

KEATS AND REALITY

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I SUPPOSE that most people who enjoy poetry see little point in calling it real or unreal. And they are surely right. It is difficult enough for philosophers to make meaningful use of such terms, let alone literary critics. Critical antitheses—Nature and Art, Art and life, moral and aesthetic—have always vanished into abstraction if their power to contrast and divide is too much insisted on. But Keats does press such an insistence upon us. 'Reality' must be admitted to have a special importance in any discussion of his poetry, because it means so much to Keats himself. It meant to him what it means to us; for like him we have come to be aware that we spend as much of our time in literature as in life, and it is for this reason that the idea of reality assumes a meaning and an emphasis for us. We need it because we feel the possibility of being outside it.

The feeling that reality may be elsewhere—this is surely a characteristically modern kind of uneasiness, and one which we find neither in the eighteenth century nor in Keats's predecessors in the Romantic movement. Bagehot calls Keats 'the most essentially modern of recent poets',¹ and the remark is quite in keeping with Arnold's judgement that he 'did not apply modern ideas to life'.² Both suggest the direction in which to look. Compare Keats's anxiety and self-distrust with the serenity of Blake, the confidence of Wordsworth and Coleridge—'explaining metaphysics to the nation'—in the sheer worldliness of their powers; their conviction of being in the centre of things and of taking part in changes of political belief and practice as well as changes of heart and style. It is a confidence that appears in the garrulous ease with which Coleridge seeks a subject for a poem 'that should give equal room for description, incident, and impassioned reflections on men, nature, and society, yet supply in itself a natural connexion to the parts and unity to the whole'.³ True, of course, that for all its easy projection of things, the spacious reference to commerce and politics as well as to moun-

¹ *Literary Studies*, vol. i, Essay on Shelley.

² *Essays in Criticism*, vol. i, Heinrich Heine.

³ *Biographia Literaria*, chap. x.

tains and the moral life, this poem *The Brook* never actually got itself written, but then neither does *The Ancient Mariner* exhibit any anxiety on the score of its distance from real life. The 'willing suspension of disbelief' it asks for is emphatically not a suspension of our ordinary sense of reality. And Shelley is as confident as Cowper or as Coleridge; perhaps, as Keats hints, because the 'magnanimity' of his uncurbed fantasies leads them straight into the muddle of human passion and event.

No, among the English Romantics it is Keats and—oddly enough—Byron, who reveal the kind of anxiety and guilt about the relation of art to reality which is still so much with us today. Frequently enough to show that it is a sensitive point in his armour of worldly confidence, Byron's letters emphasize that his poetry is unusually real, that 'it may be profligate but is it not *life*, is it not *the thing*? Could any man have written it who has not lived in the world?'¹ We might set this beside Keats's claim: 'The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth' (the exact converse, be it noted in passing, of the Knight-at-arms' experience on 'the cold hill side'); and we might also recall Dickens's strident claim that however apparently implausible and extravagant what he wrote was TRUE!² The three assertions are a long way from the confidence of the earlier Romantics that what they felt and wrote could not well be otherwise. And the guilt they reveal is not of course that exuberant guilt—if one may so describe it—for the moods of dejection, paralysis, and loss of faith and zest in nature, which haunted Coleridge and bothered Wordsworth, but the kind of uneasiness which compels its victims today (if they happen to be literary spokesmen) to dwell on a poet's 'essential relevance to living', or a novel's 'central human theme'; which impelled Tennyson to write *The Palace of Art* and Arnold to emphasize that poetry is 'a criticism of life'; Yeats, to grow the shell of legend under which all his poetic life was lived; and W. H. Auden, to insist on the poet's legitimate irresponsibility in the looking-glass world of his art, and his necessary responsibility in the real world 'in which you have to live whether you like it or not'. To be so much aware of the division between life and literature is to see life, involuntarily, as a literary concept: 'life for life's sake' is no more and no less meaningful than 'art for art's sake', because it expresses the same attitude to both.

All this begins to be true for Keats. In 'the hateful siege of

¹ Letter to Douglas Kinnaird, 26 Oct. 1819.

² Preface to *Oliver Twist*.

contraries' which oppressed his working mind, poetry was both the whole of life and a dream that must be rejected in favour of life. His ambitions never sound so unreal—to beg our question for a moment—as when he is striving for a new image of reality and rejecting as fantasy some former mode of poetic being. From dreamer to poet, from a fancy to a truth, from luxuriant ignorance to deeper understanding, from feathers to iron—these are the kinds of contrast by which he sees himself as coming to knowledge of things as they really are.

Ye tranced visions—ye flights ideal—
Nothing are ye to life so dainty real!

Keats suppressed this exclamation of Endymion in the published poem, but it never left his own mind. And the same passion for the real strives to make words themselves give the feel of a physical experience to an imaginary longing.

—one human kiss!
One sigh of real breath—one gentle squeeze,
Warm as a dove's nest among summer trees,
And warm with dew at ooze from living blood.

The words are most real—embarrassingly real perhaps—when fantasy is most apparent. *La Belle Dame sans Merci* has often been called a perfect example of the romantic temper, but in Keats these contrasts between reality and dream are more than that: they are extremely personal, and his own awareness of them continually reveals, in the Letters, his special kind of vulnerable endearing intelligence. It is not in the nature of the Letters to reveal a poetic pilgrimage: that has to be done by Keats's critics. And it is all but impossible for the critic, imposing order on their rapid asides and intelligent confusions, not to direct the flow into a ready-made channel. There is so much—too much—material to draw upon, and Keats's tendency to abstraction, so hesitant and spontaneous in his living utterance, acquires an almost Teutonic shape and purpose in our appraisal of it.

While he was writing Endymion he had realised that the poet must bear 'the burthen of the mystery', and he knew he could not shut out 'the still sad music of humanity'. In *Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* he luxuriated in the world of romance, but his imagination had been enriched and disciplined by his experiences, and he was fully aware that these poems, describing events of far away and long ago, were only a temporary escape from the pressure of reality.¹

¹ *John Keats. A Reassessment*, ed. Kenneth Muir, Introd.

Already, in this quotation from one of Keats's most sympathetic critics, do we not begin to experience a sense of removal from the actual poems, as if Keats, like the Victorian Shakespeare, were being gravely escorted by posterity from the Forest of Arden, into the depths, and perhaps onward to the serene heights?

It may be objected that Keats himself saw his poetic life as a pilgrimage, so it is surely the job of the critic to complete and clarify the stages of it. I cannot feel this. There are many indications that Keats was not a good judge of his own poetry, and that he imposed upon it and upon himself patterns of romantic aspiration that do not fit. Even the famous 'negative capability', which I must refer to again in a moment, seems to me to be one of these. To discuss his poetry as if the patterns did fit leads us ever further into abstraction, into the regions where Keats himself was only too anxious to go, but where his poetry obstinately refused to follow. For instance, the whole question of *identity*, of what the poet's identity was and should be, exercised his speculation, and has in consequence been exhaustively examined by the critics, but it is an impasse that leads not to what is of excellence in his poetry but to a number of contradictory ideas about Keats. His sense of himself, and our sense of him, begins in what Verlaine called *littérature*, in 'a lovely tale of human life'—

the silver flow
Of Hero's tears, the swoon of Imogen,
Fair Pastorella in the bandit's den
Are things to brood on . . .

So they were for the Elizabethans, for Spenser and Chapman, for William Browne and Shakespeare himself, but the Elizabethans did not feel as they brooded that they were renouncing life to do so, or letting it go by. Keats did, and prepared himself for the Romantic's progress.

Then will I pass the countries that I see
In long perspective, and continually
Taste their pure fountains. First the realm I'll pass
Of Flora and Old Pan . . .

'An ocean dim, sprinkled with many an isle', stretches before him, and though it is here that 'the agonies, the strife of human hearts' await him, and the thought fills him with excitement and awe, the geography of his imagination is still literary and magical. If it ceases to be, he loses himself, loses the power to *be* himself in the poem.

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

It looks as though 'real things' are not only Keats's enemy here but ours, for the success of the poem depends on our vivid sympathy with him in it, and that sympathy is felt for a person, a particular young man who is expressing here the fear that he may lose that particularity which he has in the nurturing 'lap of legends old'. Like Saturn in *Hyperion* he fears that

I am gone
 Away from my own bosom, I have left
 My strong identity, my real self—

but lose it he must if, like Apollo, he is to undergo the fierce but abstract anguish of 'dying into life'. The trouble is that there is a world of difference between our informal and engrossing communion with a young man and his ambitions and ideas, in *Sleep and Poetry* and the *Epistle to Reynolds*, and the spectacle of the same young man renouncing his nature in terms of grave heroic allegory. Paradoxically it is the renunciation of self that strikes us as self-absorbed, even solipsistic, while *Sleep and Poetry* and the *Epistle* do not.

