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"A Bowery Nook Will be Elysium": The Image of the Bower in the Poetry of John Keats

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**"A BOWERY NOOK WILL BE ELYSIUM":
The Image of the Bower in the Poetry of John Keats**

**A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia**

**In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts**

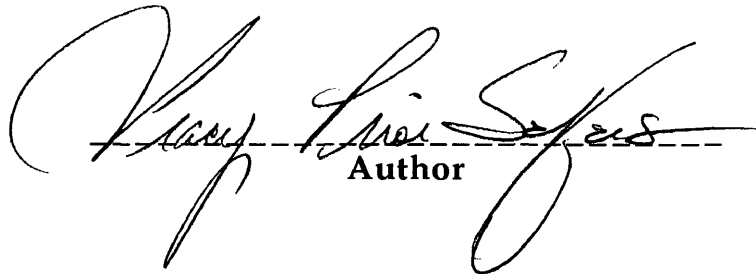
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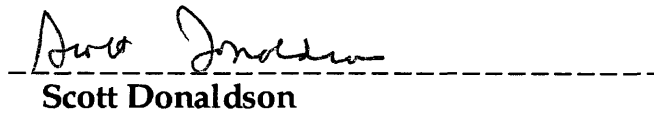


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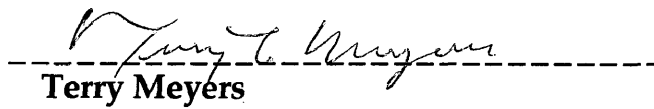
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ABSTRACT

This thesis traces the image of the bower--an enclosed private space that provides escape and protection from the world--as it appears throughout the poetry of John Keats. The bower takes on a myriad of forms throughout his poetry, sometimes a chamber, sometimes a valley, cove, or grotto, but whatever its form it embodies one of the most pervasive themes in Keats's work: the desire to attain the immortal, to shrug off the limitations of the merely mortal. It offers a physical sanctuary from the vagaries and discomforts of the world, providing a blessed place where love and poesy may be pursued unendingly; it offers too, perhaps more important to the poet, a metaphysical sanctuary free from the taint of mortality and from the flow of time and decay.

In his earliest poetry, the image of the bower is thus idealized; however, in his later poetry and as the poet himself matures, the image begins to change. The bower becomes less the solution to the problem of mortality and decay in time and more a new problem itself. The poet seeks the bower because it removes him from time and its attendant decay and disappointment; he finds, however, that he has separated himself from the very thing that has given his poetry its richness and vitality. The bower then, outside the flow of time, becomes not perfection but stasis, not an eternity partaking of the divine but an eternal hell of isolation from the world. Entering the bower, the poet is cut off from the rich and troubling earthly life that informs his best poetry.

This gradual changing is a function of Keats's own life. Early in his career, he felt himself powerful, above the "muddy stream" of life, filled with his own poetic promise. To the young Keats, then, the image of the bower was enticing. But as illness batters him, and the prospect of his early death grows in his mind, Keats's feelings become more ambivalent. He longs to remain in the world, to defeat death and fulfill his early promise; yet weakened and frustrated by sickness, he longs all the more for the release from mortality the bower offers.

This basic dilemma informs much of Keats's greatest poetry and is central to understanding the image of the bower and the changes it undergoes as the poet comes to grips with the essential problems of human life.

"A BOWERY NOOK WILL BE ELYSIUM":

The Image of the Bower in the Poetry of John Keats

Mario D'Avanzo has identified the bower as one among several similar and interrelated images which Keats used to express the workings of his poetic imagination: the fane, the temple, the grotto, the bower, etc. All have certain things in common--artifice, architecture, privacy, circularity, water and fountains (and through circularity and water, associations with femininity). As I have traced it here, the image of the bower includes all these and more: many instances of the "bower" outlined here are clearly in type rather than in name. Wherever I have seen the poet's impulse to transcend, to escape, I have seen the impulse toward the bower.

The bower, in its most common presentation, is a private, intimate space created by Man (Madeline's chamber, for example) or created by a beneficent Nature in collaboration with the Muse ("boughs pavilioned") for the communion of the Poet with the source of Poesy. It is not limited to the physical, however; the image can be seen in the visionary state which isolates the poet from the world he speaks to, in poetic thought and imagination, in sleep (which is the "vestibule" of poetry), and ultimately in death. The bower offers separation from the intrusive, often threatening world--a delightful prospect for Keats, who early sensed and then endured in tortured fashion his own too-swift separation from life. The image of the bower carries within it the ambivalence Keats himself felt about separation from the world: the paradise it offers all too often becomes the hell of eternal isolation.

In this context of tension and ambiguity, of the poetic yearning to unite with the sublime set against Keats's equally compelling desire to remain in the

world, the image of the bower, the secluded place set apart for the special intimacies of poesy and of love, set above and immune to the vagaries of mortality and mutability, reveals itself as particularly helpful in understanding Keats's transformation as a poet. The image of the bower itself has not received sustained attention, especially in recent times when looking at "images" and "imagery" seems to have gone quite out of critical fashion. D'Avanzo identifies the image but does so without much reference to Keats's larger development as a poet, and without discussing the important transformations the image undergoes as Keats matures. In Keats's letters, the image of the bower takes the shape of the "Chamber of Maiden Thought," where "we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight." Just as the Chamber of Maiden Thought gradually darkens with the apprehension of mortality, with the growing knowledge that "the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak," so too the image of the bower grows darker as Keats's poetry matures (Letters, I, 280-1). As a symbol of the transcendent wish, it holds both the promise of poetic fulfillment and the threat of darkness, annihilation, and eternal alienation from the world--which is, after all, the world of love as well as of heartache, sickness, and death. The image of the bower, when traced through its various presentations and treatments in Keats's poetry, serves as a barometer to gauge the maturation of his thoughts about poetry, love, and mortality. By following the metamorphosis of this image through Keats's work, we can begin to understand the enormous tensions working themselves out through his poetry and through his short, tortured, brilliant life.

