

**Dreaming of Love's Elysium:
The Prodigal Beauty of John Keats's *Endymion***

A.A. Gallagher

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Dr. Heringman

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Advisor: Dr. Noah Heringman

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Keats's poem famously begins with the ambitious assertion, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever"; and indeed, the reader of this work is invited to an experience of consummate Beauty, by virtue of which she is further enjoined to the critical task of explaining and understanding both how that Beauty is achieved and why such Beauty is meaningful. And of course, to accomplish this critical endeavor, one must engage with the specifics of the poem's virtuosic art in tandem with the broader themes which those specific artistic choices in collaboration necessarily evoke. But a thorough understanding of the poem entails sensitivity to its many dimensions; which is to say, one must read the work both 1) literally, as a tale of the fantastic, in which deities, faeries, and magic abound, and also 2) allegorically, so that characters and events collaborate in an extended metaphor to convey a less obvious but parallel meaning. Therefore, an essential part of the critical project entails legitimating the beliefs and assumptions that would admit of a perspective in which the fantastic is not merely an anomalous, impossible fiction. And, in so doing, one attempts to redeem the poem's unique, polytheistic religious vision—rather than resorting solely to an allegorical reading which but distorts that vision so as to fit a perhaps more popular schema of religious belief.

Of course, Beauty is not a quality exclusive to art, even if it feels tragically remote from life; and my analysis seeks to elucidate its powerful relevance to nature, gender, love, and even to the transcendent or sacred which unites as it imbues many aspects of experience—as these categories of experience are harmoniously mediated by and depicted through Keats's poetry. Nature in his work is vibrant and vital, luxurious and divine; often, it is sensuously dense and abundant with supernatural potentials which challenge circumscribed notions of the possible. Gender in Keats's work in some essential way feels conspicuously absent; which is to say, he surprises the contemporary reader with a vision in which certain culturally significant notions lack definite expression, even as some critics from his historical moment impugned him and his work in an unfortunately gendered way. Yet most significantly, this is a tale of Love and of Love's spiritual potential and sanctifying power. Finally, as the relationship between Art and Life is not only mimetic, part of the critical project necessarily entails a discussion of the conflict or disparity which seems to exist between real vs ideal Beauty, and between the profane vs the sacred—as well as the power of their potentially redemptive reconciliation.

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Preface

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Although Keats's *Endymion* is not new (by which I mean it is of course not a contemporary work), it proffers a vision which feels novel and replete with ingenuity; if one takes the time to study its careful and immensely imaginative poetic art, the reward will be an unrivaled experience of Beauty—and Beauty in its fullest sense, not merely that which is trite, picturesque, or inoffensive. Indeed, “beauty” often seems to denote but so many clichés, neat, manicured surfaces, or something specious and without substance; “beauty” is not always spoken in a spirit of breathless awe and admiration, nor is it even necessarily expressive of genuine feeling. It might be uttered to confer a certain agreement, to express that an artwork has realized its apparent function and accords with the necessary conventions, or simply to express the awareness that one is experiencing art which ostensibly has a claim to beauty but whose beauty is not comprehended as such. It can function as that convenient and safe term which bypasses the assessment and articulation of genuine feeling; for the expression of that genuine feeling entails an honest confrontation with the work in conversation with one's perhaps embattled life experiences.

To the extent that an artwork feels remote, its beauty might seem irrelevant...or, it might proffer an unexpected and impossible vision of ideality; and for it to be remote in this sense is to reveal the tragic disparity which has somehow ruptured an important and essential continuity between art and life. In this sense, life may not be remote from beauty, but beauty is remote from life, and its rather defiant, incongruous assertion seems either a forgotten memory or a hopeful portent: a promise of meaning in a world overwhelmed by grotesque suffering and desolate of deeper purpose. I believe that Keats's *Endymion* is such a vision: although one does not

encounter a poignant reflection of our current circumstances, one does encounter a world of previously unimagined potentials, an innocent world of magic and wonder, where Nature is the abode of Sacred Mystery united in Love.

My thesis proceeds from this deeper understanding of Beauty, from the sense that Beauty is a sacred ideal powerfully relevant to many aspects of human experience; and, I employ the term “aesthetic” in a broad sense, often simply in discussing a work of art qua art, knowing further that the aesthetic sense is relevant to a wide range of human experiences beyond the domain of art. And it is indeed my primary task in this thesis is to illuminate how the poem evinces such profound Beauty, both in its intricate particulars and in the broader, more encompassing themes it also invites one to cognize, for the poem, like most works of art, is necessarily a place for meaning-making. Of course, one is aware that a work’s meaning is inevitably made in collaboration with a unique subjectivity—even if only in and through a relatively simple or straightforward act of perception. The reader might strive to delimit our focus, emphasizing formal properties over contextual and intertextual relations, but we ultimately cannot preclude or avoid that subjectivity (i.e. that of the reader): just as to see is to implicate a perspective in the act of seeing. And meaning-making, which is necessarily a process of relation between an artwork and the self who encounters it, is the essence of the project, for the revelation or discovery of unforeseen meaning in a world often veiled in darkness itself attains to a certain Beauty.

The paper begins by positing several, parallel levels of interpretation (i.e. the literal and the allegorical) which one can confidently assert mutually occur so as to enhance and deepen one’s overall experience of the poem; these various levels of meaning may be predicated on fundamentally disparate perspectives, but such differences may not necessitate that (simply by

virtue of that difference) one view or interpretation must somehow cancel the other—rather than productively augment and complicate one’s total experience of the poem. But the implication of such an approach seems to call attention to, or provoke the necessity of, the real legitimacy of the fantastic or surreal; to read the poem’s narrative events and characters in a literal fashion demands a certain perspective capable of authentic belief, of belief precisely in those seemingly anomalous events which defy certain studied expectations and which challenge that which structures one’s sense of the possible. Which is to say, to understand the poem in such a way first entails the essential task of legitimating those assumptions or beliefs which would admit of such a perspective; for if we are inclined to an allegorical reading – to the exclusion of a more literal interpretation – such ostensibly impossible events are in some significant way divested of that difficult quality.

And to read the poem from a variety of perspectives seems to contribute to a greater and more holistic meaning, just as to admit of only a narrow allegorical reading (as certain critics seem inclined to do) detracts from and misrepresents the work. Further, one must note that part of what follows from such a reading (in which the fantastic elements of a story are construed as literal) not only has limited relevance to the poem’s plot, but necessarily suggests a broader difference of worldview; in reading the poem, and then in deriving from it a manner in which it might be better appreciated, the reader is further encouraged to see his own world differently: in redeeming this aspect of the poem, one poses a challenge to certain perhaps unquestioned assumptions about the nature of reality, in no small part accomplished through and as the poem’s unique religious vision. Further, notions of “reality” acquire meaning when contrasted to both that which is ideal and that which is illusory, and Keats’s *Endymion* exhibits how these qualities or attributes interact and qualify each other in complex ways.

I feel that the poem's unique religious vision must be acknowledged on its own terms, and not distorted to fit a more popular scheme, even as this vision seems at times rather syncretic; indeed, the supernatural and the transcendent are intimately connected and uniquely expressed in *Endymion*. Most obviously, Nature figures prominently as divine, and its divinity is expressed through and as living deities. Much of my critical project entails elaboration of the role Nature plays in the story—both in terms of its transcendent or divine qualities and in terms of its carefully crafted aesthetic depiction, which conveys such organic phenomena often in a powerfully beautiful way. Similarly, throughout the work, by isolating particularly powerful passages, and by careful attention to and explication of formal and stylistic choices, I seek to explain how the experience of beauty is demonstrated, achieved, or expressed. My paper progresses from exploring the expansion of Endymion's sense of the possible to discuss how his journey shares in the convention of katabasis – or a descent into the underworld – so that his quest can be understood as paradoxically both one of ascent and of descent. In so doing, I juxtapose two different “underworlds” figured in the narrative so as to illuminate the beauty of one and the more ambiguous, darkly morbid qualities of the other, as that juxtaposition further conveys a certain breadth as well as depth of emotion which qualifies or imbues Love and passion with suffering.

From this, I transition into the third portion of the thesis in which humanly significant and/or cultural notions of gender are interrogated both in relation to interpretations or judgments of Keats's language and as depicted by Keats himself in the poem. When one considers the poem through a gendered lens, one feels a discordance between certain past accusations or criticisms of the poem and the poem's contemporary experience. Often, such criticisms seem but to reveal the unfortunate biases of the time in which Keats wrote, and they necessarily lose their substance

when read with a contemporary understanding of gender. Again, nature figures prominently, both in its relation to humanity and yet also in its contrast to culture. And beauty too becomes relevant, not only to art or to aesthetic merits but also to cultural constructs and norms which seem peculiarly gendered, so that nature, culture, and art interact in mutually illuminating ways. The characters Adonis and Circe are contrasted, yet not through a facile gendered binary; masculinity is not simply contrasted with femininity, rather the criticism seeks to understand both characters in terms of artistic and cultural *beauty*, just as artistic and cultural notions of beauty interact in vexed and confusing – if also sometimes in productively disruptive – ways.

My argument moves from *nature* – and in part from the complex ways in which we experience or seek to understand it – to *humanity*, and the inescapably human understanding which colors and determines our experience of nature, art, and divinity, etc. and finally to the redemptive power of *Transcendent Love*. Beauty, of course, is a prominent theme and is frequently explored and delineated as manifested in careful poetic art, even as it, too, can be figured as a powerful and more encompassing ideal, and one which at times eludes or confounds the understanding, attaining to a certain sacredness. And indeed, notions of the sacred or divine also permeate so as to unite most every aspect of my discussion, yet I refuse to embrace a perhaps more conventional view which might needlessly distort the poem so as to fit a preconceived schema of religious conviction. My most emphatic assertion is that that which humans experience as diversely divine proffers a kind of mysterious and necessary meaning, in part to be known through and as the holiness of Love.

Interlude

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Works of art, most fundamentally, perhaps can be described as intentional artifacts, and as creations preoccupied with Beauty—as well as with the grotesque, the decadent, and the macabre, for their purview is spectacularly nuanced and deep, enabling contemplation of, and existing precisely as that which challenges us to engage more fully and thoughtfully with, a great diversity of human experience. And yet, to what extent does "Art," when engaged in a symbolic transmutation of the profane, demarcate an imaginative space that is functionally sacred? Indeed, art often very literally derives its inspiration from a sensitivity to and respect for the sacred, as an icon might exist as homage to a deity, as a song might express sincere devotion and praise, or as a poem strives to honor and exalt a more abstract divinity vaguely but profoundly intimated as a mysteriously redemptive aspect of human experience. I believe it could be persuasively argued that one deep motivation to create art and the experience of the aesthetic sense more generally – and poetry more specifically – or something of its essential origin, is vitally connected to a spiritual or religious impulse (in its inspiration and exaltation, etc.). And yet, with every work of literature there is necessarily a more fundamental transformation entailed in its existence as a mode of representation – even in the most strictly “realistic” of works – as the infinity of lives, objects, and sensations comprising one’s lonely perceptions suddenly have verbal equivalents. Indeed, to think at all demands representation, as a thought, however abstract, cannot exist apart from an apperceptive creativity, even if there exists a disparity between a thought and that thought’s (secondary) representation which might find meaningful manifestation as some form of art, itself conducive to many modes of meaning-making.

Art and its infinite varieties are in some significant way not merely static entities; which

is to say, though the words which may comprise a poem miraculously persist in themselves more or less unchanged through time, the various possible interpretations and variously derived meanings perpetually recreate that work. Similarly, it may be largely the reader's responsibility to find that meaning and to convey its relevance so as to defy and challenge an artwork's obsolescence. Such transformations of meaning thus necessarily allude to various contexts which provide perhaps the several frames and interpretive lenses through which that meaning is made and re-made. With this in mind, one becomes aware of how the same text, depending upon the reader and/or the reader's preferred methodology and unique experiences, can actually yield radically different texts with respect to interpretive meaning-making.

Yet these apparently radical differences of interpretation can coexist as various levels of meaning which, though necessarily contingent on the critical assumptions of the frameworks which construct them, productively enrich the work with a depth and diversity of relevance. Which is to say, such frameworks do not inevitably compete with one another but rather attend differently to different features of a given work so as to recreate that work from a certain privileged vantage—though a subject can legitimately be apprehended from many vantages. And it is through this principle that one arrives at the simultaneous validity of the literal-marvelous and/or surreal and the veiled symbolism of allegory (in that allegory can be said to be comprised of symbols structuring an extended metaphor—), both of which ultimately work in tandem to prompt perplexing questions about art's potential obligation to Truth, the legitimacy of the purely Imagined, the value of reality subversion, of visions, dreams, and fantastic chimeras, and of the wonders and terrors of sojourning in realms of impossibility.

Indeed, though metaphor and allegory are virtues of and valuable to poetry, one

ultimately doubts that every fantastic incident can and should be interpreted only figuratively¹: What is the value of metaphor and allegory if such literary devices only render the fantastic and "impossible" benign? or if events and characters, etc. are denied their literal, ostensibly impossible aspects so as to only have figurative legitimacy? or if attention to figurative devices ultimately collapses a certain necessary complexity into that which is merely trite? Should there *not* be possible or permissible several, numerous productively different interpretations or layers of meaning, and yet interpretations which do not serve to preclude or negate one another as rivals? Can't a journey be both allegorical – as a dream might be – and yet a reminder of the frailty and narrowness of a worldview too partial to and certain of "reality" and the limits of the possible? Are dreams themselves not evidence of fantastic realities (which seem only to lose their reality through the manner in which we might attempt to explain them)? When is to dismiss the fantastic or surreal but a means of divesting, rather than of making, meaning? One enduring virtue of Romantic sensibility is the high priority and valuation of the Imagination, and – it seems to this partial reader – an allegorical reading should not serve to delegitimize other complementary readings which consider much of the text more literally, yet perhaps with equally complex and indeed confusing implications:

For when the reader is aware that a story is perhaps not only allegorical/symbolical but potentially literal or with literal potential, how is one to proceed with analysis for which a summary might seemingly suffice? One implication, however, of the literal fantastic is that it may not entirely preclude analysis so much as it fundamentally redirects one's attempts at explanation and understanding. Perhaps when the experience of the impossible defies the expectations of cultivated and studied reason we have *madness*, whereas when the experience of

¹ See Appendix note 1 for a brief historical account of such phenomena.

the impossible confirms belief, we have *miracle*. (...though the “impossible” is sought not solely for itself or for its novelty but in defiance of corrupting influences as an assertion of the soul’s preeminence—) Yet in the limiting and limited presumptions of a certain circumscribed truth – which would dismiss not only illusion, but potentially even *belief*, as but permutations of delusion – one comes to see the potential validity of the supposed deviations from a worldview predicated on a precarious reason; and, one comes to acknowledge the more than illusory power of imagined ideals and transcendent intimations, the soul awake to and motivated by the tantalizing promise of ardent and extravagant hopes finding fruition. And further, in reading such a poem as *Endymion*, one might not only “suspend disbelief” to humor the fantastic but to necessarily discover or rediscover the power of belief and believing, of *dreams* and of *dreaming* in the sense of daring to hope. Through the faculty of the Imagination we are given a certain freedom to explore and experience impossibilities, as art might and, without necessarily rejecting reason, still manage to challenge its tyranny of one’s mind. For indeed, in the direct experience of either madness or miracle, one might also be confronted with the *necessity* of altering one’s understanding, of changing the types or modes of knowledge one privileges or believes to be true. And, after all, such seemingly anomalous experiences in one’s immediate reality don’t render the search for meaning any less imperative, even as they complicate or confound the perspective for which such is persistently necessary.

I begin with a litany of questions: If Endymion is a hero, what is the nature of his heroism; what *kind* of hero is he? What might be heroic with respect to a poet’s artistic obsessions, responsibilities, or creations (in rendering the protagonist’s journey analogous to poetic endeavor)? When erotic love is simultaneously heavenly, what complications and implications follow thus to confound the distinction between that which is profane and that

which is sacred? What follows from the opposition of the aesthetic to the erotic? What differences might exist between a spiritual beauty as opposed to a profane beauty? Does the erotic ever transgress into the grotesque? What of ugliness and the grotesque in Keats's work? What is the Imagination's role with respect to the beautiful? or to the holy? What of Keats's depictions of femininity *and* masculinity (...for in neglecting one, do we not but highlight the alterity of the other)? Is there substance to distinctions between "reality" and "illusion"? Or between the Ideal and the Real? Does not Art in general meaningfully complicate and confound these distinctions? In their confusion, conflation, or confounding, do we not precisely arrive at the validity of the surreal or the literal fantastic? And is such a disruption of expectations madness or miracle? When is a poem less art or artifact than, say, a flower? What meanings follow from the conflation of Beauty and Truth? If what is "true" is necessarily antithetical to "illusion," does it follow that beauty must be as well? What gives Beauty its profundity? Why should Love feel a salvation or constitute redemption? Like the abundance of beautiful images in Keats's poem, a profusion of questions is also, if indirectly, proffered by this work, and yet questions which defy both facile answers and fixed certainties; indeed, it seems fit to read Keats as presumably Keats himself read, both poetry and his world: with awareness of the validity of the "negative capability"; with a certain respect for doubt and Mystery—as all of these questions seem but various means or paths to explore life and literature's abiding *Why?*

I. Introduction

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth
Of noble natures, of the gloomy days,
Of all the unhealthy and o'er-darkened ways
Made for our searching: yes, in spite of all,
Some shape of beauty moves away the pall
From our dark spirits. Such the sun, the moon,
Trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon
For simple sheep; and such are daffodils
With the green world they live in; and clear rills
That for themselves a cooling covert make
'Gainst the hot season; the mid forest brake,
Rich with a sprinkling of fair musk-rose blooms:
And such too is the grandeur of the dooms
We have imagined for the mighty dead;
All lovely tales that we have heard or read:
An endless fountain of immortal drink,
Pouring unto us from the heaven's brink.

