



Università
Ca' Foscari
Venezia

Corso di Laurea magistrale in Lingue e Letterature Europee, Americane e Postcoloniali

—

Ca' Foscari
Dorsoduro 3246
30123 Venezia

Tesi di Laurea

John Keats

Relatore

Ch. Prof. Valerio de Scarpis

Laureando

Patrizia Galeandro
Matricola 818201

Anno Accademico

2012 / 2013

Contents

List of Illustrations and Photographs	p. 4
Introduction	p. 5
Chapter 1 Historical and Literary Context	p. 10
1.1 Historical Context	
1.1.1 The Napoleonic era	
1.1.2 The Industrial Revolution	
1.1.3 The Restoration in Europe	
1.1.4 The Revolutions in Europe, the Monroe doctrine and the expansion of the colonial Empires	
1.1.5 The Hanoverians in England	
1.2 Literary Context	
1.2.1 The Romantic Movement	
1.2.2 Poetry in England	
1.2.3 Prose in England	
Chapter 2 Biography and Works	p. 33
2.1 Biography	
2.1.1 Early Life	
2.1.2 Life in London	
2.1.3 Life after London	
2.1.4 Keats in Rome	
2.2 Works	
2.2.1 The <i>Poems</i> of 1817	
2.2.2 <i>Endymion</i>	
2.2.3 <i>Isabella, Hyperion, The Eve of St Agnes, The Eve of St Mark, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Lamia</i>	

2.2.4 The *Odes*

2.2.5 The *Plays*

Chapter 3 The Poetics of John Keats p. 62

3.1 Keats and the Nineteenth Century

3.2 The Negative Capability

3.3 The influence of Spenser on Keats

3.4 Keats reading Shakespeare

3.5 Keats and Leopardi: Affinities and Differences

3.6 The Bequest of Keats

Chapter 4 The *Odes* p. 88

4.1 Structure and Themes

4.2 *Ode to Fancy*

4.3 *Ode to Psyche*

4.4 *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

4.5 *Ode on Indolence*

4.6 *Ode on Melancholy*

4.7 *Ode on a Nightingale*

4.8 *Ode to Autumn*

Conclusion p. 118

Bibliography and Sitography p. 123

List of Illustrations and Photographs

The graves of John Keats and John Severn	p. 43
John Keats's signature	p. 85
The Parthenon Marbles	p. 99
Portrait of John Keats	p. 118

Introduction

In the scenario at the turn of the Nineteenth century, several events occurred: Europe was facing the expansive ambition of Napoleon, while many colonies could not tolerate their dependence any longer; the continent was subjected to a different shape conceived in the Restoration, whereas the Industrial Revolution led the Western countries to a new conception of everyday life.

These situations were translated in the narrative and poetic context by the reemergence of the emotive aspect in the world of human feelings, with the help of imagination and fancy. What was happening in history appeared in prose and poetry in the features of a great sense of nationalism and at the same time the interest for exoticism, the first due to the new rearrangement of the European borders and the latter due to the expansionistic tendency. Nature was more appreciated and acquired a central role for the writers, since they began to feel inspired by it, because it became a mirror able to reflect outside what they felt inside.

Among the many writers and poets of Romanticism, John Keats emerged and gained an important position, even though he lived only twenty-five years: his bequest is anyway copious and irreplaceable.

At his back there was not a tradition of refinement and culture, because of the humble origins of his family, which cared anyway for his education and

addressed him to study the liberal arts; thus John learnt Latin, but he did not have the chance to do the same with Greek, so he decided to study it by himself. He had to leave that modest school early in 1811, since his mother died the year before and he had lost his father when he was fifteen years old; the small assets left had to suffice him and his brothers and, since John was the eldest son and consequently the one who was in charge of maintaining the family, his guardian imposed on him more practical studies, such as surgery, that would have been surely profitable. John completed them in 1816, but in the meantime he got acquainted with young intellectuals, among whom illustrious names excel, such as Leigh Hunt, John Hamilton Reynolds and Benjamin Robert Haydon. In October he came of age and abandoned the profession to devote himself to poetry, which had become an irresistible vocation. The youngest of his brothers Thomas, ill of tuberculosis, died in 1818, while his brother George emigrated to America. This was the time when he met Fanny Brawne, an unfulfilled love, especially because of financial reasons. Soon, even worse problems aggravated the situation: the genetic disease of his family was about to attack him too. To improve his health, he followed the advice of his doctor and embarked for Italy, where a better weather was suitable to his lungs. He arrived in Rome in November and his accommodation was in Piazza di Spagna, now consecrated to his and Shelley's memory and where Keats was to

live a posthumous life. A few months later, he died and he wanted written on his grave "here lies one whose name was writ in water"¹.

The facts he had to face in his life somehow influenced his work: a common but not negligible example is his relationship with Fanny Brawne, who functioned as a muse for him and was the motivation to write many lines, as the most famous ones of the sonnet entitled *Bright Star*.

His contribution to poetry derives not only from the sonnets, but also from the *Odes* and he tried even writing *Plays*. However, his success was increased by many works: *Lamia* which interlaces medieval legends with fascination, magic and medieval elements, *Isabella or the Pot of Basil* and *St Agnes's Eve*, where he mentions the title of a future poem inspired by the Middle Ages as well, *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*; *Hyperion* represents a crucial activity in his poetic career even if it remained incomplete, whereas a large number of pages is occupied by the four books of *Endymion*, based on a Grecian myth; on the other hand, in the fragment *St Mark's Eve* he anticipates the pre-Raphaelite school.

What led him to write the magnificent verse he left to posterity is certainly his readings of the masterpieces of the authors who preceded him, inspired him and eventually taught him as mentors how to compose. Spenser was his guide in particular for the technical features of the metrical system, but he also represented an important poetic adviser, as Shakespeare and Milton were.

¹ John Keats, headstone inscription.

There happened to be some interesting similarities with Leopardi as well, thus many scholars investigated the poetic connection between the two poets, since they never met. Keats may recall Italian authors, such as Foscolo or Leopardi, because of the Greek-Latin subjects and the language filled with features of the classic past.

The acquaintances with his contemporaries were also relevant for Keats, because they had an impact on his compositions and helped to preserve his bequest to the future after his death, as his close friend Shelley, who extolled his works and his soul in the elegy *Adonais*.

Other considerable proofs of his poetry are in the correspondence exchanged with his friends, his brothers and Fanny, and in the sonnets: from his letters one can deduce his passion for art, his personal events and the attempt full of hope to become immortal and in the sonnets, mingled with the narrative poems and the *Odes*, a sort of lyrical diary appeared and accompanied his authentic artistic vein.

The main aspect of his compositions was the concept of negative capability, a term he himself coined in a letter to his brothers and which became a sort of a trade-mark of his poetry and the evidence of his belonging to Romanticism: with this expression he meant to describe the ability to handle the uncertainties and doubts men might encounter in their lives.

The *Odes* represent a great model of what poetry meant to Keats and how the artistic period that he lived in contributed to his inspiration. The *Odes* were

written between December 1818 and September 1819, except for the *Ode on Indolence*, which became known thereafter. The *Odes* were based in particular upon Grecian themes and inspired by moods and inner emotions, both coloured with the power of images and fantasy.

The meditative poetry of Keats stems from what he announced in the first and famous line of *Endymion* “a thing of beauty is a joy for ever”². The theme returns in all his compositions and functions as an incentive of another theme that Keats really cared for: Beauty, which is steeped in pain, since he knows that its destiny is limited; the allegory, which constitutes the fairy tale of the poem and shows Endymion pursuing perfect Beauty that appeared to him in a dream, humanizes the idea and concludes the story with the human love for the Indian girl.

As Keats stated in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* “beauty is truth, truth beauty”³. Beauty is what fills the heart, an anxious question and a comforting consolation.

² John Keats, *Endymion*, book I, l. 1.

³ John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, stanza V, l. 49.

Chapter 1

Historical and Literary Context

1.1 Historical context

1.1.1 The Napoleonic era

In France the executive branch was assumed by a Directory, formed with five members, and the legislative body was held by two Chambers. At the end of 1795, only Austria and England were involved in the conflict against France, that decided to continue the offensive opposing Austria. The Directory attacked from North and from South, in order to lead the war to Lombardia, so the troops had to hold back the Austrian forces in Northern Italy, but the result of the battle advantaged France, thanks to the military and political qualities of a young general, Napoleon Bonaparte.

His ascent began in 1796 on command of an army that proceeded past the Alps and started the Italian campaign. He affirmed that he considered himself “for the first time, not only a simple general anymore, but a man destined to influence the fate of people. I saw myself in History.”¹. In 1797, Austria signed the Peace of Campo Formio, which approved the concession of Lombardia and Belgium to Napoleon and

¹ Gabriele De Rosa, *Corso di storia dal Rinascimento alla fine dell'Ottocento*, Minerva Italica, Milano, 1997, p. 197.

the annexation of Venice, Adige, Istria and Dalmazia, and the Papal State renounced to Avignon, that had been the seat of papacy in Middle Ages. He went over Directory's head and instituted the so-called Sister Republics, under his control. Napoleon's victories in Italy did not threatened England, thus the Directory decided to damage English commercial and nautical power in Mediterranean Sea: the plan entailed the occupation of Egypt and the conquest of India, but England fleet, commanded by admiral Horatio Nelson, destroyed the French one. Meanwhile, the Directory invaded Switzerland, Rome and Naples, but it was facing a financial crisis, therefore Napoleon left the army in Egypt, returned in France and took advantage of the situation to grab the power with a coup d'etat: he dissolved the Chambers, overthrew the Directory, formed a consulate and emanated a new Constitution. In 1801 an agreement reconciled the relationship with the Church and in 1804 Napoleon assumed the title of Emperor of France; in the following year, he acquired also the crown of King of Italy.

England remained the implacable enemy of Napoleon, whose fleets were defeated again at Trafalgar in 1805, so he proclaimed the Continental Blockade in 1806, with which he forbade the European States to trade with England, but Pope Pio VII and Russia broke it. To punish the czar Alexander I, Napoleon started the Russian campaign in 1812, but he was undermined: his weakening encouraged the

European forces to beat him in the Battle of Leipzig in 1813. The Bourbons returned on the throne in France with Louis XVIII and Napoleon was conceded the sovereignty in the Isle of Elba, from which he escaped in 1815, but his new empire lasted only a hundred days: in Waterloo he surrendered to England and was relegated in the Island of Saint Helena, where he died after six years of imprisonment in 1821.

1.1.2 The Industrial Revolution

The Nineteenth century was marked by a great process of transformation known under the name of Industrial Revolution. It started in England in the second half of the Eighteenth century, due to many advantageous conditions: there was a solid and efficient government, which created convenient situations for those ones who wished to invest their capitals in the industry that was about to arise; there were available rich natural resources, such as coal and iron, indispensable to launch the new system, in fact important technical innovations were introduced and they helped the change and improved the communications; the practice of the enclosures of the common lands implied the expulsion of the shepherds and the farmers from the fields, but facilitated the formation of a mass of labour-force. To fully comprehend the superiority of England compared with the rest of the continent, considering the fact

that the isle already owned a prosperous trade inside is necessary; moreover, through its fleet and its wide colonial properties, it was dominating on the commercial level in all the world, therefore it possessed a large market outside its confines in which it could sell its industrial products. A proof of this dominance could be acquired by the percentage of the workers responsible of the agricultural branch: in England in 1830 only the 25% of the population resulted occupied working in fields, whereas for instance in France and in Italy they were 60%, in Spain 90% and in Russia 95%².

The first area that knew a great development was the textile: the wool fabric was in fact more requested and the English landowners had several livestock of sheep and every house used to include a loom in order to produce the family clothing; hereafter, the looms started to be mechanized, first through hydraulic energy and then with the vapour force, but they were too bulky to keep them in the houses, thus appropriate buildings, the factories, were created to collocate the machines and where the workers had to go daily to do their activities.

The iron and steel industry achieved giant steps at the end of the Eighteenth century: in the process of fusion, instead of wooden coal, the mineral fuel -the coke- was introduced and then a more solid and malleable cast iron was obtained. During

² Ibid., p. 223.

the first part of the Nineteenth century there was also a large request of iron for rails, plumbing for gas and water and machines.

The expansion in the rest of Europe was quite slow, gradual and not uniform: the prerogatives of the possibility that the industries could grow were political stability, availability of capitals and the will of invest them in activities more risky than the lands' properties. The continent was disturbed by wars and revolutions, so above-mentioned conditions did not appear until 1831. France, Prussia, Belgium and the Austrian Empire were the first to follow England's example, but it was the construction of the rail system that quickened the Industrial Revolution in Europe. The new industrial authorities tried to capitalise and value their natural resources, from the forests, which provided the necessary wood to the iron and steel industry, to the deposits of coal for the blast furnaces. In the same period, in Northern Italy industrialization began, however, England continued to maintain a position of predominance.

Meanwhile, the great international commerce required new means of transport, faster and that afflicted less the cost of goods, as for the transports with carts dragged by horses or mules: the force of vapour became useful, as in the first boat moved with the new energy produced, thanks to the invention of Robert Fulton, who

in 1807 applied the idea to his craft “Clermont” and in 1816 George Stephenson created the first steam locomotive.

A consequence of the industrial revolution was the transformation of the cities; large masses of people moved from the countryside to the centre, because of the increase of population and the financial and social changes. The situation became difficult, since the factories were not only the place to produce, but they were also the ambient where the proletarians worked hard and gained a different mentality; the salaries were low and the prices tended to raise. This premise generated problems and social imbalances: the rapid enrichment of the capitalistic entrepreneurs from one side and the poverty of large working masses on the other side; the latter began insurrections and associations, because they wanted to defend their rights and to claim a pay raise; in England the “Combination Acts” were approved in order to make the meeting of workers illegal and let employers keep low wages. This phenomenon was called “ludditism”, because of the name of a worker, Ned Ludd, who broke a loom in 1779;. In this phase Robert Owen, an industrialist, tried to realise a collaboration between employers and workers by the constitution of cooperatives; he believed that socialism could start a “world in which lies in all their aspects would have no reasons to exist, a world where all goods would be produced in abundance

and everyone could enjoy this wealth”³. In Great Britain a political movement arose and took the name of “Chartism”, from the People’s Charter’s publication in May 1838: the document contained some requests, such as the universal suffrage. However, the pioneers of utopian socialism were in a large part French: among them, Henry de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier deserve to be mention; they retained that it had to proceed a new renovation of the productive activities and to create a new system in order to make more tolerable working in the society, but their socialism was considered utopian, because it was based only on abstract theories and did not reckon with the historical and financial reality, so they were unattainable.

The “scientific” socialism of Karl Marx contrasted the utopian one: in 1848, the philosopher elaborated the Communist Manifesto, which was not founded on abstract ideas, but it was originated by an analytical study, recognising a merit to bourgeoisie to have overthrown the old feudal society. Marx claimed that the government system was an oppressive power and a revolution should have led to a proletarian dictatorship; to reach this aim, he asserted the necessity to give an international characterization to the proletarian fight, since he believed that capitalism was organized on an international scale.

³ Ibid., p. 232.

1.1.3 The Restoration in Europe

After Napoleon's defeat, the delegates of the great states call the Congress of Vienna to define the arrangement of Europe and to establish the conditions to a durable peace. With the congress an epoch of European history was closed, but another one began: the Restoration.

Napoleon had modified deeply the political map of the continent, he favoured the creation of new nations, he extended the confines of France and exported political and social reforms in the conquered territories. The orientation of the congress was the aim to annul everything that recalled French Revolution and the Napoleonic regime. According to the principle of legitimacy, all the overthrown sovereigns had to take their thrones back, all the laws introduced had to be invalidated and the slave trade was abolished.

The European map underwent several changes: France recuperated the territories that had lost in 1789 with the exception of Savoy; Prussia strengthened in Germany, but the Confederation of the German states was put under the control of Austrian Emperor, who lost Belgium but acquired Lombardia-Veneto's territory, Istria and Salmazia; Russia extended its dominion in Poland; England reinforced its maritime power, obtaining new naval bases, such as Malta in the Mediterranean Sea; Belgium was joined to Holland and formed the reign of Low Countries; in Italy the

Restoration had an oppressive and anti-liberal nature, therefore it was again fractioned and divided in different realms and states.

