

## Keats's Dharma

When I was in high school, I fell in love with the word music of John Keats, and I have never looked back. His verses epitomized the art of poetry for me. As for what he was saying, I felt I understood it very well. In the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," our individual lives are transitory while the beauty of art endures. In the "Ode to a Nightingale," the beauty of nature alleviates the oppressions of daily existence. Nature is not quite as consoling as art, however: the conclusion is bittersweet – which is how we like our sweets in high school – because the bird flies away at the end. The "Ode on Melancholy" goes to the very core of adolescent psychology: how to luxuriate in your depression. The sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be" trenchantly gives voice to the terror that every teenager feels – what if my life is cut short? It ends with a sinking feeling at the contemplation of the nothingness of death. The sonnet "Why did I laugh tonight?" memorably makes the familiar point that my life is intensified by my knowledge that I must die. The sonnet "Bright star" compares the star's steadfast shining to the poet's enduring love.

Mesmerized by the magic of Keats's cadences, it did not occur to me to read these poems more closely for their content. When I did so, after years of assuming that I already knew what they said, I found myself trying to shake the cobwebs from my brain

and to read them without presuppositions – for I had apparently never bothered to notice the plain and unambiguous meanings of their grammatically simple sentences. It turns out that several of them say the *opposite* of what I had always believed them to be saying. The "Ode to a Nightingale" does not say that the natural beauty of the bird's song has renewed the speaker's desire to live – it says that his hope of dying while the bird sang has been thwarted. The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" does not say the beauty of art makes life worth living – it says that humans would be better off as the unliving figures on the urn, immobilized for eternity and liberated from the passions of life. "Why did I laugh tonight?" explicitly proclaims that the speaker is ready to die that very moment. But if live he must, he aspires, according to "Bright star," to a condition that most readers would call a complete stupor.

At the end of the sonnet "When I have fears," Keats does *not* have a sinking feeling about the poems he will never write, the adventures he will never have, and the love he will never know; instead, it is the fame and love that sink into nothingness. By standing on the edge of the wide world and merely thinking on these worldly goods and what their acquisition would really mean, he sees very little in them worth pursuing, and is less afraid of death as a result. At the end of the sonnet "Why did I laugh tonight," he mentions verse, fame, and beauty, and finds them to be "intense indeed," but he ends by saying that death is even *intenser* – and therefore perhaps even more to be desired. He is *not* saying that the prospect of death confers greater value upon the objects of our life, but rather that death itself is "life's high meed," that is, its highest achievement or prize. Then when I read "Bright star" more carefully, I found that the real point of the comparison is between the star's *unchangeable* state – its stark staring unblinking

eternal fixedness – and the poet's desire to rest his head on his fair love's ripening breast and, in a *similar* state of unchanging lassitude, to listen *forever* to the soft inhalation and exhalation of her breathing. Notice that he does not wish, to speak delicately, to "consummate" the relationship; instead he wants to remain in an everlastingly "sweet unrest." If this be not granted, he prefers to die. In the first draft, death is not an alternative to the sweet unrest but its desirable consummation:

To hear, to feel her tender-taken breath,  
Half passionless, and so swoon on to death.

I had no idea.

And now that I did have an idea, and was thoroughly disabused of my high school notions, I was at a loss . . . because as modern as I am prepared to be, after the century of genocide and Samuel Beckett, I was mentally and emotionally unprepared to find this degree of death-infatuation in an early 19th century poet, and I simply did not know what to make of it.

But there is no getting around it. The "Ode to a Nightingale," read more closely, reveals that the poet, formerly *half* in love with easeful death, is, under the influence of the song, eager to go the rest of the way: now *more than ever* seems it rich to die. The song is not assuaging the sometime sorrows of his life; the song is beckoning him to be done with sorrow – "to cease upon the midnight with no pain" while listening to the glorious music. At the end, the poet is not merely thwarted of the temporary consolation of nature: he is denied the permanent consolation of death; and he is frustrated at finding himself thrust back into a life that is *too painful to be endured*. The third stanza, the only one depicting everyday life as opposed to the trance induced by the

nightingale, is definitive on this point: life is weariness, fever, old age, sickness, and death. Merely to think is to be full of sorrow. Beauty? Already fading. Love? Here today, gone tomorrow.

The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" seems to be more optimistic, but its few lines describing mundane existence are no more encouraging than those of the "Ode to a Nightingale": it is better for the figures on the urn to be frozen in a state of perpetual anticipation, like the lover in "Bright star," than to descend to the human plane and win the goal – for experience shows that getting what you want "leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd." The urn will be a friend to man, but man will be a stranger to any happiness other than that of contemplating the urn. The purpose of the urn is to "tease us *out* of thought" – thought that otherwise, as the previous ode attests, is full of sorrow and leaden-eyed despairs. True, the urn will provide consolation to future generations – which will be "in midst of other woe/Than ours."

The message that beauty dies and joy is fleeting – Joy is in fact already at the door bidding adieu – is emphasized in the "Ode on Melancholy." The more of delight you find to savor, the stronger will be your taste of sadness. The fate of those who have the highest capacity for experiencing pleasure will be to find themselves hanging on the wall of Melancholy's den as trophies.

Over and over in his poetry, Keats adverts to his favorite triad of Verse, Fame, and Love. In the "Ode on Indolence," Love, Ambition, and Poesy appear and try to beguile him. Keats dismisses the first temptation tersely: "What is Love? and where is it?" By his very refusal to take up the question, we understand that his answer is "Nothing and nowhere." As for "that poor Ambition – it springs/From a man's little

heart's short fever-fit." Poesy is handled less roughly than the other two temptresses, but Keats affirms that it is better to drowse the day away in honied indolence. And once again, he describes, as the ultimate desideratum of human existence, a state not unlike that of the lover in "Bright star": to lay one's head "cool-bedded in the flowery grass" and to remain in a "blissful cloud of summer-indolence," so "benumb'd" that neither pain *nor* pleasure can impinge upon the "nothingness."

What else? "The Eve of St. Agnes," ostensibly a romance about eloping lovers, begins in the bitter chill of a winter night and ends with Angela deformed by age and death and the Beadsman frozen in his ashes. In two sonnets copied out at the time of the "Ode on Indolence," fame is first mocked as a "wayward girl" who teases and disappoints those who court her, then derided as a "fierce miscreed." Love, in one unpublished fragment, is compared to "a doll dress'd up/For idleness to cosset, nurse, and dandle," and in another, is portrayed as a state of imbecility wherein the typical lover sits pensively, rolls his eyes abstractedly, nibbles his toast with an affected loss of appetite, and sighs. But perhaps Keats's most considered response to his rhetorical question "What is Love?" can be found in "La belle dame sans merci" and "Lamia." In both, love is a destructive spell or illusion.

Does Keats really mean all this? He writes to Benjamin Bailey on June 10, 1818 that he is "never alone without rejoicing that there is such a thing as death" – this at a time when he had recently finished "Isabella" to the applause of all his friends, *Endymion* had just been published by a firm that was deeply committed to him, and he was enthusiastically looking forward to his walking tour of the Lake District and Scotland. He writes to Fanny Brawne in the summer of 1819, well before the onset of

his final illness, during one of the most poetically productive periods of his life: "I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have possession of them both in the same minute."

It may not be easy to understand why Keats says such things. But I am confident that now, at last, I do understand *what* he says. The vocabulary and the syntax are too straightforward to admit a doubt. His sentences are clear. His words are common and explicit. Keats is not, like so many poets of the last half-century, a pseudo-intellectual engaged in creating elegant conundrums for his readers to scratch their heads over.

I think we need to come to terms with how dark and strange his meanings are. At the least, we need to acknowledge that they fall outside the norms and traditions of English poetry from Chaucer to Dylan Thomas. His content is so idiosyncratic that it is foolish to speak of him in the same breath with other Romantic poets and to try to fit him into "the grand march of intellect" that he himself posited as unifying the successive generations of English poets. It is easy to see the effect upon his *versification* of the examples of Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, and Wordsworth. But aside from a handful of Shakespeare's most disillusioned sonnets and plays, it is difficult to see the effect of these predecessors on his *values*.

Meanwhile, in desultory reading, I became gradually aware of the late-20th century critical orthodoxy about Keats. A crushing consensus seems to have formed around the evaluation of his *oeuvre* and his thematic development. The critics see a steady advance in his technique, with a near-unanimous vote crowning "To Autumn" as his

masterpiece – the culmination of "the five great odes." Because his evolution as a poet is tied to his famous concept of "negative capability," his effacement of his subjective self in this last completed poem is praised as the fullest realization of his aesthetic.

English majors will be able to quote Keats's definition of "negative capability" from memory, but as I hope to have a number of everyday lovers of poetry among my readers, I will reference Keats's letter to Benjamin Bailey, November 22, 1817:

Negative Capability, that is when a 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.

Something akin to negative capability is found in the *Tao Te Ching*, where it is called *wu wei* or "doing by not doing." It is the act of complete attention that is at the core of all meditative disciplines: an alertness and watchfulness without any attempt to impose one's own desire upon the phenomenon or to grasp it, master it, control it – no, not even in order to understand it and formulate it as a truth.

The odes themselves, as will not surprise any reader of modern literary criticism, are said by the scholars to be much more complicated than we imagined: we are told that a dialectic of movement and counter-movement informs them. The poet, it is claimed, typically begins by seeking to escape from the exigencies of time and mutability into the immortality of nature or art; but as each ode progresses, an antithetical motion gains momentum and pulls him back into the daily round of transitory pain and pleasure, and at the end he confronts life bravely and responsibly. The nightingale, or the fancy of following it, is a *deceiving* elf. The urn is a *cold* Pastoral.

Keats knows that he cannot escape into nature and art, but must face life out. The high school reading is actually vindicated! – although, it goes without saying, by means of interpretations so recondite and esoteric that even the most gifted senior could never arrive at them.

Writing to his brother and sister-in-law on January 2, 1819, Keats mentions that he has recently composed "one or two little poems you might like" (they were "Ever let the Fancy roam," and "Bards of Passion and of Mirth"). He copies them into the letter with the following prefatory remark: "They will explain themselves, as all poems should do without any comment." In light of this manifesto, is it not wonderful that the high-powered critic Helen Vendler devoted an entire book of nearly 300 pages to Keats's odes? There is so much more to them than you suspected. It turns out that Keats, in the eyes of Vendler and a host of similarly sophisticated exegetes, was, at the age of 23, an intellectual's intellectual. But there is a price to be paid for that – by Keats, of course, not by Vendler. Having ascribed to him a philosophical complexity and subtlety to which he never laid claim, she then taxes him for sometimes failing to execute her idea of his idea.

So the unforgettable third stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale" is found to be lacking – it is disorderly. (I noticed much scholarly carping about that third stanza in my sojourn through the critics. It is precisely the stanza that captivates us during our romantic-melancholy adolescence. As such, it certainly cannot be allowed to pass muster in graduate school.) Here is the allegedly faulty stanza:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret

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

Vendler thinks that the "uneasiness" of the poetry in this stanza is "evident." There is a lack of parallelism among the grammatical subjects. Keats did not know how to manage his catalog of woes. They appear in "no particular order."

