

The True Voice of John Keats

Author(s): Herbert Read

Source: *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (Spring, 1953), pp. 90-105

Published by: The Hudson Review, Inc

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3847239>

Accessed: 23-08-2019 10:33 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Hudson Review, Inc is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Hudson Review*

HERBERT READ

The True Voice of John Keats

KEATS CAME TO THE PROBLEM OF POETIC FORM without any of the philosophical equipment of either Coleridge or Wordsworth: came to it and came nearer to solving it in terms of conscious poetic technique. To such a statement I would like to add this preliminary qualification: when we accuse Keats of a lack of philosophical equipment we are not expressing a qualitative judgment. Keats had something infinitely more rare and precious than a trained discursive faculty—something which we must be content to call innate wisdom. Wisdom is of general scope, and the fact that on the present occasion we are going to adjust our focus to a technical matter should not blind us to the fact that the light Keats sheds on our problem is part of a wider beam. There never was an English poet, save Shakespeare, who had so instinctive a grasp of poetic realities: of the function of poetry in the life of the mind. In his short life he had no time to solve the formal problem, but the story of his experiment is full of interest. The texts, which come from his Letters¹, are almost too well-known to be repeated, but it would be rash to assume that their significance has been exhausted. The most important of them comes from a letter of 27 February, 1818, written to John Tyler, to whom he had sent the proofs of the newly-written *Endymion*:

It is a sorry thing for me that any one should have to overcome Prejudices in reading my Verses—that affects me more than any hyper-criticism on any particular Passage. In *Endymion* I have most likely but moved into the Go-cart from the leading strings. In Poetry I have a few Axioms, and you will see how far I am from their Centre. 1st. I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity—it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance—2nd. Its touches of Beauty should never be half way thereby making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the sun come natural to him—shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight—but it is easier to think what Poetry should be than to write it—and this leads me to another axiom. That

¹*The Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Maurice Buxton Forman. Oxford (Fourth Edition, 1952). A selection of these letters based on the 1947 edition, ed. with an introduction by Lionel Trilling, was recently published by Farrar, Straus and Young (Great Letters Series).

if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all. However it may be with me I cannot help looking into new countries with 'O for a Muse of fire to ascend!'

To this passage the editor of the *Letters*, Maurice Buxton Forman, added a useful footnote:

Bailey informed Lord Houghton, that one of Keats's favourite topics of conversation was the principle of melody in verse, which he believed to consist in the adroit management of open and close vowels. He had a theory that vowels could be as skilfully combined and interchanged as differing notes of music, and that all sense of monotony was to be avoided, except when expressive of a special purpose. Uniformity of metre is so much the rule of English poetry, that, undoubtedly, the carefully varied harmonies of Keats's verse were disagreeable, even to cultivated readers, often producing exactly the contrary expression from what was intended, and, combined as they were with rare and curious rhymes, diverted the attention from the beauty of the thoughts and the force of the imagery. In "Endymion", indeed, there was much which not only seemed, but was, experimental; and it is impossible not to observe the superior mastery of melody, and sure-footedness of the poetic paces, in "Hyperion".

Endymion, a poem of 4,051 lines, was written between April and September, 1817, and published at the end of April, 1818, with an apologetic Preface. Keats called the poem "a feverish attempt, rather than a deed accomplished". He used the word "mawkishness", which his critics were only too ready to adopt. The *Quarterly Review's* article appeared in September, 1818, and on the ninth of October we find Keats writing calmly to James Augustus Hessey about the defects of the poem²—"the slipshod Endymion" he called it:

It is as good as I had power to make it, by myself. Had I been nervous about its being a perfect piece, and with that view asked advice, and trembled over every page, it would not have been written; for it is not in my nature to fumble—I will write independently.—I have written independently *without Judgment*. I may write independently, and *with Judgment* hereafter. The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself. That which is creative must create itself.

²But in April (in a letter to John Taylor, his publisher), he had professed himself satisfied—"the book pleased me much—it is very free from faults; and although there are one or two words I should wish replaced, I see in many places an improvement greatly to the purpose." But Keats is perhaps speaking here of the typographical appearance of the book.

This passage, and particularly the last sentence, is sufficient to identify Keats with the romantic principle. This principle was the basis of his own dissatisfaction with *Endymion*, and it becomes of the greatest interest, therefore, to trace the further evolution of his poetic practice.