The sovereigns of Austria, Russia and Prussia signed the Holy Alliance Treaty, which was named for the religious principles it was inspired by. In this treaty, the kings established that they had to defend each other as brothers and had to provide assistance, help and rescue in every place and in every occasion to protect religion, peace and justice and to govern as “delegates of Providence on their people⁴. The Holy Alliance was then perfected with the Quadruple Alliance, stipulated among Prussia, Russia, Austria and Great Britain. According to the principle of intervention, the above-mentioned nations were obligated to send their armies where revolutionary revolts were incited.

In the first years of Restoration, a financial crisis perturbed Europe and determined prices' decrease for the industrial products and a prices' raise for the farming ones, letting aristocracy and property owning bourgeoisie earn more and consolidate their own financial and political power. However, the conservative forces were divided by conflicts: a part fought to take society back to the former government's system, antecedent the French Revolution and also previous the reforms realised during the Enlightenment, with the aim of limiting the authority of

⁴ Ibid., p. 240.

monarchy; people who belonged to this belief were called “reactionaries”, while the “moderates” thought that a conciliation was not possible. In the meantime, there were forces opposing the Restoration, represented by everybody who suspected the economic and social progresses reached during the Napoleonic era to be in danger: this category included soldiers and officials who took part in Napoleonic armies, intellectuals, who wished for great reforms and professed liberal ideas, and the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie who felt threatened by the economic and political upswing of the old aristocracy. They manifested their opposition instituting different tendencies, such as moderate liberalism, democratic radicalism, liberal Catholicism; the first favoured constitutional monarchy; the second believed in the idea of Jacobin democracy of French Revolution and disagreed the privileges of nobility; the latter claimed that catholic Church should be autonomous and renounce to the union between throne and altar. The main supporter of the forces approving the Restoration was the Austrian Empire led by the chancellor Klemens von Metternich, who refused the changes in the political arrangement that had been decided during the congress, but at the same time he was aware that the idea of leading Europe back to the earlier conditions was difficult.

1.1.4 The Revolutions in Europe, the Monroe doctrine and the expansion of the colonial Empires

After the Congress of Vienna, the forces against Restoration tried to impede its political programme; the demands of the liberal oppositions were fundamentally two: the request of a Constitution, that would have limited the powers of sovereigns and protected the citizens' freedom, and national independence. The ones who refused Restoration had not the possibility to fight openly, because police was always alert, espionage was well organised and the freedom of divulge their ideas was limited, so the first struggles were led by secret societies, among which Freemasonry was the more diffused.

The insurrections started in Spain in 1820 and then propagated in Italy, but the repression was cruel: the nations of the Holy Alliance guarded against the revolts and tried to re-establish the order, thus they gathered in a congress in Lubiana, during which the Naples's king Ferdinand I invoked Austrian intervention, that worked also in Piemonte, while France meddled in Spain. At the end of 1823, the Holy Alliance managed to suppress the revolutionary revolts and reinstate the order with brutal violence. Nevertheless the failure of the rebellions, the alliance began to show many divisions, caused mostly by the definitive independence of Greece, sanctioned from the Treaty of Adrianople in 1829; moreover, a new revolutionary wave occurred in

France in 1830 against king Carl X, who tried to cancel freedom of the press and of opinion and attempted to restore the ancient privileges of ecclesiastics; he dissolved the Parliament, constituted by liberals in majority, but the insurrection overcame and the crown was offered to the king's cousin Louis Philippe, known for his liberal ideas: he proclaimed the principle of non-intervention, affirming that it was not licit to intervene in political affairs of another State. The success of the Parisian insurrection raised hopes in other European nations, such as Belgium and Poland.

Meanwhile, the independence movement in the Southern American colonies had already started, led by Francisco Miranda and Simon Bolivar, and it concluded in 1824 with independence of Chile, Peru, Gran Colombia and Mexico, while Brazil had already obtained it pacifically in 1822.

The President of the United States James Monroe intervened with a declaration, with which he affirmed that only American people could decide for their destiny and that they should have not been considered a land of conquests anymore. In this way the European states did not have to interfere in American inside affairs. The former colonies were exposed to the economic predominance of the United States' capitalists, who advanced in their territories with the intent to exploit their considerable riches: the young South American Republics soon demonstrated that

they had not capable ruling classes and their governments were controlled by militaries.

In the first part of Nineteenth century, England consolidated its colonial dominions: Canada, India, Afghanistan and Australia belonged to a wide empire that gave to England a position of absolute predominance in the world and tried to expand in the Far East, especially in China: France intervened side to it to convince the Chinese Empire to open the commerce in some harbours and settled a protectorate in Cambodia.

1.1.5 The Hanoverians in England

George III's second half reign was characterized by the fight against Napoleon, in order to preserve England's freedom. After the efforts of the European states to oppose French force, only Britain remained to struggle in the war and was able to conserve its primacy in the naval power, so Napoleon wanted to impede English economy's growth by isolating British commerce from the rest of the continent. His intent could not be achieved, since Horatio Nelson defeated French navy in many victories, among which the one of Trafalgar in 1805. Moreover, Britain helped Spain and the reign of Naples, because their territories had been given to Napoleon's brother. The consequences of this period were taxation, inflation and unemployment. George III's period was characterized by political instability, caused especially by the

Seven Years' War and his intention to favour the Tories, so that the Whigs thought that he was an autocrat. In 1801 the Act of Union was sanctioned and established that Great Britain and Ireland would have been unified in a joined nation, known with the name of United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

George IV had anti-catholic views and his reign was marked by some reforms: the Tory's party were in power and in 1829 they approved the Bill for Catholic Emancipation, which consisted in letting Catholics have the same rights as Protestants; then the Home Secretary Robert Peel instituted the Civilian Metropolitan Police, thus he managed to keep order without military's intervention.

George IV had not any sons, therefore his brother William succeeded him; during his reign, the Whigs were in power and a new reform was passed in 1832: over 150 seats in Parliament were destined to the "rotten boroughs", which were country boroughs that used to be controlled by the Crown and the nobility, and they conquered the right to send a representative; they were called rotten, because the Industrial Revolution induced their inhabitants to move towards towns, so they used to be bought and sold. His reign was also characterized in 1833 by the abolition of slavery in the colonies, by the Factory Act, which forbade the employment of children under nine years old, and by the creation of a new educational system in 1834.

1.2 Literary context

1.2.1 The Romantic Movement

Romanticism was an artistic, cultural and literary movement, developed between the end of the Eighteenth and the beginning of the Nineteenth centuries in Europe. Enlightenment was characterized by rationality, whereas this new movement focused on spirituality, imagination and emotive side of the soul and preferred to exalt the personal features of the artists.

Hence, the romantic authors rejected the former era's ideas centred on humans' mind and rather explained life in every aspects, deepening the exploration of irrationality, including feelings, folly, dreams and visions; exoticism played an important role too, since it was considered an escape from reality and could be temporal or spatial, whereas nature became a mirror in which man reflected his own sentiments. The nationalism opposed to the universalism, contributing the formation of a national consciousness, awakening the interest for folkloristic expressions and a renovate passion for Middle Ages, which was retained the period of modern European States' birth. The relation between men and faith strengthened and determined a return to use magical practices. Another feature of Romanticism is the theorization of absolute, the infinite that causes tension towards an endless space, but also the concept of the sublime that Romanticism was very important: it

corresponds to the feeling of terror and powerlessness generated by the infinite, but it is converted in a sense of beauty and pleasure.

The use of the word “romantic” in England in the Seventeenth century meant something extravagant, but at the end of the following century it acquired the sense of connection with emotions and imagination. The literary field was partly influenced by philosophical and foreign literary movements, for example in the point of view of French writers, such as Voltaire and Rousseau with their invectives against privileges and social differences, and the German “Sturm und Drang”, in which Goethe could be counted with the value of individual.

1.2.2 Poetry in England

Poetry dominated English Romantic period, symbolized by the typical interest for imagination and feelings, but also by a simple language, the one spoken by common people. In the Eighteenth century, the poets used the verse of the heroic couplet, which was introduced by Geoffrey Chaucer and represented the form of epic narrative; it was substituted in the following century by a return to earlier types, such as the blank verse, the Spenserian stanza and the sonnet. According to the Romantic sentiment, art was filled with personal experiences and the individuals were put at the centre of life with their emotive knowledge, in fact poets started to open their souls and talk outright about their problems and fears, which used to find

comfort in an ideal Hellenism and in exotic havens, that included also the rediscovered passion for the past, in particular for the Middle Ages. Thus, the artist became a sort of prophet, whose inspiration was instilled by God Himself, so he had the same power of freedom to illustrate the truth of life through his works; so poets dedicated themselves to moments of introspection, in this way, the mystic and supernatural sides of life began to play a more important role, disclosing the hidden aspects of human's mind. Imagination mingled with fantasy, but it also determined a hue of melancholy, when the poet understood that his ideal thought was not always possible to be achieved. However, nature functioned as a lifeline in order to console this mood and it represented the mirror of man's inside world; it was conveyed in this way, because of some philosophical influences, such as Platonism, that believed humans' world was the result of an ideal metaphysical world, and such as Pantheism, which was based on the image of a powerful God, whose existence is traced in every element of nature; also German Idealism influenced the new concept of nature, since it postulated that it is alive and shields man's sentiments. The Romantic poets can be divided in two categories: the ones of the First generation, that included William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and the ones of the Second generation, that embraced John Keats, Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Gordon Byron.

Wordsworth's main works might be gathered in two groups: the longer poems, among which there are *The Prelude* and *The Excursion*, and many other poems of different kind (pastoral, lyrical, elegiac) composed in the structure of a poem or an ode: some of these took part of the *Lyrical Ballads*, which was a collection he conceived with his colleague Coleridge; the preface of it represents the "Manifesto of the Romantic Movement in England"⁵, as it could be seized in the words of Coleridge, illustrating the genesis of the *Lyrical Ballads*:

"During the first year that Mr Wordsworth and I were neighbours, our conversations turned frequently on the two cardinal points of poetry, the power of exciting the sympathy of the reader by a faithful adherence to the truth of nature, and the power of giving the interest of novelty by modifying colours of imagination."⁶

Wordsworth was the first poet of this period who tried to put the experiments with language into practice, using the everyday English and arranging the form with the matter, that he himself stated in the Preface to his *Lyrical Ballads*:

⁵ Rosa Marinoni Mingazzini, Luciana Salmoiraghi, *The new mirror of the Times*, Principato, Milano, 1998, p. 12.

⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, chapter XII.

“The principal object, then, proposed in these Poems was to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them, throughout, as far as was possible in a selection of language really used by men, and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect; and, further, and above all, to make these incidents and situations interesting by tracing in them, truly though not ostentatiously, the primary laws of our nature: chiefly, as far as regards the manner in which we associate ideas in a state of excitement.”⁷

Imagination started to be able to awaken the inside eyes of soul, walloping the ones of the mind: Wordsworth’s romanticism could be found in his pursuit of a moment of meditation, during which he used to see the emotions he had felt and to elaborate them in tranquility with the eyes of memory. The principal features of his poetry were nature and childhood: the first was not merely a decorative aspect and a mirror of feelings, but it also possessed its own spirit and the task of poetry was to translate in lines the contemplation of its beauty and to benefit the joy that it could offer; the latter was considered a close relationship with God and the adult might rediscover this relationship through nature, so the poet created a sort of exchange of roles, thus the child became “Father of the Man”⁸.

⁷ William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, preface to the second edition.

⁸ Rosa Marinoni Mingazzini, Luciana Salmoiraghi, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

A close friend of his was Coleridge, with who he went to Germany, where they discovered Kant and German idealism; Coleridge, in fact, translated several works and essays from German and wrote many poems and lectures, among which the most famous ones were *Lectures on Shakespeare*, *Biographia Literaria* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, that functioned as the opening to Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*. His romanticism appeared in the choice of Middle Ages as the set of his unfinished tale *Christabel*, in the themes of nature and exoticism and in the element of mystery. His concept of Imagination was theorised by him in two different kinds, both inspired from the studies he made in Germany: the first one was "primary imagination", which referred to the perception of the world with our senses; the second one was "secondary imagination", that signified the faculty of the poet to combine images of different moments together. The difference between them is that Wordsworth postpones the experience and recollects it in a second relaxed moment, while Coleridge preferred to transcend it, in order to conceive the true sense of it.

Byron's works consisted mostly in lyrics poems, dramas, tales and satirical verses, such as *Don Juan*, an epic satire work with sixteen cantos and written in ottava rima. He also composed an autobiographical poem, entitled *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, which was inspired by his travels: the first and the second cantos were based on his visits through Spain, Portugal and Greece, the third one was inspired by

his voluntary retirement in Switzerland and the fourth was written in Italy. Byron's compositions were outlined by his allegiance to liberty and nationalism, marked in his adhesion to the Carbonari in Italy and to the Greek rebellion against the Turks, by exoticism in the tales set in the Orient, and the disparity between dream and reality; moreover, nature was also identified by his belief of nature as a reflection of his soul and was represented with images of phenomena, such as storms, seas and mountains.

Shelley wrote prose, with some pamphlets such as *The Necessity of Atheism*, where he believes that there could not be found a proof of God's existence, and poems, whose the most famous one was the elegy for his friend Keats *Adonais*; he also composed dramas, such as the lyrical drama *Hellas*, dedicated to the Greece involved in revolts against the Turks. He admired Plato's philosophy, in fact he believed in the opinion that nature is endowed with its own soul, but unlike Wordsworth he thought that it offered only pleasure and not also a message, so it did not need to be contemplated in poet's memory, but it could be immediate. He reckoned that institutions cause superstition and selfishness, so he maintained that laws must coexist with love.

1.2.3 Prose in England

The protagonist on the scene of Nineteenth century's English fiction novels were Maria Edgeworth, Walter Scott and Jane Austen. The first was the pioneer of social and moral Irish novels and influenced the *Waverley Novels*, in whose preface Scott revealed that Edgeworth inspired him: he started off the historical romance. Jane Austen distinguished herself from the other two writers, since she seemed to belong to the Romantic movement only because of a biographical reason.

The study of German language allowed Scott to translate various German romantic works, for example, *Götz von Berlichingen* by Goethe, that inspired him with the story of a rebellious knight; *Ivanhoe* dealt with the decadence of chivalry, whereas *Waverley* illustrates the feudal world in decline and the Jacobin insurrection of 1745: the boundary symbolizes the topos of a place where passages and encounters between different cultures happen; moreover, travelling acquires a central function, because it is not only a spatial journey, but also a temporal relocation with the rediscovery of the past.

On the other hand, Austen portrayed the everyday life without heroes or romantic experiences and tended to illustrate stories related only to the provincial areas of England and did not convey her social background, except for the fact that she showed the role of women in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries. However, she

owned the capacity of faithful descriptions and psychological analysis with ironic sense.

In the ambit of prose, it is important to mention also the non-fiction literature, constituted by literary criticism, for example with Charles Lamb, Thomas De Quincey and William Hazlitt.

Chapter 2

Biography and Works

2.1 Biography

2.1.1 Early Life

John Keats was born in a town near London, Finsbury Pavement, on October 31st 1795. His father, Thomas Keats, was a west-country lad, and his mother, Frances Jennings, was the daughter of Thomas's employer. Years later, Frances's father retired and decided to leave his livery-stable to Thomas and Frances. John, their eldest son, had a sister and three brothers, one of whom died in infancy. John's parents supported the education of their children, in fact John attended an important school at Enfield, held by Rev. John Clarke. John lost his father, killed by a fall from his horse, in 1804. The following year, his mother got married with the stable-keeper William Rawling, but they soon separated, so she decided to live in her mother's house and moved to Edmonton with her children.

John spent a nice and enjoyable infancy, as one of his school-friends Edward Holmes remembered, "Keats was in childhood not attached to books. His penchant was for fighting. He would fight anyone. [...] This violence and vehemence, this pugnacity and generosity of disposition, in passions of tears or outrageous fits of

laughter, always in extremes, will help to paint Keats in his boyhood.”¹. The English painter Benjamin Robert Haydon shared a curious anecdote about the childhood of his friend’s awakening to poetry: when he was learning to speak, he used to make a trick of rhyming the last word that people had said. Although this premature sign of inclination to poetry, he started to dedicate to study only when he was fourteen, when he suddenly became completely absorbed in reading books.