Yes, the uneasiness is *evident* – to Vendler. And yet, for the better part of 200 years, it was *not* evident; and it is *still* not evident to non-professional readers of literature. In fact, this very stanza has seemed to them to be perfection itself – one of the glories of English lyric poetry.

I have relegated Vendler's argument to an appendix, to allow her to make her case in her own words, but also to give my reader the option of avoiding her critique altogether. Lovers of this ode may prefer that their many re-readings of this stanza not be disturbed by the memory of any attack on it, even one that can be readily dismissed as specious. Suffice it to say here that I believe she has found technical lapses where they do not exist.

The more substantive complaint about the stanza, among the critics, is that the catalog is contrived. It comes from books, not life. Or where it *does* come from life – Keats having nursed his 19-year-old brother throughout the final stages of consumption – that is a fault too. Tom Keats was too recently deceased, the critics think, for his brother to make sure-handed poetry out of the event. Trying to get some distance from this harrowing experience, Keats becomes artificial: "youth" growing "spectre-thin" is too

literary. (Certainly it is true that any late-20th century poet worth his salt would have given us some coughed-up phlegm.) Then too, Keats went too far: life isn't that bad, say the comfortable commentators, and no doubt that is true – for them. But Keats may have differed from them in two respects. First, as all his friends attested, every tale of injustice to others that reached his ears went straight to his heart. (He shrugged off injustices to himself.) When Bailey's ordination was held up because the bishop engaged in petty machinations, the vehemence of Keats's indignation in his letter to Bailey veers into unintentional comedy. In short, Keats's empathy was so active that he was almost overwhelmed by it. This fund of empathy, such that he really did feel the pain of others, may not be the usual equipment of literary scholars, or of any other class of people. Second, Keats did not have a tenured professor's salary or anything like it. At the time he wrote the odes, he was living on the last of his small inheritance, and the negative reviews of *Endymion* had made it highly unlikely that he would be able to make his living as a poet. Life was closing in on him. Tom was six months dead, George had emigrated to America because he saw no hope of thriving economically in England, and the unscrupulous executor of the family estate had convinced Keats that his own share of it was gone. Within a month of writing the odes, he would be seriously considering the resumption of the medical career that he had found hateful.

Setting aside the critical penchant for finding stylistic faults that are invisible to the naked eye, and turning to the content: if we take the third stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale" seriously as an indictment of life, we are forced to consider the full import of Keats's willing embrace of death, in this poem and in several others. This the critics will not do. Faced with a sonnet that ends with the unequivocal words "Death is life's high

meed," Walter Jackson Bate, author of the most respected biography, asserts that Keats was "immediately ashamed of it, and put it aside." Not one word in the letter containing the sonnet supports this inference. *Bate* is ashamed of it.

Turn to the sixth stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale" and see how the critical orthodoxy distorts it:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
To take into the air my quiet breath;  
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
In such an ecstasy!  
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –  
To thy high requiem become a sod.

Most of the commentators agree with each other that the key to understanding the fifth line is that it only "seems" rich to die. But the progression of the thought indicates that the emphasis falls upon the words "more than ever." *Before* he heard the nightingale, he was already half in love with easeful death; *now*, with the bird pouring forth its song, he is entirely enamored of it. Since the next three lines contemplate death gladly and without fear, the commentators must wait until the ninth line to seize upon the words "in vain." See, they tell us solemnly, once he is dead, the poet will no longer be able to hear the nightingale. True enough, but he does not seem to mind. Instead, he considers it a privilege to expire while listening to its song. Finally, the analysts point to the starkness of the word "sod." We might crave death if we have an optimistic view of the afterlife, they imply, but who would want to become merely a sod? "I would," is the answer given by the speaker of these lines. He has been contemplating death without

illusion all along. When, in times past, he asked death to take his quiet breath into the air, he knew what that meant; when now he finds the prospect more than ever rich, he still knows. It means becoming a sod. But it also means an end to the weariness, the fever, and the fret. Death is easeful; and to die painlessly while such a requiem is being sung is a blessing. From here, the poet passes immediately to the magnificent picture of the song's reverberation through the ages. But he is not talking himself back into life – he is moving forward into the only eternity he believes in, which is the continuation of the natural order from generation to generation. Vendler says, "At the moment of near acquiescence in dissolution, Keats chooses life, and thought." No. Death refuses to choose Keats. And he swallows his disappointment and soldiers on.

In the final stanza, the poet is regretfully called back to his sole self, appropriately enough by the word "forlorn." Incidentally, this word applies to his everyday condition, not to his pang at hearing the music flee. That comes later. Only after his fanciful attempt to join the bird has failed does the bird's "plaintive anthem" begin to fade. The song is indeed beautiful, but nothing is said to indicate that it has strengthened the poet to face the trials of life, or consoled him for his leaden-eyed despairs by giving him a brief respite from them. Instead, he had wanted to follow the bird and so fly out of his life altogether, at first on the wings of imagination, and last by ceasing upon the midnight with no pain. Nature has nothing to offer that can truly palliate the grief of human existence. The poet enjoys the thought that the same song was heard by emperor and clown, but he does not claim that they were uplifted. Hearing the song, Ruth still stood in tears amid the alien corn. Perhaps the most that can be said is that the song *expressed* for her the sadness in her heart.

It is mordantly amusing to see the erudite critics working their way back to the cheerful mis-readings of my adolescence; but I have some sympathy for them. The attitude embodied in the "Ode to a Nightingale" has been deplored by all moralists in all ages. We are not supposed to want to die. In many religions, the thought is blasphemous; in the code of character, it is set down as unmanly. Speaking for myself, I am not now, nor have I ever been, half in love with easeful death. I am not looking forward to becoming a sod. But I do not feel that I have any right to impose my own world-view upon this poem.

It is my working premise as an anti-formalist that the interpreter of the poem should make use of any ancillary piece of information that can shed light on the poet's intention. I am so far from considering the pursuit of intention a "fallacy" that I would rather establish the attempt to capture it as the first imperative of criticism. After we have done our best to understand what the poet said – or tried to say – we can always indulge ourselves in the harmless parlor game of proposing meanings that he did *not* intend. Because poets are not infallible – because their attempt to wrestle their meanings into language is fraught with the same perils as our own – I have justified the use of their other poems, their other prose writings, and reliable first-person accounts of their lives as ancillary materials that can guide us in an accurate understanding of what one specific poem says. The strangeness of Keats's death-saturated philosophy encourages me to read his poems against each other and especially to probe his letters for clues to his psychology. To do this brings me into immediate conflict with the core axiom of the New Criticism, which adjures me to attend solely to the single poem *qua*

poem as a self-sufficient aesthetic object with an ontological status similar to that of a snapdragon or a planet.

Professors of literature under the spell of the New Criticism would project a text onto a screen without even identifying the author, much less including such irrelevancies as the date of composition and whom the poet was romancing at the time. Some might grudgingly provide a bit of cultural literacy needed to understand a topical allusion or a change in a particular word's denotation during the intervening centuries. Needless to say, there was a lot of cheating: our native prudence would not suffer us to pass over in a state of chaste renunciation the juicier bits in a writer's biography. Seeing a poem as a sublimation of a biographical incident was too tempting to the children of Freud, just as it was to the High Romantics. In Keats's case, however, the critical offense has been to troll the letters less for personal revelations and more to seek in them expressions of his aesthetic doctrines. The poems are then made to body forth the aesthetic stance, such as it is, of a young man who was the first to admit that he was merely extemporizing in his letters. He wrote as follows to his closest friend, John Hamilton Reynolds, in March 1818:

Now, my dear fellow, I must once for all tell you I have not one Idea of the truth of any of my speculations. I shall never be a Reasoner because I care not to be in the right . . . .

Part of the problem is that the letters are simply wonderful. They are among the treasures of the English language, because Keats was an extraordinary human being and, when writing for the eyes of trusted friends, completely open: we get the real person unadulterated by self-censorship and stuffiness. Some of the ideas *are*

profound. For Keats to have understood the importance of negative capability and to have articulated it at such a young age is little short of miraculous. But the great odes are not versifications of the theory of negative capability. Neither are they versifications of Keats's beautiful idea that life is a "vale of soul-making," nor of his interesting but undeveloped surmise that life is a series of rooms, beginning with the thoughtlessness of childhood and moving next to "the chamber of maiden thought." If Keats *employed* negative capability to write his poems, that is no more than to say that Shakespeare employed it to write his plays – which is precisely what Keats claims about Shakespeare, and where, he says, he picked up his idea. We do not analyze the negative capability *in* Shakespeare's plays or sonnets, or say that they are *about* it. The odes may *demonstrate* negative capability – they also demonstrate a theory of vowel management that Keats tried to explain to Benjamin Bailey one day – but having noted that, we are no nearer to what they say.

On the biographical front, we can see that until Keats began to feel the symptoms of his tuberculosis, his letters, amid occasional glooms and despondencies, emanate the vibrancy of a man with an uncommon capacity to enjoy life to the hilt. In finding most of the major poems jaded toward life and shadowed by death, I am confronted by the somewhat contradictory evidence of a correspondence that is flooded by high spirits, whether Keats is eating a nectarine, playing cards all night with his friends, engaging in disquisitions on poetry, or writing verses with mind-boggling fluency in the confidence that he will be among the English poets when he is dead. There is grist for the psychologist's mill here, and I will inevitably speculate about the ways we might resolve this apparent discrepancy between the life and the art, between the letters

and the poems. But I must repeat here my commitment to what I do take to be a bedrock principle of aesthetic evaluation: the New Critics went wrong almost immediately, and in a number of ways; but they were right to make the work itself the *primary* document of exegesis, and to separate what the work says from what the author is known to have said on any given social occasion. We must no more force a Keats poem to say what *he* said at some other time than to say what *we* said at some other time. We have to start and end with the text. If we are in doubt about his meaning, we can resort to a letter to clarify it; but we must not use a letter to contradict it. If he is clear but disconcerting – if he says that he would gladly "on this very midnight cease" – I have to take his word for it unless I can demonstrate that he is joking.

Now let us see briefly what light the letters may be able to *legitimately* shine on our subject, concentrating especially upon "the five great odes." In a letter to Reynolds, written on May 3, 1818 shortly after he had completed the fair copy of *Endymion* and composed "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil," Keats copied the following verses:

Mother of Hermes! and still youthful Maia!  
    May I sing to thee  
As thou wast hymned on the shores of Baiæ?  
    Or may I woo thee  
In earlier Sicilian? or thy smiles  
Seek as they once were sought, in Grecian isles,  
By bards who died content on pleasant sward,  
    Leaving great verse unto a little clan?  
O give me their old vigour, and unheard,  
    Save of the quiet Primrose, and the span  
Of Heaven and few ears; rounded by thee  
My song should die away content as theirs,  
Rich in the simple worship of a day.