The business of identity distracts Keats. He must renounce it as a poet, and yet find his true identity as a man. 'The world is a vale of soul-making', he writes to his brother and sister-in-law, 'and souls are not souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself.' The unidentified poet must end as an identified soul? It is a sterile quibble for the critic, but it was no contradiction to Keats. As well as being a genius he was the best of men. His humility was seraphic; his loving-kindness inexhaustible. He can speak of a vale of soul-making in a way that both moves and shames us, for he had the right to speak. His humour, even on this vexed question of striving to know himself, is delightful. 'Perhaps I eat to persuade myself I am somebody', he interjects to Wodehouse, just before copying out the *Ode to Autumn*. He could never say like Yeats:

Now shall I make my soul,
 Compelling it to study
 In a learned school . . .

And he could never 'remake himself' by remaking a poem. Although he had to 'o'erwhelm' himself in it, he had too true a sense of the unimportance of poetry. 'I have no faith whatever

in poetry, sometimes I wonder that people read so much of it.' The sanity in that is a part of his goodness, the goodness which, for all his insistence on the poet's delight in an Iago as well as an Imogen, is so transparently revealed in his poetry.

And yet his obsession with poethood does run like a flaw through the sound intelligence of his insights, surfacing most conspicuously in his attitude to Shakespeare. 'Shakespeare led a life of allegory; his works are the comments on it.' It is not only untrue, it shows why Keats's relationship to Shakespeare is in fact so profoundly deceived. 'Lord Byron', he goes on, 'cuts a figure, but his works are not figurative', a comment he may be said to gloss in a later letter by saying of Byron: 'He describes what he sees, I describe what I imagine.' The briskness is the tone of Keats at his best, but it is disconcerting that the prime activity of the imagination, lacking to Byron as a mere observer of the outward show, should be assumed to be a kind of allegorizing of the inner life. Keats cannot help seeing the Bard's progress as 'full of symbols for the spiritual eye', a progress from the maiden thought of comedy to the tragic deeps and up to the serene heights—an allegory of supreme poetic mystery. 'His plan of tasks to come were not of this world—how tremendous must have been his conception of ultimates'. It is the Victorian image of Shakespeare (and it has now become for many critics the image of Keats) but more important it is the image in which Keats confided his hope of writing 'a few fine plays'.

A drama like Shakespeare's is the opposite of allegory, for the characters cannot be identified as embodying some experience or preoccupation of the author. They do not represent him: they do not even represent the 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts' in which Keats feels that the 'writer of achievement' has the 'negative capability' to live. The notion of 'negative capability', like that of 'a life of allegory', ignores the reality of the drama by concentrating on the personality of the dramatist. Keats is not really rejecting the usual Romantic emphasis on the poet's ego, but offering a different version of it. Shakespeare, the diffident and neutral-minded genius, is no more credible or necessary a hypothesis than Shakespeare the authoritative sage, for in both versions the dramatic point is missed. Even when he is stressing its 'camelion' nature, Keats cannot help but emphasize the poetic personality, perhaps because his own is so important to his poetry. His uncertainties are as characteristic and in their way as obtrusive in his poetry as are Wordsworth's certainties in his. The thrush of the Letter to

Reynolds, the Grecian Urn, the narrator of *The Fall of Hyperion*, are no less earnest about the truth of what they tell us than the Pedlar and the Narrator of *Peter Bell*.

Certainly Keats has no trademark of identity as a critic. He was no phrase-maker: he never referred to 'negative capability' again, and he did not retain it in his critical quiver for further use. When he deputized for Reynolds on *The Champion* he subdued his pen wholly to the outlook of his friend and the enthusiasms of their set. He proposed to ask Hazlitt 'in about a years time, the best metaphysical road that I can take', but it does not seem necessary to defend him against the imputation of excessive reliance on Hazlitt, as Professor Muir has done, by maintaining that 'Hazlitt is a good critic: Keats is a great one'.¹ In setting up as a critic Hazlitt made himself the embodiment of an attitude which it became his business to define and defend. Keats needed to do neither. His passion for 'truths' is for himself, not to convince others, and if Hazlitt could help him so much the better. He 'cared not to be in the right', and he was always ready to admit that 'I and myself cannot agree about this at all'. He has no wish to testify publicly: 'everyone', he said, 'has his speculations, just as everyone has his troubles'. And his speculations were troubles to Keats, not possessions.

And yet as a poet his identity is unmistakable. We must continue to say 'poet' with some emphasis, for it is true that his life and letters have been dredged to provide an ideal poet figure, who can either be transferred into the poetry and worshipped there, or else can be severely ignored by readers who prefer the *vates absconditus* of negative capability, the poet whose rather unfortunate early manner vanishes into a grave maturity, which gives promise of still more mature and impersonal things to come. Because we know so much about Keats's life we are unable, or unwilling, to accept as it is the distinct life of his poetry—distinct and different because Keats's own personality was in the most impressive sense *provisional*, while that of his poetry is not. He is not like Byron or D. H. Lawrence: his self and his work are not an inseparable and completed whole. Few readers seem prepared to accept the personality of his poetry in the way that we accept Chaucer's, about whose life we know little. But the reality of his poetry is to be found in its personality, if we are not in search of what we think the poetry should be, or what it might have become. What then is this personality, which seems to me so vital and in a way so neglected?

¹ Op. cit.

Its most decisive ingredient is vulgarity. What is real in his poetry is also what is vulgar: indeed, 'Keats and Vulgarity' would perhaps be the proper title for this lecture. He is, happily, the most vulgar of poets; he is vulgar not as a man but as a poet—vulgarity is his poetry's 'material sublime'. It goes down into the root and sinew of his poetic language; it is not just a surface genteelism, as in words like 'dainty', or in cockney spellings ('exhalt', 'ear' for 'hear', &c.), but vulgarity in the heroic sense in which Antony and Cleopatra are vulgar, in which the dung we palate is 'the beggar's nurse and Caesar's'. It is the true commonness which in German is called *Das Gemeine*, a word which weightily subsumes and generalizes the more local and trivial senses of English. It is the soil which, in German romanticism, drags down Pegasus and stifles the fire of poetic thought.¹ It implies above all a kind of helpless being oneself—'habitual self'—as Keats says; the vulgar man is sunk in his own selfhood, and yet is unaware of it.

Keats's poetic personality is magnificently *gemein*. In it the earth reveals the rift of ore; it turns what might appear mean and embarrassing into what is rich and *disconcerting*: for at his most characteristic Keats always disconcerts. Now a mark of the man of poise and breeding is to object beyond all things to being disconcerted, and it was no doubt for this reason that Byron hated Keats. 'Burns is often coarse but never vulgar',² he observed, implying that the cockney school is too vulgar even to aspire to coarseness. (There is the further implication that Burns knew he was coarse and did not care—indeed took a pride in it—but one cannot take a pride in vulgarity.) And Keats came to detest Byron. Their personalities reacted violently against each other, and this gives the clue to a point of some interest to which we must return—the point that Keats and Byron are in fact more closely related to one another than to any other romantic poet. Both transform poetry by their personality, though one exploits the process and the other seeks to evade it. Byron was ready enough to extend a tribute to the safe, depersonalized Keats of *Hyperion*.

Byron is the most easily self-conscious of poets; by contrast, Keats is vulgar when he does not know what he is doing, uneasy when he does. Vulgarity cuts both ways: an author may be vulgar when he is unaware, like Keats or Dickens, of the disagreeable impression he is creating; or when, like Hugo, he is

¹ Cf. especially Goethe, *Epilog zu Schiller's Glocke*, and the dedication of *Letters to Schiller*.

² *Journal*, Nov. 1813.

making sure that we notice an effect which yet does not impress us as he seems to think it should: in Goethe's phase, one sees the intention and one is embarrassed. Keats's brand of vulgarity is as far as possible removed from such an appearance of deliberation, of 'the artist's humour'. His language continually strikes us as fulfilling Yeats's requirement of 'the right word that is also the surprising word', but never in a way that suggests contrivance: the word would not be right for anyone except Keats, and is often right for him only in the most impossible way. Even less does he practise the 'studious meanness'¹ of language cultivated by James Joyce; and still less again—to push our necessary point to an *ad absurdum*—does he revel in the ritual of linguistic vulgarity for its own sake, like an original and personal poet of our own day, John Betjeman. No, like Chaucer's Squire, Keats deploys style 'with ful devout corage'; like that innocent rhetorician he puts his heart and soul into it. Keats is most fully his poetic self, most wholly involved in what he is writing, when he is, in the usual and technical sense, 'bad', or on the edge of 'badness'. One might say that the full reality of his poetry is revealed in the presence of this badness; the poetry needs it. Its greatness, its heavy truth, is profoundly involved with badness and cannot seem to exist without it.