.....

...And so Keats's *Endymion* begins with a presentation of human life as that which is necessarily of sorrow and shadows—though the profound Beauty of certain sensuous and supersensuous experiences powerfully mitigates the inevitable pain and grief of the tragic, the mutable, the finite, and all we experience as a somber and sobering darkness, chastening and instructive of Sublime Mystery. And as the pale moon herself is made luminous amidst a dark and daunting abyss, Beauty often emerges as a merciful light, as a promise of meaning which dispels or redeems that fathomless and relentless Darkness. Indeed, the sun and moon literally banish darkness, but the beauty of which they are emblems seems almost divine or of divinity

and thus analogous to the sacred soul whose immanence intimated or apprehended seems itself an undying light, serene, sanctifying, and transcendent. And yet, though contrast may afford a certain clarity, Beauty, perhaps, needs neither foil nor antagonist, being more than a fortuitous pairing of light and dark. Indeed, it would seem Beauty enfolds the essence of eternity; it is that which exalts to immortality; it is that which endures so as to defy the infinite pains, degradations, and sorrows that so piteously mar and challenge steadfast souls, itself miraculously immune to such taints. It seems safe to assume that, implicit in the emphatic assertion “A thing of beauty is a joy forever,” “beauty” is to be the fundamental concern, foremost inspiration, and deepest aspiration of this poem; in its pursuit and eventual realization (even as Beauty is nearly synonymous with and deeply complicated by emotions of Love), Endymion wins such an eternity, an immortality of life and a nobility of soul, affirming the initial claim in different terms. Love is his guiding impetus, yet Beauty – which is Love’s echo – seems the numinous and sacred power whose realization imbues and sanctifies that Love. Love is the means, yet Beauty is its testament and that which hallows its experience. Further, it can be argued that the expression of Beauty – as experienced and enumerated in poetry, and whose logic is musical, analogical, associative, etc. – yet suffices as its explanation through its various transformations of experience. But my analysis is not necessarily superfluous because beauty’s meaning must also in part be made and discovered in relation to the self which animates and echoes its experience: my spirit, in greeting the work², also implicates itself in understanding and appreciating it.

Endymion is a work which not only provides a touchstone for numerous important ideas – existing as a nucleus around which other perennially relevant and vexing topics might revolve – but, in allowing it to be amenable to many layers of meaning, one can read the story 1) literally,

² See Appendix note 2 for the letter which famously expounds upon this principle.

as a tale of the fantastic or surreal (importantly read with the awareness and concomitant respect that a belief in the possibility of the *reality* of various gods – even if the narrative events themselves constitute imaginative inventions – points towards a polytheistic and perhaps anachronistic system of belief not to be dismissed as unreal for its potential challenge to or conflict with more conventional – but perhaps no more legitimate – systems and institutions), 2) as an allegory, in which the fantastic and surreal serve as symbols, metaphors, etc. which, as they endow the work with a multitude of potential figurative meanings, supply the literal aspect of the story with an essential depth through the corresponding mystery of some allusive Truth, and even 3) as one might draw a parallel between the “story” or “logic” of the poem, and the process of writing a poem and/or the role of the poet, ultimately discover – in the correlation of process and product – the potential heroic role not only of the protagonist, but of Keats, or of a poet more generally, as ze engages in a process of exploration and revelation and so embarks on a journey interior and exterior.

Primarily, I aim to interrogate and explore aesthetic ideals as evinced in the poem, as well as their significance to or relevance for its depictions of natural phenomena, certain culturally important human experiences (gender, love, etc.), and notions of the transcendent or sacred which yet encompass both. For the relationship between Art and Life is not only mimetic; and, in the chasm between that which seems most immediately real, and that which seems but the ethereal product of impossible dreams, we find an ambiguity replete with possibility, as well as with an uncertainty which at last confounds even the most rigorous attempts of human knowledge to tame or subdue experience. I hope my argument will be more generally united by the pervasive conflict between real and ideal Beauty, which yet finds significant parallels in the dichotomies of reality vs illusion, and of the profane vs the sacred. Keats’s *Endymion*

exemplifies these conflicts and ideas not only through powerful juxtapositions of emotion, image, and theme, but also through its presentation of a vaguely Edenic world in which the complicated realities of dreams and visions challenge circumscribed notions of the possible. Further, as a consummate work of art, it is itself a vision with aesthetic significance. In questioning Beauty's connotations to demonstrate the potential redemptive, transformative, and even numinous power of that ideal, one hopes to assist in enabling an enriched understanding of what Art is and of what it can attain.

II. The Allure of Illusions— —and Empyrean Dreams

*.... "Drawing on this Romantic critique of scientific observation and rational analysis, recent feminist philosophers have re-emphasized the questionable methodological assumptions: most notably, how the faith in genuinely impartial observation involves in the inability to conceive of 'a fact' as 'a contestable component of a theoretically constituted order of things.' Feminist philosophers suggest that because every act of knowing requires an emotional engagement of the knower with the known, 'objectivity' is a psychological and perceptual impossibility. As Mary E. Hawkesworth summarizes, every act of cognition is 'a human practice' that includes the full 'complexity of the interaction between traditional assumptions, social norms, theoretical conceptions, disciplinary strictures, linguistic possibilities, emotional dispositions, and creative impositions.' One cannot perceive without experiencing some sort of connection, without bringing to the act of perception the full range of one's personal, ideologically biased experiences, without locating the perceived object within a pre-existing framework of coherent meaning."*³

³Cambridge Companion to Keats, Wolfson, ed; "Keats and the Complexities of Gender," Anne K. Mellor, p 218

Even as it might necessarily entail faith of a different kind, perhaps the ardent rejection of God/gods or divinity might paradoxically be the assertion of and adherence to ideals of Truth differently conceived. And this is unknowingly indeed a part of Endymion's dilemma: for his quest entails the uncertainty and trials of belief as well as love, for if he loves an illusion, can his love be Love? *(Even still, there are varieties of Truth which, in their intense, mystifying, profound experience do not merely evoke hope or zealous longing but persuasively if mysteriously actually compel conviction: the everywhere immanent soul apprehended when Love and Joy mysteriously reach such an intensity—! and Beauty is the relation between Love the impetus and the Soul in which one has ineffable conviction through Love and Beauty's sanctifying power; the Soul suggests itself in experiences of transcendence by means of a mysterious Love, belief compelled by experiences so powerful to deny the soul's reality is in some way to deny one's living flesh, those experiences having been etched into one's being....what is divine? Is not aloof or remote, yet...in its powerful nearness overwhelms in experiences of Sublimity....)*

...*Endymion* is a story of love and longing but also of some manner of quest which is simultaneously a visitation or revelation; it unfolds according to the illogic of dreams yet ultimately to reveal their substance: their being more than ephemeral, illusive semblances, though at times they also exist as a source of conflict in and for Endymion who cannot but doubt their reality. In the lovers' mutual pursuit, Endymion's quest thus equally constitutes a special instance of theophany, and ultimately of apotheosis; and, to entertain any conception of transcendent divinity is in part to know the circumscribed nature of mortal laws and to believe in the infinite possibilities which lie beyond them. The Moon – or Phoebe, Diana, Selene, and Endymion's love – seems equally a suitable symbol for dreaming and fantasy, the night being

her dominion, and thus the character of the quest: the descent into the depths of mystery and the ascent into heaven's transformative heights, both of which have reality not only in dreams, fantasy, and art, but also potentially in and for anyone willing to believe so. For do we dream only and always to escape (what could only then be an oppressive?) reality, or in some fundamental way to remind us of reality's limitless potentials and veritable magic?

Indeed, Keats's *Endymion* is a work as replete with wonder and magic as it is lush with life and abundant with a universal sensuous beauty. Through this tale of love – which somewhat miraculously resurrects a halcyon from oblivion – one finds childhood beliefs given new legitimacy, even as one comprehends innocent hopes and wishes with a deeper understanding and a much soberer heart. For indeed, the acquisition of real and startling knowledge – though not even half-understood – can be terrifying if profoundly instructive; and part of such knowledge is that what one calls reality is more tenuous and more expansive than can be readily fathomed. And realizing the reality of one's most ardent, innocent dreams also vaguely insinuates the possibility of inadvertently finding oneself amidst so many unforeseen nightmares. But Endymion is brave in the single-mindedness of his pursuit, perhaps emboldened by his love and perplexed and saddened more by her absence, elusiveness, and mystery than by the existential uncertainties, anxieties, and problems which attend definitions of or insights into reality.

But most of all, this is a story of love, and of a manner of love which does not scald and cloy, a type of love whose fires are not of the destructive intensity of a Sublime Passion; they are more subtle, more gentle, and ultimately redemptive in their transformative and unifying powers. If, as Keats claims in a letter to Benjamin Bailey, the heart's affections are indeed holy⁴, to love

⁴ *Keats's Poetry and Prose* p.102; See Appendix note 3 for a passage from the letter which makes such a claim—

in any capacity must properly be a mode of worship, whether the object of such devotion is mortal or immortal. Yet Endymion's love confounds and challenges his belief primarily as a consequence of its surreal and supramundane qualities: for the seeming illusiveness of dreams and the ideality of that which is transcendent and mysterious both can be said to stand in opposition to reality, even if "reality" is necessarily a narrowly defined and limited conception. However, in a work of literature, even the most rigorous efforts at realism can at last only remain verisimilitudes: mere likenesses and partial shadows of reality. Perhaps we need to become sensitive to and appreciative of Beauty in a world where "truth" seems to give ugliness its compelling authority? Or, insofar as "ugliness" constitutes reality, perhaps its at times relentlessly destructive power needs to be heroically confronted, so as to be changed, or redeemed, by discovering or revealing some latent Beauty?

The first book of the poem in part relates the sorrowful changes wrought in Endymion by his ardent longing for the heavenly bliss experienced in his dream-visions. Indeed, it becomes clear that in the experience of ideality, reality grows darker and more oppressive, and that prior contentments can thus become intolerable. As Endymion relates to Peona:

...all the pleasant hues
Of heaven and earth had faded: deepest shades
Were deepest dungeons: heaths and sunny glades
Were full of pestilent light; our taintless rills
Seem'd sooty, and o'er-spread with upturn'd gills
Of dying fish; the vermeil rose had blown
In frightful scarlet, and its thorns out-grown
Like spiked aloe...(l.691-98).

To feel so fully the effulgence in the presence of another's being renders their absence palpable and pervasive. In the wake of these ecstatic, mysterious unions, formerly beautiful things can only acquire a dark and even insidious aspect. One feels Endymion's altered *perspective* in the character of his descriptions rather than the literal transformation of the world in which he exists;

and, the implication is that, by virtue of their contrast to those experiences of mysterious, transcendent Love, experiences which offer an even more powerful and overwhelming Beauty, that which was once to him supremely beautiful is and can only be less so. The natural world seems to lose some essential vibrancy and to be lacking in meaningful vitality. The use of “dungeon” (693) is especially striking in that it conveys a certain reluctance and ambivalence in – if not an outright hatred for – his immediate situation, as it further suggests a compelled submission to what seems both inescapably real and no longer pristinely beautiful. Endymion is now as one imprisoned in an imperfect and disappointing reality, exiled from an idyllic Innocence; indeed, there is a pervasive sense of loss tacitly conveyed in this passage, even if it is a loss experienced as a consequence of an infinitely profound Love which seems equally to promise an infinitely greater gain.

He describes his first meeting with the goddess⁵ as unexpected and magical; nature, as its transformation seems to signify her visitation, is unaccountably profuse, creating an enticing bed of “sacred” flowers (I.555). (And importantly – if somewhat tangentially – it is crucial to this passage to clarify what one might mean by “magic” (I.554): for to some the magician is but a conjuror of deceitful if clever illusions; while for others, I suppose “magic” connotes something more esoteric and arcane. I think – although the term may indeed have several meanings – it is safe to infer that, in the world Keats envisions, “magic” is often of the latter variety. One need only recall the powers of Glaucus and Circe in Book III to find this connotation demonstrated in the narrative—) “Poppies,” (I.555) in addition to being sacred to Diane, are of course infamous for their role in potentially facilitating powerful “hallucinations”—and hence part of the power of their symbolism: for they are an essential motif of sleep and dreams and liminal spaces.

⁵ See Appendix note 4 for lines 1.554-581

(However, I will not seek to rationalize any aspect of Endymion's quest in such terms, as they would reduce his experience to some kind of deviant psychological state or states. This method might render such experiences within the acceptable bounds of rationality, yet it reduces a certain necessary Mystery into the non-entity of epiphenomenal symptom; the poppy plant perhaps merely reduced to its effects and divested of the substantive contents of those effects. Rather, I assume "deviant psychological states" – when apprehended from a different perspective or worldview – and the "acceptable bounds of rationality," to be fundamentally at odds with the uniquely *religious* vision imagined by this story—)

Endymion experiences divinity through his dreams or through similarly liminal states; and yet, because such experiences, though obviously vivid and profound, wear the guise of "mere" dreams, he is unsure not only as to their reality but as to the meaning they may portend. Surprised by mysterious visions, lulled into a delicious trance, and then overpowered by sleep, he dreams of communing with and soaring through the heavens, and is intoxicated with the moon's beauty; the intensity of his visions belies their unreality (1.554-581). And, with respect to the surreal or fantastic, especially as they are conveyed in literature, in calling an experience a dream, one may be freed from the seeming constraints of reality; which is to say, that which seems manifestly impossible in one's habitual waking world yet has very little bearing on the liberties of the dreaming mind. Even as dreams may present an incongruous reality, they exist as a reality not quite amenable to one's quotidian sense of the word. However bizarre or fantastic, in their immediate experience and in their memory they are real, even as the quality of their reality might contrast with habitual modes of experience. For Endymion to be introduced to his love in a dream or in some manner of liminal state lends an initial, illusive and uncertain quality to his vision while it yet also must subtly expand his perceptions of the scope of the possible.

In this account of Endymion's initial dream vision of Cynthia (1.554-581), the reader is implicitly presented with the entirely rational means whereby one might experience the seemingly impossible, which is to say that dreams can attain to such a vivid reality they confound the understanding. And indeed, it is a small step from such life-like dreams to dream-like life. In dismissing and sequestering dreams to unreality, we deprive them of the terrors of uncertainty which they powerfully insinuate, or we deprive ourselves of the hope promised by their occasional beauty. And Endymion's dreams are supremely beautiful in their sensuous profundity, being ecstatic as well as erotic, for they intimate both the presence and the ardent love of divinity. As Stuart Sperry astutely notes with respect to the goddess's initial mysterious visitation:

The dream is not characterized merely by images of sensual gratification but by synesthesia and effortless movement, by warmth and the sudden flowering of foliage, and by the vital, flowing quality that we associate with certain states of intense imaginative experience. It is a world of fluent harmony, the expression of a primitive experience and knowledge that forever seeks yet defies precise articulation or the power of human intelligence to arrest and define. (103)

Indeed, there is very clearly a metaphorical significance to heavenly flight; but how do such metaphors acquire their habitual meaning except through their affinity to something more literal? Heavenly flight, as metaphor, connotes intense ecstasy, and that meaning seems to me clearly concomitant with the literal circumstances of the dream, a dream in which there exists a "striking conjunction of the sensuous and the transcendent: enjoyment that is a form of transcendence" (Dickstein 61). "Heavenly flight" conveys the divine aspiration of a rapturous communion as well as the sacred quality of a physical passion.