Keats says of these lines, "I wrote them on May-day – and intend to finish the ode all in good time." This fragment is all that we have. We know that Keats rarely picked up a poem again after he put it down: once he broke off, he preferred to scrap the draft and start anew. In this case, the thought is exquisitely complete at the end of the stanza, and it is logical to assume that nothing occurred to Keats as a continuation. But his decision not to publish it indicates that it remained unfinished in his own mind. In any case, the form of the stanza, and his referring to it as the beginning of an ode, give us the first hint of his interest in this sort of poem.

A year passed, and then on April 30, 1819, he copied into a letter to George and Georgiana Keats his "Ode to Psyche," calling it "the last I have written" and saying that he had taken more than usual care with it. To the critics, this is the first of the "five great odes." There followed in quick succession the "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "Ode on Melancholy." Everyone agrees in assigning these three poems to May 1819, although the only solid evidence about any of them is Charles Brown's testimony that the "Ode to a Nightingale" was composed during that month in his garden. To the everlasting frustration of us all, Keats made no mention of any of the three odes in his correspondence, other than a single joking reference the following January – it amused him that his brother George, on a snowy winter's day during a visit to London, was copying out the warm-weather "Ode to a Nightingale." Keats did not copy the three odes of May into letters; he did not so much as allude to them. It thus seems likely that he did not set much store by them. Both before and after May 1819, he had his heart set upon a great epic poem about Hyperion, to which he referred constantly. Even poems as substantial as "The Eve of St. Agnes," in February, and

"Lamia," in July, were mentioned as if they were diversions from his main task. Finally, in September, he wrote "To Autumn" and copied it into a letter to Richard Woodhouse. This poem, to the critics, is the *ne plus ultra* of the genre, the acme of perfection toward which the earlier four odes were progressing. We should note, however, that the first four were apparently written in a sustained campaign in the spring, whereas "To Autumn" was written after a lapse of almost four months. Nor is the latter poem *called* an ode by Keats.

But wait! There is in fact a fifth ode, titled as such by the poet, and mentioned in a letter written on June 9, 1819:

You will judge of my 1819 temper when I tell you that the thing I have most enjoyed this year has been writing an ode to Indolence.

Not only does he give the poem this accolade within a few weeks of completing the famous odes – that it is "the thing I have most enjoyed this year" – and not only does he fail to mention the other odes in this letter, or in any other letter before the following year, he also has this to say:

I have been very idle lately, very averse to writing, both from the overpowering idea of our dead poets and from abatement of my love of fame. I hope I am a little more of a Philosopher than I was, consequently a little less of a versifying Pet-lamb.

To judge from this remark, he does not even count the three famous odes of May 1819 as *writing*. Apparently, he thought they were not *worth* mentioning. The effort he expended on them does not constitute, to his mind, a defense against the charge of idleness. It has always been assumed that Charles Brown exaggerated his own

importance in salvaging the scraps of paper that constituted the draft of the "Ode to a Nightingale," but perhaps posterity owes him a greater debt that it has acknowledged. Keats himself wrote to George and Georgiana on April 30 that "Brown has been rummaging up some of my old sins, that is to say sonnets." There followed three of his best copied into the letter, which became the sole surviving source of the texts.

In part because the letter of June 7 echoes a line that is found in the "Ode on Indolence," most critics have arbitrarily assigned a date in late May or early June 1819 to the manuscript, which would mean that it was composed after the other four and only a few days before the letter that refers to it. But there is good reason for believing this to be wrong.

Keats did not include the "Ode on Indolence" in the volume of his poems that was published in 1820, which contained all the others. This might be a partial justification for its lowly status in the eyes of the critics. However that may be, the critics all labor to find real fault with it, complaining that it is undramatic, or too imbued with the speaker's I-statements, or too derivative of the other odes. There is no proving or disproving an aesthetic evaluation, but I feel that these objections are shallow. I like the poem very much, and find it to be as dramatic as it needs to be. For my taste, it rates second in interest, if not in polish, among the odes. The "Ode to a Nightingale" stands at the pinnacle of poetry written in English. None of the other odes, marvelous as they are, can compare with it. In arguing for the "Ode on Indolence," I have a twofold purpose: I would like to tout its beauties for their own sake; but of more importance to the arc of my overall argument regarding the proper understanding of Keats's poetry, I believe it is perhaps *the* key document.

To set things right, we must back up to Friday, March 19th for Keats's entry into his gigantic ongoing journal-letter to his brother and sister-in-law.

This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless: I long after a stanza or two of Thomson's Castle of indolence. My passions are all asleep from my having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fibre all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness. If I had teeth of pearl and the breath of lilies I should call it languor, but as I am I must call it Laziness. In this state of effeminacy the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body, and to such a happy degree that pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown. Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me; they seem rather like three figures on a greek vase – a Man and two women – whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguisement. This is the only happiness: and is a rare instance of advantage in the body overpowering the Mind.

Here is the "Ode on Indolence" in embryo, and it seems to me far more plausible to hypothesize that Keats penned the poem within a day or two of writing this paragraph – the more so since the poetry is so faithful to the prose. The letter was finished on May 4. To date the poem a month after he mailed it off implies either that he copied the paragraph for later use or that he remembered his epistolary treatment of the subject with fine exactitude and returned to it. From what we know of Keats's working habits, these possibilities are both unlikely. He was forever dashing off poems in the heat of inspiration and then abandoning them.

In spite of the intrinsic merit of this ode, however, it was passed over by Keats for inclusion with the others in his next volume of poems. Nor was it copied into the letter, whereas the inferior "Ode to Psyche" was written out with considerable pride. I believe there to be three interlocking reasons for this. First, although the "Ode on Indolence" reads well enough in its present state, it shows some signs of not having been quite

finished. Scholars have argued over the order of the six stanzas, and not without reason. The redundancy of "A third time pass'd they by" and "A third time came they by" strikes me as a fault that would have been corrected had Keats revised the poem for publication. This roughness could also explain its absence from the letter – the more so since a prose account was already there. Second, the idea of figures on a Greek vase was obviously taken up later in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and used in that poem with great assurance. It would have been odd, I think, to have published both odes, as we have them, in the same volume, even though the treatment of the figures differs so greatly. Keats would have seen that the urn is extrinsic to the idea of the "Ode on Indolence" – the figures of Love, Ambition, and Poetry are visionary and are said merely to be *like* figures on a marble urn – whereas the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is all about the ancient object and obviously cannot do without it. After writing the latter poem, Keats may have felt that he should adjust the earlier ode accordingly, keeping the three hallucinatory goddesses while dropping the comparison to figures on a vase; but he always found it onerous to return to a poem once he had left it. Meanwhile, he transferred another key ingredient of the "Ode on Indolence" to the "Ode to a Nightingale" – the indolence itself. The poet hears the nightingale in a state of "drowsy numbness," as though he had "emptied some dull opiate to the drains." Finally, the "Ode on Indolence" may have been too personal and private a statement of Keats's unusual and provocative philosophy. The three sonnets that I have mentioned, "When I have fears," "Why did I laugh tonight," and "Bright star," were also held back from publication, in spite of their undoubted quality.

I wish to suggest that the "Ode on Indolence" subsumes the themes of Keats's

late poetry and provides the best gloss on the jaundiced view of life and welcoming embrace of death that are so characteristic of almost all the poems that he wrote after he finished *Endymion*. The critics are right that the "I" of this ode is obtrusive in a way that goes beyond the other odes: we are getting Keats himself, unvarnished, in a straight versification of the unguarded paragraph written to his most trusted correspondent. This is the fifth great ode. Let us finally admit that "To Autumn" – a lovely, faultless poem – is not an ode at all, on the authority of the poet himself when he assigned its title. And let us see how the "Ode on Indolence" sets the stage for the next four and illuminates them.

Taking the prose paragraph as a clear statement of what the poem is about, notice first that the temper indolent is described throughout in positive terms. Writing about it to his hard-working brother, Keats's inner moralist labels this condition "Laziness" – self-accusations of idleness and exhortations to rouse himself are common throughout his letters – but he experiences the languor as "a delightful sensation." The perfection of the temper indolent is that "pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown." This comment takes on great importance, because all critics have noticed the attention that Keats gives to the idea that pleasure and pain are intermixed: the entire "Ode on Melancholy" is taken up with a demonstration of this proposition. What the critics say is that Keats wisely understands this inextricability of pleasure and pain, and accepts it as our human lot. But what the poems say is that pleasure, because it invariably turns to pain, is a mirage – at least on our shallow assumption that its attainment should be our life's object. The pursuit of pleasure is an exercise in frustration.

What is the most desirable state that we can attain, then? The answer in the letter is "a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness"; a state of "effeminacy" in which "the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body"; a condition in which the passions are all asleep. *"This is the only happiness."*

A letter to his friend Reynolds from the previous year provides further illumination of what he means by the temper indolent, and incidentally sheds more light on negative capability:

I have an idea that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner: let him on any certain day read a certain Page of full Poesy or distilled Prose and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect from it, and bring home to it, and prophesy upon it, and dream upon it until it becomes stale. But when will it do so? Never. When Man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect, any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting post towards all "the two-and-thirty Palaces." How happy is such a "voyage of conception," what delicious diligent Indolence! A doze upon a Sofa does not hinder it, and a nap upon Clover engenders ethereal finger-points. . . . Let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at; but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive, budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every noble insect that favors us with a visit. Sap will be given us for Meat and dew for drink. I was led into these thoughts, my dear Reynolds, by the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of Idleness. I have not read any Books. The Morning said I was right. I had no Idea but of the Morning, and the Thrush said I was right . . . .

This passage dovetails with many other depictions of the superiority of the pleasures of imagination to the delusive pleasures falsely advertised by "real life." From his poem "Fancy":

She has vassals to attend her:  
She will bring, in spite of frost,  
Beauties that the earth has lost;  
She will bring thee, all together,

All delights of summer weather;  
All the buds and bells of May,  
From dewy sward or thorny spray;  
All the heaped Autumn's wealth,  
With a still, mysterious stealth:  
She will mix these pleasures up  
Like three fit wines in a cup . . . .

The fresh pleasures conjured up by the imagination are contrasted with the stale pleasures that melt at a touch of reality:

Summer's joys are spoilt by use,  
And the enjoying of the spring  
Fades as does its blossoming;  
Autumn's red-lipp'd fruitage too  
Blushing through the mist and dew,  
Cloys with tasting . . . .

Every thing is spoilt by use:  
Where's the cheek that doth not fade,  
Too much gaz'd at? Where's the maid  
Whose lip mature is ever new?  
Where's the eye, however blue,  
Doth not weary? Where's the face  
One would meet in every place?  
Where's the voice, however soft,  
One would hear so very oft?  
At a touch sweet Pleasure melteth  
Like to bubbles when rain pelteth.

Imagination sent from the fireside to roam freely, then, is a more reliable route to pleasure than active pursuit out of doors. But better still is to let the mind drowse and sink into the state described in "Bright star" and the "Ode on Indolence." In the letter to Reynolds, Keats's "delicious diligent Indolence" is not owing to any "voyage of conception," but to "the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of Idleness." In the ode, his "idle spright" is characterized by extreme torpor.

The definitive short exposition of this philosophy of indolence is found in the sonnet "Bright star":

No – yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,  
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,  
To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,  
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,  
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,  
And so live ever – or else swoon to death.

