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MUTABILITY AND IRONY IN THE
POETRY OF JOHN KEATS

by

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I Introductory Comments

Here are the Poems—they will explain themselves as all poems should do without any comment. (John Keats to George and Georgiana Keats, January 2, 1819)

Cleanth Brooks in his discussion of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" has emphasized Keats's use of literary irony.\(^1\) Wit and irony, which essentially derive from a disparity between concept and reality, are basic to Keats's apprehension of life and creation of art. Keats's letters exhibit wit throughout, in unorthodox verbal usages and puns both in playful and more serious contexts, founded on the disparity between expectation and reality or the ideal and the real. In the subsequent discussion I hope to show that Keats's poetry, at its most serious, reflects the same type of irony, wit, and pun directed at the tragic disparities and incongruities of life that is so recurrent in the letters. I intend to expand and extend Brooks' attributing to Keats an effective use of irony in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by demonstrating that irony, created through the employment of wit, indirection, and intentional verbal ambiguity, is characteristic of Keats's greatest poetry.

Earl Wasserman has defined poetic irony as, "that mode of expression which, by departing in opposite directions at the same time, provides for the artistic integration of contrarieties."\(^2\) I consider mutability and its association with time and death to be the persistent concern of Keats's poetry and the odes to be poems that basically deal
with mutability. By tracing Keats's continuing concern with time and death through the earlier poetry, more fully in the great odes, and then thoroughly in "To Autumn," I intend to indicate the central "contrariety" or "disagreeable" which Keats "integrates" through irony and wit; irony results from Keats's persistent artistic attempts to integrate the "contrarieties" of a sincere and philosophical concern with mutability, a basic element of human suffering, with his concern for natural beauty, love, friendship, and pleasure, the essential elements of temporal human happiness.

Because I consider "To Autumn" to be the quintessence of Keats in its verbal facility, imagistic complexity, objectivity, and treatment of mutability; I treat it most extensively in this discussion. Harold Bloom says of the poem:

"To Autumn" is the subtlest and most beautiful of all Keats's odes, and as close to perfection as any shorter poem in the English language. That is of course cliche, but it cannot be demonstrated too often (it is more frequently asserted of the ode than evidenced). The incredible richness of the ode is such that it will sustain many readings, and indeed will demand them. To paraphrase G. Wilson Knight, "To Autumn" is a round solidity casting shadows on the flat surfaces of our criticism; we need as many planes at as many angles as we can get.

In concluding my discussion of Keats's poetry, I examine exhaustively one "plane" of "To Autumn," by "evidencing" imagistically the powerful tragic side of the poem in its treatment of mutability, to demonstrate that the proverbial "serenity" of "To Autumn" indicates, not previous philosophical acceptance or personal reconciliation, but poetic irony: that "To Autumn" "departs in opposite directions at the same time" and "provides for the integration of contrarieties," in this case, an
integration of death and beauty. In many ways the entire discussion of mutability and irony in this paper will be an extended "footnote," or "commentary," on "To Autumn."
NOTES

CHAPTER I


3"Disagreeables" is the word coined by Keats in the letters to indicate the disturbing aspects of reality included in a work of art. To see an example of this usage turn to note 63 of Chapter IV. Hyder Edward Rollins, The Letters of John Keats 1814–1821, I, p. 192. All subsequent references to the letters are to this edition.

II Sufficient to Lift a Little Time from Your Shoulders

It is no matter whether I am right or wrong either one way or another, if there is sufficient to lift a little time from your shoulders. (John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds, February 19, 1818)

In modern existentialism one may discover the reason for the recurrence of mutability as a theme in literature. Existentialism in its philosophy of being and nonbeing has given back to death its important place in the predicament of life. Heidegger in Being and Time locates anxiety in being's response when "face to face" with "the possible impossibility of its existence," or death.\(^1\) Paul Tillich in The Courage to Be asserts that "the fear of death determines the element of anxiety in every fear."\(^2\) "Courage can take the fear produced by a definite object into itself, because this object, however frightful it may be, has a side with which it participates in us and we in it. But this is not so with anxiety, because anxiety has no object, or rather, in a paradoxical phrase, its object is the negation of every object,"\(^3\) or nonbeing. The problem of mutability is inherently related to the anxiety of nonbeing and death not only because change must ultimately culminate in death in our personal histories, but because there can be no change without death. In every change, whether biological or physical, some attributes of the subject must pass from being to nonbeing or we could not recognize a change. But even with this realization we have not reached the full power of mutability or change in their relationship to
death and man's existential fear of death, for we have been talking about change within the usual Aristotelian context of substance and accident since it would be but a small step to assert that the attributes which die are secondary and that the subject that survives the change is primary.\textsuperscript{4} Actually any given reality is only a bundle of attributes, or "events," including the "event" which we chose as subject, the relative importance of which can only be determined by some \textit{a priori} knowledge or by the circular method, employed by Aristotle and the common man oriented to the subject-predicate structure of the Endo-European languages, of simply affirming that those attributes which survive change are the more important. This modern description of "reality" has prompted Bertrand Russell to conclude that the "conception of 'substance,' like that of 'essence,' is a transference to metaphysics of what is only a linguistic convenience" and that "'substance,' in a word, is a metaphysical mistake, due to transference to the world-structure of the structure of sentences composed of a subject and a predicate."\textsuperscript{5} Only when we penetrate the bias of this structure of our language to a realization that the attributes which die in change may be as important as those which survive, can we return to the basic, Heraclitian vision of flux,\textsuperscript{6} the vision which is such a recurrent problem of man, the central problem of all philosophy since the Pre-Socratics. Change or mutability is then not simply the death of attributes but of being itself, recapitulating the source of all anxiety, death or the passing of being into nonbeing.

Analysis is not necessary to such a vision, for the imagination
grasps the death inherent in change and responds to the anxiety produced directly and without prompting in sensitive men. From the reading of Keats's poetry and letters I feel that he was essentially such a man and that it was his vision of death and mutability, as understood above, that formed his most important thematic concern and that the persistence and clarity of this vision associate him with existentialism and modern anxiety. There are obvious objections to such a view of Keats, which are formulated most fully in the critical discussions of Earl Wasserman and Newell Ford. Both critics argue that Keats found an "intimation" of immortality in transcendant vision and correspondingly the significance or "truth" of vision in its "prefiguration" of a potential state such as the after-life. 7

This attitude of Keats about imagination and immortality is expounded most fully in the famous letter to Benjamin Bailey (November 22, 1817) in which Keats asserts:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth—whether it existed before or not—for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty— . . . . The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth. (I, p. 184-185)

Wasserman interprets Keats's "parable" of Adam's dream in the following way:

Now, by making Adam's dream in Eden a parable of the imagination Keats certainly did not mean that we shall know in our mortal careers that our imaginings are true; here we can know only a beauty that must die, but in awakening into the reality to come we shall discover that the extraordinary imaginative insights we experience here will hereafter be experienced under the conditions of immortality. Our earthly visions of an Eve, who is our
heart's desire, the essence of all the beauty that earth or heaven can bestow or our imaginations fashion, will hereafter be enjoyed as immutable realities. But Keats felt a conviction that this heaven of immortal passion can be entered only through an intensity of experience in this life, only by a mystic entrance into the essence of that beauty which here fades; for we shall each be allotted an immortality of that degree of passion that our earthly careers have attained.8

The letter continues:

O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts! It is 'a Vision in the form of Youth' a Shadow of reality to come—and this consideration has further convinced me for it has come as auxiliary to another favorite Speculation of mine, that we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated—And yet such a fate can only befall those who delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after Truth—Adam's dream will do here and seems to be a conviction that Imagination and its empyreal reflection is the same as the simple imaginative Mind may have its rewards in the repetition of its own silent Working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness—to compare great things with small—have you never by being surprised with an old Melody—in a delicious place—by a delicious voice, felt over again your very speculations and surmises at the time it first operated on your soul—do you not remember forming to yourself the singer's face more beautiful than it was possible and yet with the elevation of the Moment you did not think so—that prototype must be here after—that delicious face you will see—What a time!

Wasserman concludes that Keats has in this letter found the value for "sensations" and vision, for:

A life of sensations provides us with experiences of beauty that we shall later enjoy under those immortal conditions that Keats called 'truth'; it foreshadows in the transitory the 'reality' to come. Therefore, if we could, by a supernal power, rise to perceive the empyreal reflection of what our merely human imaginations create for us, we would be perceiving the spiritual repetition of our human intensities, and hence our immortal existence.9

Ford makes the prefigurative truth of vision, as described in this letter to Bailey, the important "truth" for an understanding of Keats's problematic equation of truth and beauty expressed in the "Ode on a Grecian
The intention of this writer is to agree that Keats placed great emphasis on vision as a prefiguration of an after life, without giving up the contention that he had basically the powerful existential vision of change, mutability, and death which produced the anxiety of the existential view. Ford himself offers the solution to this apparent contradiction in his concluding discussion of what he calls the non-prefigurative imagination. Ford concludes that: "If the days of Keats's life were totaled and multiplied by the hours and minutes in them, the minutes dedicated to the prefigurative attitude would seem few in proportion. Measured by fervor and intensity, the Hesperidean or Elysian strain is vivid and cardinal, but measured by duration, it yields in significance to other characteristics of Keats's mental life."

