KEATS AND THE SONNET

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by

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ABSTRACT

The relatively limited range of published research on the sonnets of John Keats has until recently focused on the stylistic influences of John Milton and William Wordsworth, and has highlighted the socio-historical context that surrounds the poet and his sonnets. However, there are other, more intriguing topics for research to concentrate on Keats's sonnets themselves. He persistently wrote sonnets during his entire poetic career between 1814 and 1819. Keats's sonnets can be seen as his poetic autobiography that records the development of his mind from juvenility through emotional sufferings to a ripened understanding of his own limitations and mortality. He projected his highly personal anxiety for poetry into his sonnets. The sonnets often become the poet's manifestation of a strong confidence in his poetic identity, but when the poet was afflicted by his own weakness and impermanence, they become expressions of his fear and uncertainty. Keats established a coherent maturity of his sonnets, however, by projecting his mode of perception, which highlights man's existential ability to stay in uncertainties and doubts in reality. Thus, the sonnet became for the poet a place not only to reify a conflict between the poetic ideal and his reality but also to reconcile the conflict. This is a new thematic complexity that makes Keats's sonnets distinctive both from the elegiac mode of eighteenth-century sonnets and from the visionary mode of the Romantics' sonnets.

In my PhD thesis, I concentrate on hitherto neglected aspects of Keats as a "sonneteer". I take into account the stylistic features of his sonnets as well as external influences upon them, and internal motives, which are revealed in his poems and letters, and I also explore the way in which the sonnets reveal a process of development that exemplifies the changing character of Keats's poetics. Taking Keats's sonnets as a prime case, I am concerned primarily with the interrelationship between the poet's modes of perception and his attitudes towards the sonnet form, and also with the poet's distinctive use of the form whereby he represented the conflict and reconciliation between the poetic ideal and his mortal selfhood, working within the sonnet's predetermined bipartite structure. Based on these theoretical concepts, the thesis presents a re-positioning of Keats's sonnets not only in the personal context of poetic development, but also in the broader context of the development and completion of the revived sonnet tradition of the Romantic period.

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INTRODUCTION

The sonnets of John Keats reveal most unusually clearly his developing understanding of the nature of poetry and his identity as a poet. His sonnets articulate his poetic idealism and his confidence in his poetic ability, and they may also express the loss of this confidence. Keats's mature sonnets attempt to resolve the conflict between his enthusiasm for poetry and his awareness of its limitations. His sonnets, thus, reveal not only his mastery of the sonnet form, but also his understanding of his poetic identity, which is inseparable from his experience of expectation and disillusionment and of certainty and fear.

He was constantly preoccupied with the sonnet, and next to William Wordsworth, who wrote well over 500 sonnets, Keats was the most prolific sonneteer among the Romantic poets with his 66 sonnets. His first sonnet, 'On Peace', written in April 1814, and the last sonnet 'Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art', in October 1819, mark the beginning and the end of his career as a poet. He wrote sonnets for four and a half years and they are not only records of significant events in his life, but also a representation of his primary preoccupations with poetry and his poetic role. In number, and in depth of subject-matter, Keats's sonnets were a dominant poetic form and an important channel through which he expressed the poetic character that was in the process of development throughout his poetic career. As Keats reveals in March 1819, in a letter to

the George Keatses, his brother and sister-in-law in America, his sonnets became inseparable from his understanding of life as well as his understanding of poetry:

> ...look over the two last pages and ask yourselves whether I have not that in me which will well bear the buffets of the world. It will be the best comment on my sonnet.[1]

His sonnets were a modest place in which he exhibited the aspects of his poetic existence. They are, consequently, a useful index for understanding his other major works in which the poet's thoughts are extended and deepened. More significantly, Keats's sonnets as a whole demonstrate a process of self-making that moves through the poet's high expectation of and disillusionment with his poetic selfhood. The poet's persistent preoccupation in the sonnet with the nature of his selfhood, which often involves struggling with a sense of his own inadequacy, is what makes his sonnets unique within the sonnet tradition that had been revived in the mid and the late eighteenth century by Thomas Gray, Thomas Warton, Anna Seward, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and William Lisle Bowles. Keats's sonnets are distinct even from the sonnet practice in his own century exemplified by Coleridge, Wordsworth, Hunt, Shelley and John Clare. The purpose of this thesis is to re-evaluate Keats's sonnets as a key place in which the poet wrestles with the conflicts

[1] *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), vol. 1, p. 81. References by volume and page number to this edition are hereafter included in the text.

between poetic ideal and his limited selfhood as a poet. By organizing Keats's 66 sonnets into 5 groups according to their compositional order, and by exploring the formative and thematic features of each sonnet group, I hope to reveal the connection between the stylistic and thematic aspects of his sonnets and to establish the significance of the composition of the sonnets for Keats's poetic development.

The poet's early manifesto, "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!" (*L* i 185), which guided his major poems such as 'Sleep and Poetry' and 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill', is anticipated in many of his early sonnets in which the poet attempts to shape visions of poetry based on his experience of sensational moments. Also, the poet's key ideas of "Negative capability" and of the "intensity" of art—which emphasise the poet's capacity to overcome his uncertainties, conceptualised during the winter and spring of 1817-1818—are foreshadowed in 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' (March 1817) in which the poet attempts to transcend his own uncertainties and limitations:

> Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
> That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
> Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.[2] (6-8)

Those key concepts of the poet are expressed in the sonnets written in early 1818 including 'On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again' (January

[2] *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allott (London: Longman, 1970), p.104. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Keats's poetry are from this edition.

1818) and 'O thou whose face hath felt the winter's wind' (February 1818) in which the poet highlights his understanding of the nature of his existence, and seems to transcend the discrepancy between self and reality.

In considering the significance of Keats's sonnets as a valuable measure of the poet's modes of perception, a preliminary question needs to be raised: why was the sonnet so attractive to Keats? Why did the poet, who believed that "if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all" (*L* i 238-239), confine himself voluntarily to the restrictions and conventions of the sonnet form? It is possible to guess in a simple way that the formal constraints of the sonnet form did not inhibit the poet's ability to express his ideas. The heaviest formal pressure of the sonnet form, as Stuart Curran points out, is placed on the boundary between the octave and sestet:

> The poet who sets out to write a sonnet in the Italian form has one overriding imperative, which is how to turn the form (the technical term is "volta") from octave into sestet...The abstract pattern of such a logic is polarity between the octave and sestet.[3]

Milton and his successors, Wordsworth and Coleridge, challenged the inherited Petrarchan polarities by breaking the octave-sestet division through the use of enjambment. Shelley also resisted the formal logic of the sonnet with his daringly experimental handling of the form that

[3] Stuart Curran, *Poetic Form and British Romanticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p.10.

permitted him, for example, to place a couplet in the middle of a sonnet, concluding it with an alternating-rhyming quatrain as in 'To Wordsworth' (ABAB CDCD EE FGFG), and 'Translated from the Greek of Moschus' (ABAB CDCD EE FGGF). By deviating from the logic of the Petrarchan polarities, Milton and the Romantic poets developed new possibilities in the sonnet.

Keats, however, worked within the inherited formal constraints, conforming to the logic of the Petrarchan sonnet division. He took advantage of the logical frame of the sonnet but did not feel obliged to observe the principle of structural division marked by the turn or "volta" of the sonnet. Keats was conservative in his use of the sonnet form in comparison with other Romantic poets. Unlike Coleridge and Shelley, who constantly experimented with the sonnet form by refusing its inherent logic, Keats adhered faithfully to the structural principle of the sonnet. For instance, among his entire 45 Petrarchan sonnets, he broke the octave-sestet division only twice: in 'To one who has been long in city pent' (June 1816), and in 'On Visiting the Tomb of Burns' (July 1818). In addition, the commonest sestet rhyme-scheme of CDCDCD, which appears in twenty-four of his Petrarchan sonnets, secures the thematic and formal separation between the sestet and octave.

The thematic character of Keats's sonnets was determined by the logic of the divisionary sonnet form. Within the inherited polarities of the form, Keats represents divisions between self and reality as well as a division within his poetic character between idealism and disillusionment. In many of his early sonnets, Keats attempted to reconcile those thematic divisions, embedded in the bipartite sonnet form, and his sonnets often became a demonstration of the poet's confident engagement with external objects as well as a vivid expression of wonder. This is indicative of his poetic self-confidence. For instance, the momentous experience of reading Chapman's Homer in the octave of 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' (October 1816) is followed by an intensified representation of the moment through the metaphor of "a new planet" in the sestet.

However, when an octave-sestet division signifies thematic discordance, Keats's sonnets often become expressions of frustration, whether arising from failure of imaginative response or an experience of self division. The novelty of Keats's contribution to the revived sonnet tradition in the early nineteenth century lies in his power to represent aspects of self-division through the bipartite sonnet form, and to recover confidence, by questioning or by transcending the division. The Keatsian rhetoric of self-making, expressed through a conflict between self-confident and self–despondent modes, is repeated in his better sonnets such as 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' (March 1817), 'When I have fears that I

may cease to be' (January 1818), 'Read me a lesson, Muse, and speak it loud' (August 1818), and 'Why did I laugh to-night?' (March 1819).

Despite their significance in expressing a unique poetic selfhood, studies solely dedicated to Keats's sonnets and their position in the new sonnet tradition of the mid eighteenth and early nineteenth century have been small in number. Lawrence John Zillman's *John Keats and the Sonnet Tradition* (1939) is the only book that focuses wholly on the stylistic features of Keats's sonnets. Walter Jackson Bate's *The Stylistic Development of Keats* (1962) also contains chapters on Keats's early (1814-1816) and later sonnets (1818-1819). Zillman and Bate, however, limit their concerns to the formal features of the sonnets such as rhyme schemes, metrical variations and phrasing. Zillman, for example, classifies Keats's sonnets only by reference to their formal characteristics, excluding any discussion of the poetic principles that underlie them or of the poems' themes. Those studies of Keats's sonnets ignore their ideological orientation, which is related closely to his preoccupation with the condition of his poetic existence.

The place of Keats's sonnets in the new sonnet tradition of the Romantic period is briefly discussed by several critics in the course of wider-ranging studies. Since R. D. Havens offered a thorough study of the sonnet revival in the Romantic period in an attempt to show Milton's

influence upon the Romantic poets,[4] Stuart Curran and Jennifer Ann Wagner have written on the revival of the sonnet by the Romantic poets. In his *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, Curran recapitulates the sonnet tradition of the eighteenth century since Thomas Gray, and emphasises the significant role of the female poets, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and Helen Maria Williams, in the modern sonnet tradition, arguing that the Romantic period should be dated from the moment when the female poets of the cult of Sensibility turned to the sonnet. Curran considers that Wordsworth and Coleridge completed the sonnet revival by introducing a modern sensibility into the sonnet.[5] Wagner, in addition, dedicated her *A Moment's Monument* to the study of the sonnet practice of male poets, ranging from Wordsworth to Robert Frost. Her first three chapters discuss the characteristics of the sonnets of the major Romantic poets: Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats. The significance of Wagner's study lies in her attempts to offer a theoretical account of the Romantics' sonnet practice. According to Wagner, the Romantic poets are distinguished in the modern sonnet tradition by their endeavour to represent "a moment of heightened consciousness" in their sonnets. She argues that Wordsworth locates "a revelatory function" in the intensified moment that the sonnet memorialises, whereas Shelley and Keats find in the sonnet "potential for

[4] Raymond Dexter Havens, *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1961), pp.478-548.

[5] *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, pp.30-49.

expansiveness", which resists the formal closure of the sonnet form.[6] Nevertheless, in these recent studies of the sonnet revival in the early nineteenth century, Keats's sonnets, which need to be understood not only in terms of the development of the sonnet but of Keats's own distinctive poetic system, have been undervalued. For Curran, for instance, Leigh Hunt, rather than Keats, is Wordsworth's legitimate successor, and for Wagner, Keats's sonnets have a greater significance when they are considered as preparatory to the poet's odes of 1819.

With his independent contribution, however, Keats made an independent contribution to the revived sonnet tradition, in which the Romantic poets attempted to shape the supremacy of self which was credited in its visionary moments with an ability to see the intrinsic qualities of things. Keats's unique role in the sonnet tradition was that he demonstrated an unprecedented way of representing power of the self, by departing from the Romantic poets' trust in the supremacy of self, as well as from the sentimental mode of eighteenth-century sonnets. Through his insight into the logic of the divisionary sonnet form, he projected the psychology of a sonnet-persona which resists, reconciles and transcends the conflict between self and others. The character of the sonnet revival in the mid eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, on which Keats's

[6] Jennifer Ann Wagner, *A Moment's Monument: Revisionary Poetics and the Nineteenth-Century English Sonnet* (London and Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1996), pp.27, 33, 60-63.

understanding of the form was based, and an overview of the poet's sonnet practice in the course of his poetic career are the subjects of the first chapter, 'Keats and the Revived Sonnet Tradition', which is concerned primarily with Keats's contribution to the sonnet tradition with his ability to combine the character of eighteenth-century sonnets of sentimentality and the early nineteenth-century sonnet practice in which Romantic poets aspired towards Miltonic simplicity and austerity.

Keats's understanding of the new sonnet tradition offered him the poetic strength to express lyric qualities as well as the power of his integrated selfhood. In his early sonnet practice, he often takes as his theme the poetic development, undergone by an enthusiastic "I". His early sonnets repeatedly trace a poetic process in which a sensual experience is completed only when it ends in the composition of poetry, as in 'To my Brother George' (August 1816), 'How many bards gild the lapses of time' (October 1816), and 'On the Grasshopper and Cricket' (December 1816). These sonnets reflect the poet's early values and a system of poetry that cherishes the beauty of nature and the empathic power of the poet's perceiving mind in responding to nature, more closely and immediately than the first major works such as 'Sleep and Poetry' and 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill'. The similarities of rhetorical movement, structure, and tone, intended to express the heightened consciousness of the poet in his early sonnets before February 1817, are principal concerns in the second

chapter, 'Keats's First Engagement with the Sonnet', which examines how Keats's sonnets became key places in which he constructed his poetic subjectivity.

The strong confidence in his poetic ability evident in the early sonnets developed into a mature recognition of the conflict between ideal poetry and his limited selfhood. The third chapter, 'The Ambivalent Mode of Poetic Existence in the Sonnets' focuses on Keats's sonnets written between March and April 1817, including 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' and 'On the Sea'. This chapter demonstrates the way the poet began to represent the ideological disparities within the sonnet form.

His awareness of the conflict between self and others was sharpened in the winter of 1817-1818, by his new understanding of Shakespeare, William Hazlitt, and Wordsworth, as becomes apparent in the sonnets written in early 1818 when the poet began to practise the Shakespearean sonnet form. The next chapter, 'Keats's Shakespearean Sonnets and the Keatsian Rhetoric of Shaping Selfhood', focuses on the poet's shifting approach to the form and function of the sonnet. The chapter reads the sonnets as a key channel for embodying such important concepts as "Negative capability" and the "intensity" of art; and it describes how the poet represents the division, and at the same time, the unification of self, through the divisionary sonnet structure.

The fifth chapter, 'The Walking Tour Sonnets and the Matter of Existence', examines the sonnets written during his walking tour of Scotland in the summer of 1818. The subject-matter in the walking tour sonnets parallels closely his concept of "Negative capability", and his persistent interest in the condition of the human mind and the nature of reality. The aim of this chapter is to suggest that his interpretation of the uncertainty and limitations of the self in responding to the sublime conditions of nature can be identified as distinctive through comparison with other Romantic poets' attitudes towards the sublimity of nature.

Keats's most ambitious approach to the sonnet form is revealed in his experimental sonnets of early 1819. The poet's intellectual development, whereby he recognizes in man an existential power that transcends the indeterminacy of reality, affected subject-matters of the experimental sonnets. The last chapter, 'The Negatively Capable Sonnet: Keats's Experimental Sonnets in 1819', demonstrates the way the poet expresses his constant preoccupation with the conditions of his poetic existence, into his experimental sonnets. Keats's ambition to discover a "more interwoven and complete" sonnet form contributed to the experimental forms that avoid the conventional divisions of the Petrarchan and Shakespearean form. This signifies the poet's effort to establish the

self-sufficiency of the sonnet form whereby he could portray the independence and the power of the poet's perceiving mind.

Keats's sonnets are throughout his career informed by his understanding of the nature of poetry. His earnest and persistent inquiry into the conditions of his existence as a poet, characterised by conflicts between the ideal and reality, and expectation and disillusionment, is consistently articulated most clearly in his sonnets. Thus, the interrelationship between Keats's modes of perception and his attitudes towards the sonnet form is worthy of further examination. The following chapters are determined to demonstrate that the poet's intellectual and poetic development has a close connection with the stylistic and thematic features of his sonnets.

CHAPTER I

Keats and the Revived Sonnet Tradition

A comment in the *Monthly Review* of 1797 wrongly identifies Milton, rather than Thomas Wyatt, having introduced the sonnet into English: "Milton...was, we believe, the first Englishman that was induced to attempt the sonnet in the language of our island."[1] George Henderson also neglects, in his sonnet anthology written in 1803, the sonnets written before and after Milton: "Immediately after DRUMMOND, there does not appear to have been any writer of the sonnet of considerable consequence except Milton."[2] While those misleading comments undervalue the quality of Elizabethan sonnets, they serve to underline the importance accorded to Milton in the development of the English sonnet.

Although Milton's did not write many sonnets, publishing just nineteen sonnets in English, he introduced a variety of subject-matter and a new modification of the Petrarchan sonnet form. Some of them are addressed to persons like Fairfax and Cromwell, some address public matters. In his sonnets, Milton strove for a republican spirit that revealed itself in sincerity, austerity, and simplicity of mind. One of his noteworthy

[1] *Monthly Review*, xxiv (1797), p.17.
[2] George Henderson, *Petrarca: A Selection of Sonnets from Various Authors* (London: C. and R. Baldwin, 1803), p.33.

contributions to the English sonnet tradition is found in his rejection of the elaborate conceits and exaggerations of the Elizabethan sonnets.

In terms of form, Milton also turned against the practice of the Elizabethan sonneteers. In most Elizabethan sonnets, including the sonnets of Shakespeare, the quatrain division, and the octave-sestet division are enforced by a full stop at the end of the first and second quatrains, and, in general, the use of a caesura and run-on lines is avoided in the sonnets. Milton, however, disregards the strict octave-sestet division and makes frequent use of caesura and a run-on line in his sonnet practice. In his famous sonnet on his blindness the poem's syntax runs across the formal division between octave and sestet:

> When I consider how my light is spent,
> Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
> And that one talent which is death to hide,
> Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
> To serve therewith my maker, and present
> My true account, lest he returning chide,
> Doth God exact day-labour, light denied,
> I fondly ask; but Patience to prevent
> That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
> Either man's work or his own gifts, who best
> Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best, his state
> Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
> And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
> They also serve who only stand and wait.[3]

[3] John Milton, 'When I consider how my light is spent', in *The Poems of John Milton*, eds. John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London: Longman, 1968), p.330.

Milton's enjambments, in lines 4-5 and 8-12, break not only the division between the first and second quatrains, but also between the octave and the sestet. His use of caesura, in addition, results in an early turn after the second foot of line 8, instead of at the beginning of the sestet. The formal qualities of the sonnet highlight the solemn turn of thought, moving from agitation to the calmness of resignation. Plainness of thought, the noble and energetic tone, and the formal freedom, which are reminiscent of the vigorous blank-verse movement of *Paradise Lost*, are what make Milton's sonnets distinctive from the Elizabethan sonnets which employ elaborate conceits and hyperbole. It is the towering personality and sublimity that Milton achieved unprecedentedly in the sonnet form that eighteenth-century sonneteers recognized as inaugurating a new tradition; and that Coleridge and Wordsworth reproduced and intensified in their sonnet practice in the early nineteenth century.

In the main, Milton's influence on the revival of the sonnet in the mid-eighteenth century was decisive, but Milton's energetic and public voice was scarcely heard in the sonnets of his successors. Eighteenth-century sonneteers, such as Thomas Edward, Thomas Warton, Anna Seward, and Mary Robinson, claimed Milton as their master, but in general their sonnets resemble Milton's sonnets only superficially. They maintained the quatrain division and even the stronger octave-sestet division, which had been rejected by their predecessor. The tendency to

preserve, more rigidly than Milton, the formal divisions of the sonnet, while imitating Milton's use of a run-on line and a caesura to underline the thematic unity of the sonnet, became prominent formal features of eighteenth-century sonnets.

Eighteenth-century sonnets are distinctive first because they follow the vogue for melancholy and sensibility, and secondly, for their greater appreciation of nature. Thomas Gray and Thomas Warton are the primary architects of the eighteenth-century sonnet. Gray chose an elegiac mode in his single sonnet, written in 1742 and published in 1775, 'On the Death of Mr. Richard West':

> In vain to me the smiling mornings shine,
> And redd'ning Phoebus lifts his golden fire:
> The birds in vain their amorous descant join;
> Or cheerful fields resume their green attire:
> These ears, alas! for other notes repine,
> A different object do these eyes require.
> My lonely anguish melts no heart but mine;
> And in my breast the imperfect joys expire.
> Yet morning smiles the busy race to cheer,
> And new-born pleasure brings to happier men:
> The fields to all their wonted tribute bear:
> To warm their little loves the birds complain:
> I fruitless mourn to him, that cannot hear,
> And weep the more, because I weep in vain.[4]

Gray uses a variant of the Petrarchan rhyme scheme (ABAB ABAB CDCDCD) that preserves the clear distinction between octave and sestet,

[4] Thomas Gray, 'On the Death of Mr Richard West', in *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray*, eds. H. W. Start and J. R. Hendrickson (Oxford: Clarendon, 1966), p. 92.

but his most influential innovation was to assign an elegiac character to the sonnet. Whereas the conventional Petrarchan sonnet had illustrated a moment of love, Gray's sonnet reveals a private feeling of sadness, intensified by the juxtaposition between a pastoral morning scene and the speaker's own feeling echoed in the octave-sestet division. His elegiac mode was closely followed by successors such as Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and W. L. Bowles.

Another important figure in establishing the new sonnet tradition is Thomas Warton. He wrote nine sonnets and two of them were printed in 1775 and the rest in 1777. He performed an experiment with the sonnet form independently and introduced innovative rhyme-schemes. Like Milton, for instance, he employed a series of run-on lines and placed the turn at an unusual place, instead of at the end of the eighth line. In the sonnet on King Arthur's Table, he introduced an octave that has a rhyme-scheme of ABBA ACCA, which was to become a dominant form in Wordsworth's sonnets. 'To the River Lodon' includes a couplet at the end of the octave, making the rhyme-scheme of the sonnet, ABBA ABCC DEDEDE.

R. D. Havens placed Warton's sonnets "among the best the century produced" and noticed that "they were the first to turn for their subjects

from persons to nature."[5] They were also the first to highlight the power of the pensive mind in the presence of nature. Warton's 'To the River Lodon', for instance, describes "pensive Memory" through its response to a specific natural locale:

> Ah! What a weary race my feet have run,
> Since first I trod thy banks with alders crowned,
> And thought my way was all through fairy ground,
> Beneath thy azure sky, and golden sun:
> Where first my Muse to lisp her notes begun!
> While pensive Memory traces back the round,
> Which fills the varied interval between;
> Much pleasure, more of sorrow, marks the scene.
> Sweet native stream! those skies and suns so pure
> No more return, to cheer my evening road!
> Yet still one joy remains, that not obscure,
> Nor useless, all my vacant days have flowed,
> From youth's gay dawn to manhood's prime mature;
> Nor with the Muse's laurel unbestowed.[6]

One of the most significant aspects in Warton's experiments with the sonnet is that he rendered the form suitable for the kind of meditative description that was to find a place in the sonnets of Charlotte Smith, W. L. Bowles, and Wordsworth. The immediate response of the pensive speaker to the ceaseless flow of the River Lodon, is to ponder on the gap between the vigorous spirit of his youth and the present moment: "Ah! What a weary race my feet have run" (1). Although it is a consolation for him to have reached "manhood's prime mature" (13), the loss of "youth's gay

[5] *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, p.497.

[6] Thomas Warton, 'To the River Lodon' in *The Poetical Works of the Late Thomas Warton, B. D. Fellow of Trinity College, Oxford; and Poet Laureate*, ed. Richard Mant, 5th edn., 2 vols. (Oxford, 1802), vol.2, p. 160.

dawn" is irreparable. Tinged with melancholy, the poet's "pensive Memory"(6) that is awakened through his engagement with external natural objects became a dominant mode for many sonneteers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In particular, Warton's symbolic use of a river, in which he implies both the consistency of nature and the ephemerality of the flow of time, is repeated in Smith's sonnets to the River Arun; in William Lisle Bowles's sonnets to rivers, to the Itchin, the Wensbeck, the Tweed, and the Cherwell; in Coleridge's 'Sonnet to the River Otter'; and in Wordsworth's sonnet sequence, *The River Duddon*.

Gray and Warton introduced, on the basis of their appreciation of Milton's sonnets, a fresh structuring principle, which emphasises formal freedom by using run-on lines and caesurae while maintaining the octave-sestet division of the Petrarchan form, but their most important contribution to the development of the sonnet was thematic. They initiated the association of the sonnet with melancholy, grief, and self-consciousness.

After the second half of the eighteenth century, the revived sonnet tradition was developed further by a number of late eighteenth-century sonneteers such as John Bampfylde, Thomas Russell, Egerton Brydges, and Helen Maria Williams. The fundamental evolution of the sonnet, however, was directed primarily by such female sonneteers as Charlotte

Smith and Mary Robinson, who were also prominent writers of sentimental novels of the period.

The Sonnets of Sentimentality

When Keats began to write sonnets in 1814, composing twenty-six sonnets by the end of 1816, sonnets had been written by most of the major poets of the time. William Lisle Bowles, for instance, published *Fourteen Sonnets* in 1789 and the book went through nine editions by 1805. Coleridge published *Sonnets on Eminent Characters* and *Sonnets from Various Authors*, in 1796, which is the first sonnet collection of eighteenth-century sonnets. Wordsworth's *Miscellaneous Sonnets* and *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty* were published in the *Poems, in Two Volumes* in 1807. Leigh Hunt also published a series of sonnets, descriptive of Hampstead in his *Foliage* in 1818.

The sonnet practice of those male poets was, in fact, inherited from the practice of the female poets of the preceding century. The female sonneteers, who were also the leading literary figures of the late eighteenth century that is sometimes referred to as the Age of Sensibility, began to write sonnets in the 1780s. Charlotte Smith, the most distinguished of them, published the first edition of her *Elegiac Sonnets* in 1784; Anna

Seward began to write sonnets in 1790 and published *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Horace* in 1799; and Mary Robinson's sonnet sequence, *Sappho and Phaon*, was printed in 1796. In general, they deepened the tone of melancholy and the subject matter of nature, which Gray and Warton had introduced. The female sonneteers showed an excellent command of the eighteenth-century convention of expressing an isolated, melancholy sensibility

Charlotte Smith was the most influential sonneteer among the female poets. With her *Elegiac Sonnets and Other Essays* in 1784, which went through ten editions by 1811, Smith became the first eighteenth-century woman poet to publish a sonnet collection, and the leading female figure in the modern sonnet tradition. By attaching personal meaning to natural objects, and maintaining both the persistent elegiac tone and the simplicity of the sonnet form, her sonnets offered a model that was taken up by her romantic successors.

Smith once referred to the sonnet as "no improper vehicle for a single sentiment",[7] and she attempted to adapt that "vehicle" for her use by deviating from the Petrarchan model. She avoided the artificial formal restraints of the Petrarchan sonnet form, which she represented in the

[7] Charlotte Smith, *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, ed. Stuart Curran (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.3.

preface to her *Elegiac Sonnets* as "ill calculated for our language".[8] Although she was fond of the Shakespearean form, the majority of her sonnets are in an irregular sonnet form. Like Gray's and Warton's sonnets, Smith's establish their elegiac tone through pastoral description. In Smith's sonnets, however, there is no such emotional compensation for her sorrow and pains as "manhood's prime mature", which Warton recognises as compensation for the loss of "youth's gay dawn". Her sonnets, consequently, are typically much more miserable than those of male sonneteers. For instance, in 'Written at the Close of Spring', the poet articulates irreducible sorrow through a pastoral description of nature:

> The garlands fade that Spring so lately wove,
> Each simple flower which she had nursed in dew,
> Anemonies, that spangled every grove,
> The primrose wan, and hare-bell mildly blue.
> No more shall violets linger in the dell,
> Or purple orchis variegate the plain,
> Till Spring again shall call forth every bell,
> And dress with humid hands her wreaths again.—
> Ah! poor Humanity! So frail, so fair,
> Are the fond visions of thy early day,
> Till tyrant Passion, and corrosive Care,
> Bid all thy fairy colors fade away!
> Another May new buds and flowers shall bring;
> Ah! why has happiness—no second Spring?[9]

The distance between the pleasant spring scene and the desolate state of the speaker's mind is irreducible, and the distance is visibly represented in the formal division between the octave and sestet. The first two quatrains

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[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *The Poems of Charlotte Smith*, p. 13.

represent natural phenomena as cyclical, each spring ending only to come again the following year. By contrast, the third quatrain and the couplet represent the loss of man's early visions, which promises "no second Spring" (14).

Anna Seward was also an influential sonneteer of the Age of Sensibility. She was Milton's most devoted follower, and was convinced of her ability to accommodate the formal restraints of the strict Petrarchan sonnet form. Whereas Charlotte Smith developed the sonnet form to highlight its capacity to express feelings, Seward emphasised the formal disciplines inherited from Milton, which she eulogises in the sestet of 'To Mr. Henry Cary, On the Publication of his Sonnets':

> Our greater Milton, hath, by many a lay
>   Formed on that arduous model, fully shown
>   That English verse may happily display
> Those strict energic measures, which alone
>   Deserve the name of sonnet, and convey
>   A grandeur, grace and spirit, all their own. (9-14)[10]

Imitating Milton, she frequently blurred the quatrain division as well as the octave-sestet division, and employed frequent caesurae in her sonnets. She only employed the Petrarchan sonnet form, avoiding completely the Shakespearean and Spenserian sonnet forms.

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[10] Anna Seward, 'To Mr. Henry Cary, On the Publication of his Sonnets', in *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects; and Odes Paraphrased from Horace*, 2nd edn. (London, 1799), p. 66.

Despite the discrepancy between their attitudes to the sonnet form, both Smith and Seward loosened the sonnet's formal restrictions, implicitly agreeing that the sonnet is a "vehicle for a single Sentiment", whether they use the Petrarchan or the Shakespearean sonnet form. Moreover, Seward herself could not escape from the elegiac mode of the sonnet, articulating sorrow and loss, in accord with the late eighteenth-century cult of sensibility:

> By Derwent's rapid stream as oft I strayed,
> With Infancy's light step and glances wild,
> And saw vast rocks, on steepy mountains piled,
> Frown o'er the umbrageous glen; or pleased surveyed
> The cloudy moonshine in the shadowy glade,
> Romantic Nature to the enthusiast child
> Grew dearer far than when serene she smiled,
> In uncontrasted loveliness arrayed.
> But O! in every scene, with sacred sway,
> Her graces fire me; from the bloom that spreads
> Resplendent in the lucid morn of May,
> To the green light the little glow-worm sheds
> On mossy banks, when midnight glooms prevail,
> And softest silence broods o'er all the dale.[11]

Seward displays her ability to describe "Romantic Nature" (6) with grace. Her depiction of country sights is more vivid and detailed than Charlotte Smith's. As in Smith's sonnet, however, the poet's perceiving mind is somewhat isolated from its surroundings. Desolate feeling prevails in the sestet, contrasting with the bright and serene atmosphere of nature in the octave.

[11] 'By Derwent's rapid stream as oft I strayed' in *Original Sonnets on Various Subjects*, p. 9.

In the hands of eighteenth-century female sonneteers, the sonnet became a form associated with a heightened self-consciousness. If Stuart Curran is correct in his premise that the rebirth of the sonnet "coincides with the rise of a definable woman's literary movement and with the beginnings of Romanticism,"[12] it is mostly because the trend of the new sonnet tradition favoured the representation of self-consciousness, for which the women poets offered a model. However, it was the limitation of the sonneteers that their self-consciousness was displayed only through expressions of grief and melancholy.

The elegiac voice of the female sonneteers in the late eighteen century was nurtured, then, by the atmosphere of the Age of Sensibility. Through their sonnet practice, the female poets refined the way they presented the inward self, which was also the principal theme of the sentimental novel. Their sentimentality is often thought to set them apart from the male literary tradition. Marlon B. Ross asserts that female poets of the century "confronted with a hegemonic masculine tradition, attempt to write within that tradition while reshaping it for the feminine voice."[13] Similarly, Gary Kelly, in *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789-1830,* detects within the sentimental voice "elements of sentimental social criticism" which attempts to "redefine the individual and society in ways

[12] *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, p.30.
[13] Marlon B. Ross, 'Romantic Quest and Conquest', in *Romanticism and Feminism*, ed. Anne K. Mellor (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), p.28.

different from what were thought to be the definitions and practices of the power-holding or hegemonic classes, the aristocracy and gentry." [14] Because of the literary status that had been bestowed on the sonnet by Shakespeare and Milton, and through their own effort to imbue a feminine sensibility into the form, the sonnet became a means through which the female poets could claim an independent literary role.

Curran identifies "rootless exile" as the principal theme of Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets*, which offers a portrait of a woman's isolated sensibility and became the thematic prototype of the entire sonnet revival of the last few decades of the eighteenth century. Despite their limitations the sonnets of sensibility succeeded in focusing on the self, which they expressed through the first person singular within the concise and disciplined sonnet structure. In general, the sonneteers of the late eighteenth century were well aware of the logic of the bipartite sonnet form, and they expressed through the formal partition the division between a struggling "I" and a pastoral nature. They made an important contribution to the revitalization of the traditional poetic form. They were engaged in a significant literary project, comparable to Wordsworth's and Coleridge's poetic venture in *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798, because their focus too was on natural human feeling.

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[14] Gary Kelly, *English Fiction of the Romantic Period 1789-1830* (London and New York: Longman, 1989), p.13.

The Sonnet and the Romantic Poets

Drawing attention to the sonnet's capacity to express a heightened self-consciousness was the most important legacy of the late eighteenth-century sonneteers to the Romantics. This self-consciousness, expressed through a delicate sentimentality and frequent expressions of grief, was the quality which Wordsworth, in the early stages of his career, attempted to represent in the sonnet, as in his first published poem, 'On Seeing Miss Helen Maria Williams Weep at a Tale of Distress' (1787). Coleridge's publication of *Sonnets from Various Authors* in 1796, which is the first sonnet anthology of the late eighteenth century, and the elegiac quality of *Sonnets, Attempted in the Manner of 'Contemporary Writers'* (1797), also reveal his indebtedness to the sonnet practice of the late eighteenth century.