His mother died, because of chronic rheumatism, in 1810, so his grandmother decided that John and his brothers needed to be raised under the care of two guardians, Mr Rowland Sandell and Mr Richard Abbey. John left school at the age of fifteen to start an apprentice to a surgeon at Edmonton, but he appreciated to spend his spare time reading and translating. His friend Cowden Clarke introduced him to the *Epithalamium* and to the *Faerie Queene* of Spenser, who became a great awakener of his love for poetry, and his close friend Charles Brown believed that especially *Faerie Queen* inspired John. He left his apprenticeship in 1814 and then he moved to London as a student at the hospitals.

2.1.2 Life in London

“Poetry was to his mind the zenith of all his inspirations, the only thing worthy the attention of superior minds. It may readily be imagined that this feeling was

¹ Sidney Colvin, *Keats*, MacMillan & Co, London, 1887, p. 8.

accompanied by a good deal of pride and some conceit and that among mere medical students he would walk and talk as one of the gods might be supposed to do when mingling with mortals.”².

These were the words of Henry Stephens, one of the students John lived with. His friend George Felton Mathew, on the other hand, portrayed him as an advocate for the innovations and a faultfinder with everything established, as he canalized his energy for controversy and dispute into words and literature.

Keats began to compose in 1814, when he wrote an elegiac poem, *On Death*, which fit with the Eighteenth century style and had a vein of moralizing, whereas with the ode *To Apollo* he honoured his inspiring authors, such as Shakespeare and Spenser. Years later, Keats and his friend Clarke decided to study the text of *Homer* by George Chapman and, after a while, he met Leigh Hunt, a bright mind of literature and poetry, who had a considerable influence on Keats’s poetry. In 1813, Hunt and his brother had been imprisoned for two years, because they were guilty of the fact that they held a journal in favour of liberalism and because they outraged monarchy. Hunt mediated the acquaintance between Keats and John Hamilton Reynolds and also introduced him to Percy Bysshe Shelley and the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon. Shelley discussed several times with Lord Byron about Keats’s poetry, since Byron did not appreciate John’s works; however, after Keats’s death, Byron admitted

² Ibid., p. 18-19.

that *Hyperion* was a monument of literature, which would have led John's fame to posterity³. Keats met also Joseph Severn, a passionate art student and painter, who then sailed to Italy and lived in Rome with John until the end of his days.

In 1816 Keats published his works for the first time, thanks to the help of Hunt, who printed the sonnets *O Solitude!* and the one on *Homer* of Chapman in his magazine *Examiner*.

2.1.3 Life after London

In 1817 Keats wrote a letter to Reynolds, mentioning his intention to begin his *Endymion*. Haydon and Hunt were antagonists, but both of them exercised their influence on Keats. The young poet did not feel completely comfortable in the atmosphere of the Isle of Wight where he was sojourning, so he decided to move to Margate and he wrote to Hunt a letter, where he explains his change of mind of the place to stay and in a letter to Haydon shares his admiration for Shakespeare's genius:

"I remember you saying that you had notions of a good genius presiding over you.

I have lately had the same thought. [...] Is it too daring to fancy Shakespeare this president?"⁴.

³ George Gordon Byron, *Letter to John Murray*, July 31th 1821.

⁴ John Keats, *Letter to Haydon*.

After Keats and the publishers Olliers interrupted their relation, he encountered the publishers of the *London Magazine*, Messrs Taylor and Hessey, whom he had a great acquaintance with, thus he arranged with them the eventual publication of *Endymion*.

Meanwhile he went to Canterbury, where he spent some time with his brother Tom, and then they moved together to Hampstead, where they enjoyed the whole summer with their brother George. Hampstead was a suitable place for Tom, since he was invalid, so he benefited of the natural environment, while John had the chance to visit some friends in the neighborhood: Hunt, in fact, lived in a cottage in the Vale of Health; his friend Reynolds introduced him Charles Wentworth Dilke, Charles Brown and Benjamin Bailey, who Keats had very respect for, because of his passion for books and his admiration for Milton and Wordsworth.

In the summer of 1817, Bailey invited Keats to Oxford, where he found the inspiration to write the third book of *Endymion* and also increased the amount of production of epistles. In the autumn of the same year, Keats returned to Hampstead and three months later he showed Hunt the first book of the poem he was working on, but his friend found many faults in it and he did not completely appreciate it; however Keats did not let this episode disturb their friendship. In November, Keats spent some weeks in Burford Bridge, where he enjoyed the study of sonnets and

minor poems of Shakespeare and finished *Endymion*. In the winter he came back to Hampstead, which was useful to his social life with the company of several bright minds, such as the poet and novelist Horace Smith.

The Christmas weeks of 1817 brought him the invitation to dinner by William Wordsworth, whom he had already met at the “Sunday supper” as Haydon called it, which was a dinner that lasted long. Wordsworth convinced Keats to recite before him the Hymn to Pan from *Endymion*, that Wordsworth appreciated and defined a “pretty piece of Paganism”⁵.

In the meantime, Keats was attending a course of English poets held by the writer William Hazlitt at the Surrey Institution: those lectures represented a significant part of the influence that effected Keats’s poetry.

A few months later, Keats and Reynolds put into practice the idea to write some metrical stories from Boccaccio and then published them in a unique volume: the poet began the draft of *Isabella*, while Taylor sent him the corrections to *Endymion*.

While he was taking care of Tom’s health and George decided to emigrate to America and get married, he completed *the Pot of Basil* and deepened Milton’s works.

⁵ Sidney Colvin, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

After a tour in the North, Keats did not find a nice situation waiting for him: many attacks appeared in the *Blackwood's Magazine*, which published an offensive article about his work, as they had done before with Hunt; during this stressful situation, he had to face also the death of his brother Tom.

A few months later, a woman came to comfort him: Keats met Miss Fanny Brawne, the daughter of a widow mother of three children; Keats's friend Brown accommodated her family in his house in Scotland, where she and the young poet met for the first time. Since John could not guarantee any financial security and his health began to worsen, an engagement with Fanny would have been unlikely and their love was never fulfilled. The idea of the unsatisfied sentiment Keats was felt is in the letter of the 13 October 1819 he wrote to her:

My love has made me selfish.
I cannot exist without you. [...]
You have absorb'd me⁶.

The lady who conquered Keats's heart was described as a little judgemental, with blonde hair and gray-blue eyes; she embodied the inspiring muse of his verses, as in the ones of the sonnet dedicated to her: I cry your mercy – pity – love! Aye, love! / [...] / O! let me have thee whole, all, all, be mine!⁷.

⁶ John Keats, *Letter to Fanny*, October 13th 1819.

⁷ John Keats, *Letter to Fanny*.

In the following period of winter, Keats and Brown went to Chichester to visit the father of their friend writer Charles Dilke and during these weeks he completed *The Eve of St Agnes* and started *The Eve of St Mark*.

In February he returned to Hampstead and found the motivation to compose the *Odes*; during the summer of the same year he moved to Shanklin to his friend James Rice and the first signals of his illness began to appear, but when Brown arrived and joined them, the situation improved. While Keats was writing *Lamia*, he and Brown started to compose a tragedy, *Otho the Great*, whose dialogues were written by Keats and the plot and the construction were written by Brown. After few weeks, Keats could not stand the weather of the city anymore, so he decided to move to Winchester, where he finished *The Eve of St Mark* and *Lamia*, begun another tragedy, *King Stephen* and conceived the *Ode to Autumn*. At the end of the 1819, he went to Wentworth Place, where he undertook the unfinished satirical poem *Cap and Bells*, written in Spenserian stanzas and inspired by Pope's *Rape of the Lock*, satirizing the scandals at court.

His health began to worsen and after frequent relapses, his doctors suggested him to consider a journey to Italy, in order to escape from a harsh English winter, thus he would have benefited of the change of weather. Meanwhile, Severn planned the intention to go to Rome, thus the two men sailed to Naples together.

2.1.4 Keats in Rome

The ship landed on the Dorsetshire coast for one day, so they enjoyed an excursion among the beauties of nature of that place, which encouraged Keats to write what might be conceived as the most famous and greatest example of Keats's works and of English poetic history, that he dedicated to her loved Fanny. It is interesting to note the destiny of this sonnet: it was written on a blank page of the copy of Shakespeare's poems. After many ages the director Jane Campion, in her film dedicated to the last three years of life of the poet, entitled her 2009's screenplay with the first word of the sonnet that gave to Miss Brawne as a declaration:

Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art,
Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of cold ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft-fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors
No – yet still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever – or else swoon to death.⁸

⁸ John Keats, *Bright Star*.

Four weeks later, the ship arrived in Naples, where John received a letter from Shelley, who wrote words of esteem after he read *Lamia* and *Hyperion*; Keats and Severn left for Rome, where they found a lodge in Piazza di Spagna, that today is the Keats-Shelley House, a sort of house-museum where there are treasured paintings, sculptures, manuscripts and the editions of the first works of Keats, Shelley and Byron⁹.

After a brief time in the Caput Mundi, his illness started to worsen, so that he stated "I feel the flowers growing over me"¹⁰: he found appropriate to compose his epitaph, which is written on his grave, "here lies one whose name was writ in water"¹¹. Some days later, on 23rd February 1821 John Keats died. When the news reached Shelley, his work *Adonis* was filled with pain for his loss and in the verses he celebrated his sorrow for the young poet. He was buried in the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, where after many years Severn's grave was put beside the one of his friend.

⁹ <http://www.keats-shelley-house.org>.

¹⁰ Sidney Colvin, *op. cit.*, p. 207.

¹¹ John Keats, headstone inscription.



Figure 1 The graves of John Keats and John Severn¹².

¹² Massimo Ascani, *Guida del Cimitero Acattolico*, Roma, 1956.

2.2 Works

2.2.1 The *Poems* of 1817

Conceived between November 1815 and April 1817, Keats made a succession of experiments writing them, for instance, in the *Epistles* addressed to Felton Mathew, to his brother George and to Clarke; for example, he uses frequent disyllabic rhymes and occasional enjambements and in the *Specimen of an Induction to a Poem* or in a fragment of the poem entitled *Calidore* he modifies the measure by shortening in many parts the second line of the couplet with a lyric beat, which recalls Spenser's nuptial *Odes* or Milton's *Lycidas*. In *Sleep and Poetry* Keats enjoys the free use of the overflow and prefers to put full pauses in any point of a line rather than at the end; he also adopts the Chaucerian tendency of breaking the couplet by closing a sentence or paragraph with its first line.

In these poems, he borrows the habit of Milton, Spenser and other modern writers such as Hunt, which consists in turning nouns into verbs and vice versa, the other ones are composed in ordinary English.

In the *Epistles* there is a fullness of tributes to literature and friendship: for instance, in a letter to Clarke the poet informs him that at first he was reluctant to the idea of sending him his works:

Nor should I now, but that I've known you long;

That you first taught me all the sweets of
song:
The grand, the sweet, the terse, the free,
the fine,
What swell'd with pathos, and what right divine:
Spenserian vowels that elope with ease,
And float along like birds o'er summer seas;
Miltonian storms, and more Miltonian tenderness.¹³

Keats was indeed a conscious composer of musical effects and the Spenserian feature he alludes in the fourth verse is the use of coupling or repeating the vowels sounds in the same line or in the following lines, as in these verses:

Eftsoones her shallow ship away did slide,
More swift than swallow sheres the liquid skye;
Withouten oare or pilot it to guide,
Or winged canvas with the wind to fly¹⁴

where the "i" appears five time in open sound and ten times in closed sound.

Hunt was indebted by Keats in his *Gentle Armour*, whose lines were inspired by *I stood tip-toe upon a little hill*¹⁵, while Keats's attitude toward nature differentiates from Wordsworth's impressions, which are recalled and meditated at home in a later moment, and from Shelley's imagery, that is wrought with musical verses and visions of remote nature, nevertheless he was often inspired by other great writers, thus it

¹³ John Keats, *Letter to Charles Cowden Clarke*.

¹⁴ Edmund Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, book II, canto VI, stanza V, ll. 73-80.

¹⁵ William Arnold, *Poetic Works*, MacMillan & Co, London, 1884, p. 27.

seems strange that the similarity in the sonnet *To Solitude* with Wordsworth's verses could be a merely coincidence

let me thy vigils keep
'Mongst boughs pavilion'd, where the deer's swift leap
Startles the wild bee from the foxglove bell¹⁶

Bees that soar for bloom,
High as the highest peak of Furness Fells,
Will murmur by the hour in the foxglove bells¹⁷.

After Haydon read *Sleep and Poetry*, he wrote a letter to Keats maintaining that "it is a flash of lightening that will rouse men from their occupations and keep them trembling for the crash of thunder that will follow", adding that he should find the importance of seclusion to produce better¹⁸.

Meanwhile the brothers Ollier communicated to George Keats that they interrupted any connection with his brother's work and two weeks later John left London: on the 14th of April he undertook an excursion in the Isle of Wight, following the advice which Haydon suggested him and devoting himself to poetry and study. These were the conditions which led him to compose the *Endymion*.

¹⁶ John Keats, *To Solitude*, ll. 6-8.

¹⁷ William Wordsworth, *Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room*, ll. 5-7.

¹⁸ Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Letter to Keats*.

2.2.2 *Endymion*

Keats conceived this work as a “flowery band to bind us to the earth”¹⁹. The tale belongs to the Grecian myth of Endymion and Selene, whose bases its roots on the tradition of Elis and of some Ionian cities. The story revolves around the descent of the goddess at night to kiss her lover, who lives in an eternal youth and lies in an everlasting sleep.

The sources of this tale are uncertain, since the poem of Sappho had been lost and it is only alluded in some writings, for instance, of Ovid and Apollodorus, whereas the playwright John Lyly presented the plot in prose in the form of comedy, few years before Keats attempted his version. An important reference to him might have been *Man in the Moon* by Michael Drayton, who composed his work considering two post-classical notions of the myth: on the first the man in the moon embodies the hero of the story and on the second he represents him as a personification or mythical referent of astronomy.

Keats colors the myth with his personal touch, witnessed in his interpretation of the divine figure, which haunts Endymion while he is asleep, as a symbol of Beauty; he portrays the hero with a touch of effeminacy and softness, however he does not forfeit a dramatic dimension.

¹⁹ John Keats, *Endymion*, Book I, l. 7.

The style, which Keats built *Endymion* with, should not be defined classical, however it recalls the Greek dimension in its sense of festive life of nature. The rhythm of the story is governed by the same manner he uses in *Sleep and Poetry*, therefore the sentence is deliberately composed independent from the metre and the pauses are full and lacking of a precise position, thus they are put in any part of the verses. This made Hunt state that Keats reached even a point of negation of metre, but some scholars affirmed that he might have been influenced by *Pharonnida* of Chamberlayne, who is famous for the habit of ending his lines with prepositions, adverbs and conjunctions on which the pause could not be pronounced; Keats remains still a great pioneer of musical effects and variety of sentence.

As Keats himself alleged, poetry should surprise by fine excess and *Endymion* would have been primarily a trial of his powers of imagination and of invention by which he would have written four thousand verses of one circumstance and fill them with poetry.²⁰ Through four books Keats wrought the narration mingling a Gothic scenery with Oriental elements.

The first book is merely an introduction and functions as a presentation of its hero, who arrives at a festival celebrated in honour of the god Pan. His sister Peona is probably designed on the traits of the namesake character in Spenser's *Fairie*

²⁰ Sidney Colvin, *op. cit.*, p. 96-97.

Queene, the daughter of the giant Corflambo, mentioned in the fourth book²¹. The hymn to the divinity of Pan is influenced by Homeric *Hymns*, which George Chapman translated, by *Britannia's Pastorals* of William Browne and by Ben Jonson's *Pan's Anniversary*, whereas the scene where he describes the sunk treasures on the sea surface recalls the similar passage in Shakespeare's *Richard III*.

The second book pivots around the interrogation on felicity, untangled through a mysterious adventure. The nymph Naiad, disguised as a butterfly, leads Endymion to her spring, where she discloses herself to him; afterwards, he follows a path to a subterranean temple of Grecian magnificence, which leads him in the presence of Adonis and Venus. After the vision of mother Cybele, the hero travels, finds streams and hears voices, until he declaims a prayer to his goddess in the behalf of Arethusa and Alpheus.