If we ask ourselves what is the main defect of *Endymion*, we might agree that it is its diffuseness, its lack of a clear narrative line, of a precisely composed picture, of all the virtues which give great poetry its condensed clarity, its effect of a "crystallization" of thought. If we then seek the cause of this diffuseness, we should most likely find it in the process of swift facile rhyming. The composition jumps swiftly from rhyme to rhyme, and through keeping his eye on his steps, rather than raised to a particular direction, the poet travels in random curves. Take, for example, the description of Endymion in Book II (387-427) :

After a thousand mazes overgone,
At last, with sudden step, he came upon
A chamber, myrtle wall'd, embowered high,
Full of light, incense, tender minstrelsy,
And more of beautiful and strange beside:
For on a silken couch of rosy pride,
In midst of all, there lay a sleeping youth
Of fondest beauty; fonder, in fair sooth,
Than sighs could fathom, or contentment reach:
And coverlids gold-tinted like the peach,
Or ripe October's faded marigolds,
Fell sleek about him in a thousand folds—
Not hiding up an Apollonian curve
Of neck and shoulder, nor the tenting swerve
Of knee from knee, nor ankles pointing light;
But rather, giving them to the filled sight
Officiously. Sideway his face repos'd
On one white arm, and tenderly unclos'd,
By tenderest pressure, a faint damask mouth
To slumbry pout; just as the morning south
Disparts a dew-lipp'd rose. Above his head,
Four lily stalks did their white honours wed
To make a coronal; and round him grew
All tendrils green, of every bloom and hue,

Together intertwin'd and trammel'd fresh:
 The vine of glossy sprout; the ivy mesh,
 Shading its Ethiop berries; and woodbine,
 Of velvet leaves and bugle-blooms divine;
 Convolvulus in streaked vases flush;
 The creeper, mellowing for an autumn blush;
 And virgin's bower, trailing airily;
 With others of the sisterhood. Hard by,
 Stood serene Cupids watching silently.
 One, kneeling to a lyre, touch'd the strings,
 Muffling to death the pathos with his wings;
 And, ever and anon, uprose to look
 At the youth's slumber; while another took
 A willow-bough, distilling odorous dew,
 And shook it on his hair; another flew
 In through the woven roof, and fluttering-wise
 Rain'd violets upon his sleeping eyes.

This passage is as concrete and objective as any in the whole poem, but we may note how the image is blurred by irrelevances introduced for the sake of rhyme. After the two lines giving a fairly precise description of the chamber, we have the weak line:

And more of beautiful and strange beside

which adds nothing to the description, but provides a rhyme for "pride" in the next line. Three lines below we have the unnecessary interpolation "in fair sooth" to provide a rhyme for "youth". A peach must be introduced to rhyme with "reach", but Keats evidently felt that the image was a cliché, so added the more original and precise simile of "faded marigolds", which happily rhymed with the "folds" of the coverlids. And so on, throughout the passage, rhymes are seen begetting images, images begetting rhymes; and the regular metre stretches over it all like a net whose every mesh must be filled with a duly accented syllable.

But this, it may be said, is how poetry is written—how Spenser wrote the *Faerie Queene*, how Shakespeare wrote *Venus and Adonis*, models which Keats had before him in composing *Endymion*. But for all its luscious monotony, its crystal brightness, the *Faerie Queene* can only be read intermittently, or as an academic exercise; and Shakespeare quickly abandoned the style of *Venus and Adonis*. For the same reasons Keats had to abandon a style

too enervating for his energetic mind—a style which he felt deformed the poetic essence. He then turned to Milton as a model, and began his new long poem, *Hyperion*, in the unrhymed blank verse which Milton had used with such magical effect. With what result, we all know; Miltonics, as Keats called his new style, proved almost as unsatisfactory as the Spenserian style—indeed, the harm was much more insidious, for it was not a mere inflation of a natural mode of expression: it produced an organic deformation of language itself. The words in which Keats confessed his defeat (from a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, postmarked 22 September, 1819) are again well-known, but they may be recalled for they gain significance in our particular context:

I have given up *Hyperion*—there were too many Miltonic inversions in it—Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or rather artist's humour. I wish to give myself up to other sensations. English ought to be kept up.