Nevertheless, the most distinct contribution of the Romantic poets to the revived sonnet tradition was the way they re-established the masculine literary character that the form had been given by Milton. Although they also saw in the sonnet the possibility of representing self-consciousness, the Romantic poets did not permit this to result in an overflowing sentimentality. Instead, they established the modes of self-consciousness that intensified the anxiety over poetic vision. Coleridge's 'To the River Otter' (1797), for instance, shows a confrontation between the grace of

nature and the pensive self, which echoes the typical thematic division in eighteenth-century sonnets. Coleridge's sonnet, however, is about the passion for poetic vision, rather than an expression of melancholia, and the sonnet itself demonstrates the power of the vision at work:

> Dear native brook! wild streamlet of the west!
> How many various-fated years have past,
> What blissful and what anguished hours, since last
> I skimmed the smooth thin stone along thy breast,
> Numbering its light leaps! Yet so deep impressed
> Sink the sweet scenes of childhood, that mine eyes
> I never shut amid the sunny blaze,
> But straight with all their tints thy waters rise,
> Thy crossing plank, thy margin's willowy maze,
> And bedded sand that veined with various dyes
> Gleamed through thy bright transparence to the gaze!
> Visions of childhood! oft have ye beguiled
> Lone manhood's cares, yet waking fondest sighs,
> Ah! that once more I were a careless child![15]

The sonnet, as in many eighteenth-century sentimental sonnets, focuses on an association between a specific spot of nature and the poet's perceiving mind. The scenery of the river, which activates the poet's memory, produces an awareness of the loss of the "visions of childhood". However, the presence of self-consciousness does not direct the sonnet towards the expression of sadness and pain. It rather contributes to the representation of vivid images of the River Otter and the poet's youthful experience, which runs across the quatrain and octave-sestet divisions of the sonnet. In his

[15] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Poetical Works*, J. C. C. Mays, ed., 6 vols. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001, vol.16 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, gen. eds. Kathleen Coburn and Bart Winer (New Jersey and London: Princeton University Press, 1969-2002)), vol.1, p.300. Hereafter cited as *Poetical Works*.

reading of the sonnet, W. K. Wimsatt notices how the vivid natural description furnished "a rich ground of meaning in Coleridge's sonnet beyond what is overtly stated."[16] The detailed descriptions of the natural spot and of his experience (1-11) are themselves the poet's attempt to restore "visions of childhood", which rise and fall in his memory like "the smooth thin stone" (4) that the poet has skimmed along the river's breast.

The empowered self that dispenses with the characteristic melancholia of eighteenth-century sentimental sonnets, and that gives many Romantic sonnets their solemnity, is preoccupied with a moment of poetic inspiration. The sestet of Wordsworth's 'There is a little unpretending Rill' (1802), for instance, demonstrates the way the poet transcends the outpouring of sentimentality in favour of a clear insight into the nature of human experience:

> Months perish with their moons; year treads on year;
> But, faithful Emma! thou with me canst say
> That, while ten thousand pleasures disappear,
> And flies their memory fast almost as they;
> The immortal Spirit of one happy day
> Lingers beside that Rill, in vision clear. (9-14)[17]

Although the presence of the rill reminds the speaker of the ephemerality of "ten thousand pleasures" and "their memory", the speaker elaborates in

[16] W. K. Wimsatt, 'The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery', in *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essays in Criticism*, ed. M. H. Abrams (Oxford and N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1975), pp.29-30.
[17] William Wordsworth, 'There is a little unpretending Rill', in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth,* eds. De Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), vol.3, pp. 4-5. Here after cited as *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth.*

the conclusion of the sonnet a moment in which he associates the "immortal Spirit" with the rill.

The sonnets of Coleridge and Wordsworth reveal the poets' attempt to re-shape the sonnet of sensibility into the new frame of the Romantic sonnet which demanded what W. K. Wimsatt called an "imaginative *structure*", which "tends to achieve iconicity by a more direct sensory imitation" [18] This feature of the Romantic sonnets also echoes the characteristics of what M. H. Abram has labelled "the greater Romantic lyric" [19] in which the poet transcends the simple association between scenery and memory characteristic of the sentimental voices of the preceding century and develops a masculine voices.

Another distinct aspect of the Romantic poets' sonnet practice is evident in the formal features of their sonnets. Havens' study of sonnets written between 1740 and 1800 reveals that the Petrarchan sonnet form outnumbered the Shakespearean form throughout the century except during the last decade. Havens computes that 636 Petrarchan sonnets and 451 Shakespearean sonnets were published in the period. In the last decade, however, the Shakespearean form (270) outnumbered the Petrarchan form

[18] 'The Structure of Romantic Nature Imagery', p.26.
[19] M. H. Abrams, 'Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric', in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, eds. Frederic W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p.528.

(199).[20] At the risk of over-generalisation, it can be deduced that eighteenth-century sonnets followed the Miltonic-Petrarchan sonnet form in general, which maintains the Petrarchan logic of polarity between octave and sestet while accepting Milton's usage of run-on lines and caesurae, which break divisions between quatrains and between tercets.

This general structuring discipline of the sonnet, wherein the formal division of 8+6, caesurae and run-on lines are preferred, was applied to both the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet forms. Anna Seward, who believed only the Petrarchan sonnet form to be legitimate and who was the most committed follower of Milton in the sonnet form, disguised the division into quatrains and tercets by the use of run-on lines and caesurae, but preserved the thematic and formal division between octave and sestet. Sonneteers such as John Codrington Bampfylde, Helen Maria Williams, and Mary Robinson, who inclined to the Petrarchan sonnet form, employed one of the standard Petrarchan rhyme-scheme of ABBA ABBA CDCDCD, which maintains the division between octave and sestet. Charlotte Smith, who was opposed to the Petrarchan sonnet form, tended towards the Shakespearean sonnet form, writing also a series of irregular sonnets, which offer variations on the Shakespearean form. Like her contemporaries, she also employed a number of run-on lines and caesurae, frequently marked by a hyphen, and maintained in many of her sonnets the

[20] *The Influence of Milton on English Poetry*, p.523.

structural partition of 8+6. Seemingly, the sonnet as an appropriate "vehicle for a single sentiment" was shaped by eighteenth-century sonneteers into a poetic form that frequently expresses alienation and frustration, exploiting the bipartite sonnet structure to mark the discrepancy between reality and the mind's desires.

The Romantic poets, however, were more flexible in their approach to the form. In the main, they shared Charlotte Smith's opinion that the sonnet is a "vehicle for a single sentiment", but they followed more closely the Miltonic sonnet form than did eighteenth-century sonneteers, and the conventional octave-sestet division was often rejected for reasons of thematic convenience. They resisted the divisionary sonnet form. In the hands of Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley, the form could attain a new logic of unity that emphasises the union between self and nature, frequently denied in the elegiac mode of their predecessors.

In his introduction to *Sonnets from Various Authors* (1796), Coleridge expresses his distaste for the artificiality of the Petrarchan sonnet form:

> I have never yet been able to discover either sense, nature, or poetic fancy in Petrarch's poems; they appear to me all one cold glitter of heavy conceits and metaphysical abstractions. However, Petrarch, although not the inventor of the Sonnet, was the first who made it popular; and his countrymen have taken *his* poems as the model. Charlotte Smith and Bowles are they who first made the Sonnet

> popular among the present English: I am justified therefore by analogy in deducing its laws from *their* compositions.[21]

Resisting the "heavy conceits and metaphysical abstractions", the characteristics of the Petrarchan school, Coleridge turned to the sonnets of Charlotte Smith and W. L. Bowles in an attempt to deduce "its laws from *their* compositions." Apart from the fact that Smith and Bowles were the leading sonneteers of the Age of Sensibility, who showed a close thematic similarity in their sonnet practice, Coleridge noticed the formal similarities in their sonnet practice. Although her sonnet form is based on the Shakespearean sonnet, Smith accommodated formal elements of both Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnets. A combination of three Petrarchan quatrains and a Shakespearean couplet is found in many of Smith's sonnets, and it is often repeated in the sonnets of Bowles and Coleridge.

In the sonnet form, however, Coleridge saw a possibility to transcend the conventional manner of expressing the sentimentality of an isolated and forlorn self.

> In a Sonnet then we require a development of some lonely feeling, by whatever cause it may have been excited; but those Sonnets appear to me the most exquisite, in which moral Sentiments, Affections, or Feelings are deduced from, and associated with, the scenery of Nature. Such compositions generate a habit of thought highly favourable to delicacy of character. They create a sweet and

[21] *Poetical Works*, vol.1, p.1205.

> indissoluble union between the intellectual and the material world.[22]

In the "union between the intellectual and the material world" that the poet attempts to establish, he could represent his mature understanding of the condition of reality. Coleridge saw how the sonnet might be used to present an engagement between self and the outer world, and a synthesis of feeling and experience without being confined to the expression of suffering and grief. Thus, representing the supremacy of the perceiving mind has priority in Coleridge's sonnets over the formal principles of the conventional sonnet form. In many of his sonnets, Miltonic usage of run-on lines and caesurae breaks the standard octave-sestet division. The variety in the rhyme-schemes of his sonnets demonstrates how he privileges expressiveness over formal restriction. For instance, he combines two Petrarchan quatrains with a Shakespearean quatrain and a couplet; three Petrarchan quatrains with a couplet, as in many sonnets by Bowles; and two Shakespearean quatrains with a Petrarchan sestet, rhyming EFFEFE, EFEFEF, or EEFEFF.

Like Coleridge, Wordsworth believes that the sonnet should aim principally at unity of effect. In a letter to Alexander Dyce, written in the spring of 1833, he claims that the expressiveness of the sonnet determines

[22] *Ibid.*, p.1206.

its structure, asserting the convenience of a tripartite structure, rather than the traditional Petrarchan binary structure:

> It should seem that the Sonnet, like every other legitimate composition, ought to have a beginning, a middle, and an end—in other words, to consist of three parts, like the three propositions of a syllogism, if such an illustration may be used. But the frame of metre adopted by the Italians does not accord with this view, and, as adhered to by them, it seems to be, if not arbitrary, best fitted to a division of the sense into two parts, of eight and six lines each. Milton, however, has not submitted to this. In the better half of his sonnets the sense does not close with the rhyme at the eighth line, but overflows into the second portion of the metre. Now it has struck me that this is done not merely to gratify the ear by variety of freedom and sound, but also to aid in giving that pervading sense of intense Unity in which the excellence of the Sonnet has always seemed to me mainly to consist.[23]

As in "Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room", Wordsworth exploits compactness of the sonnet form. In order to draw out the excellence of the sonnet, the poet insists on the necessity of transforming the bipartite Petrarchan sonnet into a Miltonic syllogistic structure which has "a beginning, a middle, and an end." The Miltonic threefold structure better allows a "pervading sense of intense Unity" in the form. Wagner acknowledges the "intense Unity" that characterises Wordsworth's sonnets when she describes each sonnet as the expression of "a moment of heightened self-consciousness".

[23] *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years*, ed. Alan G. Hill, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), vol.2, pp.604-5.

For Wordsworth, the unity of the sonnet serves primarily to express the supremacy of the inward self and its visionary power. In 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge, Sept. 3, 1803' (1807), for instance, the sonnet's syllogistic form contributes to the expression of the flow of the poet's mind, moving from the specific view from the bridge to the sublime recognition of the city's "mighty heart":

> Earth has not any thing to show more fair:
> Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
> A sight so touching in its majesty:
> This city now doth like a garment wear
> The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
> Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
> Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
> All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
> Never did sun more beautifully steep
> In his first splendour valley, rock, or hill;
> Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
> The river glideth at his own sweet will:
> Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;
> And all that mighty heart is lying still![24]

The sonnet employs a three-part structure. The first part of the sonnet (1-3) draws a parallel between the external world and the visionary power of the inward self. The second (4-12) assimilates manmade objects, "ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples"(6), and the sights of nature, "the fields", "the sky", "sun", and "river". Then the third part of the sonnet (13-14) suggests the power of a poetic vision that overcomes the division between man and nature.

[24] *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, vol.3, p.38.

Wordsworth's awareness of the need for thematic and formal unity in the sonnet resulted in a liberal attitude towards the conventional sonnet form. He uses an octave which starts with a Shakespearean quatrain and ends with a Petrarchan quatrain, and often an octave which reverses this pattern. Lee M. Johnson demonstrates that out of Wordsworth's 535 sonnets, written over four and a half decades since 1802, 210 sonnets include an octave rhyming ABBA ACCA and 99 sonnets have irregular rhyme-schemes.[25]

Shelley was the most radical of the Romantic poets in his handing of the sonnet form. He wrote seventeen sonnets, none of which uses the regular rhyme-schemes of the Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet. In his irregular Shakespearean sonnets, he places a couplet after the second quatrain, as in 'To Wordsworth', that has the rhyme-scheme, ABAB CDCD EE FGFG, and 'Translated from the Greek of Moschus', ABAB CDCD EE FGGF, which is reminiscent of the rhyme-scheme of Keats's experimental sonnet, 'To Sleep' (ABAB CDCD BC EFEF). In 'Lift Not the Painted Veil' the rhyme-scheme, ABABAB CDCD DCDC, begins with the sestet and ends with the octave:

> Lift not the painted veil which those who live
> Call Life: though unreal shapes be pictured there,

[25] Lee M. Johnson, *Wordsworth and the Sonnet* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1973), p.27

And it but mimic all we would believe
With colors idly spread:–behind, lurk Fear
And Hope, twin destinies; who ever weave
The shadows, which the world calls substance, there.

I knew one who had lifted it—he sought,
For his lost heart was tender, things to love
But found them not, alas! nor was there aught
The world contains, the which he could approve.
Through the unheeding many he did move,
A splendor among shadows, a bright blot
Upon this gloomy scene, a Spirit that strove
For truth, and like the Preacher found it not.[26]

Helen E. Haworth points out that Shelley simply reverses the Petrarchan sonnet form: "Shelley's experiments were not always "lawless"—certainly his manipulations of the reversed Petrarchan cannot be so condemned..."[27] The irregularity of Shelley's sonnets suggests that he was not chained by the restrictions of the sonnet form.

In general, as we have seen, the Romantic poets attempted to escape from the constraints of the sonnet form. They often denied the sonnet's logic of polarities, and established instead a sense of unity in the sonnet by re-constructing the logic for their own convenience. The remodelled sonnet form became a principal means by which the Romantic poets developed a confident, masculine voice. They used the sonnet to demonstrate the power

[26] Percy Bysshe Shelly, 'Lift not the Painted Veil', in *The Poems of Shelley*, ed. G. M. Matthews and Kelvin Everest, vol. 2 (London: Longman, 2000), p. 413. Hereafter cited as *The Poems of Shelley*.
[27] Helen E. Haworth, '"Ode to the West Wind" and the Sonnet Form', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, xx (1971), p.73.

of the imagination and of the imaginative associations that linked the self and nature.

Keats's Sonnet Practice

Keats's sonnet practice was based on the revived sonnet tradition, which had underlined the existence of a heightened self-consciousness. In comparison with the other Romantic poets, Keats's sonnet practice was conservative, like many eighteenth-century sonneteers admitting the conventional Petrarchan logic of polarities. With the exception of a couple of experimental sonnets, he observed the inherited logic of the form. Of his forty-five Petrarchan sonnets, he employed the rhyme-scheme of ABBA ABBA CDCDCD in twenty-four sonnets, a rhyme scheme that had been used repeatedly by John Codrington Bampfylde, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Robinson, and Anna Seward. Although Keats used a number of run-on lines and caesurae in his sonnets, he disregarded the octave-sestet division in only two of his Petrarchan sonnets, 'Ah, who can e'er forget so fair a being' (March 1816) and 'On Visiting the Tomb of Burns' (July 1818), by placing a run-on line at lines four and eight.

Despite his more conventional handling of the form, Keats, like his contemporaries, used the sonnet to explore and to establish his own poetic

identity. By reconciling the elegiac mode of late eighteenth-century sonnets that frequently represented the distance between self and others, and the Romantic poets' trust in the power of self to engage with the outer world, Keats created a fresh lyric mode for the sonnet. Although the Romantic poets' urge towards subjectivity was also an important imperative in Keats's sonnet practice, he had a distinctive way of establishing the supremacy of subjectivity. The novelty of the poet's contribution to the Romantic sonnet tradition lies in his presentation of a self which is aware of, and resists, the limitations imposed upon it. In his mature sonnets, the poet represents a struggling but meditative "I" whose doubt as to his poetic identity leads him to a deeper insight into the conditions of reality and of his existence. For Coleridge and Wordsworth, the sonnet became a channel to demonstrate the strength of subjectivity and imagination. In many of their sonnets, there occur moments of poetic inspiration in which one can trace a heightened self-consciousness. However, Keats represents repeatedly the presence of a self which speculates upon its own nature. Within the formal divisions of the sonnet form, Keats portrayed the correlation as well as the conflict between self and others, and through this speculation the poet created an identity which finds its fullness through an experience of emptiness and limitation.

Many of the poet's youthful sonnets between 1814 and 1816 express a naive self-confidence. The sonnets are concerned to describe the

circumstances, whether a social experience or an experience of nature that led to their composition. For example, participation in Leigh Hunt's circle prompts 'On Leaving Some Friends at an Early Hour' (1816):

> Give me a golden pen, and let me lean
> On heaped-up flowers, in regions clear and far.
> Bring me a tablet whiter than a star,
> Or hand of hymning angel when 'tis seen
> The silver strings of heavenly harp atween.
> And let there glide by many a pearly car,
> Pink robes, and wavy hair, and diamond jar,
> And half discovered wings, and glances keen.
> The while let music wander round my ears,
> And as it reaches each delicious ending
> Let me write down a line of glorious tone
> And full of many wonders of the spheres.
> For what a height my spirit is contending!
> 'Tis not content so soon to be alone.

The sonnet records an experience that issues immediately in composition, "Let me write down a line of glorious tone" (11). The division between octave and sestet marks the division between experience and composition.

In his later sonnets, however, Keats repeatedly presented the conflict between self and others. The constraints and limitation of self became a major concern in his sonnets, and the poems frequently record moments of imaginative failure. Nevertheless, in responding to those problems, Keats demonstrated a mature insight into the nature of existence. The unrhymed sonnet, 'O thou whose face hath felt the winter's wind' (February 1818),

develops rhetoric in which the poet recovers his self by experiencing its emptiness:

> 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.
> Oh, fret not after knowledge—I have none,
> And yet my song comes native with the warmth.
> Oh, 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.

The four-part structure of the sonnet roughly follows the Shakespearean form, which the poet had begun to practise about a month before. Despite the irregular rhyme-scheme and the formal deviation, which denies the closing couplet syntactic independence, the irregularities of the sonnet are balanced by the repetitions of phrase and syntax: "O thou whose..." (lines 1 and 5), "Oh, fret not after knowledge—I have none" (lines 9 and 11). The octave-sestet division is marked by a shift from the second to the first person.

Playing with the formal restrictions of the sonnet form, the poet attains freedom in versification and thematic concision and completeness. Each quatrain shows a conflict between images of spring and winter (1-4), day and night (5-8), or between poetic ambition and the limitations of

reality (9-12). At the same time, however, the poet represents the persistence of a self that endures the difficulties of life, emblematised as "the winter's wind" (1) and "supreme darkness" (6). In the sestet, the poet's speculation upon the nature of his poetic existence is deepened, presenting a negatively capable existence which is able to retain its confidence despite the uncertainty and difficulties of reality, and whose song "comes native with the warmth" (10). The final line of the sonnet, "he's awake who thinks himself asleep," illustrates a Keatsian rhetoric that assets the power of the self by questioning its existence. This rhetoric is developed as an important element in *The Fall of Hyperion*, which the poet began to write in July 1819 and is epitomised in Moneta's words, "'Thou hast felt/ What 'tis to die and live again before/ Thy fated hour.'" (141-143)

A similar rhetoric is apparent in 'Read me a lesson, Muse, and speak it loud', written at the top of Ben Nevis in August 1818, during the poet's walking tour of Scotland. The poet's ascent of the mountain does not bring a sense of fulfilment but a vision of the radical uncertainty of existence:

> Read me a lesson, Muse, and speak it loud
>   Upon the top of Nevis, blind in mist!
> I look into the chasms, and a shroud
>   Vaporous doth hide them; just so much I wist
> Mankind do know of Hell. I look o'erhead
>   And there is sullen mist; even so much
> Mankind can tell of heaven. Mist is spread
>   Before the earth beneath me; even such,
> Even so vague is man's sight of himself.

Here are the craggy stones beneath my feet—
Thus much I know, that, a poor witless elf,
I tread on them, that all my eye doth meet
Is mist and crag, not only on this height,
But in the world of thought and mental might.

Here, a location that one might expect to inspire a conventional Romantic sense of natural sublimity raises in Keats's mind concerns about uncertain conditions of nature and himself. "Mist and crag" (13) are the description of not only around the mountain top, but also the uncertainties of the poet's own existence. The dignity of the poem, however, lies in the poet's firm awareness of his existence. The self in the sonnet is not an escapist self, but a battling self that confronts reality: "Thus much I know, that, a poor witless elf,/ I tread on them" (11-12).

He aspires to a Keatsian sublimity, which reaffirms the self by accepting its limitations and emptiness, rather than the "wordsworthian or egotistical sublime" (*L* i 387), the masculine and visionary power of a heightened self-consciousness that appeared repeatedly in the sonnets of Coleridge and Wordsworth.

Perhaps, Keats's unique critical terms such as "Chameleon poet," "Negative capability," and "Chamber of Maiden-Thought," which are nearly always associated with the concept of uncertainty, are the results of the poet's speculation upon his emptied selfhood. No other poet has an inventory of terms quite like Keats, which conceptualise a state in which

the poet's sense of loss is connected with a type of rhetorical gain. Moreover, no other poet developed a self-emptying and self–regaining rhetoric in his sonnet writing like Keats. The negatively capable self of Keats's sonnets fuses the elegiac mode of eighteenth-century sonnets with the masculine and visionary mode of the Romantic sonnets.

Keats's sonnets make their own contribution to the development of his poetics. The sonnets, written between April 1814 and November 1819, are indicative of the poet's stylistic development. His artistry in versification is most clearly displayed in his sonnets. Keats, for instance, wrote forty Petrarchan sonnets between December 1814 and January 1818. Then, from the latter part of January 1818 to November 1819, he inclined to the Shakespearean sonnet form. Of twenty-five sonnets, written during the period, sixteen sonnets follow the Shakespearean form, five sonnets are in the Petrarchan form, and four sonnets are in irregular form. Apart from the change in the types of the sonnet form, one of the most noticeable differences between the two periods of Keats's sonnet practice is the decreasing number of run-on lines. In forty Petrarchan sonnets before January 1818, there occur 223 run-on lines (5.57 run-on lines per sonnet). When he turned to the Shakespearean sonnet form after 1818, there appear ninety-three run-on lines in twenty-five sonnets (3.72 run-on lines per sonnet).

The reduced number of run-on lines has something to do with the change in Keats's poetic taste. The great contribution to the number of run-on lines in his early Petrarchan sonnets was the series of loose couplets that he employed in the quatrains. The octave of 'On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt' (April 1817) is typical:

Minutes are flying swiftly, and as yet
  Nothing unearthly has enticed my brain
  Into a delphic labyrinth. I would fain
Catch an immortal thought to pay the debt
I owe to the kind poet who has set
  Upon my ambitious head a glorious gain,
  Two bending laurel sprigs-'tis nearly pain
To be conscious of such a coronet. (1-8)

Keats makes three consecutive couplets (2-7) overflow into the next line. This is one of the most prominent formal features in his Petrarchan sonnets and is repeated in the longer poems such as 'Calidore' (1816), 'Sleep and Poetry' (1816), 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill'(1816), and *Endymion* (1817) which are written, under the influence of Leigh Hunt, in heroic couplets with a large number of run-on lines.

By reducing the number of run-on lines, Keats attained a firmer structural discipline and compactness in the sonnets, written after January 1818 mostly in the Shakespearean form. The Shakespearean combination of three alternating-rhyme quatrains and a couplet quite possibly affected the poet's decision to write *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil* in *ottava rima*, a

stanza that uses six lines of alternating rhyme and a couplet, ABABABCC. The number of run-on lines in ten sonnets written in 1819 is decreased further to thirty-one (3.1 lines per sonnet which is below the average number of 3.71 in his sonnets after 1818). The low frequency of run-on lines is maintained in the odes written in 1819. The number of run-on lines accounts for 39.82% out of 563 lines of forty sonnets written before January 1818; and 26.57% out of 350 lines of twenty-five sonnets after 1818. The percentage of run-on lines used in the five odes written in the spring of 1819, 22.80%, 65 of 285 lines, remains low.

The structural congruence between the sonnets and the odes is mirrored in their rhyme schemes. In a series of three sonnets written in April 1819, Keats used experimental rhyme-schemes: ABAB CDCD BCEFEF ('To Sleep'), ABAB CDCD EFEGGF ('How fevered is the man...'), and ABCABDCABCEFEF ('If by dull rhymes our English must be chained'). The irregularity of these sonnets is transmitted to the irregular stanza form of the 'Ode to Psyche', which is thought to be the earliest ode of 1819 because its stanza is modelled most closely on the sonnet. For instance, the first stanza is written in twenty-three lines with a rhyme-scheme of ABAB CDCD EFGEEGH IIJJ KIKI, and it includes three Shakespearean quatrains and two couplets. The rhyme-scheme of the first fourteen lines of the first stanza (ABAB CDCD EFGEEG) is reminiscent of the irregular rhyme-scheme of 'How fevered is the man...' The twelve

lines of the second stanza consist of three Shakespearean quatrains, and the rhyme-scheme of the third fourteen line stanza (ABAB CDDCEF GHGH) parallels that of 'To Sleep'. The final stanza also recalls the sonnet form, by combining four alternating-rhyme quatrains with a couplet, ABAB CDCD EE FGFG HIHI. It appears that Keats developed the stanza form of the 'Ode to Psyche' from the sonnet, testing a variety of sonnet rhyme-schemes, and extending the length of the sonnet. This experiment results in the later odes in the use of more regular and compact stanzas combining Shakespearean quatrains and a Petrarchan sestet.

The connection between Keats's sonnets and his major works becomes more apparent when one compares the chronological order of their composition. Between October and December 1816, for instance, he composed twelve sonnets, completing his first major poems, 'Sleep and Poetry' and 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill' in December; and between March and April 1817 he wrote eight sonnets and just after the eighth sonnet, 'On the Sea' (17 April), Keats began to write *Endymion* on 18 April. In February 1818, the poet composed *Isabella; or The Pot of Basil*, after writing nine sonnets between January and February, and he worked on *Hyperion* in September 1818 after writing five sonnets between July and August during the walking tour of Scotland. The seven sonnets written between March and April 1819 are part of the poet's prolific output between January and May, including *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *The Eve of St.*

Mark, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*, and a series of five odes. It seems that in this period Keats wrote sonnets as a preparation for his composition of the longer poems.

Keats's sonnets, as we have seen, have an importance both in the poet's own poetic career and in the broader context of the revived sonnet tradition of the Romantic period. While Coleridge and Wordsworth express a heightened self-consciousness in the sonnet form which transcends the Petrarchan logic of polarities, Keats was content to work within the bipartite sonnet form to explore the problems of self and its conflict with others. It was through the composition of his sonnets that Keats began to re-define the nature of his own poetic identity, claiming for himself an authority that derives from an acceptance of limitations and constraints.

The following chapters will examine the formal and thematic features of Keats's sonnets, organized into five groups by their compositional order. By exploring the interrelationship between the poet's developing modes of poetic perception and the stylistic features of his sonnets, they attempt to examine how Keats's sonnets became a primary means through which he expressed his persistent preoccupation with the conditions of poetry and his own poetic existence.

CHAPTER II

Keats's First Engagement with the Sonnet: The Early Sonnets before February 1817

This chapter explores the characteristics of Keats's early sonnets written between April 1814 and February 1817, in order to demonstrate that the sonnets offered him a medium through which to express his youthful poetic enthusiasm. The three years span the beginning of his poetic career and the exciting moment when he reaped the first substantial fruit of his efforts by publishing his first volume, *Poems* (1817). After his medical apprenticeship in Edmonton between 1811 and 1815, Keats moved to London in October 1815, to be a student at Guy's Hospital. During the course of his medical studies, Keats did not lose his enthusiasm for poetry, which had been persistent since the years at Enfield School in Edmonton, and he composed several juvenile poems. Although he passed his examination, and officially qualified as an apothecary in October 1816, Keats then abandoned his medical career to devote himself to poetry, and commenced his first major tasks as a poet, composing 'Sleep and Poetry' and 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill' in December 1816, and publishing his first volume in March 1817.

At this early stage of his career Keats expressed his enthusiasm for poetry by experimenting in various forms of poetry such as the ode, 'To Hope' (February 1815), 'Ode to Apollo' (February 1815), the sonnet, the Spenserian stanza, 'Imitation of Spenser' (1814), the quatrain, 'To Some Ladies' (1815), 'To Emma Mathew' (1815), and the couplet, 'Fill for me a brimming bowl' (August 1814), 'To George Felton Mathew' (November 1815), and 'To Mary Frogley' (February 1816). These juvenile poems are indicative of the poet's efforts to turn to account his recently acquired knowledge of the literary tradition, as he reveals in a verse letter, 'To Charles Cowden Clarke' (September 1816):

> ...you first taught me all the sweets of song:
> The grand, the sweet, the terse, the free, the fine;
> What swell'd with pathos, and what right divine:
> Spenserian vowels that elope with ease,
> And float along like birds o'er summer seas;
> Miltonian storms, and more, Miltonian tenderness;
> Michael in arms, and more, meek Eve's fair slenderness.
> Who read for me the sonnet swelling loudly
> Up to its climax and then dying proudly?
> Who found for me the grandeur of the ode,
> Growing, like Atlas, stronger from its load?
> Who let me taste that more than cordial dram,
> The sharp, the rapier-pointed epigram?
> Showed me that epic was of all the king,
> Round, vast, and spanning all like Saturn's ring? (53-67)

In his early poems, Keats repeatedly registered his preoccupation with his poetic role by making reference to the literary tradition. References to Homer, Virgil, Milton, Shakespeare, Spenser, and Tasso, for instance, in the 'Ode to Apollo', and young Calidore's chivalric venture, a metaphoric

search for an ideal poetry, in 'Calidore', function as a way of placing his own poems in the context of the literary tradition. His enthusiasm for poetry is developed in his early narrative poems, 'Sleep and Poetry', and 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill', and it achieved its first major outcome when the poet published *Poems* in March 1817.

In this early stage of his poetic career, in which the poet's enthusiasm was at its height, the sonnet became a major vehicle through which he expressed his enthusiasms and developed his own voice. Studying the poet's leading thoughts in the twenty-nine sonnets written between April 1814 and February 1817 reveals the way the sonnet graduated from a form that simply allowed Keats to practice his poetic skills to become a vehicle through which he expressed his most important poetic principles. In order to clarify the changing mode of the early sonnets, this chapter is divided into two parts. The first part, under the headings, 'The Sonnets as a Self-Adjusting Device' and '"Images of thoughts refined": The Sonnets between November 1815 and June 1816', concerns the thirteen sonnets written between April 1814 and June 1816 in an attempt to demonstrate how the poet achieved satisfactory lyric qualities in his early sonnet practice. The second part, under the heading, '"Distance of recognizance bereaves": The Integrating Power of the Selfhood', explores the characteristics of the sixteen sonnets, written in a relatively short period between August 1816 and February 1817, to suggest that

Keats's preoccupation with his own poetic subjectivity is most clearly reflected in his sonnets.

The Sonnets as a Self-Adjusting Device

It is in his earliest sonnets, such as 'On Peace', 'To Chatterton', and 'Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison', that the poet uses his most emphatically public voice. The political implications of these sonnets have been emphasised by recent critics such as Marjorie Levinson, John Kandl, and Nicholas Roe. Nevertheless, as Robert M. Ryan suggests in *Keats's Religious Sense* the level of Keats's political engagement should not be exaggerated.[1] Because poems on the end of the war in France such as 'On Peace' and on victims of social oppression, such as Keats's poems on Chatterton and Hunt, were popular in the period, they can hardly be presented as an expression of an independent political position, and in any case Keats did not persist in writing political poems.

Rather, Keats's earliest sonnets reveal their significance when we attempt to explore how the poet began to express his poetic enthusiasms in the sonnet and the various literary influences that the sonnets register. When Keats first began to write sonnets, the form functioned as a

[1] Robert M. Ryan, *Keats: The Religious Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), pp.69-70.

convenient place in which the poet could begin to absorb the literary influences to which he was subject. The overt public voice and political issues in Keats's early sonnets do not simply underline the liberal character of the literary coterie with which he was associated.

In its overtly public character, Keats's 'On Peace' might be compared with Wordsworth's *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty* (1807), and of Coleridge's *Sonnets to Eminent Characters* (1797). The sentimental melancholy of 'To Lord Byron' (December 1814), however, recalls the sonnets of Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams, Mary Robinson and Mary Tighe:

> As when a cloud a golden moon doth veil,
> Its sides are tinged with a resplendent glow,
> Through the dark robe oft amber rays prevail,
> And like fair veins in sable marble flow.
> Still warble, dying swan, still tell the tale,
> The enchanting tale, the tale of pleasing woe. (9-14)

Thus, what is worth noting in the first stage of the poet's engagement with the sonnet, is how Keats's early sonnets reflect the influences of the revived sonnet tradition and of other poets including Coleridge, Wordsworth and Leigh Hunt, but Keats added a personal touch to the tradition by using the form as an effective instrument for establishing his own poetic identity.

Keats wrote five sonnets between April 1814 and February 1815 in Edmonton where he had stayed since 1811. Except in the very first sonnet, 'On Peace', written in an irregular Shakespearean sonnet form, Keats inclined to the Petrarchan sonnet form until January 1818 after which he showed a preference for the Shakespearean form over the Petrarchan sonnet. Stylistically, Keats's Petrarchan sonnets are based on a Miltonic - Petrarchan form as practised by eighteenth-century sonneteers such as Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and W. L. Bowles. In general, although they employed the Miltonic use of run-on lines and caesurae, they also maintained the Petrarchan octave-sestet division, which had been avoided by Milton. Like the eighteenth-century sonneteers, Keats followed faithfully the Petrarchan division while still employing enjambment and caesura to increase thematic effectiveness. A persistent feature of his Petrarchan sonnets is the introduction of a late caesura, in line twelve or thirteen.

> There thou or joinest the immortal quire
>   In melodies that even Heaven fair
> Fill with superior bliss, or, at desire
>   Of the omnipotent Father, cleavest the air
> On holy message sent—What pleasures higher?
>   Wherefore does any grief our joy impair?
>
> ('As from the darkening gloom a silver dove', 9-14)

The description of a human soul joining the immortal choir is intensified by a series of run-on lines (9-12), and the fast flow of the verse becomes calm before the caesura in line 13. Controlling the speed of verse as well as

the flow of thought by the combination of run-on lines and caesurae is the prominent formal feature of Milton's sonnets:

> Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best, his state
> Is kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed
> And post o'er land and ocean without rest:
> They also serve who only stand and wait.
>
> ('When I consider how my light is spent', 11-14)

Similar formal features are found in the sonnets of Smith, Bowles, Coleridge and Wordsworth, who detested the artificiality of the formal demands of the Petrarchan sonnet form.

Keats's first sonnet, 'On Peace', is imitative, beginning with a conventional eighteenth-century invocation:

> O Peace! And dost thou with thy presence bless
> The dwellings of this war-surrounded isle,
> Soothing with placid brow our late distress,
> Making the triple kingdom brightly smile?
> Joyful I hail thy presence; and I hail
> The sweet companions that await on thee.
> Complete my joy—let not my first wish fail;
> Let the sweet mountain nymph thy favourite be,
> With England's happiness proclaim Europa's liberty.
> O Europe! Let not sceptred tyrants see
> That thou must shelter in thy former state;
> Keep thy chains burst, and boldly say thou art free;
> Give thy kings law—leave not uncurbed the great.
> So with the honours past thou'lt win thy happier fate.