Even as Endymion doubts that these experiences are purely illusory, illusions are not necessarily without powerful beauty. Perhaps it can also be argued that much of worldly beauty

is lamentably predicated on so many superficial illusions and false artifices. Or, we love the facile cliché by virtue of its simplicity and (false but) momentous promises. And, in the recognition of their illusory quality there is equally a deep sorrow as such deceptions are denied the substance that would give them reality and legitimate our desire. Thus, to appreciate certain varieties of beauty is in part to recognize their illusory existence, otherwise one will be deceived into the pain of loving what is unreal and so occasion perpetual mourning: for in the intensity of that love there is the simultaneous awareness of a deep loss, and so one feels sorrow for what is only a figment. Peona, Endymion's sister, later attempts to console him by relating precisely how beautiful – but ultimately specious – illusions are not worthy of such ardent love and pining⁶. Although Peona's words are meant as consolation, they yet seem to insinuate loss, even as the manner of her description betrays an authentic longing. And, in some significant way, the heavens, by virtue of their simultaneous beauty and ambiguity, seem to image her desires. This beauty seems simultaneously ideal and illusory; ideal and yet impossibly remote, even as that which seems remote is not necessarily that which is unattainable.

Peona expresses her sincere concern for Endymion, but in so doing she also expresses a certain doubt which ultimately betrays the fundamental assumptions of the perspective through which she sees and experiences the world. And furthermore,

Peona recalls Endymion to the heroic, active life that he himself had so vividly described to her. The issue is joined in terms of different kinds of poetry. She commends to him the traditional bard—and the martial life—of epic. But Keats himself is trying to write a new kind of epic, 'striving to uprear / Love's standard on the battlements of song' (II, 39-40), portraying the conflicts of the inner life rather than those of the battlefield" (Dickstein 82-3).

⁶ See Appendix note 5 for lines 1.739-760

In short, she discourages Endymion from wistfully hoping and dreaming and pining and even seems to admonish him for his apparent and unaccountable change of disposition. In the “slightness” (I.755) of these visions, one may not only infer their insubstantiality but also their ethereal and celestial qualities. In Peona’s explicit use of “semblance” (I.742), one is compelled to make a distinction between what *exists* and what is imagined or represented by that which *exists*, as an artwork might resemble a figure though it be fundamentally composed of paint. What *exists* is assembled by and embellished with the imagination so that which it images seems to only exist only in the imagination. And yet, what if we are to see a figure looming in a certain configuration of what *exists*? Now, the various methods we may use to comprehend certain phenomena may seem to preclude that possibility because of the assumptions and rules upon which they are predicated; yet, I think we are right in certain instances to conflate the “paint” with that which it images (take, for instance, the “cloudy Cupid” in ~I.890)—

It would seem thus, at least to Peona, that dreams after all are only dreams, and not heavenly promises. But who could deny the beauty of this imagery, which subtly belies the words’ explicit meaning? Who does not fall somewhat in love with the grandeur of the sky so depicted and with the heavens’ literal but ambiguous and abstract beauty? Perhaps there is a small element of dramatic irony, for, as it later becomes clear that Endymion’s love is not merely illusory, this attempt at consolation might be said to acquire new depth rather than serving to detract from Endymion’s vision; for dreams are not necessarily the nothing they are thought to be. Of course, Endymion, at this stage in his journey, feels a certain conviction in his vision, believing it to be much more substantive, and his subsequent defense offers a compelling and mystical account of Love which – as it testifies to its deep knowledge – also seems to argue that the intensity of such Love has a sacred power which can transform and sanctify one’s experience

of all that is profane (~l.780-813).

To reiterate, Peona's speech and/or analogy of experience reveals that she does see a certain beauty in nature, but that such beauty, in its somewhat tragic illusoriness, equally lacks in some vital substance which would merit longing like Endymion's; to quote Morris Dickstein, "She accepts the gleanings of beauty that the world affords her but would not seek to make them truth, to realize them in ways that might shake the ordered reality on which she depends." (83) Ultimately, then, it might be argued that Keats depicts a significant contrast between how these siblings experience and understand the natural world. I would say that Peona's view sees beauty as an incidental natural effect; for her, it does not seem that the sunset reveals an Apollonian influence. Endymion could be said to entertain hopes of something more vital in nature, or at least in his analogous dream visions.

Indeed, I think it is important to establish and elaborate upon what I have previously alluded to with respect to polytheism: it seems a pervasive tendency to interpret anthropomorphic gods and the myths which perpetuate their memory as merely allegories of impersonal, natural forces; the gods are not gods, but figurative personifications or the products of a primitive understanding. Indeed, myths may have many levels of meaning and deep, archetypal significance, but they seem also to hold the very real possibility for deities, for beings, for ways and modes of being, beyond the limited mortal conditions of human life. Indeed, perhaps to deny that possibility is actually a more anthropocentric way of understanding in that it is limited to and by what seems humanly knowable and/or by the nature of human knowledge with its formative influence on religious thought; religious thought which might readily provide a vocabulary for experiences which seem beyond the purview of other disciplines and/or which may only exist in their frame of reference as bizarre and unaccountable anomalies. Still, to really

understand experience through the lenses of various disciplines is not – to disagree with Keats – to unweave the rainbow⁷, but it is lamentable that certain realities are not given reality until they are assimilated and comprehended by certain perspectives of human knowledge—

And yet, anthropomorphic gods imbue Sublime Nature with essential humanity, perhaps even with some humane quality—but in a literal way, being not merely the creative, poetic reflections of humanity but transcendent beings endowed with human attributes. For Endymion, to love Nature is not quite to be enamored of an abstract idea of it, but to love a powerful, living, and essential part of it. Denying the possibility of such deities who preside over the human and natural realms might then be said to be similar to loving nature only as it manifests in picturesque illusions; to admire a sunset as merely a sunset in some important way is like not seeing the sunset at all. Its beauty is merely in its manifold colors and ambiguous dream shapes which prompt the imagination to endow it with some illusory meaning: it is thus a *profane* beauty. Indeed, perhaps it can be said that Peona’s view is somewhat analogous to a very literal understanding of heaven: it merely consists of ether and starlight and does not proffer (even as metaphor) any promise of an other-worldly paradise. And although there seems to be a real and significant distinction (in the passage I.739-760 and elsewhere) in how one conceives of and

⁷ “Do not all charms fly / At the mere touch of cold philosophy? / There was an awful rainbow once in heaven: / We know her woof, her texture; she is given / In the dull catalogue of common things. / Philosophy will clip an angel’s wings, / Conquer all mysteries by rule and line, / Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine— / Unweave a rainbow as it erewhile made / The tender-person’d Lamia melt into a shade” (“Lamia,” lines 229-38)

Further note: “The basic theme in *Lamia*, as in so many of Keats’s major poems, is that of illusion against reality. And after all, as Keats himself sets up the story, Apollonius, the cold philosopher, was right. Lamia was indeed, as he said, a serpent; and all her furniture, according to the passage from *Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy* which Keats quoted as his source, ‘no substance but mere illusions.’ So far as Lamia and her phantom palace symbolize the poet’s view of the world, they reflect Keats’s opposition of the ‘authenticity of the imagination’ to ‘consequitive reasonings,’ and his recurrent fear that the subject matter of his poetry is the vestige of a magical view of the world, vulnerable to the cold stare of reason.” (Abrams, 307-8)

experiences the spiritual life in Nature – as a pervasive and transcendent power (as perhaps in the Christian Wordsworth, for instance), or as individually living yet transcendent beings, embodying mysterious and powerful aspects of sublime forces – perhaps depriving Nature of some manner of sacred potential yet constitutes a real profanation? Much of Nature is neither tame nor picturesque but rather Sublime and Terrible: one need not be mystical to know the value of respect and to feel deep reverence, and accordingly one cannot but feel the fearful and Sublime aspects of Nature to be those forces which demand such respect, to be those powers which chasten hubristic humanity. In the Sublime there is a certain grandeur, and worship of the Mystery of Sacrosanct Life takes many forms.

Though the sacred and its manifestations in Nature may be mysterious and manifold, in acknowledging its very real presence one may see beyond certain illusions. Perhaps it can be said that a certain meaning resides in the experience itself? And that the apprehension of that meaning is true Beauty. And to be visited by ideality? To not recognize its manifestation or expression might indeed be impious or sacrilege, even as to dare to hope also entails the possibility of being deceived and thus the loss rather than the realization of one's deepest longing. That which detracts from the value of the experience is its apparent lack of reality; indeed, it may be said to lack reality as it expresses ideality, but that ideality is confused with that which is illusory precisely because both may be said to exist in opposition to that which is "real." Yet, it would seem that the substance of what is illusory or ideal largely resides in the manner in which one interprets its experience or in the perspective through which it is apprehended, even as there is also substance to the distinction: dreams have the potential to be merely unconscious figments and wish-fulfillments, yet there are aspects of reality which are ideal or divine and which may find various unforeseen and incomprehensible expressions. Hence the validity of the conflict and

the reality of one aspect of Endymion's dilemma.

And, rather than seeing Nature and humanity as antagonists, much of *Endymion* conveys some manner of profound Unity binding All of Nature. Natural phenomena offer much deep, metaphorical potential wherein organic happenings and relations can be pictured and understood allegorically as well as scientifically; indeed, both allegory and science may in fact say the same thing in different ways, though one mode be poetic and the other, factual. We see in the wake of an intimate encounter between Endymion and his "known Unknown" (II.739) – and after she (Cynthia) confesses both the sincerity of her ardor and her apprehensions of lost chastity – a *somewhat* Wordsworthian unity achieved or expressed (by the narrator, who interjects to tell what seems to be the natural history of the myth); however, in this instance that unity is not experienced as a subjective, mystical perception of immanent being but instead seems a harmonious *way* of being between Nature's apparently discrete elements, which exist as mutually necessary parts of a dynamic whole. Stories and music echo in and as a part of Nature:

Ye who have yearn'd
With too much passion, will here stay and pity,
For the mere sake of truth; as 'tis a ditty
Not of these days, but long ago 'twas told
By a cavern wind into a forest old;
And then the forest told it in a dream
To a sleeping lake, whose cool and level gleam
A poet caught as he was journeying
To Phoebus' shrine; and in it he did fling
His weary limbs, bathing an hours space,
And after, straight in that inspired place
He sang the story up into the air,
Giving it universal freedom. (II.827-39)

Though there is an element of personification in this passage, I also think one must qualify our sense of "speech" and song as expressions of the interrelation they mediate; we are of course limited by our lamentably human and circumscribed experiences, but that should not preclude an understanding that other creatures and other living things may "communicate" in less intelligible

and explicit ways. To “be” at all is to be implicated in a world beyond the self; and perhaps speech and writing constitute one way in which we attempt to heal the breach between ourselves and the world. Yet in this passage – indeed, in the poem as a whole – one does not consistently feel a significant breach between Endymion and his world, even though his journey might be said to be a painful falling away from Innocence. If there is no breach, perhaps “speech” serves a modified function which enables perfect expression as that which unifies. A song echoes into eternity so as to be shared by and between Nature’s patient, receptive powers, and having been, it cannot not-be. Further, “art” in this sense cannot be understood as artificial. Nor does it share in the illusory qualities which marked Peona’s description of the sunset. Nature is not reduced to trite human conceptions that flatter our false refinements; nor does Nature, through its Sublimity, reduce us to or remind us of our perhaps proper diminutive proportions, though we may also seek to merge with that same rebellious, defiant, Mysterious Grandeur. Song (II.838) is that which binds Nature together, and perhaps all of Nature is the Lyre of the Spirit? And thus poetic inspiration might be understood as a discovery or translation of some natural force, or existence, or the serendipitous experience of some intangible but haunting echo. Beauty demands words as exaltation; Sublimity compels obeisance; and Poetry can attain to both if its inspiration be truly numinous.

.....

.....The movement is from aspirant being to humble nothingness. If the underworld reveals the barrenness of beauty divorced from common life, the submission to experience of it represents spiritual descent. Until he has gone such steps, Endymion will not understand the first principles of that nature in which his mortality participates and through which alone he may perceive authentic intuitions of more exalted being. In its

*frequently reiterated command to 'descend,' the ethereal guide thus provides the moral and epistemological imperative that governs the whole action of the poem*⁸.....

But natural settings can also be entirely imagined, even as they lose none of their reality; rather, they can become highly symbolic. Yet, as in a dream, when the symbolic and the literal merge into the surreal, strange, fantastic, even grotesque the dreamer is presented with an interior world wherein one journeys inside one's own imaginings (if not in other supernatural or liminal realms of consciousness—). In some significant way, poetic language is dream language and I think Keats can be said to epitomize the relation. And dreaming further can be figured as a kind of katabasis: a descent into the unknown, perhaps into the archetypal depths of human experience⁹. And *Endymion* himself experiences such a descent which I believe is at least two-fold, or which can be said to have two notable examples in the narrative. The first is a literal descent into a very unconventional underworld; the second is the dark emotional despondency and resignation detailed and expressed by the Cave of Quietude; however, the action of the entire poem (including but transcending these specific instances) suggests a profound spiritual descent, a falling away from Innocence and from a primal harmony with Nature, or the tragic loss of an Edenic wholeness, if ultimately to achieve a higher unity—which is rather different from a literal journey to Hades to fulfill some manner of triumphant conquest.

The first descent occurs after *Endymion* somewhat desperately entreats Cynthia (in an instance of dramatic irony—for at this point *Endymion* does not seem to know that she is in fact

⁸ Quoted from *Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats*, Walter Evert, p 128

⁹ ...“Carlyle also uses ‘unconscious,’ after Richter’s fashion, to stand for an impenetrable area in the mind which is every man’s inheritance of the primordial realm of chaos. Underlying the surface film of consciousness is the ‘bottomless boundless deep’; the roots of life ‘stretch down fearfully to the regions of Death and Night’; and only ‘in these dark, mysterious, depths...if aught is to be created, and not manufactured, must the work go on.’” (Abrams, 216)

his love) for guidance and help in the pursuit of his mysterious beloved, and then is subsequently commanded to descend “into the sparry hollows of the world” (II.204), so described by Keats:

Twas far too strange, and wonderful for sadness;
Sharpening, by degrees, his appetite
To dive into the deepest. Dark, nor light,
The region; nor bright, nor sombre wholly,
But mingled up; a gleaming melancholy;
A dusky empire and its diadems;
One faint eternal eventide of gems.
Aye, millions sparkled on a vein of gold,
Along whose track the prince quick footsteps told,
With all its lines abrupt and angular:
Out-shooting sometimes, like a meteor-star,
Through a vast antre; then the metal woof,
Like Vulcan’s rainbow, with some monstrous roof
Curves hugely: now, far in the deep abyss,
It seems an angry lightning, and doth hiss
Fancy into belief (II.219-34)

This is clearly not an inferno of expiating fire and suffering nor the abode of daemons and sin. It is a strange, unexpected world of mineral abundance and of miraculous natural, organic beauty. Indeed, as with much of Keats’s imagery and artistry, nature is rightfully and resplendently endowed with richness, being profusely lavish and profoundly sensuous. And yet, because the world created by Keats *is* natural, or because Keats uses strictly natural imagery, the work does not – or very rarely, and not without purpose – transgress into the decadent, as the decadent might be deemed an unnatural, cloying excess which quickly becomes grotesque—and therefore seems to have a certain affinity with a more conventional conception of the underworld (hell). That this is *not* a “conventional” underworld I think is significant, even as Endymion later experiences what might be termed a psychological “hell” or torment which is more amenable to its figurative semblance and affective meaning. And yet, in this instance, there is a certain ambivalence in the imagery, if only with respect to light. Indeed, out of context, this description of underworld caverns actually very nearly resembles the night sky and the descent thus has the paradoxical quality of ascent, if only in the coincidental imagery: stars might be like “gems”

(225) or “diadems” (224), just as “meteors” (229), “rainbows” (231), and “lightning” (233) are all phenomena of the sky, itself like an “antre” (230) or “abyss” (232). And, the fact that it is an “empire” (224) might suggestively frame Endymion’s eventual ascent not only as a rather literal journeying through the heavens but also as one of spiritual aspiration: a journeying towards sovereign divinity.

Part of the real and profound Beauty of the work seems to emerge from the poem’s revelatory manner whereby elements that may seem initially incongruous (e.g. the sky and an underworld) are fused in a novel way so that – through a process of discovery (i.e. narrative) for both the reader and the hero – we further find a style which exposes the Beauty of both the familiar and the wondrous, just as that distinction is sometimes wonderfully lost. To see the night sky or underground caverns, etc. is inevitably *to see in a certain way* or through a crafted perspective, and the style is revelatory in precisely the manner Shelley described in his *Defence of Poetry*:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes: its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty, which is the spirit of its forms. (41)

There is compassion and Love, as well as art, in the ability to see and reveal Beauty; it is to attend to the world in a profound and sympathetic way. And truly this description would only seem hyperbolic to the cynic who cannot even admit the possibility – much less fathom an

experience – of the numinous. Poetry is fundamentally transformative as a mode of representation, and yet it equally has a more enigmatic power or potential in these revelations of Beauty: the familiar, the profane, even the base, can and very truly do attain a new and Sacred form. The thing becomes beautiful and beautiful becomes the thing—and so on, until much or *everything* is beautiful, if only in fleeting, though indeed overwhelming, moments. And, to call this process “revelation” or “revelatory” also seems appropriately to indicate that poetry can see beneath or beyond the picturesque illusions that we might mistake for the substance of Beauty. More specifically, it seems that the earlier passage (II.219-34) demonstrates a certain ambivalence which works to unite the “strange” and “wonderful” (II.219), though in this instance the ambivalence is largely a difference between light and darkness—rather than between various seemingly contradictory moods or between the beautiful and the ugly. However, the Cave of Quietude, which constitutes the second major “descent” in the poem (and which will be discussed later in the paper) very clearly exemplifies Shelley’s description of poetry’s mysteriously unifying and transformative powers.