And he then admits that he himself cannot distinguish, in *Hyperion*, between "the false beauty proceeding from art" and "the true voice of feeling".

With this statement one should compare a similar passage from the long journal-letter written to George and Georgiana Keats—this part of the letter apparently written on the same day as the letter to Reynolds:

I shall never become attached to a foreign idiom so as to put it into my writings. The *Paradise Lost* though so fine in itself is a corruption of our Language—it should be kept as it is unique—a curiosity—a beautiful and grand Curiosity. The most remarkable Production of the world. A northern dialect accommodating itself to greek and latin inversions and intonations.

In both letters he gives as a contrast to Milton, and as a genuine example of English poetic idiom, Thomas Chatterton. "He is the purest writer in the English Language. He has no French idiom, or particles like Chaucer—'tis genuine English Idiom in English words." And again: "The purest English I think—or what ought to be the purest—is Chatterton's. The language had existed long enough to be entirely uncorrupted of Chaucer's gallicisms, and still the old words are used. Chatterton's language is entirely northern. I prefer the native music of it to Milton's cut by feet. I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written but in the verse of art. I wish to devote myself to another sensation."

This denial or renunciation of Milton has seemed treacherous to most critics, so before we go on to observe the next and final stage of Keats's development, we should ask whether he meant what he said, and if the first version of *Hyperion* bears out his self-criticism.

Robert Bridges, who had a great admiration for Keats, as well as for Milton, thought that Keats was deceiving himself—that he was offering a superficial excuse for difficulties and defects of deeper seating. Bridges could admit the defects of *Endymion*:

To one who expects to be carried on by the interest of the story, this poem is tedious and unreadable, and parts of it merit at least some of the condemnation which fell on the whole. Keats thought to 'surprise by a fine excess'; his excess rather confuses and blurs, and it is a severe task to keep the attention fixed. A want of definition in the actual narration,—so that important matters do not stand out,—a sameness in the variety, and the reiteration of languid epithets, are the chief causes of this. . . .³

Bridges's argument is that the defects of *Hyperion* are essentially of the same nature. It is not a question of style—the style, on the contrary, makes this poem "the only poem since Milton that has seriously challenged the epic place". What is wrong is that "the subject lacks the solid basis of outward event, by which epic maintains its interest: like *Endymion*, it is all imagination . . . there is little but imagination, and a one-sidedness or incompleteness of that; a languor which lingers in the main design, though the influence of Milton is generally uplifting the language."

This attempt to divorce subject and style does not strike me as good critical procedure: it implies that a good story would support a bad style—that Miltonics or any other imitative style would not have mattered if the plot of *Hyperion* had been good enough. I would rather take the opposite view: like the music critic (I think it was Edward Dent) who said he did not mind what language an opera was sung in, so long as he did not understand it; so I would say that I am indifferent to the meaning or significance of a poet's story so long as the language is genuinely poetic. As an example of this extreme I would quote Pound's *Cantos*, which are hardly as perspicuous as *Hyperion*, but can be read with sustained poetic enjoyment. Bridges assumed that what

³*Collected Essays and Papers, etc.* IV. "A Critical Introduction to Keats". Oxford, 1929.

Keats mainly objected to in Milton was his inversions; and he advances a defence of inversion which shows once again (I am thinking of the obtuseness he displayed towards Hopkins' sprung rhythm) how far Bridges was from any understanding of the organic nature of poetic style. Inversion, he says,

. . . is of the essence of good style. In ordinary speech the words follow a common order prescribed by use, and if that does not suit the sense, correction is made by vocal intonation: but the first thing that a writer must do is to get his words in the order of his ideas, as he wishes them to enter the reader's mind; and when such an arrangement happens not to be the order of common speech, it may be called a grammatical inversion. To take the simple case, the position of the adjective with regard to its substantive: in French it generally follows the substantive, and this is in most cases its proper place, and for this reason alone descriptions of scenery are generally more pictorial in French prose than in English, the necessary frequent predicates being in their natural position: in English the common use sets the epithet before the object, and when this is a malposition of ideas, a poet must invert either his grammar or his ideas; and what is true of adjectives is true also of every word in the sentence.