This sonnet is an irregular Shakespearean sonnet written in April 1814, and it refers to the political events of 31 March 1814, when the European allies

captured Paris, and consequently France saw the restoration of the Bourbons. The turn of the sonnet is delayed when a sentence beginning in the eighth line continues into the tenth, contributing to the sonnet's irregularity.[2] The formal irregularity allows the poet more freedom to reorganise the rhetorical frame of the poem in which the object of his invocation is changed from "Peace"(1) to "Europe"(10). In the first two quatrains, which extend into line nine, the poet refers to "Peace" in Britain after the Napoleonic wars and expects its spread into Europe. In the third quatrain, shortened by the delayed turn at line ten, the poet addresses to 'Europe' his hopes for a new political settlement. In terms of its thematic development the poem falls into three parts, 4+5+5 (ABAB CDCDD DEDEE).

Keats's first sonnet is indicative of the poet's close involvement with the revived sonnet tradition, and his association with contemporary poets' reactions to and analyses of the political events of 1814 and 1815. The optimistic response of the Romantic poets to the end of the Napoleonic wars, for instance, anticipates Keats's political and public voice in this sonnet. In 'November, 1813', Wordsworth expresses his enthusiastic hopes for the post-war days:

> Now that all hearts are glad, all faces bright,
> Our aged Sovereign sits, to the ebb and flow
> Of states and kingdoms, to their joy or woe,

[2] Keats blurs the octave-sestet division in only five of his sonnets.

Insensible. He sits deprived of sight,
And lamentably wrapped in twofold night,
Whom no weak hopes deceived; whose mind ensued,
Through perilous war, with regal fortitude,
Peace that should claim respect from lawless Might.
Dread King of Kings, vouchsafe a ray divine
To his forlorn condition! let thy grace
Upon his inner soul in mercy shine;
Permit his heart to kindle, and to embrace
(Through it were only for a moment's space)
The triumphs of this hour; for they are Thine![3]

This sonnet was composed in November 1813 and first published in the *Courier* in January 1814. In referring to the downfall of Napoleon, "the triumphs of this hour" (14), Wordsworth invokes "a ray divine" to be vouchsafed by the "King of Kings" to George III who is sunk "in twofold night" (5) being blind and insane. The expectations of the poet for the peace in Britain and Europe were shared even by the radical, Leigh Hunt. Although he took a sceptical view of the restoration of the Bourbons, Hunt believed that the political events in Paris in 1814 would contribute to the future of liberty and peace in Europe. In 'Ode for the Spring of 1814', he expresses this optimism:

O Liberty! O breath
Of all that's true existence!
Thou at whose touch the soul, at death,
But leaps to joy and distance;
Before thy present call,
The very captive's wall,
If wrongly round him, like a curtain flies;
The green and laughing world he sees,
Waters, and plains, and waving trees,
The skim of birds, and the blue-doming skies,

[3] *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, vol.3, p.143.

And sits with smile at heart, and patience-levelled eyes.[4] (56-66)

Whereas his contemporaries had a direct influence the argument of Keats's first sonnet, his sonnet form again suggests the influence of the late eighteenth-century sonnet tradition. For instance, as Claude Lee Finney, in *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, points out, the sonnet reflects the poet's understanding of the popularity of the Shakespearian sonnet form, which was preferred to the Petrarchan and Spenserian forms in the last decade of the eighteenth century.[5] In its irregularity it echoes the sonnets of Charlotte Smith and Coleridge in particular. Smith paved the way for the popularity of the Shakespearean sonnet with her first edition of the *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), which went through ten editions by 1811. Having criticised the artificiality of the Petrarchan sonnet form, she made the sonnet a vehicle for the expression of feeling at the expense of formal constraints. Of her forty-seven Shakespearean sonnets, for instance, seven sonnets employ an irregular rhyme-scheme[6], and twenty sonnets cancel either the quatrain division or the quatrain-couplet division. An alexandrine in the final line of a sonnet, as in Keats's 'On Peace', appears in eleven of her sonnets.[7]

[4] Leigh Hunt, 'Ode for the Spring of 1814', in *Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, ed. H. S. Milford (Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 1923), pp. 281-283. Hereafter cited as *Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*.

[5] Claude Lee Finney, *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry* 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936), vol. 1, pp.39-42.

[6] 4 sonnets (IX, XXVIII, XXXVII, XLVII) have an irregular rhyme-scheme of EFGEFG in the final 6 lines; 2 sonnets (LII, LVII), CDCDCD; and 1 sonnet (VIII), EFEGGG.

[7] An Alexandrian occurs in XI, XXXVIII, XL, XLII, XLIII, XLVI, XLVIII, LII, LV, LVI, and LVIII..

In form and theme, however, Keats's first sonnet reflects Coleridge's and Wordsworth's sonnet practice. The two Romantic poets valued the expressiveness of the sonnet over its formal restrictions, and attempted to create a sense of unity by refusing the conventional division between octave and sestet. As a result, they produced various experimental sonnet forms. Coleridge, for instance, combined freely in his sonnet practice a Petrarchan octave with a Shakespearean quatrain and a couplet; and two Shakespearean quatrains with a Petrarchan sestet. Also, he frequently blurred the quatrain or the octave-sestet division by introducing run-on lines and caesurae. According to Lee M. Johnson, Wordsworth practised the quatrain rhyme-scheme of ABBA ACCA in 210 sonnets and irregular rhyme-schemes in ninety-nine sonnets of his 535 sonnets in total, and the formal divisions of the sonnet are disguised by the frequent use of run-on lines.[8]

Keats demonstrates in 'On Peace', then, his understanding of the principles of the revived sonnet tradition of the Romantic period, which was willing to reject the logic of polarities inherent in the sonnet form in favour of completeness and unity of thought. After this sonnet, however, Keats inclined to the Petrarchan form, and did not again write an irregular sonnet until February 1818, when he started to employ the Shakespearean sonnet form. In all Keats wrote only four irregular sonnets, including the

[8] *Wordsworth and the Sonnet*, p.27.

three experimental sonnets written in early 1819, out of his sixty-six sonnets, and in only five sonnets is the octave-sestet division ignored.

In his first sonnets, Keats appears to have made thematic capital from the sonnet's bipartite form. The octave-sestet division often marks a thematic contrast between reality and an ideal realm of the spirit. The octave of 'To Chatterton', for instance, epitomises the tragic life of Chatterton, "Melted in dying murmurs" (6), and then the following sestet pictures the unfortunate poet in a perfect spiritual state:

> But this is past; thou art among the stars
>   Of highest Heaven; to the rolling spheres
> Thou sweetly singest; naught thy hymning mars,
>   Above the ingrate world and human fears.
> On earth the good man base detraction bars
>   From thy fair name and waters it with tears. (9-14)

The ideal realm "among the stars/ Of highest Heaven" (9-10) is not only a resting place for Chatterton, but also for Keats, who represents Heaven as the perfect place for the composition and reception of poetry.

Similarly, in 'Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison' (February 1815), which is the earliest sonnet among the seventeen Petrarchan sonnets published together in his *Poems* (1817), the poet establishes more overtly a perfect realm of poetry, taking advantage of the structural division of the sonnet:

What though, for showing truth to flattered state,
Kind Hunt was shut in prison, yet has he,
In his immortal spirit, been as free
As the sky-searching lark, and as elate.
Minion of grandeur, think you he did wait?
Think you he naught but prison walls did see,
Till, so unwilling, thou unturn'dest the key?
Ah, no! far happier, nobler was his fate.
In Spenser's halls he strayed, and bowers fair,
Culling enchanted flowers; and he flew
With daring Milton through the fields of air;
To regions of his own his genius true
Took happy flights. Who shall his fame impair
When thou are dead and all thy wretched crew?

Through the octave-sestet division, the poet contrasts Hunt's confinement, "shut in prison" (2), with the freedom that the poet enjoys in his travels in the literary realms of Spenser and Milton. The sonnet represents the opposition between the oppressive political reality of a "flattered state" (1) and the political liberalism of Hunt, which is identified with the literary figures who celebrated freedom in their poetic works. The opposition is noticed by Vincent Newey and Greg Kucich in their readings of the sonnet. Newey, for instance, points out "the contrast between the 'true', productive life of imagination and deluded, sterile temporal authority"[9], and Kucich notes that the sonnet draws parallel between Keats's "intense preoccupation with poetic influence" and "his responses to the political crises" of his time.[10]

[9] Vincent Newey, 'Keats, history, and the poets', in *Keats and History*, ed., Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.167.
[10] Greg Kucich, 'Keats's literary tradition and the politics of historiographical invention', in *Keats and History*, ed., Nicholas Roe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p.240.

In his earliest sonnets, 'On Peace' and 'Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison', Keats imitates Wordsworth's manner in *Sonnets Dedicated to Liberty* and Coleridge's *Sonnets to Eminent Characters*. In addition, the poet conforms to eighteenth-century practice in maintaining the Petrarchan octave-sestet division as well as the Miltonic use of enjambment and caesura. In 'To Lord Byron' he displays the sentimental melancholy typical of eighteenth-century sonnets. In these juvenile sonnets, the poet demonstrates his understanding of the duality of the sonnet form, and uses it to underline the contrast between painful realities and his poetic ideal. Thereafter, Keats's sonnets became more refined. The thematic duality of the sonnet began to represent not only a simple juxtaposition between ideal and reality, but also the vivid correspondence between experience and poetry, and between self and others.

"Images of thoughts refined": The Sonnets between November 1815 and June 1816

Keats did not write a sonnet for some eight months after the sonnet on Hunt's release from prison (February 1815). After he moved to London to be a student at Guy's Hospital in October 1815 and before he qualified at Apothecaries' Hall in July 1816, the poet composed eight sonnets. In these

sonnets, the strong public voice of his previous sonnets is replaced by a calm private voice. 'To one who has been long in city pent', and 'Oh, how I love, on a fair summer's eve', written during the summer of 1816, for example, express the poet's pleasure in the presence of the beauty of nature, and 'To a Friend who Sent me Some Roses', written in June, marks his reconciliation with his friend, Wells, who presented a rose to Keats after they quarrelled.

A noticeable development in Keats's sonnet writing was that the poet began to explore his preoccupations with poetry and his identity as a poet in the sonnet. Keats's first published poem, 'O Solitude, if I must with thee dwell', not only reveals the poet's growing lyrical ability in the more settled rhetorical frame of the Petrarchan sonnet, but also, in token of his growing self-confidence, uses the first-person singular for the first time in a sonnet:

> O Solitude, if I must with thee dwell,
> Let it not be among the jumbled heap
> Of murky buildings. Climb with me the steep-
> Nature's observatory—whence the dell,
> Its flowery slopes, its river's crystal swell,
> May seem a span; let me thy vigils keep
> 'Mongst boughs pavilioned, where the deer's swift leap
> Startles the wild bee from the foxglove bell.
> But though I'll gladly trace these scenes with thee,
> Yet the sweet converse of an innocent mind,
> Whose words are images of thoughts refined,
> Is my soul's pleasure, and it sure must be
> Almost the highest bliss of human-kind,
> When to thy haunts two kindred spirits flee.

In its formal features the sonnet follows Keats's established practice. While the poet maintains the conventional octave-sestet division, he reshapes the sestet by a deft combination in which the rhyme-scheme of a Petrarchan quatrain (CDDC, 9-12) engages with that of a Shakespearean quatrain (DCDC, 11-14). Through this sonnet structure, Keats represents his paradoxical quest for solitude and friendship. By juxtaposing in the octave dissatisfaction with his new city life in London (1-3), and fondness for nature (3-8), he justifies his pursuit of solitude in "Nature's observatory" (4). The sestet, however, represents the poet's contradictory search for "the sweet converse of an innocent mind" (10). The poet finds consolation in natural solitude but also in communion with "two kindred spirits" (14): that is, the poet's solitude does not entail absolute isolation.

The poet's paradoxical quest in the sonnet reveals Hunt's influence upon Keats's early poetics. As Finney suggests, the sonnet is composed in the natural style which Hunt had adapted from Wordsworth. In his explanation of Hunt's understanding of Wordsworth, Finney insists that Wordsworth's natural style of poetry was conveyed to Keats, filtered through Hunt's cockney sensibility that rejected Wordsworth's principle of poetic subjectivity in which feeling has priority over objective circumstances.[11] The following extract from Hunt's *The Feast of the Poets* shows how Hunt valued sociality above excessive subjectivity:

[11] *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, vol. 1, pp.76-78.

> ...he [Wordsworth], on the other hand, lives too much apart, and is subject, we think, to low-fevered tastes and solitary morbidities; –but as there is health in both of us, suppose both parties strike a bargain, –he to come among us a little more and get a true sense of our action, –we to go out of ourselves a little oftener and acquire a taste for his contemplation. We will make more holidays into nature with him; but he, in fairness, must earn them, as well as ourselves, by sharing our working days: –we will emerge oftener into his fields, sit dangling our legs over his styles, and cultivate a due respect for daffodils; but he, on the other hand must grow a little better acquainted with our streets, must put up with our lawyers, and even find out a heart or so among our politicians...[12]

Hunt's metropolitan sensibility influenced Keats, who also finds poetic inspiration in other people and in friendship. The intercourse between two minds in the sonnet becomes a whole "brotherhood in song" in his verse letter 'To George Felton Matthew', written like the sonnet in November, 1815:

> Sweet are the pleasures that to verse belong,
> And doubly sweet a brotherhood in song. (1-2)

However, just as Keats constructs the sestet of the sonnet by amalgamating two different kinds of quatrain, so the poem brings together two discordant poetic values, the one insisting on solitary seclusion, the other celebrating pleasant conversation amongst a literary coterie. Keats juxtaposes Wordsworthian subjectivity and Huntian sociality, but he preserves

[12] Leigh Hunt, *The Feast of the Poets*, 2nd edn. (London: Gale & Fenner, 1815), pp. 107-108.

throughout a contrast between creativity and the busily material world that he figures as a "jumbled heap/ Of murky buildings"(2-3).

The poet's self-confidence is more apparent in the sonnets written after 'O Solitude', in which Keats takes as his theme the process by which poetic inspiration issues in the composition of poetry, as in 'Oh, how I love, on a fair summer's eve' (1816).

> Oh, how I love, on a fair summer's eve,
> When streams of light pour down the golden west,
> And on the balmy zephyrs tranquil rest
> The silver clouds, far, far away to leave
> All meaner thoughts, and take a sweet reprieve
> From little cares; to find, with easy quest,
> A fragrant wild with Nature's beauty dressed,
> And there into delight my soul deceive.
> There warm my breast with patriotic lore,
> Musing on Milton's fate, on Sidney's bier,
> Till their stern forms before my mind arise—
> Perhaps on the wing of poesy upsoar,
> Full often dropping a delicious tear
> When some melodious sorrow spells mine eyes.

What is worth noting in this sonnet is the process by which the experience of "a fair summer's eve" is transformed into a sensation that prompts the image of the "wing of poesy" in the poet's mind. Running across the octave-sestet division, he highlights the thematic movement in which the observation of nature culminates in the composition of poetry. The octave represents the pleasure of the poet in the presence of the beauty of a summer evening. An extended sentence incorporates a series of images, which appeal to the sense of sight and vision, such as "streams of light"(2),

"golden west"(2), "silver clouds"(4), and "a fragrant wild"(7), to deliver a vivid picture of the moment. Then, the impression of the beauty of nature is turned into a poetic impulse in the sestet, and it is intensified by the image of "the wing of poesy" (12).[13] Despite the sentimentality of its conclusion the sonnet successfully traces the process by which it came to be composed.

A common concern in the sonnets written between February and March 1816 is Keats's anxiety to establish his own poetic identity. The receptivity of the poet's mind is illustrated by the vivid simile of the mouth of "a greedy shark" in the sestet of 'Light feet, dark violet eyes, and parted hair':

> Yet these I leave as thoughtless as a lark,
> These lures I straight forget, e'en ere I dine
> Or thrice my palate moisten. But when I mark
> Such charms with mild intelligences shine,
> My ear is open like a greedy shark
> To catch the turnings of a voice divine. (9-14)

The poet's heightened self-consciousness in the early sonnets is intensified and developed in *Calidore*, his first narrative poem written between February and March 1816. In its chivalric theme the poem echoes

[13] The transition of Keats's poetic enthusiasm into poetry is often symbolised by a poetic flight in his later poems, in which his enthusiasm for poetry is balanced by the awareness of reality, such as "Phoenix wings" (14) in 'On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again' (January 1818), and "the viewless wings of Poesy" (33) in 'Ode to a Nightingale' (April 1819). However, this early sonnet represents a poetry of luxury and sentiment, represented by "a delicious tear" (13) and "melodious sorrow" (14).

Spenser's The *Faerie Queene*, especially Book VI, "The Legend of Sir Calidore, or Of Courtesie". In its loose couplets and sentimental atmosphere the poem recalls the Petrarchan sonnets written in March 1816, quoted above. The praise of the physical beauty of a woman in the sonnets develops into a description of the amorous moment in which young Calidore is greeted by a group of charming ladies:

> Into how sweet a trance his soul was gone,
> While whisperings of affection
> Made him delay to let their tender feet
> Come to the earth. With an incline so sweet
> From their low palfreys o'er his neck they bent,
> And whether there were tears of languishment,
> Or that the evening dew had pearled their tresses,
> He feels a moisture on his cheek and blesses,
> With lips that tremble and with glistening eye,
> All the soft luxury
> That nestled in his arms. (83-93)

In *Calidore*, Keats reintroduces not only the loose couplets of the Petrarchan sonnets, but also their diction: "softening", "meek", and "tender" ('Woman! When I behold thee flippant vain'), "light feet", "soft dimpled hands", "creamy breast" ('Light feet, dark violet eyes, and parted hair'), "half-retiring sweets", "a dewy flower", and "trembling moisture" ('Ah, who can e'er forget so fair a being').

The chivalric atmosphere in the sonnet, 'Woman! When I behold thee flippant, vain', "I hotly burn—to be a Calidore,/ A very Red Cross

Knight, a stout Leander" (11-13), recurs when Calidore is represented as "burning to hear" (142-143) a story from Sir Clerimond:

> ...and while Clerimond
> Is looking round about him with a fond
> And placid eye, young Calidore is burning
> To hear of knightly deeds and gallant spurning
> Of all unworthiness, and how the strong of arm
> Kept off dismay and terror and alarm
> From lovely woman... (140-146)

In the early sonnets written before June, 1816 Keats refined his lyric voice and attempted to establish his own poetic identity. The presence of an enthusiastic "I" in the sonnets written after 'O Solitude...' marks a noticeable change, because it signifies that Keats had begun to recognize in the sonnet a possibility for representing a heightened self-consciousness, through the agency of a sonnet speaker, who passionately attempts to convert experience into the inspiration for poetic creation.

"Distance of recognizance bereaves": The Integrating Power of the Perceiving Mind

In the Romantic poets' sonnet practice, we find a common rhetorical movement that emphasises a heightened self-consciousness produced by an engagement with the poet's external surroundings. In Wordsworth's 'Hail, Twilight, sovereign of one peaceful hour!', written in September 1812 and

published in 1815 among 'Miscellaneous Sonnets', the poet experiences at twilight a sublime moment of poetic vision:

> Hail, Twilight, sovereign of one peaceful hour!
> Not dull art Thou as undiscerning Night;
> But studious only to remove from sight
> Day's mutable distinctions. – Ancient Power!
> Thus did the waters gleam, the mountains lower,
> To the rude Briton, when, in wolf-skin vest
> Here roving wild, or through a leafy bower
> Looked ere his eyes were closed. By him was seen
> The self-same Vision which we now behold,
> At thy meek bidding, shadowy Power! brought forth;
> These mighty barriers, and the gulf between;
> The flood, the stars, – a spectacle as old
> As the beginning of the heavens and earth![14]

Here, Wordsworth describes the power of "Twilight", which abridges and harmonises the distance between day and night. In twilight, the uncertainty of night and the mutability of day disappear, and the poet recognises in the shadowy realm of twilight a sovereign and mysterious moment, which had been recognized even by the "rude Briton" (6) before civilization had begun. Through the obscured octave-sestet division, the poet blurs the boundary between ancient times and the present by presenting the "self-same Vision"(10) as common to both these times. In the conclusion, twilight becomes "a spectacle as old as the beginning of the heavens and earth!"(13-14) In the sonnet, the power of the poet's mind is as sovereign as twilight. The power of twilight that harmonises not only the phenomena

[14] *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, vol.3, p.31.

of nature, but also quite different historical periods, functions as a metaphor for the power of the poet's mind.

The integrating power of the mind, which can merges one with another distinct objects to create an intensified poetic impression, was what Keats also began to represent in the sonnets written after 'O Solitude, if I must with thee dwell' (October 1815). In a series of sonnets written between August 1816 and February 1817 Keats concentrated on his own individuality as a poet and on the power of his perceiving mind. In 'How many bards gild the lapses of time' (October 1816), for instance, he represents a moment in which the voices of the great poets that he has read merge together:

> How many bards gild the lapses of time!
>   A few of them have ever been the food
>   Of my delightful fancy—I could brood
> Over their beauties, earthly, or sublime;
> And often, when I sit me down to rhyme,
>   These will in throngs before my mind intrude:
>   But no confusion, no disturbance rude
> Do they occasion; 'tis a pleasing chime.
> So the unnumbered sounds that evening store:
>   The songs of birds, the whispering of the leaves,
> The voice of waters, the great bell that heaves
>   With solemn sound, and thousand others more
> That distance of recognizance bereaves,
>   Make pleasing music, and not wild uproar.

As Stuart M. Sperry explains, in *Keats the Poet*, this sonnet is about "the creative process itself."[15] More specifically, the poem identifies the "I" of the poem as a poet: "when I sit me down to rhyme,/ These will in throngs before my mind intrude" (5-6). As Wordsworth represents twilight as resolving difference between day and night, and between ancient times and the present, Keats describes an experience in which various literary influences merge, as do "the unnumbered sounds" (9) of nature itself. However, he seems more preoccupied than Wordsworth by the nature of his poetic identity, and hence he is more concerned to articulate the presence of the "I" in the process of composition.

Recently, Jennifer Ann Wagner has observed in Keats's sonnets a "poetical *potentia*", which explains the sonnet's thematic and formal open-endedness. According to Wagner, the thematic indeterminacy of Keats's sonnets is one aspect of a "strategy of closure", by which the poet resists the formal restrictions and attempts to go beyond the closure of the sonnet form.[16] Nevertheless, in this sonnet Keats affirms the fullness and the power of his selfhood within the sonnet's standard formal frame.

In the sonnet's octave-sestet division, Keats juxtaposes the voices of the great poets of the past and the sounds of various natural objects. This

[15] Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp.72-73.

[16] *A Moment's Monument*, pp.83, 88, 92-93.

juxtaposition implies that the poem has its origin both in an experience of literature and an experience of nature. The octave and the sestet exemplify a moment in which individual features of an experience are fused to produce poetic sensation. The different voices of the "many bards" (1) and the different sounds of nature lose their distinctness, and are harmonised to produce "a pleasing chime" (8) and "pleasing music" (14), which eliminate any "confusion", "disturbance" (7) or "wild uproar" (14).

According to Cowden Clarke, Leigh Hunt and Horace Smith read this sonnet, and Smith commented on line thirteen, "what a well-condensed expression for one so young".[17] The process by which sound heard at a distance lose their distinctness delicately adumbrates the abstracting process that Keats represents as a necessary prelude to composition. By establishing the presence of "I" at the centre of the compositional process, "I could brood/ Over their beauties..." (3-4), "when I sit me down to rhyme"(5), the poet emphasises that it is his own individuality that controls the abstracting power of the mind.

In the sonnets written after August 1816, which include 'To my Brother George' (August), 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' (October), and 'On the Grasshopper and Cricket' (December), Keats

[17] Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1878), p. 133.

repeatedly takes his own poetic identity and his compositional processes as his principal subjects.

The Self-Making Mode in the Sonnets

Several modern critics have focused on the struggle of the Romantic poets to secure their own poetic identity. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, for example, Harold Bloom understands the relationship between a poetic precursor and a successor as agonistic. Bloom's model of influence is diachronic, focusing on the successor's anxiety for the *past*, and an attitude towards the predecessor that is at once defensive and competitive. Bloom uses this model to define Keats's poetic character. Keats's odes, sonnets, and the two *Hyperions* establish that his precursor is Milton, of whom he is at once an imitator and competitor.[18] Whereas Bloom explains Romantic poetry by reference to its belatedness, Stuart Curran believes that the attention of the Romantic poets is directed towards the present and future, and it results not in anxiety but in poetic enthusiasm and confidence.[19]

Curran's view seems to offer a better understanding of Keats's early poetic career. The poet's youthful preoccupation with the literary tradition

[18] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 1997), The topic is discussed primarily in chapter 5, '*Kenosis*: or Repetition and Discontinuity'.
[19] *Poetic Form and British Romanticism*, pp.8-11.

and his poetic precursors did not result in an agonistic relation between the poet and the past. Instead, just as the voices of the great poets harmonised to produce "a pleasing chime" in the sonnet above, his awareness of his poetic precursors serves only to confirm his confidence in his own poetic identity. In the sonnets written between the summer of 1816 and the spring of 1817, Keats affirms the strength of his poetic selfhood.

'To my Brother George' places, for instance, the poet's perceiving mind at the centre of the compositional process, busily abstracting the impressions of each external object to create a heightened poetic self-consciousness:

> Many the wonders I this day have seen:
> The sun, when first he kissed away the tears
> That filled the eyes of morn; the laurelled peers
> Who from the feathery gold of evening lean;
> The ocean with its vastness, its blue green,
> Its ships, its rocks, its caves, its hopes, its fears,
> Its voice mysterious, which whoso hears
> Must think on what will be, and what has been.
> E'en now, dear George, while this for you I write,
> Cynthia is from her silken curtains peeping
> So scantly that it seems her bridal night,
> And she her half-discovered revels keeping.
> But what, without the social thought of thee,
> Would be the wonders of the sky and sea?

In August 1816, a month after Keats passed his examination at Apothecaries' Hall, he went to Margate with his brother Tom for a summer break. The sonnet expresses the poet's impression of the seaside of Margate as well as his intimate sense of brotherhood with George. The

significance of this sonnet is that it was composed at the moment when Keats had finally decided to take up a career as a poet, abandoning his long-term medical ambitions. The placing of the sonnet first among the collection of 17 sonnets in *Poems* (1817) implies that the poem has something to do with this momentous decision.

The sonnet follows the standard Petrarchan sonnet form, written in a precise iambic pentameter with the exception of line 10. In the juxtaposition between the octave and sestet, Keats represents how the new experience made available to him by his short excursion to the seaside issues in the composition of poetry. As in several of the early sonnets, he represents himself as a wanderer engaged in an enthusiastic search for "many...wonders" (1). Compare the metaphor of a wanderer in 'How many bards gild the lapses of time' and of a discoverer in 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'.

In this sonnet, the experience of wandering in nature is echoed by an experience of wandering amongst books. In the first quatrain, the poet describes two "wonders": "the sun"(2) and "the laurelled peers"(3). The image of "the laurelled peers/ Who from the feathery gold of evening lean" (3-4) turns the description of the setting sun in the western skies into the a representation of the realm of poetry, an Elysium on the western margin of

the earth in which the bards of ancient times dwell with Apollo, who is a sun god and a god of poetry.

In the second quatrain Keats's gaze moves from the external phenomena of nature, "its vastness, its blue green,/ Its ships, its rocks, its caves" (5-6), to speculation upon the flow of time, "what will be, and what has been" (8). In the sestet, the poet reveals himself as a poet at work, "while this for you I write" (9), and the compositional process issues in a poetic account of Cynthia, the moon goddess, on "her bridal night" (11). The sestet emphasises the poet's new vocation as a poet, as he self-consciously engages in the activity of composition by which the experience of the day is reproduced in the sonnet.

Similar preoccupations are apparent in 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' (October 1816), another sonnet in which Keats is concerned to announce his new vocation as a poet:

> Much have I travelled in the realms of gold,
>   And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
>   Round many western islands have I been
> Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
> Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
>   That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
>   Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
> Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold.
> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
>   When a new planet swims into his ken;
> Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
>   He stared at the Pacific, and all his men
> Looked at each other with a wild surmise—

Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

The immediate poetic inspiration for this sonnet was the poet's experience of reading Chapman's translation of *Homer* (1614) with Cowden Clarke in October 1816. Keats and Clarke met in Clarke's house in Clerkenwell, and read Chapman's translation of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, published in a folio edition in 1614. Next day, at daybreak, Keats walked the two miles back home to his lodgings in Poultry, and composed the sonnet and sent a copy to Clarke so that he could receive it by ten o'clock in the morning.[20]

'The realms of gold' in which Keats claims to have travelled recall the poetic Elysium of Keats's 'Ode to Apollo' (February 1815). In the ode, he describes the poets of Elysium using a similar metaphor, "western halls of gold":

> In thy western halls of gold
> When thou sittest in thy state,
> Bards, that erst sublimely told
> Heroic deeds, and sang of fate,
> With fervour seize their adamantine lyres, (1-5)

Similarly, a glow in the western sky, in 'To my Brother George', persuades Keats to imagine the presence of "the laurel'd peers/ Who from the feathery gold of evening lean" (3-4). The "realms of gold" in the Chapman's Homer sonnet connote the richness of the literary tradition, established by poets such as Homer, Virgil, Spenser, Shakespeare, and

[20] Cowden Clarke, 'Recollections of Keats', in *John Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed., G. M. Matthews (London and New York: Routledge, 1971), pp.390-392.

Milton, Keats's reverence for whom had led to his discovery of Chapman's *Homer*.

In her reading of the second quatrain, Marjorie Levinson insists that Keats's statement that before reading Chapman he had never breathed Homer's "pure-serene" (7), is an implicit confession of the poet's own belatedness and exclusion from the literary tradition.[21] However, in the early sonnets so far, Keats's acknowledgement of the tradition did not produce any sense of belatedness or isolation. Rather, they seemed to bolster his confidence in his ability to construct his poetic identity. It may be that Keats is not making a confession so much as expressing the excitement of making a new literary discovery.

The sestet offers a figurative representation of an exploration of the literary world through which the experience is transformed into a moment of sensation. In the sestet, Keats conveys the experience through metaphors of astronomical and geographical discovery. First, his literary experience is compared with the discovery of "a new planet":

> Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
> When a new planet swims into his ken; (9-10)

Then the experience is associated with Balboa's discovery of the Pacific Ocean (misattributed to Cortez): "Or like stout Cortez when with eagle

[21] Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of A Style* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), pp.11-12.

eyes/ He star'd at the Pacific" (11-12). The two similes in the sestet have been explained by reference to the poet's reading of Robertson's *History of America* which includes a description of the discovery of the Pacific Ocean and the Isthmus of Darien, and of Bonnycastle's *Introduction of Astronomy* which recounts the story of Herschel's discovery of the planet Uranus. What needs to be emphasised is the winning enthusiasm that represents the discovery of a new poet as an event of cosmic significance.

There have been many different approaches to 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer': some critics attempt to explore the political and historical significance of the sonnet, while others concentrate on its stylistic features. Marjorie Levinson's socio-historical reading, for example, highlights Keats's "fetishistic relation to the great Original", arguing that the poem reveals Keats's desire for 'the social grammar' from which his education had excluded him.[22] Greg Kucich and Theresa M. Kelley have focused on the binary opposition, which Levinson had pointed to, between Keats as an outsider, and the literary, cultural, economic and political centres of his time. Kucich, referring to the "realms of gold" (1) of the sonnet, suggests that the poem brings to mind industrial capitalism and "the troubled social conditions of nineteenth-century Europe"[23], and Kelley

[22] *Keats's Life of Allegory*, pp.9-12.

represents the sonnet as "the 'bold' gesture of a Cockney poet" repudiating the imperialistic and colonising Britain of the time.[24]

Although Nicholas Roe and Vincent Newey have also offered socio-historical readings of the sonnet, they are more interested in Keats as a poet. Roe, for instance, disagrees with Levinson's insistence on Keats's "fetishistic" connection to the Original, insisting that Keats's deviant approach to the literary canon is best considered as an expression of his "modish, liberal cast of mind." And he further suggests that Keats's admiration for "goodly states and kingdoms" in the sonnet implies the coincidence between "political history and poetic imagination" that is characteristic of Keats's poetics.[25] Similarly, Newey, focusing on the autonomous existence of the poet, reads the sonnet as "a private dream of self-elevation", which adopts not a subversive standpoint, but "a progressive ideology of upward mobility".[26] However, 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' is concerned more with a "self-elevation" in the poet's own poetics rather than in the political or social circumstances. Keats's personal experience of reading is elevated by the metaphors of astronomical and geographical discovery into a moment in world history.

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[23] 'Keats's literary tradition and the politics of historiographical invention', pp.242-244.
[24] Theresa M. Kelley, 'Keats, ekphrasis, and history', in *Keats and History*, pp.218-219.
[25] Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp.57-58, 65.
[26] Vincent Newey, 'Keats, history, and the poets', in *Keats and History*, pp.183-184.

'On the Grasshopper and Cricket' is best understood as a poem about poetry. Keats wrote the sonnet on 30 December 1816, during his visit to Hunt's cottage with Cowden Clarke, when Hunt proposed a sonnet contest, taking as its theme "the cheerful little fireside grasshopper".[27] Here are the two sonnets, written by Keats and Hunt respectively.

The poetry of earth is never dead.
  When all the birds are faint with the hot sun
  And hide in cooling trees, a voice will run
From hedge to hedge about the new-mown mead—
That is the Grasshopper's. He takes the lead
  In summer luxury; he has never done
  With his delights, for when tired out with fun
He rests at ease beneath some pleasant weed.
The poetry of earth is ceasing never.
  On a lone winter evening, when the frost
    Has wrought a silence, from the stove there shrills
The cricket's song, in warmth increasing ever,
  And seems to one in drowsiness half lost,
    The grasshopper's among some grassy hills.

Green little vaulter in the sunny grass,
  Catching your heart up at the feel of June,
  Sole voice that's heard amidst the lazy noon,
When ev'n the bees lag at the summoning brass; –
And you, warm little housekeeper, who class
  With those who think the candles come too soon,
    Loving the fire, and with your tricksome tune
Nick the glad silent moments as they pass; –

Oh sweet and tiny cousins, that belong,
  One to the fields, the other to the hearth,
Both have your sunshine; both, though small, are strong
  At your clear hearts; and both were sent on earth

[27] G. M. Matthews, ed. *John Keats: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1971), p.393.

To sing in thoughtful ears this natural song—
In doors and out, –summer and winter, – Mirth.[28]

As Duncan Wu, in 'Keats and the "Cockney School"', points out, Keats's sonnet demonstrates both Leigh Hunt's influence and, at the same time, Keats's independent poetic ability.[29] Comparing the two sonnets, Wu observes that while Hunt's sonnet represents "a scene of direct hearing", Keats's sonnet represents "a poet's imagination involved in memory and fantasy". That is, the process of integration, evident in 'How many bards gild the lapses of time', in which the "unnumbered sounds" of nature converge in a single poetic sensation, is repeated in this poem in which the voices of the cricket and grasshopper merge. The grasshopper is associated with "summer luxury" and the cricket with the "lone winter evening", but thought of the songs induces a state "in drowsiness half lost", a state in which opposites are reconciled, a state that Keats associates, by implication, with the moment of poetic composition.

The octave-sestet division presents two distinct poetic moments, symbolised by the Grasshopper and the Cricket, and the poet attempts to merge them into a combined poetic sensation. The first quatrain begins with one of Keats's most powerful poetic statements, "the poetry of earth is never dead"(1), which again insists that the natural world is continuous

[28] *The Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, p. 240.
[29] Duncan Wu, 'Keats and the "Cockney School"', in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.45-47.

with the composition of poetry. The grasshopper and cricket are presented as natural poets. In the quatrain the poet identifies the poetry of the grasshopper with summer, associating it with the "hot sun"(2) and the "new-mown mead"(4). But even the heat of summer begins to incorporate its antithesis when "summer luxury" includes the experience of finding respite from the sun.