Modern Existentialists are generally contemptuous of the possibility of the belief in immortality mitigating the anxiety caused by death and nonbeing. Paul Tillich sums up this attitude: "The unsophisticated mind knows instinctively what sophisticated ontology formulates: that reality has the basic structure of self-world correlation and that with the disappearance of the one side the world, the other side, the self, also disappears, and what remains is their common ground but not their structural correlation." But perhaps it might be adequate and more appropriate to simply indicate, that the belief in immortality has no validity for existential "despair," the ultimate anxiety about death, where it is usually assumed to have efficacy, but that it,
in a contrary fashion, occurs at moments of intense joy and transcendant vision, where it would seem to have less appropriateness and less usefulness. The belief in immortality is, even for the orthodox, sporadic and tends to dissipate when it is most needed. Ford seems to be suggesting such a vacillating condition of belief in his final discussion of the relation of Keats's non-figurative imagination to his figurative imagination;¹³ Ford draws a picture of Keats's thought and its relation to his poetry which is consonant with the more ambivalent, ironical, and sceptical Keats with which I deal later:

Consistent to the last, though sometimes puzzling in its language, Keats's view of non-figurative truth leans toward the relativistic, "A proverb is no proverb to you till your life has illustrated it." He might as easily have written: A truth is not truth to you, a speculation is no speculation, a verisimilitude is no verisimilitude, till your life has illustrated it." And once having illustrated it, life goes on, he would say, to modify it by innumerable other truths thronging the mind, passing through its thoroughfare, pausing sometimes until motion seems arrested and belief appears fixed, yet destined always to resume their onward movement, molding and remolding the mind-mirror of the poet, shaping and reshaping his view of the world, but never immobilizing their image. The life of the universe would pass through such a mind, as it did through Shakespeare's. And along with the life, the judgements and situations and times, from Socrates and Jesus to Cortez and Napoleon, from Achilles and Troilus to Juliet and Iago, from the "speculations of Satan in the serpent prison" to the hopes, the dejection, and "favorite speculations" of Endymion, of Oceanus, Saturn, Porphyro, Lycius, and Moneta. Such was Keats's ideal, such was his conception of the poet who would become a "philosopher."¹⁴

The prefiguration of immortality in vision was only "a favorite speculation," a tentative and temporary faith, not a settled and persistent creed; as Ford states the situation:

At times, under the spell of an ardent and credent imagination, Keats had hypostatized a wish and called it "truth," prefigurative truth. But the illusion never persisted for long. The
world of immediate reality flowed in again, and with it the relativistic attitude to experience and judgement, in which the illusion of prefigurative truth was seen, perhaps not certainly as an illusion, but as "a favorite speculation," a versimilitude co-existing with "half-knowledge." Never could mortal man attain to absolute knowledge, but he could, Keats learned as he grew in wisdom, increase his knowledge and experience enlarge the disinterestedness of his mind, deepen his comprehension of the human scene, and thus diminish gradually the "erroneousness" of his perceptions, making them more worthy to be called "truths" and "philosophy." 15

Keats's tentative faith in the power of his vision to predict some more permanent place of intensity and beauty is not incompatible with existential anxiety about the immediate presence of mutability which qualifies these periods of vision and which enters into the poet's attempts to overcome mutability and death through the intensity, vision, and beauty of poetry.

Keats and the Romantics in general have been accused of "benevolism" and a too facile belief in "perfectibility"; an attitude toward man's condition which may be generally labeled as Pelagianism, a "brand" of Pelagianism inherited from the late eighteenth century. It is becoming more and more evident that the great Romantics did, however, possess what William Butler Yeats has called the vision of evil. Keats had a partial vision of evil as inherent in existence, and this vision was primarily derived from his knowledge of the intricate permeation of all life and pleasure by mutability. Modern philosophical Existentialism, probably partially as a response to a somewhat Pelagian world has emphasized the permeation of mutability and death in all life, as a part of the cause of life being intrinsically painful, and, at times, "absurd."

"Nonbeing is omnipresent and produces anxiety even where an immediate
threat of death is absent. It stands behind the experience that we are driven together with everything else from the past toward the future without a moment of time which does not vanish immediately. "16 Existentialism has given back to death and mutability, while explaining their power, their central place in the predicament of life.

Since the fear of death and concern with mutability are now seen as natural to a thinking, feeling man, and because direct contact with concrete experience encourages a concern with the flux of reality, whereas abstraction and thought are usually ways of escaping or rationalizing the problem of mutability, Keats's concern with mutability can now be seen as healthy and realistic, not as morbid, sentimental, or "literary." Mutability takes its power from nonbeing and death, our own death. All periods of termination: daily, seasonal, or personal reinforce our concern with mutability; mutability is very pervasive in life because it related to what we fear and cannot objectify, nonbeing, and the personal reference to our own nonbeing is constantly being reinforced in the external world of flux and dissolution. Figures for mutability are references to death, loss, scarcity, weakness, thinness, ephemeralness, time, dissolution, " endings," and terminal periods. Figures with these characteristics attempt to direct the mind back to the emotional content behind abstraction, rather than to abstracted reflection on mutability as a purely philosophical or literary concept.

F. R. Leavis has characterized Keats's concern with transience as, "the devotion to exquisite passion and finest senses, the religious function of this aestheticsm and the cherished pang of transience."17
David Perkins more accurately describes Keats's continuing concern with this theme as derived from concrete reality, sincere, and personally painful; while, at the same time, being applicable to the general human predicament:

As our discussion has implied, what Keats conceived as an ideal—an endless sharing in some concrete fulfillment—was not simply an arbitrary projection of his own wishes without any basis in experience. Instead we may regard it as the lengthened shadow of a common psychological reaction—a reaction which helps to explain why Keats insisted so strongly that one can become "free of space" only by turning to the concrete. For at the apex of intense experience one is often conscious only of what is being experienced, and the moment seems not immortal or everlasting perhaps, but timeless. Thus a paradox is involved. The desire is to get outside of time, but ultimately the only satisfaction of this desire which is at all possible derives from the momentary sense of timelessness arising during intense experience in time. 18

Both Keats's desire to escape from time and his attempted resolutions of this problem are not only personal or only literary, but are "the lengthened shadow of a common psychological experience." Perkins has been of crucial importance in seeing Keats's basic thematic content as a concern with mutability and its resolution in terms of the aesthetic moment and the processes of the external natural world, the subject of most of Keats's poetic comment on flux.

Cleanth Brooks heightens and intensifies the nature in which Keats saw the problem of mutability by adding the problem of estrangement from the main sources from which Keats would derive resolution of this problem, art and nature. Art is separated from the intensity and problems of human life, and the immersion in nature implies a termination of the consciousness which is essential to the human situation;
as Tillich says, "Man has no place of pure objectivity above finitude and estrangement" from which "in knowledge and life" to transcend "the finitude, the estrangement and the ambiguities of human life":19

Both nature and art, as Keats contemplates them in the odes, insist upon the human predicament. Man is involved in nature and yet through his consciousness transcends nature. He cannot accept birth and death as inseparable parts of a total process without being reminded that he too is involved in the process, his very organs of perception and awareness "fastened to a dying animal," and if he would fix his vision of totality beyond the flux of change, it is only by some act as that of freezing it in cold marble, itself lifeless. To immerse oneself in the flux of change is to forfeit knowledge of it. Immersion in nature is a dissolution of the self which ends in lack of consciousness: "To thy high requiem become a sod." To detach oneself from the process in pure contemplation ends in the contemplation of changeless but lifeless stone.20

Earl Wasserman also has placed mutability and death at the center of Keats's consciousness, asserting that in the intervals between imaginative experience, there is "for Keats and Shelley only the unreality of flux and mutability."21 This concern with the problem of transience for Keats is personal and particular, not literary or abstract, and is particularly derived from the human as much as, or more than, from external nature or traditional thought; and ultimately most abstract resolutions fail a concern of this nature, even those abstracted from experience by the individual, being ultimately matters of faith, rather than matters of compelling personal reality.

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Keats's letters indicate that a personal concern with dissolution precedes a traditional or intellectual concern; that his concern is existential and therefore affects the individual powerfully. Keats's
letters are, first and last, documents of friendship, friendship which forms a very important background for his poetry and its theme of mutability. "Reality," a difficult word and concept in Keats's letters and in his poetry—and a word basic to considerations of his poetic concern with "beauty and truth"—is closely associated with the friendship discussed in the letters. Keats wrote to Reynolds (May 3, 1818): "I like to say my lessons to one who will endure my tediousness for my own sake—After all there is certainly something real in the World—Moore's present to Hazlitt is real—I like that Moore, and am glad I saw him at the Theatre just before I left Town. Tom has spit a leetle blood this afternoon, and that is rather a damper—But I know—the truth is there is something real in the world" (I, p. 282). Keats's correspondence recurrently indicates a "gordian complication of feelings" in the association of friendship, health, sickness, climate, weather, death, and mutability. Keats wrote to Reynolds of his affection for his new sister-in-law, Georgiana Keats, making the association of friendship, reality, and health: "I have felt the pleasure of loving a sister in Law. I did not think it possible to become so much attached in so short a time—Things like these, and they are real have made me resolve to have a care of my health—you must be as careful" (I, p. 325).

Sickness and death seem to haunt Keats's life and mind. Keats's family and friends and then he himself were continually seriously, if not terminally, ill throughout most of his career. John Hamilton Reynolds, one of Keats's close circle of friends, was seriously ill through most of Keats's creative career. Keats wrote to Haydon: "I was
at Reynolds's when he received your Letter and am therefore up to Probabilities—The fact is Reynolds is very unwell—he has all kinds of distressing Symptoms, and I am on this account rather glad that he has not spare time for one of our right Sort meetings—he would go to far for his health" (I, p. 148). Reynolds's illness was associated in Keats's mind with Tom's fatal illness. He wrote to James Rice, another of Keats's group of friends, who was taking care of Reynolds in his illness as Keats was taking care of his brother: "I hope you are showing poor Reynolds the way to get well—send me a good account of him and if I can I'll send you one of Tom—Oh! for a day and all well" (I, p. 256). He wrote to John Taylor, another of his friends, "My Brother Tom is getting better and I hope I shall see both him and Reynolds well before I retire from the world" (I, p. 271).

Early in his career Keats had a tendency to warn his friends about their health, a tendency which became more pronounced as his own illness developed later. Even Benjamin Bailey, Keats's steady, hearty, and industrious companion came in for such advice: "But do not sacrifice your health to Books do take it kindly and not so voraciously" (I, p. 271). And then three weeks later he warns Bailey again, "I am afraid your health will suffer from over study before your examination" (I, p. 174). Health became basic to Keats's view of life, pleasure, and happiness. He asserts the importance of health in two letters to his sister, Fanny. He wrote to her in 1819, "We all live one day like the other as well as you do—the only difference is being sick and well" (II, p. 46), and again in 1820, "Be above all things careful of your
health which is the corner stone of all pleasure" (II, p. 306). Keats realized early in life that the "spirit's" happiness, "fastened to a dying animal," is dependent on the health of the body; which is in turn dependent on all the contingencies to which "flesh is heir."

Keats's early poetry, particularly that which is epistolary, is often bound up in intent and purpose with the illness and suffering of his identifiable audience. He wrote a poem to Reynolds in his illness, in which is included the lines, "O Phoebus that I had thy sacred word to show this castle in fair dreaming wise/ Unto my friend, while sick and ill he lies" (I, p. 260). He introduces a poem to Reynolds, indicating the same purpose for his poetry that he reasserts in his last discussion of the purposes of poetry in "The Fall of Hyperion," "I shall be bound up with you in the shadows of mind, as we are in our matters of human life--Perhaps a Stanza or two will not be too foreign to your Sickness" (I, p. 27). 23 In his letters Keats makes a striking association of illness with moral concerns and human suffering--with general, related human suffering (with what might be considered, to use traditional terms, a more modern and humane doctrine of "original sin" and "corporate guilt"). He implies in a letter to Bailey that the good must suffer, and he associates this suffering with physical health. The spirit effects the body as the body's health must effect the spirit; he writes, "Health and Spirits can only belong unalloyed to the selfish man--the Man who thinks much of his fellows can never be in Spirits--when I am not suffering for vicious heartlessness I am the greater part of the week in spirits" (I, p. 175). Keats's final comment on the significance of
health and sickness and their relationship to his own life was definitive and associated these concerns with the loss of precious life-time, with mutability. In a very late letter to Fanny Brawne he wrote, "I have never known an Unalloy'd Happiness for many days together: the death or sickness of some one has always spoilt my hours" (II, p. 123).