But in this first instance of katabasis, it is obvious that Endymion is not experiencing some manner of torturous, excruciating trial; rather, this descent is an invitation to Mystery and Wonder. Simply put, that which we might casually consign to the Imagination or to the realm of the Imagined – as somehow antithetical to reason or to the expectations reason might supply or engender – becomes Real: the scene is wondrous and awe-inspiring, and, as one is invited with Endymion *to believe*, one is also wonderfully lost in and overwhelmed by the beautiful imagery which propels and justifies the narrative. And how might we approach fiction and poetry differently if we read their fantastic elements as *possible*, even if they are not strictly mimetic or true to “reality”? For indeed, fiction is not merely a substitute for the fantastic and amazing, nor

is it made purely for feeding puerile fantasy; fiction can indeed anticipate the possible, even the terrible; fiction images the impossible because it *is* possible, though the circumstances of its potential reality may be complicated or impossible to know: because we cannot always explain or anticipate *how* does not necessarily render that which we cannot explain or anticipate as being beyond the bounds of possibility.

Indeed, to vicariously undergo this journey with Endymion is also to entertain the possibility of the impossible, as what he could only previously imagine now, through direct *experience*, must necessarily inform and alter his beliefs. One immediately notes the stark contrast between Peona's somewhat dismissive experience of the sunset (recall lines 1.739-760) – which, she argues, is merely so much illusion – and Endymion's lived experience of these natural wonders. Strange, that the reality of impossibly vivid and beautiful dreams of an ideal but mysterious desire should be evidence against that reality? Perhaps we are so paradoxically invested in certain illusions – which we cannot acknowledge *as* illusions – because of the authority they have in defining our experiences and in structuring our sense of the possible? For even the most assiduous disciplines of our limited human knowledge also arise through imaginative thought: knowledge is perhaps as much created as discovered. It might thus be said that Peona confuses reality with illusion whereas – in the creation and unquestioned privileging of certain knowledge – we confuse illusion with reality. Even as knowledge and “reality” seem in certain ways inextricable – because of the prominent manner in which they mutually structure our understanding *and* our experience – why should we be committed to knowledge that limits reality? And this question is only partially rhetorical; one must make a distinction, for instance, between unlimited knowledge experienced as omniscience and unlimited knowledge as the liberation of possibility through a confrontation with the Vastness of the Unknown.

And yet, having lived these experiences, why should Endymion deny them? One senses that part of his frustration is simply the seemingly interminable pursuit itself: he wants only his beloved, and though these wonders be wonders, she is the supreme Wonder, before which all of this pales, and he is understandably impatient for her love. Though indeed, as we shall see with Circe's conjured love-dream in which "specious heaven was changed to real hell" (III.476) for Glaucus, sometimes illusions have terrible power to insidiously persuade and cruelly deceive. In such an example, the loss experienced is not only the loss of intense pleasure but also, in the realization that that pleasure was a feint, a trick of disguised malice, entails a discovery which taints all prior enjoyment. Illusions have reality so as to be divested of substantive meanings: for an illusion to be an illusion it must be bereft of that reality which would render it substantive, though it is real in the sense that it affirms its own shallow, empty meaning.

And (after several significant intervening episodes – namely the Venus and Adonis scene, which I will discuss later in relation to a somewhat different nexus of ideas) we are returned to a similar environment¹⁰ in which Endymion continues to explore fantastic, wondrous, and abundantly beautiful underground caverns. There is much Beauty in this passage, and less of the Sublime, though I suppose that Beauty can reach such an intensity it actually is rather Sublime. What stands out most powerfully and immediately is the final connection Keats makes between this strange underground world and a "cathedral" (II.626). Although it might be said that the passage establishes, through implicit analogy, the simultaneous likeness of this underworld to both a "palace" and a "cathedral," perhaps it could also be asserted that there is some manner of transformation accomplished as the description moves from being like a "palace" to being like a "cathedral." In any case, though I emphasize "cathedral" because of the powerful connotations

¹⁰ See Appendix note 6 for lines 2.593-626

and associations it has with the sacred, both terms evoke lavish grandeur, abundance, and an impressive magnificence, for such structures are consummate human achievements made to honor either that which is divine or that which is sovereign. Not only has Endymion encountered literal places of worship in this underworld (namely, a temple and shrine of Dian [~II.257, 260]), but this majestic natural environment also metaphorically assumes a similar grandeur to those imposing, sacred places. Such words as “dome,” “wall,” “floor,” “porticos,” “balustrade,” and “fretwork,” (~II.595-608) all suggest human architectural design; but it is the final lines of the passage which explicitly establish the likeness to a cathedral through “wrought oaken beams,” “pillars,” “frieze,” and “roof” (II.623-4). Though the metaphor is rather concrete by virtue of the imagery which accomplishes it, making the similarity seem fairly literal, it yet also has that important figurative meaning which might be less obvious and more significant. Importantly, then, we are inclined to make the connection that Nature can both be the abode of the holy and also evoke religious awe and reverence; in its likeness to a cathedral, we are invited to see these surroundings not only as resplendently beautiful but also as somewhat sacred. A cathedral is most obviously a place of worship, itself a magnificent work of art made to honor that purpose; and, whatever its ostentation or excesses, it displays such qualities ostensibly in the service of honoring the Divine.

However, this passage does not depict a more ordinary or mundane experience of Nature – say, a sunset – in an exalted or spiritualized manner, perhaps sanctified by a sensitive and intuitive subjectivity experiencing the intimations of divine immanence. This Nature is partially *supernatural*, and thus paradoxically seems to challenge what are taken as the obvious or manifest laws of Nature. But I do not think that such a distinction constitutes a contradiction, for that which is supernatural is not somehow opposed or antithetical to that which natural; that

which is supernatural is not to be confused with that which is *unnatural*, even if it seems to defy or challenge our expectations and perhaps transcends our capacities for understanding. Thus, it must be acknowledged that the Imagination is also implicated in this experience or vision, although I sincerely believe in the potential reality of the supernatural; and, to partially reiterate, this is not necessarily to confuse an obvious fiction with (a certain circumscribed) truth so much as to acknowledge that the supramundane can manifest in and as the supernatural: for what might seem inconsistent with a fundamentally limited human understanding is not yet limited by that understanding—because it powerfully transcends the human sphere.

Further, in envisioning these marvels, this passage strangely and wonderfully images a place of almost accidental, serendipitous, or miraculous order: again, it is a natural (as well as supernatural) scene which is replete with riches either in (its particular kind of) reality or in and by so many vivid semblances. It is a “*wild magnificence*” (II.598), which connotes natural, unrestrained abundance assuming perhaps an unexpected ordonnance: to reiterate, there is a curious and persistent blending of architectural terms – which suggest Art, structure, and deliberate design – with the sense that this order emerges of its own power. And, perhaps this miraculous order might further testify to these various wonders being powerfully *alive* and so capable of assuming such order through and as their own interdependent vitality.

Indeed, one very much feels these natural wonders as alive and vital; the fountains, in addition to being vibrant through an abundant, associative beauty, are responsive to Endymion: when he touches them with his spear, they react as surely as any living thing (~II.605). I feel it is a saddening peculiarity of certain perspectives that, in seeking to understand Nature, we sometimes divest its features and elements of that essential vitality, so that much of Nature is merely so many inanimate, impersonal forces, necessarily subordinate to humanity, and valued

in a purely practical manner. Is it any wonder that the earth should sometimes be impetuous and boldly, violently rebel against the tyranny of man's hubristic dominion? As with the Arethusa and Alpheus scene, (~2.936-1017) I do not think we can dismiss these characterizations as merely fanciful, poetic conceits, unless we also admit that those poetic conceits convey important truths—and that the “fanciful” is neither as naïve nor as impossible as many seem inclined to believe.

Which is to say, these are not the quaint anthropomorphisms of an unsophisticated or primitive knowledge; rather, this vision reflects a fundamentally different orientation to the natural world—indeed, perhaps even a different orientation to knowledge¹¹ in general, and it takes a certain initiative and many painful, vexed experiences to learn to question what is often least questioned. One might say that there is something of a human likeness established through or imprinted by the architectural metaphors; in an analogous manner, poetic endeavor more generally establishes sympathetic affinity, as mediated through human experience. But to understand such sympathetic affinity is to see Nature differently, and poetry cannot only be understood as consisting of a rearrangement or pointless distortion of that which is taken to be literal and therefore somehow irrefutably True.

¹¹...As Abrams notes: “The scheme [of ‘Mechanico-corpuscular Philosophy’] was developed, said Coleridge, under the need ‘to submit the various phenomena of moving bodies to geometrical construction’ by abstracting all its qualities except figure and motion. And ‘as a *fiction of science*,’ he added, ‘it would be difficult to overvalue this invention,’ but Descartes propounded it ‘as *truth of fact*: and instead of a World *created* and filled with productive forces by the Almighty Fiat, left a lifeless Machine whirled about by the dust of its own Grinding...’ What we need in philosophy, he wrote to Wordsworth in 1815, is ‘the substitution of life and intelligence (considered in its different powers from the plant up to that state in which the difference in degree becomes a new kind (man, self-consciousness), but yet not essential opposition) for the philosophy of mechanism, which, in everything that is most worthy of the human intellect, strikes *Death*, and cheats itself by mistaking clear images for distinct conceptions...’ 169-70 Coleridge’s assertions offer a specific instance of how our evolving knowledges simultaneously reflect and create our sense of reality, and further that we must live within and reap the consequences of the discourses which structure our world. This is of course not the equivalent of suggesting that one’s knowledge and beliefs are entirely arbitrary; but, at the very least, they seem in some important respects powerfully *relative*—rather than absolute.

Again, not only is there a pervasive, unitive intimacy between many different aspects of Nature (recall the story told “By a cavern wind unto a forest old,” II.827-39), it seems that these living forces are even capable of Love and Desire; indeed, natural phenomena (such as the moon, etc.), by virtue of their powerfully animate vitality and human-like qualities (or capacity for embodiment—and thus for the body’s concomitant sensations, emotions, etc.), suggests precisely that (...and what could be more humanizing than Love and Desire—?). Furthermore, this profound Unity is emphatically reinforced through Keats’s associative, unitive – poetic – language. In other words, one profound mode of unity is that of significant, harmoniously mediated relation (perhaps accomplished *through* speech or song); another mode exists through and as the figurative and musical logic upon which much of poetry is fundamentally predicated (accomplished *as* speech or song). These fountains remain fountains but also become invested with the innumerable kindred qualities of a vibrant, scintillating, iridescent, metamorphosing, prodigal Beauty. Yet this unity and rich, imaginative blending does not function in such an indiscriminate way as to render all semblances amorphous and indistinct; there is indeed an incredible degree of specificity whereby likenesses are deeply enhanced and clarified through so many nuances and thus are *not* unified through the mere cancelling of difference. Keats’s language powerfully invests or reveals the vibrant vitality of these (super)natural phenomena.

Again and again, Keats equates Endymion’s strange surroundings with so many natural rarities – such as gold, crystal, and diamonds (II.595, 597) – yet in such abundance and to such an impressive effect one feels transported to an underworld whose surreal qualities seem far more transcendent than nightmarish. Keats very literally loads every rift of his subject with ore¹², and ultimately his language transfigures “mundane” objects primarily through his obvious

¹² Letter to Shelley, August 16, 1820

sensitivity to Beauty. Yet the riches so depicted are riches of the mind and senses and are made tangible only by memory or through the imagination; and though they be indeed exquisite they are, again, neither luxurious nor decadent¹³, though they may invest a certain decadent quality in various natural phenomena—which yet almost subverts the very concept *of* the decadent. This is in part to say that there is something decadent or excessive in this apparent “wealth,” yet that that wealth contradicts itself because of its expansive character, upon which it dissipates into Beauty. Amidst such abundance, though this Beauty be Beauty, it is not exactly rare, for this Beauty is a pervasive quality of things (or a quality of the experience and perceptions of a certain subjectivity) and not the things themselves. For instance, the word “diamond,” might carry and convey a contagious beauty which makes a star as rare and resplendent as any stone or vice versa. Or, in this specific instance, the water of the fountains – perhaps thought to be colorless, tasteless, bland, and so ubiquitous as to be taken for granted – metamorphoses into trees, lattices, “crystal vines,” (615) and rich embroideries replete with fantastic and variegated shapes and colors. And, its ambiguous and changeable qualities perhaps render it peculiarly suited to such imaginative embellishments.

Further, to say that this language subverts the decadent might also be to emphasize how the poetic medium is particularly powerful as it indirectly engages sensations through thought and/or perceptions—which is of course to be contrasted with exclusively sensuous pleasures, though those too may have aesthetic qualities. To be so overwhelmed with this abundance is not

¹³ Oxford English Dictionary: decadence, n. a. The process of falling away or declining (from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity, etc.); decay; impaired or deteriorated condition.

See note 7 in Appendix for a descriptive passage of the social condition and literary style.

(I have often thought the term to mean both dissipated living and a peculiar mingling of the beautiful and the grotesque in the extremities or excesses of pleasure; and, I suppose it is by virtue of this mingling that I strive to situate the concept [perhaps ironically?] within aesthetics—)

to deprive the rare of its rarity but rather to experience the equally overwhelming beauty and value of the world so transmuted. Though the imagery is dense—by virtue of its artistic effects—it is yet simultaneously ethereal in that which it images, as both work in tandem to achieve a style profoundly sensuous. Take, for instance, the phrase, “The streams with changed magic interlace: / Sometimes like delicatest lattices, / Cover’d with crystal vines; then weeping trees, / Moving about as in a gentle wind” (II.613-16): “delicate” and “gentle” of course explicitly denote a certain lightness or softness; and, in addition to the movements of the waters which suggest their vibrant alive-ness, there is movement from image to image through metaphor—a density of semblances is used to convey the qualities of the waters’ subtle motions. In such descriptions, Nature and Art have a fundamental, inextricable unity which belies the simplistic dichotomy of the artificial vs. the organic, etc.; Nature is not without Art and design, and Art is not so formal as to be somehow false or unnatural. Keats draws numerous parallels both between various aspects of nature and between Nature and human creations until the distinction is very nearly lost.