The sestet begins with a line that echoes the first line of the poem, but it introduces the song of the cricket rather than the grasshopper. The poet represents in the sestet the song of a cricket, heard in a lonely and silent winter evening. The effect of the song is intensified, when the poet contrasts the frosty night with the warmth of the fireside, where "shrills/ The cricket's song"(11-12). The reappearance of the grasshopper's song among "grassy hills" in the final line of the sonnet implies that the two distinct songs and seasons are merged in a moment of "drowsiness"(13). Just as the summer luxury includes both summer heat and coolness, in the "drowsiness" of winter the frostiness of a winter night and warmth of a fireside are blended. It is in the "drowsiness" of the poet's mind that he eventually integrates, as Duncan Wu points out, the songs of the grasshopper and the cricket, and the vehement luxury of summer's day with the frosty and silent winter night.

"I shall ever bless my destiny": Keats's Poetic Identity

The sonnet on B. R. Haydon, 'Addressed to the Same', the first line of which is "Great spirits now on earth are sojourning", and the dedicatory sonnet 'To Leigh Hunt, Esq', mark Keats's effort to establish his own poetic identity by fixing his relationship with two of his closest artistic associates. Although 'Addressed to the Same' reflects overtly the poet's intimacy with Haydon, the sonnet also indicates the poetic values that Keats had come to hold. Keats visited Haydon's studio on 3 and 19 November 1816, and, according to his letter, this sonnet was quite possibly written on the next day: "Last Evening wrought me up and I cannot forbear sending you the following" (*L* i 117).

> Great spirits now on earth are sojourning:
> He of the cloud, the cataract, the lake,
> Who on Helvellyn's summit, wide awake,
> Catches his freshness from Archangel's wing;
> He of the rose, the violet, the spring,
> The social smile, the chain for freedom's sake;
> And lo!—whose stedfastness would never take
> A meaner sound than Raphael's whispering.
> And other spirits there are standing apart
> Upon the forehead of the age to come.
> These, these will give the world another heart
> And other pulses. Hear ye not the hum
> Of mighty workings?—
> Listen awhile ye nations, and be dumb.

The "great spirits"(1) referred to are Wordsworth, Hunt and Haydon, and the octave of the sonnet characterises each in turn. The first quatrain, for instance, celebrates the sublimity of Wordsworth's poetry of nature,

strengthened by the images of "Helvellyn's summit" (3) and the "Archangel's wing" (4). Then in the second quatrain, the picturesque and the sociable are represented as the traits of Hunt's poetry (5-6). Lines seven and eight suggest "stedfastness"(7) as the feature of Haydon's work. As Miriam Allott notes, the connection between Haydon's "stedfastness" and Raphael's "whispering" is obscure, but the general intention to aggrandise Haydon through the association is clear.[30]

Nicholas Roe, referring to the description of Hunt (5-6) in his *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, insists that the account represents the literary and political character of the 'new school' of poetry:

> The conjunction in these lines of floral and vernal imagery, social affability, and martyrdom for 'freedom's sake' was typical of 'Cockney' affectation, but also a precise example of the 'new school's' challenge to established literary and political values.[31]

Nevertheless, we need to focus equally on the poet's celebration of Wordsworth and Haydon, who have the quality of the sublime and grandeur in their art, which contrasts with the picturesque nature of Hunt's poetry. Keats defines his poetic identity by his ability to accommodate various artistic perspectives. Thus, in the octave the poet affiliates himself not just to Leigh Hunt and his school but to a wide spectrum of his contemporaries.

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[30] *The Poems of Keats*, p.68.
[31] Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p.110.

In its broad thematic frame, this sonnet parallels the Chapman's Homer sonnet, in that both sonnets anticipate the art of the future: both are expectant, as when Cortez and his crew "looked at each other with a wild surmise—/ Silent, upon a peak in Darien." (13-14); or when the poet asks "Hear ye not the hum/ Of mighty workings?—/ Listen awhile ye nations, and be dumb." (12-14) Wagner locates in the sestets of the two sonnets a preoccupation with potentiality, a quality that is apparent both in their thematic and formal aspects. The potentiality, in her words, however, resists "closure in literary history" and in "literary repetition and secondariness". She asserts that the silence in both sestets reflects the poet's wish to register the potentiality of poetry.[32] However, it is doubtful whether the potentiality of the sestets does resist literary tradition. In the sestet of the Chapman's Homer sonnet, for instance, Keats figuratively reinterprets the tradition by "breathing" and "speaking out" from an experience of the literary past, and in the sestet of 'Addressed to the Same', he also projects the continuation of the literary tradition into the future. The silence in the sestets, represented by the half-line in line thirteen, is less a refusal to place himself within a literary tradition than a blank space that he has the opportunity to fill.

[32] *A Moment's Monument*, pp.86-92.

Keats's ability to forge a poetic identity within the literary tradition is also the primary issue in the dedicatory sonnet, 'To Leigh Hunt, Esq', which begins with the poet lamenting the ill effects of the progress of civilization:

> Glory and loveliness have passed away,
> For if we wander out in early morn
> No wreathèd incense do we see upborne
> Into the east, to meet the smiling day;
> No crowd of nymphs soft-voiced and young and gay,
> In woven baskets bringing ears of corn,
> Roses and pinks and violets, to adorn
> The shrine of Flora in her early May.
> But there are left delights as high as these,
> And I shall ever bless my destiny
> That in a time, when under pleasant trees
> Pan is no longer sought, I feel a free,
> A leafy, luxury, seeing I could please
> With these poor offerings a man like thee.

Within the octave-sestet division, the poet marks the boundary between the lament for what is lost and the determination to recover that loss in the present. The poet deplores in the octave a progressive but unimaginative society. Civilization, which was once represented by the poet as a "jumbled heap/ Of murky buildings" ('O Solitude, if I must with thee dwell', 1815), has dispelled the beauty of nature, "no wreathèd incense do we see" (3). Modernity has sapped the power of imagination that once allowed us to perceive the "nymphs" and "Flora" in the spring landscape.

In the sestet, the poet attempts to revitalise the imaginative power that poetry had once possessed. He reconfirms his identity as a poet in an

insipid world in which "Pan is no longer sought" (13). The poet expresses his determination in his poetry to hold at bay an unimaginative society, by preserving, "a free, /A leafy, luxury" (12-13). This anticipates the 'Ode to Psyche', written in April 1819, in which he pledges to build a temple to Psyche: "I will be thy priest" (50).

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In his early sonnets, Keats not only tested his lyric ability, but also worked out his relationship both with his predecessors and his contemporaries. In 'O Solitude, if I must with thee dwell', Keats values at once Wordsworthian solitude in nature and Huntian sociableness. In the sonnets written after 'O Solitude', Keats seems to take as his principal subject his own creative process of composition. Keats repeatedly expressed in the sonnets his strong poetic enthusiasm and demonstrated how his experience issues in composition. Thus, his sonnets often trace the process by which they came to be composed: "while this for you I write" ('To my Brother George', 9), "when I sit me down to rhyme" ('How many bards gild the lapses of time', 5), "Let me write down a line of glorious tone" ('On Leaving Some Friends at an Early Hour', 11) and "while for rhymes I search around the poles" ('To my Brothers', 5).

Keats idealised the poetry of the past. The literary tradition offered inspiration, rather than a reminder of his own belatedness. In the sonnets, he represents himself as a wanderer in the literary "realms of gold" ('On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'), an admirer of Milton and Petrarch ('Keen, fitful gust are whispering here and there'), and as attentive to "the hum/ Of mighty workings" in Wordsworth, Hunt and Haydon. ('Addressed to the Same') In the sonnets written after February 1817, however, we frequently find the poet's belief in his poetic identity being threatened by his own despondency. The octave-sestet division begins to register the discrepancy between self and experience, and the compositional process often ends in frustration. The following chapter will focus on Keats's sonnets written between March and April 1817, which include 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' and 'On the Sea'.

CHAPTER III

The Ambivalent Mode of Poetic Existence in the Sonnets

Keats's poetic ambitions are still more evident in his first major narrative poems, 'Sleep and Poetry' (1816) and 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill' (1816). The invocation in 'Sleep and Poetry' reflects his anxiety to enter the sanctuary of ideal poetry:

> O Poesy! For thee I hold my pen
> That am not yet a glorious denizen
> Of thy wide heaven. (47-49)

It appears that the passionate aspiration of the poet to become a "glorious denizen" of poetry was at its height when Keats visited Leigh Hunt's house in April 1817 after the publication of *Poems* (March 1817), when the two men crowned each other with wreaths of laurel and ivy. Keats's attachment to the laurel crown on his head was so strong and passionate that when Hunt's other friends visited, the poet did not take off the crown, although Hunt took his crown off immediately. Keats's over-heated poetic mood is reflected in his two sonnets on a laurel crown ('To a Young Lady who sent me a Laurel Crown', and 'On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt'). The sestet of 'To a Young Lady...' is particularly triumphant:

> ...This very moment I would frown
> On abject Caesars, not the stoutest band
> Of mailèd heroes should tear off my crown— (11-13).

This heady self-confidence, however, quickly turned into self-reproach. In a letter to George Keats, written shortly after the episode of the laurel crown, Keats regrets his absurd and juvenile behaviour at Hunt's house: "I hope Apollo is not angered at my having made a Mockery of him at Hunt's" (*L* i 170). He maintains this apologetic stance in the ode, 'To Apollo': "When like a blank idiot I put on thy wreath,/ Thy laurel, thy glory..." (7-9) As W. J. Bate notes in his biography of Keats, the poet's self-reproach is directed not so much at his youthful activity of crowning himself with a laurel as at his extravagant poetic self-absorption.[1]

This mood of self-reproach signals his doubts about Hunt's poetics as well as his own early poetic strategy, both of which seem to be figured for him by the sonnets on the laurel crown. He recalls the embarrassing episode once more in the ode 'To Apollo':

> When like a blank idiot I put on thy wreath,
> Thy laurel, thy glory,
> The light of thy story?
> Or was I a worm, too low-creeping for death?
> O Delphic Apollo! (8-12)

Keats's self-reproachful manner is echoed in his sonnets of early 1817, amongst them 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles', 'On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt' and 'On the Sea'. The sonnets can be understood

[1] W. J. Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp.138-139.

as attempts to resolve the conflict between the ideal and reality, and they demonstrate, both separately and as a whole, a movement of the poet's mind that swings between firm confidence in his poetic progress and achievement, and a deep-rooted suspicion of the claims of art.

In 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles', Keats reveals, for the first time in his sonnet writing, that his strong poetic idealism is challenged by an awareness of limitations. Keats's earlier belief in the poetry of luxury in "the realms of gold" is significantly modified after the Elgin Marbles sonnet. He begins to value a poetry that can express "an undescribable feud" within the human heart. This change in his poetic values is immediately evident in his next sonnet, 'On the Sea', and is developed in the major project that he embarked on immediately afterwards, *Endymion* (April 1817). Thus, evidence of the progress that Keats made by developing what might be described as a self-making and self–emptying process is provided by these sonnets. By tracing the oscillating movement in the sonnets, this chapter explores Keats's understanding of the conditions of a poetry that at once accepts and transcends its own limitations.

"Who dares call down my will from its high purpose?": The Sonnet and Poetic Self-Confidence

Keats wrote eight Petrarchan sonnets between March and April 1817, when he published *Poems* (3 March) and began to write *Endymion* (18 April). Significant experiences such as seeing the Elgin Marbles, receiving a laurel crown from Leigh Hunt and reading Shakespeare, are recorded most immediately in the sonnets. In his interpretation of the experiences, the poet sometimes reasserts his youthful poetic self-confidence, but he just as often registers an awareness of limitation and of mortality.

In 'On *The Story of Rimini*' (March 1817), Keats builds a poetic bower, inspired by his reading of Hunt's *The Story of Rimini*:

> He who knows these delights and, too, is prone
>   To moralize upon a smile or tear,
> Will find at once a region of his own,
>   A bower for his spirit, and will steer
> To alleys where the fir-tree drops its cone,
>   Where robins hop and fallen leaves are sere. (9-14)

The compliment to the man who can appreciate the delights of nature, and who is capable of finding "a bower for his spirit" (12) in nature, is directed not only to the writer of the *Rimini*, but also to Keats himself, who can appreciate the beauty of *Rimini.* Keats's desire for a "region of his own" and "a bower for his spirit" has been recently read by Nicholas Roe as a sign of the poet's close association with Hunt. By defining Coleridge's

enthusiasm for solitude, nature, and community in the poems written between 1795 and 1798 as a reflection of his religious and political enthusiasms, Roe suggests that the poetry of Keats and Hunt celebrating nature and sociality should similarly be understood in terms of their political agenda in the post-Waterloo period:

> Whereas in Coleridge's poems the discourse of compassion, benevolence, fraternity, and philanthropy was construed by Tory readers as 'Jacobin', in the 'Cockney School of Poetry' seemingly innocuous categories such as cheerfulness, sociality, the greenwood, pastoral bowers, suburban life, and even tea-drinking were received as suspect tokens of a resurgent radical community whose opinions were canvassed explicitly in the columns of newspapers such as the *Examiner* and the *Yellow Dwarf*.[2]

As Roe points out, Keats's choice of an epigraph from Hunt for 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill', "Places of nestling green for Poets made", implies the two poets' "mutual commitment to renewal of poetry as the imaginative preparation for a renovation of society".[3] Similarly, Keats's bower for his spirit" should be understood as supplying a refuge for a reforming creative community from the reactionary political mainstream of the time. Keats's faith in the reforming power of poetry is expressed in early poems such as 'Addressed to the Same', 'Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition', 'After dark vapours have oppressed our plains', and 'To Leigh Hunt, Esq', in which the poet writes of Wordsworth, Hunt and Haydon: "These, these will give the world another heart/ And other

[2] *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, p.116.
[3] *Ibid.*, p.125.

pulses"('Addressed to the Same', 11-12) and predicts that from Hunt's religious scepticism "fresh flowers will grow,/ And many glories of immortal stamp". ('Written in Disgust…', 13-14)

'To a Young Lady' is best understood in the context of Richard Abbey's brutal response to Keats's decision to devote himself to poetry. After Keats reached the age of twenty on 29 October, an interview with Abbey, the poet's trustee, became inevitable for financial reasons. Three interviews between Keats and Abbey took place in October 1816 and March 1817. According to Taylor's memorandum of Abbey's recollections, Keats refused Abbey's recommendation that he become an apothecary in Tottenham, and disclosed an intention to pursue a career as a poet which was mocked by his guardian:

> He communicated his Plans to his Ward but his Surprise was not moderate, to hear in Reply, that he did not intend to be a Surgeon—Not intend to be a Surgeon! why what do you mean to be? I mean to rely upon my Ability as a Poet—John, ~~Are you Mad or Silly~~ you are either Mad or a Fool, to talk in so absurd a Manner.[4]

Keats must have been humiliated by Abbey's contemptuous response. However, he recovered through the encouragement of Georgiana Augusta Wylie, who was, in Keats's words, "the most disinterested woman" (L *i* 293) and who sent him a laurel crown to restore his confidence.

[4] *The Keats Circle*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2nd edn., 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), vol. 1, pp. 307-308. References by volume and page number to this edition are hereafter included in the text.

The sonnet is an expression of gratitude for Wylie's kindness, and at the same time a response to Abbey.

> Fresh morning gusts have blown away all fear
>   From my glad bosom; now from gloominess
>   I mount for ever—not an atom less
> Than the proud laurel shall content my bier.
> No, by the eternal stars! Or why sit here
>   In the sun's eye, and 'gainst my temples press
>   Apollo's very leaves, woven to bless
> By thy white fingers and thy spirit clear.
> Lo, who dares say, 'Do this'? Who dares call down
>   My will from its high purpose? Who say, 'Stand,'
> Or 'Go'? This very moment I would frown
>   On abject Caesars, not the stoutest band
> Of mailèd heroes should tear off my crown—
>   Yet would I kneel and kiss thy gentle hand!

The sonnet is a self-conscious acknowledgement of the poet's attachment to poetry, its diffidence and its boldness expressed by the poet's alternating feminine and masculine tones. The poem expresses a resolute determination not to be deterred from his "high purpose". In the sonnet's octave-sestet division, Keats juxtaposes a moment of triumph, when he feels as if he were sitting in "the sun's eye" feeling "Apollo's very leaves" against his temples, with his awareness of a vulgar society which claims the right to order him to "Stand" (10) or "Go" (11).

The octave of the sonnet records the receipt of the laurel crown and the poet's determined dedication to poetry, while the sestet implies his defiance of Abbey's response to his ambition. Apart from his appreciation

for the kindness of the lady and his contempt for Abbey's relentless scorn for poetry, this sonnet also announces Keats's high ambitions. The "fresh morning gusts" in the first quatrain have a power to rescue him from "all fear"(1) and "gloominess"(2). The purifying power of poetry is shown in his previous sonnets. For instance, church bells in 'Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition' (December 1816) are associated with oppressive religious authorities that have brought "gloominess"(3) to people, taking them away from their "fireside joys" (7). The sestet accords to poetry the power to dispel this gloom:

> Still, still they toll, and I should feel a damp,
>   A chill as from a tomb, did I not know
> That they are going 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.

Poetry also has the power to transform winter into spring, as shown in the octave of 'After dark vapours have oppressed our plains' (January 1817):

> After dark vapours have oppressed our plains
>   For a long dreary season, comes a day
>   Born of the gentle South, and clears away
> From the sick heavens all unseemly stains. (1-4)

The strong belief in the power of poetry is represented in 'To a Young Lady...', in the dramatic moment in which the speaker is crowned by the young lady. The moment of crowning is built up through a series of images such as "the sun's eye", "my temples"(6), "Apollo's very leaves"(7) and "thy white fingers"(8). The combination of run-on lines and the caesurae in

lines five and eight all help to sustain the sense that the poem traces a single, continuous movement of feeling.

The sestet responds to Abbey's devaluation of poetry. The poet's uplifted tone in the octave is transformed into a rather disdainful voice at the beginning of the sestet. The flow of the poet's statement in the sestet is interrupted by a series of interrogative sentences and by the preponderance of monosyllabic words in lines nine to eleven, and this reflects the strength with which Keats responded to Abbey's derision. By insisting that the poet occupies a station in comparison with which even Caesar seems 'abject', Keats insists on the superiority of poetic to worldly power. Then in the final line of the sonnet, the poet's arrogance is replaced by a studied display of courtesy as he represents himself kneeling to the lady and kissing her "gentle hand" (14).

After his first collection, *Poems*, was published on 1 March 1817, Keats took a copy from Cheapside to the Vale of Health in order to give it to Leigh Hunt. Having passed Millfield Lane, Hampstead Heath, Keats met Hunt, who invited Keats to his home at the Vale of Health to celebrate the publication. The two poets had dinner together and enjoyed wine in the garden in the mild and warm spring afternoon. Hunt picked laurel growing in his garden, coiled it, and placed it on Keats's head, while Keats did the same to Hunt with ivy that he found in the garden. Both poets wrote

sonnets on the occasion.[5] Hunt quickly wrote two sonnets on the subject ('On Receiving a Crown of Ivy from the Same', and 'On the Same'), both of which were published in 1818. Here is Hunt's first sonnet on the ivy crown:

> A crown of ivy! I submit my head
> To the young hand that gives it, — young, 'tis true,
> But with a right, for 'tis a poet's too.
> How pleasant the leaves feel! And how they spread
> With their broad angles, like a nodding shed
> Over both eyes! And how complete and new,
> As on my hand I lean, to feel them strew
> My sense with freshness, —Fancy's rustling bed!
>
> Tress-tossing girls, with smell of flowers and grapes
> Come dancing by, and downward piping cheeks,
> And up-thrown cymbals, and Silenus old
> Lumpishly borne, and many trampling shapes,—
> And lastly, with his bright eyes on her bent,
> Bacchus, —whose bride has of his hand fast hold.[6]

In this sonnet, Hunt offers a delightful description of the experience of receiving a crown of ivy. The experience affords a poetic inspiration, "Fancy's rustling bed"(8) that issues in the sestet in a powerfully sensuous image of Bacchus.

By contrast, the laurel crown fails to inspire Keats. He seems more conscious of the time limit set for the competition and his own inadequacy:

> Minutes are flying swiftly, and as yet

[5] For the account of the event at Hunt's house see Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1968) p.115; and Andrew Motion, *Keats* (London: Faber, 1997), p.147.

[6] *Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, p. 240.

Nothing unearthly has enticed my brain
Into a delphic labyrinth. I would fain
Catch an immortal thought to pay the debt
I owe to the kind poet who has set
Upon my ambitious head a glorious gain,
Two bending laurel sprigs—'tis nearly pain
To be conscious of such a coronet.
Still time is fleeting, and no dream arises
Gorgeous as I would have it; only I see
A trampling down of what the world most prizes,
Turbans and crowns and blank regality—
And then I run into most wild surmises
Of all the many glories that may be.

The poem explores a collision between experience and imagination. Although the poet is aware that the laurel crown on his head should inspire him, he remains nervously aware of the passage of time. The optimistic tone in his earlier sonnets significantly changes into a rather fretful voice in which the poet complains of his lack of inspiration. In the octave, the poet realises the distance between his present moment of poetic incapacity, in which "minutes are flying swiftly", and "an immortal thought" that the laurel crown ought to prompt. In the poet's awareness of that distance, the laurel crown becomes a heavy burden for the poet rather than "a glorious gain" (6). In the sestet, although he can envisage a poetic vision with the power to trample down "what the world most prizes" (11), there is no apparent connection between his experience and the vision.

Stuart M. Sperry identifies in the sonnet a preoccupation that was persistent at this youthful stage of Keats's poetic career. Sperry recognises the strategy of Keats's poetry as pursuing "the coil of sensation into the

cave or labyrinth" in order to capture "immortal thought", and then he points out the failure of the strategy in this sonnet:

> However the sonnet expresses only the painful consciousness of a strategy that remains unfulfilled. It is not so much a tribute of thanks as the analysis of a failure.[7]

The sonnet records the failure of the laurel crown to inspire "an immortal thought" or "a glorious gain" (6). The crown serves only to make him more conscious of the failure of the creative process.

The conflicts between experience and poetry, and between the "high purpose" of poetry and a moment of poetic impotence are reflected in the sonnet on a stylistic level. We see in the sonnet, for instance, a conflict between Huntian and un-Huntian poetic styles. One of the noticeable Huntian features is the use of run-on lines. Keats includes nine run-on lines in the sonnet. Only 'To a Young Lady who sent me a Laurel Crown' and 'To Mrs. Reynolds's Cat' (January 1818) use as many. The run-on lines create a rapid movement that expresses Keats's consciousness of the time limit, and they also blur the formal divisions between quatrains and tercets. This is a stylistic feature often found in Hunt's sonnets including those he wrote on this occasion. Like Hunt, Keats employed run-on lines in his early sonnets quite often to describe and intensify images of nature and poetry. However, whereas Hunt's run-on lines contribute to the representation of a merger between experience and poetic inspiration,

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[7] *Keats the Poet*, p.78.

which he describes as "Fancy's rustling bed," Keats's run-on lines strengthen the expression of the conflict between them.

The poet's acknowledgement of poetry's reforming spirit, "...only I see/ A trampling down of what the world most prizes,/ Turbans and crowns and blank regality—" (10-12), is another Huntian feature that contributes to the collision. Condemnation of the vulgarity of his society and the hope that it might be reformed by poetry are common in the poems written after November 1816, when he first made Hunt's acquaintance. In the sonnet on B. R. Haydon, ('Addressed to the Same', November 1816), for instance, the reforming spirit of poetry promises to bring about social transformation:

> And other spirits there are standing apart
>   Upon the forehead of the age to come.
> These, these will give the world another heart
>   And other pulses. Hear ye not the hum
> Of mighty workings?— (9-13)

In the same way, decadence in poetry is linked to social degradation: "Yes, a schism/ Nurtured by foppery and barbarism/ Made great Apollo blush for this his land./ Men were thought wise who could not understand/ His glories." ('Sleep and Poetry', 181-185); "Glory and loveliness have passed away" ('To Leigh Hunt, Esq.', 1).

Nicholas Roe explains several aspects of Keats's early poems by reference to his association with Hunt. For instance, he points out that the vernal imagery that both used was closely associated with the reform movement of the time:

> Green had for centuries been the colour favoured by radical political and religious groups and sects in England and elsewhere, very probably following the Lincoln Green supposed to have been worn by the outlaw Robin Hood...Given the long continuity of green opposition down to the Environmental Movement of our own time, it comes as no surprise to find that green was the badge for reformists in Keats's lifetime.[8]

In 'Addressed to the Same', 'To Leigh Hunt, Esq.', 'Sleep and Poetry', and even in 'On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt', Keats echoes one of the fundamental principles of the Hunt circle, that a renewal of poetry was the harbinger to a reformation of society, and that the overthrow of artificial taste would herald the overthrow of artificial social divisions.

Nevertheless, the reference to the spirit of reform in the sonnet on a laurel crown (11-12) is not a sign of comfortable conformity with the poetics of Hunt's circle. Rather, it opens a gap between the ideal and reality. Although the poet acknowledges that "no dream arises" (9) in his mind, he manages to build a poetic vision in which "turbans and crowns

[8] *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, p.123.

and blank regality" (12) are trampled, an event which prompts "wild surmises" (14), a phrase that recalls another, much more convincing moment of poetic inspiration, the "wild surmise" that ends 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer' (October 1816). In this sonnet, however, there is no bridge between the discomfiture described in the octave and the insistence on the power of poetry of the sestet. The octave-sestet division reflects the barrier between present realities and imaginative possibilities. The poet finds it difficult to pass the barrier, twice being pulled back: "Still time is fleeting, and no dream arises" (9). Keats's response to the Elgin Marbles releases similar anxieties.

"My spirit is too weak": The Failure of Imagination

Keats's experience of seeing the Elgin Marbles challenged his two strongholds: his faith in ideal poetry and his poetic self-confidence. Although the Greek marbles became a strong poetic inspiration for the poet, their fragmentary condition reminded him of the mortality of all artefacts. Unlike his earlier sonnets, which repeatedly represented a moment of heightened self-consciousness, 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' presents a poet who is conscious of his mortality, sighing "My spirit is too weak". As E. B. Murray insists, however, this sonnet is not merely an expression of the poet's weakness and self-despondence. It is rather,

> A stepping stone away from self and towards the objective poetry which distinguished him from poets of the egotistical sublime because it illustrates his ability to lose himself and his subjective personality in the object he contemplated.[9]

By losing himself the poet attains in this sonnet a new model of self that will reveal itself in the composition of "objective poetry". The dignity of the sonnet lies in the poet's better understanding of his poetic identity, which is arrived at through an acceptance of mortality. In order to understand this sonnet, then, we need to read beyond the poet's confession of weakness, "My spirit is too weak", and recognise a heroic search for a new poetic identity.

The sonnet is Keats's contribution to a contemporary debate over the value of the Elgin Marbles that centred on the concept of Ideal Beauty. In January 1817, the British Museum constructed a temporary building in order to display the Elgin Marbles to the public. Shortly after the first public display, Keats visited the museum to see the Marbles accompanied by Haydon. Soon afterwards, before 3 March 1817, he recorded the experience in two sonnets, sending copies to Leigh Hunt, J. H. Reynolds, and B. R. Haydon. What Keats saw during the visit were portions of frieze, metopes, and pediments from the Parthenon which had stood on the Acropolis for over two millennia. Lord Elgin supposed that the sculptures might develop the taste of his countrymen by making them more familiar

[9] E. B. Murray, 'Ambivalent Mortality in the Elgin Marbles Sonnet', *Keats-Shelley Journal*, xx (1971), p. 22.

with Greek antiquities. During his ambassadorship at Constantinople between 1799 and 1803, he executed his plan, transporting approximately 247 feet of frieze from its original length of 524 feet, fifteen metopes, and seventeen pedimental figures into Britain. The first and second collection of the Marbles arrived in London in January 1804 and May 1812, and after an Act of Parliament was passed, the collection of the Greek antiquities was entrusted to the British Museum on 8 August 1816. The Marbles were now officially called the Elgin Marbles and were displayed to the British public from January 1817.[10]

The Elgin Marbles had a profound impact on the dispute over the nature of ideal beauty. The conventional notion of Ideal Beauty had been established by Joshua Reynolds in his *Discourses on Art.* Reynolds, the founder and the first president of the Royal Academy, insists in *Discourses* that an artist should dispense with all "particularities" in order to represent a generalised nature. For him "nature herself is not to be too closely copied",[11] because a copyist would reproduce the faults and deformities of nature. Consequently, it is a duty for artists, seeking for Ideal Beauty in their art, to imitate, in Reynolds's words, "general nature" or "the perfect

[10] For an account of the early history of the Elgin Marbles, see Philip Hunt and A. H. Smith, 'Lord Elgin and His Collection', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, xxxvi (1916), pp. 294-355.
[11] Robert R. Wark, ed., *Sir Joshua Reynolds: Discourses on Art* (London: Yale University Press, 1975), p. 44.

state of nature" in which all deformities are removed and the beauties in each particular species are abstracted into Ideal Beauty:

> His eye being enabled to distinguish the accidental deficiencies, excrescences, and deformities of things, from their general figures, he makes out an abstract idea of their forms more perfect than any one original;...This idea of the perfect state of nature, which the Artist calls the Ideal Beauty, is the great leading principle, by which works of genius are conducted.[12]

Preference for general beauty over particular beauty was central to the conventional aesthetic standard in the eighteenth century, and it was still exerting its authority when the Elgin Marbles arrived in Britain in the early nineteenth century.

Artists, academicians and connoisseurs of the century valued the Greco-Roman sculptures such as the Apollo Belvedere, the Laocoon, and the Medici Venus, for their conformity to the traditional aesthetic standard of Ideal Beauty. When they saw the Elgin Marbles for the first time, they were struck by the anatomical details of muscles, bones, and veins, which should have been eliminated as "deformities" according to the neo-classic ideal. When Benjamin Robert Haydon saw the Marbles displayed at Park Lane in 1808, however, he found in them a "life like, yet above life". Of one of the marbles, *Theseus*, he wrote, "I saw, in fact the most heroic style of art combined with all the essential detail of actual life...here were the

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[12] *Ibid.*, pp. 44-5.

principles which the great Greeks in their finest time established..."[13] Haydon was impressed that the Marbles could represent real human features without damaging their artistic quality. He was convinced that the Marbles offered him what he needed for his heroic paintings. Haydon became one of the most passionate supporters of the Marbles in opposition to Payne Knight and many others who disputed their value.

William Hazlitt too used the Marbles to challenge the conventional neo-classic concept of Ideal Beauty. For Hazlitt, the Elgin Marbles prove that Reynolds's notion of ideal Beauty was incongruent with the classical art from which he claimed to derive it. In his essay, 'The Elgin Marbles', printed in the *Examiner* on 16 June 1816, he insists that the Marbles themselves are "the best answer to Sir Joshua Reynolds's Discourses":

> Art is the imitation of nature; and the Elgin Marbles are in their essence and their perfection casts from nature, —from fine nature, it is true, but from real, living, moving nature; from objects in nature, answering to an idea in the artist's mind, not from an idea in the artist's mind abstracted from all objects in nature.[14]

Reynolds and Hazlitt agreed that "art is the imitation of nature". What they disagreed about was what kind of nature was to be imitated. Hazlitt denied Reynolds's argument in the *Discourses* that there is a division between

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[13] Haydon, Benjamin Robert, *The Autobiography and Memoirs of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. Tom Taylor, 3vols. (London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1926), vol.1, pp.64-77.

[14] William Hazlitt, 'On the Elgin Marbles' in *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. Howe, 21 vols. (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1930-1934), vol.17, p.100. Hereafter cited as *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt.*

general and particular elements in the realm of nature; and that Ideal Beauty exists only in general nature. For Hazlitt, Ideal Beauty can be found in nature's particulars: "*The IDEAL is only the selecting a particular form which expresses most completely the idea of a given character or quality, as of beauty...and which preserves that character with the greatest consistency throughout.*"[15] The Elgin Marbles are offered in disproof of Reynolds's notion that "Nature herself is not to be too closely copied."[16]

Hazlitt concludes his essay, 'On the Elgin Marbles', with a definition of truth and beauty by remarking, "truth is to a certain degree beauty and grandeur; since all things are connected, and all things modify one another in nature."[17] Hazlitt's statement had a strong influence upon Keats's understanding of the Elgin Marbles, and it also bears a close similarity to the enigmatic ending of Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', "Beauty is truth, truth beauty". Thus, Keats's sonnet on the Elgin Marbles is indicative of his association with Hazlitt in the aesthetic debate over the Marbles. Moreover, the sonnet is a poetic representation of Hazlitt's statement, "truth is to a certain degree beauty", although the object of Keats's representation is not so much nature as his own selfhood as a poet.

[15] *Ibid.*, p.158.
[16] *Discourse on Art*, p.41.
[17] *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 17, p.166.

Even before Keats began to have an intimate relationship with Haydon in November 1816, he was aware of Haydon's role in the controversy over the Marbles: "What when a stout unbending champion awes/ Envy and Malice to their native sty?" ('Addressed to Haydon', 11-12). It is certain that before the poet saw the Elgin Marbles in March 1817, he would have learned from Haydon of the debate that they had provoked. When the poet saw the Marbles for the first time, he was impressed by what had similarly impressed Haydon, exactness of detail which is "life like, yet above life". The sensation was strong enough for him to write a sonnet shortly after visiting the Marbles.

> My spirit is too weak—mortality
>   Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
>   And each imagined pinnacle and steep
> Of godlike hardship tells me I must die
> Like a sick eagle looking at the sky.
>   Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
>   That I have not the cloudy winds to keep
> Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.
> Such dim-conceivèd glories of the brain
>   Bring round the heart an undescribable feud;
> So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
>   That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
> Wasting of old Time, with a billowy main,
>   A sun, a shadow of a magnitude.

Although the sonnet follows the Petrarchan sonnet form, rhyming ABBA ABBA CDCDCD, the run-on line at line four and the full stop at line ten make it possible to divide the poem as follows, ABBAA BBA CD CDCD. This structure clarifies the sonnet's thematic movement. In the first five lines the poet reflects on his own mortality and the mortality of art. The

early turn of the sonnet, "Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep/ That I have not the cloudy wind" (6-7), signals the poet's acceptance of mortality and limitation as a condition of his existence. He goes on to complain that an excessive preoccupation with the artistic distance between himself and the Elgin Marbles (9-10) and between the Marbles and the eternity of ideal art (11-14) would produce an inescapable pain in his mind.

Instead of describing the Marbles, Keats offers in the sonnet a subjective impression of them. A sense of "mortality" is the immediate response of the poet to the Marbles. Marjorie Levinson groups the sonnet with the Chapman's Homer sonnet and the sonnet on Chaucer's 'The Floure and the Leafe' all of which exemplify the poet's fetishistic relation to the Original:

> 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' absents its advertised original by a parodic and at the same time idealizing procedure. The stylistic discrepancy between the Marbles and the poem in their honor is sharp and dramatic: indeed dramatised. One is invited to see that the production of a distinctively literary value occurs by a violently abstractive process; and, that this objective ravishment is also a form of self-abuse.[18]

That is, Keats's despondency is the result of "a violently abstractive process", which can be seen as "a form of self-abuse".

[18] *Keats's Life of Allegory*, pp.247-250.