It may be that we have here a perfect expression of the radical difference that separates the classical poet and critic from the romantic poet and critic. For what Bridges is asserting is the priority, in poetry, of idea or discursive thought, and the consequent adaptation of poetic diction to "the order of ideas". What the romantic poets and critics assert, from Coleridge to Pound, is the priority of the verbal symbol, of the expressive phrase, which is spontaneous in origin and therefore does not *seek* a logical order of words, but is uttered as native, natural speech. Now, inversions are not altogether prohibited in natural speech: they are sometimes used instinctively for a particular expressive effect ("She's a beautiful girl, is Jane"; "A common thief, that's what he is!"). But such natural inversions are rare, and are never a deliberate re-shuffling of the natural order of words to fit a logical order of ideas, or a metrical pattern of syllables. They do not disrupt the native music, which is the true voice of feeling.

Let us now look more closely at the three stages in Keats's technical progress: the stages represented by *Endymion*, *Hyperion*, and *The Fall of Hyperion*. I have already quoted a passage from *Endymion* that is sufficiently representative. From *Hyperion* we might take the description of Hyperion at the end of Book II:

It was Hyperion:—a granite peak
 His bright feet touch'd, and there he stay'd to view
 The misery his brilliance had betray'd
 To the most hateful seeing of itself.
 Golden his hair of short Numidian curl,
 Regal his shape, majestic, a vast shade
 In midst of his own brightness, like the bulk
 Of Memnon's image at the set of sun
 To one who travels from the dusking East:
 Sighs, too, as mournful as that Memnon's harp
 He utter'd, while his hands contemplative
 He press'd together, and in silence stood.
 Despondence seiz'd again the fallen Gods
 At sight of the dejected King of Day,
 And many hid their faces from the light:
 But fierce Enceladus sent forth his eyes
 Among the brotherhood; and, at their glare,
 Uprose Iäpetus, and Creüs too,
 And Phorcus, sea-born, and together strode
 To where he towered on his eminence.
 There those four shouted forth old Saturn's name;
 Hyperion from the peak loud answered 'Saturn!'
 Saturn sat near the Mother of the Gods,
 In whose face was no joy, though all the Gods
 Gave from their hollow throats the name of 'Saturn!'

From *The Fall of Hyperion* any twenty lines would reveal the
 drastic change of texture: I take the famous passage that follows
 the unveiling of Moneta, lines 256-82:

Then saw I a wan face,
 Not pin'd by human sorrows, but bright blanch'd
 By an immortal sickness which kills not;
 It works a constant change, which happy death
 Can put no end to; deathwards progressing
 To no death was that visage; it had pass'd
 The lily and the snow; and beyond these
 I must not think now, though I saw that face—
 But for her eyes I should have fled away.
 They held me back, with a benignant light,
 Soft-mitigated by divinest lids

Half-closed, and visionless entire they seem'd
 Of all external things—they saw me not,
 But in blank splendor beam'd like the mild moon,
 Who comforts those she sees not, who knows not
 What eyes are upward cast. As I had found
 A grain of gold upon a mountain's side,
 And twing'd with avarice strain'd out my eyes
 To search its sullen entrails rich with ore,
 So at the view of sad Moneta's brow,
 I ached to see what things the hollow brain
 Behind enwombed: what high tragedy
 In the dark secret Chambers of her skull
 Was acting, that could give so dread a stress
 To her cold lips, and fill with such a light
 Her planetary eyes; and touch her voice
 With such a sorrow. . . .

I am tempted to go on, to include such a magnificent line as:

The pale Omega of a wither'd race

or, five lines further on, the take-up of the familiar opening of *Hyperion*:

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale,
 Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
 Far from the fiery noon and Eve's one star. . . .

What are the major changes of style between these three passages? Bridges has already indicated the most obvious one—the omission of all invocatives. In *The Fall of Hyperion* there is not a single invective “O”, and Bridges shows how in comparable passages (*Hyperion*, I, 50-6 and *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 352-8), the alterations are consequent on this change.

The vital changes, however, are more organic. The inversions have not gone—there is one in each of the first three lines of the passage quoted; there are nine or ten in 27 lines. A count in *Hyperion* would not yield a higher proportion, and I suspect that there are even less in *Endymion*. The excessive use of inversions in *Hyperion* comes from Milton: the most we might be able to claim for *The Fall of Hyperion* is that the inversions are generally determined by required emphasis, and not merely by the structure of a regular metre. But if we rewrite the first three lines of my quotation giving the words their natural order, what, if anything, is lost?:

Then I saw a wan face
 Not pin'd by human sorrows, but blanch'd bright
 By an immortal sickness which does not kill. . . .