Climate, weather, and temperature were intricately involved in Keats's concern with friends, health, sickness, death, and mutability. Cold and sickness, bad weather and loneliness (the absence of loved ones) form a set pattern of relationships in the letters. He wrote to Bailey of Reynolds, "Yesterday Morning while I was a Brown's in came Reynolds—he was pretty bobbish we had a pleasant day—but he would walk home at night that cursed cold distance" (I, p. 169). He repeatedly relates his personal "spirits" to the conditions of external nature in his long letters to his brother George and his sister-in-law in America. He admits, "I know not what I should do without a Sunshiny morning now and then—it clears up one's spirits" (II, p. 15). He expresses his loss at the absence of his brother and sister-in-law, both of whom were very important to him, in references to the weather: "I am not sure how I should endure loneliness, and bad weather at the same time; it is beautiful weather now." The loss of personal friendship and the recapitulation of this loss in the failure of external nature is unbearable to Keats. He repeats this claim to the George Keats in another letter in almost the same words: "I am not sure how I should endure loneliness, and bad weather at the same time" (II, p. 209). Keats equated bad weather with illness and the absence and loss of
companions. Each loss of friends is an analogue to the loss of all friends in death, when death is seen in ontic and spiritually unmitigated honesty. This quality of death is what Tillich emphasizes when he considers death as the irremediable cessation of the basic "structural correlation" of "self-world" which results from the "disappearance" of the world in death. The separation of the world from the self, rather than the more common view of death as the separation of the self from the world, is the aspect of death emphasized by Keats himself when nearing death: "I wish for death every day and night to deliver me from these pains, and then I will death away, for death would destroy even those pains which are better than nothing. Land and Sea, weakness and decline are great separators, but death is the great divorcer for ever. When the pang of this thought has passed through my mind, I may say the bitterness of death is passed" (II, p. 345). The bitterness of death is a result of its "divorcing" us from the world. This is the pain even greater than the pain of suffering; the pain to which, in Keats words, the pain of suffering can be preferred. Each individual loss of friends suggests this archetypal loss of the "world," the "great divorce" from the community of men, the "great separation" from all friends. Thus, illness and bad weather become symbols of mutability and nonbeing.

Keats directly associated, on the other hand, good weather with invention and poetic creation. He wrote to his sister in the Fall of 1819, "The delightful Weather we have had for two Months is the highest gratification I could receive—no chill'd rednoses—no shivering—but
fair atmosphere to think in . . . Still I enjoy the Weather I adore fine Weather as the greatest blessing I can have" (I, p. 149). He wrote to Reynolds earlier, "say we shall now have a Month of seasonable Weather, warm, witty, and full of invention" (I, p. 246). Thus, Keats's concern with weather was both positive and negative, involving "contrarities," contrasts, and oppositions; it was associated with friendship, poetic creation, health, and poetry, but also with illness, loss, and death. In both of these contexts, this concern with the conditions of external nature often was expressed humorously and ironically in order to indicate the contrasts and ambivalence. Keats writes to Fanny in a light tone of the weather: "O there is nothing like fine weather, and health, and Books, and a fine country, and contented Mind, and Diligent—habit of reading and thinking, and an amulet against the ennui—and, please heaven, a little claret-wine cool out of a cellar a mile deep . . . two or three sensible people to chat with; two or three numskulls to argue with—instead of using dumb bells on a rainy day" (II, p. 56). But we sense the dissatisfaction with the inadequacies of the world in his ironical and fine comments on the Devonshire weather directed to his friend Reynolds:

I regret to see your confounded Rheumatism keeps you in Little Britain where I am sure the air is too confined—Devonshire continues rainy. As the drops beat against the window, they give me the same sensation as a quart of cold water offered to revive a half drowned devil—No feel of the clouds dropping fatness; but as if the roots of Earth were rotten cold and dead [canceled] drench'd. (I, p. 267)

The relationship of the heavens and the earth are ironically not Romantic here. One of Keats's comments about the weather, climate, and
conditions of England seems biographically prophetic, and interestingly antithetical to "To Autumn" in its mention of "Mists" and in its humorous indictment of English weather in relation to that of Italy (since "To Autumn" is conventionally related to Keats's usual "patriotism" to the climate, land, and language of England). He exclaims to Reynolds in a letter, "Who would live in the region of Mists, Game laws, indemnity Bills, and etc. when there is such a place as Italy?" 26

Keats's interest in mutability did not start with the external world of seeming recurrence but with a personal involvement with people in their illness and absence, and with human injustice and suffering; and when he moved to external nature he found as many analogues for, and causes of, illness, suffering, and loss as he did assurances of continuance. Poetry, friendship, health, and climate formed a related "complication" of "contrarieties" in Keats's letters—which, although they include the great comments on aesthetic theory and "philosophy," record more often the author's deep relationships with his friends and family, than they do "solipsistic" contemplation and "well considered" abstract philosophy and aesthetic theorizing. Even in the letters which record Keats's most abstract "speculations" on "philosophy" and poetry, we consistently feel the direction toward a particular audience or "receptor" with its own problems conditioning the emphasis, development, and method of the "speculation." Such a claim merely puts in context the conventional assertion that Keats was a poet of the personal, human, and concrete, rather than of the abstract and external; an assertion that must place the poet directly in contact with the problem of mutability, for
this is an existential problem.

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Robert Wooster Stallman, who has written a study dealing exclusively with Keats's use of time, has emphasized the importance of time for all critical considerations of Keats's poetry (and its importance to all "tragic" thought and to "culture"):

The soul of a Keats poem is intelligible only by having regard to the poet's conception of time. Time is Keats' cardinal theme, figuring either as the total intention of his poems or as the obsessive motif of his minute particulars. His basic motivating intention, as disclosed within the frame-work of his poems, was to arrest in formal orders of meaning this fundamental of philosophic thought. It is time that is tragic.27

Stallman emphasizes the fact that time was the "enemy" for Keats; that it was the problem with which his poetry struggled: "Everywhere in his poetry, not only in the later poems expressing his premonition of death, but equally in the earlier ones, like "On Death" (1814) or "When I Have Fears" (1818), time was the enemy. That was his greatest torture; his profound and painful consciousness of time's uniquely occurring oneness and irreversibility. . . . The . . . contradiction . . . stated in the sonnet to Rice ("O That a Week Could Be an Age"): "So could we live long life in little space/ So time itself would be annihilate."28 Jack Stillinger, in the introduction to his recent anthology of Keats criticism, flatly asserts that Keats's "significant poems center on a single basic problem, the mutability inherent in nature and human life."29 As early as "Sleep and Poetry" Keats had expressed the basic problem of life in terms of mutability, time and transience:
Stop and consider! life is but a day;  
A fragile dew-drop on its perilous way  
From a tree's summit; a poor Indian's sleep  
While his boat hastens to the monstrous steep  
Of Montmorenci.30

Life itself is essentially transient, permeated by mutability.

Keats's developing technical, linguistic, and poetic methods, as established by Walter Jackson Bate, are basically ways of dealing with and manipulating time. Bate establishes that Keats's choice of words in the later poems, particularly the odes, is conditioned by a search for words to control the tempo of the poetic line: "The shortness of words in the odes, like the prevalence of words of native origin, is symptomatic of Keats's fondness and instinctive reaching for words of greater consonantal strength, which necessitate more time in the pronunciation—words such as 'glut,' 'grape,' 'tight-rooted,' and 'deep-delved.'"31 Even certain patterns and prevalences of consonants are chosen because of their retardation of time in prosody, such as "stronger varieties of consonants, particularly the bi-labials, m, b, and p, which, as English prosodists have noted for almost two centuries often tend to enrich euphony and retard the line tempo."32

Keats's preference for the past participle as epithet is aptly explained by Bate as an attempt to hold time and the flux of reality in stasis. Keats destroys the distinction of primary and secondary attributes of Aristotelian substance and accident by his constant use of the past participles: "Keats had learned before writing 'Hyperion' that by using past participles as epithets he could secure an energy momentarily caught at rest and condensed and impressed within an otherwise static
image, and, by such a concentration of action he effected a noticeable gain in strength and intensity." Bate implies, in his discussion of the revisions of "The Eve of St. Agnes," that the control of time, mutability, and flux is at the center of the concrete and static "identity" given to particularly reality by the past participle:

The connotation of the epithet is indelibly stamped into the substantive in the transition from "o'er the silent carpet" (XXVIII, 8) to "over the hush'd carpet," and in the felicitous replacement of "where the fading moon" (XXIX, 1) with "where the faded moon." And in the alteration finally, of "bosom jewels" (XXVI, 3) to "warmed jewels," the jewels are not in the process of being warmed, neither is warmth made a secondary quality through the use of the mere adjective "warm"; warmth, rather, has been concentrated within them until they are indeed weighted with this intensity of energy and this peculiarity of identity rendered static and concrete.94

Francis Berry has indicated that Keats's use of verbs, especially in the odes, creates "a world of Tense, one where Youth, Beauty, and Love are continually slipping from a Present reality (of a kind) into the reality (of a kind) of the past." Berry contends that Keats creates a new tense, the "Intense Present," a tense of a new mood somewhere between the timeless subjunctive and the time-bound indicative. He uses the "Nightingale" as his example: "Yet I name the Nightingale's tense the Intense Present, a Tense neither of the Indicative nor Subjunctive but of a third Mood, because, inter alia, the Indicative is, if anything is, time-bound, and its Present becomes past or Perfect, while—on the contrary—as we know from a later stanza in this Ode, where we are told: "'The voice I hear this passing night was heard/ In ancient days by emperor and clown;' this bird's singing has always been 'present.'"36
Hubert Heinen has made time the central concept in his study of Keats. He has made a thorough study of an important treatment in Keats's poetry, the characteristic treatment of time that Walter Jackson Bate has called "stationing," and which he calls "interwoven time." Heinen describes Keats's "interwoven time" as the attempt to hold the past and the future in the present; he says, "when the past becomes present, when the future is mirrored in present time, when past and future are no longer held separate, one has what is here termed 'interwoven time' . . . Keats interwove time in his poetry through the use of anticipation and simultaneity, both with regard to grammar and with regard to the seasons."