In the third book, Endymon encounters Glaucus and Scylla, whose legend Keats approaches in a free manner, in fact the part when Circe transforms Scylla into a devouring monster is omitted and the one when the sorceress punishes her rival by a trance that make her seem dead, which many years later, Endymion helps Glaucus to rescue his Scylla for. Then the protagonist is borne earthward in a trance by Nereids, while he reads words of omen written in the light of the stars on the dark.

²¹ Ibid., p. 98.

In the fourth book, Endymion faces again many adventures, but the most interesting one is when he hears the lamentations of an Indian maiden, who says to him that she has come wandering from the east, and follows her through a series of charmed sleeps and Olympian visions; but eventually the hero discovers that she is his goddess in disguise. When the maiden tells him her story, she communicates it in lyric poetry, mingled with a sense of pathos, of romance, of visions of remote places and beauties, such as from India, the East and Greece of imagination. Keats called this passage a “roundelay”, which is a form that starts with a tender invocation to sorrow, followed by an image of an unpopulated maidenhood near Indian streams, after which Asian Bacchus appears on his march. In the end, the roundelay returns to the opening way, thus it ends in the same sensation of pathos at the beginning

Come then, sorrow!
Sweetest sorrow!
Like an own babe I nurse thee on my breast:
I thought to leave thee,
And deceive thee,
But now of all the world I love thee best.
There is not one,
No, no, not one
But thee to comfort a poor lonely maid;
Thou art the mother
And her brother,

Her playmate, and her wooer in the shade²².

Keats's opinion on *Endymion* is conserved in a letter he wrote after the work was printed: he believes it is good, contrasting Hunt's fear of writing a long poem and Shelley's doubts on publishing it hasty, but he defended himself, declaring that the genius of poetry "cannot be matured by law and percept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself"²³.

2.2.3 Isabella, Hyperion, The Eve of St Agnes, The Eve of St Mark, La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Lamia

Planned and begun in February 1818, Keats found the inspiration to write the subject of *Isabella* in the well-known chapter of Boccaccio, where the love between a damsel of Messina and a youth in the employ of her merchant-brothers is narrated.²⁴ In *Isabella* the set of the scene it is transferred from Messina to Florence, describing the stream of the Arno and enriching the story with tones of sentiment and romance.

Keats chose the Italian metre introduced in English by Wyatt and Sidney, the octave stanza; he shows musical and emotional features, since the beginning "O

²² John Keats, *Endymion*.

²³ Sidney Colvin, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

²⁴ Giovanni Boccaccio, *Decameron*, giornata IV, novella V.

melancholy, linger here awhile”, which is repeated with variations as a melodious interlude in the main narrative.

The wild and all dewy-bright eyes of the vision which appears to the heroine of her lover’s mouldering corpse and the description of Isabella at her lover’s burial place like a lily of the dell indicate the great combination between the imaginative vitality and the truth of beauty.

After the composition of *Isabella*, Keats undertook the most arduous poetic creation he had ever written, the incomplete *Hyperion*. The idea of this work had been in his intentions since he had written *Endymion*, in whose preface and text in fact he anticipated his will to compose it.

The influence of John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and the vastness of the subject made him change his mind on writing it as a romance, so he preferred to present it with a blank verse epic in ten books. Narrating the Titanomachia and the warfare between the Titanic dynasty with the Olympian dynasty of the Greek gods is the main aim of *Hyperion*. The dethronement of the sun-god who gives the title to this work and the consequent assumption of his kingdom by Apollo represent important episodes in Keats’ conception of the story. The poem is interrupted in the moment when Apollo achieves the divinity and the gift of singing through a form of painful transit. The mythology and the polytheism of ancient Greece combined with the

newfound observation of nature indicate the symptoms of the awakening to the forgotten charm of the past in the Eighteenth century. He sang the glories of Hellas in its beauty, but he did not write Greek histories in a Greek manner, rather he borrowed the purity and precision from Milton. Keats celebrates nature in a very characteristic imagine, maintaining that

As when, upon a tranced summer night,
Those green-robed senators of mighty woods,
Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars,
Dream, and so dream all night without a stir²⁵.

He expresses the whole and truly meaning of Greek ideas with his own decorated English touch. The ancient writers, in particular Hesiod, helped Keats to enact the story of the war of Titans and Olympians in a version, which mingles Latin conceptions with Greek nomenclature and illustrates the passage from an old rude worship to a humane and more advanced one. He chooses similitudes and images of beauty and force to portray the nature and the personality of gods with a great sense of solemnity in the opening vision of the fallen Saturn.

This work occupies the status of being a grand poem, even though the poet did not accomplish it, because of the bereavement of his brother Tom and of the onerous subject. Keats resumed the themes in *The Fall of Hyperion* in 1819, but he did not

²⁵ John Keats, *Hyperion*, Book I.

conclude it; the poem's structure was based on Dante's *Divine Comedy* and was inspired by Milton's style in *Paradise Lost*.

While Keats was writing *Hyperion*, he put it aside for a period to start *St Agnes's Eve*. The story of *Romeo and Juliet* functions as a photography's negative because of the theme of the narrated love between an adventurous youth and the daughter of a hostile house.

The Spenserian stanza is combined with a melodious grace and his author mark of concentration of poetic meaning. *St Agnes's Eve* is indeed suggestive since the first stanza, in whose verses Keats manages to involve us in the cold atmosphere with the frosted breath of the old beadsman in the chapel aisle²⁶. The imagination of the reader is coloured by the hues of the painted panes in the chamber window with "innumerable of stains and splendid dyes / as are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings"²⁷ and Madeline's warmed jewels²⁸ adds the richness of the accessory and decorative imagines. The contrast between Madeline's dream of her lover and his physical presence is perfectly expressed by her uttering

Ah Porphyro!, said she, but even now
Thy voice was at sweet tremble in mine ear
Made tunable with every sweetest vow;
And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear;

²⁶ John Keats, *St Agnes's Eve*, stanza I, ll. 1-6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, stanza XXIV, ll. 212-213.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, stanza XXVI, l. 228.

How changed thou art! How pallid, chill, and drear!²⁹.

Although many critics has alleged that the deaths of the beadsman and Angela in the final stanza are due to the exigencies of rhyme, when Keats declares that the beadsman “already had his death-bell rung; the joys of all his life were said and sung”³⁰ and Angela is “a poor, weak, palsy-stricken, churchyard thing”³¹, he reveals them in advance.

It is connected to *St Agnes's Eve* the four-foot ballad *St Mark's Eve*, ideated at Chichester and Winchester, whereas Bertha, the name of its heroine, is nearly related with Canterbury, because of the story of Bertha from Kent, who lived in the Seventh century, that restored a Christian church in that city.

The belief of *St Mark's Eve* was that a person, staying near a church porch at twilight on the anniversary, would have been able to see the apparitions of the people who would have died in the following year.

In Keats's fragment it is not defined his intention of the period he wanted to set the story, whether in medieval or in modern times, nor it is clear from the beginning the way he intended to illustrate the facts which lead to the incidents that illustrate the

²⁹ Ibid., stanza XXXV, ll. 306-311.

³⁰ Ibid., stanza III, ll. 22-23.

³¹ Ibid., stanza XVIII, l. 155.

belief. This poem presents suggestive and picturesque detail and pictures, almost anticipating the pre-Raphaelite school with his elaborated and bright figures.

La Belle Dame Sans Merci is a poem of the same period, referring to the title of a poetry of Alain Chartier, which Keats mentions in *St Agnes's Eve* when Lorenzo wakens Madeline by playing beside her bead "an ancient ditty, long since mute, / In Provence call'd 'La belle dame sans merci' "³². Within twelve stanzas, which are divided in a narrative introduction and a dialogue body, this poem is considered by many readers Keats's master-piece, due to perfect union between sound and sense he uses to show us the medieval world.

Some critics saw the dame as the emblem of the woman who seduces and forsakes, becoming the prefiguration of the unhappy love of Keats for Fanny; others interpreted her as an idealized depiction of poetry itself, which destroys its creator, whereas there are some scholars who read it as a representation of the social change in the relationship between man and woman transfigured in an historical frame.

With *Lamia* Keats returns to narrate a Greek subject, but illustrates its life and legend near to the medieval. Composed while Keats suspended the writing *Hyperion*, the story presents the protagonist, the serpent-lady, who loves a young boy from

³² Ibid., stanza XXXIII , l. 292.

Corinth, whose happiness is shattered. *Anatomy of Melancholy* by Robert Burton hedges in the origin of Keats's idea of composition, whereas the style finds its bases on a free use of the Alexandrine verse, which is the heroic French verse commonly utilized in epic narrative.

Keats recalls the protagonist of the story in the flexible and serpentine idea of movement in the structure, as it is suggested by the following verses, where the Greek mythology is intertwined with the power of imagination and the rhetoric of love

Leave thee alone! Look back! Ah, goddess, see,
Whether my eyes can ever turn from thee!
For pity do not this sad heart belie
Even as thou vanishest so I shall die.
Stay! Though a Naiad of the rivers, stay!
To thy far wishes will thy streams obey³³.

2.2.4 The *Odes*

In the spring months of 1819, Keats composed the *Odes* and was inspired by the art of the old Greek world for the *Ode to Psyche* and the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, incited by his moods for the *Ode on Melancholy* and the *Ode to a Nightingale*, motivated by both reasons in the *Ode on Indolence*.

³³ John Keats, *Lamia*, part I, ll. 257-262.

Spenser's nuptial odes' length is reinterpreted in the stanzas of the one of *Psyche* to present the homage of his own mind addressed to a divinity

O Goddess! Hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
Even into thine own soft-conched ear³⁴.

On the other hand, Keats prefers a regular stanza to compose the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, in a sublime perfection of form. The invocation at the beginning to the still unravished bride of quietness³⁵ opens a series of interrogations, which represents pictures of antiquity at the same time

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?³⁶

In the second and the third stanzas, the poet contrasts life with its prerogative is reality and art which is able to preserve beauty and gain charm in imagined experiences that could overtake real ones. Furthermore some scholars reported that at Holland House it is conserved an urn where is represented a scene of pastoral sacrifice as the one described in the fourth stanza.³⁷ A marble urn³⁸ is quoted also in

³⁴ John Keats, *Ode to Psyche*, stanza I, ll. 1-4.

³⁵ John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, stanza I, l. 1.

³⁶ Ibid., stanza I, ll. 5-7.

³⁷ William Arnold, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

³⁸ John Keats, *Ode on Indolence*, stanza I, l. 5.

the *Ode on Indolence*, where Keats narrates the allegoric Phantoms embody Love, Ambition and Poetry which appear before him and within six stanzas these three Ghosts

faded, and, forsooth! I wanted wings:
O folly! What is Love! and where is it?
And for that poor Ambition! it springs
From a man's little heart's short fever-fit;
For Poesy!, no, she has not a joy³⁹.

In the *Ode on Melancholy* Keats illustrates the alternation of joy and pain in his soul, offering a poetic expression of that sentiment which falls from the sky as a weeping cloud.⁴⁰

The *Ode to a Nightingale* is as well a sensitive lyric, enriched by images, lights, sounds, flavors and scents, but also characterized by a deep sentiment, proposing again the two opposite spheres of life and art of the *Grecian Urn*: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: - Do I wake or sleep?"⁴¹.

The last ode he wrote was the one *To Autumn*, where he recalls his September time at Winchester. The poet wishes for Spring to come in the place of this personified season, which conspires with the sun. In the first stanza, it is described the process of ripening as becoming a product of labors of the season, while in the

³⁹ Ibid., stanza IV, ll. 31-35.

⁴⁰ John Keats, *Ode on Melancholy*, stanza II, ll. 11-12.

⁴¹ John Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*, stanza VIII, ll. 79-80.

second stanza, the autumn is compared to a series of activities of a farm during the harvest. A curious characteristic of this ode is the ending, because it remains suspended in the syntax, in the meaning and in the meter: “and gathering swallows twitter in the skies”⁴². The suspension is syntactic, because the only connective between the elements he lists is the “and” at the beginning. It is semantic, because the adjectivally present participle “gathering” expresses a sense of continuity that has still to be finished. The meter is not closed, since it could be read with five iambic stresses, but a meaningful reading would not stress the preposition “in”, thus the ode ends with an empty fifth beat⁴³.

2.2.5 The *Plays*

Even though Keats didn't succeed in the field of drama, it is fair to mention his effort in the creation of his plays. His friend Charles Brown collaborated with him in the draft of *Otho The Great*, but although the characters speak in lines coloured with beautiful poetry shades, only from the fifth act this work starts to show an improvement. The audience witnesses a great sense of dramatic effect, for instance,

⁴² John Keats, *Ode to Autumn*.

⁴³ Robert Ryan, Ronald Sharp, *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1998, p. 49.

in the disclosure of the dead body of Auranthe, when Ludolph in a moment of madness imagines to have slain her.

In *King Stephen* Keats fills his work with heady action in the few scenes he finished. This proves his capacity and qualities in a different art production, which gives him an additional value of being considered a great writer.

Chapter 3

The Poetics of John Keats

3.1 Keats and the Nineteenth Century

Keats's premature death secured him a "posthumous existence"¹ and his poems have been given several interpretations and meanings, disclosed and conceived since he gained the status of eternal poet.

However, Keats was not spared by short-sighted critics who did not recognise his poetic greatness, but considered him as an overrated poet. Especially at the end of the Nineteenth century, when the correspondence between Keats and his lady-love Fanny Brawne was published, critics were not able to consider the letters as a proof of his worthy poetics, but they rather divided his personal life from his writings, therefore they did not approve the choice of speculating on his private dimension, as in 1883 the poet John Albee claimed in a sonnet:

Rest, hunted spirit! Canst thou never sleep?
Ah, when the ghouls and vampires of the Press
Vex thy all tender soul in wantonness
Canst thou know aught of peace, but still must weep!²

¹ Jeffrey Robinson, *Reception and Poetics in Keats: 'My Ended Poet'*, MacMillan Press, London, 1998, p. 53.

² *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Many contemporaries of Keats foresaw his promising future and praised him, but Shelley seemed to be the one who understood his afterlife fortune the most: *Adonais* embodies, in fact, the sorrow for his loss, which is translated in a pastoral elegy dedicated to his friend:

The breath whose might I have invoked in song
Descends on me; my spirit's bark is driven,
Far from the shore, far from the trembling throng
Whose sails were never to the tempest given;
The massy earth and sphere skies are riven!
I am borne darkly, fearfully, afar;
Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of Heaven,
The soul of Adonais, like a star,
Beacons from abode where the Eternal are³.

Shelley had already manifested his approval of Keats's talent before, when he had just finished to read the *Hyperion* and with enthusiasm wrote

"Keats' new volume has arrived to us, & the fragment called Hyperion promises for him that he is destined to become one of the first writers of the age."⁴.

Since then, magnificent tribute poems have poured in:

Thy name was writ in water – it shall stand:
And tears like mine will keep thy memory green,
As Isabella did her Basil-tree⁵.

³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Adonais*, stanza LV.

⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Letter to Marianne Hunt*, October 29th 1820.

⁵ Oscar Wilde, *The Grave of Keats*.

Wilde named Keats with the alias of Sebastian, because he was inspired by the painting *Saint Sebastian* of Guido Reni that he had seen at Palazzo Rosso in Genoa, as he explained in a note to a poem he wrote for Keats:

“As I stood beside the mean grave of his divine boy, I thought of him as a Priest of Beauty slain before his time; and the vision of Guido’s St. Sebastian came before my eyes as I saw him at Genoa, a lovely brown boy, with crisp, clustering hair and red lips, bound by his evil enemies to a tree and, though pierced by arrows, raising his eyes with divine, impassioned gaze towards the Eternal Beauty of the opening Heavens.”⁶.

On the other hand, Byron did not esteem him, as Keats’s words show in a letter to his brother George, where one can deduce that the dislike was mutual:

“You speak of Lord Byron and me. There is this great difference between us. He describes what he sees. I describe what I imagine. Mine is the hardest task.”⁷.

Keats was subjected to the tag of “Cockney poet”, since he belonged to the middle-class, while poetry was believed to derive from nobility, as for Byron. The reason why the snob poet criticized the work of Keats has to be found at an aesthetic level, for instance in his abuse of Pope’s inspiration, whereas the young poet envied Byron’s poetic and financial success. Byron recognised the talent of Keats only after his death, he changed his mind about his criticism of Keats’s work and admitted that his *Hyperion* was a fine monument.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Keats, *Letter to George Keats*, September 1819.