Now, we have arrived at the implication that – partially through the manner of Keats’s description, which sanctifies as it makes possible the impossible through a nuanced, abundant, colorful, vital Beauty – though the Divine is variously figured here, we must yet figure the Divine differently than if we were in fact to be present in an actual cathedral. From the perspective of Endymion, these wonders must occupy a somewhat liminal space: they are phenomena which are like a cathedral and yet which are ostensibly (super)natural in the sense that they mostly do not seem to be humanly contrived, but rather divinely revealed or created. It seems it can be no coincidence that these beauties are accompanied by or testify to such divinity, because (as I believe) the very idea of Divinity cannot itself be reduced to a human creation: a

mere phantom or delusion of an irrational human imagination; it seems to me consummate hubris to reject the possibility even if one only knows it as a possibility (...for how necessary a desperate hope! though deep must be the pain of doubt and disillusionment—). Which is to say, these wonders give witness to what they signify. Cathedrals are the proper abode of worship; apprehended Divinity must compel worship; and, the proximity of Divinity might thus be accompanied by certain circumstances we associate with worship, whether they be direct, immediate feelings of Sublimity or Beauty or surreal situations or circumstances which incidentally evoke those feelings. Similarly, a certain mysterious sanctity is bestowed on objects through beautiful and sublime language, though it is difficult to isolate words or phrases – rather than the many complex effects they achieve as they work together – as the means to such. “Cathedral” seems the definitive and climactic word in this passage; through the analogy, in tandem with the rich and reinforcing imagery, the reader feels the sacred to be both powerfully ubiquitous yet no less exceptional and rare. For Beauty so envisaged must necessarily intensify subjective experience rather than merely dilute the overwhelming excellences and wonders simply by virtue of their abundance—

However, other significant portions of the text are *not* so unambiguously beautiful; or, their beauty is even more nuanced and deeply ambivalent in that they both mingle and attest to the tragic affinities of Grief and Love. Indeed, Endymion’s first, literal descent into a wondrous and majestic underworld which – though it can be figured as importantly similar through the convention of katabasis – provides a stark contrast to his emotional “descent” later in the poem. The Cave of Quietude has a certain quality of both sublimity and anticlimax, which is significant because the Sublime can be bathetic¹⁴—and not necessarily only through unexpected

¹⁴ ...“All these smaller and larger changes cooperate significantly to modify the poem’s manner. Just as Keats’s own verse statement of poetics at the beginning of book 3 might lead us to expect, it is not, like

juxtaposition. As with *experiences* of Beauty, any private subjectivity necessarily imbues or variously distorts the objects of its experience in the intensity of that experience (...so that even the innocuous and ordinary can seem a profoundly painful confrontation). Yet, for Endymion, this descent represents a private feud rather than an epic battle; and how do we invest a more mundane tragedy with epic dignity? Though importantly, a tragedy is a tragedy—whether it is borne of heartbreak or disaster or war or any manner of loss; and at least some small part of Keats’s accomplishment is the implicit or derived awareness that love and heartbreak are important, valid subjects (i.e. see the opening of Book II ~lines 1-44) and that they can entail as real a tragedy as any—that Love can indeed mean terrible loss, loss of as great a magnitude as one’s human Heart can fathom. Keats writes:

There lies a den,
Beyond the seeming confines of the space
Made for the soul to wander in and trace
Its own existence, of remotest glooms.
Dark regions are around it, where the tombs
Of buried griefs the spirit sees, but scarce
One hour doth linger weeping, for the pierce
Of new-born woe it feels more inly smart:
And in these regions many a venom’d dart
At random flies; they are the proper home
Of every ill: the man is yet to come
Who hath not journeyed in this native hell.
But few have ever felt how calm and well
Sleep may be had in that deep den of all.
There anguish does not sting; nor pleasure pall:
Woe-hurricanes beat ever at the gate,
Yet all is still within and desolate. (4.513-28)

Here, dream-space is dramatized powerfully and succinctly. What seems most apparent about this passage is the pervasive mood not only of melancholy but also of mourning, for the

his earlier couplet pieces, an exercise in putting aside the lofty for something more heart-easing but the development of a mode distinctly capable of embracing the sublime and lofty together with the domestic, the sentimental, the erotic and the comical.” (Jarvis 150)

latter is a highly specific instance of the former: it is a melancholy born of intense “grief” and thus of some manner of loss. (This is clearly not an ecstatic, erotic vision of his love but rather a private vision of the feud engendered in consequence of his seemingly divided and irreconcilable affections; more specifically, it seems [to Endymion] that to love one person in a certain way precludes loving another in an similar manner, and so that love – or those loves – necessarily entails loss—either of one or of both of his beloveds, even as Endymion does not quite seem to experience this feud as infidelity on his part.) And, one immediately notes that the imagery – of this figurative depiction of emotional space – is again immensely dense, yet entirely congruous with the at times highly incongruous atmosphere of dreams. Yet Keats’s meaning is not obscure; the use of such terms as “glooms” (416), “Dark,” “tombs” (417), “weeping” (419), “woe” (420), and “ill” (422) make it obvious that this is a paradoxical and painful place of retreat, wherein one still finds a dark placidity in oblivion and forgetfulness. Take, for instance, the phrase, “Dark regions are around it, where the tombs / Of buried griefs the spirit sees, but scarce / one hour doth linger weeping, for the pierce / Of new-born woe it feels more inly smart” (IV.516-19): there is a subtle use of personification in that we entomb dead persons (and thus this space feels analogous to a cemetery); and, these tombs seem to represent numerous accumulated pains which one feels more particularly as losses, even as one feels a recent pain or conflict to hurt most immediately.

However, whereas in other passages dreams and “reality” seem to meld in actual experience, it seems that in this instance we are given a vivid depiction of dream-space rather than an account of the fantastic and surreal; and here, dream-space has the paradoxical quality of possessing tangible, sensuous features, though dreams seem to exist only in the mind, just as complete absorption in a state of dark oblivion seems to entail the entire absence of sensory

feelings, though that state *can* be given a figurative likeness. In the poem's fantastic events, the reader and Endymion experience what is ostensibly impossible but which is rarely grotesque; indeed, it is often exquisitely beautiful even as it seems to share a property of dreams in its defiance of mundane expectations. This description, however, seems to be a somewhat literal depiction (of dream-space) in that those literal, "normal" qualities are or often can be experienced as the aberrant, unusual, surreal, and uncanny. Perhaps it can be said that dreams denaturalize the familiar and make familiar the unusual.

Furthermore, one might genuinely establish the parallel import of this passage to the mythic convention of katabasis through its explicit use of "hell," which emphatically suggests and reinforces the emotional, psychological, and even physical qualities of this internal and torturous space. Even still, despite the obvious commonplace of its figurative aspect, this "hell" is not a conventional underworld: this is the solitude of the dreamer exploring his own tormented psyche. Indeed, this figurative, emotional descent actually occurs in the midst of a literal ascent in which Endymion is borne towards Diane's wedding – which he experiences as both a dream and as a reality – until he reluctantly awakes in a more familiar, bucolic setting. The Cave of Quietude is the only escape proffered Endymion, but it does not provide a resolution to his dilemma, feeling as he does the inevitability of a portending loss.

One can safely infer that this scene depicts the peculiar pain and the profound emotional despondency of one rather disappointed, resigned, and heart-broken; yet, to return to Shelley's comment on the transformative and beautifying powers of poetry (p.29-30), one must note that many beautiful images and effects are achieved despite the passage's obvious qualities of sorrow, grief, and suffering. Though there is a remote, obscure, and somewhat insular quality to these experiences, one would be wrong to deem them unequivocally ugly or grotesque; Keats's

poetry indeed effects a powerful transformation in which pain is still pain but also perhaps not a pain so terrible as to be entirely bereft of beauty or at least of beautiful potentials; further, such beauty is necessarily complex and ambiguous and therefore cannot be characterized solely by that which is merely pleasant. This passage marries “grief and pleasure” by submitting the grief of an intense and divided love to the pleasures of poetic art. Yet, in this transformative union, seeming opposites do not find their mutual negation; rather, in their powerful merging we experience poetry’s capacity to engender beauty even in and from those experiences which are far from being intrinsically beautiful.

Similarly, one must make a distinction between directly experiencing beauty and finding or creating beauty in and from experiences which may seem horrendously ugly. In the Cave of Quietude passage, we find these seemingly antagonistic qualities – ugliness vs beauty, pain vs pleasure – to be ultimately reconcilable; that which is metaphorically “deformed” (“deformity” itself connoting a visible affliction) acquires a new form as it is translated into the images and sounds of poetry. Which is to say, the subject matter of or inspiration for poetry is not always beautiful, even as it is the nature of poetry to create, reveal, express, and evoke beauty, so that even the most unpleasant and painful of human experiences can be miraculously transformed: to convey these devastating emotions in such a manner is not only to bestow them with a certain unexpected beauty but in so doing to further dignify them with unexpected meaning.

...And, just as any visible scene or image must necessarily be apprehended from a certain perspective, so as to be variously clouded or distorted by one’s subjective powers of perception, to describe such emotions is to describe in a certain way, style, or manner; one might simply say, “I am sad,” or perhaps only cry in inarticulate throes, yet, as in this passage, various emotions attain to a vastly different reality through the means of their conveyance. And further, through

this manner of depiction, we are invited to feel these emotions with Endymion; for the manner of poetic description is fundamentally expressive and sensuous, and therefore not merely reducible to bland and straightforward statements. Poetry in this instance conveys more than minimal denotative and connotative meanings; or, its meaning is comprised of many layers and of a profound affective dimension which, if it seems to obscure what might seem a more literal or direct meaning, simultaneously works to evoke and express the experience of what it describes. If these feelings and the manner of their depiction are not unequivocally ugly, they are neither unequivocally beautiful, though Beauty be itself equivocal.

III.

A Gendered Aesthetic— —and the Aesthetics of Gender

*'I cannot help but thinking that the fault of Mr. Keats's poems was a deficiency in masculine energy of style. He had beauty, tenderness, delicacy, in an uncommon degree, but there was a want of strength and substance. His Endymion is a very delightful description of the illusions of a youthful imagination, given up to airy dreams – we have flowers, clouds, rainbows, moonlight, all sweet sounds and smells, and Oreads and Dryads flitting by – but there is nothing tangible in it, nothing marked or palpable – we have none of the hardy spirit or rigid forms of antiquity.[...] We see in him the youth, without the manhood of poetry.'*¹⁵ –William Hazlitt

.....

Now, nature can be so experienced or envisaged that it becomes invested with human or humane qualities; very obviously, anthropomorphic gods realize and embody natural phenomena so that their very conception becomes an assertion of their powerful vitality. Similarly, through such a

¹⁵ Quoted from the essay, "Keats and the Complexities of Gender," by Anne K. Mellor, p 214; from *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, edited by Susan J. Wolfson

conception they are no longer impersonal, abstract, sublime forces but rather transcendent beings with individuality, and perhaps capable of relationship—and of relationship conceptualized not only as interdependent necessity but also as personal desire and Love. Though such beings or existences may transcend humanity in and as their own divinity, they may be neither inhumane nor inhuman as they are powerfully alive yet differently alive (than humanity). Again and again, Cynthia takes on a human form to realize and express her desire (though her identity remains mysterious to Endymion), and the religious idiom and/or perspective of the poem emphatically depicts numerous other gods not only as transcendent beings, but as existences capable of embodiment or incarnation. Personification and anthropomorphism are convenient and expressive poetic tools, to be sure; yet to reduce certain phenomena to mere symbols is to divest the poem of that unique, essential idiom. This interpretive strategy (which circumvents the poem's fantastic elements) so applied might treat Endymion himself as but a symbol; and, although the story may have profound allegorical potential – in which many symbols collaborate as an extended metaphor so as to convey a deeper meaning – such an interpretation *must* occur in tandem with a more literal conception (of the narrative and characters). Of course, such a strategy *might* redeem the poem as it makes the story more palatable to someone of a fundamentally different religious or spiritual persuasion; but much of my interest lies precisely in the fact of the poem's unique and somewhat defiant religious vision—

To recapitulate: the Divinity envisaged by this poem shares in both the Human and the Natural, yet humanity (or Keats's human characters) is/(are) also directly implicated in nature, and part of the beauty of Keats's vision is that he does not figure the inevitable relation as one of conflict, nor even often of contrast. Wordsworth writes about the natural world as though it were a sacred refuge from mutable human concerns, imbued with powerful memories, and evocative

of mysterious, spiritual Truths. But again, Keats's nature is also often *supernatural*, and not only because of its affinities with dreams and the fantastic, but also by virtue of the unique manner in which that relationship (between humanity and nature) is conveyed. Which is to say that this is a polytheistic (rather than a pantheistic, monotheistic, etc.) vision; and further, that there is often a deep, holistic affinity and harmony (as a state of being) between the human characters and their environments: rather than an emotional, subjective *feeling* of transcendent unity, what is repeatedly conveyed are environments in which unnaturalness does not interpose. And further, these depictions ultimately demonstrate

the romantic theme that art is a joint product of the objective and the projected. Art is 'the mediatrix between, and reconciler of, nature and man. It is, therefore, the power of humanizing nature, of infusing the thoughts and passions of man into everything which is the object of his contemplation'... 'Poetry is also purely human; for all its materials are from the mind, and all its products are for the mind.' Yet 'it avails itself of the forms of nature to recall, to express, and to modify the thoughts and feelings of the mind.' (Coleridge/Abrams 52)

Which is in part simply to say that this unity between humanity and nature is either depicted, expressed, and/or achieved through poetry, so that poetry becomes a medium in the very literal sense of that which is intermediate and mediating—even as this unity can be realized or experienced in different ways. Poetry can proffer a certain restorative harmony; and further, to assert that Keats's poem is "Edenic" is not necessarily to situate the story incongruously in another religious tradition so much as to appropriately locate that story in myth or to establish important affinities between various myths. And, even as Keats seems powerfully aware of the inevitable travesties which mar a fallen human existence, his metaphors reinforce a primal unity. For example, he writes:

'But this is human life: the war, the deeds,
The disappointment, the anxiety,

Imagination's struggles, far and nigh,
All human; bearing in themselves this good,
That they are still the air, the subtle food,
To make us feel existence, and to shew
How quiet death is. Where soil is men grow,
Whether to weeds or flowers; but for me,
There is no depth to strike in' (II.153-61)

Of course, this passage occurs after Endymion capriciously follows a golden butterfly to a fountain where she (the butterfly) reveals herself to be a nymph favorably disposed to Endymion and who presages the necessity of his strange journeyings. But Endymion's future is still uncertain, and he utters this speech in the midst of his melancholic ardor. Very simply, what is said is that human life is tragic and full of tragedy; yet, somewhat paradoxically, death is not so much tragic as potentially merciful in its promised cessation of the sorrows which invariably attend existence.

But it is the manner in which this is said – the implicit uses of figurative language which accomplish his explicit meaning – which deserves especial attention: for the emphatic assertion of the nature of human existence, uttered with simultaneous courage and defeat, is conveyed by means of a parallel with organic process. Humankind is also powerfully implicated in nature; indeed, so much so that – although this *suffering* is perhaps not characteristic of an idyllic state of innocence – we are as “flowers” or “weeds” (160) united in a primal dependence. Perhaps what is also subtly conveyed is a certain pestilent profusion: not an abundance conducive to beauty but rather the inevitable and furious abundance of the fleeting. And this passage acquires further meaning because the reader is aware that it also tacitly expresses Endymion's disenchantment with his mortal condition: it is partly a rejection and denunciation of humanity, and of the tragic world humans must inhabit, even as it accepts what seems most characteristic of the human. Suffering characterizes the human condition, and Endymion *has* known suffering, but he has also known a transcendent, beautiful, and mysterious power which beckons him to

something *more*; he is no longer content with what in the past had brought him intense joy, and he is now caught in a vexed and liminal place, having yet to fully experience the redemptive transformation of realized Love.

But Keats's poem is not often employed in the service of mundane realism; vision follows beautiful vision and the world so envisioned effects more than a transformation of what is ostensibly "real," however powerfully redemptive such poetry may be. (For example, when one reads Whitman, there is the ambitious sense that all things, however apparently common, fall within the exalted domain of poetry and deserve appreciation; much of his verse is a passionate celebration of what seems ordinary or mundane. It seeks to encompass so much as though to mirror the deep joy and love with which such things are experienced or apprehended; and in so doing, such verse reveals the magnanimity of the poet's spirit—) The beauty of the poem effects a transformation by virtue of its poetry – in other words, the medium necessarily transforms as it translates experience into those specific artistic forms which define it – but the materials for the poetry are mythic and otherworldly: the narrative takes its inspiration from myth and realizes it as a mode of fantasy or even fairy-tale. And the natural world or natural phenomena depicted in the poem are perfectly consistent with this mythic scheme; perhaps the seemingly supernatural is only the realization of what is differently natural. For a nymph or faerie, such sudden physical transformations may be in their own way ordinary; and again, gods, by their definition as beings which transcend the humanly circumscribed, need not make their ways intelligible to humanity. To posit beings other than humans is to posit Natures other than Human, but to read the story only in terms of allegory seems to evade that very possibility, reducing the fantastic to that which seems consistent with human understanding and thus with human nature.

Human life, on the other hand, often seems defined by the imposition of culture, which

can be meaningfully opposed to nature, or which derives much of its meaning from the tensions it seems to enact with and against nature—even as “nature” may also be dubiously employed to endow culture with a deterministic authority. Which is to say, what seems most culturally entrenched might very well precede “nature” (or the discourse of nature) but becomes imputed as the inevitable effect and realization of an intrinsic nature, and in that conflation resides a justification for the apparent necessity and inevitability of certain social and cultural hierarchies. But perhaps human life really emerges as a falling away from nature? as an incompleteness and disharmony which culture imperfectly attempts to heal—in which case, culture is necessarily a deviation from (rather than entirely an expression of) nature. So perhaps culture is an elaboration and outgrowth of nature, or perhaps it is an indication of a real spiritual deficiency—or some combination of both. But in *Endymion*, the reader does not feel these tensions; one feels a supernatural harmony and an Edenic wholeness where the distinction between culture and nature has no or very little palpable meaning. Existing in a state which feels their contrast so acutely, such a vision of their reconciliation seems as profound as wondrous, and one is further made cognizant of the disparity in *z*ir own situation—in which these tensions *are* realized. The settings of *Endymion* and the characters’ manner of existence within them seem to indicate a way of being which precedes such a fall from Innocence, even as Endymion himself seems to experience an analogous conflict wherein such a fall is perhaps necessary to attain to a higher, more spiritualized state.