"Stationing" or "interwoven time" results from Keats's struggles to include both past and future in the present; thus making the present concrete moment include all time, and thereby become timeless, overcoming mutability. David Perkins is speaking of such "stationing" or "interwoven time" when he refers to the "process" which Keats found in Shakespeare's poetry. He notes that "in speaking of the 'Sonnets,' Keats remarks that 'they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally' and quotes four lines:

When lofty trees I see barren of leaves
Which erst from heat did canopy the herd,
And summer's green all girded up in sheaves,
Borne on the bier with white and bristly beard.

It is, of course, not possible to say with certainty just which of the many 'fine things' in these lines Keats had in mind, but what seems to be most distinctive in them, and might therefore have especially led Keats to quote them, is the condensed expression of the entire life of
the trees or the corn as a process occurring through time."\(^{39}\)

The seasons are instrumental in "stationing" or "interwoven time" because they possess a distinctness in their characteristics and significance, yet each season possesses indications of both the preceding and subsequent season. In "Fancy," a very important poem for deriving Keats's concept of the essential function of the poetic imagination, one finds centrally this sense of "interwoven time" or "stationing," made specific and drawn out in terms of the seasons and the powers of the poetic "fancy":

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,
Blushing through the mist and dew,
Cloys with tasting: What do then?
Sit thee by the ingle, when
The sear faggot blazing bright,
Spirit of a winter's night;
When the soundless earth is muffled,
And the caked snow is shuffled
From the ploughboy's heavy shoon;
When the Night doth meet the Noon
In a dark conspiracy
To banish Even from her sky.
Sit thee there, and send abroad,
With a mind self-overaw'd,
Fancy, high-commission'd:—send her!
She has vassals to attend her:
She will bring, in spite of frost,
 Beauties that the earth hath lost;
 She will bring thee, all together,
All delights of summer weather;
All the buds and bells of May,
From dewy sward or thorny spray;
All the heaped Autumn's wealth,
With a still, mysterious stealth:
She will mix these pleasures up
Like three fit wines in a cup,
And thou shalt quaff it:—thou shalt hear
Distant harvest-carols clear;
Rustle of the reaped corn;
Sweet birds antheming the morn:
And, in the same moment—hark!
'Tis the early April lark,
Or the Rooks, with busy caw,
Foraging for sticks and straw.
Thou shalt, at one glance, behold
The daisy and the marigold;
White-plum'd lillies, and the first
Hedge-grown primrose that hath burst;
Shaded hyacinth, alway
Sapphire queen of the mid-May;
And every leaf, and every flower
Pearled with the self-same shower.
Thou shalt see the field-mouse peep
Meagre from its celled sleep;
And the snake all winter-thin
Cast on sunny band its skin;
Freckled nest-eggs thou shalt see
Hatching in the hawthorn-tree,
When the hen-bird's wing doth rest
Quiet on her mossy nest;
Then the hurry and alarm
When the bee-hive casts its swarm;
Acorns ripe down-patterning,
While the autumn breezes sing. (pp. 213-214, lines 10-66)\(^40\)

This entire poetic passage is an extended description of stationing or interwoven time, indicating that time is the subject with which the "fancy," the poetic imagination, deals and that mutability is what it must overcome.

The seasons are very important natural symbols of this struggle of Keats to control time and mutability, to hold past and future in the present concrete and particular instant, emphasized by Perkins, Bate, and Heinen. "Four Seasons" is, of course, the most complete treatment of what Perkins has called the ability of Keats to see in nature an analogue for human life and to see the "seasonableness" of this life, rather than its mutability, as derived from this analogue:
Four seasons fill the measure of the year;
    There are four seasons in the mind of man:
He has his lusty Spring, when fancy clear
    Takes in all beauty with an easy span:
He has his Summer, when luxuriously
    Spring's honey'd cud of youthful thought he loves
To ruminate, and by such dreaming high
    Is nearest unto heaven: quiet coves
His soul has in its Autumn, when his wings
    He furleth close; contented so to look
On mists in idleness—to let fair things
    Pass by unheeded as a threshold brook.
He has his Winter too of pale misfeature,
    Or else he would forego his mortal nature. (p. 423)

For Keats as for most of the Romantics external nature is consistently
seen as a reflection of man's internal "life." Keats uses "seasonable-
ness," the emotional appropriateness and necessity of the "seasons" of
nature, as a foil to the personal problem of mutability and flux. The
relationship of external nature to the internal world of man's suffering
does, at times, make it possible for him to say, "nor much it grieves/
To die, when summer dies on the cold sward" (Endymion, p. 155, lines
35-36).

Heinen finds in "Isabella" one of the finer treatments of the
functioning of the seasons and nature with mutability, which he con-
siders an example of "interwoven time." He says that for Keats, "The
seasons are also important as heralds of each other. This follows, of
course, from their invariable sequence . . . Keats's description of the
anticipation of winter by fall or of summer by spring is far more an
active treatment of the theme than a passive recognition of their in-
evitable progression:

    In the mid days of autumn, on their eyes
    The breath of Winter comes from far away,
And the sick west continually bereaves
Of some gold tinge, and plays a roundelay
Of death among the bushes and the leaves,
To make all bare before he dares to stray

Heinen contends that the "important word here is 'roundelay,' with its primary meaning of song or poem. The very structure of such a poem ... insists on circular repetition."\(^1\) Although the word "roundelay" suggests an attempt at interwoven time or stationing, the phrases "sick west," "continually bereaves," and "death among the bushes and the leaves" contain "important" words also, words which suggest the complication of seasonal changes, sickness, loss, and death, which is so recurrent in the letters.

Stallman, who like Heinen has written an article dealing specifically with time in Keats's poetry, emphasizes the extreme "point consciousness" of Keats's sense of time rather than his resolutions of the passage of time through the myths of continuance in nature. Stallman defines Keats as the "apollinian soul," which he describes as, "Euclidean and point-formed ... somatic, conceiving of its inner world plastically exhausting itself in the completeness of the momentary sense-present."\(^2\) Stallman's emphasis on the "momentary sense-present" is more consonant with my argument in indicating the place from which Keats starts in his concern with the problem of mutability than is the emphasis on stationing, or interwoven time; making this concern tragic, for the momentary sense-present is inherently transient. Even though Keats was at times capable of producing stationing, an effective reconciliation of the passage of time, the past and future, in the intensity of his poetic
experience of the present; no one ever saw more clearly than did Keats the tragedy of time; that each moment of human happiness is fleeting; that "one moment's pleasure/ In one moment flies" and the "passion's treasure/ in one moment dies" (p. 428, lines 13-16). He saw the lack of steadfastness of human life in relation to but, at times, distinct from, the more permanent objects of external nature.

The poignancy of such disparity is beautifully expressed in "Bright Star," where the poet would be not "stedfast" as the star, "in lone splendour hung aloft the night," performing its "religious" and detached "overseeing" of the functions of the earth below, but rather would be,

... 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. (p. 372, lines 9-14)

Ford discusses the tragic "dualism" formed by the natural object and the "warm and intimate" "breast of a loved one": "The star of the poem is an Eremite, ascetically remote, except in its beauty, from Venus the 'amorous glow-worm of the sky' ("Ode to Psyche," 1.27), and similarly remote from the impassioned 'throbbing star' to which Porphyro is likened in 'The Eve of St. Agnes' (XXXVI),"^3 and from, I might add, the "beauteous star," into which Apollo would "flit" in Hyperion "And make its silvery splendour pant with bliss," (p. 242, lines 101-102) and the "Star of high promise!" whose beam "shall shine through ages strong/ To ripest times a light" (The Letters, p. 17). The star is not an
example of the possible merger of the processes of amorous life, ("panting" and "throb- 
ing") with a beautiful natural object nor associated with 
"ripening" or "progress" in time. The star is as Ford says, "cold and 
inhuman, at once naturalistic and Christian (nature's . . . Eremite); 
the breast of a loved one is warm and intimate."44

In a crucial discussion in The Prefigurative Imagination Ford 
concludes that, "the imaginative whole of the poem, 'Bright Star,' is 
built upon a duality, a duality which is forever impossible of dissolu-
tion. There is no ecstatic nightingale's song or visionary Arcadian urn 
to dissolve the poet's awareness of this duality. His deepest intention 
is to present the irony forever irreconcilable of desire illimitable and 
the reachless object of desire. . . . Surely it is the supreme irony, 
and irony of which Keats was fully conscious, that his sonnet, while it 
imaginatively Christianizes the physical universe, takes the form of a 
futile prayer to the fancied mercy of the indifferent universe." "It is 
only this mind which, by a conscious fiction, enables the nonhuman uni-
verse to suspend its eternal indifference and momentarily to look with 
interest on the human drama."45

Keats seems to have felt particularly strongly the difficulty of 
dealing with the problem of mutability, time, death, and nonbeing which 
has been stressed by modern Existentialism in that we lack an object 
with which to deal in our fear of nonbeing. A problem of objectifica-
tion such as this places a burden on and, possibly, indicates a purpose 
for artistic expression. T. S. Eliot in his aesthetic theory of the 
"objective correlative" has attempted to indicate that a beneficial, or
therapeutic, objectification is one of the essential "ethical" or "moral" purposes of art. In "Drear-nighted December," Keats expresses the helplessness of the lack of an objective correlative when dealing with mutability:

But were there ever any
Writh'd not of passed joy?
The feel of not to feel it,
When there is none to heal it,
Nor numbed sense to steel it,
Was never said in rhyme. (p. 437, III, lines 3-8)

This expression of the existential "anxiety" elicited by the "feel of not to feel it," elicited by transience, mutability, nonbeing, and death, if read closely or analyzed imagistically, reveals the same "gordian complication" of time, death, health, weather, and temperature with mutability which is found in the letters; "writh'd," "heal," and the "anaesthetic" physiological quality of "numbed sense" indicate this recurrent "complication of feelings."