In his earliest published poem, "O Solitude! If I must with thee dwell," Keats establishes the tension between the realm of Man, subject to time, decay, and death, and the idealized natural world where the poet may commune with himself and his Muse. His clear preference is to escape the former into the freedom of the latter; and, sure enough, he will find many bower-like structures waiting to receive him. Unlike the wild Nature of "Tintern Abbey" who speaks her lessons directly to the heart of the "worshipper," the natural world of "O Solitude" is more ideally Neo-classical, shaped by and for the uses of the poetic soul of man. The creations of the unsympathetic and unpoetic works, the cities, are characterized by chaos and decay--"the jumbled heap/Of murky buildings"--rather than the orderliness they were intended to impose upon Nature. In contrast, the natural world reveals a calm orderliness and almost scientific purpose: the mountain becomes "Nature's observatory" where the poet may refine his perceptions and craft; the poet walks not in wild woodlands but in "boughs pavilioned" shaped and set apart from the mutable world for his education and edification.

These early bower images offer the promise of order, of perfect beauty beyond the taint of the "jumbled heap," but they also hint at the ambivalence with which Keats will come to regard that promise. However sweet the atmosphere within these bowers, Keats clearly prefers "the sweet converse of an innocent mind" to solitude. More interestingly, the very images he uses to describe the natural world foreshadow the problems inherent in the bower--isolation, separation, stasis. Keats finds himself oddly distanced from the ideal scene before him--the entire sweep of his vision is shrunk to the "span" of his own hand, miniaturized, unreal. He has happily escaped from the "jumbled heap" of the mortal world, yet he finds himself literally at arm's length from

the ideal world set aside for him. Disturbing, too, is the unusual characteristic of the river, a common metaphor for the visionary imagination bursting forth from the depths of the poet's unconscious (D'Avanzo, 126). In an early flash of genius, Keats creates both voluptuous movement and rigidity in the same image of the "river's crystal swell." It is an ominous prophecy, that Keats would imagine his own poetic powers frozen, locked into a static perfection at the very moment of their bursting forth. Like the fixed and unfulfilled images of the Grecian urn, the river--Keats's poetic vision?--will never flow freely in time. In this earliest poem, the image of the bower hints at the same tension and ambiguity: the poet will escape from the flow of time and its attendant decay only to find separation and stasis. Keats shows his naiveté and youth in that he still believes he can leave the bower, that he can choose to turn away from its solitude to hold "sweet converse." In the older, more fearful Keats, this choice is more often not available. Separation is permanent, communion impossible.

In other early poems, Keats seems to use the image of the bower in rather conventional ways. In the admittedly derivative "Imitation of Spenser" (1814), Keats describes "the verdant hill" whose "little lake" reflects the "woven bowers" of "so fair a place [as] was never seen" (2, 7-8). It seems to be a conventionally romantic nature poem, yet even so it exhibits a uniquely Keatsian twist, the entire scene enclosed within the "bower" of Keats's imagination, separate from reality:

It seemed an emerald in the silver sheen
Of the bright waters; or as when on high,
Through clouds of fleecy white, laughs the cerulean sky. (25-7)

Yet the scene is full of the images, sounds, sensations of the natural world. Thus early did Keats establish the parameters of his poetic sensibility, the

boundaries and tensions of his poetic vision: a poetry full of earthly sensuality, yet longing for a more-than-earthly paradise. He forever seeks a refuge that will transcend the merely mortal while retaining the rich textures of human life.

In "To George Felton Mathew" (November 1815), Keats creates in the bower the only place for the poet to meet his Muse:

Should e'er the fine-eyed maid be kind,
 Ah! Surely it must be whene'er I find
 Some flower spot, sequestered, wild, romantic,
 That often must have seen a poet frantic. (36-8)

Inspiration comes for the poet not "In this dark city" nor "Mid contradictions" of the real world of pain, confusion and human suffering, but rather in a place of "leafy quiet," where the poet may in peace "soft humanity put on,/And sit, and rhyme and think on Chatterton" (33-4, 47, 55-6).

The boundaries of the scene in "Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left Prison," again lie entirely in Keats's imagination (Keats not having met Mr. Hunt yet); here, though, the sonnet reveals itself, layer within layer, the liberating bower of poetry, a refuge within the confining cage of prison, within the creative bower of Keats's imaginative vision:

Think you he naught but prison walls did see,
 Till, so unwilling, thou unturned'st 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. (6-13)

The richness and activity of Keats's imaginative world--"bowers fair," "enchanted flowers," "flew," "daring"--while taking their imagery from the human world, are clearly superior to the world of the Prince Regent and his

politics of flattery and prison keys and shadowing mortality. In fact, their superiority lies chiefly in their immortality: Milton and Spenser, through their imaginative work, are not dead poets but active agents in Keats's own imaginative world; and the world they inhabit, created from the rich raw materials of earthly experience but perfected forever by the poetic vision, is "as free/As the sky-searching lark" from the taint of death.

"Sleep and Poetry," written December 1816, continues to explore the relationship of the poet to the world, of his transcendent vision to the mutable world--in other words, the relationship between the two antithetical worlds the poet must inhabit.

The series of rhetorical questions that begin the poem serve initially to draw the reader in, to engage him in the poetic dialogue. Significantly, many of the questions refer to bower images:

the pretty hummer
That stays one moment in an open flower,
And buzzes cheerily from bower to bower
... a green island, far from all men's knowing ...
... the leakiness of dales ...
More secret than a nest of nightingales ...
... full of visions. (2-10)

Each image builds upon the others, investing the answer to the questions, when it comes, with a growing sense of mystery, secrecy, and removal from the world. The poet draws the reader into the enchanted circle; but answering his own questions with a direct invocation, "What, but thee, Sleep?" the poet effectively closes the circle, leaving the reader outside the secret communion of poet and Sleep. The poet turns away from human discourse to address his poetry exclusively to its subject and source.

The use of religious language here is intentional. When the poet invokes Sleep, he does so as a devotional exercise to prepare him for the Muse.