My use of the word 'bad' here begs as many questions as my borrowing of *gemein*, and both are more easily demonstrated in Keats than defined. The clue is, I repeat, that Keats's language is right only for him, and even in him will only seem right after we have accepted his poetic nature whole; it is no good 'by naming the faults to distinguish the beauties'. Keats's badness reveals his kinship with Shakespeare more clearly than his agreed excellence. In both we can find the same apparent lack of close scrutiny and sure taste. Who but Shakespeare could have brought off the repetition in Macbeth's speech?

And with some sweet oblivious antidote
 Cleanse the stufft bosom of that perillous stuffe
 Which weighes upon the heart?

Early editors did all they could to remove or emend it; to us it seems the only possible word. Keats often echoes this primal Elizabethan certainty, though the *gemein* in him is also his own. He describes Isabella after Lorenzo's disappearance as

Spreading her perfect arms upon the air
 And on her couch low murmuring 'Where? O where'.

¹ Letter to Joyce from his brother, quoted in *The Critical Writings of James Joyce*, ed. Mason and Ellman, p. 86.

In most poets such an epithet at such a moment would be merely vacuous—in Dryden a routine insensibility, in Hunt a routine archness (it is applied, in *The Story of Rimini*, to Francesca's waist)—but is it not, in Keats, intensely moving? Keats assumes with such 'corage' that a *cliché* is the burning word for him that it becomes so: everything works together for good, even when Isabella turned up Lorenzo's 'soiled glove'

And put it in her bosom where it dries,
And freezes utterly unto the bone
Those dainties made to still an infant's cries.

The congruity between the genteelism and the situation is uncannily touching, as far removed from banality as the apparition of Lorenzo out of the 'kernel of the grave', which,

past his loamed ears
Had made a miry channel for his tears

is removed from any suggestion of the ridiculous. *The Story of Rimini*, of course, subsides continually into both, but Hunt's 'trusting animal spirits'¹ are not entirely unselfconscious—he gives us a sidelong glance as he plays the eager enthusiast. Keats's temperament transforms his attitude without altering its idiom.

This 'badness' in Keats, then, might be summed up as a devout, 'unmisgiving' (Hunt's admirable word) acceptance of the first eager brainwave, and a subsequent unawareness that it might be modified or corrected. Keats of course alters much, but he does not polish. His alterations do not, as it were, take the bloom off his characteristic efforts, but show them in a sharper relief. The 'deceitful elf' of the *Ode To A Nightingale* is changed to 'deceiving', but the disconcertingly Keatsian entity remains (all his 'self' rhymes are unsuspectingly clumsy) weighing down with its queer passionate awkwardness the last stanza of the Ode, an awkwardness marvellously in contrast with the nightingale's invisible departure

Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side . . .

I do not want to suggest that his diction is always unselfconscious: of course he had a most attentive ear for the varieties of English poetic diction. Chatterton, whose memory is honoured in the foundation of this lecture, was, as we know, both honoured by Keats and admired as a poet by whom English—poetic English

¹ Leigh Hunt, Preface to *Poetical Works*.

—had been 'kept up'. When in *Isabella* Keats says that he writes to salute Boccaccio and 'thy gone spirit greet', he is using, I think, a conscious Chattertonism; and so also, perhaps, is the phrase 'husky barn' in a cancelled line of the *Ode to Autumn*. He refused his publisher's plea to restrain the dolphins who 'bob their noses through the brine' in *Endymion*, but allowed 'tip-top quietude' to dwindle into 'utmost quietude'. By the time he came to revise, he was more confident of Chatterton's English than of Hunt's, but here he did his friend less than justice, for Hunt's preface to his own poems—far less lofty and more empirical than Wordsworth's famous document—shows an acute sense of how the spontaneous and 'animal' impulse might be brought back into the diction of the poet who, in Hunt's phrase, 'knows his station', and who would otherwise use the kind of dead language which Wordsworth deplored.¹

We cannot say of all poets that they are at their best when at their most characteristic, that their excellence is inseparable from their personal diction. It is true of Hardy, and it is perhaps true of Keats. It is less true of Shelley than of any poet, and it is certainly not true of Spenser or of Hopkins, who might be thought to be enclosed within a poetic idiom of their own creation. Perhaps because they have so obviously fashioned it for themselves, their manner can be shed in favour of a fine simplicity that might have come from anywhere. It is the simplicity we meet in *The Faerie Queene* in lines like

Thus do those lovers with sweet countervayle
Each other of love's bitter fruit despoil.

Or in the fragment of Hopkins which begins

To him who ever thought with love of me . . .

However impressive, this power of achieving a great and plain anonymity need not be taken as a touchstone. I comment on it in order to emphasize by contrast how indispensable Keats's

¹ Ibid. See especially Hunt's defence of his neologisms *swirl*, and *cored*, in the excellent couplet:

And so much knowledge of one's self there lies
Cored, after all, in our complacencies.

Compare the many metaphors in which Keats uses the word *kernel*.

Further evidence that Hunt's use of naïve neologisms was systematic turns up in a letter of Byron to Thomas Moore (June 1818) 'I told him [Hunt] that I deemed *Rimini* good poetry at bottom, disfigured only by a strange style. His answer was that his style was on a system—or some such cant.'

personal idiom is. Unlike Wordsworth or Shelley he cannot cease to be immediately himself without losing his peculiar poethood. The early verses *On Death* show what I have in mind; it is one of the few little pieces of its period which his more squeamish admirers can read without shuddering.

Can death be sleep, when life is but a dream
And scenes of bliss pass as a phantom by?
The transient pleasures as a vision seem,
And yet we think the greatest pain's to die.

Imitative no doubt, but with a simplicity that is rather beautiful, and yet because the thought has not Keats's own linguistic stamp it achieves no wide poetic dignity, it remains banal. But this is not banal—

O to arrive each Monday morn from Ind!
To land each Tuesday from the rich Levant!
In little time a host of joys to bind,
And keep our souls in one eternal pant!

It is *gemein*, but it is not banal. It has the true devotion of Keats in it.

Of course he can make other styles into his own, the Elizabethans above all, but they must *be* made his own: insubstantiality and nullity occur when he cannot work the change, when—to borrow his own phrase about Milton—what is life to another poet becomes death to him.¹ Even at its most unpropitious, *Endymion* is packed with borrowed life which has become Keats.

There are who lord it o'er their fellow-men
With most prevailing tinsel; who unpen
Their baaing vanities, to browse away
The comfortable green and juicy hay
From human pastures; or, O torturing fact!
Who, through an idiot blink, will see unpack'd
Fire-branded foxes to sear up and singe
Our gold and ripe-ear'd hopes.

This is apparently terrible, but let us compare it with the opening of the second *Hyperion*.

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave
A paradise for a sect; the savage too

¹ An illuminating instance of failure in adaptation is *Daisy's Song*, where Keats takes the form and manner of a lyric by Blake, but gives it, most incongruously, a vulgar touch that is all his own.

From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep
 Guesses at heaven: pity these have not
 Trac'd upon vellum or wild Indian leaf
 The shadow of melodious utterance.
 But bare of laurel they live, dream and die;
 For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,
 With the fine spell of words alone can save
 Imagination from the sable charm
 And dumb enchantment.

The passage seems to be treading gingerly, with a precarious confidence, secured by a careful abstention from anything that may jar. We miss the deplorable rhymes which wrench the sense so nakedly in their direction, and yet which—like Byron's—in fact give a greater vigour and forcefulness of meaning to the *Endymion* passage than the opening of *Hyperion* can show. In the latter, Keats's greater caution seems to blur and weaken sense; his voice survives only in the thoughtful, colloquial note of—'Pity these have not . . .'; and the metaphors (*weave, spell, enchantment*) lie limply, and indeed decoratively, without pressing their conviction boisterously in upon us. Without gathering itself consciously together, the animation of the *Endymion* style can leap into the discovery of

Innumerable mountains rise, and rise,
 Ambitious for the hallowing of thine eyes.

('Rise, and rise'—the rhyme takes the mountain range in its stride; and *ambitious* is a perfect example of Keats's power to make use of a grand word without reflecting on it, as unself-consciously as he uses *baaing* or *comfortable*.) Or into a typically Keatsian argument:

And, truly, I would rather be struck dumb
 Than speak against this ardent listlessness;
 For I have ever thought that it might bless
 The world with benefits unknowingly;
 As does the nightingale, upperched high,
 And cloistered among cool and bunched leaves—
 She sings but to her love, nor e'er conceives
 How tip-toe night holds back her dark-grey hood.
 Just so may love, although 'tis understood
 The mere commingling of passionate breath,
 Produce more than our searching witnesseth.

(The movement of that line—'the mere commingling of passionate breath' is as subtle as anything in Pope or Tennyson, but

is given without pretension or pause; and the nightingale, in its characteristically awkward setting, is far more real than Clare's more graceful bird, 'lost in a wilderness of listening leaves'.) Or it may be into a passage like this—

Straying about, yet cooped up in the den
Of helpless discontent,—hurling my lance
From place to place, and following at chance,
At last, by hap, through some young trees it struck,
And, plashing among bedded pebbles, stuck
In the middle of a brook.