However, there is no reason that we should represent the poet's interpretation of the Marbles as "a violently abstractive process" or "a form of self-abuse". In the process of composition, the poetic representation of the Marbles entails the poet's subjective response to the original, which Levinson criticised as "parodic" because, in her words, the original that the sonnet refers to is ignored. In fact, Keats knew that he did not "speak/ Definitively on these mighty things" ('To B. R. Haydon, with a Sonnet Written on Seeing the Elgin Marbles', 1-2), but his intention in the sonnet is to represent the sensations he received, which allows some possibility of deviating from the original, but which does not wholly ignore it.

Keats's confidence in his poetic ability is fundamentally challenged in the sonnet, with the result that Keats becomes conscious of his own mortality, "My spirit is too weak" (1). This echoes a similar lament, "My heart aches", in 'Ode to Nightingale' (April 1819). "Mortality", which is highlighted by the caesura after the sixth syllable, and by the run-on line, is the impression that the Marbles leave on the poet. The Grecian marbles impressed him with their sublime artistic quality, but at the same time their fragmentary condition reminded the poet of their vulnerability, subject to the flow of time. In the poem, the poet's concern about "mortality" is directed towards both the fragmentary condition of the Marbles and his own artistic limitations. Thus, the impression of the Marbles, "each imagined pinnacle and steep"(3), troubles the poet who imagines that the

magnificence of the masterpiece "tells me I must die" (4) and who identifies himself with "a sick eagle looking at the sky" (5). In the Chapman's Homer sonnet, the "eagle's eye"(11) emblematises the poet's belief in his poetic ability, but in this sonnet "a sick eagle looking at the sky" figures the depressed poet, afflicted by a painful awareness of his own mortality.

The conflict between the artefact and the poet in the octave is intensified in the sestet when he speculates upon a conflict between absolute art which exists beyond human concepts of time and place, and an art form limited by those conditions in reality. In the sestet the poet refers to the Elgin Marbles as "Grecian grandeur" (12) and "a shadow of a magnitude" (14), and this conflicted understanding of the Marbles produces "a most dizzy pain" in his mind. That is, his awareness of the "Grecian grandeur" reminds him of the distance between ideal art and his own abilities, while "a shadow of a magnitude" implies the poet's realisation that the "Grecian grandeur" is itself vulnerable to the "wasting of old time"(13). The revelation that even "Grecian grandeur" is subject to decay, and that its glory can now be only "dim-conceived" intensifies rather than alleviates the poet's consciousness of his own mortality. He seems despairingly aware that he cannot produce even a "shadow" of work that is itself only a "shadow" of what it once was.

Nevertheless, the sonnet is not all about the poet's failure or defeat. David Bromwich in his "'Keats'" rightly points out the dignity of the poet's expression of frustration and limitation:

> ...yet the poem ends with impressive dignity in spite of its loss of heart. The new quality emerges from the sudden awareness of distance, in a mood so unexpected by Keats that he can approach it only by telegraphic dashes...[19]

The awareness of a conflict between ideal art, the material conditions of existence of any actual work of art, and the poet himself is unprecedented in Keats's sonnets. The sonnet's early turn in line six, "Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep", insists that an awareness of his own poetic limitations does not simply result in sadness. Eventually, in the sonnet the poet is able to accept both "a gentle luxury" and "an undescribable feud" as integral elements of his poetry, and the conflict between eternity and mortality as the condition of ideal art.

'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' is the first sonnet in which Keats employs the conventional sonnet rhetoric of a lover's compliment and complaint, which is seen frequently in the sonnets of Shakespeare, and more recently in Mary Robinson's sonnet sequence. In his sonnet, however, Keats substitutes a work of art for a female figure as the object of his love. Alternating between compliment and complaint, the poet

[19] David Bromwich, "'Keats'", in *Critical Essays on John Keats*, ed. Hermione de Almeida (Boston: Hall, 1990), p.247.

demonstrates his understanding of the nature of art which is conditioned by its sublime features as well as its mortality and limitations. The conventional rhetoric of compliment and complaint becomes the vehicle through which Keats attempts a re-definition of art, which he now defines not simply by its "gentle luxury" but by the "indescribable feud" that it prompts within the human soul.

In early 1817, Keats was puzzling over whether poetry should confine itself to an ideal world or address painful realities. 'On the Story of Rimini', written in the same month as the Elgin Marbles sonnet, takes a quite different direction:

> Who loves to peer up at the morning sun
> With half-shut eyes and comfortable cheek,
> Let him, with this sweet tale, full often seek
> For meadows where the little rivers run. (1-4)

Through "half-shut eyes", the poet sees "the morning sun" and "meadows". By contrast, "a sun, a shadow of a magnitude" in the Elgin Marbles sonnet reminds him of his own limitations and mortality, and the "unwilling sleep" implies a painful suspension of his poetic power.

Overall, 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' reflects a new insight into the conditions of poetry and his poetic identity which is inseparable from an awareness of the constraints of reality. In the poet's earlier sonnets, the beauty of poetry represents his poetic idealism and his confidence in his

own poetic ability. Keats's experience of the Marbles by contrast provokes him to confront the limitations of all artefacts and the limitations of his own poetic ability. However, despite exclaiming, "my spirit is too weak", Keats attempts an objective response to the conflicts between the magnificence of the Grecian Marbles and his own mortality, and between the notion of ideal beauty and the fragmentary condition of the Marbles in reality. The sonnet, thus, reflects Keats's shifting idea of the beauty of poetry, which now acknowledges not only the ideal and sublime state of external objects and the human mind, but also their limitations and defects. As Hazlitt saw both "truth" and "beauty" in the Elgin Marbles, saying "truth is to a certain degree beauty", Keats began to understand that truth in art must accommodate an acceptance of the weakness and ephemerality of all material things, and that the beauty of poetry inheres in the representation of this truth. Keats's poetic interpretation of the Elgin Marbles was a significant step forward, and it prepared the way for the later sonnets.

"I cannot exist without poetry—without eternal poetry": The Universalising Power of the Sonnet

Keats's next sonnet and his last until January 1818, 'On the Sea', is a result of the progress that he made out of the experience of seeing the Elgin Marbles. The poet's preoccupation with the conflict between ideal art and

the mortality of an artefact and between ideal art and his own limitations, contributes to a better understanding of the nature of poetry and his own poetic identity. But in 'On the Sea', he develops the thought through a meditation on a natural object rather than an artefact.

Keats wrote the sonnet on 17 April 1817 in the Isle of Wight, the day before starting to write *Endymion.* Inspired by the experience of publishing his first collection of poetry and of seeing the Elgin Marbles, Keats's anxiety to make progress in his poetry led him to follow Haydon's advice to separate himself from the busy life of London for a while. In a letter to J. H. Reynolds, written on 17 March 1817, the poet states: "Haydon has pointed out how necessary it is that I sho[d] be alone to improve myself...So I shall soon be out of Town." (*L* i 125) He left Hampstead for Southampton on 14 April, and a few days later in the Isle of Wight he wrote 'On the Sea'. Prefaced by a short quotation from *King Lear*, Keats transcribed the sonnet in a letter to Reynolds, written on 17 April:

> From want of regular rest, I have been rather *narvus*—and the passage in Lear—"Do you not hear the Sea?"—has haunted me intensely..
>
> It keeps eternal whisperings around
> Desolate shores, and with its mighty swell
> Gluts twice ten thousand caverns, till the spell
> Of Hecate leaves them their old shadowy sound.
> Often 'tis in such gentle temper found
> That scarcely will the very smallest shell
> Be moved for days from where it sometime fell,
> When last the winds of heaven were unbound.
> O ye who have your eye-balls vexed and tired,

Feast them upon the wideness of the sea!
   O ye whose ears are dinned with uproar rude,
Or fed too much with cloying melody,
   Sit ye near some old cavern's mouth and brood
Until ye start, as if the sea-nymphs quired!

Sperry regarded this sonnet as the last and best of the "early lyrics" of the poet.[20] The poem presents the poet on "desolate shores", speculating upon the "eternal whisperings"(1) of the sea. In the sonnet, we do not hear an agonizing outcry over the conflict between the ideal and reality as in 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles'. Instead, the poet seems to identify himself with the power of the sea, envisaging eternity in a particular phenomenon of nature. The power of the imagination not only intensifies the descriptions of the waves beating upon the seashore, and of a night view of the sea, but it also elaborates the sound of the sea into universalised "eternal whisperings". Also the simple enumeration of images, which has occurred frequently in his early poems, is replaced by an elaborated reflection on the eternity of nature. In August 1816, for instance, Keats's experience of seeing the sea at Margate produced a catalogue of images in the octave of 'To my Brother George':

The ocean with its vastness, its blue green,
   Its ships, its rocks, its caves, its hopes, its fears
   Its voice mysterious, which whoso hears
Must think on what will be, and what has been. (5-8)

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[20] *Keats the Poet*, p.75.

The series of images contributes to the heightened state of the poet's mind in which he thinks about his poetic identity. In 'On the Sea', however, the poet responds more inwardly, able to find a timeless quality in the phenomenon of nature: "It keeps eternal whisperings around/ Desolate shores". The significance of the sonnet lies in the fact that the poet finds in a natural phenomenon, the sea, an appropriate vehicle to convey his sense of the power of the imagination.

Through the standard octave-sestet sonnet division, the poet juxtaposes his speculations on the eternal quality of nature and on the "vexed and tired" poet, attempting to hear the choir of the "sea-nymphs", the sounds of nature as well as of poetry. The octave represents a confrontation between the speculative poet and the sea's "eternal whisperings around/ Desolate shores" (1-2). In the two quatrains, the poet pictures the varying aspects of the sea. The power of the sea sometimes becomes a "mighty swell" (2), and sometimes the sea is "in such gentle temper" that its mild ripple does not move "the very smallest shell" (6) on the shore. The sea reigns not only over "ten thousand caverns", but also the "very smallest shell". In the octave's many sibilants, the "eternal whisperings" of the sea merge with the voice of the poet.

In the sestet, consequently, the poet finds in the eternal quality of the sea solace for a mind that had been disturbed by a preoccupation with

the collision between the ideal and reality. The poet asks us in the sestet to transcend the limitations of selfhood by contemplating the eternal qualities of art and poetry. For instance, the first two lines of the sestet—"O ye who have your eye-balls vexed and tired,/ Feast them upon the wideness of the sea!" (13-14)—are addressed to a man who recalls the man "who cannot look/ Upon his mortal days with temperate blood,/ Who vexes all the leaves of his life's book" ('How fevered is the man...', 1-3, April 1819). Just as the sonnet of April 1819 offers the unity and eternity of nature as consolation for the troubled man,[21] 'On the Sea' suggests that the proper antidote to the "cloying melody" of false poetry is to listen to the sea. The final lines of the sonnet return to its beginning, to the sounds of the sea:

> Sit ye near some old cavern's mouth and brood
> Until ye start, as if the sea-nymphs quired! (13-14)

The conclusion identifies the sound of the sea with that of poetry, emblematized as the choir of the "sea-nymphs". The poem ends when the outward and the inward, the sound of the sea and the sound of the poem, are recognised as one and the same.

'On the Sea' offers a remedy for the poet's despondency that has resulted from his lack of a poetic system. This had been a primary concern even in early 1817, and is addressed in 'On Receiving a Laurel Crown

[21] But the rose leaves herself upon the briar,
For winds to kiss and grateful bees to feed,
And the ripe plum still wears its dim attire,
The undisturbèd lake has crystal space. (9-12)

from Leigh Hunt' and 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles'. But whereas the speculation upon a laurel crown and upon the Elgin Marbles resulted in mental conflict, the poet, in 'On the Sea' is able to universalise a particular sea sound into the "eternal whisperings" of poetic inspiration.

'On the Sea' needs to be compared with 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles', but the immediate context for the sonnet was Keats's reading of Shakespeare. In the solitude of his retirement in Southampton, Keats found comfort in Shakespeare: "I felt rather lonely this Morning at breakfast so I went and unbox'd a Shakespeare—"There's my Comfort"" (*L* i 128). References to Shakespeare are frequent in his letters at this period. In a letter to Haydon, written on 11 May 1817, Keats expresses his reverence for Shakespeare, saying "Is it too daring to Fancy Shakespeare this Presider?"; and "I think I never read any other Book much...I am very near Agreeing with Hazlitt that Shakespeare is enough for us." (*L* i 142-143) In a letter to Reynolds written on 22 November 1817, the poet points out the naturalness and intensity of Shakespeare's sonnet 12:

> I neer found so many beauties in the sonnets—they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally—in the intensity of working out conceits—Is this to be borne? Hark ye!
>
> When lofty trees I see barren of leaves
> erst
> Which <not> from heat did canopy the he<a>rd,
> And Summer's green all girded up in sheaves,
> Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard.

He has left nothing to say about nothing or any thing.

(*L* i 188-189)

The connection between Keats's sonnet and *King Lear* has been discussed by J. Middleton Murry and R. S. White. Murry suggests that 'On the Sea' is representative of Shakespeare's influence on the earlier poems. Pointing out the poet's quotation from *King Lear* before transcribing in his letter, "Do you not hear the Sea?", Murry further insists that Keats's sonnet demonstrates a more profound connection with the play, beyond the direct verbal similarity between them:

> ...the whole passage from *Lear* was running verbatim in his mind. Its intense haunting, the sea's eternal whispering, Keats' unsleeping night-thoughts of 'the end and aim of poetry' and his brooding on Shakespeare as his mighty forerunner, composed one tumultuous and scarcely separable whole. At this moment of intense creative excitement Shakespeare, poetry and sea became knit together in a single thought and feeling.[22]

Whereas Murry emphasizes the circumstantial similarity between the sonnet and the play, White focuses more specifically on the similarity between Keats and Shakespeare's Edgar. According to White, the poem was suggested by the scene on Dover Cliff, and he notes in particular the power with which Edgar imagines the scene:

[22] J. Middleton Murry, *Keats and Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), p.35.

> The scene on Dover Cliff, whatever else may be said about it, is a sublime example of the power of the poet's imagination to create a landscape full of palpably perceived detail, using nothing at all but words and sounds. Edgar's spellbinding descriptions, first from the top of the cliff and then from its base, belie the evidence of the senses left to Gloucester and allow the audience to transcend the ocular proof of a flat, bare stage.[23]

White suggests that 'On the Sea' has the same power of imaginative description that Edgar shows in the scene:

> Keats's poem weaves us into the 'spell' of the sea's presence, and like Edgar's descriptions it evokes an imaginary landscape, this time based on sound. Poetry creates a spell, 'Until ye start as if the Sea Nymphs quired –'[24]

In a letter to Reynolds, written on 18 April, as he was planning to begin *Endymion*, Keats quotes lines from *The Tempest* (I. ii. 326-328; I. ii. 50):

> ...the following, from the Tempest, never struck me so forcibly as at present,
>
> "Urchins
> *Shall, for that vast of Night that they may work,*
> All exercise on thee—"
>
> How can I help bringing to your mind the Line—
> *In the dark backward and abysm of time—*
>
> I find that I cannot exist without poetry—without eternal poetry...
>
> (L *i* 133)

He values Shakespeare's ability to intensify and universalize human emotion. For instance, the intense sorrow and pain of Prospero, the usurped Duke of Milan in *The Tempest*, is compressed into heroic solemnity in the

[23] R. S. White, *Keats as a Reader of Shakespeare* (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p.188.
[24] *Ibid.*, p.190.

phrase, "the dark backward and abysm of time". Similarly, when Keats saw the sea from Shanklin Cliffs, he was prompted to meditate on the eternal quality of nature and poetry, realizing that his poetic ambitions required calm persistence rather than short-lived, feverish excitement.

'On the Sea' is the last of the eight sonnets written in early 1817, and Keats did not write another sonnet until January 1818, when he acknowledged more comfortably the conflict in poetry between "gentle luxury" and the "undescribable feud" of the human heart. Keats's sonnets of early 1817 differ from his early sonnets which seem full of self-confidence. The later sonnets accept conflict as an important motive of poetry. Although his sonnets began to represent ideological difference through the structural polarities of the sonnet form, the poet at the same time sought a possibility of transcending these discrepancies. The poet's statement in the letter quoted above, which highlights the transcendental nature of poetry, "I find that I cannot exist without poetry—without eternal poetry", offers a conclusion to his speculation upon the conflict both in poetry and in himself, that he had addressed in the series of sonnets of early 1817. He had arrived at a point at which he found it possible to embark on the composition of *Endymion*.

CHAPTER IV

Keats's Shakespearean Sonnets and the Rhetoric of Self-Shaping

One of the merits of Keats's sonnets is that they were written so closely after the experiences that they record. Keats shows how imaginative experience has its proper outcome in poetic composition. As we have seen in the second chapter, in his early sonnets written between 1814 and 1816, the poet's belief in poetic idealism and his confidence in his poetic selfhood are projected in a sonnet-writing persona for whom the perception of the delights and wonders of nature issues directly in poetic composition. 'On Leaving Some Friends at an Early Hour' (1816) is a typical example of the poet's early sonnets.

> Give me a golden pen, and let me lean
> On heaped-up flowers, in regions clear and far.
> Bring me a tablet whiter than a star,
> Or hand of hymning angel when 'tis seen
> The silver strings of heavenly harp atween.
> And let there glide by many a pearly car,
> Pink robes, and wavy hair, and diamond jar,
> And half discovered wings, and glances keen.
> The while let music wander round my ears,
> And as it reaches each delicious ending
> Let me write down a line of glorious tone
> And full of many wonders of the spheres.
> For what a height my spirit is contending!
> 'Tis not content so soon to be alone.

The catalogue of images in the octave generates the poetic impulse which is translated in the following sestet into the activity of writing poetry. It is a narrative that places the poet at the centre of the creative process. As discussed in the third chapter, however, Keats's sonnets written in early 1817 reflect a conflict in the poet's mind between the mortality of the poet and the immortality of art. For the first time he makes a poem out of his inability to write a poem ('On Receiving a Laurel Crown from Leigh Hunt', April 1817); and he focuses on the distance between the ideal and reality, both external reality and the reality of his own consciousness ('On Seeing the Elgin Marbles', March 1817).

Keats's sonnets after 1818, when he began to practise the Shakespearean sonnet form, reveal a more refined approach to the sonnet form and its function, acknowledging his intellectual growth which culminated in the winter and the spring of 1817 and 1818. The sonnets become more introspective, and focus on the conflict between the self and others. Through his key concepts such as "Negative Capability" and the "intensity" of art, Keats developed a poetic manner able to accept the conflicts both in reality and in himself. In his earlier practice of the Petrarchan sonnet form, self and experience are often related antithetically, as are his own alternations between self-confidence and self-doubt. However, in his Shakespearean sonnets, written after 1818, the poet

reshapes the bipartite Petrarchan structure into a three-part structure that allows for thesis and antithesis to be reconciled.

Joseph Phelan, in his introduction to *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet*, suggests that in his sonnets Keats "becomes important primarily as the precursor of the neo-renaissance sonnet-writers of the last third of the (nineteenth) century", who had sought alternatives to the "Milton-Wordsworthian form".[1] According to Phelan, Wordsworth's return to the Miltonic sonnet signifies "a return to Miltonic values of earnestness, Puritanism, and a proper, sober, responsible liberty," but he insists that there was a significant change in the sonnet practice in the latter half of the century:

> During the years after 1850, however, poets began to look to Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, to Keats, and to the Italian originators of the sonnet in the search for alternatives to the Miltonic-Wordsworthian model and every thing that it implied. The sonnet, in fact, played an important part in the broad cultural reaction against Victorian earnestness and Puritanism which characterized the latter part of the nineteenth century.[2]

Keats's practice of the Shakespearean sonnet after 1818 suggests a similar aesthetic reaction against the poet's own earlier system of poetics. The formal division of the Shakespearean sonnet into three quatrains and a couplet allowed the poet to avoid the more inflexible bipartite structure of

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[1] Joseph Phelan, *The Nineteenth-Century Sonnet* (N.Y.: Palgrave, 2005), p. 7.

[2] *Ibid.*, p.4.

the Petrarchan sonnet, and adopt a more flexible approach to his themes. The sonnet became an important means by which he was able to define the stage that he had reached in his rapid poetic development.

King Lear rather than Milton's Hair

In December 1817 Keats took over from Reynolds, who was holidaying in Devon, as theatre reviewer for the *Champion*. His first review, of *Richard III* in which Kean, the most celebrated actor of the time, played, having just returned from illness, appeared on 21 December:

> "In our unimaginative days" *Habeas Corpus'd* as we are, out of all wonder, curiosity and fear; –in these fireside, delicate, gilded days, –these days of sickly safety and comfort, we feel very grateful to Mr Kean for giving us some excitement by his old passion in one of the old plays.[3]

Keats contrasts the "old passion" of Shakespeare's plays with his own "unimaginative days" of "sickly safety and comfort". It is noteworthy that the adjectives that he chooses to describe his own day, "fireside, delicate, gilded", signify qualities closely associated with Leigh Hunt. Keats had himself been a lover of delicate, sensuous and luxurious images; many of his early sonnets were inspired by the fireside (as in 'To my Brothers' and 'On the Grasshopper and Cricket'); and he had often referred to poetry as

[3] John Keats, "Mr. Kean," in *The Poetical Works & Other Writings of John Keats*, eds. H. Buxton Forman, and Maurice Buxton Forman, 8 vols. (New York: Phaeton Press, 1970), vol.5, p. 227.

golden or gilded (as in 'How many bards gild the lapses of time', and 'On First Looking into Chapman's Homer'). In reviewing Shakespeare's play and Kean's performance, however, Keats values "passion", "wonder, curiosity and fear", above the modern values of "sickly safety and comfort".

'On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again', written a month after the review, is the first poem which reflects the recently modified aesthetic view:

> O golden-tongued Romance, with serene lute!
> Fair plumèd Siren, Queen of far-away!
> Leave melodizing on this wintry day,
> Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute.
> Adieu! For, once again, the fierce dispute
> Betwixt damnation and impassioned clay
> Must I burn through, once more humbly assay
> The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit. (1-8)

Here, the "golden-tongued Romance"(1) that represents an ideal, chivalric poetry is challenged by the "bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit"(8), the aesthetic value of which seems to derive from the conflicts that it accommodates.

The ten sonnets that Keats wrote between December 1817 and March 1818—when he revised and made a copy of *Endymion* for the press, and composed *Isabella; or The Pot of Basil*—chart a "fierce dispute" in which he challenges his own earlier poetic values. In 'O thou whose face

hath felt the winter's wind' (February 1818), for instance, the poet suggests that poetry is born out of an acceptance of harsh reality and of the poet's limitations.

> Oh, 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. (11-14)

Here, the poet values an ability to accept uncertainties and doubt without running after "knowledge"(11). In the conclusion of 'When I have fears that I may cease to be' (January 1818), his mature understanding of the nature of his negatively capable existence is reflected again in a sonnet speaker who can accept the emptiness of his most intense desires:

> ...then on the shore
> Of the wide world I stand alone and think
> Till love and fame to nothingness do sink. (12-14)

The impetus behind this development is the growing preoccupation with the importance of intellectual power that he derived from his reading of Hazlitt. After re-reading King Lear in January 1818, he looked forward to a "gradual ripening of the intellectual powers" (*L* i 214), and this becomes the emotional basis of the *King Lear* sonnet in which he endeavours to examine "The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit."

Keats's letters written during the winter and the spring of 1817-1818 reveal the poet's attempts to define and his intellectual powers. His most

famous concepts of the "intensity" of art and "Negative Capability", for instance, occur in a letter written in December 1817 to George and Tom Keats (*L* i 191-194), and they became major guidelines for his poetry thereafter. Keats's idea of intellectual power, however, is far from the traditional concept of pure reason or consecutive reasoning. It is rather subjective and intuitive. "Negative Capability" reveals the limits of fact-based reasoning, and it vindicates "half knowledge" which ultimately includes rational thinking as well as the non-rational kind. The idea opened the way to the poet's other key concepts such as the "intensity" of the power of art to evaporate "all disagreeables" in the condition of the world and the human mind; and the "diligent Indolence" in which the poet becomes "passive and receptive" (*L* i 231-232) in a positive sense, and does not seek impatiently for rational truth.

Keats's statement in a letter to George and Tom Keats, written on 23 January 1818, "I think a little change has taken place in my intellect lately" (*L* i 214), is his acknowledgement of a series of ideas that he had conceptualized in the winter of 1817 and 1818. The "little change" that he perceived in early 1818 had initially occurred as early as September 1817 when the poet spent time with Bailey at Oxford where he stayed from 3 September until 5 October. It was a time of unprecedented intellectual activity for Keats. Had it not been for Bailey, Oxford would simply have been the quiet refuge that allowed Keats to finish the third book of

Endymion so quickly. But during his stay he read Dante, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth and Hazlitt, and occasionally conversed with Bailey on his reading. Bailey, according to Keats's account in January 1818, was "one of the noblest men alive at the present day," (*L* i 204) and was more scholarly than any other friends of Keats. Bailey had been a student at Oxford University since October 1816, and had begun to read for holy orders. His formal approach to theological questions was systematic, unlike Haydon's eccentric manner.

One of the most significant benefits of the experience in Oxford was a greater understanding of Hazlitt, who came to shape his understanding of Shakespeare and Wordsworth. Before he visited Oxford, Keats had had access to Hazlitt's ideas through his essays in *Round Table* (1817). At Oxford, the poet read Hazlitt's *Principles of Human Action* (1805) and *Characters from Shakespeare's Plays* (1817), borrowed from Bailey. These two books gave him an insight into the human mind in general as well as Shakespeare's plays in particular. Hazlitt had argued against the notion that human beings were defined by their "natural selfishness".[4] In *Characters from Shakespeare's Plays*, he found a tribute to Shakespeare's ability to create autonomous characters dissociated from the author's subjectivity and characters so various that it was "impossible to find any

[4] *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol.1, p.1-2.

two alike".[5] His understanding of Hazlitt's insistence on the "natural disinterestedness of mind" and the nature of the characters in Shakespeare's plays influenced his new understanding of the poet's identity, which is necessarily free from overwhelming "individuality" and "Character", as he reveals in a letter to Bailey: "they [Men of Genius] have not any individuality, any determined Character. I would call the top and head of those who have a proper self Men of Power—" (*L* i 184).

In January 1818, as he stayed at Burford Bridge, Keats was conscious of a "gradual ripening of the intellectual powers" that enabled him to extend his understanding of Hazlitt to his understanding of poetry. He valued Hazlitt's emphasis on the passions of the human mind and on the mind's ability to achieve imaginative identification with an external object it perceives. Hazlitt emphasises the intuitive powers of the mind:

> The soft suffusion of the soul, the speechless breathing eloquence, the looks 'commercing with the skies', the ever-shifting forms of an eternal principle, that which is seen but for a moment, but dwells in the heart always, and is seized only as it passes by strong and secret sympathy, must be taught by nature and genius, not by rules or study.[6]

Artistic perception does not depend on "rules or study", but on the passion and feeling of the artist. Similarly, in a letter to Bailey, Keats emphasises the power of passion and imagination: "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—What the

[5] *Ibid.*, vol.4, p.171.
[6] *Ibid.*, vol.8, p.82.

imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth..." (*L* i 184) In this most cited phrase, the poet underlines the passionate activity of the mind necessary to apprehend "the truth of Imagination". The "holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination" recall the term "Gusto" that Hazlitt introduces in *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*, which also emphasises passionate and energetic qualities in art as well as in the artists and their audience. Keats's notion that "intensity" is a condition of "the excellence of every Art" and his principle of "Negative Capability" also seem to derive, even if indirectly, from Hazlitt, suggesting Hazlitt's dominant influence on Keats at this time.

Keats arrives at his concepts of "disinterestedness", the "intensity" of art, and "Negative Capability" in the course of his speculations upon the conditions of reality and of man. In early 1818, the poet was disturbed by various events. He had witnessed quarrels between Haydon and Reynolds, and Haydon and Hunt; and was concerned by his brother, Tom's ill health as well as his own. The account of nature, given in a verse letter 'To J. H. Reynolds, Esq.' (March 1818), reflects the poet's pessimistic understanding of the natural order:

> Still do I that most fierce destruction see:
> The shark at savage prey, the hawk at pounce,
> The gentle robin, like a pard or ounce,
> Ravening a worm... (102-105)

The early version of Nature as a compendium of "luxuries" is displaced here by an emphasis on natural cruelty.

This effort to accept the dark side of reality is reflected in a letter to Bailey written on 23 January 1818 in which the poet informs Bailey of the estranged relationship between Haydon and Reynolds, and Haydon and Hunt. His response is to urge tolerance:

> Men should bear with each other—there lives not the Man who may not be cut up, aye hashed to pieces on his weakest side. The best of Men have but a portion of good in them—a kind of spiritual yeast in their frames which creates the ferment of existence—by which a Man is propell'd to act and strive and buffet with Circumstance. The sure way Bailey, is first to know a Man's faults, and then be passive... (*L* i 210)

The poet highlights tolerance, because he is certain of the power of the human mind to accommodate discordances. His thoughts on art and artists are closely related to his thoughts on the condition of human life. That is, the poet's idea of the "intensity" of art reflects his insight into a world in which one experiences conflict; and the principle of "Negative Capability" also suggests a need to accept the intermingled existence of good and evil.

In the winter and spring of 1817–1818, Keats was preoccupied with the nature of reality, both outward and inward. His crucial critical terms emerged directly from these preoccupations, and they impinged directly on

his poetic strategies. Most overtly, he came to be dissatisfied with *Endymion*, the first two books of which had been already completed before the sojourn in Oxford where he developed his new thoughts on life and poetry. The poet realized that *Endymion* had "many bits of the deep and sentimental cast". He was moving towards a more "naked and grecian manner" in his plans for *Hyperion*. This changed mode was also reflected in the dismissal of Huntian poetry implicit in 'On seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair', a poem that he transcribed in the letter to Bailey quoted above. On 21 January 1818, Leigh Hunt showed Keats an authentic lock of Milton's hair and asked him to write a poem on the occasion. On the same day, Keats wrote an ode 'On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair'. After transcribing the ode in the letter to Bailey, written on 23 January, the poet comments: "This I did at Hunt's at his request—perhaps I should have done something better alone and at home." (*L* i 212)

The New System of Poetry in the *King Lear* Sonnet

In fact, Keats's first sonnet in 1818, 'On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again' (January 1818), was the poem that he wrote "alone and at home" after making the comment above. The series of sonnets in early 1818 is the most immediate expression of the "little change" in his thoughts on life and poetry. Keats's *King Lear* sonnet was the last

Petrarchan sonnet before he turned to the Shakespearean sonnet form, but it reveals that Keats had to handle the Petrarchan form quite differently if he was to be able to express a different kind of poetic perception.

In the sonnets written before 1818, Hunt's influence is evident. The use of Hunt's favoured diction, "tender", "sweet", "bright", "balmy", "delicious", produces the sentimental atmosphere of the early sonnets, as in:

> But when, O Wells, thy roses came to me,
>   My sense with their deliciousness was spelled;
> Soft voices had they, that with tender plea
>   Whispered of peace and truth and friendliness unquelled.
>
> ('To a Friend who Sent me Some Roses', 11-14, June 1816)

The sonnets, like Keats's heroic couplets, give an impression of formal looseness produced by the frequent use of run-on lines, another device that Keats borrowed from Hunt.

The influence of Wordsworth is also found at a more profound level in Keats's early sonnet practice. Although Wordsworth's primary sonnet form was the Petrarchan sonnet, he adopted a Miltonic-Petrarchan sonnet, in which the octave-sestet division is maintained but is accompanied by a Miltonic use of enjambment and a caesura. It is the strength of the poet's inner mind and its power of imagination that Wordsworth attempted primarily to represent in this sonnet model. For instance, in the following

sonnet from *The River Duddon* (1820) the confidence of the poet's voice is underlined when he associates himself with Horace:

> Not envying shades which haply yet may throw
> A grateful coolness round that rocky spring,
> Bandusia, once responsive to the string
> Of the Horatian lyre with babbling flow;
> Careless of flowers that in perennial blow
> Round the moist marge of Persian fountains cling;
> Heedless of Alpine torrents thundering
> Through icy portals radiant as heaven's bow;
> I seek the birth-place of a native Stream.—
> All hail ye mountains, hail thou morning light!
> Better to breath upon this aery height
> Than pass in needless sleep from dream to dream;
> Pure flow the verse, pure, vigorous, free, and bright,
> For Duddon, long-loved Duddon, is my theme![7]

The sublime beauty of "Bandusia", the Italian fountain which is believed to be near Horace's birthplace, described in the octave prompts the poet to go in quest of his own "native stream" in the first part of the sestet (9-12), and in the sonnet's final lines he finds in the river Duddon the qualities that he claims for his own verse. The dignified public voice of the Miltonic sonnet is adopted by Wordsworth as a voice, able to articulate the visionary poetic power of the inward self. This Miltonic-Wordsworthian sonnet model was followed in many of Keats's sonnets before 1818.

The changes in Keats's sonnets after 1818, when he began to practise the Shakespearean sonnet form, are most evident in versification and in

[7] *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. 3, p. 246.

tone. One of the most obvious innovations of the sonnets of early 1818 is the reduced number of run-on lines. This formal change is due to the nature of the Shakespearean sonnet form. For instance, Keats keeps strict quatrain divisions and attempts to develop a single image or thought in each formal unit. On many occasions, the poet makes each line a complete unit of sense and calls attention to this through repetition:

> And yet I never look on midnight sky,
>   But I behold thine eyes' well-memoried light.
> I cannot look upon the rose's dye,
>   But to thy cheek my soul doth take its flight.
>
> ('To—['Time's sea']', 5-8)

The syntactical completeness, along with the repetition of phrase, demonstrates structural discipline as well as formal and thematic steadiness. The stability of the octave, however, is balanced by the looseness of the sestet:

> I cannot look on any budding flower,
>   But my fond ear, in fancy at thy lips
> And hearkening for a love-sound, doth devour
>   Its sweets in the wrong sense. Thou dost eclipse
> Every delight with sweet remembering,
> And grief unto my darling joys dost bring. (9-14)

Keats often enjambs the twelfth and thirteenth lines of a Shakespearean sonnet to blur the division between the quatrain and couplet. The structural division is marked by a caesura in the twelfth line of the sonnet. The consecutive run-on lines of the sonnet not only accelerate the pace of the verse, but also emphasise the climactic moment when the speaker's visual

and auditory senses are bewildered in the presence of a woman's beauty: "my fond ear.../doth devour/ Its sweets in the wrong sense." Then the extended conclusion of the sonnet (12-14) intensifies the poet's thought that beauty intermingles "grief" and "joys". Keats habitually places a caesura in the twelfth or thirteenth line of the sonnets of 1818, although Shakespeare almost never did. Of the ten sonnets written in early 1818, for instance, only two sonnets mark a clear division between the quatrain and a couplet by a full stop, and a caesura in the twelfth line is found in five sonnets of the period.

A more fundamental change in Keats's sonnet practice after 1818 is evident in the poems' thematic aspects and in their tonal quality. The confident speaker of the early sonnets is replaced by a reflective speaker, engaged with uncertainties, and aware of imaginative failure. A mature awareness of human limitations brought with it a disenchantment with his youthful poetic manner characterised by sentimentality, excessively sensuous images, and laxity in poetic form.

The shift from the Miltonic-Wordsworthian mode of the Petrarchan sonnet into the Shakespearean form is indicative of the significant changes in his intellectual and poetic system. Although 'On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again' is not written in Shakespearean form, the sonnet exemplifies the poet's changed mode of perception.