Sleep is the "vestibule" of Poesy, the "place where I may greet the maid." It too literally involves a rejection of the world in favor of the vision-world of Poesy. Although he half-heartedly identifies himself with others--by the plurals "we" and "us"--he clearly longs to

die a death
Of luxury, and my young spirit follow
The morning sunbeams to the great Apollo
Like a fresh sacrifice. (58-61)

If sleep is the vestibule, the harbinger, of poetry, then clearly Death--the final sleep--is even more desirable. It is the final intensity, the ushering-in of the poet to the heavenly realms of Apollo. Behind him lies the world, the "muddy stream [which] would bear along/My soul to nothingness" (158-9). The movement from the world, to sleep, to the "mountain-top" and its splendor, through death to Apollo inexorably completes the turning-away first hinted at in the closed circle of the poem's opening lines.

However, Keats presents an alternative:

or, if I can bear
The o'erwhelming sweets, 'twill bring to me the fair
Visions of all places: a bowery nook
Will be Elysium. (61-4)

Instead of the "vestibule," the closed circle of sleep and death, Keats may survive in the "bowery nook" of vision that Poesy inspires. This bower is as seductive as the first, offering as it does the chance for the poet to experience directly the vision-world of his poetry, of myth, of all Truth and Beauty. But disturbingly, his poetry changes. Instead of finding his inspiration in "the fair Paradise of Nature's light," he will merely "copy many a lovely saying/About the leaves and flowers--about the playing/Of nymphs in woods, and fountains" (65-7). To attain the glory of Apollo's presence, he must

remove himself from the world and become not the direct translator of Nature's glory but a mere copy-boy. He is twice removed from the earthly life that inspires him: once, spiritually or metaphorically dead, when he enters the bower of poesy; twice, removed even from the poetic dialogue, when he copies the "lovely sayings" of others. He reaches the source of Poesy and revels in the power of those who have gone before, but to do so he must sacrifice some of his own poetic power, whose source is not the glory of Apollo but the riches and tragedies of earth, of this human life. It is this tension between the corruptible world of sensation and the incorruptible world of vision--an early death on earth, or, alienated from the world but filled with Apollo's glory--this ambiguity that informs the image of the bower. It calls him, seduces him, draws him powerfully; he must leave earth behind to enter the bower. He must choose--a terrible choice for a poet of sensation: the peace and glory of Apollo's bower; or the "muddy stream" that changes and corrupts--but also inspires and enriches his poetry.

Interestingly, the images in the stanza beginning, "Stop and consider! life is but a day," bear within them this same tension. The stanza seems unquenchably optimistic--life in the face of death--but each hopeful image of life bears within it the process of death and an ominous foreshadowing of his own end. The "rose . . . unblown" implies the soon-withered rose; the "ever-changing tale" must end, the book closing; the "maiden's veil" put aside when virginity is surrendered; the "clear summer air" lowering in winter; the "laughing school-boy" soon a grieving, careworn man; the "springy branches" soon broken and bare in winter. Keats knew enough of life to know that the hope it brings bears also the end of hope; the springing life that inspires the best poetry brings with inspiration its own destruction.

Feeling perhaps the burden of his own mortality, Keats longs for the ten years he senses he cannot have. With Time closing in, a greater urgency is his so he "may overwhelm/Myself in poesy . . [to] do the deed/That my own soul has to itself decreed." He longs to loose his ties to this world so that, free to immerse himself in Apollo's world, he may fulfill his poetic destiny.

But see what such an abdication brings: during his sensual idyll in the realm "Of Flora, and Old Pan," he is oddly distanced from the real source of sensuality, human life. Despite the adolescent sex-fantasy, he suggests his separation from earthly experience: "A lovely tale of human life we'll read" (110). He is clearly outside the merely human and earthly, removed from actual experience in an attempt to transcend time and mutability "Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes" ("Ode to a Nightingale" 29). The danger of separation will become clearer to him as he matures as a poet, although perversely, his longing to leave this world for Apollo's only grows stronger. He already knows something of the seductive nature of Apollo's world:

Another will entice me on . . .
Till in the bosom of a leafy world
We rest in silence, like two gems upcurled
In the recesses of a pearly shell. (117, 119-21)

He has entered the bower, that enclosed paradise, there to be united with the Muse, but he has lost his humanity, become a hard and frozen perfection in the beautiful prison of Apollo. Keats admits the danger when, in "Ode to a Nightingale," he draws the connection between release from the world, death, and the high price he would pay: "Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain - /To thy high requiem become a sod" (59-60).

Keats seems very young when he compares the world of "real things" to a "muddy stream [to] bear along/My soul to nothingness." After the vision of

Apollo, perhaps the burden of the real would seem heavier than usual. He is still filled with the heady wine of his own growing poetic power, not realizing fully how much power and vision lie in the "muddy stream," how often "nothingness" and "doubtings" are the stuff of poetry and call forth the chariot of Apollo! Keats still sees the Poet as one who stands apart from the world. This will--as it must--change as he matures.

Sleep is the ambassador of Poetry, the "harbinger" that open to Keats the flow of poetic vision: "yet I must not forget/Sleep, quiet with his poppy coronet,/For what there may be worthy in these rhymes/I partly owe to him" (347-50). Ending with the catalogue description of Leigh Hunt's house--"cold and sacred busts/Smiled at each other"--Keats again creates the "gem upcurled" image, a cold stasis of vision outside time, outside mutability (357-8). Like the gem image, these old poets are devoid of humanity--divinely perfect, yet lifeless. They seem to exclude all others from their lifeless circle (a macabre twist on the bower image)--even Keats, who is (literally) dying to join them.

Yet, with Keats's power to hold an ambiguity without "irritable reaching," he imbues the lifeless, static, two-dimensional paintings there at Hunt's cottage with life and motion, depth and time: "swelling," "frisky leap," "reaching," "heap," "rose," "approaching," "Bending," "eagerly," "liquidity," "dewy," "timorous," "dabbling swims," "Heaves," "swelling," "balances," "undulating" (361-80). This is certainly a different vision from the "Grecian Urn," where the timelessness of Art produces a stasis without any potential for life or fulfillment. But even within the poem, perhaps Keats, at least unconsciously, senses that however the artist struggles to reach outside time to secure his own vision forever, it is his art, after all, that will survive him and

achieve the immortality he cannot achieve for himself.