Keats's early poetry shows even more directly, friendship, the controlling element of this "complication," functioning as an important source of Keats's content and imagery in association with health, happiness, and mutability. The correlation of time and friendship is clear in Keats's poem to John Hamilton Reynolds, mentioned above, "O That a Week Could Be an Age":

O that a week could be an age, and we
   Felt parting and warm meeting every week,
Then one poor year a thousand years would be,
   The flush of welcome ever on the cheek:
So could we live long life in little space,
   So time itself would be annihilate
So a day's journey in oblivious haze
   To serve our joys would lengthen and dilate.
O to arrive each Monday morn from Ind!
To land each Tuesday from the rich Levant!
In little time a host of joys to bind,
And keep our souls in one eternal pant!
This morn, my friend, and yester-evening taught
Me how to harbour such a happy thought. (p. 367)

In an epistolary poem to Charles Cowden Clarke, another of Keats's close circle of friends, Keats deals with the poignancy of the passage of time, in association with his friendship for Clarke and his desire to write lines "free and clear" to his friend:

Or ruffles all the surface of the lake
In strivings from its crystal face to take
Some diamond water drops, and them to treasure
In milky nest, and sip them off at leisure.
But not a moment can he there insure them,
Nor to such downy rest can he allure them;
For down they rush as though they would be free,
And drop like hours into eternity.
Just like that bird am I in loss of time,
Whene'er I venture on the stream of rhyme;
With shatter'd boat, oar snapt, and canvass rent
I slowly sail, scarce knowing my intent;
Still scooping up the water with my fingers,
In which a trembling diamond never lingers.
By this, friend Charles, you may full plainly see
Why I have never penn'd a line to thee:
Because my thoughts were never free, and clear, (p. 29, lines 6-22)

The recurrence of the theme of friendship in Keats's poetry has not been emphasized adequately in the criticism of this poetry; this theme is comparable to the more often discussed themes such as romantic love, natural beauty, myth, and art. Keats places friendship directly below love, his highest value, in the hierarchy of values in "Endymion":

. . . the crown of these
Is made of love and friendship, and sits high
Upon the forehead of humanity.
All its more ponderous and bulky worth
Is friendship, whence there ever issues forth
A steady splendour; (p. 75, lines 800-805)
and possibly suggests some more permanent and dependable, "ponderous and bulky worth" for friendship, as compared with love which "hangs by" an "unseen film" and which, when "thrown in our eyes," causes us to "start and fret" (p. 75, lines 806-809).

Friendship was an important source of Keats's poetry and his characteristic grasp on the concrete and the real. He associated it with the creation of poetry. In "Sleep and Poetry," friendship is made the source of facility in poetic creation; Keats could hardly pay it a greater compliment:

... brotherhood,
And friendliness the nurse of mutual good.
The hearty grasp that sends a pleasant sonnet
Into the brain ere one can think upon it: (p. 50, lines 318-321)

Actually, in one of his final judgements on the importance of companionship, friendship, or brotherhood—in a letter to his sister-in-law, Georgiana Keats—Keats seems to have placed friendship over the "Realms of verse," putting this value about as high as a value could aspire for Keats. He wrote to his sister-in-law, Georgiana Keats:

Imagine not that greatest mastery
And kingdom over all the Realms of verse
Nears more to Heaven in aught than when we nurse
And surety give to love and Brotherhood. (p. 454, lines 7-10)

Keats associated health with friendship, "brotherhood," and mutability in the poetry as in the letters. In "Hyperion," Book II, Keats finds the source of a Homeric simile in illness:

As with us mortal men, the laden heart
Is persecuted more, and fever'd more,
When it is nighing to the mournful house
Where other hearts are sick of the same bruise;
(p. 232, lines 215-226)

The essentially communal, or "corporate," quality of significance of sickness, its association with friendship, companionship, and brotherhood, is evident in this passage from "Hyperion." Health and sickness are recurrent and important themes and sources of imagery in the poetry of Keats; in "I Stood Tip-Toe" he wrote of health:

The evening weather was so bright, and clear,
That men of health were of unusual cheer;
Stepping like Homer at the trumpet's call,
Or young Apollo on the pedestal:
And lovely women were as fair and warm,
As Venus looking sideways in alarm.
The breezes were ethereal, and pure,
And crept through half-closed lattices to cure
The languid sick; it cool'd their fever'd sleep,
And soothed them into slumbers full and deep.
Soon they awoke clear eyed: nor burnt with thirsting,
Nor with hot fingers, nor with temples bursting;
(p. 8, lines 215-226)

In the climactic stanza of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," sickness is again present as the basis of the imagery describing the ultimate plight of the knight deceived by his elfin love, in this case, directly allied with a thematic motif of loss and isolation, the loss of "community" and "brotherhood" so disturbing to Keats:

I see a lilly on thy brow,
With anguish moist and fever dew;
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast withereth too. (p. 350, III)

Sickness is associated with isolation and loss of companionship, with mutability, imagistically in these lines as it is in Keats's life and correspondence.

In Keats's poetry health and sickness are inextricably involved
with both the creation and purpose of poetry and art. In the "Ode to Fanny," the position of verse as a physician is evident and is extended to the length and complexity of a conceit. Both nature, a source of poetry, and poetry itself are seen as functioning essentially in dealing with ailing and suffering man:

Physician Nature! let my spirit blood!
   O ease my heart of verse and let me rest;
   Throw me upon thy Tripod, till the flood
   Of stifling numbers ebbs from my full breast.

(p. 360, lines 1-4)

The metaphor of poetry as "bad blood" that must be released somehow through its creation and the reference to the physician's table create all the ambivalence, complexity, and mundane, even gruesome, reality that have been so admired in the Metaphysical conceit. Nature and poetry function to release, possibly through "therapeutic" objectification, the suffering of man; thus the occurrence of this motif of sickness and its association with poetry and the poet as a physician to man, when it appears to centrally in "The Fall of Hyperion" is the recurrence of a continuing theme of sickness in its association with invention, the loss of friends, weather, death and mutability in the letters and the previous poetry.

Sickness seems almost worse than death in Canto I of "The Fall of Hyperion," when Keats describes the effects of the vision of "truth" on the visage of Moneta:

... Then saw I a wan face,
   Not pin'd by human sorrows, but bright-blanch'd
   By an immortal sickness which kills not;  (p. 409, lines 256-258)
It is in "The Fall of Hyperion" that Keats makes his claim for the "moral" intention of true poetry as opposed to the poetry of the "dreamer" who "venoms all his days" in the famous reference to the poet as "a sage/A humanist, physician to all men (p. 407, lines 189-190). This definition of the poet is sometimes seen as an example of a new maturity, a new humanism, and realism in Keats's attitude toward the grounds of poetry. This metaphorical relationship in association with all of Keats persistent concern with brotherhood, nature, the seasons, weather, death, and loss is too embedded and recurrent in both Keats's earlier poetry and his letters to be considered totally new in "The Fall of Hyperion." Keats was too consistently concerned with, and too consistently suffered from, his immediate interest in the real, the personal, the human—friendship, love, health, pleasure, and life—and their permeation by loss, injustice, transience, death, sickness, and mutability to be considered a newly made "humanist" in "The Fall of Hyperion." He is rather berating himself for his emphasis on personal vision at the expense of the continuing strain in his poetry and thought of a lively concern with the community of men, united in the human experience of suffering.

Weather, the seasons, friendship, health, and their association with mutability form, as I have indicated in this section, the same "gordian complication of feelings" in much of the poetry of Keats that they did in the letters. The "Eve of Saint Mark," even though it might be validly called Keats's poem of spring, a basically "wholesome" season as implied in line five of the poem (line two here), suggests an
imaginative grouping of bad or "chilly" weather, and sickness.

The city streets were clean and fair
From wholesome drench of April rains;
And, on the western window panes,
The chilly sunset faintly told
Of unmatur'd green vallies cold
Of the green thorny bloomless hedge,
Of rivers new with spring-tide sedge,
Of primroses by shelter'd rills,
And daisies on the aguish hills. (p. 357, lines 5-9)

In the poem Keats wrote on visiting the tomb of Robert Burns, the association of health, cold, weather, the seasons, and time form the basis of the unity of the imagery of the poem:

The town, the churchyard, and the setting sun,
The clouds, the trees, the rounded hills all seem,
Though beautiful, cold—strange—as in a dream,
I dreamed long ago, now new begun.
The short-liv'd, paly Summer is but won
From Winter's ague, for one hour's gleam;
Though sapphire-warm, their stars do never beam:
All is cold Beauty; pain is never done:
For who has mind to relish, Minos-wise,
The Real of Beauty, free from that dead hue
Sickly imagination and sick pride
Cast wan upon it! Burns! with honour due
I oft have honour'd three. Great shadow, hide
Thy face; I sin against thy native skies. (p. 385)

A sickness and pain of the mind associated with the cold seasons, the imagination, and physical sickness are implied in "paly Summer," "Winter's ague," "cold Beauty," "Sickly imagination and sick pride" and in the recurrent imagery of coldness (lack of warmth) and wanness (lack of color). Many values which are conventionally considered unambiguously positive for Keats can be seen to be ambivalent in this poem, and the "Eve of Saint Mark,:" nature, spring, summer, contemplation or "speculation," beauty and the imagination. These values have ambivalent valences in
this poem and in the "Eve of Saint Mark" in association with an imagery of bad health and bad weather.

Keats had a strong and continuing desire to achieve perfect happiness, a desire to escape from "every care, of chilly rain, and shivering air" (p. 352, lines 21-22), but he saw that this achievement was virtually impossible while involved in a world of mutability, in which sickness, cold, and loss permeate not only the life of man and his companionship with his fellow men; but also the external world of nature—the world which for a Romantic should seem more free from corruption, a world which must, in some sense, indicate the way things really are, must symbolize reality. Keats's poetry indicates generally, even when considered exclusive of the odes, as do his letters, that his basic human interests in friendship, health, and nature were not only sources of beauty, but also naturally became sources of his concern with loss and mutability and of the imagistic means of expressing this concern.

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The odes, Keats's greatest works which I will discuss more closely in the discussion of irony in the next chapter, are consistently, in theme and method, a final struggle with Keats's persistent problem with death, change, time, and mutability. As Walter Jackson Bate has indicated in his thorough study of Keats's poetic style, even the invention of the particular ode form which Keats employed was partially dictated by Keats's concern with the theme of mutability. Bate gives this credit to the stanza form of the odes in his description to the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," saying that:
Within its intensity braced stanzas is a potential energy momentar-
ily stilled and imprisoned, like Cleopatra's, 'Eternity was
in our lips and eyes' (I, iii, 35), a line . . . which is heavy
with the concentration within concrete particulars of all the
suggestion eternity can convey exhibiting a condensed energy
heightened the more because of its compactness . . . tremulously
heavy with an eternity intensified and compressed within a par-
ticular. And this strict and staid repose is largely owing to
the remarkable stanzaic medium which Keats had devised . . . a
stanza at once leisurely and majestic in movement, without the
'pouncing rhymes' of the couplet, and at the same time unified,
closely knit, and restraining in temper and form.\(^\text{48}\)

The "majesty," "leisureliness," and "restraint" produced by the form of
the odes, when contrasted with the traditional Pindaric Ode or the sonnet
forms from which the form of the Keatsian Ode was derived, indicate that
Keats sought a form in which he could deal with "concrete particulars,"
but which would support his desire to control time and mutability.