O golden-tongued Romance, with serene lute!
Fair plumed Siren, Queen of far-away!
Leave melodizing on this wintry day,
Shut up thine olden pages, and be mute.
Adieu! For, once again, the fierce dispute
Betwixt damnation and impassioned clay
Must I burn through, once more humbly assay
The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit.
Chief Poet, and ye clouds of Albion,
Begetters of our deep eternal theme!
When through the old oak forest I am gone,
Let me not wander in a barren dream,
But, when I am consumed in the fire,
Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire.

('On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again')

The sonnet's central argument, "the fierce dispute" (5), represents the contrast between remote and restful romance and Shakespearean tragedy. The poet insists that he must turn away from "golden-tongued Romance" (1) and "burn through"(7) Shakespearean tragedy. The power of Shakespearean tragedy lies in its ability to bring together the characteristics of both comedy and tragedy, of both light and dark, and the poet defines this combination as the "bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit" (8).

Keats's celebration of Shakespearean tragedy as a poetic form able to accommodate conflicting elements is extended to his sense of the human condition as well as to a self-analysis of his own poetics. The "fierce dispute" becomes in the sestet a dispute between the poetry of "a barren dream" and a poetry of passion. The same argument recurs in a letter to B. R. Haydon, written a day after the *King Lear* sonnet:

> ...in Endymion I think you may have many bits of the deep and sentimental cast—the nature of *Hyperion* will lead me to treat it in a more naked and Grecian Manner—and the march of passion and endeavour will be undeviating...
> (*L* i 207)

The opposition in the letter between the "deep and sentimental cast" of *Endymion* and the "naked and Grecian Manner" of *Hyperion* supports C. L. Finney's reading of the sonnet which suggests that the "golden-tongued Romance" from which the poet withdraws is *Endymion*, and that the *King Lear* sonnet demonstrates "his reaction against the poetry of romance in general."[8] More profoundly, in the opposition between *Endymion* and *Hyperion*, the poet implies a conflict between the sentimental qualities of his earlier poems and his aspiration towards a new system of poetry.

The sonnet also reveals how the poet's understanding of Shakespeare had been revitalised by Hazlitt. The poet's concern with "Shakespearean fruit" is reflected first in his introduction into the sonnet of a Shakespearean sestet. Keats employs in the sonnet a Shakespearean rhyme scheme of CDCDEE for the sestet, which he had used only once in his Petrarchan sonnets before 1818 in 'To my brother George' (August 1816). The couplet, as in many of Shakespeare's sonnets, stands apart from the poem that it completes, so that Keats's poem follows the rhetorical movement of many of Shakespeare's sonnets. The couplet concludes the

[8] *The Evolution of Keats's Poetry*, vol.1, p.351.

argument that has been developed over three quatrains. In the first quatrain the poet dismisses "golden-tongued Romance" and in the second, he acknowledges his new admiration for Shakespearean tragedy. In the third he seems to look askance at his own earlier poetry, contrasting its "barren dream" with the "eternal theme" of Shakespeare. The concluding couplet states his ambition to undergo a poetic rebirth.

The influence of Shakespeare is also reflected in the sonnet's argument in which the poet dismisses "golden-tongued Romance", which might, as Finney suggests, indicate a dismissal of his own *Endymion*. However, it is more likely that the "golden-tongued Romance", as Stillinger points out, designates the kind of poetry the limitations of which are exposed by comparison with *King Lear*:

> It seems clear that Keats is viewing romance not simply as a literary genre but as a category of experience or a mode of perception—one whose limitations, moreover, are immediately exposed by the mere thought of reading *King Lear*.[9]

Thus, conflict between "Romance", characterised by its remoteness and Spenserian chivalric images, and the "fierce dispute" of the present "wintry day" signifies less the waning influence of Spenser and Hunt, or the poet's distaste for a specific literary genre, than his new ambition to write a poetry that had the power to reconcile poetic idealism and human realities.

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[9] Jack Stillinger, 'Reading Keats's Plots', in *Critical Essays on John Keats* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1990), p.74.

The second quatrain reveals what has impelled this recognition. It is the experience of reading *King Lear* that leads him to engage in a "fierce dispute" as to his understanding of life and poetry. Initially, in April 1817, Keats had located in *King Lear* a power to soothe his restless mind:

> From want of regular rest, I have been rather narvus—and the passage in Lear—"Do you not hear the Sea?"—has haunted me intensely. (*L* i 132)

In December 1817, the play became an instance of the "intensity" of art:

> ...the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth—Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified throughout. (*L* i 192)

When Keats read *King Lear* once again in January 1818, he recognised that his changed understanding of the play was a measure of his intellectual development:

> Nothing is finer for the purpose of great productions, than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers—As an instance of this—observe—I sat down yesterday to read King Lear once again the thing appeared to demand the prologue of a Sonnet.... (*L* i 214)

King Lear prompted a new insight into a reality that could admit both torments and human affections. In reading the play Keats immersed himself in the conflicting conditions of life and art. The "Shakespearean fruit" might be variously understood. The "fruit" might signify the

outcome of his reading. Despite his deepening awareness of the nature of poetry and the poet, the play still brought home to him his own limitations. The poet's habitual attitude of homage to great poets is revealed again in the use of the word, "humbly" (7), and by the exclamatory address to Shakespeare as "Chief Poet". Although golden-tongued Romance seems to be dethroned by Shakespeare, the dethronement is temporary. As the epithet insists, Keats remains conscious of the high value of romance. His reading of Shakespeare, thus, brings him not only pleasure but also a sense of depression, provoked by an awareness of his own immaturity and limitations.

"Shakespearean fruit" can also be understood as a tribute to the quality of the play. Keats's understanding of the bitter-sweet elements of *King Lear* is influenced by Hazlitt's opinions on Shakespeare in *The Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* and 'On Poetry in General' in *Lectures on the English Poets*. In the first of his lectures at the Surrey Institution, 'On Poetry in General', Hazlitt insists that superior poetry is capable of blending, through the agency of the poet's imagination and passion, the conflicting feelings of pleasure and pain:

> Poetry is the high-wrought enthusiasm of fancy and feeling. As in describing natural objects, it impregnates sensible impressions with the forms of fancy, so it describes the feelings of pleasure or pain, by blending them with the

> strongest movements of passion, and the most striking forms of nature.[10]

Keats certainly did not attend this lecture on 13 January, because he learnt that Hazlitt had begun a series of lectures only when he dined with Haydon and Hazlitt at Haydon's studio on Sunday 18. However, Keats possessed a copy of Hazlitt's lectures. He had studied Hazlitt's notion that the experience of reading *King Lear* "balances the pleasure against the pain",[11] and found in the play a similar artistic ability to make "all disagreeables evaporate".

Keats closes the sonnet with a confirmation that he is no longer the poet of "a barren dream", and with aspiration towards a new poetic strength, emblematized as "new Phoenix wings".

> When through the old oak forest I am gone,
> Let me not wander in a barren dream,
> But, when I am consumed in the fire,
> Give me new Phoenix wings to fly at my desire. (11-14)

The poet pictures himself about to embark upon a new poetic task, which necessitates a new interpretation of the source of poetic inspiration, "the old oak forest". In explaining the meaning of the "oak forest", H. E. Briggs points out that

[10] *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol. 5, pp. 4-5.

[11] *Ibid*, pp.271-272.

> Though the "old oak forest" was probably intended to be a reference to Lear (Keats seems to mean simply, "When I have finished reading Lear"), it is unconsciously a reference to *Endymion.*[12]

In either case, whether the "old oak forest" is a reference to *King Lear* or to *Endymion*, it is the site of a new poetic inspiration that will result in something very different from "a barren dream" (12), a phrase in which he seems to dismiss his juvenile poetry of idealism.

In 'On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again', Keats balances the relative merits of his past and present poetic systems, and dedicates himself to a new scheme of poetry in the future. After this sonnet, Keats turned to the Shakespearean form, and his sonnets became a principal means through which he explored the nature of his poetic identity.

Negatively Capable Existence in the Sonnets

Keats's expectation in the *King Lear* sonnet of a new poetic strength, based on his intellectual development, develops into a more intense speculation upon the nature of his existence in his next sonnet, 'When I have fears that I may cease to be'. On 30 January 1818 in a letter to John Taylor, the publisher of *Endymion*, the poet hints at his growing insight into art and

[12] H. E. Briggs, 'Keats's "Golden-Tongued Romance", *Modern Language Notes*, lviii (1943), p.127.

life: "first Step towards the chief Attempt in the Drama—the playing of different Natures with Joy and Sorrow." The sonnet is copied on the next day in a letter to Reynolds, in which he refers to as his last sonnet. In the poem, the poet's belief in himself and poetry is expressed in a paradoxical way, through a meditation on his own death:

> When I have fears that I may cease to be
>   Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
> Before high-piled books, in charactery,
>   Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;
> When I behold, upon the night's starred face,
>   Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
> And think that I may never live to trace
>   Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;
> And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
>   That I shall never look upon thee more,
> Never have relish in the fairy power
>   Of unreflecting love; then on the shore
> Of the wide world I stand alone and think
> Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

This sonnet demonstrates not only the poet's awareness of his own mortality but also a determination to concentrate on his inward self, "I stand alone and think" (14). This is the first of the series of Shakespearean sonnets in early 1818 as well as the first legitimate Shakespearean sonnet in Keats's career. The static tone of the sonnet contrasts with the energetic optimism and the anxiety in the *King Lear* sonnet. The poem attains steadiness in form with its regular iambic pentameter and the repeated clauses, "when I have fears" (1), "when I behold"(5), "when I feel" (9).

The stylistic features of this sonnet—each quatrain beginning with an adverbial clause, "when I" (1, 5, 9), each of which is answered in the "then" of line 12—are common in Shakespeare's sonnets (in Sonnets 12, 15 and 64, for example). However, Shakespeare never delayed the primary turn of the sonnet, as Keats does above, until the twelfth line. In addition, placing a caesura in the last line of the third quatrain and breaking the division between the quatrain and couplet, are uncharacteristic of Shakespeare's sonnets, which maintain the completeness of quatrains, and the division between the quatrains and the couplet.

It is not only the formal characteristics of this sonnet that derive from Shakespeare. Keats's sense of a world unsympathetic to the individual's feelings seems also to echo Shakespeare's sonnets of unrequited love. For example, Keats employs the "meditative structure"[13] that Shakespeare uses most overtly in sonnets 12 and 15. Here is sonnet 15:

> When I consider every thing that grows
> Holds in perfection but a little moment;
> That this huge stage presenteth naught but shows,
> Whereon the stars in secret influence comment;
> When I perceive that men as plants increase,
> Cheered and checked even by the selfsame sky,
> Vaunt in their youthful sap, at height decrease,
> And wear their brave state out of memory;
> Then the conceit of this inconstant stay
> Sets you most rich in youth before my sight,

[13] Colin Burrow, ed., *William Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 410.

> Where wasteful time debateth with decay
> To change your day of youth to sullied night,
> And, all in war with Time for love of you,
> As he takes from you, I engraft you new.

The movement from the repeated subordinate clauses in lines one and five to the main clause in line nine, culminates in the expression of a particular wish that the young man be spared the depredations of time.

In his sonnet, Keats employs similar syntactic and rhetorical features. There is a similar relationship between the subordinate clauses in lines one, two and nine and the main clause in line twelve. The movement of thought also runs from the general to the individual. Whereas the conclusion of Shakespeare's sonnet is addressed to his lover, in the conclusion of Keats's sonnet, his awareness of the limitations of poetry, fame and love in the three quatrains moves into a more general recognition of human and poetic limitation.

The sonnet takes a tragic view of life. Harold Bloom, in his introduction to *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, suggests that Wordsworth's and Keats's sonnets resemble Milton's in their intense subjectivity and in their expression of poetic anxiety:

> Wordsworth and Keats learn from Shakespeare in their sonnets, but are closer to Milton because they put into their sonnets, as Milton sometimes did, the burden of their prophecy. Shakespeare, who had the power to hurt, nevertheless husbanded nature's riches from expense in his

> Sonnets and chose rather to live and die not only to himself, in his tragedies.[14]

Under the Miltonic-Wordsworthian influence, Keats's Petrarchan sonnets written before 1818 repeatedly express Keats's own poetic self-confidence. Despite Bloom, however, Keats is closer to Shakespeare than to Milton in his sonnet writing after 1818, because his constant preoccupation in the sonnets with mortality and the limitations of his existence recalls Shakespeare's sonnets, rather than Milton's or Wordsworth's.

In 'When I have fears that I may cease to be', Keats represents himself as troubled by his mortality and poetic limitations (1-11). In the conclusion of the poem, however, one can note the poet's effort to achieve a distance from the outer world and to focus on his disturbed self:

> ...then on the shore
> Of the wide world I stand alone and think
> Till love and fame to nothingness do sink. (12-14)

To "stand alone and think" is in some sense a positive outcome. That is, the poet's recognition of mortality, limitation and death seems to endow him with a new poetic strength.

The poet's awareness of uncertainty is counterbalanced by a series of images in the poem such as "teeming brain", "high-piled books", "full ripened grain", "high romance" and "fair creature of an hour", which

[14] Harold Bloom, ed., *Modern Critical Interpretations: William Shakespeare's Sonnets* (New York and Philadelphia, Chelsea House, 1987), p. 3.

suggest a richness of imaginative activity that ironically serves only to prompt an anxiety that it may never be fully realised. In the first quatrain, Keats acknowledges two ambitions: first the ripening of his poetic power, emblematized as his "teeming brain"; and then the composition of poems, imagined as "high-piled books". However, the poet's fears centre on his awareness of his own mortality. In the second quatrain, the poet's fears are awakened by his awareness of the distance between his mortality and the eternal existence of poetry. In his letter to John Taylor, written on 27 February 1818, Keats highlights spontaneity and naturalness as the essential characteristics of poetry ("if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all." (*L* i 238-239)), but in this quatrain he worries that his poetry does not come naturally, and that he might remain unable to interpret the "cloudy symbols of a high romance" (6) with the "magic hand of chance" (8). Then in the third quatrain, the poet frets about the distance between himself and "the fairy power of unreflecting love" (11-12).

Helen Vendler, pointing out the resemblance between the harvest scenes in the first quatrain of this sonnet and in 'Ode to Autumn', remarks:

> Keats's own fears prohibited both the deathly vision beyond the last gleaning and the reassuring cyclicity of the spring; the last vision allowed in *When I have fears* is that of a

> teeming field of ripening grain, or at most that of some partial harvest, of fields not yet entirely gleaned.[15]

However, the sonnet highlights the poet's existential ability to envisage the fullness and the perfection of his existence, an ability that, however paradoxical it may seem, is confirmed rather than contradicted when in the last line love and fame sink "to nothingness". The sonnet exemplifies better than any other the Keatsian rhetoric in which his own identity is affirmed at the moment when that identity seems most emptied.

The following sonnet, 'O thou whose face hath felt the winter's wind' (February 1818), deploys a similar rhetoric of self-making. In a letter to J. H. Reynolds, Keats transcribes the sonnet with the following comment:

> 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—seeming to say— (*L* i 232-233).

> 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.
> Oh, fret not after knowledge—I have none,
> And yet my song comes native with the warmth.

[15] Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1983), p.236.

Oh, 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.

Keats, in fact, had not been idle when he wrote this sonnet. Since 'When I have fears...' he had composed eight poems including four sonnets, and was preparing to write *Isabella*. Moreover, contrary to his claim that "I have not read any Books", he had been reading Voltaire and Gibbon.

Although it is an unrhymed sonnet, the poem maintains a formal regularity similar to the Shakespearean sonnet form. Despite its irregularity in rhyme-scheme, for instance, the firm quatrain division and the Shakespearean repetition of phrase, provide the sonnet with a sense of regularity and steadiness, and establish a thematic movement consonant with the formal divisions of the Shakespearean sonnet (4+4+4+2).

The sonnet reflects the poet's understanding of the conditions of his existence. In the first two quatrains, he addresses a person who has experienced the harsh conditions of reality, and in the following six lines, he urges us to accept our limitations as a means to a better understanding of our existence. Although the poet confronts the uncertainties and hardships of reality— "the winter's wind" (1), "the snow-clouds hung in mist" (2) and "supreme darkness" (6)—he also looks forward to a spring, which will also, in a daring paradox, be "a harvest-time" (4) and "a triple morn" (8).

In the third quatrain, Keats urges the reader to stop pursuing knowledge, saying, "fret not after knowledge"(9, 11), which seems to contradict the second quatrain. However, he does not so much repudiate knowledge as redefine it, by accommodating it to his own principle of "Negative Capability". In the same letter, the poet remarks, "Memory should not be called knowledge." Knowledge should not be a superficial association of ideas, rather it should be linked to one's own experience and understanding of reality. Rather than insisting on the rationality of knowledge, Keats suggests its naturalness which is reminiscent of his own definition of poetry, "my song comes native with the warmth" (10). In the concluding lines of the sonnet Keats once again employs a rhetoric in which he affirms the self through an experience of its emptiness. It is a rhetoric in which idleness and sleepiness become the key indicators of poetic vigilance.

Similar preoccupations are developed in *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*, written between February and April 1818. The rhetorical movement from antithesis to synthesis in a sonnet's fourteen lines is compressed into *ottava rima*'s eight lines, a stanza that may have attracted Keats because of its formal similarity to a Shakespearean sonnet. The connection between the sonnet and *Isabella* is most evident on the formal level. In all six of the Shakespearean sonnets that Keats wrote in this period, the three quatrains

and the couplet are independent units of sense, a pattern that he underlines by verbal and syntactic repetition, as in:

> And yet I never look on midnight sky,
>   But I behold thine eyes' well-memoried light.
> I cannot look upon the rose's dye,
>   But to thy cheek my soul doth take its flight.
> I cannot look on any budding flower,
>   But my fond ear, in fancy at thy lips
> And hearkening for a love-sound, doth devour
>   Its sweets in the wrong sense. Thou dost eclipse
> Every delight with sweet remembering,
> And grief unto my darling joys dost bring.
>
> (To—['Time's sea'], 5-14)

The repetition and the fact that all lines but one are end-stopped, accentuates the firmness of the sonnet's structure. When Keats writes in *ottava rima*, he uses similar devices of syntactic and verbal repetition to mark the formal structure of the stanza:

> Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!
>   Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love's eye!
> They could not in the self-same mansion dwell
>   Without some stir of heart, some malady;
> They could not sit at meals but feel how well
>   It soothed each to be the other by;
> They could not, sure, beneath the same roof sleep
> But to each other dream, and nightly weep. (1-8)

More fundamentally, the awareness that Keats displays in his sonnets of the paradoxical nature of reality is echoed in *Isabella. Ottava rima* is a disciplined poetic form, and it is linked conventionally with satire. But Keats seems to associate it with a combination of the modern and the

antique, so that it is an appropriate choice given his ambition "to make old prose in modern rhyme more sweet"(156). Like the couplet in the Shakespearean sonnet, the couplets in Isabella often function as epigrammatic conclusions to the stanza's first six lines:

> So said he one fair morning, and all day
> His heart beat awfully against his side;
> And to his heart he inwardly did pray
> For power to speak; but still the ruddy tide
> Stifled his voice and pulsed resolve away—
> Fevered his high conceit of such a bride,
> Yet brought him to the meekness of a child.
> Alas! when passion is both meek and wild! (41-48)

The character of Lorenzo's love, at once timid and passionate, is summed up in the stanza's final line when it is described as "both meek and wild!" Similarly, in the following stanza, the couplet emphasises pain and pleasure as the natural elements of love:

> But, for the general award of love,
> The little sweet doth kill much bitterness.
> Though Dido silent is in under-grove,
> And Isabella's was a great distress,
> Though young Lorenzo in warm Indian clove
> Was not embalmed, this truth is not the less—
> Even bees, the little almsmen of spring-bowers,
> Know there is richest juice in poison-flowers. (97-104)

Similar associations between pain and pleasure are common in the sonnets of the period, as when he confesses that his love brings "grief unto my darling joys" ('To—['Time's sea']', 14); or when Keats identifies the

"bitter-sweet" quality of Shakespeare's play ('On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again').

The Sonnets of Keats, Shelley and Hunt

Keats's sonnets of early 1818 frequently represent not only a conflict between the ideal and reality and between the self and others, but also the poet's response to the problem. The estrangement from his early creed of imaginative idealism is accompanied by a recognition of the harshness of reality and the constraints upon his selfhood. Nevertheless, his key concept of "Negative Capability", which emphasises the ability to be in uncertainty "without any irritable reaching after fact & reason", offered him a means to resolve the conflict.

The distinctive character of the sonnets of early 1818 is highlighted when we compare three sonnets on the same subject, the River Nile, composed by Keats, Shelley and Hunt during a sonnet-writing competition. According to Keats's letter to George and Tom Keats written on 14 February 1818 (*L* i 227-228), the three poets wrote competing sonnets on the River Nile on 4 February 1818. Whereas Shelley and Hunt locate in the sublimity of the River Nile an intellectual and moral significance, Keats enters into a natural engagement with the sublime, rejecting the rational process of elaboration.

Although Shelley inclined to experimental sonnet forms, on this occasion he used the conventional Petrarchan sonnet form:

> Month after month the gathered rains descend
> Drenching yon secret Aethiopian dells,
> And from the desert's ice-girt pinnacles
> Where Frost and Heat in strange embraces blend
> On Atlas, fields of moist snow half depend.
> Girt there with blasts and meteors Tempest dwells
> By Nile's aereal urn, with rapid spells
> Urging those waters to their mighty end.
> O'er Egypt's land of Memory floods are level
> And they are thine, O Nile—and well thou knowest
> That soul-sustaining airs and blasts of evil
> And fruits and poisons spring where'er thou flowest.
> Beware, O Man—for knowledge must to thee,
> Like the great flood to Egypt, ever be.[16]

In the octave-sestet division, Shelley juxtaposes the source of the River Nile and its "mighty end" (8). The poet's insight into the river reflects his understanding of the ambivalent character of knowledge. The river originates in "secret Aethiopian dells" (2) where rain falls, and also in "the desert's ice-girt pinnacles" (3) in which snow melts in a strange combination of "frost and heat" (4). In the sestet the river is associated with the human civilization that develops on its banks. The river that has its origin in nature's contraries, now nourishes the similarly contrary aspects of human experience, an experience torn between "soul-sustaining airs and blasts of evil" and between "fruits and poisons" (11-12). The poem implies

[16] *The Poems of Shelley*, vol.2, p.349.

that humanity can be defined only by reference to contraries, and the Egyptian river makes us aware of this. Thus, knowledge by the conclusion of the sonnet has been defined as an understanding of good and evil, a knowledge at once fruitful and poisonous.

In Hunt's sonnet the river becomes a symbol of history that Hunt represents as a history of progress:

> It flows through old hushed Egypt and its sands,
> Like some grave mighty thought threading a dream,
> And times and things, as in that vision, seem
> Keeping along it their eternal stands, –
> Caves, pillars, pyramids, the shepherd bands
> That roamed through the young world, the glory extreme
> Of high Sesostris, and that southern beam,
> The laughing queen that caught the world's great hands.
> Then comes a mightier silence, stern and strong,
> As of a world left empty of its throng,
> And the void weighs on us; and then we wake,
> And hear the fruitful stream lapsing along
> Twixt villages, and think how we shall take
> Our own calm journey on for human sake.[17]

In Hunt's version, the river flows from the past through the present to the future. Although the river metaphor was popular among eighteenth-century sonneteers, Hunt develops the metaphor to symbolise the common history of the human race. For instance, in the octave, the poet associates the river with the glorious history of Egypt, and then in the sestet the river is related

[17] *Poetical Works of Leigh Hunt*, p. 248.

to a universalized history of the human race, which, the poet believes, is progressive.

The sonnets of Shelley and Hunt display an ability to abstract and idealise their experience. They discover in the river a moral and intellectual symbol. However, in Keats's 'To the Nile', the poet does not attach a symbolic significance to the river. Instead, Keats represents the immediate and natural influence of the river upon his mind:

> Son of the old moon-mountains African!
> Chief of the pyramid and crocodile!
> We call thee fruitful, and, that very while,
> A desert fills our seeing's inward span.
> Nurse of swart nations since the world began,
> Art thou so fruitful? Or dost thou beguile
> Such men to honour thee, who, worn with toil,
> Rest for a space 'twixt Cairo and Decan?
> Oh, may dark fancies err! They surely do.
> 'Tis ignorance that makes a barren waste
> Of all beyond itself. Thou dost bedew
> Green rushes like our rivers, and dost taste
> The pleasant sunrise. Green isles hast thou too,
> And to the sea as happily dost haste.

Although we associate the River Nile with ideas of its fruitfulness, Keats throws doubt on this association: "Art thou so fruitful? Or dost thou beguile/ Such men to honour thee" (6-7). Keats is suspicious of a subjective understanding of the river that has no reliance on first-hand experience. While Hunt imagined the Nile as figuring the progress of man and Shelley imagined it as figuring the nature of knowledge, Keats dismisses all such notions as "dark fancies". He ends by choosing to

understand the Nile through his direct experience of English rivers, associating it with "green rushes" (12), a "pleasant sunrise" (13), and "green isles". A similar distrust of abstract theorising can be found in the unrhymed sonnet, 'O thou whose face hath felt the winter's wind':

> Oh, fret not after knowledge – I have none,
> And yet my song comes native with the warmth. (9-10)

Poetry, which "comes native with the warmth", is found through the renunciation of the pursuit of knowledge.

Keats's practice of the Shakespearean sonnet after 1818 reveals an increasingly refined approach to the sonnet form and its function as well as a reaction against the aesthetic values that had informed Keats's earlier poems. The poet's intellectual development in early 1818, apparent when he offers "Negative Capability" as the proper response to the uncertainty and conflicts in the world, is signalled most immediately in his sonnets.

In June 1818, about five months after writing 'To the Nile', Keats started his walking tour to Northern England, Ireland and Scotland. He believed that the experience of the tour would "strengthen more his [my] reach in Poetry" (*L* i 342). During the walking tour, the sonnet also played an important role, used not only to record major events during the tour, but also to test the powers of the negatively capable self, which he had first

explored in his sonnets of early 1818. The following chapter will discuss the sonnets that he wrote during his tour.

CHAPTER V

The Walking Tour Sonnets and the Matter of Existence

John Middleton Murry, in his essay 'The Feel of *Not* to Feel It', observes that although Keats tried to escape from his troubles in his walking tour in the summer of 1818, he found that he took them with him. Murry argues that his emotional depression explains the "poverty of the poems" produced during the tour, and specifically offers the failure to recognise "the real of beauty" (10) in Keats's sonnet on visiting Burns's tomb as indicative of a "deficiency in his own power of response."[1]

Since Murry's essay, critical comments on Keats's walking tour and the poems written during the journey have focused mainly on the poet's mental state. Stuart M. Sperry asserts, in *Keats the Poet*, that from the outset of the journey Keats was eager to attain "a perfect accommodation between the perceiving mind and the objects," which, as Sperry recognizes, is a general concern of Keats's as of much other Romantic poetry. He explains the depression revealed in the sonnets referring to Burns as produced by a conflict between what he had imagined and the reality of the scene he experienced.[2] Other critics such as Aileen Ward, Morris Dickstein, and John Glendening point to a crisis of self-confidence

[1] John Middleton Murry, *The Mystery of Keats* (London, N.Y.: Peter Nevill, 1949), pp.151, 158.
[2] *Keats the Poet*, pp. 135-6, 138.

accompanied by a sense of despondency to explain the melancholy which appeared frequently during the journey. Dickstein maintains that Keats's despondency reveals itself in the sonnet, 'On Visiting the tomb of Burns' as a "momentary incapacity of response."[3] Glendening similarly suggests that during the tour Keats underwent a mental crisis.[4]

A general tendency of criticism on the poet's walking tour to focus on the psychological crisis has drawn attention to the melancholy and obscurity of the sonnets written on the tour, which are usually represented as mediocre work. Murry asserts that "poetry, at that time, did not 'come natural' to him".[5] "As tourist and literary pilgrim," Glendening maintains, "Keats was largely unsuccessful," although he did succeed "as a seeker of a capable self."[6] Sperry offers the most positive assessment of the importance of the walking tour to Keats's poetic development:

> His sense of landscape and of the heroic in human life was beginning to combine within a deeper kind of understanding one could only call "heart knowledge"...Setting and a sense of the heroic character were beginning to assume the shape of epic drama in his mind.[7]

Nevertheless, Keats's despondency or even his "momentary incapacity of response" was not a symptom that appeared exclusively during the poet's

[3] Morris Dickstein, *Keats and His Poetry: A Study in Development* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 170-171.
[4] John Glendening, 'Keats's Tour of Scotland: Burns and the Anxiety of Hero Worship,' *Keats-Shelley Journal*, xli (1992), pp. 82-83.
[5] *The Mystery of Keats*, pp.151-152.
[6] 'Keats's Tour of Scotland: Burns and the Anxiety of Hero Worship,' p. 98.
[7] *Keats the Poet*, pp. 153-154.

walking tour of 1818. Similar emotions are expressed in his poems and letters written before and after the tour. The sonnet, 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles', written in March 1817, also records a failure of response to "Grecian grandeur" (12) and the eternity of art. The poet who speculates on the ambivalent value of "the bitter-sweet of this Shakespearean fruit" (8) in the sonnet, 'On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again', finds a similar ambivalence in Scotland's "cold beauty" (8) in 'On Visiting the Tomb of Burns'.

The general comments, moreover, which have been made on the poems of the walking tour, have focused narrowly on the sonnets that refer to Burns. Thus, the other sonnets, 'To Ailsa Rock', and 'Read me a lesson, Muse, and speak it loud', have attracted little comment. These sonnets, however, show the poet freeing himself from a depressed and impotent mental state. In 'To Ailsa Rock', for instance, the poet successfully translates his impressions into poetry, resulting in a sonnet with which Keats was satisfied: "This is the only Sonnet of any worth I have of late written."(*L* i 329-30) Moreover, in 'Read me a lesson...' he expresses a mature understanding of the human condition and his own existence.

On the tour Keats alternated between disillusionment and renewed expectation. He had greatly looked forward to the tour, but as he travelled he experienced a crisis of self-confidence. Little attention has been paid,

however, to his attempts to recover from that crisis. Although Keats admits his "prejudice" in the sonnet on visiting Burns's tomb, the poem records how he freed himself from it by taking an apologetic stance towards his prejudiced misreading of the place, "I sin against thy native skies"(14). Similarly, in the sonnet on visiting Burns's cottage, 'This mortal body of a thousand days', the poet expresses his depressed mood and the failure of his imagination, "Fancy is dead and drunken at its goal' (8), but he attempts to reactivate his imagination, "Yet can I stamp my foot upon thy floor." (9) Although his state of mind alternated between expectancy and disillusionment during the journey, Keats never fully surrendered to either tendency. The sonnets trace an emotional state that seems to accommodate both despair and determination.

Expectation and Disillusionment

The poet's apparent purpose in undertaking the walking tour in the summer of 1818, was to escape from the depressing realities of London life. In early 1818 the poet had a number of anxieties. His brother, Tom's, health became worse, although he made an effort to reassure Keats by pretending that he was on his way to recovery, and the poet's own health became so fragile that his doctor suggested calling off the tour. (*L* i 291) Besides, George's marriage and his decision to emigrate to America seriously

disturbed him. Because George had been "more than a brother" to Keats as well as his "greatest friend" (*L* i 358), the prospect of his departure was painful:

> I am now so depressed that I have not an Idea to put to paper—my hand feels like lead—and yet it is and unpleasant numbness it does not take away the pain of existence—I don't know what to write. (*L* i 287)

The walking tour offered the prospect of escaping from all this, immersing himself in natural scenery. The beauty of the Lake District made the poet "forget the divisions of life; age, youth, poverty and riches" (*L* i 299), and he much enjoyed, in Ireby on 1 July, watching children dance:

> There was as fine a row of boys & girls as you ever saw, some beautiful faces, & one exquisite mouth. I never felt so near the glory of Patriotism, the glory of making by any means a country happier. This is what I like better than scenery. (*L* i 307)

As many commentators on the walking tour have pointed out, however, Keats's pleasure was suddenly converted into depression when he visited Robert Burns's tomb at Dumfries on 1 July and his cottage on July 11. As he reveals in a letter to J. H. Reynolds, the sudden shift in the poet's state of mind was prompted by thoughts of Burns and his misery:

> His Misery is a dead weight upon the nimbleness of one's quill—I tried to forget it—to drink Toddy without any Care—to write a merry Sonnet—it wont do— (*L* i 325)

Keats's understanding of Burns was influenced by Hazlitt who had given a series of lectures on the English poets in early 1818. Although it is not certain if Keats attended Hazlitt's lecture on Burns on 24 February

1818, the poet quite possibly would have been aware of the content of the lecture. In a letter to his brothers, written on 21 February, Keats expresses his disappointment with Hazlitt's treatment of Chatterton in his previous lecture given on 17 February. The apology in the next lecture on *Burns, and the Old English Ballads*, "I am sorry that what I said in the conclusion of the last Lecture respecting Chatterton, should have given dissatisfaction to some persons"[8], would have attracted Keats's attention.

In discussing the general character of Burns, Hazlitt emphasises the poet's sinewy temperament: "He had a strong mind, and a strong body...He had a real heart of flesh and blood beating in his bosom...the pulse of his poetry flows as healthily and vigorously." However, he also points out that Burns had been attacked for his "moral character, and the moral tendency of his writings".[9]

Another prominent aim of the walking tour was connected to Keats's poetic ambitions. Keats believed that the tour would do more for his poetry than absorbing himself in books. He remarks, in the middle of the tour, in a letter to Bailey:

> I thought it would give me more experience, rub off more Prejudice, use [me] to more hardship, identify finer scenes load me with grander Mountains, and strengthen more my

[8] *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, vol.5, p.123.
[9] *Ibid.*, pp.127-128.

> reach in Poetry, than would stopping at home among Books
> even though I should reach Homer. (*L* i 342)

Keats expected to benefit more from a direct experience of natural beauty than from reading about it. Keats wished to supplement with a direct experience of nature an experience that had until now been largely literary. Thus, his primary task during the tour was to accrue from a direct experience of natural sublimity fresh materials for his poetry. At the beginning of the tour, he succeeded in turning his impressions into vivid poetic images. In his first letter to his brother Tom, Keats records his immediate impressions of the Ambleside waterfall which he visited on 27 June:

> What astonishes me more than any thing is the tone, the coloring, the slate, the stone, the moss, the rock-weed; or, if I may so say, the intellect, the countenance of such places. The space, the magnitude of mountains and waterfalls are well imagined before one sees them; but this countenance or intellectual tone must surpass every imagination and defy any remembrance. I shall learn poetry here and shall henceforth write more than ever... (*L* i 301)

Here, Keats is fascinated by the fact that he is able to gather fresh and vivid images from his first-hand experience of nature. Each distinctive image of nature, "the slate, the stone, the moss, the rock-weed", comes together to form the fresh poetic impression that the poet defines as the "intellect" or the "countenance" of nature. In this process, whereby his visual impressions of nature are transformed directly into new poetic materials, the poet freed himself from "every imagination" he had formed of the

landscape, and the effect was an access of self-confidence: "I shall learn poetry here and shall henceforth write more than ever". What he saw surpassed anything that he could imagine: "I live in the eye; and my imagination, surpassed, is at rest." (*L* i 301)

Nevertheless, he was unable to maintain a direct connection between his working mind and his impressions of nature. In 'Sleep and Poetry', 'I stood tip-toe upon a little hill', and *Endymion*, Keats had shown himself expert in the representation of small-scale natural spaces, but he had never before had direct experience of the natural sublime, and he failed to find an appropriate language with which to communicate the experience. For example, Keats begins the very first journal letter of June 25-27 to his brother, Tom, with a brief description: "Here beginneth my journal, this Thursday, the 25th day of June, Anno Domini 1818. This morning we arose at 4, and set off in a Scotch mist." When he continues, however, to report the impression of Winander, he finds himself lapsing into a mechanical description:

> June26—I merely put *pro forma*, for there is no such thing as time and space, which by the way came forcibly upon me on seeing for the first hour the Lake and Mountains of Winander—I cannot describe them—they surpass my expectation—beautiful water—shores and islands green to the marge—mountains all round up to the clouds. (*L* i 298)

Here, Keats's attempt to articulate his impressions of the "Lake and Mountains of Winander" only to acknowledge: "I cannot describe them—they surpass my expectation".