"Lines Written in the Highlands," written in honor of Burns in 1818, is indicative of the direction Keats would take in later poems: beginning to confront the horror of his own mortality and separation from life, he begins to crystallize the tension between the mutable world and the ideal world (which we see even in his earliest poetry), and to give a name to the danger the poet faces in trying to find his place in and between those worlds:

Scanty the hour and few the steps beyond the bourn of care,
Beyond the sweet and bitter world - beyond it unaware;
Scanty the hour and few the steps, because a longer stay
Would bar return, and make a man forget his mortal way.
O horrible! to lose the sight of well-remembered face,
Of brother's eyes, of sister's brow, constant to every place,
No, no, that horror cannot be, for at the cable's length
Man feels the gentle anchor pull and gladdens in its strength.
(29-34, 49-50)

This poem is an example of the distinctive "motion" of Keats's best poetry that Stillinger identifies--an awareness of the immediate world of change, decay, and mortality; a longing for and visionary passage to the transcendent ideal; and a return to the mutable world which is now informed and enriched by the poet's new and visionary knowledge (Stillinger, 2). The poet, painfully aware of "the bourn of care . . . the sweet and bitter world" (a lovely and typical juxtaposition of sensation), longs to escape into the world that Burns, merely by living, invests with his own immortality. He realizes, though, that to stray too long from the mortal risks losing its joys as well as its pains. Those joys are not only the treasures not to be lost but the "cable's length," the "anchor pull" that ties him to their world. So the poet returns, and the pattern is completed. The visionary knowledge gained outside mortality and time serves to enrich the mortal world, giving the mutable the taste and shape of the immutable:

One hour, half-idiot, he stands by mossy waterfall,
But in the very next he reads his soul's memorial.
He reads it on the mountain's height, where chance he may sit
down
Upon rough marble diadem, that hill's eternal crown. (41-4)

The waterfall that will, over eons, change its shape and flow is transformed by his transcendent vision into a message from eternity to his soul. So does the "mountain's height," the "rough marble diadem," bearing the imperfect textures of earthly life, now become an "eternal crown." The daily is imbued with the eternal, through the mediation of the poet and his vision. But the tenuous relationship between these two worlds is only a step away--a cable's length--from the "horror" that Keats would reject. As the embodiment of this poetic impulse to leave the world, the bower image as it appears in this period is increasingly characterized by "horror"--darkness, coldness, and an isolation which is paradoxically as enticing as it is horrific.

One of the clearest ways by which the image of the bower and its corresponding impulse to leave the world are expressed in this period is in Keats's love poems. Beyond politics, or the tenuous philosophies of mortality, Keats concerned himself with another--and for his short life, perhaps more pressing--issue, that of earthly love. His tempestuous, tortured relationship with Fanny Brawne has endured much contradictory interpretation over the years. In his later years, when his physical degeneration haunted him more and more, his relationship to Fanny--always beset by tempers artistic and romantic--grew intensely jealous and potentially destructive. Both frustrated by and desirous of secrecy, despairing in his own physical inadequacy, Keats tried to exert control where he could, striking out at their detractors and often torturing Fanny with his suspicions and jealous demands. Keats's letters and poems suggest again and again his deeply ambivalent feelings about women

and love and in particular about his relationship to Fanny Brawne. His poem "I cry your mercy" demonstrates Keats's anguish and the resulting jealousy:

Yourself - your soul - in pity give me all,
 Withhold no atom's atom or I die,
 Or living on perhaps, your wretched thrall,
 Forget, in the midst of idle misery,
 Life's purposes. (9-13)

The urgency of his failing health made Keats perhaps unreasonable: not enough to love and be loved, he wishes to possess her utterly or, failing that, to be possessed himself in a loss of self that echoes "La Belle Dame sans Merci/Thee hath in thrall!" (39-40). Noting that Keats admitted to his publisher, "I equally dislike the favour of the public with the love of a woman --they are both a cloying treacle to the winds of independence," biographer Joanna Richardson rightly sees a contradictory urgency in Keats to live and love and write his poetry, "haunted by the apprehension of early death; he would not burst the grape against his palate, nor taste the transience of happiness" (Richardson, 43, 45). Reluctant to submit himself to what he saw as a sort of enslavement, he was at the same time obviously deeply in love and grieving that he had so short a time with Fanny. Perhaps these mixed feelings prompted his jealousies and his fiercely-guarded need for privacy and secrecy about their relationship:

My friends . . . have become tattlers, and inquisitors into my conduct: spying upon a secret I would rather die than share it with any bodies confidence. . . . Good gods what a shame it is our Loves should be so put into the microscope . . . I hate the world: it batters too much the wings of my self-will, and would I could take a sweet poison from your lips to send me out of it. (Letters, II, pp. 292-3, 133)

This impulse for privacy from the world finds its poetic expression in the Keatsian grove, the blissfully private bower hidden from the world and its influences. Like the Chamber of Maiden Thought, the love bower reflects the

growing darkness in Keats's life: his illness, his jealousies, his frustration with mortality balanced with his desperate clinging to life and love in the short time left to him. They also reflect his conflicting view of women and love (Diane Hoevelor gives an interesting treatment of this subject in her Romantic Androgyny).

"The Eve of St. Agnes" is an example of this personal and poetic struggle to find a balance between the attractions and the dangers of love, between the impulse to leave the world and the desire to remain in it. John Barnard calls "The Eve of St. Agnes" a "celebratory dream of love" (Barnard, 91), and indeed the poet is almost extravagant in his efforts to contrast the warmth and richness of the lovers' private world with the cold barrenness of the world outside. The poet clearly finds the potential for fulfillment in love and is drawn to it as Porphyro is drawn to Madeline. The poem begins with images of coldness and death: even the Christian promise of eternal life cannot dispel the shadow of death, and the beadsman who prays for the eternal souls of the dead lives not in the promised glory of the church but in the "Rough ashes" of his own mortality, with the sound of the "deathbell" already rung for him (26, 22). In contrast to this are the two lovers: Madeline, who in her earnest prayer for love is already "divine," the "splendid angel, newly dressed,/Save wings, for Heaven . . . so free from mortal taint" (57, 223-5); and Porphyro, who wishes to "worship all unseen" but who in the act of love is transformed "Beyond a mortal man," fulfilling Madeline's lost dream of "Those looks immortal" (80, 316-323). This transforming power of human love (which we find in "Endymion" as well) would appeal to a poet who perhaps already knew or sensed that his time for love and life would be short.