Byron was not the only one who criticized Keats: the *Blackwood's Magazine* in fact attacked him and coined, for the circle the young poet belonged to, the tag "Cockney School". The term was first used in October 1817 from an anonymous reviewer, who criticized the authors of lack of quality. The definition "Cockney School" referred to the group of poets, writers and artists headed by Leigh Hunt. When Keats was welcomed in the group, Hunt took advantage of his journal, the *Examiner*, to help the young poet to build and publicize his reputation as a poet, as the publication of many poems proved. The *Examiner* was a magazine imbued by political independence, insomuch as it published an attack against the Prince Regent: Hunt and his brothers were prosecuted and convicted for two years; when Leigh Hunt was freed from prison, Keats composed a poem about it:

What though, for showing truth to flatter'd state,
Kind Hunt was shut in prison, yet has he,
In his immortal spirit, been as free
As the sky-searching lark, and as elate...
Who shall his fame impair
When thou art dead, and all thy wretched crew⁸.

In a review of the *Blackwood Magazine*, John Gibson Lockhart quoted in fact the appearance of John Keats's work and stated

"The readers of the *Examiner* newspaper were informed, some time ago, by a solemn paragraph, in Mr Hunt's best style, of the appearance of two new stars of

⁸ John Keats, *Written on the day that Mr Leigh Hunt left prison*, 1817.

glorious magnitude and splendour in the poetic horizon of the land of Cockaigne. One of these turned out, by and by, to be no other than Mr John Keats. This precocious adulation confirmed the wavering apprentice in his desire to quit the gallipots, and at the same time excited in his too susceptible mind a fatal admiration for the character and talents of the most worthless and affected of all the versifiers of our time.”⁹.

The attacks became famous and successful, so that a provoked enraged Hunt asked the hidden author of the critiques (who used to sign the articles with a Z and whose identity was John Gibson Lockhart) to stand up and be counted. The magazine built up a campaign against the group and derided the artists, but it was more an issue on their “Cockney politics” and on their class identity rather than an aesthetic attack. The main question about their circle was how to label them, in fact it was not a proper name, since they could not be correctly identified as cockney and Hazlitt’s origins were not even in London. The group was loyal and sympathetic with each other, as it could be understood in the words of Hazlitt, who defined them as “poets, patriots and friends” or in the memories of Hunt of the time he enjoyed with Keats:

“We read and walked together, and used to write verse on an evening upon a given subject. No imaginative pleasure was left unnoticed by us, or unenjoyed; from the recollection of the bards and patriots of old, to the luxury of a summer rain at our window, or the clicking of the coal in winter-time.”¹⁰.

⁹ John Gibson Lockhart, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, August 1818.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 87.

They used to entertain themselves also with political discussions, as Haydon annotated in his diary when he learnt the news of the Battle of Waterloo and dealt with it with Hunt or when Mary Shelley reported the conversations on monarchy and republicanism between her and Hazlitt.

Moreover other journals followed on the same wavelength of *Blackwood's Magazine*: the *New Monthly Magazine* reported a piece of *Blackwood's* offensive attacks, whereas the *Quarterly Review* joined them in the vex campaign and mocked Keats. John Wilson Crocker in his article confessed not to have read Keats's *Endymion*, because he was not able to complete the first of the four books and defined his power of language acceptable if only confined to the context of the Cockney School and stated

“Mr Keats is a copyist of Mr Hunt; but he is more unintelligible, almost as rugged, twice as diffuse, and ten times more tiresome and absurd than his prototype, who, though he impudently presumed to seat himself in the chair of criticism, and to measure his own poetry by his own standard, yet generally had a meaning.”¹¹.

The *Blackwood's Magazine* had previously discussed Keats's poetic capacity and considered failed the young poet's intention was to write *Endymion* in English heroic rhyme¹²:

¹¹ John Wilson Croker, *The Quarterly Review*, April 1818.

¹² John Gibson Lockhart, *op. cit.*

“Mr Hunt is a small poet, but he is a clever man. Mr Keats is a still smaller poet, and he is a boy of pretty abilities, which he has done everything in his power to spoil.”¹³.

Shelley wrote an elegy for Keats and accused the *Quarterly Review* to have killed him: in the Preface of his *Adonais* Shelley, in fact, complaint

“The genius of the lamented person to whose memory I have dedicated these unworthy verses, was not less delicate and fragile than it was beautiful; and where cankerworms abound, what wonder, if it's young flower was blighted in the bud? The savage criticism on his *Endymion*, which appeared in the *Quarterly Review*, produced the most violent effect on his susceptible mind; the agitation thus originated ended in the rupture of a blood-vessel in the lungs; a rapid consumption ensued, and the succeeding acknowledgments from more candid critics, of the true greatness of his powers, were ineffectual to heal the wound thus wantonly inflicted.”¹⁴.

and Byron dedicated to Keats a stanza of his *Don Juan*

John Keats, who was killed off by one critique,
Just as he really promised something great,
If not intelligible, - without Greek
Contrived to talk about the Gods of late,
Much as they might have been supposed to speak.
Poor fellow! His was an untoward fate: -
'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article¹⁵.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *op. cit.*, preface, p. 3-4.

¹⁵ George Gordon Byron, *Don Juan*, stanza LX, canto XI.

3.2 The Negative Capability

In Keats's poetics the concept of "negative capability" is an important theme and is even specifically mentioned in one of his letters:

"I had not a dispute but a disquisition, with Dilke on various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason-Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrarium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration."¹⁶

This capability is the ability of resisting the instinctive belief that poetry is characterized of human experiences, which are too numerous to be delimited in a system, therefore poetry actually consists in the opening to the expansion of experience, which could be achieved abandoning the comfort zone of restricted inflexible knowledge, in order to delve a more veritable view of the world. Dealing with Negative Capability means to live with uncertainties and mysteries. This new poetic idea is a philosophical approach, which is based on an aesthetic idea. The expression has emerged very popular not only in the literature field, but also in other

¹⁶ John Keats, *Letter to his brothers*, December 21st 1817.

areas: it has spread to associations with different authors and it even attained the cinema in 1979, when Woody Allen recurs to it in his film *Manhattan*, in the scene where Diane Keaton describes a sculpture at the Guggenheim museum.

Keats was not a poet of thoughts, he was a poet of sensations¹⁷, as one could understand from his statement “if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all”¹⁸; this is the key to seize the truly significance of his artistic approach, since his belief of poetics lies in the emotionally perspective and not in facts and reason, as he had already explained in a letter dated a month before the one where he wrote about the negative capability:

“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. The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream – he awoke and found it truth. I am the more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning.”¹⁹.

and later he dealt with it in another letter, where he used the imagine of flowers and bees:

“Let us know not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at:

¹⁷ Robert Ryan, Ronald Sharp, *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1998, p. 44.

¹⁸ John Keats, *Letter to John Taylor*, February 27th 1818.

¹⁹ John Keats, *Letter to Benjamin Bailey*, November 22nd 1817.

but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive – budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every noble insect that favors us with a visit.”²⁰.

Some scholars thought that Keats began to refuse the negative capability since 1819, but some other critics believed that he just matured the concept, as he explained in a letter addressed to his brother George:

“Call the world if you please ‘The vale of Soul-making’. Then you will find out the use of the world. I say ‘Soul-making’ Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence. 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 ones individual existence? How, but by the medium of a world like this? 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!”²¹.

The scholar Heathcote William Garrod affirmed that Keats’s negative capability could be associated to Wordsworth’s wise passivity, whereas Jacob Wigod argued that the two terms should be separated, even if Keats did not reject Wordsworth’s principle; on the other hand, the critic Lionel Trilling considered Keats a hero, because the

²⁰ John Keats, *Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds*, February 19th 1818.

²¹ John Keats, *Letter to George*, April 21st 1819.

negative capability is positive, since it refers to a tragic heroism against the problem of evil²².

²² Li Ou, *Keats and the negative capability*, Continuum International Publishing Group, London, 2009, p. 14.

3.3 The influence of Spenser on Keats

The effects of how Spenser's works had an imprint on Keats's compositions are evident, especially in the many quotes from *Faerie Queene*, which fascinated the Nineteenth century poet; Keats was helped by him in his research of exaltation of sounds and unforgettable verses and even borrowed many words from the stanzas of his poetic mentor. According to the English dramatist Mary Russell Mitford, Keats seemed to be the direct heir of Spenser's signature, since she stated that no one until the young John was able to handle the pen as he had done. This influence often appears in Keats's frequent use of the Spenserian metre, the main and most clear trace of Spenser is in fact in the metrical system, which consists in a stanza composed with eight iambic pentameters and an alexandrine verse tied with rhymes. The inspiration was not only in the form of Keats's poetics, but also in the quotes of characters from Spenser's works, for instance, the Knight of the Red Cross and the magician Archimago of *Faerie Queene* appear respectively in the sonnet *Woman! When I behold thee* and in an epistle *To my brother George*. A tribute manifest was revealed in a letter to his friend Clarke, to whom Keats confessed "Spenserian vowels that elope with ease / And float along like birds o'er summer seas"²³ in order

²³ John Keats, *Letter to Charles Cowden Clarke*, September 1816.

to thank him to get John acquainted with the Sixteenth century poet. In 1815 he celebrate his poetic model in *Ode to Apollo*:

A silver trumpet Spenser blows,
And as its martial notes to silence flee,
From a virgin chorus flows
A hymn in praise of spotless Chastity.
'Tis still! Wild warblings from the Aeolian lyre
Enchantment softly breathe, and tremblingly expire²⁴.

Keats's homage to his model became more explicit in *Imitation of Spenser* in 1814, but it was not a banal emulation of his poetic guide, he tried to suit to his works the ability of Spenser to charm the reader with power of beauty and poetry:

Now Morning from her orient chamber came,
And her first footsteps touch'd a verdant hill;
Crowning its lawny crest with amber flame,
Silv'ring the untainted gushes of its rill;
Which, pure from mossy beds, did down distill,
And after parting beds of simple flowers,
By many streams a little lake did fill,
Which round its marge reflected woven bowers,
And, in its middle space, a sky that never lowers²⁵.

²⁴ John Keats, *Ode to Apollo*, stanza VI, ll. 30-35.

²⁵ John Keats, *Imitation of Spenser*, stanza I, ll. 1-9.

3.4 Keats reading Shakespeare

Keats stated that a man's life that is worth something is a persisting allegory and there are only few people who are able to see the Mystery of a life that is as symbolic as writings could be and added that Shakespeare lived a life of allegory, his works are a proof of it indeed²⁶.

Keats identified Shakespeare as one of his poetic guides and he believed that the great poet's genius functioned as a source of illuminated poetry, as in the quotes of his epistles and in the comments in his copies of his books, but his aim was to find a personal interpretation of Shakespeare's works, in fact Keats's *St Agnes's Eve* is a free perception of Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* and in his *King Lear's* Folio copy, to side of Goneril's monologue, he wrote:

"How finely is the brief of Lear's character sketched in this conference – from this point does Shakespeare spur him out to the mighty grapple – "the seeded pride that hath to this maturity blowne up" Shakespeare doth scatter abroad on the winds of Passion, where the germs take buoyant root in stormy Air, suck lightning sap, and become voiced dragons – self-will and pride and wrath are taken at a rebound by his giant hand and mounted to the Clouds – there to remain and thunder evermore."²⁷.

²⁶ Rosario Portale, *Omaggio a Keats e Leopardi, Atti del simposio internazionale in occasione del bicentenario della nascita di John Keats*, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, Pisa, 1997, p. 19.

²⁷ Robert White, *Keats as a reader of Shakespeare*, The Athlone Press, London, 1987, p.47.

The notes in his letters and texts make evident that Keats read Shakespeare's plays in their whole entirety, perhaps except for *Pericles*, because there are not markings after the Act II of his book. Keats was moved in particular by *Love's Labour's Lost*, as the several quotes in his letters prove, and he was fascinated by the poetry of *Much Ado About Nothing*, in whose book he took notes many times especially in Act III, where the story leaves the prose and the dialogues present verses. He frequently underlined the parts of the character of Leonato, whom he was mostly interested in and whom he was inspired by in the description of Saturn in his *Hyperion*; he also appreciated the figure of Dogberry, in fact he mentioned him in some letters, as when he wrote to his friend Charles Brown "I hope the weather will give you the slip; let it show itself, and steal out of your company"²⁸ which recalls Dogberry's instruction to his watchmen saying that "the most peaceable way for you, if you do take a thief, is to let him show himself what he is, and steal out of your company"²⁹.

²⁸ John Keats, *Letter to Charles Brown*.

²⁹ William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, act III, scene III.

3.5 Keats and Leopardi: Affinities and Differences

Beauty is everlasting: a famous sentence of John Keats claims that a creation of it is a joy that lasts; a phrase of Leopardi agreed with this statement, in fact he affirmed that contemplating your own works and appreciate their values is a pleasure that delights the awareness of having done something beautiful in the world.

The comparison between Keats and Leopardi represents a chance to consider an interesting link of two different authors in the same frame of epoch. They did not meet during their lives, but they shared some affinities, not only because they both experienced Romanticism, but also because of some coincidences that happened to them; however, their art is obviously distinguished by many features.

Memory is a main point that united both the poets: Leopardi was known as the poet of memories, which his works were inspired by, whereas Keats believed that poetry may functioned as a remembrance device.

Leopardi did not know English well, but he made an effort to learn it, so he studied volumes of great translated works of Shakespeare, Milton, Locke, Pope and Byron; they never read each other's poetry, although they seemed to have experienced similar coincidences.

They both undertook the translation of Virgilio's *Aeneid*; unfortunately Keats's version had been lost, but the testimonies of his friends resisted through the ages

and arrived to us swearing that the young poet translated the whole work in prose, for instance as Haydon's affirming that "Keats translated all the *Aeneid* without ever having been educated"³⁰. On the other hand, Leopardi's translation of the second book represents the result of his famous study "matto e disperatissimo".

Another similarity between them is the fact that an illness marked their lives; the hard condition they experienced was conveyed in their writings. In the *Ode on Indolence*, Keats farewells the incarnations of Love, Ambitions and Poesy, while Leopardi's verses recall those of the English poet in the canticle *L'appressamento della morte*, where he represents the personifications of Love, Glory and Wisdom.

They shared a melancholy for antique stories, expressed also in their adoration for Homer and the inspiration from classical art. An analogy could be read in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and in *Sopra un basso rilievo antico sepolcrale*, where they contemplate and interrogate the figures

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed?³¹

Sola, peregrinando, il patrio tetto
Sì per tempo abbandoni? A queste soglie
Tornerai tu? Farai tu lieti un giorno

³⁰ Rosario Portale, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

³¹ John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, stanza IV, ll. 31-34.

Questi ch'oggi ti son piangendo intorno?³²

The sense of sadness and the painful complaint of precariousness and fugacity of youth embody in the *Ode to a Nightingale* and the *Passero Solitario*: Keats envies the nightingale the capacity to sing, which is the symbol of the immortality of Poetry and Nature, whereas Leopardi envies the lonely sparrow, because the bird will not regret a life not fully appreciated and savoured.

They both believed that once nature had been sacred, therefore it had represented the dwelling of gods and spirits, but at their time it was neutral and forsaken. They tuned their verses to it, one uttering

O brightest! Though too late for antique vows,
Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
When holy were haunted forest boughs,
Holy the air, the water and the fire³³

and the other interrogating

Vivi tu, vivi, santa
Natura? Vivi e il dissueto orecchio
Della materna voce il suo accoglie?
Già di candide ninfe i rivi albergo,
placido albergo e specchi
furo i liquidi fonti³⁴.

³² Giacomo Leopardi, *Sopra un basso rilievo antico sepolcrale*.

³³ John Keats, *Ode to Psyche*, stanza III, ll. 36-39.

³⁴ Giacomo Leopardi, *Alla primavera o delle favole antiche*.

The sentiment of love led them to pain, anxiety, jealousy; the very coincidence is that the name of their loved women was the same: Fanny. Keats burnt for a passion for Fanny Brawne, with whom he could never fulfil his feeling, while Fanny Targioni Tozzetti was the muse and illusion of love for Leopardi. Keats composed his torment in lamenting lines

Yourself – your soul – in pity give me all,
Withhold no atom's atom or I die,
Or living on perhaps, your wretched thrall,
Forget, in the midst of idle misery,
Life's purposes, - the palate of my mind
Losing its gust, and my ambition blind!³⁵

while Leopardi expressed the same intensity of sorrow

Ne' tu giammai quel che tu stessa
Inspirasti alcun tempo al mio pensiero,
Potesti, Aspasia, immaginar. Non sai
Che smisurato amor, che affanni intensi,
Che indicibili moti e che deliri
Movesti in me³⁶.