—where being young has all the force that it might have in Byron, together with a most un-Byronic sense of the *feel* of an event, the moment in the wood when the spear clattered into the stream. (Contrast this, or 'the sodden turfed dell' of the murder in *Isabella*, with the Claude landscape of *Hyperion*.) Or Keats may launch a *sententia*:

But this is human life: the war, the deeds,
The disappointment, the anxiety,
Imagination's struggles, far and nigh,
All human, bearing in themselves this good,
That they are still the air, the subtle food,
To make us feel existence and to show
How quiet death is.

The passage rises into a greatness of generality and at once presses onward; while the opening of the second *Hyperion* seems to be feeling its way forward towards the plotted moment of a great line, followed by an appropriate rest for appreciation:

When this warm scribe, my hand, is in the grave.

It is moving, and impressive, but it is also in a damaging sense aesthetic. We have seen it coming. Keats is no longer the Squire, writing with 'ful devout corage', but a nineteenth-century poet, nearly a Tennyson, feeling deeply and fashioning a line out of the feeling; the pause between feeling and making can be felt, and in the hush our sense of craftsmanship at work is embarrassingly strong.

Does it matter? Is this a philistine reaction, and should not I just say I prefer the more immediate and emotional manner of *Endymion* to that of *Hyperion*, as one might prefer *Maud* to *In Memoriam*? I think, though, there is something of real critical significance here. The wary, meticulous artistry which seems natural to Arnold and Tennyson does indeed matter to Keats,

because it inhibits the play of his linguistic personality. *Hyperion* is, so to speak, not *bad* enough, too full of hard-won decorum. Keats distrusted art, because 'human nature' was finer as he felt, but perhaps more because his nature was spontaneously artful. The sad dilemma of his genius is that when he tries to express reality he becomes abstract; when he turns towards the discipline of art he becomes Parnassian. In *Hyperion* both things occur and Keats knew it. He invited Wodehouse to mark in the poem 'the false beauties proceeding from art and the true ones from feeling'. It is a fatal distinction for his poetry and it should be a meaningless one—the whole force of his language and personality should make nonsense of it. But the Keats who abandoned *Hyperion* because it had so much of Milton and 'the artist's humour' in it, is the Keats who had come to make such a distinction. He stifles his personality in order to make the necessary calculations for the major philosophical poem, the playing up, or playing down, of 'beauties' to enhance the paragraphing and the overall effect. *Hyperion* thus becomes the prototype of what might be called *romantic correctness*, the effect displayed in Saturn

whose hoar locks
Shone like the bubbling foam about a keel
When the prow sweeps into a midnight cove . . .

or

Prosperine return'd to her own fields
Where the white heifers low

no less than in lines of Tennyson like

And see the great Achilles whom we knew

or

While Iliion like a mist rose into towers.

In *Ulysses* and *Tithonus* Tennyson perfects the model; portentous and yet truncated, it makes a kind of poem which seems more deviously intimate the more grandly generalized it is in style, and the more it appears to universalize the burden and the sorrow. It is ideally suited to Tennyson's genius. But it is suited to Keats?

Then saw I a wan face
Not pin'd with 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 passed
 The lily and the snow; and beyond these
 I must not think now, though I saw that face—

In its admirable movement there is something withheld which makes us wonder if Keats has in fact anything to withhold, an impression not uncommon in Tennyson (we have it in *A Vision of Sin*). Superb as Keats's passage is, our view as spectators is one of abdication, of great curtains rippling together. Very different from Moneta is the Niobe of *Endymion*.

Perhaps, the trembling knee
 And frantic gape of lonely Niobe
 Poor lonely Niobe! When her lovely young
 Were dead and gone, and her caressing tongue
 Lay a lost thing upon her paly lip,
 And very, very deadliness did nip
 Her motherly cheeks.

The words here are 'unmisgiving' and alive (compare the potent word *gape* with *wan* and *blanch'd*). This is the real anguish of the human heart. It is typical of Keats that even the repetition of *very* and the loose femininity of *paly* in no way enfeeble the passage or add a note of hysteria. The contrast between caressing, with its firm sexual meaning, and the terrible disregard for itself of this face in torment, would be almost too painful, were it not that the intensity of the image 'causes all disagreeables to evaporate'. It is the same brief, almost unregarded intensity which marks Keats's vision of the brothers' activities in *Isabella*—

Half-ignorant, they turned an easy wheel

—and his expansion of the metaphor into brutal images of blood and suffering. It is the world's 'giant agony' in a graphically realized form, as meaningful as the glimpse Shakespeare gives us of the officer in *King Lear* who was ready to hang Cordelia—

I cannot draw a cart, nor eat dried oats;
 If it be man's work, I'll do't.

These touches on the nerve are far more effective than a grave allegory of human suffering, but Keats's sense of guilt made him feel that one who was a true poet and no dreamer must prepare himself for a direct assault on 'the mystery'. He did not know,

perhaps could not afford to know, that for him it had to be revealed indirectly, almost inadvertently, and that he was continually revealing it in this way. *Isabella* struck him as a 'weak-sided' poem. But like *Endymion* it is as real as anything he wrote. And *Endymion* has as much life in it as *Don Juan* itself.

Byron thought otherwise, as we know, and in spite of himself Keats cared much what Byron thought. When in the recast *Hyperion* he made his frontal assault on the human condition he could not forbear—from the height of his new seriousness—a side-swipe in Dante's manner at those critics and 'careless hectors in proud bad verse' who had dismissed him earlier as the 'drivelling' Keats.

Tho' I breathe death with them it will be life
To see them sprawl before me into graves.

The notion of his Lordship, for all his poise and *savoir-vivre*, tripped up and toppled into his own grave, is as gloatingly good as anything in *The Vision of Judgment*. 'Sprawl' is the old Keats: the bizarre picture expands into our mind's eye; but though he had the impulse to 'trounce Lord Byron' in a satire, he would have been ashamed to nurse it up for a long enough period, and become a 'self-worshipper' himself in the process. Satire is no more his *forte* than the grand manner. Though his vulgar native style often has the disconcerting force of good satiric writing (and we might remember that curiously Keatsian line in *Don Juan* about 'cooks in motion with their clean arms bare') it is precisely the element of the *gemein* which gives it its total modesty, and total lack of the keen but complacent self-appraisal which poised satire must have. The vulgarity which Keats's worldlier critics find hardest to stomach is the lack of this kind of self-awareness: no more than the Squire's does his poetry keep a sharp pleased eye on itself. And not only is Keats too full of the milk of human kindness to maintain the satiric appetite; he was going to drop the passage from *Hyperion* because in the context of the poem's intended seriousness, and select diminishment of effect, it would not do. He had lost the innocence which could include and enjoy so much. One of the reasons *The Cap and Bells* makes depressing reading is that he seems to be exposing and exploiting, with a kind of determined frivolity, the vigour and innocence with which he began, and which Hunt had inspired in him.¹ When he rejects honest vulgarity, and all that for him goes with it, he parts from a great deal. The evidence of this

¹ e.g. Stanza lxii, where Keats is parodying Hunt's style of narration.

makes it perplexing to know what T. S. Eliot had in mind when he suggested that in the second *Hyperion* we see 'signs of a struggle towards unification of sensibility'. Does 'unification' here mean the disappearance of so much that makes sensibility in Keats's poetry so worth while?

Both the second *Hyperion* and *The Cap and Bells* show us, in their very different ways, Keats's growing awareness of, and distaste for, his poetical character. In one poem he seeks to evade it in a grave anonymity, in the other in a flippant cynicism. The former is a heroic but desolating attempt, and it might have led him to silence. For his disgust with the idea of the writer carving out a principality for himself—as we say, 'Richardson's world', or 'a Browning character', or 'Trollope country'—was on a typically heroic scale. 'Each of the moderns,' he notes, 'like an Elector of Hanover governs his petty state.' His outburst against the storm in *Don Juan*, if correctly reported by Severn, sounds oddly priggish to us, who find it spirited enough; but Keats's revulsion was, I feel, against Byron consciously making a good thing out of a new mode or fashion of insight into human nature and human conduct. His protest was against the growing pretension of the romantic novelist, and it reminds us that Keats, for all his affinities with Dickens or with Byron, could never have mustered the solipsistic assurance of such a novelist. He writes of the people at a Scottish inn: 'I was extremely gratified to think, that if I had pleasures they knew nothing of, they had also some into which I could not possibly enter.' That is delightful and characteristic, and all the more so from the emphasis with which he records it. We might remember, too, how he noted for his sister the 'old French emigrant with . . . his face full of political schemes' he saw from his Hampstead window; and the curious respect with which he observed the old woman at Belfast—'with a pipe in her mouth and looking out with a round-eyed skinny-lidded inanity, with a sort of horizontal idiotic movement of her head. . . . What a thing would be a history of her life and sensations!' But for all his sharpness of eye and pen he would never have made anything out of it. He was (it was his own highest term of approbation) too 'disinterested' to do so.