But the promise of human love in the poem is not simply escape from

the effects of mortality, but protection from the intrusions of the world; human passion becomes the longed-for refuge. Porphyro makes Angela

. . . lead him, in close secrecy,
Even to Madeline's chamber, and there hide
Him in a closet, of such privacy
That he might see her beauty unespied (163-6)

He wishes to remain "all unseen" certainly at first from Madeline, but perhaps more importantly from the outside world that intrudes. We are never allowed to forget the threat of danger and discovery: "The carved angels, ever eager-eyed/Stared . . . At length burst in the argent revelry" (34-5, 37). Though we are told to wish these away, they remain in the background, breaking into the lovers' intense silence in bursts of riotous sound. From the intrusive and harsh world the lovers must find or create some sort of refuge. Sleep itself becomes a sort of Keatsian bower where Madeline is "Blissfully havened," and where Porphyro's "soul doth ache" to join her (240, 279). But it is a strangely empty bower, needing Porphyro's love to complete it: she is havened "both from joy and pain," empty of all sensation, which Porphyro will provide. She is "my heaven" and his "silver shrine," but these sanctuaries remain empty and meaningless until he is there to fulfill their purpose, to be "thine eremite," "a famished pilgrim" (277, 337). The consummation of their love "contains the whole poem--the threat of the outside world set against the intense privacy of love" (Barnard, 87), the safe refuge they create together:

Into her dream he melted, as the rose
Blendeth its odour with the violet--
Solution sweet. Meantime the frost-wind blows
Like Love's alarum pattering the sharp sleet
Against the window-panes (320-4)

But even this idyllic picture of human love has its intimations of danger--echoes of Keats's own ambivalence. Porphyro's approach, "Noiseless

as fear in a wide wilderness," not only foreshadows the lovers' noiseless exit but further suggests what they will find in the world (250). The safety of the blissful bower is only temporary, since of course they must leave it. They exchange it for a life of fear, living "like phantoms" (361), echoing Angela's foreshadowing, "Alas me! flit!/Flit like a ghost away" (104-5). He promises Madeline "a home for thee," and she is willing to leave for this promise of future refuge, though "beset with fears,/For there were sleeping dragons all around,/At glaring watch"--leaving their known paradise of privacy beset by known dragons for a promised paradise beset by "the beseiging wind's uproar" and the unknown emptiness of a "wide wilderness" (351-4, 359, 250). They must separate themselves from the world, indeed become like phantoms to the world they have known.

These are only intimations, however, just dim echoes of the dark side of this impulse to flee the world for love, of the fear of being lost forever to the world and to oneself. This is part of the danger Keats explores in "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Barnard suggests that it "is an oblique expression of some aspects of Keats's feelings for Fanny Brawne" and certainly it contains a good deal of ambivalence about love and its potential for the destruction of the self --a potential both threatening and strangely enticing (Barnard, 637). The attractions of human love were for Keats closely related to death, the loss of the self in the other (as we see in the madness of Isabella for her lover). He explores this in several of his poems but makes the relationship explicit in a letter to Fanny: "I have two luxuries to brood over in my walks, your Loveliness and the hour of my death. O that I could have the possession of both in the same minute" (Letters, II, p. 133). Although Keats clearly yearned for both life and independence, the opposing impulse toward the surrender of the

self to love and death had its own macabre allure. He transforms the blissful private world of "The Eve of St. Agnes" into the isolated and private hell of "La Belle Dame"--the terrifying fulfillment of the previous poem's intimations of danger and the loss of self.

The speaking voice at the beginning of the poem is perhaps a representative voice from our own world, as isolated in spirit and understanding from the tormented, barren world of the knight as the knight himself is from the rich autumn world where "The squirrel's granary is full,/And the harvest's done" (7-8). But the knight's tale begins in an idyllic mode, promising at first the same sort of bliss in privacy that the lovers Porphyro and Madeline share. The knight points out their separation from the rest of the world--"And nothing else saw all day long"--but the line implies as well the knight's own blindness, his inability to see his imminent danger (22). When the lady takes him

to her elfin grot,
And there she wept and sighed full sore,
And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four,

we see again the Keatsian grove, the private place away from the world where the lovers can hide (29-32). But in order to be thus free from the world, the lovers must lose themselves in each other in what Keats feared would be a sort of enslavement or death:

I saw pale kings and princes too
Pale warriors, death-pale were they all:
They cried--'La Belle Dame sans Merci
Thee hath in thrall!' (37-40)

There is none of the mutuality of Madeline and Porphyro's love; the knight loses himself utterly and, joining the phantom ranks, is lost forever to the world.

Of course, critics are still trying to decide what exactly happens to the knight: does he dream the truth and so is in fact trapped by the cruel Dame? or does he, in losing the vision of passion, awake unworthy of her love, abandoned in the barren world? Does he sojourn by the withered lake by choice, or is he constrained there by the cruel Dame? Who is the Dame anyway? Some have suggested that she is Love--both beguiling and destructive, as we have seen--some, that she is the merciless poetic Muse, either imprisoning the knight-poet in barrenness when he loses the poetic vision, or tantalizing him cruelly with its ecstatic taste before abandoning him, isolated in the stark dead world. Bate reminds us that "in this ballad all clues to ready judgment are withheld" and that the poem is doubly and deliberately suggestive of the attractions and dangers of both love and poetry --impulses that draw him, not into the blessed private sanctuary where Porphyro becomes the realization of Madeline's poetic/erotic dream, but into isolation and death in the loss of the self to the dangerous enticements of love and art (Bate, 478-81).