The only remedy that they could consider was death, which was not thought as suffering but sweetness and it even became more intense than life itself, they believe that death donated pleasure, since it ended their illnesses and pains. Keats wished for it, as he wrote to his friend Charles Brown in 1820, because he would have

³⁵ John Keats, *To Fanny*, ll. 9-14.

³⁶ Giacomo Leopardi, *Aspasia*.

destroyed his sorrow; he was aware of the fact that his life was not everlasting, but it was “but a day; / a fragile dew – drop on its perilous way from a tree’s summit”³⁷ he celebrated it in the verses

I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath³⁸.

Leopardi was as much conscious as the English poet about this, as he showed in the lines “l’ mi rivolgo indietro e guardo e piagno / In veder che mio giorno fu sì corto”³⁹; he hoped for the same end, through the memories of suicidal thoughts and painful cries

Morte chiamai più volte, e lungamente
Mi sedetti colà su la fontana
Pensoso di cessar dentro quell’acque
La speme e il dolor mio⁴⁰.

Keats and Leopardi died far from their birthplaces: the first in Rome and the latter in Naples. They went in these cities, in order to improve their health, the English man had to move in the capital because of tuberculosis and the Italian man was trying to find relief from asthma.

³⁷ John Keats, *Sleep and Poetry*.

³⁸ John Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*, stanza VI, ll.51-54.

³⁹ Giacomo Leopardi, *L'appressamento della morte*.

⁴⁰ Giacomo Leopardi, *Le ricordanze*.

The last lyric of Keats was dedicated to the “bright star”, the last one of Leopardi to the moon; the English poet conveys the vanishing of love, whereas the Italian poet sings the regret for the lost hopes and the sunset of youth:

Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender – taken breath,
And so live ever – or else swoon to death⁴¹.

Ma la vita mortal, poi che la bella
Giovinezza sparì, non si colora
D'altra luce giammai, né d'altra aurora.
Vedova è insino al fine; ed alla notte
Che l'altre etadi oscura,
segno poser gli Dei la sepoltura⁴².

Keats raised superb poems to the myth as a celebration of the antique world, in particular in the *Odes*, whereas Leopardi just used it in function of support of reasoning.

They both refused the literary clubs; Keats, tired of the London “chit – chat”, did not want to deal with anyone except for Wordsworth and Leopardi, during his staying in Rome, was disgusted from those literatus who ruined literature but, different from Keats, he was comforted in the illusion that a possible afterlife fame would have given him back the right value in a sort of poetic retaliation.

⁴¹ John Keats, *Bright Star*, ll. 9-14.

⁴² Giacomo Leopardi, *Il tramonto della luna*.

Religion occupied the same meaning for both: Keats defined it a pious fraud and Leopardi stated that it is a necessary illusion. Leopardi believed that men had to be humble to accept their limited state of being, swearing that he would have not stained his soul with the guilt of thinking in a finalistic election over the other species, as he maintained "Non io / Con tal vergogna scenderò sotto terra"⁴³; Keats based his faith in the comforting thought of God, since man does not "forsake / His rugged path; nor dare he view alone / his future doom which is but to awake"⁴⁴.

The Romantic period that framed both their lives was not translated into their art in the same manner; the neoclassicism, that could be associated with both the poets, separated them in two different dimensions: the one of Leopardi found its roots in the study of classics, whereas the one of Keats is not the result of erudition, in fact his knowledge of classic world was mainly limited on Homer by Chapman and, since he did not know Italian, he was not able to deeply understand Dante or Boccaccio in their original writings, but only in the translated versions.

Moreover, for Keats the sense of truth was comprehended in the one of beauty, therefore it was strictly related to imagination, for Leopardi it involved the whole existence, whether it was a pleasant imagination or something that is suffered in reality.

⁴³ Giacomo Leopardi, *Ginestra*.

⁴⁴ John Keats, *Can Death be Sleep, when Life is but a Dream*, stanza II, ll. 6-9.

Keats's philosophy was a combination of reasoning and both intellectual and intuitive thoughts, felt and followed by heart; on the other hand, Leopardi's philosophy was an anti – philosophy, more associated with mental dimension.

Keats and Leopardi shared coincidences and were distinguished in many characteristics, but it is interesting to compare their art, in order to appreciate it more, since they belonged to the same period but were not necessarily and consequently similar in several aspects, and since they belonged to different places but they were joint from many affinities.

3.6 The Bequest of Keats

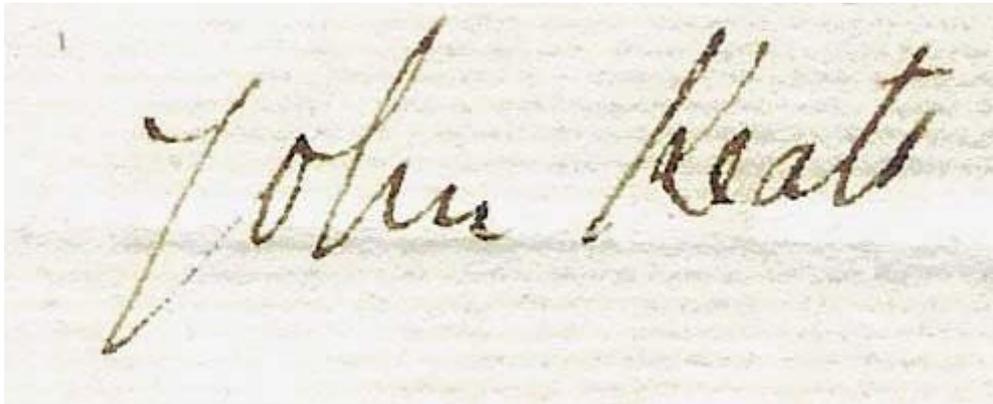


Figure 2 John Keats's signature⁴⁵.

Keats was not aware that he owned a talent and that he would have become an endless poet. He affirmed, in fact, in a letter addressed to Fanny that he had not written any immortal work nor he had produced something to make his friends proud of him⁴⁶. However, from his prospective, it is reasonable that he believed that his fame would have never been known to posterity: his *Endymion* did not succeed and his *Hyperion* remained incomplete, thus he felt the weight of failure over his shoulders. As John Middleton Murry remembered the young poet:

⁴⁵ <http://www.keats-shelley-house.org/system/images/0000/0466/Yours-ever.jpg?1323279055>.

⁴⁶ John Keats, *Letter to Fanny*, February 1820.

“His greatest poetry was, as he wished it to be, a spontaneous utterance of the complete being, and for that reason is the only English poetry that is truly like Shakespeare’s. Keats was the poet- prophet”⁴⁷.

Keats’s bequest could be appreciated from his works to his private correspondence and the proof of his eternal poetic existence is confirmed by the awareness of his greatness in the words of his friends, his contemporary colleagues and modern authors. Shelley borrowed, from the poem *Three years she grew in sun and shower* of Wordsworth, the invocation of Lucy on poetry in order to paint Keats’s soul, where Keats became a source of light in the path of poetry and even a feminine figure:

He is made one with Nature; there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night’s sweet bird;
He is a presence to be felt and known
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,
Spreading itself where’er that Power may move
Which has withdrawn his being to its own⁴⁸.

⁴⁷ Neville Rogers, *Keats Shelley & Rome*, Great Russell Street, London, 1949, p. 43.

⁴⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *op. cit.*, stanza XLII.

Keats's letters provided a large amount of poetic sources and has given us the gift of great poetic verses through which he expressed his love for Fanny, but he also conveyed his passion for poetry:

"I find that I cannot exist without poetry - without eternal poetry - half the day will not do - the whole of it - I began with a little, but habit has made me a Leviathan. I had become all in a Tremble from not having written anything of late - the Sonnet over leaf did me some good. I slept the better last night for it - this Morning, however, I am nearly as bad again. Just now I opened Spenser, and the first Lines I saw were these:

'The noble Heart that harbors virtuous thought,
And is with Child of glorious great intent,
Can never rest, until it forth have brought
Th' eternal Brood of Glory excellent'⁴⁹ ⁵⁰.

The importance of Keats in the history of poetry has become relevant: due to the works he composed, it has been possible to polish off the masterpieces and the authors of the English literature, such as Shakespeare, Spenser, Pope and Milton, and the culture of ancient worlds as the Greek one. The talent of Keats resides in his capacity of combine the features of the great poets he was inspired by and his own poetic noticeable characteristics such as the research of musical and harmonious verses.

⁴⁹ Edmund Spenser, *Faerie Queene*, book I.

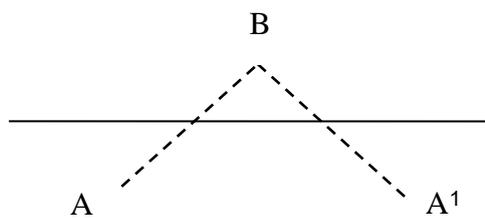
⁵⁰ John Keats, *Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds*, April 18th 1817.

Chapter 4

The *Odes*

4.1 Structure and Themes

Keats wanted to conceive something beautiful in poetry, in fact his *Odes* represent a great example of Romantic art, from the importance of Beauty to the descriptions of ancient worlds; when he composed them, he was inspired by several themes, for instance by the art of the old Greek world in the case of the *Ode to Psyche* and the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and he was influenced by his inner moods in the case of the *Ode on Melancholy*. Although Keats was able to express poetry according to his own manner and to create a personal style, he has to be analyzed with his artistic context. The typical scheme for poetry in the Nineteenth century may be illustrated in a sort of diagram, as the scholar Jack Stillinger suggests¹:



¹ Jack Stillinger, *Twentieth century interpretations of Keats's Odes*, Prentice-Hall International, London, 1968, p. 2.

According to this theory, Romantic lyrics used to create a representation of binomials, such as material and spiritual, known and mystery, reality and fantasy. The diagram exemplifies the path travelled by the poet, during which he learns something and then brings it back home: he starts the travel in the real world (A), then he takes a mental flight to reach the ideal world² (B) and finally he goes back to where he started (A¹). The point from where he starts is named in a different way of the point where he ends, because the journey offers him a new conception of his reality, so the situation is different from the one at the beginning: the poet has become more aware of something, so he is not the same at the end. There were two opposite tendencies in the Romantic period, which were the inclination to transcend the flux and the wish to merge with it³. An example of this tendency is Keats's sonnet *Bright Star*.

Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art –
Not in lone splendor hung aloft the night
And watching, with eternal lids apart,
Like nature's patient, sleepless Eremite,
The moving waters at their priestlike task
Of pure ablution round earth's human shores,
Or gazing on the new soft fallen mask
Of snow upon the mountains and the moors –
No – yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,

² Ibid., p. 3.

³ Ibid., p. 3-4.

Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever – or else swoon to death.⁴

At the beginning, the poet focuses on the star and its constancy (A), but then he reflects on its aloofness and distance (B), then he arrives at the final sestet where he compares the star's situation to his own and expresses the desire of achieving the same steadfastness in his life (A¹). Keats adapted this model also in the Odes: in *Ode to a Nightingale* the element B is embodied by nature and, in fact, Keats presents the ideal world of the bird in opposition to the world of the poet, who claims the immortality of the nightingale; through the wings of imagination, he is able to reach the ideal level of the invisible animal and to come back wiser, because he has gone through significant experiences. In *Ode on a Grecian Urn* the ideal world is defined by art: after the contemplation of the urn, the poet understands that Beauty

⁴ John Keats, *Bright Star*.

Fulgida stella, fossi fermo come tu lo sei / Ma non in solitario splendore sospeso alto nella notte, / A vegliare, con le palpebre rimosse in eterno, / Come paziente di natura, insonne eremita, / Le mobili acque al loro dovere sacerdotale / Di puro lavacro intorno a rive umane, / Oppure guardare la nuova maschera dolcemente caduta / Della neve sopra i monti e le pianure. / No – pure sempre fermo, sempre senza mutamento, / Vorrei riposare sul guancialetto del puro seno del mio amore, / Sentirne per sempre la discesa dolce dell'onda e il sollevarsi, / Sempre desto in una dolce inquietudine / A udire sempre, sempre il suo respiro attenuato, / E così vivere in eterno – o se no venir meno nella morte.

can be experienced only on earth and the urn helps him to comprehend this idea. In *Ode to Autumn* imagination contributes to the reconciling of the poet and his real world.

4.2 *Ode to Fancy*

This ode focuses on one of the central themes of Romantic lyrics and on a recurring and significant subject of Keats's poetry: the poet wrote in fact a homage dedicated to the power of imagination, which is personified in the form of a sweet winged figure, compared to the seasons and welcomed by the poet's soul:

Ever let the fancy roam,
Pleasure never is at home:
At a touch sweet pleasure melteth,
Like to bubbles when rain pelteth;
Then let winged Fancy wander
Through the thought still spread beyond her:
Open wide the mind's cage-door,
She'll dart forth, and cloudward soar⁵.

In the following lines, Nature appears in the succession of seasons and in the sequence of the phases of the day, whose joys are "spoilt by use"⁶:

O sweet Fancy! Let her loose;
Summer's joys are spoilt by use,
And the enjoying of the Spring
Fades as does its blossoming;
Autumn's red-lipp'd fruitage too,

⁵ John Keats, *Ode to Fancy*, ll. 1-8.

Lascia sempre vagare la fantasia, / il Piacere non è mai a casa: / E il dolce Piacere si scioglie, solo a toccarlo, / Come le bolle quando la pioggia picchia; / Lasciala quindi vagare l'alata Fantasia, / Per il pensiero che davanti ancor le si stende; / Spalanca la porta alla gabbia della mente, / E, vedrai, si lancerà volando verso il cielo.

⁶ Ibid., l. 10.

Blushing through the mist and dew,
Cloys with tasting: what do then?
Sit thee by the ingle, when
The seat faggot blazes bright,
Spirit of a winter's night;
When the soundless earth is muffled,
And the caked snow is shuffled
From the ploughboy's heavy soon;
When the Night doth meet the Noon
In a dark conspiracy
To banish Even from her sky⁷.

As in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats reflects on the everlasting contemplation of Beauty, which the poet believes that it can be reached only through Fancy, that becomes a means to truly experience pleasure in life:

Oh, sweet Fancy! Let her loose;
Every thing is spoilt by use:
Where's the cheek that doth not fade,
Too much gaz'd at?
[...]
Break the mesh

⁷ Ibid., ll. 9-24.

O dolce fantasia! Libera sii per sempre! / Rovinate dall'uso le gioie dell'estate, / E appassisce il godimento della primavera / Come i suoi fiori. Anche le bocche rosse / Dei frutti autunnali quando tra le nebbie / E la rugiada ardono come fanali / Saziano a gustarle: e dunque, che fare? / Siediti nel canto del fuoco quando l'arida fascina brucia luminosa, / Spirito di una notte di inverno; / Quando la terra senza suono è soffocata, / E la neve indurita è smossa / Dalle scarpe pesanti del bifolco; / Quando la Notte incontra il Giorno / In un tenebroso complotto / Per bandire il Crepuscolo dal cielo.

Of the Fancy's silken leash;
Quickly break her prison-string
And such joys as these she'll bring⁸.

⁸ Ibid., ll. 67-70. 89-92.

O dolce Fantasia! Lasciala andare; / L'uso guasta ogni cosa: / Dov'è la guancia che non vizzisce/ A
contemprarla troppo? [...] Rompi le maglie / Del guinzaglio di seta della Fantasia; / Svelto rompi la
corda che la tiene imprigionata / E gioie simili a queste porterà.

4.3 *Ode to Psyche*

In the *Ode to Psyche* there are traces of Keats's passion for the ancient world, in fact, its main subject is the mythological figure of Cupid's lover, which is shaped with features of human nature and involved in the process of evolution and growing⁹.

Keats himself mentioned in a letter to his brother George, Apuleius, the Latin poet who dedicated a part of his *Metamorphoses* to the story of Cupid and Psyche:

"You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the time of Apuleius the Platonist who lived after the Augustan age, and consequently the Goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour—and perhaps never thought of in the old religion—I am more orthodox than to let a heathen Goddess be so neglected."¹⁰.