Although he calls it here a "sweet unrest," and elsewhere seems to describe it as a perpetual state of anticipation in which realization is thwarted, in fact he sees this state as characterized by plenitude and fulfillment; for it is a peculiarity of his conception that the person who undergoes it feels no frustration over its stasis. He wishes to remain in it "awake for ever." It is all-in-all sufficient, a receptive indolence shielding the idler from the inevitable disenchantment of getting what he (thinks he) wants. The "Ode to Psyche" gives us another description of the state:

They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;  
Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;  
Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,  
As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,  
and ready still past kisses to outnumber  
At tender eye-dawn of aureorean love.

Note again that Keats does not picture sexual consummation here, or even readiness or arousal, but a state akin to that of the lovers on the Grecian urn, "for ever panting and for ever young." From the same epic letter to his brother and sister-in-law that contains the "Ode to Psyche," here is yet another account of the blessed state:

The fifth canto of Dante pleases me more and more. It is that one in

which he meets with Paulo [sic] and Francesca. I had passed many days in rather a low state of mind and in the midst of them I dreamt of being in that region of Hell. The dream was one of the most delightful enjoyments I ever had in my life. I floated about the whirling atmosphere as it is described with a beautiful figure to whose lips mine were joined as it seem'd for an age, and in the midst of all this cold and darkness I was warm. Even flowery tree tops sprung up and we rested on them sometimes with the lightness of a cloud till the wind blew us away again.

Once more, this is not "foreplay." There is no progression in the sensation, no development, no evolution. But to our poet, this is better, much better, than the feverish excitement of sexual passion or even its gratification. "I tried a sonnet upon it," Keats tells George. "There are fourteen lines but nothing of what I felt in it. O that I could dream it every night." The sonnet falters because it fails to preserve the strangeness of the spell, the uncanniness of the lips "joined as it seem'd for an age." Only a trace remains, in the verb "floated," and, by its leaving off where it does, in its implicit rejection of the banalities of a merely carnal encounter:

Pale were the sweet lips I saw,  
Pale were the lips I kiss'd and fair the form  
I floated with about that melancholy storm.

The "Ode on Indolence" remains more faithful to the seminal experience, and takes a more expansive route than the sonnet "Bright star" to reach the same conclusion. This is the fullest inventory in his poetry of the qualities of the experience:

Ripe was the drowsy hour;  
The blissful cloud of summer-indolence  
Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;  
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower:  
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense  
Unhaunted quite of all but – nothingness? . . .

For Poesy! – no, – she has not a joy, –  
At least for me, – so sweet as drowsy noons,  
And evenings steep'd in honied indolence;  
O, for an age so shelter'd from annoy,  
That I may never know how change the moons,  
Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

It is easy to pass over this poem in the same kind of hurry that makes us miss the darker meanings of the sonnets about death. The reader may summarize the contents too quickly – "It is good to take a morning off from the pother of civilization and spend a few hours with nature." But the speaker of this poem is dramatically alienated from life. He wishes to drop out completely, never again to know the day of the week or hear the wheels of commerce turning. He wishes to remain in so low a metabolic state that even pleasure cannot rouse him. He wishes to stop thinking. In short, he craves a state that we associate with morphine, and in fact, the morning torpor that Keats described in the letter may have been produced by his having ingested an opiate the night before. A cricket ball had hit him directly in the eye and Brown had doctored him with such anodynes as the period afforded.

This ode is not a Sunday stroll in the garden that reinvigorates body and spirit for the coming week. It records a total rejection of the world and the sweets with which the world tries to seduce us. Not Love, not Ambition, not even Poetry, says Keats, will induce a wise soul to abandon the nirvana of a temper indolent if the fates have been kind enough to grant it. Verse, Fame, and Beauty are intense indeed, but they do not pan out. Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eye beyond tomorrow. Joy has his hand at his lips bidding adieu. Fame will turn you into a pet-lamb in a sentimental farce. Love will deposit you on the cold hill's side, where no birds sing – or wrap you in a winding

sheet on the day of your marriage. When you think carefully about what love and fame entail, they sink into nothingness. If it is intensity you crave, death is life's high meed. If you are not quite ready to swoon to death, then let yourself fall into a state of sweet unrest and honied indolence. *This is the only happiness.*

Should we take all this at face value? In light of the critical refusal to come to terms with Keats's meanings, that question is already on the table, and I have argued for the plain signification of the words found in his poems. But should we take *Keats himself* at face value? Here we confront what I have agreed to call the disparity between, on the one hand, the ostensible cheerfulness, courage, and life-affirmation of his letters and the confirmatory evidence of the letters of his friends about him, and on the other hand, the darkness and despair of the poems. Grant that the poems *are* dark and despairing – how serious is Keats? Is he posturing? Is he convincing? (But if he *is* posturing, surely he will *not* be convincing?) Is he a very young man too enamored of cheap profundity, too quick to wrap himself in the cloak of disillusionment? Is his disaffection "literary"? Vendler makes a good case for Keats's debt to *Hamlet* in the vocabulary of the third stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale." Has the youthful poet wrapped himself romantically in Hamlet's inky cloak and put on that character's suit of woe? Are we dealing with warmed-over and poorly digested Shakespeare? – with an adolescent's idea of "tragedy"?

Put it this way: can there be a cheerful, active person who is loved and celebrated by a large group of intelligent and engaging friends, and who is well on his way to great accomplishment and likely renown, who nevertheless looks upon life as

fundamentally so painful that death will be a welcome release? Can he have a philosophy that argues against his apparent enjoyment and vivacity?

Many psychologists would offer this principle: Never mind what he says, look only at what he does. They would say that we humans carefully frame our statements to make an impression, if only an impression upon ourselves, whereas what we do is, *by definition*, what we want to do. Even those who look askance at the Freudian deepthink about sublimation and repression might still be skeptical of a poem as a likely vehicle for truth-telling: a work of literature would, in fact, be even likelier to lie than a letter or a blurted confidence, because great pains must be taken with its artifice.

Against this perspective, I would urge the original view of the New Criticism that the poem is made of words and we have nothing whatsoever to guide us except these words. To go behind the words is always to violate the first axiom of criticism, that the work must stand alone as an autonomous object and give the native speaker of its language all that is needed for a clear understanding. It must emanate its own principles of interpretation. Vendler herself, writing the introduction to *Poets Thinking* in 2004, put this very well: "All poems, it seems to me, contain within themselves implicit instructions concerning how they should be read."

At the very least, I would say this: the poems have priority over the life. If they give us clear meanings, the critic surely is not called upon to read the biography of the poet and then cast a miasma over those meanings, in order to next clear away a mist of his own making by resorting to intellectual jujitsu and elucidating a new set of meanings antithetical to the original. Surely we are not ready to fall back into a Freudianized version of the worst practices of 19th century interpretation, when musicologists listened

to a string quartet by Beethoven written at the time of a serious illness and then found in it a record of the doctor's visit. We cannot find it implausible that Keats could have a good day and then sit down to write a baleful poem; we must not revive the long-discredited and frankly lunatic theory that this would have been psychologically impossible because poets can only write directly out of their strongest passions. The critic who wishes to use the life against the work in this way has only one frankly unpalatable option: to assert that the poems are inauthentic – that Keats did not know whereof he wrote, and merely imitated older, sadder, and wiser poets. This might seem the more likely, inasmuch as Keats was a very young man and it is often a young man's malady to posture about love and death and the pity of it all. But few young men are destined to write poetry that will later be placed at the summit of literary achievement. In any case, precisely here I will take my stand and say that Keats was in full control of his words and completely in earnest about his sentences; and I will say further that Keats, along with Jacques in *As You Like It*, had a right to say "I have gained my experience." And I will stand on the same ground as my opponents and use the letters to support my reading of the poems. Keats, like many expansive personalities, is multifaceted; but he is not an enigma, and the art does not contradict the life.

If called upon to summarize Keats's stance toward the world in a single word, I would say "alienated." He finds much to love, but much that he loves disappoints him in the long run. He is enchanted, but over time he is dis-encharmed. He goes into company, he is voluble and his listeners are entranced, but he looks back upon those evenings as wasted. His feelings go out warmly to his friends, and then he so takes their troubles

upon himself that he is deeply pained on their behalf. He is appalled at their quarrels among themselves. He is strongly repelled by the frivolity of most of the young women he encounters, but mesmerized from time to time by some girl of exceptional beauty or unusual conversation. When he experiences these rushes of inordinate attraction, sometimes brought on by a mere glimpse of a figure at a distance, they intensify rather than alleviate the perplexity to which the very existence of the opposite sex sometimes seems to drive him.

In selecting tendentiously a few passages from his letters, I readily admit that I pass over large swaths of ebullient writing. That Keats wrote often in his letters like a man who lived life to the hilt and loved his portion is well known to every reader of them. I wish only, by culling a few neglected remarks from them, to double in prose the assertions of the poems, and to refute any critic who finds the philosophy of the poetry altogether at variance with the accepted picture of the life.

I will begin with this broadly general and comprehensive condemnation of his fellow mortals confided to his sister-in-law Georgiana Keats in a letter of January 1820:

The worst of Men are those whose self interests are their passion; the next those whose passions are their self-interest. Upon the whole I dislike Mankind. Whatever people on the other side of the question may advance they cannot deny that they are always surprised at hearing of a good action and never of a bad one.

The first sentence has a pleasing aphoristic pungency; the last is of an arresting pithiness and particularity. It can be too easy and lazy to dislike mankind, but Keats's passing remark that we are surprised at hearing of a good deed but never at hearing of a bad has a homely specificity that bespeaks real observation. (It is interesting to find

him writing so dismally to Georgiana in Kentucky while George himself is actually in London: his sister-in-law had recently given birth to her first child and was probably not the most appropriate audience for these misanthropic musings. But Keats felt strongly drawn to Georgiana and was more comfortable confiding in her than in almost any other person of either sex.)

Keats is often pictured in good company, but the following complaint, found in the same letter to Georgiana, strikes a note that occurs more and more often as he gets older:

Almost all the parties I may chance to fall into I know by heart. I know the different Styles of talk in different places, what subjects will be started, how it will proceed like an acted play from the first to the last Act. If I go to Hunt's I run my head into manytimes heard puns and music; to Haydon's worn out discourses of poetry and painting. The Miss Reynolds I am afraid to speak to for fear of some sickly reiteration of Phrase or Sentiment. . . . At Dilke's I fall foul of Politics. 'Tis best to remain aloof from people and like their good parts without being eternally troubled with the dull processes of their everyday Lives. When once a person has smok'd the vapidness of the routine of Society he must have either self-interest or the love of some sort of distinction to keep him in good humour with it. All I can say is that standing at Charing cross and looking east, west, north and south I can see nothing but dullness.

He had written to George and Georgiana in a similar vein during the spring of 1819:

I look back upon the last month and find nothing to write about, indeed I do not recollect one thing particular in it. It's all alike; we keep on breathing. The only amusement is a little scandal of however fine a shape, a laugh at a pun and then after all we wonder how we could enjoy the scandal, or laugh at the pun.