It is bitterly ironic that even the *gemein* goes bad on him when he attempts to refine it to the standards of *Hyperion*. One of the curiously intimate apprehensions he is so good at, touches that seem to knit the innerness of the body with the imagination—'ears, whose tips are glowing hot' or, 'eyes, shut softly up alive'—is merely otiose here.

I had no words to answer; for my tongue
Useless, could find about its roofed home
No syllable of a fit majesty
To make rejoinder to Moneta's mourn.

In the gravely classic context, 'roofed home' is no more alive than 'fleecy care' or 'finny tribe' would be. And the simile

As when in theatres of crowded men
Hubbub increases more they call out hush—

anticipates the fatuity of Arnold's in *Sohrab and Rostum*—'As some rich woman on a winter's morn.' That close and potent co-operation of the bad and the good which triumphs in *Melancholy*, *The Nightingale*, and the earlier narrative poems, is nullified in *Hyperion*, so that we merely shake our heads when Apollo wishes 'to flit into' a star, 'and make its silvery splendour pant with bliss'; and we sigh with relief when Keats cancelled his metamorphosis

Into a hue more roseate than sweet pain
Gives to a ravish'd nymph when her warm tears
Gush luscious with no sob.

Compared with the sleepwalker's sureness with which he found the alterations in *The Eve of St. Agnes*, there is no other word than tinkering for the changes Keats made between the two *Hyperions*. When he takes this kind of pains he becomes conventional, as if convention were an earnest of maturity. For T. S. Eliot and other critics the *Ode to Psyche* is the finest of the odes, and Keats himself said it was the first poem 'over which I have taken even moderate pains'. But he is more at home with the linguistic innocence of the Elizabethans: the sheer efficiency of Milton and Dryden is not a happy model for him. The concluding stanza of the Ode is indeed a *tour de force*, but not one of a Keatsian kind; it has the flat Augustan brio which we find in the description of the snake in *Lamia* (so like Pope's pheasant), and the landscapes of his imagination are formalized and parcelled out incongruously—Keats cannot inform the mixture with his own disconcerting truth.

Yes, I will be thy priest and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain—

We notice the lapse here as we might in Gray or Dryden, and again I take this as a sign that Keats is not fully himself. In the

adroitness of the stanza the bad rhyme jars as it should not, and as a similar rhyme does not in the *Sonnet to Homer*.

Aye, on the shores of darkness there is light,
And precipices show untrodden green;
There is a budding morrow in midnight;
There is a triple sight in blindness keen;

In both poems the adjective *untrodden* makes its distinguishing mark, but while it seems to draw the sonnet into a unique and intense locality, its power in the *Ode* remains in the air. The sonnet earns the characteristic word, and moves us where the *Ode* does not.

Keats's endings are worth a study in themselves. He may have been like Shakespeare in this respect: that he attached little importance to what he could do supremely and naturally well; this casualness (if it can be called that) fathers what we associate with Shakespearian greatness. *The Nightingale*, *Autumn*, and *The Eve of St. Agnes* 'slipped idly from him'; he does not bother with their 'imperfections', and they do not so much end as complete elsewhere their cycle of fruition, moving without disturbance into their season in our minds. This prolongation of his finest endings is in sharp contrast with the aggressive full stop of others. Keats's sincerity, his almost embarrassing tendency to mean what he says, is bothering (or at least has appeared to bother many critics and readers) at the conclusion of the *Ode On A Grecian Urn*, because it is put in the kind of poetic language which usually does *not* mean quite so intensely what it says. Compare 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', with the line in *Endymion*—'I loved her to the very white of truth'—where the abstract word is brought home to us through the medium of the graphic kernel image. Phrases like 'the feel of not to feel it', 'a sort of oneness', 'one smallest pebble-bead of doubt', show how effectively and with what accuracy the Keatsian *gemein* can deal with propositions and ideas if it is allowed to do so in its own way, by means of the 'plump contrast' of sense. To generalize for Keats is not to be an idiot, but to run the risk of losing the necessary contact with his physical self.

The finality, as of a closing door, in the last couplet of *The Grecian Urn*, has affinities with the ending of *Lamia*.

—no pulse, or breath they found,
And, in its marriage robe, the heavy body wound.

We know from a letter of Wodehouse to Taylor, Keats's publisher, that Keats had difficulty in completing *Lamia*; that he

wished to end it even more abruptly by cutting off the last twenty lines or so; and that—as Professor Garrod plausibly suggested—he replied to the protests of his friend and publisher by telling them to finish it off as they wanted.¹ He valued *Lamia* much more highly than his other two narrative poems, and for the usual disquieting reason: he thought it had more toughness and reality in it, and he had tried hard to put them there. He wanted it to end with a flourish, a defiant full stop, but—to adapt his own comment on poetry—we might say that if a poem of his does not end as naturally as the leaves fall from a tree it had better not end at all.

The Eve of St. Agnes does end like the seasons and the leaves; it is Keats's most moving ending to what I consider his finest poem. Yet he insisted on altering the last lines 'to leave on the reader a sense of pettish disgust'. (The account is Wodehouse's.) 'He says he likes that the poem should leave off with this change of sentiment—it was what he aimed at, and was glad to find from my objections to it that he had succeeded.'²

Angela went off

Twitch'd with the palsy; and with face deform
The beadsman stiffened, 'twixt a sigh and laugh
Ta'en sudden from his beads by one weak little cough.

We can only uphold Wodehouse's objection. But Keats felt that this was more wry and worldly, less romantic and 'weak-sided'. Was it a final gesture towards Byron and to the kind of expectation in the reader which Keats felt that Byron had created? Certainly Byron's most terrible gift was to dissolve the selfhood of his victims, to make those under his spell feel that reality was in him, not in themselves, and he made Keats feel it. He made Keats want 'to write fine things which cannot be laughed at in any way'³—perhaps the most significant admission in his letters. It was a desolating ambition for himself, though it reveals an astonishingly shrewd insight into Byron's own social and poetic obsession. It is like Keats to be dismissive of his poem once written, but it is horribly unlike him to try to give it an all-round reality, a Byronic sort of reality, by adding this touch. And it is in marked contrast to the typically effortless and natural relation which he had with romantic medievalism. 'They are not my fault', he says of the names in the poem, 'I did not search for them.' Mrs. Radcliffe's world was native to him, Byron's was not.

¹ *Keats' Poetical Works*, Introd., p. xxxv.

² *Ibid.*, Introd., p. xl. ³ My italics.

None the less, the thread that obstinately though incongruously links the two poets is that of personality: and it is Keats's fate that the elements of greatness in him, of aspiration and virtue, all make against the personal actuality of his poetry, negate and extinguish it, are bent on passing it for 'a higher life'. In Byron these elements are in complete harmony with his personal style and show themselves through it. Keats is always in danger of losing himself, either to another kind of 'truth' or to his own ambition. His personality is not self-renewing—it is not ruthless and egocentric enough. A poet like Yeats or Byron can abandon to his following the attitudes which have served him—the energies of Lara, Childe Harold, even Don Juan—and yet remain even more richly and recognizably himself; but with Keats the processes of 'maturity' are those of real impoverishment and sacrifice, of muting and muffling. The realities of Calidore and Endymion, of Isabella and Porphyro, are disowned, together with the vocabulary and the sexual imagination that made them real. Reality *changes* for Keats, as it never does for Byron, and the eclipse of reality in his poetry is the eclipse of sex.

3

The most emphatic aspect of the *gemein* in Keats is, of course, the way he writes about sex. I do not think that any critic, not even Leigh Hunt, has found himself able to praise Keats's treatment of the subject, and I feel some qualms in attempting to do so now. But considering the general agreement that his poetry is full of sex, and the equally general agreement that he is a fine poet, this negative attitude is odd, to say the least. How does this side of Keats come to be so customarily dismissed—as indeed Keats himself was only too ready to dismiss it—with epithets like 'mawkish' and 'adolescent'? The critic's route of escape from the topic seems to be that Keats outgrew all that nonsense when he became full of flint and iron, or that it is in any case of little importance, something sloughed off in his finest poetry. Distrust of it unites the most dissimilar critics. It moves D. G. James to say that 'the most serious side of Keats does not emerge in *The Eve of St. Agnes*';¹ it annoys Professor Blackstone so much that he curtly dismisses one of the most striking and characteristic passages of *Endymion* as 'hardly relevant to our purposes',² the purposes of thematic interpretation; Professor Muir takes refuge from

¹ D. G. James, *The Romantic Comedy*.