Though we are indeed like flowers and weeds, sharing in their transience and fragility, the conditions of our existence are immensely complicated by this tragic insufficiency which is also somewhat paradoxically experienced as so much (perhaps gratuitous) excess. Perhaps it could be argued that, for someone like Wordsworth, Nature exists as an escape from an

oppressive humanity which also proffers the promise of returned or restored spiritual harmony through some manner of mystical insight (...but *not* merely as some manner of regression). And indeed, it seems possible that experiences of theophany can be similarly mystical – if simultaneously erotic – even as they occur in what seems a highly idiosyncratic world. In Keats’s *Endymion*, in which the poet’s biography is incidental rather than primary, nature, to reiterate, is more often experienced as supernatural and marvelous than as an emanation of the transcendent in which one can find reprieve; however, divinity being differently conceived must necessarily be differently experienced and vice versa. Indeed, these disparate visions are also necessarily the products of different dispositions; and whereas Wordsworth finds his inspiration from a direct engagement with his lived experiences (as the “egotistical sublime”), Keats seems to efface his own experiences as he empathically enters into external sense objects or even into the characters and natures of other living beings¹⁶.

Of course, in discussing an abstract “nature” as the processes, phenomena, and existences of the physical world, in tandem with its relevance to or for a specifically *human* nature, one might inevitably be led to discussions of that which is *natural*. “Nature” understood as a proper noun or as a conglomeration of sublime forces is wonderfully capacious and potentially as rich with poetic as scientific meaning; but when that abstract “nature” becomes transformed into so many tyrannical social dictums we have a terribly pernicious reification. For rhetoric which seeks to define and delimit the “natural” with respect to various human behaviors seems (to this biased reader) both specious and highly problematic; for instance, such rhetoric can be faulted for seriously positing essentialist notions of difference (between genders, “races,” etc.) which further seem to presume (or necessitate) a uniformity of sexual practice. So, if I am to proceed

¹⁶ See Appendix note 8 for an excerpt from a letter to Richard Woodhouse October 27th, 1818 which discusses the “poetical character.”

with a gender-cognizant explication of this poem – in which issues of gender can be made salient in a productively disruptive and contemporarily germane way – one must understand that I outright reject essentialism and those projects which unfairly seek to establish or assume certain inevitable (“natural”) correlations between identities, behaviors, orientations, etc. and which at last seems but an unproductive dialectic of opposition.

One must begin thus: *If “Beauty” is a gendered term – being unfortunately freighted with connotations of oppressive, tedious, and painful demands made especially upon women and female bodies – how does Keats subvert rigid gender expectations through his beautiful depictions or through his indiscriminately beautiful aesthetic—and, in the process, redeem “Beauty” as an aesthetic ideal while freeing it from a gendered domain of ritualized, mimed performance?*

What seems so interesting about Keats’s vision is not necessarily a flagrant disregard for gendered conventions but rather what seems their somewhat conspicuous absence; which is to say, one does not significantly feel the “masculinity” of his hero or the “femininity” of the goddess—nor the inverse. One does not acutely feel the influence of certain oppressive and pervasive expectations insidiously looming in this work, but rather often experiences the human characters to be so united and integrated with their natural surroundings that those natural surroundings vaguely usurp or cancel the social worlds in which such distinctions must find and realize their meaning. (...and perhaps to situate this story in myth is an act of intentional de-contextualization, whereby the imagination is free to invent and idealize; to free the story from a veristic social context is to proffer strange and miraculous new possibilities through and as a profoundly liberating and immensely creative vision. Rather than tediously adhering to verisimilitudes – which might lend a certain historical credence – that imaginative vision

legitimizes the poem both as an escape from the oppressively real and as a window into Wonder.) A perfect example is the Venus and Adonis episode¹⁷ in which Endymion stumbles upon a deeply peaceful Adonis, asleep amidst an effortless, supernatural harmony of flowers and foliage, to which he is also likened—and to which we feel his deep resemblance, for he seems as natural as his surroundings...even as there is a simultaneous impression of deliberate Art which makes the experience feel similar to encountering a sculpture, perfectly and intentionally poised.

And, through the artifice of poetry (which *can* attain to a certain transparency—) there is the revelation of supernal Beauty realized by Nature; yet Art and Nature in this instance seem mutually constitutive, and are (or can be) experienced as a perfect conflation, so that the artifice dissolves into its unity with what it images, just as that which is imaged imbues words with an impossibly vivid depth of meaning. But again, though one feels and can confidently assert that such a scene is consummately beautiful, we must ask *how do we account for that Beauty?* In short, *why*, why do we experience it as beautiful in the first place? And such a question must invariably lead one to the specifics which constitute the scene and which effect the unified transformation of sensation—

First, and most simply, Keats is explicit (but not unsophisticated), using the terms “beautiful” (391) and “beauty” (394) as direct indications of the scene’s qualities. The overall impression is that of idleness, of innocent luxury, and of a manner of indulgence which is both simple and profound, being *not* so desirous or intense as to be self-destroying. Though the imagination necessarily completes and embellishes the experience of Adonis, he is mostly composed through a kind of synecdoche and simile; the synecdoche is essential for it simultaneously exists as the details, as the specifics, of the sleeping youth—but it would seem

¹⁷ See Appendix note 9 for *Endymion* lines 2.387-407

that every representation must be deliberately selective and choose those features which seem most salient, characteristic, or expressive. Too much detail, and we are lost in myopic intricacies; too little, and the scene could become impossibly abstract; here, we encounter Adonis's form necessarily represented in a piecemeal fashion, at least if we consider the specific language which actually accomplishes a more holistic image.

The description begins with Adonis as a "sleeping youth" (393) – a vague but fairly encompassing description, and one suitable for embellishment – and the reader, by virtue of the perspective Keats employs and/or accomplishes, seems to see Adonis as Venus must see him; the aesthetic and the erotic seem to benignly mingle without the imagery being somehow unduly suggestive or lewd. Indeed, although some critics seemed to fault Keats for the poem's ostentatious sensuality, the erotic in much of his writing asserts itself as capable of being much more than that which is merely lewd. The erotic, one might argue, is the aesthetic of the body, an embodied aesthetic; though many and profound qualities may seem to inhere in objectified sensations, to exist in a body is to be perpetually receptive to the manifold forms presented to sense: it is to *experience* the ever-nascent possibility of the aesthetic. One imagines, for instance, that the "coverlids," (396) which seem to both conceal and reveal, confer a certain pleasure and comfort—to Adonis, to be sure, and to the reader vicariously, through careful poetic art.

Further, there seems something in Keats's descriptions which realizes simple, perhaps "mundane" objects as ideal (perhaps vaguely platonic?) types; the peach to which the coverlids are likened (by virtue of their similar, golden color) seems to be the very epitome and perfection of what a peach is, and in that epitomizing capacity, expressive of ideality, Beauty results from a kind of perceptual synesthesia, clarifying through association the intrinsic virtues of any object. The coverlids acquire a rich color and a delicate texture through the comparison to peaches and

marigolds, just as those comparisons overwhelm the image with an organic quality that expresses the natural, effortless but deep Beauty of an innocent abundance suspended in perfect fruition. The *erotic* in much of Keats's work is the profoundly sensuous (as well as sensual) way in which such Beauty is *experienced*—whereas the *aesthetic* mode might be properly understood as the way that Beauty is expressed and/or the specific artistic choices which accomplish that effect. The erotic, it could be argued, is the subjective experience of objective beauty.

But to return the synecdochical manner by which Adonis is depicted: he is specifically composed of an “Apollonian curve / Of neck and shoulder,” (II.399-400) by his knees and ankles revealed and concealed by the coverlids (400-1), by “one white arm” on which he leans (404), and by a “faint damask mouth” (405) likened to a “dew-lipp'd rose” (407). The reader is given a representation of him through these select images (rather than through speech or action), but his beauty seems neither superficial nor incidental. He is god-like by virtue of the similarity with Apollo; yet he is unself-conscious and vulnerable, as one must to some degree be when lost in dreams. Peacefully lulled by the love of a goddess, lovingly guarded by cherubs, and nourished and nurtured by nature, the experiences of Adonis in this scene indeed seem characteristic of an Elysium. Further, one must note that color figures somewhat prominently in this passage: not only do we have the “gold” (396) of the peach, the marigolds, and the coverlids, but his arm is also “white” (404) and his lips, faintly “damask” (405). That the “peach” invoked is not orange, and the marigolds, not yellow—but both being described as golden, one feels the effect of the unitive, associative comparison also as a heightened, clarifying, and enriching idealization. (It is indeed something of a paradox that “a thing is most itself when likened”—) “Gold,” which conveys a certain hue, also subtly suggests something rare and precious, and that rarity and fineness is then bestowed on those objects united by that quality. That Adonis's arm is “white”

might suggest his purity or innocence, or it might simply reflect his state of languor in that his flesh does not seem to be characterized by exertion or strain. To me, that “whiteness” is also vaguely evocative of marble—and thus potentially of the human form brought to absolute perfection, and further inviting us to contemplate *why* and *how* that is so: *what does it mean for a figurative form to be expressive of ideality? what depth is expressed or realized by beautiful surfaces?* And, finally, Adonis’s “damask,” rose-like lips bestow or reinforce a certain softness and delicacy; this final image (which describes his lips as rose-like) again unites Adonis to his surroundings; not only is he resplendently overwhelmed by the lush profusion of foliage (or by things which take its semblance), he exists amidst this profusion in a perfectly seamless and harmonious way, reinforcing the impression of an Edenic wholeness and innocence realized in a miracle of simplicity.¹⁸

Of course, I don’t believe that I can attribute deliberate subversive intention to Keats (i.e. the intentional fallacy), but I do believe his work can be read in a potentially subversive way. It might be said that the Adonis scene realizes an aesthetic beauty which transcends gender—or which does not find itself to be unduly limited by it, in part because the very notion of “the aesthetic” renders Beauty an artistic phenomenon, proper to created objects or imagined experiences; the beauty we inscribe on the body which reflects culture and which seems gendered becomes differently erotic as it is partially a response to desire. But I don’t believe that the issue is merely a difference of semantics, as the word “beauty,” though differently applied, establishes an important conceptual link between artistic experience and cultural practice.

¹⁸ Of course, one might also recognize a certain ambivalence which qualifies the obvious beauty of the scene, for as Morris Dickstein notes: ...“It is something of a bier as well, for though Adonis has achieved that recurrent dream of early Keats, complete absorption into nature, to be resurrected with the seasons, the ideal now carries with it an overtone of death-in-life.” 103

This is not to say that art cannot image cultural standards or exalted ideals or does not reflect the values of a certain historical moment; in fact, one might conversely argue that women can be reduced to the status of art object or seen as analogous to something merely and superficially decorous by virtue of the extent to which standards of beauty serve to delimit and define them—in which case, by this peculiar and unfortunate reversal, social realities are not enriched by the aesthetic but absurdly strive to approximate certain perfect surfaces of simulacra. Such objectification necessarily entails the divestment or erasure of the erotic power proper to an embodied nature. But this is an unfortunate inversion of the power the aesthetic mode might productively effect upon social realities.

In other words, it might be argued that art wrests or can wrest certain cultural standards away from their insular social domain and in so doing can transmute Beauty into an endless array of abstract possibilities which challenge narrow concerns with convention—even as art and gender both seem realized and limited by different sets of conventions. If Beauty is proper to a poem, then anything that a poem can imagine might merit beautiful depiction; and, under the influence of a licentiously indiscriminate Beauty, Beauty can transcend narrow, gendered concerns—as art and poetry proffer novel possibilities for its realization or expression. And, perhaps if we feel any inhibition in calling or recognizing Adonis as “beautiful,” we but betray our own cultural indoctrination; or, we dismiss him as effeminate because we have not transcended notions of gender which consign beauty to femininity and femininity to inferiority. The aesthetic mode can liberate Beauty and can simultaneously realize it as a quality proper to experience—rather than as a designation of social approval for those who successfully conform to limited conceptions of bodily presentation—or even mortification. (For how does beauty become oppressive or entail oppression? because of the seemingly impossible demands it makes

on one's body? because of the uniformity it demands which does violence to inevitable difference? because of its restricted, policed expression? ...or because it is a cultural effect precluding authentic expression?)

Further, I cannot but emphasize that "culture" seems somehow curiously elided here; Adonis is composed by so many likenesses to natural phenomena and one does not feel that culture is depicted through (this depiction of) nature. Which is to say, perhaps there are certain assumptions implicated in gendering nature or natural objects—which might be but a reflection of our own human notions – and which are fundamentally foreign to those objects – even as they may be undeniably freighted with cultural meanings. Indeed, it might be said that that is precisely how symbolism functions, as an object becomes a mode signification for meanings not inherent to it but somehow powerfully invoked or evoked by it. The question then becomes, *where and how are we to situate or locate masculinity and femininity, in this passage or in this text?* Thus, to follow the manner of Hazlitt – or, to interpret language through a subjectively biased understanding of culture – is yet to betray and to reveal how language, as a series of more or less innocuous symbols, is or can be construed as somehow imbued with or distorted by the human experience of gender; gender being no longer proper just to differently sexed bodies but potentially to entire ideational systems. In reality, I suppose masculinity would by default be present more particularly in this scene only if we assume that it must be correlated with maleness—for Adonis is a young man. Or, we have the assumption (or accusation) of femininity in the poem's wonderful surcharge of eros. (Yet, perhaps in the elision of culture we have the assertion of what is truly natural—rather than culture dictating what is natural and then attributing to itself a determinative realization of innate tendencies....)

It seems that in trying to locate gender in this text, we first become engrossed in its style, and attention to the work's style forces us to advert to the genre, and then to the context which defines the practice and relative valuation of that genre; *Endymion* is a poetic *romance*, perhaps to be contrasted with such genres as the epic: "By the early nineteenth century, women poets were strongly associated with certain forms of poetry: the sonnet, the ode, the romance. Ambitious male poets tended to regard these forms as less important, less prestigious, than the more 'elevated' genres of epic, heroic tragedy, even satire."... "But unlike his male predecessors, Keats found these 'lesser' forms exceptionally attractive." (Wolfson; Mellor 219) It is unfortunate and telling that in many valuations – of genre, or style, or even politics – there seems to exist a gendered correlation wherein that which is different or deviant is lesser—which is to say, lesser in a necessarily gendered way. One critic writes:

Edmund Burke had said that beauty invokes ideas of 'weakness and imperfection,' arguing further that '[w]omen are very sensible of this; for which reason, they learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, to counterfeit weakness, and even sickness.' For Keats 'feminine' sickliness and imperfection were overcome and assimilated by the imagination as a paradoxical source of human strength which, unlike the French Revolution, might offer a lasting renewal for the world: 'a joy forever.' And the diction of Keats's poetry, glossed by viewers as an 'effeminate' and childish lisp, articulated the challenge of beauty to the authorized 'masculine' discourses of the political and cultural establishment. (Roe 581)

For what would it or does it mean when men defiantly appropriate Beauty? It might simply mean to be relegated to the sphere of the censured female; or, we might see the assertion of an equality which reveals how power is implicated in, signified by, and sustained through gendered difference. To call Keats or his poetic style "effeminate" or non-masculine – even as one is in reality responding to and rejecting his social status or political affiliations – is in effect to dismiss

and delegitimize him without really engaging with those substantive, difficult elements which would give that criticism authority. Or, to refer to something as “masculine” might be to confer a certain approval empty of any real meaning; for it is or can be applied expressly with a vague connotative sense which only confirms itself as a denotation of superior value. (If that which is “masculine” is correct and laudable, whereas that which is “feminine” is deficient and weak, even as the two polarities might work and develop as an oppositional process, what is inevitably realized by gender is the maintenance of power; and, it would seem that it is precisely its arbitrariness which maintains that inequality.) Obviously and furthermore, this quote reveals the ludicrous and vexed relationship between culture/gender and aesthetic or artistic beauty; “beauty,” being implicated in gender relations, becomes associated with the inferiority demanded or expected of women—“beauty” manifested as a set of practices and constraints which delimit the female. But perhaps the key word (in Roe’s quotation from Burke) is “learn,” as such practices must be taught or acquired; and is it possible for humanity to realize, to exist amidst, or be accountable to anything other than the paradox of artificial natures? as nature and culture seem to perennially exist in tenuous, mutually definitive (and at times inextricable) compromise—and as culture is realized as a retroactive effect.