Such reflections could indicate little more than a funk, but there is real psychological penetration in the following negative epiphany, recorded in a letter to B. R. Haydon on

March 8, 1819:

Conversation is not a search after knowledge, but an endeavour at effect. In this respect two most opposite men, Wordsworth and Hunt, are the same.

Like Shakespeare's melancholy Jacques, Keats is jaded and cynical about all the busyness that people put themselves to. But Jacques also has a capacious sense of humor and a love of satire, and about half the time seems to be enjoying himself immensely. It is always a challenge for the actor to join these halves of his character together in a seamless whole, because we assume rather too hastily that they are incompatible. We would do better to be instructed by Shakespeare as to what is psychologically probable, and to apply the lesson to Keats.

In the same letter to Haydon, we find this comment:

[W]ith respect to my livelihood I will not write for it, for I will not mix with that most vulgar of all crowds the literary.

This could be said to be posturing, but it is a thought that is often reiterated in his letters.

Also to Haydon, on December 22, 1818:

I never expect to get anything by my Books and moreover I wish to avoid publishing. I admire Human Nature but I do not like *Men*. I should like to compose things honourable to Man, but not fingerable over by *Men*. So I am anxious to exist without troubling the printer's devil or drawing upon Men's and Women's admiration; in which great solitude I hope God will give me strength to rejoice.

He was continually alarming his friends and his publishers with his disdainful remarks about the public. He wanted to write directly for posterity without having to pass through

popularity, which latter malign fate he associated with Lord Byron. He could see that Byron's well-remunerated fame as a poet rested upon the sensational facts and rumors about his celebrated and notorious life and was unrelated to the quality of his verses even when the verses were good. In the fragmentary "Ode to Maia," Keats extols by contrast the poets who die content but almost unknown, "leaving great verse unto a little clan."

It should be said here that even at the age of 23 – and he wrote no poetry that he chose to publish after his 24th birthday – Keats was not the man to convert his personal grudge against life into a philosophy binding on other men. He was much too objective and clear-seeing for that. His poetry is uncontaminated by any sense of personal injury at the hands of fate. At the time he wrote the odes, he would have been the first to say that he had nothing to complain of. His health was not yet thought to be in jeopardy and his relations with Fanny Brawne had not yet begun to torment him. Nonetheless, for those critics who, like Paul de Man, demand to see evidence that he *had* "gained his experience" and that the ideas in his poetry are not merely taken over from other writers, I will mention his letter to Benjamin Bailey on June 10, 1818. As is usual when he writes to this correspondent, Keats is confiding and forthright about his state of mind. The date is significant: with *Endymion* recently published and *Isabella* behind him, he has come of age as a poet; from this date forward, almost every serious effort at poetry produces a masterpiece. I have already called attention to the line that begins this excerpt:

I am never alone without rejoicing that there is such a thing as death,  
without placing my ultimate in the glory of dying for a great human  
purpose. Perhaps if my affairs were in a different state I should not have

written the above. You shall judge. I have two Brothers, one is driven by the "burden of Society" to America, the other, with an exquisite love of Life, is in a lingering state. . . . Life must be undergone, and I certainly derive a consolation from the thought of writing one or two more Poems before it ceases.

Keats is writing to a devoutly religious friend, and must have considered carefully whether to make an admission that so obviously renounces the Christian virtues of hope and faith.

What is it that so poisons life? We are given the two calamities that had touched him most nearly in the lives of his brothers. They reappear in various guises throughout the mature poetry. The "burden of society" that is so oppressive to George haunts even so decorative and mannered a romance as "The Eve of St. Agnes," so much so that the inimical environment of the chilly, hate-filled castle makes a more lasting impression on us than the love of the protagonists; and the "lingering state" of his consumptive brother inspires the wrenching third stanza of "Ode to a Nightingale."

But perhaps the first point to grasp about Keats's philosophy, if we should call it that, is expressed in the laconic statement "Life must be undergone." In other words, suicide is out of the question. Not ever, in letters or poems, is there any intimation that he might wish to die by his own hand. If only to do his remaining brother and sister good, it was imperative to live. Every atom of his cultural inheritance militated against suicide; and everything we know about Keats reinforces our impression that he would have felt a positive abhorrence at the idea of hastening his own end. This is certainly borne out a thousand times over by his enduring such a protracted death from consumption, knowing that recovery was impossible. His view of death in the poems, accordingly, oscillates between finding in it nothing to fear and looking forward to it as a

release. The sonnet "When I have fears" concludes not by saying that death is desirable, but only that an early death is nothing to lament, because fame, adventure, and love – all that we set our hopes upon that makes us cling to life – will sink to nothingness when carefully examined. The sonnet "Bright star" puts death second-best to the sensuous trance-experience described in the sestet: it is better to swoon to death if you cannot sustain the sweet unrest; but it is better still to remain in it. The sonnet "Why did I laugh" is, of all Keats's poems, the one that seems most to embrace death as a positive experience – as life's highest achievement, more intense even than verse, fame, and love – but for a correct interpretation, we must not neglect the octave. The poet has laughed tonight, presumably at a social gathering – inappropriately, we surmise, and inexplicably. The tone is ironically amused rather than anguished: heaven and hell, whence comes no answer, bear no burden of the supernatural. His turn to his own heart is treated comically – "Nobody here but the two of us, come on now, you can tell me." The end of the octave is humorously exaggerated: "O mortal pain! O Darkness! Darkness!" This is a mock-despair that cannot be taken as a genuine objective correlative of the poet's puzzlement as to why he laughed. Certainly the sestet takes a turn toward the serious, but it is still answering the question of the octave. The "naive narrator" insists that it is vain to ask why he laughed, but the poem exists for no reason other than to supply the answer, and in the sestet he blurts out everything we need to know: surely it was because, in the midst of the glitter of an evening party full of stale puns, familiar tunes, and talk of what he called "fashionables," he caught a glimpse of the fatuity of our frantic pursuits – of the quest for love and fame that is animating all the guests, himself included. Laughing amid the hollowness of London

life, he sees death to be, by contrast, the more meaningful experience. But this is not a death-wish. John Middleton Murry, in *Shakespeare and Keats*, comments aptly that "To accept death is to accept life." Since "Verse, Fame, and Beauty are intense indeed," Keats has much of interest to do in the meantime. The higher intensity of death will arrive on schedule. There is no hurry. Perhaps "one or two more Poems" can be written while waiting for it.

It is in the "Ode to a Nightingale" that the desire for death is given its strongest expression, and I have argued that it is no good pretending otherwise. But the poet does not contemplate self-slaughter, and certainly he keeps his grip on his sanity throughout and knows that it is not really possible to die by asking Nature to take into the air his quiet breath. Death would be a relief, and he does not want to return to life – his clear statement of this has flummoxed the critics, and made them grasp at "life-affirming" straws that are mostly in their imaginations – but neither does he lash out with existential gloom or the rage of the believer who feels betrayed by his god. Life is no worse than we have any right to expect, and it has its beauties, such as the music of the nightingale and the incense of the musk-rose.

From his letters, we also get Keats's confidence that life is getting better all the time. He believed in the "grand march of intellect," which meant to him that Wordsworth had easily surpassed Milton in philosophical depth, in spite of Milton's formidable and perhaps superior mind, simply because humanity had progressed in the meantime. It also meant that religion and tyranny were on the way out (but here he was a little *too* optimistic) because true science is superior to superstition and freedom is better than slavery.

Keats is not a carper at life. Quite the contrary: cynicism is foreign to him, as is defeatism or any brand of reflexive or unearned pessimism. He is always open-eyed and realistic, even when he foresees a world of troubles – in fact, in one of his most famous letters, he asserts that such a world is the precondition for acquiring an identity, a soul. When he considers, objectively and dispassionately, the likelihood that he will be unable to prosper as a poet, he blithely assures his sister that he has other ways to make a living. Whenever he hears of misfortune befalling another, he tells Bailey in a letter, his first thought is, "Well, it cannot be helped. He will have the pleasure of trying the resources of his spirit." Yet in the same letter, he writes, "I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness." Readers of Epictetus will not blink an eye at this combination of self-confidence and low expectations.

What we have is a person who is determined to live, and to live as happily as is possible, who is nonetheless fully cognizant of the odds against him. So attuned is he to the forces that oppose our self-realization that he finds thought itself to be a burden. He is powerfully agitated by the panoply of life's injustices, painfully aware of life's hardships, very knowing about human frailty, and deeply insightful into the snares and delusions of love and ambition. Let us amplify upon these sensitivities and bear in mind how they might be exacerbated in a person of great feeling. Anyone who grieves too deeply over injustice to others can expect to remain in a perpetual state of disturbance, for this world will afford no shortage of examples: but instances continually struck Keats close to home. To the hardships that he saw afflicting humankind in general and his friends in particular were added those that harassed his family and himself. He famously forgave the weaknesses and foibles of his friends, but as he got older, he saw

them quarreling with each other over trifles, making fools of themselves in their relations with women, and becoming more and more touchy with self-importance. As a result, he came to count less on the pleasure of evenings out and the comforts of conviviality. Finally, after the reviews of *Endymion*, he became increasingly doubtful that he could ever earn his living by pleasing the public with his poetry. (It is here that the malignity of the reviewers had its effect on his state of mind. He was completely unshaken in his belief in himself as a poet, but he understood the power of the reviews to dampen his sales at a time when he was running out of money.)

The overall picture given by Keats's letters is not that life is not worth living at all, but that its everlasting pains, troubles, and delusions make it so constant an oppression that death is hardly to be feared and may prove to be a relief. He was the first to admit that some of our difficulties are entirely of our own making, and that to our real difficulties we are prone to add imaginary ones. When his brother George unwisely sank much of his capital in a bad investment in Kentucky and wrote home about it, Keats was almost pleased to have the motivation of a serious practical challenge: "I feel I can bear real ills better than imaginary ones." In another letter, he resolved to give up "fretting." If he could have heard a roomful of contemporary group-therapy patients lamenting "I know it's all in my head," he would have laughed and said, "Of course." I think he knew, with extraordinary percipience, not only that we are so mentally constituted as to fester with neurotic ills, but that we cannot be easily cured of the propensity – certainly not by simply having it pointed out.

What, then, is the exact nature of Keats's brief against life? If he was never suicidal,

little given to complaining, was instead cheerful, courageous, and confident – until his fatal illness – and if he was convinced both early and late that there was much good poetry in him still waiting to be written, then why did he portray death so positively as a release from a nearly intolerable burden? Thus far, I have indicated his critique of life randomly and haphazardly. What follows now is a more formal indictment, drawn up from the letters and poems. I have placed the particulars of his charge sheet under the following five headings:

- Religion and politics
- Getting and spending
- Love and fame
- Curious conscience
- The pleasure trap

The poetry has much to say about his disaffection in these areas.

### **Religion and politics**

Keats was alienated from much of what other poets write about. He is often lumped with Byron and Shelley, but we cannot imagine him caring to emulate their hortatory tendencies. He shared their contempt for religious piety and political malfeasance, but this distaste rarely found its way into his poetry. The youthful sonnet, titled "Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition," was tossed off in 15 minutes:

The church bells toll a melancholy round,

Calling the people to some other prayers,  
Some other gloominess, more dreadful cares,  
More harkening to the sermon's horrid sound.  
Surely the mind of man is closely bound  
In some black spell; seeing that each one tears  
Himself from fireside joys, and Lydian airs,  
And converse high of those with glory crown'd.