Of course, there is nothing startlingly new about propounding
that the common theme of the great odes is mutability; Douglas Bush has
stated this position firmly in *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in

**Literature:**

At first sight Keats's theme in the "Ode to a Nightingale" and the
"Ode on a Grecian Urn"--the two cannot be separated--is the belief
that whereas the momentary experience of beauty if fleeting, the
ideas embodiment of that moment in art, in song, or in marble, is
an imperishable source of joy. If that were all these odes should
be hymns of triumph, and they are not. It is the very acme of
melancholy that the joy he celebrated is joy in beauty that must
die. Even when Keats proclaims that the song of the bird is im-
mortal, that the sculptured lover feels an enduring love that is
beyond the pains of human passion, his deepest emotions are fixed
on the obverse side of his theme. He tries to believe, and with
part of his mind he does believe and rejoice, in the immortality
of ideal beauty, but he is too intense a lover of the here and
now, of the human and tangible, to be satisfied by his own affirma-
tions. It is the actual moment that is precious, that brings
ecstasy with it, and the moment will not stay.\(^\text{49}\)

Harold Bloom, one of the most influential of Keats's critics, has claimed
a very high place in literature for Keats in association with the poet's concern with death and mutability.

Bloom asserts that Keats was the first poet to write a true poem of "earth," breaking with the tradition of poetry which had dealt exclusively with poetic "escape" toward "heaven," an escape from the basic problem of "earth" which is the continual presence of time, death, and mutability. He says that the "Ode to a Nightingale" was Keats's breakthrough in this regard; this was the first poem that exhibited:

... the sense of the human making choice of a human self, aware of its deathly nature, and yet having the will to celebrate the imaginative richness of mortality. The "Ode to a Nightingale" is the first poem to know and declare, wholeheartedly, that death is the mother of beauty. The "Ode to Psycho" still glanced, with high good humor, at the haunted rituals of the already-written poems of heaven; the "Ode to a Nightingale" turns, almost casually, to the unwritten poem of earth. There is nothing casual about the poem's tone, but there is a wonderful lack of self-consciousness at the poem's freedom from the past, in the poem's knowing that death, our death, is absolute and without memorial.50

Jack Stillinger, in the introduction to his recent anthology of Keats criticism, an anthology which must become very influential in future studies of Keats's poetry, has reinforced the interpretation of the odes as essentially dealing with "time and change," with mutability. Stillinger asserts that, "if we ignore ... most of the subtleties and complexities that make them the great poems that they are, the odes as a group may be read as an investigation of the imagination's ability to cope with time and change; the first three are plainly exploratory, and the final two are written, as it were, with the exploration over and an awareness of the results."51

Any study of mutability and its association with Keats's odes
should start with the "Ode on Melancholy" and end with the ode "To Autumn" (my extensive analysis of "To Autumn" in this regard will be put off until the last chapter of the paper, see Poetical Works, pp. 219 and 218). The "Ode on Melancholy" is primary in a consideration of the theme of mutability in the odes since, if the cause of the emotion dealt with, rather than the emotion itself, was the starting point of the ode, a procedure which would be closer to the more indirect approach of the three great odes, the "Ode to a Nightingale," the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "To Autumn"; this ode could be appropriately entitled the "Ode on Mutability." The substance of the "Ode on Melancholy" might be paraphrased: "melancholy" does not result from the presence of "disagreeables" or negatively charged objects, such as the Gothic objects mentioned and discarded in the first stanza; but from the absence or loss of beauty, or positively charged objects, the objects mentioned in the second stanza in conjunction with the fact that these objects of beauty are inherently transient.

Such a "definition" of the causes of melancholy indicates a more sophisticated understanding of human suffering than does that based on positively malevolent objects, an understanding to be associated with the "rediscovery" of the power of nonbeing in being evidenced in modern Existentialism. Absence, loss, and termination are more powerful sources of man's anxiety and suffering than are the more traditional "bug-bears" of positive horror and pain; for anything objectifiable can be more easily dealt with by the psyche than can the ontic reality of nonbeing, loss, failure, sickness, transience, and death.
Keats's conclusion in the poem, that only he who "Can burst joy's grape against his palate fine" will "see" melancholy can be related to the Existentialists' criticism of "neurotic anxiety" as the reduction of self-affirmation resulting from an inability to "accept" nonbeing and its anxiety. Without this "acceptance," the affirmation of life in the face of death, some of the "self's potentialities are not admitted to actualization."\(^{52}\) Keats contends that only those who affirm life can "appreciate" "melancholy" (the anxiety over nonbeing, mutability and death) as the Existentialists assert that only those who "appreciate" and "affirm" the constant threat of nonbeing and its resultant "existential anxiety" can achieve full actualization of all the self's potentialities, the affirmation of life. Keats and the Existentialists agree; an affirmation of life is necessary to an appreciation of death (only those who "burst joy's grape" can "see" melancholy) and an affirma-
tion of death (an acceptance of life in the face of death, a realization that the enjoyment of "joy's grape" must be an immediate and transient "bursting") is necessary to an affirmation of life.

Keats's choice of the word "melancholy" may be somewhat ironical in reference to the realism and depth of the suffering dealt with by him in this poem; it has hurt the evaluation of this poem by encouraging references, such as Leavis's, to the poet's "cherished pangs of tran-
sience."\(^{53}\) Robert Bridges asserts that, "in the second stanza the melancholy is . . . a 'luxurious tenderness,' while in the third it is strong, painful, and incurable."\(^{54}\) I too feel that when Keats moves from the first stanza to the second he moves from an ironical, detached
consideration of "melancholy"—a word which only too conventionally represents an ambivalent and "literary" concept associated with cherished "pangs of transience"—to a consideration of real human sorrow. I feel that a possible modern equivalent to the human suffering that Keats associates with mutability and flux in the main discussion of the ode would be the Existentialists use of the term "anxiety," borrowed from modern psychology, which is also, in its own way, only the result of a struggle for an objective correlative for the "incurable" fears and psychological pain resulting from the existence of mutability, death, fate, and guilt.

In the "Ode on Melancholy" Keats has, in a sense, "stacked the cards" against himself (a characteristic practice that I will consider later, in the discussion of humor and irony in the letters and poetry) by the inclusion of Gothic "clap-trap," heavy personification, gustatory imagery, and the choice of the word, "melancholy" to indicate the emotion he examines. I feel that this poem is much more "philosophical" and intense in content and theme than is suggested by the methods, traditions, and language chosen to carry this content. For Keats, the "Ode on Melancholy" is a tentative treatment of a theme that is too powerful for such direct discussion as is demanded by the direct thematic approach he chooses in this ode; it is a treatment made tentative by "heavy-handed" use of methods, which I will treat at length in the discussion of irony in Chapter III below, methods which Keats refined in his greatest poetry to avoid critically disturbing the tone of the verse, as I feel they must in this ode.
The "Ode to a Nightingale" begins, as do the two other greatest odes, the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn," with a subject for discussion rather than with a resultant human emotion as does the "Ode on Melancholy"; thus Keats's thematic progress in these odes is of a freer nature from the start (see Poetical Works, pp. 207 and 209). The progress of the "Ode to a Nightingale" involves a discussion of the disparity between life as it is experienced in time, most negatively presented in Stanza III, and the joy of the intense experience of a point of time that seems temporarily to transcend time. Here again, time is the enemy to happiness. A key word in interpreting this poem is the word "fade" which occurs four times in the poem with shifts of emphasis and connotation as the emphasis and meanings of the poem shift. At the end of Stanza II, the poet yearns to escape into the forest frequented by the nightingale, to "fade away into the forest dim."

"Fade" is a useful word for Keats in the poem, for the ode is about a song, an auditory phenomena; it deals thematically with the possibility of "mystical" escape; and the imagery is predominantly visual (or a paradoxical merger of visual and auditory, "Darkling I listen," VI, 1).55 "Fade," peculiarly can be, and is, applied in all of these areas. The use in Stanza II "to fade away into the forest dim" has both the implication of visual and physical "fading" and escape. In the beginning of Stanza III "fade" assumes completely the meaning of escape; "Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget." Keats seeks to "fade away" from or escape from time in its association with sickness, loss, and death; time is a realm of "weariness," "fever,"

"fretting," and "leaden-eyed despairs"; where "youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies. The recurrent complication of feelings about family and friends, sickness, death, and loss is obvious in this third stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale": a stanza which represents Keats's most direct attempt to indicate what makes the real world, the world of time, a place of suffering. It is mutability from which Keats seeks to escape by "fading" into the intense immediate experience of the bird's song.

In Stanza V the poet has successfully "faded" into the world of natural beauty, but time is present even here; but here he can be partially successful in transcending time. As Brooks and Robert Penn Warren have said, "If Keats's primary emphasis is on fertility and growth, he accepts the fact that death and change have their place here too: the violets ... are thought of as 'fast-fading,' but the atmosphere of this world of nature is very different from that of the human world haunted by death, where 'men sit and hear each other groan.' The world of nature is a world of cyclic change (the 'seasonable month,' 'the coming musk-rose') and consequently can fresh and immortal, like the bird whose song seems to be its spirit."56 In this stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale," as Brooks's comments imply, Keats executes one of his feats of "stationing" or "interweaving time" through an involvement in the processes of nature; the poet "sees,"

Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.
In these lines "fade" has taken on its central valence for the poem in its association with time; "fading" indicates the passage of time and the loss of substance occurring in this passage of time. "Fade" is a word applicable to sight, sound, escape, and the passage of time and the loss implied in this passage of time, therefore it is capable of being used in all of the imagistic and thematic concerns of the ode; but it is in its connotation of loss that it takes on its central valence for the poem. But in nature the "fading" of the flowers is offset by the "coming musk-rose" and the reference to the expected summer. In the "natural" setting, the past and the future balance each other in the present, producing "stationing," or "interwoven time." Actually, of course, these processes could not really have been experienced by the poet at any one, present time, only being "observable" in the imagination; not in natural time, but in the imagination's "recreations" with nature. Truly the poet "cannot see," as he admits in the introductory words of this 'vision," the processes described here. When the imaginative flight ceases, or to put the same thing more simply, the song of the bird ends; the word "fade" reoccurs, this time with its final connotation in the loss of sound associated with the loss of the auditory subject of the ode, "Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades."