Similarly, as he records his impression of Fingal's Cave in Staffa, in a letter to Tom written on 26 July, the poet experiences difficulty in finding an appropriate language:

> I am puzzled how to give you an Idea of Staffa. It can only be represented by a first rate drawing—One may compare the surface of the Island to a roof—the roof is supported by grand pillars of basalt standing together as thick as honey combs The finest thing is Fingal's Cave—it is entirely a hollowing out of Basalt pillars. Suppose now the Giants who rebelled against Jove had taken a whole Mass of black Columns and bound them together like bunches of matches—and then with immense Axes had made a cavern in the body of these columns—of course the roof and floor must be composed of the broken ends of the Columns—such is fingal's Cave... (*L* i 348)

Keats finds it difficult to convey in language what could only be conveyed by "a first-rate drawing". Instead, he attempts to convey the "Idea of Staffa" by a conventional mythological reference to the "Giants who rebelled against Jove". Thus, Keats's ambition to enjoy a carefree holiday from depressing realities and to acquire new poetic materials was not fully realised. He plunged into depression, and in the poems on Burns the change of mood is clearly apparent.

"Yet can I stamp my foot upon thy floor": Self and Existence

Of Keats's five walking tour sonnets, the two sonnets that refer to Burns ('On Visiting the Tomb of Burns', and 'This mortal body of a thousand days') have aroused most interest among recent critics. Dickstein's reading of the two sonnets as poems about the "failure of the poetic imagination"[10], has been generally accepted. Critics have focused in particular on the exclamation, "Fancy is dead" ('This mortal body of a thousand days', 8). Keats's walking tour sonnets, however, achieve their intensity by articulating antithetical responses to the emotional crisis and the failure of the imagination. The sonnets acted as a yardstick by which Keats could measure his ability to create poetry from a direct experience of nature. They also record the chief events of the tour such as visiting Robert Burns' tomb and his cottage, seeing Ailsa Rock, viewing a play, *The Stranger*, and climbing Ben Nevis.

The first sonnet that Keats wrote during the walking tour is 'On Visiting the Tomb of Burns', written on July 1, 1818. After beginning the tour at Lancaster on June 25, he walked to Endmoor, Bowness, Ambleside, where he was amazed by a waterfall, on June 26; to Rydal, on June 27, where he expected to meet Wordsworth; to Ireby after climbing Skiddaw on June 29; and he reached Carlisle on June 30. According to what Keats

[10] *Ibid.*, p.176.

records in a letter to Tom, written in Carlisle on July 1, he had walked 114 miles in the first six days of the tour, and expected to "ride 38 miles to Dumfries." (*L* i 308)

Until he wrote the letter in Carlisle, he was in a traveller's mood, fascinated by what he had experienced walking through nature and visiting towns. When he approached Burns's tomb, however, his mood suddenly changed. The sonnet on visiting Burns's tomb expresses a sense of pain and sadness, which differs from his mood in Carlisle a few hours before visiting Dumfries: "I never felt so near the glory of Patriotism."

> The town, the churchyard, and the setting sun,
> The clouds, the trees, the rounded hills all seem,
> Though beautiful, cold—strange—as in a dream
> I dreamed long ago. Now new begun
> The short-lived, paly summer is but won
> From winter's ague for one hour's gleam.
> Through sapphire warm their stars do never beam;
> All is cold beauty; 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! Burns! With honour due
> I have oft honoured thee. Great shadow, hide
> Thy face; I sin against thy native skies.

The problem of pain is the primary concern in this sonnet. Critics have focused on the moment of disillusionment in which the poet sighs, "all is cold Beauty". Murry, for instance, interprets the exclamation as the poet's

recognition of his unresponsiveness,[11] and Dickstein asserts that the poem's despondent atmosphere intimates a more profound problem, "the universality of pain."[12]

Indeed, the scenery of Scotland, summarised in the first two lines, does not inspire the poet to see "the real of beauty" (10). He perceives it as "cold beauty"(8), for reasons that he explains in the letter to Tom in which he copied the sonnet:

> This Sonnet I have written in a strange mood, half asleep. I know not how it is, the Clouds, the sky, the Houses, all seem anti Grecian & anti Charlemagnish—I will endeavour to get rid of my prejudices, & tell you fairly about the Scotch— (*L* i 309)

The "prejudices" that he attempts to get rid of are, first, his aesthetic taste for Grecian and Gothic beauty and, second, his antipathy to Scotland, more specifically, to the Scottish Kirk. He insists in a letter written on July 7 that although the neighbouring shores of Scotland and Ireland are close enough to share a similar dialect, they are, at the same time, far enough apart to preserve the fair Irish chambermaid from the oppressive influence of the Kirk, which has "done Scotland harm." Keats, furthermore, claims that Burns's southern disposition inevitably suffered in the cultural climate imposed by the Scottish Kirk:

[11] *The Mystery of Keats*, p.153.
[12] *Keats and His Poetry*, p. 172.

> ...and go on to remind you of the fate of Burns. Poor unfortunate fellow—his disposition was southern—how sad it is when a luxurious imagination is obliged in self defence to deaden its delicacy in vulgarity... (*L* i 319)

Keats speculates on how Burns's "luxurious imagination" must have been shackled by the influence of the Kirk. But Keats also brought with him into Scotland aesthetic prejudices, in particular a prejudice in favour of the Grecian, as he indicates when setting out his plans for *Hyperion*: "the nature of *Hyperion* will lead me to treat it in a more naked and grecian manner." (*L* i 207) It is a taste that found the Scottish landscape alien.

The sonnet, then, implies the presence of these emotional obstacles, and confesses the poet's inability to transform his experience into poetry. The octave illustrates his difficulty in responding to the visual images that Scotland offered him. In the first quatrain, the poet recollects Dumfries at sunset as possessing "cold-strange" beauty. In the following quatrain the poet intensifies the sense of coldness by referring to the chilly summer weather of Scotland, and by contrasting it with the warm sky of the south. Although it is the beginning of July, the poet feels "winter's ague" (6) in the Scottish "paly summer" (5), and he thinks that even the bright stars in the cold Scottish sky are different from the stars in the "sapphire warm" (7) sky of the south. Then the sestet develops the central argument of the poem:

> ...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! (8-12)

Discussion of these problematic lines has focused on the exclamation mark in the twelfth line. Most critics such as Murray, Dickstein, and Sperry agree to replace it with question mark, so that the question signifies the impossibility of the human mind understanding "the real of beauty" without pain. Glendening, however, asserts that the sentence properly ends with an exclamation mark, ""for" being a preposition and "who" meaning "whoever."" In addition, he reads "Minos-wise" as an adverb meaning ""in the manner of Minos"", unsympathetic to human sufferings, a sense that Keats might have remembered from his reading of *The Inferno.* He concludes:

> The "real beauty" that Minos and like-minded people would "relish" is thus not beauty itself, but something additional and negative, since desiring it brings suffering.[13]

Although the exclamation mark should perhaps be retained, the expression "Minos-wise" is probably intended to suggest the disinterested observer or traveller rather than the cruelty with which Minos is associated in *The Inferno.* Because the "mind" in the sonnet attempts not only to relish "the real of beauty", but also to be "free from that dead hue" (10), the "mind" cannot be identified with the mind of "Minos and like-minded people", as

[13] 'Keats's Tour of Scotland: Burns and the Anxiety of Hero Worship,' p.89.

Glendening insists. The sestet reflects the poet's attempt to view objectively "the real of beauty", freed from the "dead hue" that "sickly imagination" casts upon it. Thus, the sestet represents the poet's reaction to the failure of imagination recorded in the octave, and culminates in the last line of the sonnet, "I sin against thy native skies" (14) with an apology for his prejudiced misreading of the landscape.

Keats's other sonnet referring to Burns, 'This mortal body of a thousand days', makes a similar response to a failure of imagination. In the sonnet, despondency gives way to expectation. When Keats approached Burns's cottage on 11 July, he tried to regain the buoyancy that he had lost after his visit to the tomb of Burns on 1 July:

> One of the pleasantest means of annulling self is approaching such a shrine as the Cottage of Burns—we need not think of his misery—that is all gone—bad luck to it—I shall look upon it hereafter with unmixed pleasure as I do upon my Stratford on < and > Avon day with Bailey.
> (*L* i 323)

Keats proposed to forget Burns's misery and to think of his visit to the cottage as a pilgrimage, honouring Burns, as he had honoured Shakespeare on his visit to Stratford, as a valued precursor. However, when Keats visited the cottage and wrote a sonnet "for the mere sake of writing," it seems that the poet's intention remained unrealised. He could not think about Burns without remembering the harshness of the poet's life:

> His Misery is a dead weight upon the nimbleness of one's quill—I tried to forget it—to drink Toddy without any Care—to write a merry Sonnet—it wont do—...We can see horribly clear in the works of such a man his whole life...
> (*L* i 325)

Thoughts of Burns's misery made it impossible to pay him proper homage. What becomes "horribly clear" is not Burns's poetic achievement but the misery of his life:

> This mortal body of a thousand days
> Now fills, O Burns, a space in thine own room,
> Where thou didst dream alone on budded bays,
> Happy and thoughtless of thy day of doom!
> My pulse is warm with thine own barley-bree,
> My head is light with pledging a great soul,
> My eyes are wandering and I cannot see,
> Fancy is dead and drunken at its goal;
> Yet can I stamp my foot upon thy floor,
> Yet can I ope thy window-sash to find
> The meadow thou hast trampe□d o'er and o'er,
> Yet can I think of thee till thought is blind,
> Yet can I gulp a bumper to thy name—
> O, smile among the shades, for this is fame!

As in the previous sonnet, Keats confesses a failure of imagination, "Fancy is dead" (8). The opening line, "This mortal body of a thousand days," (1) signifies both the poet's awareness of his own mortality and his modest sense of his own smallness in comparison with Burns. In the first quatrain, Keats is an excited tourist and, at the same time, an enthusiastic admirer of Burns. Nevertheless he suddenly exclaims, "I cannot see,/ Fancy is dead." He explains in the letter accompanying the poem that thoughts of Burns's misery meant that he could not find "unmixed pleasure" in his visit. This failure is what most of the major critics of Keats have focused on. Sperry

points out the failure of "a process of imaginative transformation" in the sonnet[14], and Dickstein asserts, "the sonnet is really about Keats' inability to get a sonnet written."[15] Few, however, have discussed the thematic shift at the turn of the sonnet through which the poet attempts to reactivate his imagination.

By using strong verbs, "stamp," "ope," "think," and "gulp," in the sestet, Keats attempts to rehearse Burns's own experience in the cottage, suggesting a recovery of poetic energy, even though the sonnet seems to end with a cynical dismissal of any ambition to win poetic fame. In this substantial effort, we cannot find signs of emotional depression or concern about mortality, Keats had explored the distance between his own mortality and the immortality of art in his earlier sonnet 'When I have fears that I may cease to be'. Yet, in the present sonnet, the poet recognises that the immortality and fame that Burns had achieved had been secured only by his own death. Overall the sonnet is not so much about "Keats's inability," rather it is about his ability to cope with the provisional inability. In the sonnets that he went on to write, Keats seems to recover his poetic confidence not by denying but by accepting uncertainty and limitations.

[14] *Keats the Poet*, p.146.
[15] *Keats and His Poetry*, p.176.

The Interpretation of Uncertainties and Mutability

In contrast to the sonnets on Burns, Keats was satisfied with 'To Ailsa Rock': 'This is the only Sonnet of any worth I have of late written.' (*L* i 330) In this sonnet, the poet produces a sublime image of Ailsa Rock that he first saw on July 9, as he was walking from Cairn to Ballantrae. Even on the next day when he walked from Ballantrae to Girvan he could still see the rock raising, its summit rising 940 feet above the sea. During the night he spent at Girvan, Keats recorded the impression in the following sonnet:

> Hearken, thou craggy ocean pyramid!
> Give answer from thy voice, the sea-fowls' screams!
> When were thy shoulders mantled in huge streams?
> When from the sun was thy broad forehead hid?
> How long is it since the mighty power bid
> Thee heave to airy sleep from fathom dreams—
> Sleep in the lap of thunder or sunbeams,
> Or when grey clouds are thy cold coverlid?
> Thou answer'st not, for thou art dead asleep.
> Thy life is but two dead eternities—
> The last in air, the former in the deep,
> First with the whales, last with the eagle-skies.
> Drowned wast thou till an earthquake made thee steep,
> Another cannot wake thy giant size.

The poet's impression of the sublimity of Ailsa rock is expressed in a steady iambic pentameter that makes little use of run-on lines and caesurae. The sonnet maintains a clear distinction between quatrains, and the standard Petrarchan octave-sestet division. The octave offers an impression of Ailsa Craig, and the sestet makes general reflections on the experience. The octave-sestet division also indicates the irreducible gap between the eternal and the temporal. A series of interrogative sentences in the octave

focus on the long ages since the rock was first raised from the sea. However, in the sestet, which begins with the turn, "thou answer'st not", the poet admits the distance between himself and the rock's eternity, and confesses his inability to fathom it. Instead, he sees the rock as suspended between two eternities:

> Thy life is but two dead eternities—
> The last in air, the former in the deep,
> First with the whales, last with the eagle-skies.
> Drowned wast thou till an earthquake made thee steep,
> Another cannot wake thy giant size. (10-14)

Keats imagines that the rock was raised out of the sea by an earthquake, but its two existences, "with the eagle-skies" and "with the whales", although they seem antithetical, are in fact similar. Both are "dead". Not even another earthquake would have the power to "wake" the Rock. The real contrast is presumably between the dead Rock and the living mind of the poet who reflects upon it.

In the last sonnet written during the walking tour, 'Read me a lesson, Muse, and speak it loud', Keats acknowledges uncertainties in external reality and in his own existence. On August 1 Keats walked to Fort William, and on the next day he climbed Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in Britain. He wrote the sonnet on the top of the mountain, and copied it in a letter to Tom on August 3:

> Read me a lesson, Muse, and speak it loud

Upon the top of Nevis, blind in mist!
I look into the chasms, and a shroud
Vaporous doth hide them; just so much I wist
Mankind do know of Hell. I look o'erhead
And there is sullen mist; even so much
Mankind can tell of heaven. Mist is spread
Before the earth beneath me; even such,
Even so vague is man's sight of himself.
Here are the craggy stones beneath my feet—
Thus much I know, that, a poor witless elf,
I tread on them, that all my eye doth meet
Is mist and crag, not only on this height,
But in the world of thought and mental might.

The sonnet takes as its primary metaphor the "sullen mist" that engulfed Keats on its summit, completely obscuring the view. Sperry reads the "sullen mist" as an indication of the poet's depression, insisting that we cannot see in the sonnet "the promise of a deepening vision" but an "oppressive, even purgatorial" tone.[16] In his reading of the sonnet, Sperry, however, did not take account of the poetic gesture that Keats made by insisting on writing his sonnet so near the precipice. His posture was recorded by Brown:

> When on the summit of this mountain, we were enveloped in a cloud, and waiting till it was slowly wafted away, he sat on the stones a few feet from the edge of that fearful precipice, fifteen hundred feet perpendicular from the valley below, and wrote this sonnet. (*KC* ii 63)

He flamboyantly adopts the posture of a poet not at all overwhelmed by the mist in which he is engulfed or the "fifteen hundred feet perpendicular"

[16] *Keats the Poet*, p.133.

precipice directly in front of him. Rather, he confronts disinterestedly the uncertainty and the danger around him.

In his famous simile of the "Mansion of Many Apartments,' Keats describes the development of an individual from infancy to the point at which he recognizes that "the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression." In the final stage of this development, "We see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist" (*L* i 281). The "Mist", as he goes on to make clear, offers not an obstacle but a challenge: "Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them". It seems reasonable to suggest that his experience on the summit of the mountain, engulfed in "sullen Mist" might have prompted similar speculations. Read in this way, the sonnet emphasises not so much the uncertainty of the human world as man's existential power to overcome his problems, which is the "lesson" that Keats intends to find from the outset of the poem.

Although he maintains the Shakespearean rhyme-scheme, the poet blurs the traditional quatrain-couplet division by employing seven run-on lines and five caesurae, devices used far less frequently in Keats's earlier Shakespearean sonnets. The formal variation allows the poet to develop his narrative, freeing himself from the sonnet's formal restrictions. For instance, none of the four formal units into which the sonnet coincides with a unit of sense.

The sonnet's "octave" which ends in flow of the poet's speculation changes within just two or three lines of the poem. For instance, the first part of the sonnet, which lasts until the middle of the eighth line, describes the mist he experienced during the climbing of Ben Nevis. The lines from the third to the seventh, picture the poet, in the middle of the climb, looking down into the chasm and up at the mountain top through the mist: "I look into the chasms"(3) and "I look o'erhead"(5). Then, in the sonnet's final lines, the poet turns from the mist outside to the uncertainty encountered in the human world and in himself. He realises that uncertainty is the inevitable condition of human experience, and that nevertheless, the speculating "I", treading on "the craggy stones" (10) in the middle of the mist, is the one thing that is certain in the world.

It is useful to compare Keats's procedure in the sonnet with Wordsworth's. In 'Lines written a few miles above Tintern Abbey', the physical landscape melts almost imperceptibly into a landscape of the mind:

> Do I behold these steep and lofty cliffs,
> Which on a wild secluded scene impress
> Thoughts of more deep seclusion... (5-7)

Wordsworth associates the sublime with an experience of heightened clarity:

> ...that blessed mood,
> In which the burthen of the mystery,
> In which the heavy and the weary weight

Of all this unintelligible world
Is lightened: (38-42)

He goes on to claim that in such moods "We see into the life of things." (50) Although, for Wordsworth, suffering and sorrow are necessary aspects of experience, he finds ample compensation in the experience of nature. On the summit of Ben Nevis, Keats seems, like Wordsworth intent on eliciting "a lesson" from his encounter with the sublime. However, he finds that it works only to awaken him to problems and limitations. The "sullen mist" (6) and "craggy stones" (10) remind the poet of the indeterminacy apparent both in external reality and in the inward world of the self. Nevertheless, the dignity of the sonnet lies in the representation of a mode of existence which knows its own limitations and acts upon them.

In his earlier work Keats had made his own poetic development a central theme of his poetry. In 'Sleep and Poetry', for instance, he charts a development from the poetry of sensuousness and luxury in the state of "Flora and old Pan," to the poetry of "the agonies, the strife/ Of human hearts" (124-5). *Endymion* also traces a poetic journey from the poetry of luxury to that of humanity, as Endymion moves from the ideal love of Cynthia to the earthly love of the Indian Maid. The walking tour in the summer of 1818 was a real rather than a symbolic journey: Keats walked 642 miles through Northern England, Ireland and Scotland. The poet's persistent preoccupation with the nature of poetry and life, which had

produced the idea of "Negative Capability", preoccupied him during the walking tour.

He was testing his poetic ability to transform his direct experience of sublime nature into poetry. The sonnets often employ language of disillusionment and despair, and may suggest that Keats was suffering from depression. However in confronting these moods Keats arrives at an affirmation of the vitality of his own consciousness that may persuade us that the ambition that he set himself before setting out on the tour was in the end realised, however unexpected and paradoxical its realization may have been: "I will clamber through the Clouds and exist." (*L* i 264).

CHAPTER VI

The Negatively Capable Sonnet: Keats's Experimental Sonnets in 1819

By 22 January 1818, Keats had written forty-two Petrarchan sonnets. Many of his early sonnets between 1816 and 1817 confirm the influence of Leigh Hunt, who had also practised the Italian sonnet form writing some forty sonnets after his first published sonnet, 'Quiet Evenings' (February 14, 1813). The subject-matter and the style of Hunt's sonnets are echoed in Keats's sonnets. They often wrote on the same theme, both writing sonnets on Haydon, the Polish patriot, Kosciusko, a grasshopper, a cricket, the River Nile, and the memory of exchanging ivy and laurel crowns. In the sonnets of both, enjambment often blurs the division between quatrains, but they faithfully maintain the conventional octave-sestet division. Unlike Hunt, however, Keats in his sonnets repeatedly reflects on his poetic identity and the business of composition.

After January 1818, when Keats turned to the Shakespearean sonnet form, he abandoned the bipartite Petrarchan form. In his Shakespearean sonnets, Keats often focuses on his own imaginative frustrations. 'When I have fears that I may cease to be' (January 1818) and 'Read me a lesson, Muse, and speak it loud' (August 1818) in particular reveal a paradoxical kind of self-assertion that Keats arrives at

through an acknowledgement of his own uncertainties. They employ a Keatsian rhetoric in which a self-making process is mapped through self-emptying and self-regaining movements, whereby the poet first questions and then transcends the problem of self. The mode of "Negative Capability" is deployed more apparently in his later sonnets, and it is what gives the sonnets their underlying energy. However, when the tour of Scotland was suddenly suspended due to his ill health, so was the composition of sonnets He wrote no more sonnets until the spring of 1819.

By August 1818, Keats had written fifty-five sonnets. He resumed sonnet composition in the spring of 1819, writing seven sonnets between March and April. Thereafter he was to write only three sonnets between October and November 1819. Keats's three experimental sonnets ('To Sleep', 'How fevered is the man who cannot look' and 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chained') are amongst the group of sonnets written in the spring, and they have been considered as anticipating Keats's abandonment of the sonnet.

These sonnets demonstrate in a much clearer way the poet's aesthetic response to the distance between his poetic ideal and reality. The agonising awareness of his mortality, that had a year earlier informed "When I have fears that I may cease to be," is now transformed into a

mature attitude of acceptance. The poet's acknowledgement of his limitations, whereby he re-defines the conditions of life and his poetry, becomes the main thematic frame of his sonnets of early 1819. For example, 'Why did I laugh to-night?' is a kind of introductory sonnet to Keats's coherent poetic maturity in early 1819, which represents a Keatsian mode of existence that derives its fullness from its overtly articulated indeterminacy and emptiness. In his three experimental sonnets, Keats more confidently claims the power of his poetic identity to operate upon the external world while understanding its own constraints. The experimental sonnets suggest not only Keats's mastery of the sonnet form but also the coherent maturity of the poet's view of the human world and himself.

Keats's experimental sonnets have been represented as expressing his dissatisfaction with the sonnet. W. J. Bate, for instance, comments:

> The later sonnet of Keats, however, was at best an incidental and occasional form...And Keats's distinctive excellence as a lyrist lies far less in his sonnets than in that lyrical form for which, in the late spring of 1819, he abandoned the sonnet.[1]

In addition, two recent critics of the nineteenth-century English sonnet, Jennifer Ann Wagner and Joseph Phelan, have suggested that the weakness of these poems derives from an impatience with the formal constraints of

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[1] W. J. Bate, *The Stylistic Development of Keats* (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), p.125.

the sonnet that found its positive expression in the odes of 1819. Wagner, for example, insists that "the new ode form was an effort to escape the constraints of the sonnet form."[2]

The primary argument of this chapter, however, is to demonstrate that Keats's experimental sonnets were a significant arena in which he expressed his mature poetics, rather than implying his dissatisfaction with the sonnet form. The Keatsian mode of subjectivity—which understands the negatively capable self as able to reconcile the conflicting elements not only in his experience, but also in external reality—is represented more confidently in the poet's experimental sonnets than critics have recognised.

"Death is Life's high meed": Keats's Response to the Problem of Pain

Between March and April 1819, Keats wrote six sonnets: three Shakespearean and three experimental. The first sonnet of the six, 'Why did I laugh to-night', not only gives the tenor of all six sonnets but also indicates his changed attitude towards poetry Keats introduces the sonnet in a journal letter to the Keatses in America:

> I am ever afraid that your anxiety for me will lead you to fear for the violence of my temperament continually smothered down: for that reason I did not intend to have sent you the following sonnet—but look over the two last pages and ask yourselves whether I have not that in me

[2] *A Moment's Monument*, p.109.

> which will well bear the buffets of the world. It will be the best comment on my sonnet...it was written with no Agony but that of ignorance; with no thirst of any thing but knowledge when pushed to the point thoug[h] the first steps to it were through my human passions—they went away, and I wrote with my Mind—and perhaps I must confess a little bit of my heart... (*L* ii 81)

Then he immediately copied the sonnet:

> Why did I laugh to-night? No voice will tell;
> No God, no Demon of severe response,
> Deigns to reply from Heaven or from Hell.
> Then to my human heart I turn at once—
> Heart, thou and I are here sad and alone;
> Say wherefore did I laugh? Oh, mortal pain!
> Oh, darkness, darkness! Ever must I moan,
> To question Heaven and Hell and Heart in vain!
> Why did I laugh? I know this being's lease
> My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads;
> Yet could I on this very midnight cease,
> And the world's gaudy ensigns see in shreds.
> Verse, fame, and beauty are intense indeed,
> But Death's intenser—Death is Life's high meed.

The sonnet follows faithfully the conventional division of the Shakespearean form with its rhyme-scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG, and it includes one of the characteristic features of the Shakespearean sonnet, the repetition of a phrase, "why did I laugh", in each quatrain. However, the atmosphere of the sonnet is much darker and sadder than Shakespeare's sonnets, and the perspective, defined in the phrase "sad and alone" (5), is hardly found in the sonnets of Shakespeare. The elegiac tone of the sonnet is rather similar to late-eighteenth-century Shakespearean sonnets, as written for example by Charlotte Smith. Nevertheless the energy in the enigmatic statement, "Verse, fame, and

beauty are intense indeed,/ But Death's intenser—Death is Life's high meed,"(13-4) is the Keatsian signature that explains the poet's understanding of the contradictory condition of man.

Keats insists in the letter that he is capable of coping with "the buffets of the world", and suggests that this belief is the thematic basis of the sonnet. In the "two last pages" of the letter, Keats expresses his understanding of the human world which is inseparable from pain and sorrow:

> This is the world...Circumstances are like Clouds continually gathering and bursting—While we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into <he> the wide arable land of events—while we are laughing it sprouts it grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck. (*L* ii 79)

Then, he continues to point out the "disinterestedness of mind"(*L* ii 79) of Jesus and Socrates, the lack of the disinterestedness of common men including Keats himself, and the passion and purity of human nature by quoting Wordsworth's 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', "we have all one human heart" (*L* ii 80). Keats, in other words, highlights the strength of the human mind to cope with an unsympathetic world, something he also emphasises in his sonnet.

Despite the sonnet's gloomy atmosphere and its reference to death in the sestet, this poem is an illustration of Keats's introspective reflection

on life and on his own inward strength. In the first three quatrains, the poet asks a question that is not answered directly throughout the poem, "Why did I laugh to-night?" The poet wonders how was it possible for him, "sad and alone", to contrive a laughter expressive of joy and happiness. In search of an answer, he first turns to the supernatural in the realms of heaven and hell (2-3), and then to his "human heart" (4). Keats, however, has no response from them: "Ever must I moan,/ To question Heaven and Hell and Heart in vain! (7-8)

The sestet, consequently, represents the poet's willingness to accept death as the solution for his depression. The poet seemingly supposes that by his own death he can terminate his sadness and loneliness as well as his own limitations so that he will not be disturbed by the world's ephemeral values, "the world's gaudy ensigns" (11). In the conclusion of the poem, however, Keats implies that the death that he refers to does not mean the termination of his life. Rather, his acceptance of death signifies his acceptance of his own mortality as an element of life and his poetry.

> Verse, fame, and beauty are intense indeed,
> But Death's intenser – Death is Life's high meed. (13-14)

"Verse, fame, and beauty" were what Keats persistently pursued, and at the same time what troubled him most. In his sonnets, written after the Elgin Marble sonnet (March 1817), Keats had been conscious of the distance between his mortal self and ideal poetry, and this concern repeatedly disturbed the poet's mind. Here, however, the poet's

acceptance of death and mortality offers a solution for his troubled mind. As John Middleton Murry suggests, "to accept death is to accept life; it is to accept the whole of one's mortal destiny."[3] The concluding couplet, thus, gives a sense of relief to the poet who has managed no explanation for his unexpected laughter.

The sonnet is about mortality and death. This is the reason why Keats was concerned, before copying the sonnet in the letter quoted above, that his brother, George, would be troubled by it and its reference to death: "I am ever afraid that your anxiety for me will lead you to fear for the violence of my temperament continually smothered down: for that reason I did not intend to have sent you the following sonnet." Robert M. Ryan, in *Keats: The Religious Sense*, considers death, to which the poet is about to incline in the "very midnight" (11), as an easy but poisonous resolution for the poet that promises an end to all his sufferings and even an unanswer to his unanswered question, "Why did I laugh?"[4]

However, death in the conclusion of the sonnet is not separated from life. In the poem's final line, "Death's intenser – Death is Life's high meed", the poet suggests that his understanding of mortality is closely connected with his understanding of beauty and poetry. Thus, the

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[3] John Middleton Murry, *Keats and Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 126.

[4] *Keats: The Religious Sense,* pp.194-195

seemingly causeless laughter in the sonnet is the external manifestation of the poet's belief that he has achieved an internal strength and confidence which free him from the burden of poetic anxiety, "verse, fame, and beauty". This perception became Keats's dominant subject in the sonnets and odes of early 1819.

The Three Experimental Sonnets

Keats's experimental sonnets ('To Sleep', 'How fevered is the man...' and 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chained') are copied at the end of the journal letter to the Keatses in America written between 14 February and 30 April 1819. They reflect his progress both in his understanding of poetry and in sonnet writing. Keats transcribed two sonnets on the subject of fame, one of which is an experimental sonnet, and another experimental sonnet 'To Sleep' on 30 April. He copied the last experimental sonnet, 'If by dull rhymes...', on "the third of May". The actual compositional order, however, can only be guessed at. Before copying the two sonnets on fame, Keats mentions that:

> Brown has been here rummaging up some of my old sins—that is to say sonnets. I do not think you remember them, so I will copy them out as well as two or three lately written—I have just written one on Fame which Brown is transcribing and he has his book and mine. I must employ myself perhaps in a sonnet on the same subject: (*L* ii 104)

The sonnet that he transcribes after the comment, referred to as "a sonnet on the same subject", is a sonnet on fame, 'How fever'd is the man'. Thus, the sonnet "which Brown is transcribing" would be 'Fame like a wayward girl will still be coy'. For this reason, 'To Sleep' is presumably one of the "two or three lately written". That 'If by dull rhymes…' was written last is suggested by the poem's rhyme scheme. The first experimental sonnet, 'To Sleep' (ABAB CDCD BCEFEF), for instance, still includes three Shakespearean quatrains (EFEF), even if the third occupies lines eleven to fourteen. The rhyme scheme of the following experimental sonnet (ABAB CDCD EFEGGF), which avoids a third quatrain, suggests an experiment still incomplete. 'If by dull rhymes…'(ABCA BDCA BCDEDE), bears no trace either of the Shakespearean or the Petrarchan model, suggesting that it is the last of the three experimental sonnets.

Of Keats's contemporaries, Coleridge also produced a number of experimental sonnets. Quite similar to Keats's two experimental sonnets, 'To Sleep' (ABAB CDCD BCEFEF), and 'On Fame' (ABAB CDCD EFEGGF), Coleridge also wrote an experimental sonnet with two alternating quatrains followed by an experimental sestet in, *Effusion IV* (ABAB BCBC DEDFEF). However, Coleridge's experiment stems from his belief that the Petrarchan sonnet was ill-suited to the peculiarities of the English language, as he reveals in *Introduction to the Sonnets*:

Now, if there be one species of composition more difficult

> and artificial than another, it is an English Sonnet on the Italian Model. Adapted to the agitations of a real passion! Express momentary bursts of feeling in it![5]

Under the influence of Milton and Bowles, Coleridge occasionally blurred the conventional octave-sestet division in order to establish the unified tone appropriate to "momentary bursts of feeling".

Keats's experiment, however, was based on the Shakespearean sonnet form, which he had practised since January 1818. In his experimental sonnets, 'To Sleep' and 'How fever'd is the man...', he experiments primarily with the sestet, preserving the first two Shakespearean quatrains. Keats finishes 'To Sleep' with a Shakespearean quatrain, and initially he intended to finish 'How fever'd is the man...' with a Petrarchan quatrain by making the fourteenth line rhyme with the eleventh. In the sonnets, by blurring the formal division between the quatrain and the couplet, the poet could avoid the couplet's epigrammatic function and effect a thematic unity in the sestet. The overall result of this formal organization is to achieve the rhetorical thrust of a Petrarchan octave-sestet division, while maintaining the prosodic freedom of the Shakespearean sonnet form.

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[5] *Poetical Works*, vol.1, p.1206.

Keats begins his first experimental sonnet, 'To Sleep' (April 1819), with two Shakespearean quatrains, in which he establishes an elegiac mood:

> O soft embalmer of the still midnight,
> Shutting with careful fingers and benign
> Our gloom-pleased eyes, embowered from the light,
> Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:
> O soothest Sleep! If so it please thee, close,
> In midst of this thine hymn, my willing eyes,
> Or wait the 'Amen', ere thy poppy throws
> Around my bed its lulling charities.
> Then save me, or the passèd day will shine
> Upon my pillow, breeding many woes;
> Save me from curious conscience, that still hoards
> Its strength for darkness, burrowing like a mole;
> Turn the key deftly in the oilèd wards,
> And seal the hushèd casket of my soul.

Despite the experimental rhyme-scheme, the sonnet still preserves the structural frame of the Shakespearean sonnet, which makes it possible to divide the fourteen lines into 4+4+4+2. Indeed, the twelve-line original draft written on a flyleaf of his copy of *Paradise Lost* that he gave to Mrs. Dilke suggests that Keats had set out to write a standard Shakespearean sonnet. The draft varies from the completed copy of the sonnet above in lines four, six, eight, and between nine and twelve:

> O soft embalmer of the still midnight,
> Shutting with careful fingers and benign
> Our gloom-pleased eyes, embowered from the light,
> As wearisome as darkness is divine:
> O soothest Sleep! If so it please thee, close,
> My willing eyes in midst of this thine hymn
> Or wait the 'Amen', ere thy poppy throws
> Its sweet-death dews o'er every pulse and limb.

Then shut the hushed Casket of my soul
   And turn the key round in the oiled wards
And let it rest until the morn has stole
   Bright tressed from the grey east's shuddering bourn...

Here, Keats stopped the poem leaving the twelfth line unrhymed. The alterations he makes improve the quality of sound and the effectiveness of the narrative. Keats substitutes the rhyming words, "eyes", and "charities" for "hymn" and "limb" so that the end rhyme of the second quatrain carries the sound of "z". This matches the sound pattern of the first quatrain, in which the rhyming words, "midnight", "benign", "light" and "divine" are alternating and at the same time they all have the same double vowel, "ai".

The decision to change the rhyme-scheme of the third Shakespearean quatrain, EFEF, into BCEF has something to do with the phonetic features of the previous two quatrains. The reader's expectation of a third quatrain is delayed by the insertion of two lines BC in lines nine and ten, and then the EFEF rhyme appears between the eleventh and fourteenth lines. Despite the irregular rhyme scheme, lines nine to twelve of the sonnet preserve some of the syntactic features common in the Shakespearean quatrain. The effect is that the final six lines of the sonnet function as a unified sestet, both formally and thematically. Consequently the contrasting features of sound and sense allow us to divide this sonnet into the Petrarchan division of a quatrain and a sestet; 8+6.