I see no violence to "the order of ideas" in such a restitution, and a positive gain in ease of diction.

Miltonics, however, is more than a question of invocations and inversions:

Golden his hair of short Numidian curl,
 Regal his shape, majestic, a vast shade
 In midst of his own brightness, like the bulk
 Of Memnon's image at the set of sun
 To one who travels from the dusking East. . . .

This is magnificent, but it is not Keats; and Keats knew that he was merely relaying another poet's voice, another poet's personal accent. The abstract music of exotic proper names, the sonorous and jewelled epithets, the ruthless syntax—the verse of art, apt for imitation and elaboration, but not the true voice of feeling!

Milonic verse is the individual voice of Milton, and Keats felt that he had fallen into the most insidious of all traps—the mimicry of personal idiosyncrasies. The weakness of *Endymion* had been his own weakness—"mawkishness" he called it; but we can now call it verbal excess, induced by the rhyming structure, and by imprecision of diction. In *Hyperion* Keats avoided these weaknesses, but only by sacrificing his own sincerity, his valid sensation. In *The Fall of Hyperion* he would devote himself to another sensation—that is to say, he would try to be true to his own poetic sensation. Keats knew that poetry had to be tested on the poet's own pulse—that it had an affective and visceral basis betrayed by any merely superficial affectation of a traditional style.

The style, the poetic diction and vocal accent, of *The Fall of Hyperion* is at last his own—free and individual, moving isometrically round the contour of his thought, revealing the sensational structure of his poetic experience. The lines I have quoted are illustration enough of this delicate fluctuant measure, but I cannot resist quoting a further half-dozen lines in which the accent itself almost makes visual the subject it describes:

Then the tall shade, in drooping linens veil'd
 Spake out, so much more earnest, that her breath
 Stirr'd the thin folds of gauze that drooping hung
 About a golden censer from her hand

Pendent; and by her voice I knew she shed
Long-treasur'd tears.

But here, and generally in *The Fall of Hyperion*, it is possible to detect another, remoter accent. At the same time that Keats was rejecting Milton, he was absorbing Dante. In the same letter to George and Georgiana from which I have already quoted, he tells that he has been reading Italian—Ariosto and Dante—but defiantly asserts that he will “never become attach’d to a foreign idiom so as to put it into (his) writings”. Bridges, in the essay already referred to, makes a good deal of this point:

And besides this conscious correction of old faults, it is now for the first time that the influence of Dante appears, and that not merely in the gravity of the vision in this poem, which is unlike any other of his embodiments, and in the sort of connection conceived between his vision of doom and his own experience and poetic meaning, all of which he might have come at through at translation, but in echoes of the Italian balance in passages where the sense is like Dante’s, as in this—

High prophetess, said I, purge off,
Benign, if so it please thee, my mind’s film.

And also where there is only the indefinable and individual touch to point to, as in—

When in mid-day the sickening east wind
Shifts sudden to the south, the small warm rain
Melts out the frozen incense from all flowers,

where the last line shows that Keats has now added to his style a mastery of Dante’s especial grace: and such passages as this, or again as when he calls written words

The shadows of melodious utterance,
which is also Dantesque in thought, should, I think, have forbidden the later critics, who knew from external evidence when the *Revision* was written, from judging that the new style came from decay of poetic power.

It will be seen that Bridges regards this “attachment to a foreign idiom” with favour—it is an acquired mastery of a special grace, Dante’s grace, and Keats is honoured by the theft. We must not carry the demand for integrity too far; and we might admit that a personal style can absorb “especial graces” and still remain predominantly personal. A question of affinity is involved. I do not think there was much affinity between the minds of Milton and Keats. Milton was ridden by his daemon: his utterance is positive and portentous. Keats had “no identity”; was “continually in for

(?informing) and filling some other Body". To be identified with Milton was to be identified with a foreign body ("life to him would be death to me"); to be identified with Dante was to be identified with a sympathetic and familiar body. We do not, properly speaking, *imitate* identities: we fall into step with our fellow spirits. Bridges finds the "indefinable and individual touch" of the lines about the "small warm rain" that "melts out the frozen incense from all flowers" Dantesque. For my part, I find them very English and Keatsian. I am reminded of that most English of all lyrical utterances:

Western wind, when will thou blow,
The small rain down can rain?