Still, still they toll, and I should feel a damp,  
A chill as from a tomb, did I not know  
That they are dying like an outburnt lamp;  
That 'tis their sighing, wailing ere they go  
Into oblivion; – that fresh flowers will grow,  
And many glories of immortal stamp.

Walter Jackson Bate did not like this poem at all, because it does not say what he liked to hear. Therefore he convinced himself that its poetic value must accordingly be "meager" and that Keats thought so too.

The heart of the hasty sonnet – the extraordinary naiveté – lies in the assumption that those attending evening prayer are tearing themselves away not only from "fireside joys" but also from "Lydian airs," and from "converse high of those with glory crown'd."

Surely Keats does not mean that the parishioners are *literally* engaged in such worthy pursuits when the church bells call them to prayer, but only that they *could* be if they were freed from vulgar superstition. Nor is he speaking merely of the availability of the time slot: because our minds are under the black spell of superstition, we are *unable* to hold converse with the great classical literature and appreciate its beauties.

Here we have the essence of the matter. The weak sestet of the sonnet repeats it – for it is the only thing he has to say . . . .

Yes, the end of the sonnet recapitulates the point made earlier, that we could spend in a

better fashion the time that is now wasted harkening to the sermon's horrid sound. Such a rounding off is a familiar strategy in a poem making an argument. But the first mention, in the octave, is a regretful allusion to what might be, while the second mention, in the sestet, is a bold prediction of what *will* be. The structure of the sonnet is rock-solid, showing a progression from the present gloominess of superstition to the glorious prospect of our future liberation from it.

I do not wish to say that this is a great or memorable poem, but I must defend it against the imputation of imaginary faults; and I believe Bate found these faults solely because he did not care for the sentiment. I find the thought to be admirably compressed, and, sad to say, as apropos today as the day it was written. The black spell is too much with us yet. As for the supposed haste that Bate deprecates, the oft-anthologized sonnet to the grasshopper and the cricket, beginning with the famous line "The poetry of earth is never dead," was also written in a quarter of an hour.

It is extremely difficult to claim Keats as any sort of religious believer, but Bate does his best. Keats did try to keep a promise that he made to Bailey, that he would no longer be a scoffer at religion; but the closest he comes to a Christian sentiment in his letters is to find Jesus worthy of comparison to Socrates. Bate, along with all of Keats's Anglican champions in the United Kingdom, wants to trace a progress out of thoughtless agnosticism toward the higher truth of theism. But the evidence is so sparse that, after a half-hearted attempt to make the "vale of soulmaking" letter do duty as a theological treatise, Bate trails off and abandons the subject.

Like most intelligent and enlightened men of the time, Keats espoused a Jeffersonian tolerance of religious sentiments but fiercely opposed organized religion.

The following sketch, written to George and Georgiana in the spring of 1818, is interesting as a canny piece of psychology:

I begin to hate Parsons. They did not make me love them that day when I saw them in their proper colours. A Parson is a Lamb in a drawing room and a lion in a Vestry. The notions of Society will not permit a Parson to give way to his temper in any shape, so he festers in himself. His features get a peculiar diabolical self-sufficient iron stupid expression. He is continually acting. His mind is against every Man and every Man's mind is against him. He is an Hippocrite to the Believer and a Coward to the unbeliever.

As unyielding as Keats is in his contempt, he also characteristically studies his subject with negative capability and notes that the social role itself plays a part in warping the Parson's personality.

Keats was as opinionated about politics as he was about vulgar superstition, and again it is touching, if unedifying, to see the English critics of a bygone era try their best to disengage him from any taint of association with Leigh Hunt, Shelley, and the other disreputable radicals who were blamed for Keats's early flippancy about the deity. But from a very young age, Keats was flamingly liberal, and there is no reason to believe that he was beginning to follow Wordsworth into Tory respectability just because he had learned to better evaluate the paltriness of Hunt's verse. Every reference to current events in his letters flies the liberal flag. At the same time, however, Keats had no interest in following the debates in Parliament or keeping abreast of the machinations of the political parties. "At Dilke's I fall foul of Politics."

As there is but one sonnet addressed solely to the subject of religion, there is but one that expressly gives his opinion on the statesmen of the day, but it is unambiguous:

Before he went to live with owls and bats,  
Nebuchadnezzar had an ugly dream . . . .

A horrid nightmare, similar somewhat,  
Of late has haunted a most valiant crew  
of loggerheads and chapmen . . .

In today's language, a crew of idiots and politicians-for-sale.

### **Getting and spending**

Of the mercantile world, Keats was, if possible, even more contemptuous. He felt that there was no way for a decent man to make a decent living in trade:

You know my Brother George has been out of employ for some time. It has weighed very much upon him and driven him to scheme and turn over things in his Mind. The result has been his resolution to emigrate to the back settlements of America, become farmer, and work with his own hands after purchasing 1400 hundred Acres of the American Government. This for many reasons has met with my entire consent, and the chief one is this: he is of too independent and liberal Mind to get on in trade in this Country in which a generous Man with a scanty recourse must be ruined. I would sooner he should till the ground than bow to a Customer.

In August 1819 he wrote to Fanny Brawne:

*Seriously*, you say I may do as I please. I do not think with any conscience I can. I have all my life thought very little of these matters; they seem not to belong to me. It may be a proud sentence, but by heaven I am as entirely above all matters of interest as the Sun is above the Earth, and though of my own money I should be careless, of my Friends I must be spare.

As for his opinion in general, a few verses from *Isabella* give the clue:

And for them many a weary hand did swelt  
    In torched mines and noisy factories,  
And many once proud-quiver'd loins did melt  
    In blood from stinging whip . . .

For them the Ceylon diver held his breath,  
    And went all naked to the hungry shark;  
For them his ears gush'd blood for them in death  
    The deal on the cold ice with piteous bark  
Lay full of darts; for them alone did seethe  
    A thousand men in troubles wide and dark . . .

Why were they proud? Because their marble founts  
    Gush'd with more pride than do a wretch's tears?

These are the thoughts of a man who found the notion of a career so alien that he could never give proper attention to his own.

### **Love and Fame**

The poems warn us over and over about the drug of fame and the illusion of love. I have briefly mentioned the poems on these subjects; let us examine them more closely. In his early verse, Keats confesses himself eager to pursue his chosen vocation of poetry; and up through "Isabella" he paints sentimental pictures of love. But from the time he returned from his walking tour in Scotland until the end of his working life, his every reference to ambition and love is admonitory.

A sonnet titled "On Fame" was copied into his journal-letter to George and Georgiana on April 30, 1819:

How fever'd is the man, who cannot look  
    Upon his mortal days with temperate blood,  
Who vexes all the leaves of his life's book,

And robs his fair name of its maidenhood . . . .

The sonnet ends by calling the pursuit of fame a "fierce miscreed." It is immediately followed by "Another on Fame," thought to have been written earlier because it reverts to the Shakespearean form of the sonnet:

Fame, like a wayward girl, will still be coy  
To those who woo her with too slavish knees,  
But makes surrender to some thoughtless boy,  
And dotes the more upon a heart at ease . . . .  
Make your best bow to her, and bid adieu;  
Then if she like it, she will follow you.

As a counterweight to this depiction of the feverish and delusive chase after glory, the unfinished "Ode to Maia" gives us a memorable picture of anonymous poets plying their craft in a bygone age. Keats desires only to emulate them:

My song should die away content as theirs,  
Rich in the simple worship of a day.

His ideal is poetry itself, not fame as a poet.

Keats's indictment of love is, if possible, even more derisive than his condemnation of ambition. Here is an unpublished bit of iambic pentameter from 1818:

And what is love? It is a doll dress'd up  
For idleness to cosset, nurse, and dandle;  
A thing of soft misnomers, so divine  
That silly youth doth think to make itself  
Divine by loving, and so goes on  
Yawning and doting a whole summer long,  
Till Miss's comb is made a pearl tiara,  
And common Wellingtons turn Romeo boots;  
Then Cleopatra lives at Number Seven,  
And Antony resides in Brunswick Square. . . .

On September 17, 1819, he wrote as follows to George and Georgiana:

I saw Haslam. He is very much occupied with love and business, being one of Mr. Saunders' executors and Lover to a young woman. He show'd me her Picture by Severn. I think she is, though not very cunning, too cunning for him. Nothing strikes me so forcibly with a sense of the ridiculous as love. A Man in love I do think cuts the sorriest figure in the world – Even when I know a poor fool to be really in pain about it, I could burst out laughing in his face. His pathetic visage becomes irresistible. Not that I take Haslam as a pattern for Lovers. He is a very worthy man and a good friend. His love is very amusing. Somewhere in the Spectator is related an account of a Man inviting a party of stutterers and squinters to his table. 'Twould please me more to scrape together a party of Lovers, not to dinner – no to tea. There would be no fighting as among Knights of old:

Pensive they sit, and roll their languid eyes,  
Nibble their toasts, and cool their tea with sighs,  
Or else forget the purpose of the night,  
Forget their tea – forget their appetite.  
See, with cross'd arms they sit – ah hapless crew,  
The fire is going out, and no one rings  
For coals, and therefore no coals Betty brings. . . .

At the time he wrote this, he was engaged to Fanny Brawne, but he had not yet admitted the fact to George. There is much that we can make of this psychological disjunction, and, for once, we should: he is himself caught in the toils of this dangerous and unworthy emotion – which adds power and poignancy to his denunciation of love.

In "The Eve of St. Agnes," composed in February 1819, he versified a predetermined plot about lovers who overcome a Capulet-Montague type of feud and elope together. He regarded the poem as a mere exercise, a way to keep his hand in before returning to *Hyperion*. He understood that the genre of romance could not tolerate a jaundiced view of chivalrous love. He would be working at cross-purposes

and producing a satire if he treated the story with skepticism or irony. But here is how he begins:

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

Here is how he ends:

And they are gone: ay, ages long ago  
These lovers fled away into the storm.  
That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,  
And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form  
Of witch, and demon, and large coffin-worm,  
Were long be-nightmar'd. Angela the old  
Died palsy-twitch'd, with meagre face deform;  
The Beadsman, after thousand aves told,  
For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.

In September, 1819 he decided to intensify the effect of the ending, and revised accordingly:

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

Richard Woodhouse wrote as follows to Keats's publisher John Taylor:

He retains the name of Porphyro, has altered the last 3 lines to leave on the reader a sense of pettish disgust by bringing Old Angela in (only)

dead, stiff and ugly. 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.

We do not know if the publishers prevailed upon him to withdraw this revision (and two others), or whether they simply overrode his wishes and obeyed their own at a time when Keats was too ill to object. I prefer the original ending, which is already dark enough. But whichever version we choose, it is clear that Keats wishes to begin and end this poem of love with a trenchant reminder of old age, sickness, and death, of the icy inhospitableness of the natural world and the cruelty of the human.