Also Spenser and Milton influenced this ode: Spenser inspired Keats with his *Nuptial Odes*, which are in fact reinterpreted in the first stanza:

O Goddess! Hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
Even into thine own soft-conched ear¹¹

whereas Milton's ode *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity* inspired Keats with the lines:

⁹ Jack Stillinger, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁰ John Keats, *Letter to his brother George*, April 30th 1819.

¹¹ John Keats, *Ode to Psyche*, stanza I, ll. 1-4.

O Dea! Ascolta questi ritmi senza armonia, torsi / Da una dolce costrizione e una cara rimembranza, / E non dolerti del fatto che i tuoi segreti vengano cantati / Perfino dentro alla morbida conchiglia del tuo orecchio.

The Oracles are dumb,
No voice or hideous hum
Runs through the arched roof in words deceiving.
Apollo from his shrine
Can no more divine,
With hollow shriek the steep of Delphos leaving
No nightly trance, or breathed spell,
Inspires the pale-ey'd Priest from the prophetic cell¹²

which are reinterpreted in the third stanza of Keats's *Ode to Psyche*

No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
From chain-swung censer teeming;
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming¹³.

The metrical system of this ode is characterized by irregular stanzas formed by inserted lines, which produce the effect of a "Pindaric" poem¹⁴. The first stanza of the ode recalls the end of the one *To a Nightingale*, since the poet wonders if he is awake or he has only dreamed about Psyche. The second stanza describes Cupid, while the third admires and celebrates her beauty. On the other hand, the fourth

¹² John Milton, *On the Morning of Christ's Nativity*.

¹³ John Keats, *Ode to Psyche*, stanza III, ll. 32-35.

Nessuna voce, nessun liuto, nessun flauto, nessun incenso dolce / Che fumi dal turibolo che dondola; / Nessun tempio, nessun bosco, nessun oracolo, nessun ardore / Di un profeta sognante dalla pallida bocca.

¹⁴ Jack Stillinger, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

defines the sacred experience of the encounter with Psyche through religious images
in the lines

O brightest! Though too late for antique vows,
Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
Holy the air, the water, and the fire;
Yet even in these days so far retir'd
From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,
Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd.
So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
Upon the midnight hours¹⁵

and in the fifth stanza the poet shows his devotion to her

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain¹⁶

¹⁵ John Keats, *Ode to Psyche*, stanza IV, ll. 36-45.

O splendida! Sebbene sia troppo tardi per gli antichi voti, / Troppo, troppo tardi per l'appassionata credula lira, / Quando i rami della foresta incantata erano sacri, / Sacra l'aria, l'acqua, e il fuoco / E perfino in questi giorni così remoti / Dai riti felici, le tue lucenti ali, / Che volteggiano tra gli Olimpi in rovina, / Vedo, e canto, dai miei occhi ispirati. / Perciò lasciami essere il tuo coro, e fammi fare un lamento / Sulle ore di mezzanotte.

¹⁶ Ibid., stanza V, ll. 50-52.

Sì, voglio essere il tuo sacerdote, e costruire un tempio / In un luogo inesplorato della mia mente, / Dove pensieri come rami, spuntati appena con piacevole dolore.

in whose lines there is an oxymoron that often recurs in Keats's works, that is "pleasant pain", which expresses the inseparable nature of joy and sorrow.

4.4 *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

The *Ode on a Grecian Urn* was composed with regular stanzas, in a great perfection of form; it perfectly symbolizes the main characteristics of Keats's poetry, for example in his attention for Beauty. He already mentioned the urn in the *Ode on Indolence* as a "marble urn"¹⁷ and as a "dreamy urn"¹⁸. Keats was determined to conceive something beautiful and everlasting, so he found the right inspiration in the immortal art of the ancient world of Greece and its glorious works. Keats was in particular inspired to write it by the Parthenon Marbles that he had admired in the British Museum.



Figure 3 The Parthenon Marbles, 447-438 B.C., London, British Museum¹⁹.

¹⁷ John Keats, *Ode on Indolence*, stanza I, l. 5.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, stanza VI, l. 56.

¹⁹ http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/02703/Elgin-Marbles_2703279b.jpg.

Keats opens the poem with an invocation to the “still unravished bride of quietness”²⁰ that raises a series of questions:

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?²¹.

Keats is charmed by the picture of ancient history illustrated on the urn, which represents perennial Beauty and immutable Nature. This ode represents Keats's pursuit of eternal magnificence and art, even though he believes that the ideal world is not exempt of imperfections, in fact he describes the picture on the urn “lifeless, motionless and unreal”²². In the first stanza the urn functions as a muse for the poet

Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme²³

The Parthenon Marbles, known also as Elgin Marbles, were transported from the Parthenon in Athens to England by the British diplomat Thomas Bruce, VII count of Elgin.

²⁰ John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, stanza I, l. 1.

Sposa ancora inviolata dal silenzio.

²¹ Ibid., stanza I, ll. 5-7.

Qual leggenda incorniciata di foglie abita la tua forma / Di immortali o mortali o entrambi / In Tempe o nelle valli di Arcadia?

²² Jack Stillinger, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

²³ John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, stanza I, ll. 2-4.

Tu figlia del silenzio e del lento tempo, / Narratrice silvana, che sai narrare / Una favola ornata più dolcemente della nostra rima.

but in the second stanza he focuses on a particular detail, which underlines the permanent state of it

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!²⁴

The pictures illustrated communicate an idea of motion and perpetuity, but at the same time they illustrate “moments of being and becoming suspended permanently in art”²⁵. As Keats expresses in the *Ode on Melancholy*, Beauty cannot be separated from nostalgia, that in fact appears in the third stanza; he presents it with a combination of opposite words, such as “happy” and “adieu”

Ah, happy, happy boughs! That cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! More happy, happy love!²⁶.

²⁴ Ibid., stanza II, ll. 15-20.

Bel ragazzo, sotto gli alberi, tu non puoi smettere / La tua canzone, né mai quegli alberi possono essere spogli; / Audace Amante, mai, mai tu puoi baciare, / Benché vicino a vincere lo scopo – comunque, non ti dolere / Ella non può svanire, sebbene tu non abbia la tua gioia, / Per sempre tu l'amerai, e lei sarà bella.

²⁵ Jack Stillinger, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

²⁶ John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, stanza III, ll. 21-25.

The fourth stanza is structured with a climax; Keats leaves the ideal world and returns to the one he actually belongs to. He describes a little empty town, because he wants to communicate a metaphor of the fact that the figures depicted on the urn are confined there and they belong to a remote past²⁷:

What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return²⁸.

The fifth stanza reveals a sort of circular form of the ode, in fact the end is related with the beginning: the "sylvan historian"²⁹ seems to narrate the legend disclosed in the following lines:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

Ah, felici, felici rami! Che non possono perdere / Le tue foglie, né mai potete dire addio alla Primavera; / E, felice musico, infaticabile, / Per sempre moduli canti sempre nuovi; / Più felice amore! Più felice, felice amore!

²⁷ Jack Stillinger, *op.cit.*, p. 80.

²⁸ John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, stanza IV, ll. 35-40.

Quale piccola città presso un fiume o una spiaggia al mare, / O costruita su una montagna con una roccaforte pacifica, / Si è svuotata di questa gente, questo pio mattino? / E, piccola città, le tue strade per sempre / saranno silenziose; e non un'anima a dire / Perché tu sei desolata, può ritornare.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, stanza I, l. 3.

With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st³⁰.

The last lines contain Keats's approach of Beauty and truth in his production of art:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty" – that is all / Ye know on earth, and ye need to know³¹.

³⁰ Ibid., stanza V, ll. 41-48.

O Attica forma! Posa leggiadra! Con un ricamo / Di uomini e fanciulle nel marmo, / Coi rami della foresta e l'erba calpestata; / Tu, forma silenziosa, ci turbi la ragione / Come fa l'eternità: Fredda Pastorale! / Quando il tempo avrà guastato questa generazione, / Tu resterai, tra altro dolore / Che il nostro, un amico dell'uomo, al quale tu dici.

³¹ Ibid., stanza V, ll. 49-50.

"Bellezza è verità, verità bellezza," – che è tutto ciò / Che voi sapete sulla terra, e tutto ciò che avete bisogno di sapere.

4.5 *Ode on Indolence*

The *Ode on Indolence* was composed in the spring of 1819, but it was published only in 1848. Keats found the inspiration to write this ode, when he became aware that his devotion to poetry did not allow him to earn enough.

In the *Ode on Indolence*, Keats depicts three allegoric Phantoms which embody Love, Ambition and Poetry and in the poem they appear before him. Keats is not able to contemplate his life without poetry, so he realizes that he could not abandon his art, even if it would mean not gaining economic wealth:

They faded, and, forsooth! I wanted wings:
O folly! What is Love! and where is it?
And for that poor Ambition! it springs
From a man's little heart's short fever-fit;
For Poesy!, no, she has not a joy, -
At least for me, - so sweet as drowsy noons,
And evenings steep'd in honied indolence³².

The ode reproduces the pattern of Romantic lyrics, since the poet begins his poem in an unsatisfying reality in which ambition, love and poetry appear just as shadows. At the beginning he is hesitant in the dilemma between pursuing his art

³² John Keats, *Ode on Indolence*, stanza IV, ll. 31-35.

Sparvero, e davvero desideravo avere ali / O follia! Che cos'è l'Amore! E dov'è? / E quella povera Ambizione! Nasce dal meschino cuore di un uomo di breve febbre; / E la Poesia – no – lei non ha nessuno gioia / Almeno non per me, - così dolce come i sonnolenti meriggi / E le sere d'indolenza pregne che sanno di miele.

and becoming immortal or trying to find a profession that would assure him a better income. He finally dismisses all the three figures, with a conclusion that reminds us of the Negative Capability, since he faces the possibility of abandoning his poetic career:

So, ye three Ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise
My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;
For I would not be dieted with praise,
A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!
Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more
In a masque-like figures on the dreamy urn;
And for the day faint visions there is store;
Farewell! I yet have visions there is store;
Vanish, ye Phantoms! From my idle spright,
Into the clouds, and never more return!³³.

The structure of this ode starts with a Shakespearian quatrain and ends with a sestet typical of Milton, which is a metrical organization used also in other odes, such as in *Ode on Melancholy* and in *Ode to a Nightingale*. Moreover, many words are repeated, such as “vanish”, “faded”, “ghosts”, “phantoms”, “shadows”, “adieu”, “farewell” and there is a dense chiming, for example, in the following lines:

³³ Ibid., stanza VI, ll. 51-60.

Dunque, o tre fantasmi addio! Non potete sollevare / La mia testa dal fresco letto di erbe fiorita; / Perché non voglio nutrirmi di lodi, / Come un agnello di una farsa sentimentale! / Svanite dolcemente dai miei occhi, siate ancora una volta / Figure in maschera sull'urna del sogno; / Addio! Ho avuto altre visioni per la notte, / E per il giorno tenue visioni ne ho tante; / Svanite, voi Fantasmi! Dal mio spirito ozioso, / Nella nuvole, e non tornate mai più.

The blissful cloud of summer-indolence
Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;
Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower:
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
Unhaunted quite of all but – nothingness?³⁴.

³⁴ Ibid., stanza II, ll. 16-20.

La beata nuvola dell'indolenza estiva / Mi intontiva gli occhi; / Il polso cresceva a mano a mano; / Il dolore non aveva aculeo, e la corona del piacere non aveva fiori: / O, perché non svaniste, e lasciate il mio senso / Inabitato da niente a parte il nulla?

4.6 *Ode on Melancholy*

The alternation of joy and pain in the poet's soul are illustrated in the *Ode on Melancholy*. This ode appears as a sort of anticipation of the later one *To Autumn*, since the poet presents the theme of fulfillment and the awareness that men could succeed to live completely only by accepting not only pleasure, but also pain; thus, this belief creates the tendency to pursue a whole realization of experience, but at the same time the inclination to escape from this process; as a result an opposition is produced between an idea of motion and an idea of stasis, that corresponds to a non-experience dimension. Keats discusses this topic also in *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and in *Lamia*, where the poet shows a failed attempt to achieve fulfillment and the consequent descent into oblivion³⁵, which is mentioned in the first lines of the ode, where a "visionary haven"³⁶ could be possible in a state of unawareness:

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,

³⁵ Jack Stillinger, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.87.

And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul³⁷.

The aim of the poet aspires is not to avoid melancholy, but to accept it and even experience it though oblivion, because he understands that he can awake his soul only if he lets himself become involved in the process³⁸ of melancholy, which is described by a metaphor in the following lines:

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud³⁹.

The month of April is represented with an antithesis, because spring is a season when flowers bloom, but in this ode it is presented as a time of death. Keats believes that Beauty cannot exist without Melancholy, because the first might vanish and consequently produce a feeling of anguish; so he creates a binomial pleasure-pain

³⁷ John Keats, *Ode on Melancholy*, stanza I, ll. 1-10.

No, non andare al Lete, né spremere / Per il vino velonoso, dalle salde radici, l'aconito; / Né dovrai soffrire sulla pallida fronte i baci / Della belladonna, vermiglio grappolo di Proserpina; / Né fare il tuo rosario con le bacche del tasso, / Né divenga per te lo scarafaggio, né la falena della morte / La tua triste Psyche, né il piumoso gufo / Il compagno dei tuoi segreti dolori; / Perché l'ombra sull'ombra arriverà troppo assennatamente, / E annegherà l'angoscia vigilante del tuo cuore.

³⁸ Jack Stillinger, *op. cit.*, p.88.

³⁹ John Keats, *Ode on Melancholy*, stanza II, ll. 11-14.

Ma quando la malinconia cadrà / Tutto a un tratto dal cielo come una lacrimosa nuvola, / Che ristora i fiori languenti, / E nasconde il verde colle in un sudario di Aprile.

and suggests that they are inevitably interrelated; this concept becomes clear in the last stanza:

She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die;
And joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her Sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung⁴⁰.

Only whoever let himself fully taste experience may savor the essence of joy.

⁴⁰ Ibid., stanza III, ll. 21-30.

Ella dimora insieme alla Bellezza, la Bellezza che deve morire; / E la Gioia, la cui mano tiene sempre sui suoi labbri / A dire addio; e presso al Piacere che duole, / E muta in veleno mentre l'ape la bocca sorseggia: / La velata Malinconia ha il suo tempio sovrano, / Benché la veda solo chi con strenua lingua / Sa schiacciare contro al palato fine il grappolo di Gioia; / La sua anima assaggerà la tristezza del suo potere, / E tra i suoi trofei cupi andrà sospesa.

4.7 *Ode on a Nightingale*

The *Ode to a Nightingale* is a delicate lyric, rich of images, lights, sounds, flavors and scents. Keats presents the contrast between the human world and the one of the nightingale: Nature represents the ideal world, to which the poet travels. The aim of the poet is to reach the height of the nightingale, which belongs to a world where he can find the beauty that he is looking for. First the poet demands wine

O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim⁴¹

and then poetry to help him achieve the ideal world he aspires to. The passage from the invocation of wine to art is conveyed with a natural and smooth style:

Away! Away! For I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! Tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;

⁴¹ Ibid., stanza II, ll. 15-20.

O per un bicchiere pieno del caldo Sud, / Pieno del vero, il roseo Ippocrene, / Con perlate bolle occhieggianti all'orlo, / E la bocca tinta a macchie rosse; / Che io potessi bere, e lasciare il mondo non veduto, / E con te svanire nella foresta oscura.

But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways⁴².

The poet falls into a daydream, while he is listening to the song of the bird, which brings him into a dark atmosphere, where it creates a sort of reconciliation between the poet and death; in this ode, in fact, Keats presents the concept of Negative Capability, with which he becomes able to deal with the difficult aspects of life. This situation evolves until the eighth stanza, when the daydream breaks:

Forlorn! The very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! Adieu! Thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades⁴³.

⁴² Ibid., stanza IV, ll. 31-40.

Via! Via! Perché voglio volare a te, / Non sul carro di Bacco e con i suoi leopardi, / Ma sulle ali invisibili della Poesia, / Benché la mente ottusa svaghi e ritardi: / Eccomi già con te! Tenera è la notte, / E forse la Regina-Luna è sul suo trono, / Con sciami intorno le sue Fate stellari; / Ma qui non c'è luce, / Altra non c'è fuori quanta con la brezza spira / Per verdeggianti ombre dal cielo e sentieri di muschio sinuosi.