These two poems explore the two extremes of Keats's feelings, but as Keats would of course recognize, the two are not really separate impulses: they exist with and within one another. The perils and pleasure of love live side by side, in a tenuous union typical of Keats: the private grove of love becomes a mixture of paradise and hell made explicit in the dream sonnet "As Hermes once took." After reading Cary's translation of Dante, Keats wrote:

I dreamed of being in that region [the second circle] of Hell. The dream was one of the most delightful enjoyments I ever had in my life--I floated about the whirling atmosphere . . . with a beautiful figure to whose lips mine were joined as it seemed for an age. . . . and in the midst of all this cold and darkness I was warm. (Letters, II, p. 91)

Paradise in the midst of hell--Newell Ford writes that "Rather than chastening him, as Dante intended, the infernal punishment of the lovers lost all moral significance and was transformed into a luxurious sex-dream" (Ford, 126-7). Certainly Keats's dream-image of being joined "for an age" is sexual, but both the poet and the poem suggest much more than a mere wet dream. In fact, Keats goes on in the same letter to write that "I tried a Sonnet upon it--there are fourteen lines but nothing of what I felt in it." The poem might be less "luxurious" than the dream it attempts to re-create, but it is perhaps more richly suggestive of Keats's complex feelings about the impulse toward the lover.

The identification of the dream with both Hermes and Paolo is significant in that it merges the two identities of the lover and the poet: Hermes is a poet-figure himself, playing on "a Delphic Reed," lulling Argus, the "dragon world" to sleep so that he can escape from "all its hundred eyes" to a private paradise, where he becomes Paolo, the poet-lover (3, 5). He flees, not to a divine but to a damned place, to hell itself, and there he finds his Keatsian bower. The Penguin edition of the poems gives the usual emendation "whirlwind" (10) from the Indicator's "world-wind" (Poems, 637), but such a change is unfortunate. The original evokes so much more effectively the sense and tone of the whole poem: that the sadness of hell and the lovers' sorrows result not from any Dantean eternal punishment for their carnality but "from the misery of the conflict between romantic love and a hostile world" (Barnard, 95). Though in hell and battered by the "world-wind," they create at least in the intimate space between them an inviolable refuge. We can sense the relief, the spiritual lightness such a refuge provides in "I floated" (14), echoing the lightness of Hermes' feathers in the opening line. The multiple-

identified poet/lover is free at last from the eyes of the "dragon-world," with his lover in an intensely personal sanctuary not even the violence of the "world-wind" can breach.

But the sanctuary itself, free perhaps from outside intrusion, presents its own problems. Dante's moral judgment of the lovers is absent, as Ford points out, but if this dream of hell provides a sought-after refuge from the prying eyes of the "dragon-world," it is still no "luxurious sex-dream," no blissful bower. While the sanctuary of the lovers' embrace partakes of paradise in the midst of hell, it also reverberates with its own particular dangers; free from external dangers, they are vulnerable to the destructive potential in their embrace, to the possibility of hell in the midst of their personal paradise. The "Flaw/Of rain and hail-stones" (10-11) recalls the "flaw-blown sleet" (325), the intimations of danger and loss into which Madeline and Porphyro flee; the pale lips of the Dantean lovers echo the "pale kings and princes too,/Pale warriors, death-pale" (37-8) who warn the knight of his enthrallment. Like the knight, the lovers in hell are enthralled, trapped in their own longed-for embrace, with or without moral judgments--Keats's focus here is not on the punishment of carnal sin, but on the perils of love in the midst of its obvious pleasures.

All three poems thus depict the ambivalent nature of the lovers' impulse toward each other and away from the world. Robin Mayhead writes of "The Eve of St. Agnes":

In a way . . . Angela is right to call [Porphyro] a 'cruel man,' for although he brings his lady the love that she craves, he wakes her to face with him a world whose reality may prove . . . mingled in its pleasure and its pain . . . (Mayhead, 53)

Their lovers' world will prove both paradise and hell, both the pleasure of

fulfillment and the pain of loss and fear in the unknown. The opening voice in "La Belle Dame" is that poem's Angela, the voice from the world looking on and still unable to understand the knight's situation, the horribly final fulfillment of the lover's impulse to leave the world with the beloved. Losing the world, losing the self--this is the hellish underside to the lovers' private paradise. The poetic dream, such an important and powerful image in Keats's poetry, becomes itself a kind of Keatsian bower: refuge is possible only within its tenuous confines, and when the lovers wake and the dream is gone, they flee not into sanctuary but "into the storm" (371); when the poet wakes from the pleasant refuge of his "luxurious sex-dream," he must struggle with the often disturbing realities of the human heart.

Keats uses the image of the bower to suggest a separation, temporary or permanent, from the earthly and mutable; he also creates certain poetical constructs that function structurally, aesthetically, and philosophically in the same manner. Sleep, dreams, and visions have a greater task in his poetry than simply to symbolize a certain state of receptiveness to the Muse: their appearance serves to distance the text, to heighten the poetic dialogue and separate it aesthetically from the world of the reader, in the same way that the image of the bower serves to isolate the poet from the mutable world. So when, for example, in "Endymion" or even as late as "The Fall of Hyperion" the reader must move through increasingly complex layers of vision within dreams within dreams within a poem which is itself a dream, the poet is setting up the structural analogue to the bower image, distancing himself and his art from the world, creating the vision-bower where he may meet his Muse. In that rarified vision-world, the poet is free from earthly taint to create--or to reflect--Truth and Beauty, just as the lovers in their bower are free from the

"world-wind" to love each other. Expanding the analogy, then, we find that these structural analogues to the bower image bear the same danger--that, like the man walking the Highlands in the shadow of Burns, he will be snatched away from rich and troubling mortality, that the cable connecting him to life will be severed.

The "Ode (Bards of Passion and of Mirth)," written in 1818 and published in the 1820 collection, begins to develop Keats's later idea that poets hold a double allegiance--an allegiance he felt ill-equipped to maintain--that they are "double-lived" and are connected as inextricably to earth as they are to the eternal. It affirms the idea Keats expressed in his letter, "we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we call happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone" (Letters, I, 185).