The "Ode to a Nightingale" is an extended attempt to arrest time in a present experience, in this case, the song of a bird. Keats contemplates escape from mutability in its "gordian complication" with brotherhood, time, sickness, and death (even Ruth is "sick for home"). Since the subject of the poem is the song of a forest bird, imagery of
auditory and visual, natural beauty is appropriate. The theme is an interaction, or opposition, of escape from time and the loss implied in the passage of time. Both imagistic and thematic considerations merge and interact in the recurrence of the verb "fade"—which occurs more often than any other substantive word in the poem.

"Fade" is a word ideally expressive of the real meaning of mutability in its suggestion of loss when associated with the sense images of sight and hearing, and in its suggestion of the loss of substance, the encroachment of nonbeing, in the passage of time. To "fade" may be to escape from the events of time, but it also implies the loss of sight and hearing ("to thy high requiem become a sod") and a "passing away" in time. The word "fade," in its shifting usages, inclusively exhausts the, ultimately unsolved, thematic problem of the "Ode to a Nightingale": that to escape from time implies to perish. Brooks concludes, the poet's "fading into the forest dim is a merging of himself with the world of nature, but the price is death—felt as a rich consummation as he listens "darkling," but seen in its bleak and chilling aspect of the end of the Ode when the "plaintive anthem fades" and is "buried." He would fade into the bird's song, but at the end, it is the bird's song that fades away from him."58 To escape from mutability, sickness, and death, one must give up natural beauty, love, brotherhood, and pleasure, the entities which give mutability its power, as mutability may give these experiences, such as the "auditory vision" which "fades away" after inspiring these speculations, their intense beauty and value.
The theme of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is mutability also. It is not coincidental that the word "fade" recurs, and also the word "adieu" (which occurs also in the "Ode on Melancholy," "And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips/Bidding adieu;"). The word "generation," in its association with the passage of time, recurs also ("No hungry generations tread" the nightingale "down," and the urn will not be involved when "old age shall this generation waste,") exploiting a connotation of this word aptly responded to by William Butler Yeats in "Sailing to Byzantium" in his reference to "Those dying generations at their song," the connotation suggesting life's constant "turn over," the constant process of death. The subject used by the poet to transcend time in the "Ode to a Nightingale" was a piece of auditory natural beauty, here it is a piece of visual art. The events on the piece of art cannot "fade" ("She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss") as the joys of human life must do or as the song of the bird does in the other ode. The central imagery of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is paradoxically visual; the recurrent key word here is "silent," which occurs in the first, fourth and fifth stanzas. The urn is elicited to communicate, to tell a tale or history, to offer to man an escape from time. And the "silent form" finally, ironically and unexpectedly, does so, offering a very unqualified, direct, and difficult statement about the equivalency of art and life, of "beauty and truth"; an assertion that beauty and art can temporarily transcend life and "truth," the hard truth that Keats has been discussing throughout the poem, the truth of the disparity between the world of art and the world of life permeated by mutability, time and
death.

The "truth" that "beauty" must overcome in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and the "Ode to a Nightingale" is the truth of mutability. The "disagreeable" or "contrariety" that Keats seeks to overcome through the experience of a piece of auditory natural beauty or through a piece of visual artistic beauty is mutability; the truth that the beauty of personal, individual, real, breathing life is permeated by death. Keats was not an eighteenth century Pelagian, a Benevolist, or a disciple "Perfectibility"; for mutability is truly not respondent to the efforts of enlightened politics or the successes of science. As he said in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law, if life were "perfected" it would only result in the attenuated suffering of life being equalled, all at once, by the event of death (II, p. 101). Keats's liberal hope for the happiness of man led him slowly to a more orthodox view of the limitations on existence, such as change and death; but this liberal hope and his great vision of beauty made his vision of evil, made these "limitations," more fresh and powerful to him than they could be to the Classical or Christian orthodox.

A Pelagian or Benevolist world (a Protestant world without free will and man's ultimate responsibility for evil, without the traditional "Catholic" limitation on God's power) must face again the basic theological problem of evil. Both Albert Gerard and Lionel Trilling have aptly summarized this problem while discussing Romantic literature. Gerard says that the problem of the age was, "The moral problem . . . about sorrow and evil, whether they have any function and value in the
universal scheme; it was the old theological crux of the uses of evil in a world created and governed by a benevolent Providence."

Trilling says, "What is traditionally and technically called the problem of evil raises a question about the nature of God, who is said to be both benevolent and omnipotent, for man's experience of pain would seem to limit either God's benevolence or his power." Keats and the great Romantics were modern in seeing and suffering from the problem of evil. As Trilling asserts in the introduction to his edition of the letters of Keats, Keats "perceived the fact of evil very clearly, and he put it at the very center of his mental life." Keats made no compromise with evil and human suffering, the inherent evil of mutability, sickness, and death; he asserted in a letter to Bailey: "Were it my choice I would reject a petrarchal corination—on account of my dying day, and because women have Cancers."

Keats's problem is the desire to integrate the "contrarieties" of his powerful vision of friendship, love, beauty, and pleasure with his equally great vision of mutability, sickness, time, death, loss, and nonbeing; and to recreate the ironical fact that these two groups of "contrarieties" are somehow intricately and inherently interrelated in reality. Keats's art is the attempt to integrate these concerns, and to express their realistic interrelation; if a recognition of either side of Keats's vision is disregarded or de-emphasized, Keats's poetry looses its complexity and depth. As Trilling says, "The element of Keats's artistic theory that chiefly makes for its complexity and its power is, among other things, an effort to deal with the problem of
evil." In Shakespeare we find the balance and complexity of this "double-sided" vision of life and art. Trilling explains Shakespeare's rise to prominence in the nineteenth century on the basis of his full, complex, and mature view of life:

It is therefore not hard to understand the virtually religious reverence in which Shakespeare began to be held in the nineteenth century, for when religion seemed no longer able to represent the actualities of life, it was likely to be Shakespeare who, to a thoughtful man, most fully confronted the truth of life's complex horror, while yet conveying the stubborn sense that life was partly blessed, not wholly cursed.

Such a vision of life, coupled with the continued attempt to keep the complexity and contrasts of life present in art, leads to the artistic attempt to "integrate" these "contrarieties," which is poetic irony.

In the following chapter I will attempt to show Keats's poetic irony, generally and in individual play of humor and wit, which is produced by this continuing struggle to integrate "the truth of life's complex horror," mutability and death, with the "blessedness" of love, friendship, art, and natural beauty.
NOTES

CHAPTER II


3Ibid., p. 36.

4A definition of "substance" and "accident" may be found in the Metaphysics (Book Delta, sections VIII and XXX). The English definitions for "substance" as: "essential nature," "fundamental or characteristic part or quality," and "ultimate reality that underlies all outward manifestations and change," and for "accident" as: "a nonessential property of an entity or circumstance" derive from the basic Aristotelian theory of substance and accident.

5Bertrand Russell, The History of Western Philosophy (New York, 1945), pp. 201-202. "The conception of 'substance,' like that of 'essence,' is a transference to metaphysics of what is only a linguistic convenience. We find it convenient, in describing the world, to describe a certain number of occurrences as events in the life of 'Socrates,' and a certain number of others as events in the life of 'Mr. Smith.' This leads us to think of 'Socrates' or 'Mr. Smith' as denoting something that persists through a certain number of years, and as in some way more 'solid' and 'real' than the events that happen to him. If Socrates is ill we think that Socrates, at other times, is well, and therefore the being of Socrates is independent of his illness; illness, on the other hand, requires somebody to be ill. But although Socrates need not be ill, something must be occurring to him if he is to be considered to exist. He is not, therefore, really any more 'solid' than the things that happen to him.

'Substance,' when taken seriously, is a concept impossible to free from difficulties. A substance is supposed to be the subject of properties, and to be something distinct from all its properties. But when we take away the properties, and try to imagine the substance by itself, we find that there is nothing left. To put the matter in another way: What distinguishes one substance from another? Not difference of properties, for according to the logic of substance, difference of properties presupposes numerical diversity between the substances concerned. Two substances, therefore, must be just two, without being, in themselves, in any way distinguishable. How, then, are we ever to find out that they are two?

'Substance,' in fact, is merely a convenient way of collecting
events into bundles. What can we know about Mr. Smith? When talking, we hear a series of sounds. We believe that, like us, he has thoughts and feelings. But what is Mr. Smith apart from all these occurrences? A mere imaginary hook, from which the occurrences are supposed to hang. They have in fact no need of a hook, any more than the earth needs an elephant to rest upon. Any one can see, in the analogous case of a geographical region, that such a word as 'France' (say) is only a linguistic convenience, and that there is not a thing called 'France' over and above its various parts. The same holds of 'Mr. Smith'; it is a collective name for a number of occurrences. If we take it as anything more, it denotes something completely unknowable, and therefore not needed for the expression of what we know.

'Substance,' in a word, is a metaphysical mistake, due to transference to the world-structure of the structure of sentences composed of a subject and a predicate."

Heidegger in his extensive discussion of nonbeing and death in Being and Time (pp. 279-313) makes the belief in immortality merely another means for the "they" (common men) to avoid any real confrontation with the problem of anxiety and death. Soren Kierkegaard in Fear and Trembling (Garden City, New York, 1954), p. 35, in his myth of Abraham's ideal "faith," asserts unequivocably that the faith "for a future life was not Abraham's, if there be such a faith" (my underlining). Jean-Paul Sartre in Existentialism (New York, 1947), which has come to be the most important document of philosophical Existentialism, says (p. 39) that, "a man is involved in life, leaves his empress on it, and outside of that there is nothing." Even the Christian Existentialists de-emphasize immortality, as in Tillich's comments above; Tillich does not consider immortality to be a Christian doctrine (see The Courage to Be, p. 169).
at different times. In 1818 he wrote George and Georgiana Keats, after Tom's death, "I have scarce a doubt of immortality of some nature or other" (II, p. 4). But in 1820 he wrote, "I long to believe in immortality" (II, p. 293). Keats's "faith" in an after life was tentative and sporadic and in no way could preclude confrontation with the problem of existential death.

14Ford, p. 159-160.

15Ibid., p. 160.

16Tillich, p. 45.


18Perkins, p. 215.

19Tillich, p. 125-126.


21Wasserman, p. 186.

22See the passage referred to in note 16 of Chapter III for a discussion of the source of this phrase in Keats's letters.

23See the passage referred to in note 46 of this chapter for Keats's "purposes" for poetry as suggested in "The Fall of Hyperion."

24Note the simple and humorous source of the line from "The Ode to a Nightingale," "Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth." Note also the simple but effective comic pun with "numskulls" and "dumb bells."

25See the passage referred to in note 22 of Chapter III for a similar ironic quotation on rain, and the relationship of the "skies" to the "earth."