² Bernard Blackstone, *The Consecrated Urn*. The passage in question is the love-making of Cynthia and Endymion in bk. ii.

it in the study of *Hyperion* as a political and spiritual allegory;¹ and Professor Garrod, debarred from that outlet by his own robust refusal to admit a growing maturity and reality in the later poems, fell back on the world of 'pure imaginative forms'² which Keats ideally inhabits.

Professor Garrod, indeed, disposed of the problem most honestly. He would not make the often implied contrast between the 'serious' and the sexual or 'adolescent' side of Keats, but he made another between Keats's supremacy in these 'pure imaginative forms', and his unfortunate 'relapses upon the real'. Imagination, he suggested, is as far removed from the erotic in Keats as can well be: the first produces his 'characteristic perfections', the second 'assails him with the old hunger and thirst for reality'. And with disastrous consequences.

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,
Haunters of cavern, lake, and waterfall,
As a real woman—

'That the same man', wrote Professor Garrod, 'could write like that, and elsewhere write poetry, we can only believe by finding it to be so.' This seems to me to go the root of the matter, and though I take the opposite view and find in these lines the most characteristic evidence of Keats's unique gift, Garrod's vigorous reaction does challenge us to decide what is good and bad in Keats, and why. 'Upon whatever page of the poetry there falls the shadow of a living woman,' he continues, 'it falls calamitously like an eclipse.' Again the emphasis is in the right place, though again my own feeling would be that when it is indeed a living woman that Keats writes of his poetry is never more real. *Moneta* and *Mnemosyne* are not real precisely because they are not there as women, in the sense that *Cynthia*, *Lamia*, *Isabella*, and *Madeleine* are; they have a function doubtless, a serious and symbolic function, but they do not exist, and it is this kind of existence, the existence that Keats can give to sexual fantasy, that is the kernel of his poetic achievement.

The *Ode To Autumn* is usually considered his most perfect poem, the most free from any 'mawkish' or personal intrusion, and I suppose that Professor Garrod would not have considered the great personification of autumn there to be in any sense 'a living woman'. But in fact she surely is? The poem's weight

¹ Op. cit., pp. 102 et seq.

² H. W. Garrod, *Keats*.

and substance depend upon her sisterhood with those other ladies about whom the critics prefer to make no comment. Take the second line of the poem,

Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;

and the seventeenth,

Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep . . .

There is not only weight and perfection here but also the *gemein*, the warmly domestic. *Sound asleep*—the phrase expands and withdraws from the mythology of the classic seasons into the more intimate mythology of family and home. More perfect and more generalized as the phrases are, they are none the less cognate with the 'mistress' of the *Ode To Melancholy*, with her 'rich anger', 'peerless eyes', and the 'globed peonies' that are associated with her; with Lorenzo's Isabella, whose 'full shape did all his seeing fill'; with the Niobe of *Endymion* whom I have already mentioned, and with the picture of Cybele in that poem.

What the psychologists might make of this is both obvious and unimportant. The sexual psychology of Byron or Dostoevsky is clearly of the greatest possible significance to the critic of their work: there is no need to concern ourselves with that of Keats because it is in every sense so commonplace. Nor would it be relevant to dwell on the sexual reality of these figures if such a reality was all they possessed. The sensuous weight of Keats's language is evident enough, and its heavy condensation at these moments (like the boat in *Endymion* that 'dropped beneath the young couple's weight') also goes without saying. No, the real importance of such passages is their power of expansion and universalization. Keats is, I believe, unique among English poets in his power of generalizing the most personal and the most intimate sensuality back into a great and indeed an august idea of nature and life. It is a peculiarly romantic power: the Elizabethans, from whom he learned so much, do not have it. Keats can endow an intimate sensuality with the same power of expansion and suggestion with which Wordsworth, in *The Leechgatherer* and elsewhere, endows his own spiritual and poetic predicament. In both cases we share in something that seems deeply and universally relevant. But unlike Wordsworth, Keats is not aware of the process, or aware of it only in the context of his feeling both antipathy and envy for Wordsworth's more conscious power of generalization. The irony with which we are by now so sadly familiar is that he assumed, as his critics have been ready to assume, that sex was for him a refuge, a *cul-de-sac*, a veritable

chamber of maiden thought. His poetry shows otherwise: its power of expansion lay in the very 'mawkishness' which he felt he must grow out of. Sexual vulgarity is the matrix of a generalizing greatness.

'Perfection' in Keats is for this reason never a pure, elevated, separable affair. When his poetry is alive it is never 'perfect' in the sense in which Garrod observed that 'it is hard to conceive more perfect speech' than the first six lines of the 'Bright Star' Sonnet, the remainder being 'in painfully inferior contrast'. The end couplet of a Shakespeare sonnet may be inferior to what precedes it in the sense Garrod had in mind, but this kind of perfection or inferiority just does not occur in Keats. The sonnet is a seamless whole, but it reverses the usual order of Keats's great effects; the expansion and the breadth are manifested at the opening, and in the conclusion we can see where they had their source. Professor Garrod felt the perfection began to 'waver' in the couplet:

Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors.

—significantly, because the image of the snow is marvellously balanced between the intimate and the spacious: in its erotic overtone 'the real woman' is beginning to appear.

In its small compass the 'Bright Star' Sonnet has the same latent scope, the same promise of the illimitable, that we find in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. (Consider, for example, the significance in line six of the adjectives *pure*—Keats first wrote *cold*—and *human*. In themselves they contain two worlds.) Although Keats has no outstanding gift for verse narration, in the traditional sense, his art holds the seed of that form which was to flower so conspicuously later in the century—the form of the short story. It is a form which demands for its highest success a deceptive slightness of setting combined with the utmost expansion of meaning, and, as I shall hope to show, we find these in *The Eve of St. Agnes* as we find them in a masterpiece like Joyce's story *The Dead*. How that characteristically romantic form, the allegory of spiritual quest and struggle, is as ill-suited to Keats as it is suited to Shelley, we have already seen: allegory sinks under the weight which Keats gives to his own apprehensions of intensity, but such moments are the life of the short-story form. I have already mentioned *The Leechgatherer*, and Wordsworth's poem has indeed this same quality, embodied in the place or person who provides for the narrator and hence for ourselves what Joyce

called 'an epiphany'. It does not seem to me absurd to compare the leechgatherer, who is seen not only as a man but as a vision, as a creature of unknown age and provenance, with Keats's beadsman, or even with an apparition of similar intensity in *Endymion*, that of Cybele.

Forth from a rugged arch, in the dusk below,
Came mother Cybele! alone—alone—
In sombre chariot . . . four maned lions hale
The sluggish wheels; solemn their toothed maws,
Their surly eyes brow-hidden, heavy paws
Uplifted drowsily, and nervy tails
Cowering their tawny brushes. Silent sails
This shadowy queen athwart, and faints away
In another gloomy arch

As well as being a Wordsworthian apparition the leechgatherer is a fully human figure (this gives the poem its force as a story) perhaps because Wordsworth here (and Keats habitually) combine with ease the intimate with the frankly literary or mythological, a mixture that, surprisingly, combines to make their visions like a portrait from life—perhaps life inheres in the very incongruity of the mixture? In stanza, spirit, and vocabulary, the leechgatherer joins with the world of Spenser, fully evident in such a phrase as 'the sable orbs of his yet vivid eyes'; and Keats can produce his Cybele as if in the garish background of the pantomimes he delighted in at Drury Lane, whisk her on as if with wires and away into the wings again.¹ Keats's essentially vulgar embrace of mythology (about which he became sensitive as the critics took care to assure him of its vulgarity) is triumphant in its eclectic and unselfconscious vigour: he is as familiar with his Andromeda in the *Endymion* chorus as with the bride in his Galloway Song. No lively use of mythology can come of an anxiety about good taste; Keats here is in the company of Chaucer and Shakespeare.

In the passage from *Lamia* which has been so much deplored, we can see a similar and splendid combination of the Keatsian *gemein* with a neo-classic vitality straight from Dryden. Dryden's

¹ That the pantomime was in Keats's head at this point comes out still more clearly a few lines later when *Endymion* has put

Into his grasping hands a silken cord
At which without a single impious word
He swung upon it off into the gloom.

Keats afterwards substituted 'a large eagle' for the silken cord.

worldliness is replaced by Keats's 'devout corage', but his energy is fused with it admirably in such lines as

—a real woman, lineal indeed
From Pyrrha's pebbles or old Adam's seed

or

With no more awe than what her beauty gave,
That, while it smote, still guaranteed to save.

This is not to say that *Lamia* is successful as a poem, as are—in their different ways—*Endymion* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Its failure is indeed best shown by the importance which we, and Keats, have to give to its 'meaning' (which yet neither he nor we can take seriously) and by the helplessness with which we find ourselves comparing its thematic tendencies—the fatal woman, the destructive infatuation, and so forth—with comparable themes in other poems. Failure in Keats, we might almost say, can be measured by the extent to which there seems nothing for it but to appraise the significance which his themes might seem to have, particularly in relation to one another. Such an analysis is a sign of failure, though where *Lamia* is concerned of permissible failure, in our response to what he can best do.