Conscious of how femininity entails studied artifice – and at times a denial which renders that artifice the substance and denies one’s substance legitimacy – we can proceed to Keats’s descriptions of *demonic* female agency—which exists as an important contrast to *divine* and benevolent female power. Now, for all of the poem’s beauty, one must acknowledge that there are yet grotesque elements or scenes, or...scenes not in themselves grotesque but which figure the grotesque in a significant way—for a style truly grotesque obtrudes or offends and so resists reading. The story of Circe and Glaucus conveys the terrible and tragic reality of illusions in

which an illusory beauty becomes decadent—and the decadent then quickly transforms into the grotesque. This transformation is realized as a powerful juxtaposition between the apparent beauties of decadent, sensual pleasure¹⁹ and the ultimate revelation that such indulgences were but a disguise for a terrible, grotesque reality, distorted and tainted by malice and bereft of genuine affection. In some significant way, it could be argued that Circe enacts or represents the conflict and disparity necessitated by a restricted, limited feminine role: on the one hand, she proffers the promise of something ideal through a perfect and powerful, but ultimately specious, illusion; simultaneously, however, there exists a terrible and tumultuous reality behind and concealed by those alluring surfaces, surfaces contrived entirely to deceive and disguise (...and perhaps then to be contrasted with Adonis whose [sculpture-like] beauty *could* be figured as a perfect correspondence of depth and surface?) She is not a one-dimensional villain conveniently realizing or embodying the totality of masculine anathema against that which is female; rather, one might say she represents the fracturing necessitated by the incompatibility of depth and surface. Furthermore, those surfaces, in the total context, become bitterly sarcastic and parodic; Circe seems very conscious of her parodying of feminine enticements, and so the depiction quietly calls attention to the social construction of gender in its sense as a propagated illusion (for gender seems a conscious act which deceptively constitutes the subject; and, perhaps, might always be construed as a kind of parody—)

The initial scene²⁰ – though in certain overt ways it may seem but a fairly innocuous reiteration of other of the story's love scenes – yet has a decidedly different character. For one, the hyperbole feels especially hyperbolic (e.g. “the fairest face that morn e'er look'd upon,”

¹⁹ ...and, as Bruce Miller notes: “This grotesque portrayal of Circe's low pleasures is a criticism, I believe, of carnal indulgence.” 47

²⁰ See note 10 in Appendix for *Endymion* 3.418-43

(III.424) and “...more bliss than all / the range of flower’d Elysium” (427-8)) and the excesses seem meant to cloy: the repetition of “sweet” followed by emphatic exclamation (421) very straightforwardly accomplishes that effect; and further, “honey,” “bliss,” and “rich,” (in lines 426-29) emphasize the unexpected pleasure conferred by Circe’s presence—which seems but to anticipate and promise further pleasures. However, Glaucus’s telling and seemingly incongruous use of “thraldom” (427) conveys a certain overwhelmed or compelled submission and the peculiar inequality of one entirely at the mercy of another: he is as one trapped and ensnared. And, this submissive state is yet somewhat strangely paired – or, actually is said to exceed in pleasure and bliss – that which one might expect to experience in “Elysium” (428) (...and yet, taken with its epithet of “flower’d,” the phrase seems but to reinforce and succinctly epitomize the qualities that the natural world very frequently acquires or exhibits in Keats’s writing. Which is simply to say, a “flower’d Elysium” – a natural paradise – often constitutes *Endymion*’s settings.) And yet “thraldom” also conveys an ambivalence incipient with and portending the disappointment and devastation of his later discovery...

...and how is Circe initially characterized? Even as she is not a simplistic or stereotypical villain, she seems quite willing to assume the role of blasphemed temptress; she says explicitly, “If thou art ripe to taste a long love dream; / If smiles, dimples, tongues for ardour mute, / Hang in thy vision like a tempting fruit, / O let me pluck it for thee.” (3.440-3) But she is a demonic Eve – one might say, a conflation of Satan and Eve – and the parallel seems to evoke the threat and consequent perils of succumbing to forbidden temptation, which Glaucus is all too helpless to resist. And Circe might be said to overact or exaggerate her role—perhaps to persuade and seduce Glaucus, but also because it *is* an act, a feigning of affection and a feigning of

character—a conjured trick. In the later scene²¹ she metamorphoses from a beautiful enchantress into a grotesque – and mercilessly and gleefully malicious – sorceress; and “truth...[comes] naked and sabre-like against [Glaucus’s] heart.” (III.556-7) Circe ensnares men through surfeit pleasures only to condemn them to hellish torments, which she sadistically relishes. What seemed ambrosia becomes bitter poison and excessive pleasure rankles into pain. The disappointment and devastation follow as consequence of the illusion being exposed *as* an illusion—and further that it was but a veil for a dark and demonic truth.

It seems fair to claim that the grotesque (at least in this poem) is often characterized by or as pain and suffering; and thus, further figures as an important contrast to the poem’s erotic elements, for those elements are necessarily expressive or characteristic of beauty, pleasure, and joy. Circe happens to strangely unite – through a simultaneous inversion and confusion – those seemingly discordant modes, so as to figure them as disconcertingly similar, even as they seem to stand in sharper relief. But rather than effecting a true reconciliation or unity, the reader feels a fragmentation of the character into disparate extremes. One might claim that she seems to be the powerful foil for Diane/Cynthia/etc. enacting an inverse process and realizing a contrary power (even as one might also argue that Diane is or could be construed as her own foil, existing seemingly as separate women, and thus representing, for instance, different types of love²²—but

²¹ See note 11 in Appendix for *Endymion* lines 3.483-506

²² ... as Bruce Miller astutely argues: “so the predominant note of the beloved gradually shifts from the physical (the ‘known unknown’ of the first and second books), to the romantic (the Indian maid of the fourth book), and finally to the deific (the true Cynthia). Cynthia is a symbol, an exteriorization of Endymion’s state of mind. As the character of the hero changes so does the figure which embodies and so expresses his desire. At each step in the narrative the central figure assumes the aspect which represents the kind of love that Endymion wants and is ready for.” “On the Meaning of Keats’s *Endymion*,” 46 ... and as Stuart Sperry suggests: “Endymion is unexpectedly confronted with the choice between two quite different and opposing ideals of love—the one transcendent, ecstatic, and immortal; the other warm, earthly, and filled with the passion of the human heart.” 109

to say so might be to miss the important point that their apparent difference is perhaps only superficial, as one must further note that “the revelation that she [the Indian maid] and Cynthia are one confirms the whole point of Endymion’s journeyings, the lesson that only by full sensitivity to and appreciation of the mundane can we come to apprehension of the divine, for they are inextricably mingled in human experience.” [Evert 155]) In the conflict or division embodied by Circe, the real becomes opposed to that which is illusory, and ideality disappears altogether—for an illusion can only offer its semblance. Despite the fact that Cynthia is a goddess, a transcendent being, she is also simultaneously for a time human; as Endymion ascends, she seems to descend, and through that human embodiment resists an illusory idealization and acquires physical reality. Circe, on the other hand, seems merely to dissemble a terrifying physical reality.

Finally, what seems most significant about Circe is that her intervening story detailing the deception of Glaucus frames Endymion’s trial of Love and Belief as real and not assured of success; it suggests that there is a real possibility of loss – or of never-realized attainment – entailed in daring to hope²³. For such Love necessitates a leap of faith, it demands hope and trust in what seems simultaneously illusory and ideal, and there is no certainty that that faith will be confirmed in the journey. Indeed, as the story progresses, Endymion seems to lose faith and grow impossibly despondent (recall the Cave of Quietude); but this seems the result of both the recognition of loss and of his own perceived failure—

²³ ...“More specifically, how is one to interpret Glaucus’s misadventure in the pursuit of his nymph Scylla? Does his failure merely serve to heighten the triumph and superior powers of his liberator, Endymion? Or does the episode possess a further significance? Does it serve as something of a warning to Keats’s hero, a premonition that the search for fulfillment in imaginative experience can end in deception and enslavement rather than in happiness and truth? Does the episode stand in stark contrast to, or does it subtly qualify, the ambition and significance of Endymion’s own pursuit?” (Sperry 106)

It might be said that Keats's vision is surprising, both in the scope of its beauty and in beauty's relation to gender, for it subverts even a contemporary reader's expectations: one does not feel a rigid boundary between the male and female characters (for whatever differences they manifest seem more contingent on their individuality than on any adherence to types), but rather, as nature usurps culture as the context for narrative action, one comes to feel the arbitrariness of such boundaries. Indeed, if the reader sees Adonis as Venus sees him, we also see a depiction of maleness which is thoroughly aesthetic; just as one might argue that an awareness and appreciation of the aesthetic mode can be inhibited by one too aware of the erotic (in that the sexual can turn an aesthetic nudity into mere pornographic nakedness), it seems that cultural biases and expectations can and do distort our vision so that we are unable to see beauty in an aesthetic way—as a transcendent ideal and not as a set of norms or expectations.

For indeed, as cultural practice, "beauty" is thoroughly female, and this awareness might necessarily inform or delimit aesthetic awareness, although a truly aesthetic awareness certainly does not inevitably image the paragon of societal expectations. Further, cultural expectations of masculinity seem to have no place in an artistic vision which privileges the ideal to the real, for the ideal seeks to transcend the limited situations and stifling particulars of the real. In *Endymion*, one finds a depiction or expression of Beauty imbuing and uniting men, women, and nature so as to effect an almost spiritual transformation; for it is the Beauty of Keats's poetry which simultaneously exalts that which it images, and, if it has a tendency towards idealization, that idealization seems to approximate or reach for a transcendent vision of perfected Beauty—and does not merely consist of the obfuscation of or escape from the real.

Art, and the aesthetic sense we take to art (as well as to nature and culture, etc.) though not limited by beauty, productively challenge one to think differently and more deeply about

such beauty. Although art (and/or the art-world as an institution) depends upon certain conventions, one might also argue that it has evolved into that which can flout and directly challenge the tyranny of other, perhaps unquestioned and deeply entrenched, *cultural* conventions. Though it may not be at all mimetic, it can still hold up a critical mirror to the culture within it which it exists, so as to comment upon it, or even actively disrupt it, and so has the potential to present an internal challenge to those norms and expectations which define and structure it. Keats's poem, precisely because of the profundity of its vision, regarded from a contemporary situation, evokes hope indeed—but also deep mourning in the realization of the disparity which exists between the Beauty of the work and the rather tragic Truth of one's life—

.....

But at last, one rejoices with Endymion who wins his immortality, and, one might say, Keats's poetic achievement is of a similar magnitude, for as art enshrines life, defying death with its aspirations of permanence, it becomes very much analogous to the Soul itself. Keats's achievement endures as a powerful testament to transcendent Love and as a monument of sacred Beauty. Again, although Endymion must have felt his Love as paradoxically both ideal and illusory, his ardent pursuit must and does confirm the reality of a powerfully redemptive ideality—which is triumph. (Art itself seems precariously liminal and treacherously alluring in its capacities to be both a carefully crafted illusion as well as potentially an extraordinary vision of ideality.) ... As Walter Evert notes: "in Keats's initial conception of the poem as a whole, Endymion's pursuit of Cynthia was seen as the romance equivalent of the poet's pursuit of poetry. In this consists the whole basis of the poem's allegory."(106)

...For if there is anything heroic about poetic endeavor – and if there is anything which testifies to artistic accomplishment – it resides precisely in the arduous and difficult task of

wresting from the degradations of the profane, and salvaging from the darkness of one's embattled soul, some defiant Beauty—so as to bestow or reveal an unexpected and profound meaning: to write poetry is find, expose, and passionately pursue the ideality at times obscured by a relentless and oppressive reality. Endymion finds that ideality in Love; and Keats realizes ideality through the Sublime Beauty of his poetry which recreates, preserves, and honors the story of that Love. It might therefore be said that Endymion's journey and Keats's poetry work in tandem to realize both the sacred Beauty of Love and the heroic end of Art....

...Love is a sacred, transformative power, imbuing and uniting All. As Dickstein observes, "What Keats describes as love seems, at its most subtle, to be the distinctly human element of all experience, just as what Wordsworth describes as 'poetry' in the preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is not only verse but rather the distinctly human element in all knowledge." (96) That which seems profane becomes, through the influence of that mysterious, exalted force, an expression of divinity, and so realizes its true Beauty. The means of Endymion's apotheosis is Love, Love for and by a goddess—though Love indeed often entails deep sorrow, doubt, and sometimes loss. There is a recurring theme of Love's mystical potential²⁴ in the poem, which contributes to the complexity of conceptions of the sacred more generally, and which is epitomized in the following passage:

“Wherein lies happiness? In that which becks
Our ready minds to fellowship divine,
A fellowship with essence; till we shine,
Full alchemized²⁵, and free of space. Behold

²⁴ See note 12 in Appendix for other relevant quotes related to love.

²⁵ ...“Happiness is a state achieved by a humanistic alchemy that results in our being made free of the limitations of materialistic conceptualizations of reality. And the way to this is through what beckons our ready minds to the fellowship divine that Keats terms a fellowship with essence. Keats seems to be edging on a Neoplatonic statement, but he is too naturalistic to cross over into it. What he does give is a version of myth-making very close to Wordsworth, Blake, and Shelley. The subject-object experience, in which we are not free of space, can be surmounted by a relationship in which life confronts life, an alchemized sharing of essence between two equal partners. Friendship as such a mode has been illustrated by Book III

The clear religion of heaven! Fold
 A rose leaf round thy finger's taperness,
 And soothe thy lips: hist, when the airy stress
 Of music's kiss impregnates the free winds,
 And with a sympathetic touch unbinds
 Eolian magic from their lucid wombs:
 Then old songs waken from enclouded tombs;
 Old ditties sigh above their father's grave;
 Ghosts of melodious prophecyings rave
 Round every spot where trod Apollo's foot;
 Bronze clarions awake, and faintly bruit,
 Where long ago a giant battle was;
 And from the turf, a lullaby doth pass
 In every place where infant Orpheus slept.
 Feel we these things? –that moment we have stept
 Into a sort of oneness, and our state
 Is like a floating spirit's. But there are
 Richer entanglements, enthrallments far
 More self-destroying, leading, by degrees,
 To the chief intensity: the crown of these
 Is made of love and friendship, and sits high
 Upon the forehead of humanity.
 All its more ponderous and bulky worth
 Is friendship, whence there ever issues forth
 A steady splendor; but at the tip-top,
 There hangs by unseen film, an orb'd drop
 Of light, and that is love: its influence,
 Thrown in our eyes, genders a novel sense,
 At which we start and fret; till in the end,
 Melting into its radiance, we blend,
 Mingle, and so become a part of it,—
 Nor with aught else can our souls interknit
 So wingedly” *Endymion* I.780-813²⁶

...perhaps Endymion's unique journey towards apotheosis and ultimate transcendence of mortality – in which he becomes exalted to divinity and kindred to the gods – necessarily entails some manner of transformation or esoteric, metaphorical “alchemy” in which his being is refined

of the poem. Book IV is devoted to richer entanglements, enthrallments far more self-destroying, leading, by degrees, to the chief intensity of love.” (Bloom 375)

²⁶ ...“it remains impossible to read the whole of Keats's narrative, regardless of how aimless and confusing much of it seems, as a mere play of erotic fantasy. Endymion's speech on happiness, the central argument of Book One, outlines an ascending order of imaginative values, beginning with love of natural objects, leading on to sympathy and friendship, and culminating in human and divine love, a hierarchy of intensities that is both developed and put to trial in the books to come.” (Sperry 94)

and perfected to spiritual “gold”? Thus, the phrase “fellowship divine” we might assume to anticipate both Endymion’s eventual god-like state, and also, through the tautology, that such fellowship can be achieved through and is experienced as identification with (divine) “essence”...so that one might further posit that the “essence” of the created world is the divine, immanent substance which unites as it transcends the baffling diversity of material phenomena: to experientially realize this innermost “essence” is thus to identify with and so become the eternal soul beyond death and mutable process²⁷. To identify with the deepest, truest part of oneself is further to identify with all that shares in this fundamental Self, feeling life’s vitality and beauty as the soul, the force of being and becoming, the only and ultimate Reality.

Importantly, notions of the sacred or numinous can be understood to encompass and imbue Nature, Humanity, and Art: and each of these interconnected spheres attain their substance and meaning through the Mysteriously Transcendent. Indeed, Keats’s vision acquires much of its power and beauty by the way in which those separate but necessarily related spheres share in the Transcendent: Sublime Nature acquires essential humanity when its composite forces become embodied or are personified, even as they remain transcendent; humanity comes to intimately know the sacred through experiences of sovereign Love and undying Beauty; and Art enshrines the numinous, envisions the impossible, sanctifies feeling, consummates beauty, and defiantly persists as a redemptive promise of that which is ideal. If one is to make the bold assertion that Life is Art and Art is Life, it is an enriched understanding of Art and of what it can attain which enables the conflation; for such does not detract from the holiness of a life or of any living thing, but rather ambitiously seeks to extend the purview of the sacred and further demands from life its true and proper Beauty. (...as Beauty is certainly not an appellation worthy

²⁷ See note 13 in Appendix for an excerpt from a letter to George and Georgiana Keats, April 21, 1819 which discusses Keats’s view of the soul—

only of Art...for what, what is a *life* bereft of Beauty?)