No commentator overlooks this obvious emphasis – no one could – but few have known what to make of it. Why is this frame chosen for this picture? Nobody wants to call the poem anything but a masterpiece; everybody approves of the first and last stanzas, myself included; but who can say convincingly *why* they are great? As a teacher, I could certainly make up something that would cow my students – "Keats knows that love is fragile, the world is hostile, blah blah" – but if the poem did not start in bitter chill and end in death and ashes, would any critic ever have suggested that it *should*? We have to admit that it satisfied something in Keats's soul to start and end this way. And we get glimpses of that same something in poem after poem. The subject is love . . . and so runs his mind.

Here is how "La belle dame sans merci" starts, in the letter to George and Georgiana:

O what can ail thee knight-at-arms  
Alone and palely loitering?  
The sedge has withered from the Lake  
And no birds sing!

O what can ail thee knight-at-arms  
So haggard and so woe begone?  
The squirrel's granary is full  
And the harvest's done.

I see a lily on thy brow  
With anguish moist and fever dew,  
And on thy cheeks a fading rose  
Fast withereth too.

And here is the conclusion:

And there she lulled me asleep,  
And there I dream'd, Ah woe betide!  
The latest dream I ever dreamt  
On the cold hill side.

I saw pale kings and Princes too,  
Pale warriors, death pale were they all;  
They cried, La belle dame sans merci  
Thee hath in thrall.

I saw their starv'd lips in the gloam  
With horrid warning gaped wide,  
And I awoke and found me here  
On the cold hill's side.

And this is why I sojourn here  
Alone and palely loitering;  
Though the sedge is wither'd from the Lake  
And no birds sing.

There is such a high degree of artifice in taking a medieval French romance and setting it in traditional English ballad form that we might easily assume that the poem is merely an exercise in poetics and has nothing substantive to say about love or anything else. But Keats could have made a ballad out of any subject he chose, and he chose this one. (All formalism founders on the rock of this straightforward query: why precisely

*this* content for the experiment in style and versification?) Karl Shapiro reminds us that, at the very least, a poet is someone who is always asking "what is the poetry of" the situation that he happens to be writing about. Every finished poem is an answer to this implicit question. What is the poetry of love? "Love is like (fill in the blank)."  
Hmmm. "Like being duped by a lovely temptress, only to wind up sojourning on the cold hill's side, alone and palely loitering."

Keats turned once more to the subject of love in "Lamia," and again we may hastily conclude that he had a story line to follow and did not worry himself too much about what it meant. We know that he was pleased with the result, and thought it would give the reader a strong sensation; but he did not say anything about its "philosophy." If we fill in the blank, I think we have to admit that love is again portrayed as a strange interlude, a dangerous delusion. This time the enchantment is much more protracted than that described in "La belle dame sans merci," and the awakening to reality is correspondingly more catastrophic.

Some readers have felt that Keats looks favorably upon the love of Lycius and Lamia, and faults Apollonius for disturbing the happy pair in their nest. To this we must respond that Lycius is living in a fool's paradise. Apollonius is merely right about this, even if Keats does heap coals on the philosopher's head for taking such malignant pleasure in solving an intellectual puzzle. "And what is love?" Not, this time, a doll dressed up, but a snake dressed up. Enough said.

### **Curious conscience**

It has been too little remarked that Keats, so celebrated, and properly so, for his preternatural power of empathy, found it a burden. He writes as follows to Benjamin Bailey in October, 1817:

Health and Spirits can only belong unalloyed to the selfish Man; the Man who thinks much of his fellows can never be in Spirits.

This arresting statement indicates the psychic cost of empathy and attests to the emotional depletion that follows upon it, and no doubt has relevance to many another great-hearted and compassionate soul. Again to Bailey in June, 1818:

[My sister-in-law] is the most disinterested woman I ever knew. . . . To see an entirely disinterested Girl quite happy is the most pleasant and extraordinary thing in the world. . . . Women must want Imagination and they may thank God for it, and so may we that a delicate being can feel happy without any sense of crime.

In Keats's view, normal people would experience a "sense of crime" in being happy because they would be simultaneously aware of the undeserved sufferings of so many of their fellow humans. In supposing his sister-in-law to be an exception to this rule, Keats can explain this phenomenon in no other way than to tax her with a want of "Imagination," which has here the connotation of "fretting over hypothetical cases." (Another letter to Bailey, apologizing for having worried him, makes this clear: "I carry all matters to an extreme, so that when I have any little vexation it grows in five Minutes into a theme for Sophocles. . . . Now you know how far to believe in them; you must allow for imagination.") In Keats's personal lexicon, "disinterested" is a term of the highest praise. He deeply admired his sister-in-law, and he could not have considered her disinterestedness to be exemplary had she been lacking in intellect and empathy.

He can only mean that she is free of the unnecessary burden of imagined ills and imaginary duties. But he finds such a case to be so extraordinary as to be essentially inexplicable.

In a letter to Reynolds in April 1818, Keats is pointed about the scruples that dog a conscientious person:

The most unhappy hours in our lives are those in which we recollect times past to our own blushing. If we are immortal that must be the Hell.

His sonnet "To Sleep" gives this idea a memorable turn:

Then save me or the passed day will shine  
Upon my pillow breeding many woes.  
Save me from curious conscience that still lords  
Its strength for darkness, burrowing like a Mole.

Shakespeare, in Macbeth's famous apostrophe to sleep, celebrates its restorative powers. Reading hastily, we may take Keats's sonnet to be a humdrum reiteration of this familiar idea; but it is, on closer examination, a paean to utter unconsciousness. As the frequently anthologized verse letter to Reynolds states clearly, even to dream is to be dangerously vulnerable to the recollection of the day's many woes:

O that our dreaming all of sleep or wake  
Would all their colours from the sunset take,  
From something of material sublime  
Rather than shadow our own Soul's daytime  
In the dark void of Night.

In the sonnet "On visiting the Tomb of Burns," we have a stronger assertion of the burden of consciousness:

. . . pain is never done:  
For who has mind to relish, Minos-wise,  
The real of beauty, free from that dead hue  
Sickly imagination and sick pride  
Cast wan upon it?

And yet, a person of self-respect must confront this pain that is never done, for to avoid it is unworthy of a sovereign nature. From *Hyperion*:

Now comes the pain of truth, to whom 'tis pain;  
O folly! for to bear all naked truths,  
And to envisage circumstance, all calm,  
That is the top of sovereignty.

We have, then, numerous variations of the idea that "to think is to be full of sorrow/And leaden-eyed despairs." From this it follows that the blessed state of indolence is one that is almost vacant of thought.

Perhaps the most explicit statement about the nature of empathy, and how it afflicts a person emotionally, is found in *The Fall of Hyperion*. When the poet is allowed to attain the top of the hill on which the temple of Saturn stands, he asks Moneta, the priestess of the sacred site, why he was spared:

"None can usurp this height," return'd that shade,  
"But those to whom the miseries of the world  
Are misery, and will not let them rest."

These are perhaps the most-often quoted of the 529 lines that constitute the abandoned draft of Keats's revision of *Hyperion*. We modernists think we know that the narrator of the poem is a "persona"; but there is full agreement by all readers of Keats's letters that he was such a person. Immediately Moneta goes on to distinguish the narrator from

All else who find a haven in the world  
Where they may thoughtless sleep away their days . . . .

The word "thoughtless" is even more indicative here than the word "sleep." Humanity is divided into those empathic few who are dogged by misery and the insensate many who are spared by virtue of lacking any meaningful consciousness at all.

*The Fall of Hyperion* as we have it is clearly an uncorrected first draft, and the argument is clotted enough that scholars have been kept busy ever since. But by reading it carefully and taking it a line at a time, and obeying Richard Woodhouse's injunction to omit lines 187-210 because Keats rewrote them without canceling them, and finally by recalling the earlier Keats poems and letters that bring us the bad news about empathy, it is possible to sort things out. We need only remember that Keats was improvising it as he wrote, trying out his ideas as they came to him. The narrator responds that there must be many other empathic people "who love their fellows even to the death," who also "feel the giant agony of the world," and who, out of duty toward suffering humanity, "labor for mortal good." But Moneta carves out a distinction between such humanitarians and the narrator, saying that he is a "dreamer" and the former are *not* "visionaries." The cheerful, helpful people, who devote themselves to the common welfare, appear to be empathic in our common way of judging: they exhibit kindness, generosity, and fellow-feeling; as Moneta puts it, they take pleasure in sociability and hear music in the human voice. But the quality that the narrator possesses is more like a curse – he automatically absorbs, like the "empath" in a *Star Trek* episode, the pain of others. He cannot even consciously control this faculty: it is not chosen; it *operates*.

Now throughout my adolescence, while readily responding to the "Ode to a Nightingale" and also subscribing, on paper at least, to the conclusion of *Ecclesiastes* that "in much wisdom is much grief, and he who increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow," I was still confident that knowledge is better than ignorance, awareness superior to stupor, and that I would rather be my smart sad self than a happy goof. (This hypothetical choice was the subject of a "philosophical" conversation between me and a friend. We had an actual goof in mind as the foil for our thought experiment. My friend was readier to believe that it might be better to be dumb but happy. We did not know that John Stuart Mill had already addressed the subject of our debate and found for me: "It is better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.") But Keats is not posturing here, as I was. The empath is not better than other people by virtue of his greater imaginative reach: instead, he is everlastingly cursed by this umbilical cord that connects him to the sufferings of others, a cord that he cannot cut.

Such empathy is pronounced by Moneta to be more or less useless:

What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe,  
To the great world?

And she is explicit that it unfits a person for happiness:

What bliss even in hope is there for thee?  
What haven? Every creature hath its home;  
Every sole man hath days of joy and pain,  
Whether his labours be sublime or low –  
The pain alone; the joy alone; distinct:  
Only the dreamer venoms all his days,  
Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve.

In these lines, Keats appears to rethink the contention of his earlier poems that pain is

necessarily intertwined with pleasure. Now he admits that he was speaking for himself. Other people appear to be able to turn off thought, ignore curious conscience, and take their pleasures as they come. It is only highly empathic individuals whose joys are mixed with pain, because they have the imagination to foresee the brevity of every pleasure, and also because they are so acutely tuned to the miseries of others that they experience those miseries as their own. *The Fall of Hyperion* reaffirms what every previous letter and poem implies: that "the Man who thinks much of his fellows can never be in Spirits"; and that to think on the world at all "is to be full of sorrow." Keats is unfazed by the prospect of death – that eternal unconsciousness – because, for those who are truly conscious, "pain is never done".

### **The pleasure trap**

Life is also full of pleasure. Here is Keats writing to Charles Dilke about eating a nectarine:

Talking of Pleasure, this moment I was writing with one hand and with the other holding to my Mouth a Nectarine. Good god, how fine. It went down soft pulpy, slushy, oozy; all its delicious embonpoint melted down my throat like a large beatified Strawberry.

