volume, reflect the Keatsian dialectic operating most dramatically. Undoubtedly, Keats's frequent, dichotomic reference to the " Mind " and the " Heart " at the time of the odes' composition indicate recurrent

[1] For example, *Ode to Psyche* can be a palinode almost in the traditional sense of the word to the two immediately preceding odes, and *To Autumn* and *Ode on Melancholy*, though slightly differently, also to the same odes.

collisions of such conflicting forces in him.[1] For example, the last lines of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (ll. 44–50), like those of *Ode to a Nightingale*, more than hint at the conflict between the poet's 'intellectual' urge to "buzz here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at" (*Letters*, I, 232) and his 'emotional', almost 'physical', longing to "open [his] leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive" (*ibid.*) after his visionary experience of ideal beauty.

In the same way *Ode on Melancholy*—one of the richest fruits produced by Keats's "Negative Capability"—proves, when examined scrupulously, to be virtually a literal paraphrase of that passage in the "Negative Capability" letter quoted above, and the ode thereby strongly suggests the close relationship of the poet's melancholy with his "Negative Capability". At the very beginning of the poem is seen a sharp conflict of the "mind" and the "heart" underway in the melancholy poet's "mournful Psyche"; and the struggle occasions such a cluster of negatives as "no", "not", "neither", and "nor", the imperative cry of the "mind". While the poet manages to endure "the wakeful anguish of the soul", to face his inner conflict unflinchingly, "the melancholy fit" of an unknown kind suddenly possesses him. Now is the time when he should strain his nerves to remain in "sorrow's mysteries", that is, "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts", "without any irritable reaching after fact & reason". The poet "glut[s]" (l. 15) his "sense of Beauty" with sorrow, "feed[ing] deep" (l. 20) on the raving beauty of "Melancholy".[2] Only when this "sense of Beauty overcomes ["or rather obliterates"] every other consideration" can a happy glimpse of "Veil'd Melancholy" (l. 26) be caught from "her sovran shrine" (*ibid.*). The poem thus implies that the goddess Melancholy is nothing other than "a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery"; and this explains why she is "veil'd", the word "verisimilitude" meaning 'a thing that *seems* truth', not truth itself. Here the poet is required to remain "content with half knowledge". Then, finally, he loses himself, or *dies* a symbolical death in rich abundance of melancholy beauty. The conclusion of the poem is, as already pointed out, ambiguous in that this death could be

[1] See *Letters*, II, 25, 79–81, 102–3.

[2] The poem's context allows us to see "thy mistress" (l. 18) as both an actual mistress and the goddess Melancholy. See William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930; rpt. London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 216.

at once the poet's victory and his defeat. Imagery suggests that it might be the poet's total defeat: "And be among her cloudy trophies hung" (l. 30). Such ambiguity hints at Keats's indecisiveness when he tries to evaluate his own melancholy experience. However effectively it may operate at times as an aesthetic, healing experience, Keats—especially the moralistic, humanitarian part of Keats—must be ill at ease about the abrupt visitation and inevitable transitoriness—the mysterious quality—of the "melancholy fit" or "sublime Misery":

> . . . there is no altering a Man's nature and mine must be radically wrong for it will lie dormant a whole Month—This leads me to suppose that there are no Men thouroughly [sic] wicked—so as never to be self spiritualized into a kind of sublime Misery—but alas! 't is but for an Hour—
> (*Letters*, I, 173)

We know that the young, melancholy lover-poet, Endymion, was successfully "spiritualiz'd" (*Endymion*, IV, 993)—or 'sublimated'—at the end of his dreary journey,[1] yet it was still "by some unlook'd for change", by the "sorrow's mysteries". No matter how successfully it may bring happy 'moments' of heavenly beauty, the mystery of melancholy must, as long as it is 'mystery', continue to be for the rest of the time what lays on Keats another "burden of the Mystery". This is probably the essential reason why Keats was so dissatisfied with the happy ending of *Endymion* and can also be the most persuasive reason for the uncertainty and doubt about Apollo's apotheosis at the end of *Hyperion*, the poem meant to be among the "verses fit to live" ('Preface' to *Endymion*).

When seen from the viewpoint of melancholy, as from that of other important subjects such as 'imagination', 'beauty', 'truth', 'immortality', 'eternity', and so forth, Keats's poetry impresses us with its striking open-endedness, where nothing seems to have been given any definite answer whatsoever. For the reader to appreciate this ambiguous, therefore unfathomably rich, character of Keats's poetry, the 1820 volume could act as both 'revealer' and 'concealer' of the truth: a revealer—though a 'teaser' at the same time—in the sense that it contains almost all of the important poems, ranging widely enough both in subject and in the date of composition, which can provide, when

[1] For the various symptoms of Endymion's melancholy, see Goellnicht, *op. cit.*, pp. 177–86.

read *chronologically*, a concise outline of the labyrinthian path the 'poet' Keats forced himself to take throughout his life; and a concealer in the sense that the volume, with its whole poems arranged in the present order, tempts the less shrewd reader to follow innocently the straight road smoothly paved and signposted by Keats's "thoughts" or 'intellect'. In following this easy road, the reader may constantly be exposed to the danger of forgetting that it could also be "a thoroughfare for all thoughts. Not a select party [of thoughts]" (*Letters*, II, 213).

Thence what has been argued here emphasizes the supreme importance for the reader of Keats's poetry, not alone of the 1820 volume, of paying due attention to its self-revisional, almost endlessly self-renewing idiosyncrasy: a "miserable and mighty" sign of Keats's trial-and-error efforts not to finally "unsay" the great end of his poetry:

> How much toil!
> How many days! what desperate turmoil!
> Ere I can have explored its [of the ocean of poetry] widenesses.
> Ah, what a task! upon my bended knees,
> I could unsay those [the poet's vows]—no, impossible!
> Impossible!
>
> (*Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 307–12)

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