4

It is a measure of the success of *The Eve of St. Agnes* that if we respond to it we do not feel any need to make this kind of analysis. If we are determined to analyse we can call it another example of Keats's wish-fulfilment fantasy, pointing out what is certainly true, the way in which Madeleine's awakening,

Her eyes were open, but she still beheld,
Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep—

illustrates Keats's own deep yearning for the imagination to be like Adam's dream: 'he awoke and found it true'. But this is no more relevant than the description of the poem as 'an exquisitely coloured tapestry', 'a beautiful piece . . . which fences us elaborately from all infection of reality',¹ &c. It is not a psychological conundrum with medieval trappings, like *Christabel*, or a picturesque labour of love of the past, like *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, from which much of its material is taken. It is the most remarkable instance in romantic poetry of a poem based wholly upon literature and yet expanding wholly into life. Just as we are surprised, and yet wholly persuaded, by Wordsworth's literary

¹ Garrod, *Keats*, op. cit.

vision of the leechgatherer in a line like 'the sable orbs of his yet vivid eyes', so it is a shock to find Keats's hero 'brushing the cobwebs with his lofty plume', but a shock that reminds us just how far from Mrs. Radcliffe we have come; how completely viable, in any human setting, the vision has been made to be. In Keats, literature can become the most effective vehicle of reality.

The best insight into the true nature of the poem is also the earliest, that of Leigh Hunt. For me, Hunt is a wholly benign influence on Keats's poetic make-up, notwithstanding that Keats's own repudiation of him has been fervently echoed ever since, and I think him Keats's best critic as well. When he remarks that Keats 'sympathised with the lowliest commonplace', we feel that this is the real bond between the two writers and that it unites them with a third, whose sympathy with the commonplace was indeed meticulous—James Joyce. Hunt not only writes of 'the present palpable reality of *The Eve of St. Agnes*', as opposed to 'the less generally characteristic majesty of *Hyperion*', but he also understands the nature of Keats's language in the poem, and how its 'beauties', so far from being merely luxuriant and richly coloured, have a penetrating and revealing power that draws out to indefinite limits the perspective of reality.

Northward he turneth through a little door,
And scarce three steps, ere Music's golden tongue
Flatter'd to tears this aged man and poor . . .

Hunt has this to say of these lines about the Beadsman. 'A true poet is by nature a metaphysician: he feels instinctively what others get at by long searching. In this word *flattery* is the whole theory of the secret of tears, which are the tributes, more or less worthy, of self-pity to self-love. Whenever we shed tears we take pity on ourselves, and we feel, if we do not consciously say so, that we deserve to have the pity taken. In many cases the pity is just and the self-love not to be construed unhandsomely'.¹ I suppose this might be felt to be a mere flight of critical garrulity, typical of its period, and telling us more about Hunt himself than about either the Beadsman or Keats's poetry. I must admit to being both impressed and delighted by its shrewd warmth—'more or less worthy' is particularly neat—but the special interest of it for us is surely its close resemblance, as critical appraisal, to the way in which Coleridge, Hazlitt, and Hunt himself, were

¹ Leigh Hunt, *Imagination and Fancy, or Selections from the English Poets*.

recording at this time their perceptions about Shakespeare. It is a type of criticism that illuminates both authors but which would be lost on any other Romantic poet; a type of insight whose value lies in exhibiting and expatiating on a general truth implicit in a concentration of artful language. A general truth, for it tells us nothing of Keats himself, just as the similar perceptions of Coleridge and others seemingly tell us nothing about Shakespeare. In the poetry of Wordsworth or Byron there are concentrations of meaning which can be enlarged on so as to tell us much about those poets, and hence perhaps about the human situation, but they lack the anonymity which is so complete here, and to which Hunt unconsciously pays the greatest compliment he can by reflecting on a meaning as he would reflect on one in Shakespeare.

In showing the scope of the poem, these meanings that reveal themselves through the nature of Keats's language are even more important than the evident symbolic setting of warmth and cold, darkness and light, ecstasy and deprivation. As in most great imaginative works which we agree for convenience to call 'symbolic', the perspective of linguistic meaning humanizes and elaborates the more elementary and static significance of symbol: a phrase like 'bright dulness', for example, with which Keats describes the revelry in the castle, contributes as much to the epiphany of the story as the snow outside. As Hunt admiringly implies, it is by meanings of this sort that the Beadsman becomes a human being, and not a mere symbol of age and renunciation. And so it is with the other characters. Their individuality is all there in embryo, and it surrounds them with the freedom and the scope which would be a condition of further more detailed characterization. Madeleine herself is not 'what the woman is', in D. H. Lawrence's sense,¹ but a particular girl in a general situation, created from literature—the 'lap of legends old'—and from the intensity of Keats's vision of warmth and love in the dark night of human destiny. When

She danc'd along with vague regardless eyes

we see her as we see Natasha and Jane Bennett, yet the brilliant stanzas open to reveal an impersonal glimpse into the divided nature of the dream of love, the simultaneous attraction and recoil.

¹ D. H. Lawrence, *Letters*, p. 198. (Lawrence is saying that he is not interested, as a novelist, in 'what the woman feels', but only in 'what the woman is'.)

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.

Blush'd has a typically Keatsian weight; it universalizes the erotic not only among the living but back into the past, calling up the fears and desires that once warmed the dead. It concentrates Madeleine's livingness, as Porphyro's is concentrated in 'The carved angels, ever eager-eyed' who '*star'd*, where upon their heads the cornice rests'. As well as being the perfect oxymoron for the two sides of desire, *tiger-moth* has a similarly uncontrolled metaphorical life: it reminds me of images of attraction and pursuit in the 'warm darkness' of the later novels of Henry James. The girl's impulse of withdrawal from this dangerous world, into the old safety of sleep and childhood, carries us too on the wings of metaphor.

Flown, like a thought, until the morrow-day;
 Blissfully haven'd both from joy and pain;
 Clasp'd like a missal where swart Paynims pray;
 Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain,
 As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again.

Though stilled for now by the echo of *Venus and Adonis*—'Love comforteth like sunshine after rain'—the words *clasp'd* and *blinded* promise the struggle and tears, the necessary onset of life, promise it, as it were, without speaking. The precision of these words (in a stanza which has been called escapist and sentimental) belongs not to Keats but to his story.

The distinction could be illustrated by comparing such effects of universalized life, and sexual life in particular, in Keats's poem with those in *La Cimetière Marin*. There the peremptory, indeed jaunty, precision of Valéry's language (which in the sixteenth stanza, for example, strikes me as only just pausing on the brink of a really disheartening and mechanical vulgarity)¹ remains with, and emphasizes, the presence of the poet, and does not initiate the anonymous tale of humanity that seems implicit in every word of *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Keats thought the poet must

¹ Les cris aigus des filles chatouillées
 Les yeux, les dents, les paupières mouillées,
 Le sein charmant qui joue avec le feu,
 Le sang qui brille aux lèvres qui se rendent,
 Les derniers dons, les doigts qui les défendent,
 Tout va sous terre et rentre dans le jeu!

'die into life', and here he is indeed 'dying into' the life of his story, though it is very different from his imagination of the process in the weighty symbolism of the second *Hyperion*. It is perhaps in the nature of the true process that he could not realize when it happened.

I will not continue to labour this significance of meaning, but in view of the critics' deprecation, and Keats's own inevitable modesty, I would emphasize how wholly dramatic is the balance it makes between the particular and the general, the real persons and the universalizing vision. Consider Madeleine's simplicity of action, her apparently random involvement in commonplace detail.

Her falt'ring hand upon the balustrade,
 Old Angela was feeling for the stair,
 When Madeleine, St. Agnes' charmed maid,
 Rose, like a mission'd spirit, unaware:
 With silver taper's light, and pious care,
 She turn'd, and down the aged gossip led
 To a safe level matting.

The last word drags a weight of the commonplace that is almost sublime. It is a commonplace that gets into the heroine; her kindness is immensely ordinary. She is the girl whose lover will advise her to put on 'warm clothing' before they make the escape; the girl whose destiny, whose womanhood and death, are shown forth in the last stanza, a coda that seems to play without a sound the chords of some majestic fictional ending. 'But though she was glad, he presently discovered that, beneath her hood, she was in tears. It is to be feared that with the union . . . she was about to enter, these were not the last she was destined to shed.'¹

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

The rumours of warmth and cold, the living and the dead, echo backwards and forwards and vanish in darkness.

Out went the taper as she hurried in;
 Its little smoke, in pallid moonshine, died.