The realization of Love is but the soul's awakening. And Love is the sovereign monarch of human aspiration, for anyone who dares to love deeply is great, as great as their passion is profound. Love is that miraculous power which mysteriously bestows redemptive meaning so as to sanctify a tragic, fallen world, a world haunted by malevolent darkness. Love is that effulgent, sacred light which overwhelms, subsumes, and so transforms all which is profane. As Shelley writes in *A Defence of Poetry*:

“The great secret of morals is love; or a going out of our own nature, and an identification of ourselves with the beautiful which exists in thought, action, or person, not our own. A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own. The great instrument of moral good is the imagination; and poetry administers to the effect by acting upon the cause.” (13)

...For Love is not always characterized by sensual ecstasy and unadulterated bliss; sometimes it is known as Sublime suffering, as a fierce, consuming, merciless fire, an impetuous and even violent ardor: as the mythic knowledge of a dark and mysterious Passion which echoes from the fathomless depths of one's abased soul. And as Shelley rightly notes, to Love is also to demand from oneself a deeply empathic understanding of and engagement with the world; Love also entails the grave and profound responsibilities necessitated by compassion. Sometimes, to Love is to weep with the weeping, to exult with the joyous, to forgive and to strive courageously in altruistic action—for the experience of unity and transcendent Oneness is to feel oneself powerfully implicated in the Life of everything living. And it would seem that the essence of Love is harmony: a partaking of one thing in everything, and of everything's mutual necessity, a fundamental unity perhaps mediated and sustained by song and numinous word. Further,

“harmony” not only denotes this unitive relation but is metonymically suggestive of the apparitions of old songs which seem to echo into eternity as a kind of undying history; dead music alive with memory subtly reverberates to reanimate—and somehow nothing is or can be lost to Time.

APPENDIX

.....

1. And as Abram notes in *The Mirror and the Lamp*, with respect to the analogous natures of poet and creator: ...“the poem of the marvelous is a second creation, and therefore not a replica nor even a reasonable facsimile of this world, but its own world, *sui generis*, subject only to its own laws, whose existence (it is suggested) is an end in itself...It follows that ‘artistic truth and natural truth are entirely distinct.’ Yet a perfect work of art gives the illusion of being a work of nature, because, as a work of the human spirit, it is ‘above nature but not out of nature’; and ‘the genuine amateur of art sees not only the truth of what is imitated but also...what is supernatural [*das Überirdische*] in the little art world.’ Or as Goethe phrased the concept a year later: ‘The artist, grateful to the nature which produced him, gives back to her a second nature, but one which has been felt, thought out, and humanly perfected.’ In England, Richard Hurd, without either the detail or the elaborate metaphysical substructure of the German theorists, faced similar problems and reached comparable conclusions. In *his Letters on Chivalry and Romance* (1762), Hurd explicitly set himself to defend the romantic marvelous of poets like Tasso against the writings of Davenant and Hobbes. These documents, he says, ‘open’d the way’ to a ‘new sort of criticism’; and with historical acumen, Hurd attributes the declines of pagan gods and ‘Gothic Faeries’ to the growing rationalism of the seventeenth century, which finally drove out ‘the portentous spectres of the imagination,’ until ‘fancy, that had wantoned it so long in the world of fiction, was now constrained, against her will, to ally herself to strict truth, if she would gain admittance into reasonable company.’ But, he insists, the maxim of ‘following Nature,’ in the sense of equating nature with the world of experience, although valid for such realistic species as the drama, is not relevant to the epic, a ‘more sublime and creative poetry,’ which addresses itself ‘solely or principally to the Imagination.’ Hurd quotes from the Spectator paper on the fairy way of writing, and expands Addison’s concept of this poetry as a ‘new creation’ in such a way as to distinguish the world of poetry from the world of experience, and poetic truth (or self-consistency) from philosophical truth (or correspondence to empirical nature). ‘So little account [he says ironically] does this wicked poetry make of philosophical or historical truth: All she allows us to look for, is *poetical truth*; a very slender thing indeed, and which the poet’s eye, when rolling in its finest frenzy, can but just lay hold of. To speak in the philosophic language of Mr. Hobbes, It is something much *beyond the actual bounds, and only within the conceived possibility of nature*...A poet, they say, must follow *Nature*; and by Nature we are to suppose can only be meant the known and experienced course of affairs in this world. Whereas the poet has a world of his own, where experience has less to do, than consistent imagination. He has, besides, a supernatural world to range in. He has Gods, and Faeries, and Witches at his command’...Richard Hurd, like Bodmer and Breitinger, paralleled the poet to the Creator in order to account for and certify the supernatural creatures in a poem”... (278-80)
2. *Excerpt from a letter to Benjamin Bailey. Teignmouth, Friday March 13, 1818*
....“last night I thought the moon had dwindled in heaven ——
I have never had your Sermon from Wordsworth, but Mr. Dilke lent it me. You know my ideas about Religion. I do not think myself more in the right than other people, and that nothing in this world is proveable. I wish I could enter into all your feelings on the subject, merely for one short 10 minutes, and give you a page or two to your liking. I am sometimes

so very sceptical as to think Poetry itself a mere Jack o' Lantern to amuse whoever may chance to be struck with its brilliance. As tradesmen say everything is worth what it will fetch, so probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer — being in itself a Nothing. Ethereal things may at least be thus real, divided under three heads — Things real — things semireal — and nothings. Things real, such as existences of Sun moon and Stars — and passages of Shakspeare. — Things semireal, such as love, the Clouds etc., which *require a greeting of the Spirit* to make them wholly exist — and Nothings, which are made great and dignified by an ardent pursuit —”

3. *Excerpt from a letter to Benjamin Bailey, November 22, 1817...*

“I am certain of nothing but of the *holiness of the Heart's affections* and the truth of Imagination - What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth - whether it existed before or not - for I have the same idea of all our passions as of love: they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential beauty. In a word, you may know my favorite speculation by my first book, and the little song I send in my last, which is a representation from the fancy of the probable mode of operating in these matters. The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream, - he awoke and found it truth. I am more zealous in this affair because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning - and yet it must be. Can it be that even the greatest philosopher ever arrived at his goal without putting aside numerous objections? However it may be, O for a life of sensation rather than of thoughts! It is a 'Vision in the form of Youth,' a shadow of reality to come. And this consideration has further convinced me, - for it has come as auxiliary to another favorite speculation of mine, - that we shall enjoy ourselves hereafter by having what we called happiness on earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated. And yet such a fate can only befall those who delight in sensation, rather than hunger as you do after truth. Adam's dream will do here, and seems to be a conviction that imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as human life and its spiritual repetition. But, as I was saying, the simple imaginative mind may have its rewards in the repetition of its own silent working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness - to compare great things with small - have you never by being Surprised with an old Melody - in a delicious place - by a delicious voice, felt over again your very Speculations and Surmises at the time it first operated on your Soul - do you not remember forming to yourself the singer's face more beautiful than it was possible and yet with the elevation of the Moment you did not think so - even then you were mounted on the Wings of Imagination so high - that the Prototype must be here after – ”

4. *Endymion* 1.554-581

There blossom'd suddenly a magic bed / Of sacred ditamy and poppies red: / At which I wondered greatly, knowing well / That but one night had wrought this flowery spell [...] Moreover, through the dancing poppies stole / A breeze most softly lulling to my soul; And shaping visions all about my sight / Of colours, wings, and bursts of spangly light; / The which became more strange, and strange, and dim, / And then were gulphed in a tumultuous swim: / And then I fell asleep. Ah, can I tell / The enchantment that afterwards befel? / Yet it was but a dream: yet such a dream / That never tongue, although it overteem / With mellow utterance, like a cavern spring / Could figure out and to conception bring / All I beheld and felt. Methought I lay / Watching the zenith, where the milky way / Among the stars in virgin splendor pours; / And travelling my eye, until the doors of heaven appeared to open for my flight [...]

5. *Endymion* 1.739-760

‘Although before the crystal heavens darken, / I watch and dote upon the silver lakes / Pictur'd in western cloudiness, that takes / The semblance of gold rocks and bright gold

sands, / Islands, and creeks, and amber-fretted strands / With horses prancing o'er them,
 palaces / And towers of amethyst,—would I so tease / My pleasant days, because I could not
 mount / Into those regions? [...] how light / Must dreams themselves be; seeing they're more
 slight / Than the mere nothing that engenders them! [...] Why pierce high-fronted honor to
 the quick / For nothing but a dream?"

6. *Endymion* 2.593-626

So, with unusual gladness, on he hies / Through caves, and palaces of mottled ore, / Gold
 dome, and crystal wall, and turquoise floor, / Black polish'd porticos of awful shade, / And, at
 the last, a diamond balustrade, / Leading afar past wild magnificence, / Spiral through
 ruggedest loopholes, and thence / Stretching across a void, then guiding o'er / Enormous
 chasms, where, all foam and roar, / Streams subterranean tease their granite beds; / Then
 heighten'd just above the silvery heads / Of a thousand fountains, so that he could dash / The
 waters with his spear; but at the splash, / Done heedlessly, those spouting columns rose /
 Sudden a poplar's height, and 'gan to enclose / His diamond path with fretwork, streaming
 round / Alive, and dazzling cool, and with a sound, / Haply, like dolphin tumults, when sweet
 shells / Welcome the float of Thetis. Long he dwells / On this delight; for every minutes
 space, / The streams with changed magic interlace: / Sometimes like delicatest lattices, /
 Cover'd with crystal vines; then weeping trees, / Moving about as in a gentle wind, / Which
 in a wink, to watery gauze refin'd, / Pour'd into shapes of curtain'd canopies, / Spangled, and
 rich with liquid broideries / Of flowers, peacocks, swans, and naiads fair. / Swifter than
 lightning went these wonders rare; / And then the water, into stubborn streams, / Collecting,
 mimick'd the wrought oaken beams, / Pillars and frieze, and high fantastic roof, / Of those
 dusk places in times far aloof / Cathedrals call'd.

7. a. From Henry Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1923), 51-53 “...[Decadence] is generally used...to express the literary methods of a society which has reached its limits of expansion and maturity—‘the state of society...which produces too large a number of individuals who are unsuited to the labours of the common life. A society should be like an organism. Like an organism, in fact, it may be resolved into a federation of smaller organisms, which may themselves be resolved into a federation of cells. The individual is the social cell. In order that the organism should perform its functions with energy it is necessary that the organisms composing it should perform their functions with energy, but with a subordinated energy, and in order that these lesser organisms should themselves perform their functions with energy, it is necessary that the cells comprising them should perform their functions with energy, but with a subordinated energy. If the energy of the cells becomes independent, the lesser organisms will likewise cease to subordinate their energy to the total energy and the anarchy which is established constitutes the *decadence* of the whole. The social organism does not escape this law and enters into decadence as soon as the individual life becomes exaggerated beneath the influence of acquired well-being, and of heredity. A similar law governs the development and decadence of that other organism which we call language. A style of decadence is one in which the unity of the book is decomposed to give place to the independence of the phrase, and the phrase to give place to the independence of the word.’ A decadent style, in short, is an anarchistic style in which everything is sacrificed to the development of the individual parts. Apuleius, Petronius, St. Augustine, Tertuillian, are examples of this *decadence* in ancient literature; Gautier and Baudelaire in French literature; Poe and especially Whitman (in so far as he can be said to have a style) in America; in English literature Sir Thomas Browne is probably the most conspicuous instance; later, De Quincey, and, in part of their work, Coleridge and Rossetti.”

b. Santayana writes in *The Sense of Beauty*: “If Sybaris is so sad a name to the memory—and who is without some Sybaris of his own?—if the image of it is so tormenting and in the end so disgusting, this is not because we no longer think its marbles bright, its fountains cool, its athletes strong, or its roses fragrant; but because, mingled with all these supreme beauties, there is the ubiquitous shade of Nemesis, the sense of a vacant will and a suicidal inhumanity. The intolerableness of this moral condition poisons the beauty which continues to be felt. If this beauty did not exist, and was still not desired, the tragedy would disappear and Jehovah would be deprived of the worth of his victim. The sternness of moral forces lies precisely in this, that the sacrifices morality imposes upon us are real, that the things it renders impossible are still precious.” (p. 214)

8. *Excerpt from a Letter to Richard Woodhouse October 27th, 1818*

As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself - it has no self - it is every thing and nothing - It has no character - it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated - It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually in for - and filling some other Body - The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute - the poet has none; no identity - he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more? Might I not at that very instant have been cogitating on the Characters of Saturn and Ops? It is a wretched thing to confess; but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature - how can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins so to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated - not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children.[...] I feel assured I should write from the mere yearning and fondness I have for the Beautiful even if my night's labours should be burnt every morning, and no eye ever shine upon them. But even now I am perhaps not speaking from myself: but from some character in whose soul I now live....

9. *Endymion* 2.387-407

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. Sideways 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.

10. *Endymion* 3.418-43

'When I awoke, 'twas in a twilight bower, / Just when the light of morn, with hum of bees, / Stole through its verdurous matting of fresh trees. / How sweet, and sweeter! For I

heard a lyre, / And over it a sighing voice expire. / It ceased—I caught light footsteps; and anon / The fairest face that morn e'er look'd upon / Push'd through a screen of roses. Starry Jove! / With tears, and smiles, and honey-words she wove / A net whose thralldom was more bliss than all / The range of flower'd Elysium. Thus did fall / The dew of her rich speech: "Ah! Art awake? / O let me hear thee speak, for Cupid's sake! / I am so oppress'd with joy! Why, I have shed / An urn of tears, as though thou wert cold dead; / And now I find thee living, I will pour / From these devoted eyes their silver store, / Until exhausted of the latest drop, / So it will pleasure thee, and force thee stop / Here, that I too may live: but if beyond / Such cool and sorrowful offerings, thou art fond / Of soothing warmth, of dalliance supreme; / If thou art ripe to taste a long love dream; / If smiles, if dimples, tongues for ardour mute, / Hang in thy vision like a tempting fruit, / O let me pluck it for thee."

11. *Endymion* 3.483-506

'Wandering about in pine and cedar gloom / Damp awe assail'd me; for there 'gan to boom / A sound of moan, an agony of sound, / Sepulchral from the distance all around. / Then came a conquering earth-thunder, and rumbled / That fierce complain to silence: while I stumbled / Down a precipitous path, as if impell'd. / I came to a dark valley.—Groanings swell'd / Poisonous about my ears, and louder grew, / The nearer I approach'd a flame's gaunt blue, / That glar'd before me through a thorny brake. / This fire, like the eye of gordian snake, / Bewitch'd me towards; and I soon was near / A sight too fearful for the feel of fear: / In thicket hid I curs'd the haggard scene— / The banquet of my arms, my arbour queen, / Seated upon an uptorn forest root; / And all around her shapes, wizard and brute, / Laughing and wailing, groveling, serpentine, / Shewing tooth, tusk, venom-bag, and sting! / O such deformities! Old Charon's self, / Should he give up awhile his penny pelf, / And take a dream 'mong rushes Stygian, / It could not be so phantasied.'

12. *Endymion* 1.832-842

“Just so may love, although 'tis understood / The mere commingling of passionate breath, / Produce more than our searching witnesseth: / What I know not: but who of men can tell / That flowers would bloom, or that green fruit would swell / To melting pulp, that fish would have bright mail, / The earth its dower of river, wood, and vale, / The meadows runnels, runnels pebble-stones, / The seed its harvest, or the lute its tones, / Tones ravishment, or ravishment its sweet, / If human souls did never kiss and greet?”

Endymion 3.162-171

'And as I grew in years, still didst thou blend / With all my ardours: thou wast the deep glen; / Thou wast the mountain-top—the sage's pen— / The poet's harp—the voice of friends—the sun; / Thou wast the river—thou wast glory won; / Thou wast my clarion's blast—thou wast my steed— / My goblet full of wine—my topmost deed:— / Thou wast the charm of women, lovely Moon! / O what a wild and harmonized tune / My spirit struck from all the beautiful!'

13. *Excerpt from a letter to George and Georgiana Keats, April 21, 1819:*

“Call the world, if you please, "the Vale of Soul Making". Then you will find out the use of the world....

There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions -- but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself.

Intelligences are atoms of perception -- they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God. How then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them -- so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one's individual existence. How, but in the medium of a world like this?

This point I sincerely wish to consider, because I think it a grander system of salvation than the Christian religion -- or rather it is a system of Spirit Creation...

I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive -- and yet I think I perceive it -- that you may judge the more clearly I will put it in the most homely form possible. I will call the world a school instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read. I will call the human heart the hornbook used in that school. And I will call the child able to read, the soul made from that school and its hornbook.

Do you not see how necessary a world of pains and troubles is to school an intelligence and make it a soul? A place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways....

As various as the lives of men are -- so various become their souls, and thus does God make individual beings, souls, identical souls of the sparks of his own essence.

This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity..."

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