The date is September 22, 1819; he had been immersed in the gloom-ridden ambience of *The Fall of Hyperion* only a few days before. In fact, few poets have ever written so intensely about sensuous pleasure – so much so that the Victorians, preoccupied with "manliness" to a degree that would embarrass today's professional football players, had many moral misgivings to overcome in cultivating their appreciation for Keats.

It is noteworthy that Keats's pleasures are those of the five senses. "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" We have also seen that he touts the pleasure that fancy can bring back from an excursion abroad. But merely intellectual pleasure, so important to the philosophers as the touchstone of the true *eudaimonia* or highest human happiness, rarely comes into it at all:

I have not read any Books. The Morning said I was right. I had no Idea but of the Morning, and the Thrush said I was right, seeming to say:

"O thou whose face hath felt the Winter's wind,  
Whose eye has seen the Snow clouds hung in Mist  
And the black-elm tops 'mong the freezing Stars;  
To thee the Spring will be a harvest-time.  
O thou whose only book has been the light  
Of supreme darkness which thou feddest on  
Night after night, when Phoebus was away;  
To thee the Spring shall be a triple morn.  
O fret not after knowledge – I have none  
And yet my song comes native with the warmth.  
O fret not after knowledge – I have none  
And yet the Evening listens. He who saddens  
At thought of Idleness cannot be idle,  
And he's awake who thinks himself asleep."

This unrhymed Shakespearean sonnet – we can confidently call it Shakespearean because its structure, by way of compensating for the lack of rhymes, is so transparent – is unduly neglected in the Keats literature. In the poem, we have yet another evocation of negative capability – "O fret not after knowledge" – and in the letter from which it is taken, we again encounter "the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of Idleness" as the optimum state. The capitalization of "Idleness" in the next-to-last line thus gives the key to the meaning of the poem's closing paradox: the individual who rejects this desideratum in the mistaken belief that it is mere laziness will be unable to

ever relax ("be idle"), while the person who embraces Idleness so fully that he experiences "a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness" – a state that the busy seeker regards as little better than sleep – will be truly awake to what matters most.

Of pleasure, then, there is a great deal in the poetry of Keats. But to be alive to the taste of pleasure, says the "Ode on Melancholy," is to be in a state of "wakeful anguish." Jack Stillingner finds it provocative that this state seems to be as good as it gets. Yes, in this ode it is: if but to think is to be full of sorrow, then the occasions for joy are few and they will never be unmixed with pain. But they do include the intense sensation of glutting your sorrow on a morning rose. True, such pleasure turns to poison almost as soon as it is taken, begins to cloy as soon as it is begun; but the alternative to the wakeful anguish of the pleasure-pain nexus is either a touch of sedative to dull the senses or a lethal dose to end the frustration of it all. Melancholy – the aching awareness that joy is fleeting and beauty dies – is not a bout of depression that interrupts the cheerful pursuits of an active life; melancholy *is* the active life. You can be alive and in pain; or pain-free and dead. Pick one.

Thus runs Keats's ontology. His case against existence is comprehensive and unmitigated. Pleasure is fleeting and inadequate. Pain is never done. Knowledge is no help.

Yet life must be undergone.

And as every stoic from Epictetus to Victor Frankl has told us, while we can do nothing about the vicissitudes of life, we can do something about our attitude toward them. Keats does not "affirm life" in the fashion of a greeting card or a self-help book –

not a bit of it. But he does tell us, after his fashion, how to endure our going hence even as our coming hither. With the utmost tact and deftest touch, he insinuates into his poetry here and there a brief instruction in how to conduct ourselves in this vale of soul-making. He does so indirectly, needless to say, for as he wrote to Reynolds, "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us." No poet ever did less to set himself up as an oracle. He would not have agreed with Shelley that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world." He would have rejected the role had it been offered: "I have not one Idea of the truth of any of my speculations. I shall never be a Reasoner because I care not to be in the right." He did not have a polemical bone in his body. But because, *pace* the formalists, every intelligible sentence says *something* while it is flaunting its pure stylishness, Keats cannot withhold from his writing an implicit stance or general philosophy. The poems inevitably give us his values. And they are well worth our considered attention.

### **Keats's dharma**

The Second Noble Truth given by Siddhartha Gautama is that suffering is caused by graspingness or desire. Keats intuited the psychological insights of Buddhism. Negative capability, the refusal to grasp, is the application of the Second Noble Truth to the intellectual realm.

Before going further, we need to clarify a point that is a stumbling block to many Buddhists themselves. The ordinary bodily appetites are not pathologized by the Buddha's reprehension of desire. Keats's poetry is never healthier than when it

celebrates food and wine, music and aromas, and all the beauties of the natural world. As *Ecclesiastes* says, these are our portion. What the Second Noble Truth warns against is the delusive, insatiable desire for fame, for love, even for poetry itself when it is conceived of as a career. We cannot get enough of what does not fill us up.

Our most compelling desires are for accumulation in the psychic realm. We are entangled in *maya*, the perpetual unreality of our thought-infested worlds. The normal gratification of our ordinary appetites, on the other hand, is an unmixed good. While eating a nectarine, we are momentarily drawn into the present moment by a tangible delight, and, if only for a few seconds, freed from "curious conscience." We can put the onerous burden of our empathy in a time-out; even conscience must acknowledge that we have to eat.

But nothing in Keats suggests that pure hedonism – the satisfaction of the five senses as an exclusive vocation – can succeed as a "meaning of life" or even a reliable palliative to the pain of everyday existence. To be alive, and certainly to be at all sensitive, is to be alert; and to be alert is to be in a state of wakeful anguish or sweet unrest that no hedonistic indulgence can assuage for more than a moment.

The better answer is negative capability or intelligent idleness. Better still – and here we encounter Keats's version of enlightenment, or *satori* – is the temper indolent. In that rarefied state, thought and even the capacity for pleasure and pain diminish almost to "nothingness" (a state that Zen adepts understand and cherish). Suspended in an appetitive and intellectual stasis, we appreciate the beauty of nature through sensations that are purified of the dross of self-seeking. The "Ode on Indolence" gives us the experience in its most dramatic and elaborated form. The other odes give us

moments of satori that are glimpsed when the soul, even if not quite descended to the zero of the temper indolent, has at least settled itself into a state of receptivity.

Keats is, without ever preaching, the foremost exponent of "living in the present" in the English language. This is how we make the best of the bad hand that we have been dealt. I have already quoted from the extraordinary letter to Benjamin Bailey written on November 22, 1817, only a few weeks after his 22nd birthday:

I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness. I look not for it if it be not in the present hour. Nothing startles me beyond the Moment. The setting sun will always set me to rights, or if a Sparrow come before my Window, I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel.

We cannot *count on* any happiness; we should not *look* for it, *i.e.*, scan the future for it; but there is still the present hour. What use can we make of it? No use at all, if by that we mean getting and spending, setting our sights on the goals that sink to nothingness when we see them for what they are – in short, selling out the present for the sake of the future. But by cultivating Idleness, we can take part empathically in the existence of the sparrow that is picking about the gravel, or even participate imaginatively in the amusing instinctual behaviors of the human animals – thus coming to understand, with Olympian forbearance, the devout Bailey's strangely wanton conduct among the women he courted, Haydon's penchant for quarreling, and the Parson's plight. Thus does Keats tell us exactly what empathy really means and how it redeems the time. How perfectly Keats would have understood Thoreau! – another natural Zen Buddhist, who wrote in *Walden* as follows:

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line.

We are here for a little while, and death, a necessary end, will come when it will come.

In the meantime, as Keats says in the same letter to Bailey, there is "the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination." In fact, he says that he is sure of nothing else. And he goes on, anticipating the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by a full year-and-a-half: "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth." This much-manhandled aphorism surely makes sense without any of the irony or ambiguity that modern exegetes read into it – but only in the context of Keats's mistrust of intellectualization and his advocacy of the present hour as the only happiness. From the same letter again, including his own wonderful spelling: "I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning."

We know the worldly truth men live by – impeccably arrived at by that "consequitive" reasoning. Keats deflates every piety of conventional wisdom. What is left is the beauty of the setting sun – the only reliable truth. But, as he says in another letter, even this natural beauty requires "a greeting of the spirit": we must send the fancy forth to savor the sunset or to pick about the gravel with the sparrow.

What is good in life is to eat a good meal, drink a good wine (preferably claret), read Chapman's Homer, see the Elgin marbles, hear the nightingale, and use imagination to better understand the robin, the hawk, and the stoat – three animals whose activities he compares explicitly to human endeavors. These are immediate sensations; they are enjoyed in the here and now. Everything else – religion, politics,

trade, fame, "love" – is *samsara*, the wheel of life that spins us round and round in a mist of illusion without our ever getting anywhere. Enlightenment means getting off the wheel.

Keats is preeminently the poet of the five senses, not because he is a merely "decorative" writer addicted to ornamentation, and not because he is a shallow sensualist, but because the senses are the portals to the wisdom of the present moment – to the knowledge that is continually vitiated by our intellectualizations. When we think he is being merely "descriptive," he is trying to tell us something – something of great importance: that this object of everyday experience is all we know and all we need to know. The "moral" that is supposedly put too baldly at the end of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," about which the critics have complained so vociferously, is not so obvious that they have been inoculated against misunderstanding it. Those carpers would have been wiser, before they called the lines vague, sententious, or trite, to consider the possibility that a poet as great as Keats may be farther down the road than they are. The deep background for the lines is Keats's distrust of intellectualization and his high valuation of negative capability. The emphasis lies not on the five words that are so often torn out of their immediate context, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" – Keats is not forcing an absurd equivalence between aesthetic judgments and scientific facts. He is calling our little intellectual verities – what we *denominate* as "truth" – into such radical questioning as to propose that the little we know when we experience the beauty of the world in a moment's epiphany may be *all* that we know with certainty, and the only valuable knowledge. Beauty is thus higher than the alleged truth that we acquire *via* "consequitive reasoning," and it becomes thereby the only real or dependable Truth.

Thus did Keats anticipate Nietzsche's skepticism about consensual reality, and the postmodernists have not caught up to him yet.

Much of Keats's verse can be read as a gloss on the Second Noble Truth. The letter to Reynolds that contains the song of the thrush also suggests that a Zen-like meditative state might be induced by concentrating upon a single passage of poetry, treated like a koan. In addition to the appetitive pleasures, then, which are so lavishly and lovingly recommended in the "Ode to a Nightingale" and "The Eve of St. Agnes" (two of the darkest poems), and the pleasure of negative capability – the observing of the beauty of the world, including the strange doings of its madcap people, without any irritable attempt to reduce what is observed to an intellectual system – there is the pleasure of poetry itself, implicitly glorified and exemplified by the odes. Whatever teases us out of thought, and takes us out of ourselves and into the present, and makes us aware of the beauty that is *now* – the setting sun, the sparrow on the walk, or a page of full poetry or distilled prose – that is our calling until we encounter our high meed. Beauty may not keep her lustrous eyes, but she has them now. New Love may not pine at them beyond tomorrow, but today is all we know. Joy has his hand to his lips, bidding adieu, but that is a problem only if we grasp at him and think that there is some unfairness in his going. Look not for happiness if it be not in the present hour. But the present hour has that which will set you to rights. Tender is the night.