It may be objected that a story cannot tell us so much of human life when it has day-dream and fantasy at its heart. But Keats was never more successful at realizing the interdependence of the two. The dreams of Madeleine and Porphyro are brought

¹ Henry James, *The Bostonians* (the concluding sentence).

together; their fantasies coincide, but the pathos of their isolation is inseparable from the warmth of their meeting, is at one with the storm and the snow and the motionless figures in their icy hoods and mails.

For on the midnight came a tempest fell.
 More sooth for that his close rejoinder flows
 Into her burning ear—and still the spell
 Unbroken guards her in serene repose.
 With her wild dream he mingled as a rose
 Marryeth its odour to a violet.
 Still, still she dreams—louder the frost wind blows
 Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet
 Against the window-panes; St. Agnes' moon hath set.

Well after the poem was written, and in a truculent and self-protective mood, Keats found it necessary to insist to his friend Wodehouse that the physical union of the lovers is described here. It is possible to wonder whether the imagination of the poem, as written, really bears him out? 'More sooth for that his close rejoinder flows'—it is this line, with its marvellous Keatsian concretion (*sooth* has a double meaning, echoing 'jellies soothe than the creamy curd') which gives us the lovers' embrace. What follows—if Keats's own interpretation be insisted on—is figurative, and feebly so; and Keats's love-scenes are never figurative, nor is anything in the rest of the poem. If figurative, the lines are vulgar in a sense alien to Keats (we find it in Rossetti's *The House of Life*) and I suspect that the distaste for much of the poem which is apparently often felt nowadays, has its origin here.¹ Once again the influence of Byron, of a queasy compound of Byron and Keats, has a disastrous effect. Nothing is worse for Keats than the convention, already stirring in his time and tyrannical in our own, that the truth must be told, that it is 'weak-sided' and cowardly to leave anything out, especially anything so apparently important as this. But it is an illusory importance, for the intensity of the poem's imagination of love

¹ Cf. 'The Stealthy School of Criticism' (*Athenaeum*, 1871), Rossetti's answer to Buchanan's attack on 'The Fleshly School of Poetry'. He tells us that in the sonnets (e.g. *Love-Sweetness*) 'all the passionate and just delights of the body are declared—somewhat figuratively it is true, but unmistakably—to be naught if not ennobled by the concurrence of the soul at all times.' The point is surely admirable (D. H. Lawrence himself would have wholeheartedly agreed with it) but the word *figuratively* goes a long way towards explaining the modern misunderstanding of, and antipathy for, the Victorian rendering of sex.

is conveyed by vision and not by fact; the relation of the lovers is imagined in terms of their wishes and their dreams.

The Dead seems to me an achievement very close to *The Eve of St. Agnes* in the nature and power of its vision: I should be tempted to call them the most remarkable, and in the broadest sense poetical, short stories in English. Joyce's mastery is of course entirely poised and self-conscious; the weight he gives to the commonplace is as elegant as in Keats it is instinctive, and yet the intensity of impersonal meaning in the language is as remarkable in the story as in the poem. Both have a ritual solidity of description, which somehow pledges that what one dreams and yearns for and regrets is as much a part of life as what one eats, that one's fantasies are as real as one's food. Joyce's dinner laid out is one for the dead to remember; his loving account of a Dublin musical party is the equivalent of Keats's tranced exploitation of the medieval and picturesque. The hero and heroine of *The Dead* dream of their past, which divides them as individuals and yet which in a strange and touching way also unites them and the others in a communion of living and a corresponding awareness of death. "I love to see the snow", said Aunt Julia sadly, a phrase which compresses the same meaning as the extinguished candle in *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Like the lovers, she is on her way to join the vast hosts of the dead. We cannot apprehend death, but we can perceive our relation to it here, with an intensity that does indeed, for the moment, 'make its disagreeables evaporate'. Both Joyce and Keats knew that what *is*, can and must be made beautiful by art, and Joyce's *credo* of the principle of beauty, even where it has not yet been imagined or apprehended, is an echo of Keats's own.¹

So far from its being 'elaborately fenced from all infection of reality', I have tried to show how *The Eve of St. Agnes* takes its place among moving and memorable fictions, and how its reality is of the same nature as theirs. It has supremely what Arnold called the power of natural interpretation, the power that 'calms and satisfies us as no other can'. Yet this phrase has its dangers, not much less so than Joyce's picture of 'the luminous silent stasis of aesthetic pleasure', for the point about the interpretative power is that it does *interpret*: the aesthetic diagnosis of art is irreproachable, but in concentrating on the end state it suggests—disastrously—that we can take a short cut. We can certainly agree that his

¹ See *A portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Critical Writings*, op. cit., p. 148. Also in the early essay *Drama and Life* the para. (p. 43) beginning 'A yet more insidious claim is the claim for beauty'.

poetry ultimately gives the rich calm of aesthetic satisfaction, but we must none the less beware of taking the aesthetic view of Keats. The Pre-Raphaelites did so, concentrating on his 'exquisite detail', and for them a line like 'My sleep had been embroidered with dim dreams' was the choicest example of his art. But it is the kind of line which, in Robert Bridges's phrase, 'displays its poetry rather than its meaning.'

Keats's poetry is in the meaning, and it is in a story which is filled with such meaning that he seems to me to achieve his masterpiece. But we must not forget that for him the poetry had to be in the meaning in a different and more direct sense, the sense in which for Wilfred Owen, a true descendant of Keats as Rossetti and the late romantics were not, the poetry of war could only be 'in the pity'. Owen's rich and Keatsian talent is in sharp contrast with the experience of war to which he felt that poetry must be offered up—'above all', he wrote, 'I am not concerned with poetry'. But his art transcended the use he wished to make of it, and became a majestic celebration of the eternity of man at war as well as a denunciation of the futility of war. 'Calm and satisfaction', 'the luminous stasis', cannot ultimately be kept out. His rich art has achieved a meaning much wider than the one required of it, and yet this greatness still depends on the urgency and simplicity of his purpose. There is a lesson in this for our reading of Keats.

Owen's poetry, like that of Keats, is inevitably on a grand scale—the scale of his feeling for those 'hearts grown great with shot'. It is this generosity, transcending the art of poetry, which antagonized Yeats, a firm believer in the need for a poet to be master in his own house. But it does not need to express itself in a conventionally 'grand' form, and I must admit to experiencing something of the same doubt about Owen's last and most evidently impressive poem, *Strange Meeting*, that I feel about the second *Hyperion*. It is a doubt which I hope takes the form of humility, and in conclusion I should like to suggest that our most disturbing apprehension of greatness in Keats (and, as an illuminating parallel, in Owen) may be the singular kind of uncertainty we have to feel about these poems, an uncertainty which is not fully answered by the fact of untimely death.

For notwithstanding the conventional supremacy of the Odes (and they are really far less homogeneous, more typically *Keatsian* than the convention implies) there is astonishingly little general agreement about his best-known poems. Nothing is more finally disconcerting about this most disconcerting of our poets than our

lack of decision, and of accepted standards of judgement, at moments when some sort of unanimity might be expected. Is the passage from *The Fall of Hyperion* which I have already quoted, and which ends with the comparison of Moneta's eyes to 'the mild moon'

Who comforts those she sees not, who knows not
What eyes are upward cast.

—is such a passage, which Middleton Murry calls 'an apprehension of an ultimate reality', and 'a wonderful symbol of the unspeakable truth', the finest poetry or not? I have to confess my sense of not knowing, and I can only hope that other readers have experienced this peculiar kind of awed discomposure. It is certainly not just good poetry, and however unaffirmed, our confidence in our own ability to tell the great from the good in poetry is really pretty strong, but Keats upsets it. That he does so seems to be not only because what I have had to call 'badness' plays so strangely important a part in his total meaning, and we look in vain for any trace of it here, but also because here is the final proof that he has no poetic world of his own, no aesthetic enclosure where he is a law unto himself, and where we can recognize and appreciate at once his own special kind of performance. His reality is not, after all, to be found in one place. He does not 'know his station'. His power of loading words with meaning is changed here into quite a different sort of potential, which remains enigmatic.

But one thing is certain—Keats could never have made the most of his genius. However good *The Eve of St. Agnes* may be—and I believe it to be his masterpiece—he could never have continued to write more poetic tales, or more Odes, each richer and more full of satisfactions than the last. Nothing held him to the *mode*, as Shakespeare was held to the theatre, and whatever may appear to the contrary his lack of belief in writing poetry, just because he had the genius to write it, was fundamental. It has been argued that unless we believe in his emergent power to express what he so directly and deeply felt about 'suffering humanity', we degrade him to the status of a 'minor poet'.¹ No poet, perhaps, can be labelled minor who does not in some sense acquiesce in being so, and Keats did not, but—and this is the truth that must shape our last understanding of him—he did not acquiesce in the status of being a poet at all. We need not pretend that we have to place him as one.

¹ *John Keats. A Reassessment.* (Introductory note.)