And of "The Unquiet Grave":

The wind doth blow to-day, my love,
And a few small drops of rain.

The *thought* of calling written words "the shadows of melodious utterance" may be Dantesque, but the expression, if not Keatsian, is Spenserian or Shakespearean.

This distinction, between the imitation of turns of thought, or conceits, and the imitation of verbal expression, is perhaps unduly subtle. I do not know what a critic like Leone Vivante⁴ would make of it, for to him there would be no distinction between originality of thought and originality of expression: to be original in diction, the thought itself would have to be original, or at least, authentically re-thought. But most of us, I think, would admit a variety of authentic expressions of the same thought. The ambiguity lies in the expression "turn of thought"; for "thought" acquires a subtle inflection from the manner in which it is expressed, and Bridges is implying that Keats imitated Dante's inflections rather than the main substance of his thought. I am not very convinced myself, but the problem should be discussed with wider reference to such Dantesque poems as Shelley's "Triumph of Time" and the second movement of Eliot's "Little Gidding".

Before leaving *The Fall of Hyperion* I would like to point to two or three passages which seem to me to stand out with startling originality. We should bear in mind that we are quoting from a poem contemporary with the "Ode to Melancholy" and "To

⁴See his *Notes on the Originality of Thought* (1939) and his *English Poetry and its Contribution to the Knowledge of a Creative Principle* (1950).

Autumn" (poems which have a wealth of traditional beauty), and then compare such phrases as I italicize in these lines:

. . . the scenes

Still swooning vivid through my globed brain
With an electral changing misery. . . .

or:

Still fix'd he sat beneath the sable trees,
 Whose arms spread straggling in wild serpent forms,
 With leaves all hushed: his awful presence there
 (Now all was silent) gave a deadly lie
 To what I erewhile heard: *only his lips*
Trembled amid the white curls of his beard.

or:

. . . so also shudders he:

Not at dog's howl, or gloom-bird's Even screech,
 Or the familiar visitings of one
 Upon the first toll of his passing bell;
But horrors, portion'd to a giant nerve
 Make great Hyperion ache.

These, and many other separate lines and passages, are neither Miltonic nor Dantesque, neither Spenserian nor Shakespearean; they are the authentic voice of Keats's own feeling. Why, then, was the poem given up? Bridges would have it that there was a fundamental defect of organization—"the subject lacks the solid basis of outward event, by which epic maintains its interest . . . the poem (he is speaking of the first version) fails in conduct." "Whatever mental qualities go to make a born artist, none is more essential than an unconscious enthrallment to his creative conception. When any true and sane artist has strayed into a fault that falsifies his conception, then his inspiration comes to a stand." The explanation is ingenious, but I doubt if it is the real one. We must remember Keats's tragic circumstances at the time: his hopeless, consuming passion for Fanny Brawne, the shadow of death that deepened every day. Poetry was a "feverous relief" from such worries; "abstractions" were "his only life" (expressions from his letter to Reynolds of September 21 or 22, 1818). "There is an awful warmth about my heart like a load of Immortality." These phrases were written during the composition of the first *Hyperion*, but they continue in the same strain, and with increased cause, during the period of the composition of *The Fall of*

Hyperion. Middleton Murry, in an Appendix to his *Keats and Shakespeare*,⁵ has shown very convincingly that Keats's failure to complete the poem was a physical failure—a constitutional inability which Keats himself called "idleness", but which we might call despair. In spite of the factual details, Mr. Murry must nevertheless, in the main text of his book, give us a reason which is somewhat mystical:

Keats abandoned the revised *Hyperion* because he was committing the sin of uttering soul-knowledge through an effort of mind-knowledge. That is a sin absent from the Decalogue, and unknown to ordinary experience; it is known only to poetic genius: it consists in the effort to utter what can only be revealed. It is in some sort a betrayal of the soul's knowledge, it is also a betrayal of the soul itself.