The Ode is divided into four parts: a four-line refrain at the beginning and end, and between, two stanzas detailing the twin lives of poets. Overall, this is an unremarkable poem, but it bears examining for the striking contrast between the heavenly and the earthly lives of poets: the "heavenly" verse takes on more of the sensations and images of earth than the "earthly" verse is allowed. The heavenly souls of poets are surrounded by the "noise of fountains," "voices thund'rous," "trees . . . lawns" on which browse, earthlike, "fawns" (7-9, 11-12). This heavenly life is fully inhabited by the flora and fauna of earth--with the essential difference, that they are "repeated in a finer tone." The daisies there are "rose-scented"--they are themselves, as on earth, only more so. Roses, accordingly, move further up the tonal scale, bearing a perfume unknown on earth--the rose is itself, only more so (14-6). The nightingale, which elsewhere speaks so beautifully to Keats's imagination (perhaps because of its ambiguity) is finally free to speak clearly all "divine

melodious truth"; the poet's mind, free of earthly confusion, is free at last to understand clearly (19). The mysteries which on earth provide such food for poets (which Keats, groping, related in his "Beauty is Truth" equation) are themselves clarified, and the truth they dimly point to on earth becomes in eternity Truth, revealed and real.

The ode then moves to the "earthly" soul of poets. What is striking here is the lack of detail, of sensation, in comparison to the "heavenly" verse--a deliberate move that reveals Keats's contradictory allegiance, his own "double-lived" state. He longs to attain the heavenly, immutable life of poesy, but in creating it in his imagination, he clothes it in the richest garb he knows: the colors, sounds, sensations of this earthly life. That he does not do the same in describing the earthly souls of poets is a measure, perhaps, of his would-be repudiation of that earthly life. If this verse is deliberately weaker, nevertheless there are flashes of brilliance. The word "slumbered," for example, is a wonderfully Keatsian condensation, its structure both intransitive and transitive, giving us both the soul's action ("my soul slumbered") and the action of a greater outside force upon the soul (Death slumbered the souls). That our souls can be "slumbered" evokes not merely the sleepy dullness of earthly life but final sleep of death (28). In this verse, too, Keats touches upon a common theme throughout his poetry--the responsibility the poet bears toward the non-visionary world, which we will see again in "The Fall of Hyperion." Perhaps still trying to justify his questionable career (to himself as much as to his guardian Abbey, Mrs. Brawne, and others), he claims for those heavenly poets--and for himself--the task of instructing:

And the souls ye left behind you
 Teach us, here, the way to find you . . .
 Here, your earth-born souls still speak
 To mortals, of their little week;
 Thus ye teach us, every day,
 Wisdom, though fled far away. (25-6, 29-30, 35-36)

Notice, too, the pun in "little week": not merely the rather commonplace metaphor for the short, transitory span of man's life, but also suggesting the "puling infant's force" ("Sleep and Poetry," 185), aspiring, while yet deaf and blind, to the eternal. Keats has moved away from the idea that poets somehow require separation from the mutable--he knows now that the two lives are (must be) intertwined--but he has not fully reconciled himself to mortality.

The relationship between sleep and death, and the longing for release from the conscious world of suffering, is nowhere more explicit than in the sonnet "To Sleep," written April 1819, as one of the five experimental sonnet forms that included the "Ode to Psyche." The hymnlike opening quartet invokes Sleep as a sort of demigod and the poet as a representative of Sleep's votaries. These lines establish Sleep as the bringer of death and release: "soft embalmer," "still midnight," "benign," "gloom-pleased," "Enshaded in forgetfulness divine" (1-4). The poem then changes, not only in the rhyme form, but more significantly in the movement from the representative "Our" to the singular and pleading "my willing eyes" (3, 6). The poet breaks from the formal hymn to create a personal appeal for release from the burdens of consciousness. That the poet welcomes release is clear--he considers the forgetfulness and end to waking that the poppies bring to be "lulling charities," and the poet begs for Sleep/death to "save me . . . Save me from curious conscience" (8-9, 11). The word "curious" is understood in its older sense of unduly careful and unremittingly attentive--giving us a sense of a

man haunted by the unending workings of his own mind. No wonder he longs for "a Life of Sensation rather than of Thoughts" (Letters, I, 185).

Barnard has pointed out that Keats breaks the Shakespearean sonnet form, "tying the sestet's rhymes into that of the octet, thus achieving a more fluid movement" (Poems, 641). While the idea of fluidity of rhyme nicely mirrors the soft encroachment of Sleep, I think the stylistic break here serves another purpose. The rhyme is unexpected and, for a reader expecting the Shakespearean rhyme form, would no doubt create confusion and a certain poetic anxiety. The broken rhyme form works against fluidity, creating an eddy of tension and disorientation that characterizes consciousness for the tortured poet.

The final protection against the "burrowing mole" of wakefulness is the final sleep of death, intimated in the first quartet and in the final two lines. The poet orders Sleep with chilling calm and finality to "seal" up his consciousness, not simply to store for safekeeping, as one would jewels. The "hushed casket" will not be opened again--it has been sealed, suggesting a permanent closing-off of the soul from the waking and mutable world. Sealed up by Sleep, the "casket of my soul" becomes the solipsistic bower where a more final sleep may enclose the poet forever. The relief of release is perhaps mirrored in the soothing, hypnotic sibilants and unvoiced consonants of the final line: "seal," "hushed," "soul," with only the hard, jarring "casket" to disturb its peaceful drop down into silence and unknowing.

Sleep and dream images continue to work through Keats's later poetry, creating within their poetic confines the bowery refuge where his vision could take shape. One of the most interesting differences between "Hyperion" and "The Fall of Hyperion" is the increasingly complex poetic structure in the

level of vision, the temple of Saturn (I, 46-55). Through the mediating substance of "Maian incense," which "spread around/Forgetfulness of everything but bliss," the poet first hears and comprehends the voice of Moneta, who will usher him into yet a third level of vision. Like the "poison," the incense is double-edged: it calls him both to understanding and to the death-in-life struggle at the foot of the temple stairs. In the pleasure-in-pain ministrations of these vision-things we can see Keats's clear ambivalence toward the siren call of art: it calls him forth to eternal fulfillment, but the process is agony-wracked and fraught with the danger that he will lose himself even as he "evolves" to a higher form of himself.

(Hoeveler has an interesting reading of Moneta as the figure of the Muse. She combines the Romantic Muse's dual qualities of being "On the one hand . . . beneficent and unthreatening"--in that she is his guide and teacher in the world of vision--and on the other hand, "denying, cruel, and punishing"--in that she requires all, even death, from the poet who seeks her. Moneta as the Muse "tropes both his best hopes . . . and his worst fears about the price he has paid" [Hoeveler, 206, 247].)