⁴³ Ibid., stanza VIII, ll. 71-80.

Solitarie! È la parola come un rintocco di campana / A tirarmi indietro da te nel mio solo me stesso! / Addio! La fantasia non può barare così bene / Come fa la fama, ingannevole elfo. / Addio! Addio! Il tuo lamentoso inno svanisce / Oltre i prati, oltre il fermo fiume, / Sul fianco del colle; e ora è sepolto profondo / Nei vicini albereti della valle: / Fu cosa vista, o un sogno a occhi aperti? / Il canto prese il volo: sono desto o dormo?

The nightingale has the power to alleviate the sorrow with its song, so the poet can return to his real world, relieved from pain and in harmony with the idea of death. The song functions as a sort of opiate, which helps him to escape from his unhappiness, and supports him in his journey to a higher and better world. The world of the bird is, however, concerned with death, but the difference is that it is not considered in a negative manner as in the world of the poet

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies⁴⁴

but it is instead represented with “verdurous glooms”⁴⁵ and the flowers are “fast-fading”⁴⁶: it is an immortal world, because Nature changes and forms a cyclic evolution: the structure of the poem is, in fact, a circle.

⁴⁴ Ibid., stanza III, ll. 21-26.

Svanire via, dissolvermi, e quasi dimenticare / Ciò che tu non hai mai saputo tra le foglie, / La stanchezza, la febbre, e l'ansia / Qui, dove gli uomini stanno e sentono l'un l'altro piangere; / Dove scuote la paralisi gli ultimi grigi capelli, / Dove la giovinezza cresce pallida, e sottile in modo spettrale, e muore.

⁴⁵ Ibid., stanza IV, l. 40.

⁴⁶ Ibid., stanza V, l. 47.

Keats describes the Negative Capability with repetitions of the verb “fade” and uses to the expressions “darkness” and “forest dim”: in alienation, the poet finds the power to leave his dark reality and to fly to a higher level of Nature.

4.8 *Ode to Autumn*

The *Ode to Autumn* was the last ode that Keats wrote and in which he remembers his month of September spent at Winchester. The poet wishes for Spring to come in the place of Autumn, which conspires with the sun.

In the first stanza, the process of ripening is described as the result of labors of the season

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells⁴⁷

whereas in the second stanza, autumn is compared to a series of activities of a farm during the harvest

⁴⁷ John Keats, *Ode to Autumn*, stanza I, ll. 1-11.

Stagione di nebbie e di dolce ricchezza di frutti, / Fedele amico al sole che matura; / Cospirando col lui come per caricare e benedire / Con la frutta le viti che intorno alle grondaie; / A curvare con le mele gli alberi muscosi nel casolare, / E riempire tutti i frutti con il succo fino al torso; / Gonfiare la zucca, e arrotondare il guscio delle nocciole / con un dolce nocciolo; e gemmare altri, / E altri ancora, i fiori più tardivi per le api, / Finché pensino che i giorni caldi non cessino mai, / Per l'Estate le loro celle viscoso traboccano.

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,
Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers:
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours⁴⁸.

Nature is personified and assumes an active role: the sun ripens the earth and Autumn is identified in the figure of the harvester and associated with the one of the gleaner, who collect the grains that the harvesters left. This season suggests the idea of something still and motionless, because of many adjectives and present participle such as “sitting”, “asleep”, “steady”; so there is an opposition to the idea of the circle, which is actually how nature works.

The main theme of the poem is the impression of fulfillment and, as in the *Ode to a Nightingale*, Nature assumes the significance of immortality; age is, in fact, is

⁴⁸ Ibid., stanza II, ll. 12-22.

Chi non ti vede spesso nella tua abbondanza? / Chiunque, andando, può trovarti a volte / Seduto
spensierato su un'aia / I tuoi capelli mossi dal vento che setaccia; / O addormentato su un solco per
metà mietuto, / Profondo nell'intontimento che esalano gli effluvi dei papaveri, mentre la riva /
Risparmia accanto il tuo falchetto e tutti i suoi fiori attorcigliati: / E a volte come uno spigolatore tu tieni
/ Immutabile il tuo capo carico per un ruscello; / O presso dove cola il sidro, con sguardo paziente, /
Tu guardi le ultime stille per ore e ore.

expressed, for example, in the description of the sun maturing, which is meant metaphorically in the sense that it grows older⁴⁹. As in the *Ode to a Nightingale*, the notion of death is expressed in a positive way, in fact, Keats presents it as a sort of accomplishment and fulfillment and, as in the *Ode on Melancholy*, the poet realizes that Beauty co-exists with fugacity, here he comprehends that life co-exists with death, so that he may be reconciled with his reality:

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,
While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river shallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft⁵⁰.

The ending of this ode is interesting, because it remains suspended in the syntax, in the meaning and in the meter, in the following line: “and gathering swallows twitter

⁴⁹ Jack Stillinger, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

⁵⁰ John Keats, *Ode to Autumn*, stanza III, ll. 23-32.

Dove sono i canti di Primavera? Ah, dove sono? / Non pensarci, anche tu hai musiche, / Mentre nuvole striate fioriscono il giorno che lento muore / E toccano le stoppie in pianura dalla tonalità rosea; / Allora in un gran coro i moscerini gemono / Tra i salici del fiume, portati in alto / O affondati come la luce del vento vive o muore; / E agnelli adulti belano dal collinoso ruscello; / I grilli di siepe cantano; e ora con dolce vibrato / Il pettirosso fischia dal piccolo appezzamento di un giardino.

in the skies”⁵¹. The suspension is syntactic, because there is only a connective between the elements of the sentence, that is the conjunction “and” at the beginning. It is semantic, because “gathering”, which is an adjectival present participle, expresses a sense of continuity. The meter could be read with five iambic stresses, therefore it is not closed, but a meaningful reading would not stress the preposition “in”, thus the ode ends with an empty fifth beat⁵².

⁵¹ Ibid., stanza III, l. 33.

Le rondini garriscono nei cieli.

⁵² Robert Ryan, Ronald Sharp, *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*, The University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1998, p. 49.

Conclusion



Figure 4 Portrait of John Keats¹.

Keats was aware of the excellence of the poets that inspired him, but he was not conscious of his own talent. He was not totally appreciated and understood from his contemporaries and poet colleagues, except for Shelley and other few friends and authors; he reached more recognition years later and even right after his death Byron admitted the greatness of Keats's works.

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/12/john-keats-new-life-review>.

Many poets, such as Shakespeare and Spenser, represented a guide for him in the composition of poetry, but he did not simply imitate them, in fact he always tried to translate what they taught him in terms of techniques and models into something personal, which could bear his own poetic signature. Even when he wrote *Imitation of Spenser*, he did not banally imitate the Sixteenth century poet's works, but he attempted to compose a piece of literature full of admiration and esteem for the Spenser in a new personal manner. He never kept secret who his poetic guides were, from Milton to Shakespeare, and he perceived the value of the influence they had on him and followed the great literary example they gave to him. Unlike Wordsworth, who proposes to the reader an external world of emotions, Keats involves us in the operations of his complex sensibility and his intense sensory participation and lets us be witnesses of the maturation of that experiences; thus, Keats's lyric is the actual perception of the vital intrinsic force of things².

The culmination of his poetry may be found in the *Odes* and especially in the one entitled *on a Grecian Urn*, in which he seizes the infinite sense of suspension, of death and mystery; he presents criticism and art, intermingled with a great combination of psychology and beauty. In this particular ode, echoes of an anxiety that recalls Leopardi's seem to appear.

² Euralio De Michelis, *Keats*, Newton Compton, Roma, p. 32.

A source of his poetic output is represented not only by his published works, but also by his private letters; as T. S. Eliot stated, his epistles were “the most notable and the most important ever written by and English poet”³, as may be assumed, for example, in the following lines:

“Upon my Soul I can think of nothing else. The time is passed when I had power to advise and warn you again[s]t the unpromising morning of my Life. My love has made me selfish. I cannot exist without you. I am forgetful of everything but seeing you again - my Life seems to stop there - I see no further. You have absorb'd me. I have a sensation at the present moment as though I was dissolving - I should be exquisitely miserable without the hope of soon seeing you. I should be afraid to separate myself far from you. My sweet Fanny, will your heart never change? My love, will it? I have no limit now to my love.”⁴

The Italian professor Raffaello Piccoli in 1925 affirmed that Keats could be considered the most objective poet among those of his romantic generation, because his lyric is never personal and biographical, but it evolves from a more deep part of his soul; his pure poetry derives from a moral inspiration that the translation of the celebration of an inner tragedy⁵. The name of Keats in Italy started to circulate in the last years of the Nineteenth century, thanks to D'Annunzio, who quoted lines of Keats's *Endymion* in his *Canto Novo* “I shall be young again, be young!”⁶. The Italian

³ Mohit Ray, *The Atlantic Companion to Literature in English*, Atlantic, New Delhi, p. 291.

⁴ John Keats, *Letter to Fanny Brawne*, October 13th 1819.

⁵ Euralio De Michelis, *op. cit.*, p. 25-26.

⁶ John Keats, *Endymion*, book III, l. 237.

writer dedicated magnificent words of esteem to Keats; he thought that the English poets of the Nineteenth century used to moralize and philosophize lyrically, so romantic poetry was not something artistic, but he believed that Keats was the only author exempt from this Romantic tendency, since Keats homaged nothing but Beauty and he believed in nothing but Fantasy.

The importance to study and admire Keats's works lies in the great expression of his poetry, in his attention to harmony of sound in his verses and in his cult for Beauty, which is present in every natural phenomenon, in every change of colour in the sky or in the sea; to him, these things deserve attention and admiration, because they have their own individuality and represent the expression of a divine form. He expressed esteem for Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton; he homaged the classic world, especially from Greek and Latin myths and also Italian culture inspired him, as in *Isabella or the Pot of Basil*.

Keats was a poet of emotions, in fact he did not pursue knowledge and reason; he in fact believed that the sense of Beauty had a great power and that poets had to pursue it, since through Beauty one could attain truth, but in his soul, the fascination for Beauty lives with the awareness of its fugacity. Moreover, he produces in his lines a profound sense of music that gradually becomes more intense and follows a rhythm.

His inclination to feelings rather than to thoughts made him developed a philosophical tendency called Negative Capability: this particular and personal concept consists in the ability to face mystery and doubts in life and to handle the truth that Beauty might reveal.

The bequest of Keats and the importance to preserve the interest on reading his works is due to the fact that he was able to create a brand-new and irreplaceable kind of poetry in the history of Romantic literature and his greatness should be recognized. He surely deserves to live a posthumous life; he has become an immortal poet thanks to his dedication in composing something beautiful, which became his mission. As he himself claimed "if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all"⁷.

⁷ John Keats, *Letter to John Taylor*, February 27th 1818.

Bibliography and Sitography

Primary Sources

De Michelis, Euralio, *Keats*, Roma, Newton Compton, 1973.

Fazi, Elido, *Bright Star*, Roma, Fazi Editore, 2010.

Gillham, David George, *John Keats: Poems of 1820 and The Fall of Hyperion*, London, Collins, 1969.

Keats, John, *Endymion and the Longer Poems*, Garsington, Benediction Classics, 2012.

Keats, John, *Selected Poems*, London, Penguin Group, 2007.

Keats, John, *The Complete Poems of John Keats*, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1994.

Scott, Grant, *Selected Letters of John Keats*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2005.

Tomalin, Claire, *Poems of John Keats*, London, Penguin Group, 2009.

Secondary Sources

Ascani, Massimo, Roma, *Guida del Cimitero Acattolico*, 1956.

Aske, Martin, *Keats and Hellenism*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Bari, Shahidha, *Keats and Philosophy: The Life of Sensations*, New York, Routledge, 2012.

Bennett, Andrew, *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Bertinetti, Roberto, *Un eroe visionario che non fu capito dai contemporanei*, Il Messaggero, 5 Febbraio 2010.

Bickersteth, Geoffrey, *The Poems of Leopardi*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Boccaccio, Giovanni, *Decameron*, ed. M. Marti, Milano, Rizzoli, 2008.

Byron, George Gordon, *Don Juan*, ed. B. Beatty, Kent, Croom Helm, 1985.

Byron, George Gordon, *Lord Byron: Selected Letters and Journals*, ed. L. Marchand, Cambridge, Belknap Press, 1982.

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Engell and J. Bate, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1983.

Coleridge Samuel Taylor, Wordsworth William, *Lyrical Ballads and Other Poems*, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions Limited, 2003.

Colvin, Sidney, *Keats*, London, MacMillan & Co, 1887.

Cox, Jeffrey, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

De Rosa, Gabriele, *Corso di storia dal Rinascimento alla fine dell'Ottocento*, Milano, Minerva Italica, 1997.

Fermanis, Porscha, *John Keats and the Ideas of the Enlightenment*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

Gérard, Albert, *English Romantic Poetry, Ethos, Structure And Symbol In Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley And Keats*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1968.

Gittings, Robert, *Keats, John, : The Living Year. 21 September 1818 to 21 September 1819*, London, Heinemann, 1960.

Gorell Barnes Baron Gorell, Ronald, *John Keats: The Principle of Beauty*, New York, Haskell House Publishers, 1948.

Jackson Bate, Walter, *Keats John*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1963.

Leopardi, Giacomo, *Opere*, Novara, De Agostini, 2013.

Li, Ou, *Keats and the negative capability*, London, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009.

Loreck, Christoph, *Endymion and the "Labyrinthian Path to Eminence in Art"*, Würzburg, Königshausen&Neumann, 2005.

Marinoni Mingazzini Rosa, Salmoiraghi Luciana, *The new mirror of the Times*, Milano, Principato, 1998.

Matthews, Geoffrey, *Keats John, The Critical Heritage*, London, Routledge, 1995.

Matthey, Francois, *The Evolution of Keats's structural imagery*, Bern, Francke, 1974.

Milton, John, *Selected Poems*, London, Penguin Group, 2007.

Minahan, John, *Word like a bell: Keats John, music and the romantic poet*, Kent, Kent State University, 1992.

Motion, Andrew, *Keats*, Gordonsville, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1998.

Portale, Rosario, *Omaggio a Keats e Leopardi, Atti del simposio internazionale in occasione del bicentenario della nascita di Keats John*, Pisa, Istituti Editoriali e Poligrafici Internazionali, 1997.

Ray, Mohit, *The Atlantic Companion to Literature in English*, New Delhi, Atlantic, 2007.

Robinson, Jeffrey, *Reception and Poetics in Keats: 'My Ended Poet'*, London, MacMillan Press, 1998.

Rogers, Neville, *Keats Shelley & Rome*, London, Great Russell Street, 1949.

Ryan Robert, Sharp Ronald, *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*, Amherst, The University of Massachusetts Press, 1998.

Sasso, Giampaolo, *Il segreto di Keats: il fantasma della Belle Dame Sans Merci*, Bologna, Pendragon, 2006.

Shakespeare, William, *Much Ado About Nothing*, Lakewood, Full Measure Press, 2010.

Shelley, Percy Bysshe, *The Major Works*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

Spenser, Edmund, *Faerie Queene*, London, Penguin Group, 2003.

Sperry, Stuart, *Keats The Poet*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1973.

Stillinger, Jack, *Twentieth century interpretations of Keats's Odes*, London, Prentice-Hall International, 1968.

Suddard, Mary, *Keats, Shelley and Shakespeare*, Hamburg, Severus, 2011.

Watkins, Daniel, *Keats's Poetry and the Politics of the Imagination*, London, Associated University Presses, 1989.

Wheatley, Kim, *Romantic Periodicals and Print Culture*, London, Routledge, 2003.

White, Robert, *Keats as a reader of Shakespeare*, London, The Athlone Press, 1987.

Wilde, Oscar, *Tutte le opere*, Roma, Newton Compton, 2011.

Wordsworth, William, *Lyrical Ballads*, Peterborough, Broadview Editions, 2008.

Sitography

<http://www.keats-shelley-house.org>

<http://www.englishhistory.net/keats.html>

<http://www.keats-shelley-house.org/system/images/0000/0466/Yours-ever.jpg?1323279055>

http://i.telegraph.co.uk/multimedia/archive/02703/Elgin-Marbles_2703279b.jpg

<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/12/john-keats-new-life-review>