'To Sleep' seemingly describes a troubled soul seeking to escape from the agonizing conditions of reality. However, the poet's wish to be confined in his "hushèd casket" (14) can be seen as a deliberate emphasis on the independence of his mind rather than as an expression of sadness or escapism. The depressed tone in Keats's sonnet certainly echoes the melancholic atmosphere of Charlotte Smith's sonnet, *To Sleep*:

> Come, balmy Sleep! tired Nature's soft resort!
> On these sad temples all thy poppies shed;
> And bid gay dreams, from Morpheus's airy court,
> Float in light vision round my aching head!
>
> But still thy opiate aid does thou deny
> To calm the anxious breast; to close the streaming eye.
>
> (1-4, 13-14)

In Smith's sonnet, the elegiac tone is maintained throughout the poem, and the depressed speaker's urgent request for "balmy Sleep" is not fulfilled until the end of the sonnet, because the power of sleep will still "deny/ To calm the anxious breast" of the poet. The whole sonnet is pervaded by the single emotion of melancholy.

Keats's sonnet, however, does not express overpowering grief. Although the poet desires an escape from consciousness—"Turn the key deftly in the oilèd wards,/ And seal the hushèd casket of my soul"—this does not suggest a complete retreat from troublesome reality. The reference to the "the hushèd casket of my soul" rather indicates his belief in the

independence and inwardness of his mind. In addition, by representing a thematic closure, wherein the poet wishes to be sealed in a casket of his soul, in the concluding quatrain, which breaks the formal closure of the conventional sonnet, Keats attains an intensity of expression that overcomes a merely melancholic atmosphere.

Although it is unlikely that Keats thoughts of the three sonnets as articulating a single argument, they have in common a strong interest in the human mind. Just as 'To Sleep' emphasises the strength of the inwardness of the poet's mind, the next experimental sonnet, 'How fevered is the man who cannot look', underlines the naturalness of the mind that maintains its own identity, thus giving release from self-destructive concern about mortality:

> How fevered 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:
> It is as if the rose should pluck herself,
> Or the ripe plum finger its misty bloom,
> As if a Naiad, like a meddling elf,
> Should darken her pure grot with muddy gloom;
> But the rose leaves herself upon the briar,
> For winds to kiss and grateful bees to feed,
> And the ripe plum still wears its dim attire,
> The undisturbèd lake has crystal space.
> Why then should man, teasing the world for grace,
> Spoil his salvation for a fierce miscreed?

In the poem's sestet, a couplet intrudes into a quatrain rather than, as in the preceding sonnet, introducing it, with the effect that the tenth line

introduces a rhyming expectation that it not fulfilled until the end of the poem.

The proverb that Keats places before the sonnet, "*You cannot eat your cake and have it too*", suggests, as in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', that perpetual expectation can be secured only in the absence of fulfilment, but expresses the thought with a rough, proverbial common sense. Keats, about a month before, had remarked "Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced—Even a Proverb is no proverb to you till your Life has illustrated it." (*L* ii 81) In this respect, the fact that he quotes a proverb as an epigraph to the second experimental sonnet implies that he has confirmed its truth by personal experience.

The sonnet is about mortality and the poet's response to that mortality. John Jones, in *John Keats's Dream of Truth*, identifies "the man" with "Everyman", because consciousness of mortality is "a fact of our humanity"[6]. It can be also said that what Keats tells us in the sonnet is what his "Life has illustrated", so that it may not be improper to associate "the man" with Keats himself. He had, after all, in the sonnet on visiting Burns's cottage spoken of "this mortal body of a thousand days"(1). The second and third quatrains identify self-destructiveness as a distinctively human characteristic that cannot be paralleled in the rest of

[6] John Jones, *John Keats's Dream of Truth* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), pp.265-266.

nature. In nature, he points out in the third quatrain, objects preserve their own identities, and he wonders in the poem's final lines why man should not do likewise.

The sonnet's emphasis on the autonomous and natural existence of man, transcending the morbid preoccupation with fame and poetry, is reflected in his long journal letter to the Keatses, written on 30 April, nine days before he wrote this sonnet. In the letter, Keats had written of the need to accept one's own mortality and limitations. First, he describes a natural object that maintains its own identity despite the disturbances to which it is subject:

> For instance suppose a rose to have sensation, it blooms on a beautiful morning it enjoys itself—but there comes a cold wind, a hot sun—it can not escape it, it cannot destroy its annoyances—they are as native to the world as itself: no more can man be happy in spite, the world[l]y elements will prey upon his nature... (*L* ii 101)

His view of the independence and naturalness of the identity of a natural object is applied to his understanding of the nature of man's identity. That is, the poet suggests that in a circumstance in which pains are "native to the world", we need to focus on the naturalness of our own existence. Furthermore, by representing the world as a "vale of Soul-making" Keats justifies pain and sorrow as contributions to personal development: "Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?" (*L* ii 102)

The poet's persistent emphasis on the naturalness and the strength of the mind in relation to the limitations of reality, is expressed through his decision to use the sonnet form without being chained by its formal regulations. In the last few pages of the journal letter, Keats copied two sonnets on the same subject, then, after copying 'To Sleep', the poet transcribed 'Ode to Psyche'. Immediately after the ode, Keats copied his last experimental sonnet with a short comment on his dissatisfaction with the two traditional sonnet forms:

> I have been endeavouring to discover a better Sonnet Stanza than we have. The legitimate does not suit the language over-well from the pouncing rhyme—the other kind appears too elegiac—and the couplet at the end of it has seldom a pleasing effect—I do not pretend to have succeeded—it will explain itself.
>
> (*L* ii 108)

> If by dull rhymes our English must be chained,
> And, like Andromeda, the Sonnet sweet
> Fettered, in spite of painèd loveliness,
> Let us find out, if we must be constrained,
> Sandals more interwoven and complete
> To fit the naked foot of Poesy.
> Let us inspect the lyre, and weigh the stress
> Of every chord, and see what may be gained
> By ear industrious, and attention meet;
> Misers of sound and syllable, no less
> Than Midas of his coinage, let us be
> Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown;
> So, if we may not let the Muse be free,
> She will be bound with garlands of her own.

In his comment, Keats first points out the difficulty of writing Petrarchan sonnets in English. The Petrarchan octave, which uses only two rhymes, is far simpler in Italian, which has - as Coleridge once noticed - "a sameness in the final sound of its words." [7] In addition, Keats expresses his dissatisfaction with the Shakespearean sonnet, the tone of which, as in the sonnets of Charlotte Smith, is too often monotonously elegiac. He finds the couplet at the end of the sonnet awkward because it is not formally integrated with the poem that it concludes.

The two preceding experimental sonnets reflect these principles. In both sonnets, for instance, he enjoys the prosodic freedom of the Shakespearean sonnet in the first two quatrains, and eliminates the epigrammatic effect of the final couplet by blurring the quatrain-couplet division to produce the effect of a sestet. The final experimental sonnet is a more complete realization of these principles. The rhyme scheme of this sonnet, ABCABDCA BCDEDE, avoids both "the pouncing rhyme" of the Petrarchan sonnet, and the detachable couplet that ends the Shakespearean sonnet.

The sonnet, however, still preserves a sense of regularity by the repetition of "let us" in lines four, seven and eleven, all three of which respond to the conditional clause with which the sonnet begins. The

[7] *Poetical Works*, vol.1, p.1206.

opening clause occupies the first three lines, after which three parallel main clauses each occupy three lines. Each main clause describes a particular way of finding new "Sandals"(5) for "the naked foot of poesy"(6). The syntactic and thematic divisions of the sonnet, thus, allow us to rearrange the rhyme-scheme into a series of four tercets followed by a distich (ABC ABD CAB CDE DE). The organization of sound, rhyme, phrase and syntax in the sonnet play against the formal divisions, so that the sonnet becomes "interwoven and complete".

Despite their irregularity, the first two experimental sonnets are based on the Shakespearean sonnet form. By merging the third Shakespearean quatrain and the concluding couplet, Keats arrives at a sestet that balances the sonnet's first two quatrains. The two sonnets use an experimental rhyme-scheme in their sestet: BCEFEF in 'To Sleep', and EFEGGF in 'How fever'd is the man'. In the last experimental sonnet, 'If by dull rhymes...', Keats dispenses with the syntactic restraints of the Shakespearean quatrain. He now attempts to contain each statement within the three lines of a tercet and to present the movement of his narrative through a combination of tercets. This modifies the conventional division of the Shakespearean sonnet, 4+4+4+2 into 3+3+3+3+2, an arrangement through which Keats achieves a more natural mode of expression, while maintaining a structural concision.

This sonnet is about finding an appropriate sonnet form, which is the unprecedented subject in his sonnet writing. The poet's effort in the two preceding sonnets to establish the thematic and formal independence of a sestet in a Shakespearean sonnet developed into a more complicated sonnet from which denies both the Shakespearean quatrain-couplet division and the Petrarchan octave-sestet division. Keats's preoccupation with freeing the sonnet form is echoed in the sonnet's theme where it is metaphorised as a masculine here, Perseus, freeing Andromeda. The masculine role he claims as saviour of a feminised poetry had been anticipated in a sonnet written about two weeks earlier, 'As Hermes once took to his feathers light', in which the poet takes up Hermes's role rescuing Io from Argus.

Susan J. Wolfson suggests, after pointing out the sonnet's allusion to Andromeda, that this gender division has something to do with Keats's feeling for Fanny Brawne:

> This mythology sets an alluring horizon for Keats's intent to have his way with a feminized poetic form, and suggests why he returned to sonnets to write of his psychomythia with Fanny Brawne.[8]

Although "Love" together with "Poetry" and "Ambition" made up the trinity to which Keats offered his devotion in March 1819, it was not the dominant force which drew him back to the sonnet. Considering the poet's

[8] Susan J. Wolfson, 'Late lyrics', in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.105.

preoccupation, shown in the experimental sonnets, with the naturalness of the mind as well as of the sonnet form, the allusion to Perseus's search is more closely connected with Keats's enthusiastic quest for a better poetic form. The poet's understanding of the voluntary and determined retreat into the mind ('To Sleep') and of man's autonomous and natural existence ('How fever'd is the man') now requires an appropriate engagement with poetry in 'If by dull rhyme...' The gender division in the sonnet, thus, reflects Keats's concern with his poetic identity and his role, and it is given more intense expression in 'Ode to Psyche' (April 1819) when the poet endeavours to rescue the goddess from neglect.

In the experimental sonnets, the sonnet's formal division no longer represents a conflict between self and others, or between experience and imagination. Complaints of creative failure, "Fancy is dead and drunken at its goal" (8) in 'This mortal body of a thousand days', and a concern that poetic achievement might itself prove empty, as in "When I have fears..." are not repeated in the sonnets. His belief in the stability of man's identity in a troubled reality preoccupied the poet in early 1819, and in the experimental sonnets he resolutely insisted on the freedom of his mind and his poetic self-confidence.

Nevertheless, Keats's career as a sonnet writer did not culminate in the experimental sonnets, but in the odes that he began to write

immediately afterwards. Although he could represent in the sonnets certain aspects of his negatively capable existence, the poet continued his search for a poetic form in which he could elaborate and intensify his mode of subjectivity. The ode form, which the poet began to practise immediately after the experimental sonnets between April and May 1819, offered him a greater opportunity to suggest the fullness and the completeness of his mode of subjectivity as well as to express its expansiveness.

The Sonnets and the Odes

Many studies such as H. W. Garrod, *Keats* (1926), M. R. Ridley, *Keats's Craftsmanship* (1933), and W. J. Bate, *The Stylistic Development of Keats* (1962), and *John Keats* (1979), agree that the stanzas of Keats's odes, including the irregular stanza of *Ode to Psyche*, developed from his practice in the sonnet form. Keats's anxiety for a disciplined poetic stanza, as Bate suggests in *The Stylistic Development of Keats*, drives him to develop the stanza forms of the odes, 'To a Nightingale', 'On Melancholy', 'On Indolence', and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' [9], which contain a Shakespearean quatrain (ABAB) followed by a Petrarchan sestet (CDECDE)[10]. More specifically, those critics have also commented on the

[9] Except the sestets of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' in the first and fifth stanza (CDEDCE), and the second stanza (CDECED).

[10] *The Stylistic Development of Keats*, pp.127-32.

formal connection between Keats's experimental sonnets and 'Ode to Psyche'. The rhyme-scheme of the first fourteen lines of the first stanza of the ode, for instance, ABAB CDCD EFGEEG, is similar to 'How fever'd is the man' (ABAB CDCD EFEGGF); and the fourteen lines from the beginning of the third stanza of the ode, ABAB CDCD EFGHGH, are reminiscent of 'To Sleep', (ABAB CDCD BCEFEF).

The similarity between the sonnets and the odes in form, the concurrence in the dates of their composition, and the small number of sonnets written by the poet after the spring of 1819, have been thought, most recently by Jennifer Ann Wagner and Joseph Phelan, to indicate Keats's dissatisfaction with the sonnet and to mark his final turn towards the ode, which offered him a more flexible stanza. Yet, Keats did not abandon the sonnet. Five months after the experimental sonnets, in October 1819, a date which in fact marks the virtual end of his poetic career, the poet returned to the sonnet. The gap of five months in his sonnet writing was not exceptional. It was eight months after 'On the Sea' (April 1817) before he wrote another sonnet ('Nebuchadnezzar's Dream', December 1817), and there is a gap of seven months between 'Read me a lesson...' (August 1818) and 'Why did I laugh tonight' (March 1819).

The sonnet's thematic concern with the nature of the human mind and the interest in constructing a better sonnet form remain evident in the

poet's odes of early 1819. For example, the paradoxical co-presence of mortality and immortality, which had been explored in 'To Sleep' and 'How fever'd is the man…', is central to the five odes of early 1819, in which Keats represents the perpetual conflict between ideal art ('Ode on a Grecian Urn'), or poetry ('Ode to a Nightingale') and the conditions of mortal experience ('Ode on Melancholy'). In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', although Keats sees the distance between the frozen figures of lovers on the urn, he realises that their passion will be unfading:

> Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
> Though winning near the goal – yet do not grieve:
> She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
> For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (17-20)

The poet's justification for human passion, though it is mortal, echoes his emphasis on the naturalness of individual identity in the mortal realm of reality, shown in 'How fever'd is the man…' In addition, Keats's search for a better poetic form in 'If by dull rhymes…' continues in 'Ode to Psyche' in which the attempt to construct a temple for Psyche is mirrored in the formal construction of the ode.

Keats's development of the ode from the sonnet can be compared to Shelley's. Although Shelley does not discuss the sonnet as Keats does, his practice of the form, like Keats's, is persistently experimental. In his seventeen sonnets, he experimented with both the Shakespearean and the Petrarchan sonnet. As in Keats's 'To Sleep', Shelley occasionally placed a couplet after the second quatrain so that a sonnet ends with a quatrain ('To

Wordsworth', and 'Translated from the Greek of Moschus'), and he wrote a reversed Petrarchan sonnet that starts with a sestet and ends with an octave, in 'Lift Not the Painted Veil'.

Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind', like Keats's odes, provides evidence that his ode stanzas were developed from the sonnet, in this case by amalgamating the sonnet and *terza rima*. Haworth notes how the two verse forms work together to produce the disciplined onrush of the poem:

> The tendency to perceive the poem as one breathless rush of non-stopped terza rima stanzas is restrained by recognition of the counter, sonnet, pattern. Terza rima, in fact, has no natural end; a poem written in this form can continue as long as the poet's ingenuity and interest hold out. Such a form is a particular temptation for Shelley, and in using the sonnet form he gains the discipline his poem needs.[11]

For instance, the first section of 'Ode to the West Wind' re-organises the rhetorical structure of the Shakespearean sonnet, built by three quatrains and a couplet, into the *terza rima* stanzas:

> O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
> Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
> Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeting,
>
> Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
> Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O, thou,
> Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed
>
> The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
> Each like a corpse within its grave, until

[11] Helen E. Haworth, '"Ode to the West Wind" and the Sonnet Form,' *Keats-Shelley Journal*, xx (1971), pp.76-77.

Thine azure sister of the spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)
With living hues and odors plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and preserver; hear, O hear![12]

The description of the west wind as a "destroyer" runs to the middle of the third stanza, and then the depiction of the spring wind continues to the end of the fourth stanza, followed by the concluding couplet that invokes the wind once again. Enjambment breaks the division between three of the tercets, blurring the distinction between the stormy autumnal wind and his spring sister. The rhetorical structure of the Shakespearean sonnet is used to restrain the forward momentum of the *terza rima*, and to stabilise the thematic movement of the ode. The speed of the *terza rima* stanza, for instance, is retarded by the pauses at lines 4 (after "red"), 8 and 12 (after "grave" and "hill" respectively), and this suggests the quatrain division of the Shakespearean sonnet form. Moreover the rhetorical structure of the ode falls into the three parts into which the Shakespearean sonnet is characteristically divided: the description of the destructive west wind (1-8); the opposing aspect of the spring wind (9-12); and then the final invocation to the west wind (13-14).

[12] *The Complete Poetical Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson and revised by G. M. Matthews (Oxford Standard Authors; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 577.

By maintaining the tension between the two different poetic forms throughout the ode, Shelley reveals the conflicting aspects of the west wind as "destroyer and preserver". Around the primary metaphor of the west wind, the poet develops his theme of destruction and rebirth in nature and in his existence:

> Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
> Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!
> And, by the incantation of this verse,
>
> Scatter, as from an unextinguished hearth
> Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
> Be through my lips to unawakened earth
>
> The trumpet of a prophecy! O, Wind,
> If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?[13]

In this last stanza, Shelley intensifies the metaphor of the west wind by identifying himself with "withered leaves". He exhorts the west wind to drive away his "dead thoughts" and turns his words into "the trumpet of a prophecy", in the same way that the west wind's power in the first stanza drives away the dead leaves in a forest and promises its new birth.

Richard Cronin points out that Shelley's paradoxical rhetoric in the ode is heightened by the combination of *terza rima* and the sonnet, saying that the ode

> attempts to hold together the contradictory notions of explosive energy and containment, a paradox that Shelley

[13] *Ibid*, p.579.

> achieves in the pun on 'Vaulted,' in a phrase like 'congregated might', but also in the poem's simultaneous use of two apparently antithetical verse forms, terza rima and the sonnet.[14]

That is, while the explosive energy of the west wind and the poet's desire for its power are aggrandised by the cumulative quality and the fast speed of *terza rima*, the rhetorical movement of the Shakespearean sonnet, which surges through quatrains and ebbs with a couplet, controls the flow of the ode's verves and thoughts.

Keats's move from the sonnet to the ode form has similarities with Shelley's. Like Shelley, Keats reorganises the rhetorical units of his last experimental sonnet, 'If by dull rhymes...', into a combination of four tercets and a couplet. He also employs the structural materials of the sonnet form in 'Ode to Psyche', and produces a refined ten-line ode stanza combining a Shakespearean quatrain and a Petrarchan sestet. In addition, Shelley's insight, in 'Ode to the West Wind', which understands the contradictory power of the wind that promises rebirth through its destructive energy, echoes Keats's preoccupation with the rhetoric of gaining his identity by accepting its limitations and emptiness, which is shown repeatedly in his sonnets and odes written in early 1819.

[14] Richard Cronin, *Shelley's Poetic Thoughts* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p.232.

Despite the similar qualities in the two poets' formal experimentation, there are, however, fundamental differences between them. First, there is a difference in their manner of approaching the power of poetic subjectivity. Shelley desires in the ode the fullness of his poetic identity by revivifying his "dead thoughts" through the paradoxical power of the west wind. Nevertheless, he does not focus on his own limitations or on the struggle for his poetic identity. Rather, the poet, in longing to be the wind's lyre, is enthralled by the power of the west wind, which has the power to renew his poetic subjectivity.

Unlike Shelley, in Keats's sonnets and odes, the presence of a sublime power often prompts a sense of mortality, and the poet establishes his identity by transcending this conflict. Through the articulation of emptiness and limitation, for instance, in 'When I have fears…', the poet concentrates on his own existence, "I stand alone and think/ Till love and fame to nothingness do sink" (13-14), which allays his anxiety that he might die before he has fulfilled his talent, emblematised as "the full ripened grain" (4), and "cloudy symbols of a high romance" (6).

Secondly, Keats's transition into the ode signifies the development of his poetics and his mastery of poetic form, whereas Shelley's employment of *terza rima* and the sonnet form in 'Ode to West Wind' is rather the poet's formal strategy for achieving a particular syntactic and

rhetorical movement, appropriate to represent the contradictory power of the west wind. Keats's preoccupation with the construction of a capable self, able to surpass its limitation and to claim its autonomous existence, is repeated in his sonnets. In his experimental sonnets, moreover, the poet demonstrates both the fullness of his introverted mind ('To Sleep' and 'How fever'd is the man...') and its movement towards an outer world in 'If by dull rhymes...' Similarly, in the experimental sonnets, in which the poet preserves and at the same time denies the sonnet's conventional divisions, Keats tests not only the sonnet form's self-sufficiency but also its elasticity.

It appears that the poet's preoccupation in the experimental sonnets with his poetic identity and with finding a better poetic form is also manifest in his 'Ode to Psyche'. In the ode, Keats highlights his perceiving mind in its engagement with poetic representation, and demonstrates the expansiveness of the sonnet form. Although Keats usually uses a ten-line stanza in his odes, the first ode in 1819, 'Ode to Psyche' is written in an irregular form, the stanzas of which vary in number of lines and rhyme-scheme. The irregularities of the ode form appear to emerge from the poet's efforts to find a better sonnet form in his experimental sonnets, and in fact the four stanzas of the ode are reminiscent of the sonnets. For instance, the first stanza is written in twenty-three lines with a rhyme-scheme of ABAB CDCD EFGEEGH IIJJ KIKI that incorporates three

Shakespearean quatrains and two couplets, much in the same way that he rearranges Shakespearean quatrains and couplets in his experimental sonnets. Then the twelve lines of the second stanza consist of three Shakespearean quatrains and the rhyme-scheme of the third quatrain of fourteen lines (ABAB CDDCEF GHGH) parallels that of 'To Sleep' (ABAB CDCD BCEFEF). The final stanza has four alternating-rhyme quatrains with a couplet, ABAB CDCD EE FGFG HIHI. Despite its apparent irregularity, the stanza form of the 'Ode to Psyche', is evidently developed from the sonnet.

The ode demonstrates an enclosing stanza form wherein an initial rhyme pattern is repeated at the end of the stanza, and the form of each individual stanza replicates the form of the entire ode. Helen Vendler defines the ode form as "a reduplication-shape" which underlines its mimetic function in the creative process:

> The task of the poet is defined in excessively simple terms: he is, in this instance, first to sketch the full presence of Psyche and her cult as they existed in the pagan past—that is, to show the locus of loss—and then to create by his art a new ritual and a new environment for the restored divinity.[15]

[15] *The Odes of John Keats*, p.47.

This process of restoration is formally echoed in what Vendler terms the ode's "reduplication-shape" where in the final lines of the second stanza (28-35),

> Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,
> Nor altar heaped with flowers;
> Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
> Upon the midnight hours—
> No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
> From chain-swung censer teeming;
> No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
> Of pale-mouthed prophet dreaming.

are repeated in the last lines of the third stanza (44-49),

> So let me be thy choir and make a make a moan
> Upon the midnight hours—
> Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
> From swingèd censer teeming;
> Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
> Of pale-mouthed prophet dreaming.

The ode's last stanza also adopts a mimetic form in which the couplet in the middle of the stanza becomes a symmetrical point between the first and last two quatrains:

> Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
> In some untrodden region of my mind,
> Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
> Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
> Far, far around shall those dark-clustered trees
> Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
> And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
> The moss-lain Dryads shall be lulled to sleep;
> And in the midst of this wide quietness
> A rosy sanctuary will I dress
> With the wreathed trellis of a working brain,
> With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,

With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
  Who breeding flowers will never breed the same:
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
  That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
 To let the warm Love in! (50-67)

Here, the stanza form becomes something that highlights, formally and thematically, the essence of the poet's poetic subjectivity. In the first two quatrains, Keats's expresses his dedication to Psyche, and builds an imaginary "fane" for the goddess around which "dark-clustered trees" cover the "wild-ridged mountains" and the various natural objects, "zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,/ The moss-lain Dryads", are merged into the same state of "sleep". The couplet, located in the middle of the stanza, places the poet at the centre of the invented fane, "a rosy sanctuary": "And in the midst of this wide quietness/ A rosy sanctuary will I dress" (58-59). The centred couplet implies that the power of the poet's perceiving mind is also at the core of the process of poetic representation. Then, as the running-on lines of the couplets engages with the last two quatrains, the formal and thematic emphasis on his poetic identity moves into its activity of attracting Psyche into his poetry: "a casement ope at night,/ To let the warm Love in!" (66-67)

The poet's search in his experimental sonnets for a poetic form "more interwoven and complete" reaches its climax in the ode. The poet's desire in the experimental sonnets to be perfectly enclosed in the "casket"

of his own mode of subjectivity and of the sonnet form; and at the same time to explore the expansiveness of the mind through an expansion of sonnet form, are answered in 'Ode to Psyche'. In the ode, Keats concentrates on his poetic existence and its engagement with artistic representation, and he tests not only an experimental ode form, but also the elasticity of the sonnet form.

Keats's other odes written in the spring of 1819 use a ten-line stanza, made up from a combination of the Shakespearean quatrain and the Petrarchan sestet. The ode form was developed our of the poet's experiments in the sonnets and 'Ode to Psyche'. Within a stanza, he establishes formal concision and thematic completeness by employing the structural fabric of the sonnet form; and in the sequence of stanzas the poet develops and deepens the theme of the ode. Moreover, in his last major ode 'To Autumn', written in September 1819, Keats challenged the completeness of his earlier ode stanzas. The ode resembles metrically the four odes written in the spring of the year, but Keats adds an additional line to the ten-line ode stanza. In the eleven-line stanza, the poet places a couplet just before the final line, as in the first stanza, ABABCDEDCCE, and the second and third, ABABCDECDDE. The stanza fails to end at the couplet, overflowing like the bees' cells into another line in a formal expression of the autumnal excess or surplus that the whole poem celebrates:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plum the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o'erbrimm'd their clammy cells. (1-11)

Autumnal ripeness is evident everywhere in the stanza: "mellow fruitfulness", "the maturing sun", "how to load and bless" and "to swell the gourd". In lines nine to eleven, the ripeness of the season becomes full to the point of overbrimming. The added eleventh line delays the formal closure to suggest the overbrimming fullness of autumn. That is, in its completeness, autumn has "still more". Autumn bewilders the bees with its "later flowers" until they think that the season will never end, "for summer has o'erbrimm'd their clammy cells".

Autumn is made to seem like a seamless extension of the summer. Nevertheless, it cannot escape from its own belatedness and decay, and from the emptiness and death of winter. The poet, consequently, inclines to a nostalgic attitude towards spring in the beginning of the last stanza:

Where are the songs of spring? Aye, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too—
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallow, borne aloft

Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. (23-33)

The poet, however, refers to the songs of spring only to return to the distinctive music of autumn. In the rest of the stanza, Keats pictures a natural landscape in which we hear the songs of "small gnats", "full-grown lambs", "hedge-crickets", the "red-breast" and "gathering swallows". In the autumnal scene, we have a slight tincture of death, mixed with the vividness of life, suggested by "the soft-dying day", "a wailful choir", "mourn" and "lives or dies". This reflects the belatedness and the inevitable closure of autumn and anticipates the coming of winter. The fullness of autumn and its songs are, however, sufficient for the moment. As the poet says, "think not of them, thou hast thy music too".

In 'To Autumn', Keats does not over-anxiously pursue fullness as he did in his juvenile sonnets, nor is the poem afflicted by the emptiness that often preoccupies him in his sonnets after 1818, especially in 'When I have fears that I may cease to be'. In the ode, the poet develops a mode that expects the continuance of its fullness. The ode also signifies the completion of his search for a better poetic form, which escapes the deadlock of the closure of the sonnet and the ode forms, as exemplified in his experimental sonnets and 'Ode to Psyche'.

Conclusion

Keats's persistent preoccupation in his sonnets with selfhood finds precedents in the revived sonnet tradition of the Romantic period. Such late eighteenth-century sonneteers as Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson and William Lisle Bowles intensified the introverted character of the sonnet by representing a suffering sonnet speaker, confronting his or her irreducible distance from others. The thematic distance was maximised when the poets expressed it by exploiting the bipartite sonnet form. By contrast, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Shelley preferred to represent the self of the sonnet as empowered. The Romantic poets challenged the bipartite structure of the sonnet, which they found constraining, by conducting experiments that allowed the sonnet to achieve a structural and thematic unity. The sonnet form became a means through which they registered a heightened self-consciousness whether expressed in meditations on the profound affinities between the self and nature, or on the contradictions between imagination and experience.

However, in many late eighteenth-century sonnets, self-consciousness issues only in sentimentality, as in the conclusion of Charlotte Smith's 'To the South Downs':

> Ah, no! –when all, e'en Hope's last ray is gone,
> There's no oblivion—but in death alone! (13-14)

It is difficult to find in the expression of sentimentality an emotional solution for the troubled self. In addition, although the Romantic poets acknowledged the possible use of the sonnet form to portray personal feelings and to intensify their interests in the visionary mode of the imagination and self, their sonnets often place their own belief under threat. Wordsworth's 'The world is too much with us', for example, records a failure of man's imagination and a lament for vision lost.

> The world is too much with us; late and soon,
> Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
> Little we see in Nature that is ours;
> We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon! (1-4)[1]

The material world of getting and spending threatens to produce a failure of imagination in which the self becomes alienated from its own fundamental nature.

Keats inherited the sentimental inclinations of the late eighteenth-century sonneteers and maintained their use of the sonnet's conventional bipartite structure.. He also adopted the Romantic sonnet's interest in the representations of the perceiving mind. Keats, however, also contributed to the revived sonnet tradition by introducing his distinctive perception of his poetic identity, which acknowledges at once its strong poetic enthusiasm and its limitations. In his mature sonnets, the poet embodies a capable self

[1] *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth* , p.18.

that is not overwhelmed by melancholia or by the Romantic's masculine austerity. This is the reason why one can detect in Keats's sonnets dignity and strength, despite their apparent expression of a sentimental atmosphere.

Keats found in the sonnet, as had other sonneteers, its ability to reify opposites: self and others, ideal and reality, and experience and composition. In the sonnet, however, the poet saw a chance to embody a possible answer to the conflicts by emphasising the significance of his poetic existence. In his Petrarchan sonnets, written before 1818, the sonnet's bipartite octave-sestet division often projects a thematic division between experience and the activity of the poet's own composition. Generally, they become a place in which the poet demonstrates his concern with the creative process of poetry. Keats's early sonnets before 1817 often represent the ease and pleasure that he takes in composition in which experience turns apparently effortlessly into poetry. However, in the subsequent sonnets up to early 1818, the octave-sestet division begins to signify the conflict between experience and poetry, and the sonnets often become representations of the emotional crisis of his selfhood and of the failure of his imagination.

After 1818, as he inclined to the Shakespearean sonnet, Keats seems tends to avoid the emphatic Petrarchan bipartite division in favour of a structure more consonant with his new aesthetic ideal, "Negative

Capability". Within the more flexible formal units of three quatrains and a couplet, the poet expresses his response to the problem of self and its conflict with others. As he moves to the Shakespearean sonnet, his sonnets become introspective and portray an inner landscape of self, confronting the uncertainty and limitations of reality. That is, his sonnets reflect his consciousness not so much of his own mortality as of his own identity itself.

Based on his understanding of the two traditional sonnet forms, Keats experimented with the sonnet in early 1819, introducing controlled irregularities in the sonnet form and a more developed theme, concerning the autonomy and the competence of his poetic existence. Keats's sonnet writing between 1814 and 1819, in which he makes a formal transition from the Petrachan through the Shakespearean to the experimental sonnet form, signifies not only the poet's mastery of the sonnet form, which was developed further into his ode form, but also the poet's achievement of a maturity that understands the limitations of his own reality and the reality of the human world.

'Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art', which was written in early 1819, reflects the maturity of the poet's mind.[2] The poem calmly accommodates contradictory elements, both eternity and mortality:

> Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art—
> Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
> And watching, with eternal lids apart,
> Like nature's patient, sleepless eremite,
> The moving waters at their priestlike task
> Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
> Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
> Of snow upon the mountains and the moors;
> No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
> Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening breast,
> To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
> 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 the poet follows the Shakespearean sonnet form, he still employs the Petrarchan thematic division between octave and sestet. In the division, he deploys his desires for eternity and for the experience of love in a mortal world. The poet wishes in the octave that he were as eternal as a "Bright star". There is nothing feverish, however, in his desire for eternity. The eternity of a star in the octave is employed in "watching" (3) or "gazing" (7) on the human world, not as a passive object to be pursued by the poet. Although he longs for eternity in the octave, the poet also reveals in the sestet his desire for an experience of love which involves physical satisfaction. He wishes to be "Pillowed upon my fair love's ripening

[2] This sonnet is titled 'Keats's Last Sonnet' by Milnes in his 1848 biography of Keats. However, Sidney Colvin has dated its composition to spring 1819 in his *John Keats; his Life and Poetry, his Friends, Critics and After-fame* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1917), pp. 493-494.

breast,/ To feel for ever its soft fall and swell" (10-11). In the final lines, he wishes to "live ever" (13) in love, but he also understands the ecstasy of love will eventually "swoon to death" (14).

Keats expresses in this sonnet how the pursuit of poetry is connected with his aspirations for the immortality of art and for the experience of human passion and love. It seems that in the poem Keats cannot have both of those elements, because there is still an irreducible distance between his self and eternity, and because mortal pleasure is by definition ephemeral. Nevertheless, he is not afflicted by his mortality, rather Keats implies that his two desires, for eternity and for love, are equally passionate and essential qualities in his search for poetry. This sonnet signifies that the poet has overcome the conflict between immortality and mortality.

Keats's mature transcendence of this conflict and of his own limitations is articulated in his letter to the George Keatses written on 21 September 1819:

> Some think I have lost that poetic ardour and fire 't is said I once had—the fact is perhaps I have: but instead of that I hope I shall substitute a more thoughtful and quiet power. I am more frequently, now, contented to read and think—but now & then, haunted with ambitious thoughts. Qui[e]ter in my pulse, improved in my digestion; exerting myself against vexing speculations—scarcely content to write the best verses for the fever they leave behind. I want to compose without this fever. I hope I one day shall.
>
> (*L* ii 209)

Here, he reveals a change in his poetics. The poet frees himself from "ambitious thoughts" and "vexing speculations" on the "best verses" that requires of him poetic perfection. Instead, he accepts his mortality and limitations and finds that this has deepened his pleasure in poetry.

Keats was twenty-three when he wrote this letter in 1819. The poet's rapid poetic development of his poetry is closely reflected in his sonnets. His early poetic confidence and idealism, an awareness of his limitation, and his response to reality are the primary concerns in his sonnets. Keats attempts to establish a viewpoint in his sonnets whereby he could frame the problems and conflicts within the disciplined form that the sonnet offered him. Thus, one might agree that Keats's wish, "I want to compose without this fever. I hope I one day shall", was fulfilled in his sonnets of early 1819.

To understand Keats's sonnets is to understand the development of the poet's mind. Keats's sonnets, as a whole, are akin to a poetic autobiography, in which the poet confronts and transcends his own limitations and mortality. Keats's sonnets, thus, lead us into the heart of his passion for poetry.

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