Finally through a godlike intensification of vision, the poet is equipped to apprehend Truth directly (rather than through outside sources):

there grew
A power within me to see as a God sees, and take the depth
Of things as nimbly as the outward eye
Can size and shape pervade. (I, 302-6)

By acquiring godlike knowledge and the means to sustain his vision-dream, the poet takes the place of Apollo in "Hyperion," who cries,

yet I can read
 A wondrous lesson in thy silent face:
 Knowledge enormous makes a God of me. . . .
 Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,
 And deify me, as if some blithe wine
 Or bright elixer peerless had drunk,
 And so become immortal. (III, 111-13, 117-20)

The parallels between Apollo in "Hyperion" and the poet in "The Fall of Hyperion" are clear: Apollo appeals to Mnemosyne for knowledge, just as the poet pleads, "purge off,/Benign, if so it please thee, my mind's film" (I, 145-6). Both Apollo, fledgling god, and the poet undergo a death-into-life struggle to achieve their parallel states of transcendence:

Soon wild commotions shook him, and made flush
 All the immortal fairness of his limbs -
 Most like the struggle at the gate of death;
 Or liker still to one who should take leave
 Of pale immortal death, and with a pang
 As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse
 Die into life: so young Apollo anguished.
- At length
 Apollo shrieked -
("Hyperion," III, 124-30, 134-5)

I shrieked, and the sharp anguish of my shriek
 Stung my own ears . . .
 Slow, heavy, deadly was my pace: the cold
 Grew stifling, suffocating, at the heart;
 And when I clasped my hands I felt them not.
 One minute before death, my iced foot touched
 The lowest stair . . .
"Thou has felt
 What 'tis to die and live again"
("The Fall of Hyperion," I, 126-7, 129-133, 141-2)

In "Hyperion," the student is Apollo, his teacher Mnemosyne, and through her instruction, he achieves godhood; in "The Fall," Moneta teaches the poet, an analogue of Apollo, and through her instruction he achieves, if not godhood, then what for Keats must have been the equivalent: a permanent poetical reality of vision outside the reality of the mutable world--the bower realized.

Only within this poetic construct, this vision within a dream within a dream, can the poet comprehend "the lofty theme" of the sorrowful world. He has achieved, through his poetic vision, the state of "sovereignty" that Oceanus exhorts his fellow gods to accept: "to bear all naked truths/And to envisage circumstance, all calm" ("Hyperion," II, 203-4). The painful irony of this visionary refuge is that the poet, so full now of godlike vision and "the lofty theme," can never return to the world beyond those "black gates/ . . . shut against the sunrise evermore" (I, 85-6). Keats longs to be the kind of poet who is "a sage,/A humanist, physician to all men," one whose verse "pours out a balm upon the world" (just as Saturn longs to exercise "influence benign on planets pale"), but in achieving the transcendent vision, he permanently removes himself from the world (I, 189-90, 201, 414). By ascending the temple stairs--entering his own poetical construct--he finds that, transcending the earth at last, he has left it behind forever, and must instead travel deeper into the vision, fulfilling for eternity Moneta's declaration that he is not of the Earth but instead "a dreaming thing,/A fever of thyself" (I, 168-9). Keats seeks the gods of vision--finds them within the poetic bower of his vision-dream--but he cannot return to share that vision and restore the lost dream to a suffering world. The transcendent bower, the poetical construct of vision, has become both the paradise of fulfillment and the hell of eternal isolation from the world he longs to serve.

When Keats set himself the task in "Sleep and Poetry" to "do the deed/That my own soul has to itself decreed" (97, 8), he little realized how far his Muse would take him. From the naive young poet who railed against the "poets Polyphemes" whose work

Is like a fallen angel: trees uptorn,
 Darkness, and worms, and shrouds, and sepulchres
 Delight it; for it feeds upon the burrs,
 And thorns of life; forgetting the great end
 Of Poesy, that it should be a friend
 To soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man

Keats gradually came to integrate the darker side of experience into his understanding of "Truth" and "Beauty" (234, 242-7). What Keats found--and his poetry was nothing if not his own quest to clarify his confusing, ambivalent views about human life and poetry--was that the visionary imagination that transcends the merely human and natural is inadequate to the problem of mutability--it is indeed problematic itself. For the requirements of the Muse and the requirements of human life and love are mutually antagonistic: to achieve the sublime requires the loss of the world of sensation that gives his poetry its richness, vitality, and greatest inspiration. To escape from mutability into the "bower" of art is no more an answer for Keats than it was for Madeline and Porphyro, or for the poet in "The Fall of Hyperion."

The metamorphosing bower--from paradise, to stasis, to a hell in isolation--follows Keats's developing sensitivity to his multiple, intertwined roles as poet, lover, and human being. Keats found himself pulled between two impulses: on the one hand, as both poet and mortal suffering first-hand the results of time, disease, and decay, he yearned to escape the mutable, to move away from "the muddy stream," and toward the ideal world of Truth and Beauty; on the other hand, at the same time, and for the same reasons, he discovered the growing desire to remain in the world, to remain connected to the movement of time and passion, to remain part of the "still, sad music of Humanity." Wigod observes:

Since life is a flow and subsists in change, the flow of blood within and the flow of time and circumstance without, in addition to the constant physical activity of the body, then the essential nature and vitality of life itself is negated when transfixed in art. (180)

Keats could not relinquish the pain of mutability without also relinquishing the very flow and pulse of his greatest poetry--his own life's calling--thus rendering life savorless and the poet alienated from all that was most meaningful. The image of the bower--the embodiment of that first impulse--gradually takes on the tension of the struggle between the two opposed urges. That tension would remain largely unreconciled. His letters near the end of his life contain both great despair that he was leaving the world unfulfilled -- his great potential for art and love untapped--and great relief that the pain of disease and disappointment would be over, that his essential struggle would be resolved soon enough. Through the image of the bower we can trace Keats's explorations of the implications and costs of his poetic destiny, his struggle to ask the questions and to find the answers for his own heart's dilemma.

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