But in the same paragraph Mr. Murry admits that "at the moment that (Keats) was trying to shut out of his heart and mind Fanny and the world of men and women he was trying also to utter his knowledge that all things must be accepted. He was trying to deny and accept at once". And in a footnote Mr. Murry tries to illuminate this tangle:

It is impossible to interrupt the narrative (and run the risk of mystifying the reader) by insisting once more upon what I believe to be true—namely, that the second *Hyperion* could not have been completed as that poem. It must necessarily have changed into something quite different. The visions and actions of the deified Apollo could have been none other than the visions and actions of the future Keats—that is to say, his unwritten poems and plays. This may be called a transcendental criticism: the name is unimportant, provided the criticism is a true one.

The criticism I have been indulging in is not transcendental: it is merely technical. All I am concerned to establish, with reference to the second version of *Hyperion*, is that it represents an advance in Keats's poetic diction, and that it was not abandoned for technical reasons. The reasons given by Bridges are conceptual: Keats had bitten off more than he could chew, to express it vulgarly. That, I think, Mr. Murry would most vehemently deny; and if Bridges means that Keats did not have a technique adequate to his conception, I too would deny such a charge. What Mr. Murry is saying, transcendental criticism apart, is that Keats

⁵Oxford, 1925.

had got himself into a mood in which he could not continue that particular poem. He quotes "the terrible lines" that reveal this mood:

Oftentimes I pray'd
Intense, that Death would take me from the vale
And all its burthens—Gasping with despair
Of change, hour after hour I curs'd myself.

"The mood betrays the vision." Perhaps, but the mood was induced, not by metaphysical speculation, nor by a sense of creative inadequacy, but by the pressure of outward circumstances. Let us state the matter plainly: an unfrustrated, physically capable Keats would have carried *The Fall of Hyperion* to a triumphant conclusion.

Though we must, with Middleton Murry, regard *The Fall of Hyperion* as "the profoundest and most sublime" of Keats's poems, the fact remains, and remains to be considered, that at the moment he abandoned this poem, he wrote another poem which is generally regarded as his masterpiece: the "Ode to Autumn". Mr. Murry calls this poem Shakespearean—"Shakespearean in its rich and opulent serenity of mood, Shakespearean in its lovely and large periodic movement, like the drawing of a deep full breath . . . this is natural and spontaneous poetic power." I have no desire to challenge this judgment, though I think there is more of Chatterton than of Shakespeare in the poem—the Chatterton of "the purple plum'd maccaws" and of "the fragrant scented thorn" that "trembles with the gummy dew", as well as the Chatterton of those "limpid and lovely" lines which Mr. Murry does admit into comparison:

When Autumn blake and sun-brente do appear
With his gold hand gilding the falling leaf
Bringing up winter to fulfil the year
Bearing upon his back the ripéd sheaf;
When all the hills with woody seed is white;
When levin-fires and lemes do meet from far the sight;

When the fair apple, ruddy as even sky,
Do bend the tree unto the fructile ground:
When juicy pears and berries of black dye
Do dance in air, and call the eyne around;
Then, be the even foul, or even fair,
Methinks my heartes joy is steyncéd with some care.

There is even in the "Ode" something of the Milton of "Lycidas", though nothing of the Milton of *Paradise Lost*. If it does represent a return to Shakespeare, it is not to the Shakespeare of *Lear* and *The Tempest*, though possibly to the Shakespeare of *Antony and Cleopatra*—"colour'd with magnificence".⁶ *The Eve of St. Agnes*, which also belongs to this Shakespearean "return", returns to the still earlier Shakespeare of *Venus and Adonis*. But in *The Fall of Hyperion* Keats had advanced beyond these models, and this being granted, the Odes and *The Eve of St. Agnes* are to be regarded, not so much as a return, but as a reaction—as a failure of nerve, as "false beauty proceeding from art" and not as "the true voice of feeling". To place the "Ode to Melancholy" in a poetic category somewhat lower than *The Fall of Hyperion* is to go against the general consensus of opinion. What is different in kind is not necessarily different in degree. But looking to the future, from the standpoint of Keats's last technical efforts, the "Ode" has a weedy if luscious progeny; whereas *The Fall of Hyperion*, in the organic vitality of its structure, points forward to "The Windhover" and *The Waste Land*.

⁶The phrase Keats used of this play in a letter to Haydon (10 April, 1818).