26Autumn is a "season of mists;" see the first line of "To Autumn." For further discussion of the ambivalence of the word "mists" in Keats, see note 14 of Chapter IV.

28 Ibid., p. 143.


30 John Keats, Keats: Poetical Works edited by H. W. Garrod (London, 1959), p. 44. All further references to the poetry will be noted within the body.


32 Ibid., p. 135.

33 Ibid., p. 96.

34 Ibid., p. 97.


36 Ibid., p. 136.


38 Heinen, p. 387.


40 Note the "dark conspiracy" of the "Night" and "Noon" to "Banish Evening." See the discussion of this pejorative word in "To Autumn," section 4 or Chapter IV.

Stallman, pp. 144–145.

Ford, p. 146.

Ibid., p. 146.

Ibid., p. 146.

Keats's training as an "apothecery" should be noted; it would make these references to the "accouterments" of medical practice very real to him. Edward E. Bostetter in The Romantic Ventriloquists (Seattle, Washington, 1963), pp. 164–171, discusses Keats attitude toward poetry as a "healing" art.

"Speculation" was associated in Keats's mind with the presence and power of "beauty and truth" in art. See note 63 of Chapter IV for an example of this usage.

Bate, The Stylistic Development of Keats, p. 141. See the passage referred to in note 39 of this chapter for a discussion of Shakespeare's influence on Keats's treatment of time.


Bloom, p. 272.

Stillinger, p. 5.

Tillich, p. 66.

See Leavis's comments referred to in note 17 of this chapter.


The contention that the imagery of the "Ode to a Nightingale" is essentially visual needs some discussion and support, since the imagery primarily creates a feeling of "darkness." By saying that this imagery is visual I mean that, since imagery is commonly based on one of the senses, the imagery of the "Nightingale" can be seen as an imagery of sight, even though, paradoxically, in this case, an imagery of "not seeing" and "darkness"; much as the imagery of the "urn" is auditory although an imagery of not hearing and "silence." The central and recurrent word of the poem, "fade," is a visual word commonly referring to a diminishing of sight. In the first lines the poet declares that
"a drowsy numbness pains/ My sense"; it is to be noted that he says "sense" not senses. We should naturally "ask" to what sense he is referring, although "numbness" initially suggests a tactile quality. An answer to the question is offered in the imagery of "darkness" or the "sightlessness" which begins in stanza I, with the "shadows numberless" in which the bird is hidden. In line seven of stanza II an associated figurative pattern of "eyes" begins, with the "beaded bubbles winking at the brim"; this motif recurs in stanza III in "leaden-eyed," a phrase which implies loss of sight, and the "failure" of the "lustrous eyes" of "beauty" (III,9). At the end of stanza II the poet wishes to "fade" into the forest "dim," an adjective implying again, inability to see.

The imagery of the lack of sight becomes emphasized in stanza IV, with the "viewless wings of Poesy," and the "placing" of the poet example of the "probable impossible" discussed in the next chapter, since "light" cannot be "blown"). In stanza V the imagery of not seeing becomes explicit as the poet says he "cannot see" (V, 1) in "embalmed darkness." He can only "guess" (V, 1) at the beautiful natural objects such as the "fading violets cover'd up in leaves," a phrase which taken with the poet's initial admission that he "cannot see" becomes an hyperbole through duplication, on the imagery of "darkness" and the "failure" of sight, for the poet (1) "cannot see," because of the lack of light, (2) "fading violets" (3) which are "cover'd up in leaves." One cannot see "fading violets" if they are covered, nor covered violets when they are faded or the "fading" of violets at any one time; and without sight you cannot see any violets. (This hyperbole is like the joke mentioned by Freud in Jokes and the Unconscious (New York, 1963, p. 62) where a defendant, who is accused of returning a kettle with a hole that he has knocked in it, replies: "First, I never borrowed a kettle from B. at all; secondly, the kettle had a hole in it already when I got it from him; and thirdly, I gave him back the kettle undamaged." Any of these three facts would exonerate the defendant, but the inclusion of all three is highly suspect). In stanza V the paradoxical merger of seeing and hearing is executed in the oxymoron, "Darkling I listen" (V, 1) which introduces the stanza. In stanza VII, the ode ends with a failure of vision, when the nightingale with his song ("plaintive anthem") is ultimately "buried deep/ In the next valley-glades" (VIII, 7-8), suggesting an amplification of the difficulties of vision surrounding the bird at the beginning of the poem, singing in "shadows numberless," and the "dim" forest into which the poet would escape in stanza II; and the poet queries, "Was it a vision or a waking dream?"

This discussion of the visual imagery of the poem unavoidably overlaps and adumbrates my discussion of the indirection and irony in this ode in section 4 of Chapter III, for the visual imagery is imagery of darkness, the poet describes visually all sorts of things that he purportedly cannot see, and visual imagery is unexpected in dealing with the auditory subject. The ode is a poem of "vision," in imagery and theme, which deals, in imagery and theme, with the difficulty, or impossibility, of "envisioning." Thus the visual imagery is replete with paradox reflecting the difficulties of "vision," the "examination" of
which as a foil to the mutability of "youth," "beauty," and "love" (III, 6-10), constitutes the theme of the ode.

56 Cleenath Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, "The Ode to a Nightingale," from Twentieth Century Interpretations of Keats's Odes, p. 46.

57 See the passages referred to in notes 37 through 39 of this chapter.


60 Lionel Trilling, "Introduction" to The Selected Letters of John Keats, edited by Lionel Trilling (Garden City, New York, 1956, p. 32.


64 See the passage referred to in note 3 of Chapter I.
III Golden Jokes

The other Lady passenger arrived soon after a Miss Cotterell—very lady like—but a sad martyr to her illness—which is to a jot the same as Keats... the Pasport coming had unloosed all my prattle—and in a short time with Keats backing me with his golden jokes in support of my tinsel—we recovered Miss Cotterell—to laugh and be herself—my wit would have dropt in a minute—but for Keats plying me—but I was done for all that—leaving him sole Master—but I struck up in my own language or Keats would have born the Lady off in Triumph—I began drawing my picture for my dear Sister Maria. (Joseph Severn to William Haslam, September 21, 1820)

Since I intend to show the relationship between Keats's wit in the letters and his poetic use of irony, I need to establish a relationship between literary irony and the methods of wit and humor. By literary irony I mean that Cleanth Brooks means by this term in The Well Wrought Urn, for which he substitutes the terms "paradox," "wit," "ambiguity," and "complex of attitudes," in attempting to find a term to express "the assertion of the union of opposites," "the reconcilement of opposites," or "the principle of unity which informs by balancing and harmonizing connotations, attitudes, and meanings," the quality which Brooks considers the essence of poetry.1 Brooks must qualify his use of the word "irony," for he does not wish to imply that this quality of poetry, which he considers the essence of the poetical method, makes poetry "arch and self-conscious":

Irony, for most readers of poetry, is associated with satire, vers de societé, and other "intellectual" poetries. Yet, the necessity for some such term ought to be apparent; and irony is the most general term that we have for the kind of qualification which the various elements in a context receive from the context. This kind of qualification, as we have seen, if of tremendous importance in any
poem. Moreover, irony is our most general term for indicating that recognition of incongruities—which, again, pervades all poetry to a degree far beyond what our conventional criticism has been heretofore willing to allow.\(^2\)

Irony indicates for Brooks, the fact that "the essential structure of a poem (as distinguished from the rational or logical structure of the "statement" which we abstract from it) resembles that of architecture or painting: it is a pattern of resolved stresses. Or, to move closer still to poetry by considering the temporal arts, the structure of a poem resembles that of a ballet or musical composition. It is a pattern of resolutions and balances and harmonizations, developed through a temporal scheme."\(^3\)

I am not surprised to find that William Hazlitt, a Romantic critic, defines humor and wit in much the same terms as the modern critic defines "irony" the essential method of poetry. Hazlitt says that humor or wit is based on the "principle of ambiguity and contrast"; it is "the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another."\(^4\) "Irony, as a species of wit," achieves it's point through "the contrast between the appearance and the reality, the suspense of belief and the seeming incongruity."\(^5\) One might say, uniting these two discussions, that wit and "irony," in the traditional sense, derives from the disparity or incongruity between concept and reality and that literary irony, in the modern sense, is the poetic recognition of this disparity or incongruity and the struggle through the manipulations of the connotations of language to balance or include both sides of the disparity.
B. F. Skinner in a digression into the realm of literature, in an article primarily designed to define the method of humor, discovers this same relationship between the method of wit or "verbal play" and the essential method of poetry:

The formal preparation of the listener or reader which develops as a poem is heard or read bears upon a problem of long standing in literary criticism. It is generally assumed, in line with traditional conceptions of verbal behavior, that there are only two elements in a literary work--form and meaning. Some works, particularly poems, seem to be enjoyable because of their form; they are nice noises, and they can be enjoyed in this sense by one who does not know the language. Literary works are also enjoyable because of their meanings: they describe things which are pleasant or interesting. But there is obviously something more in good writing--something not far from wit or verbal play. This has been argued to be a subtle connection between form and meaning, but a more likely possibility is that it has to do with how a reader's behavior is prepared and released by a text. A parallel distinction has been made between "melopoeia," or the musical art of literature, "phanopoeia," or the art of images and meanings, and "logopoeia," the artistic use of the strong patterns arising from the reader's verbal history and constructs others on the spur of the moment. Joyce's line "Wring out the clothes, wring in the dew," borrows strength from the latent intraverbal sequence "Ring out the old, ring in the new," as well as from a current theme of women washing clothes in the open air. The line may or may not be musical; it may or may not evoke emotional or practical responses, but it clearly manipulates verbal strength. It is this verbal play which is reinforcing to the reader and hence indirectly to the writer.

Logopoeia is most obvious in verbal play or wit. The reinforcing effect of a clever style is hard to analyse; we usually simply report our delight and prove it by returning to the same writer for more of the same stimulation. But the laughter generated in verbal play is more objective. Laughs can be counted and even, as in a television audience, measured in decibels. Each of the literary effects already described has a parallel in the field of humor, where the response of the listener or reader may be more closely followed.6

The methods of poetry, indicated by the term irony, are "paralleled" in "the field of humor"; when a modern critic talks of literary irony or a Romantic critic talks of wit and humor, they speak of "tension,"
"contrasts," "ambiguity," and "incongruity."

Humor derives from the pleasure and surprise elicited when there is a disparity between expectation and reality. Irony, either as a category of wit or a method of poetry, occurs when there is a persistent tension caused by disparity or incongruity between concept and occurrence and when this incongruity or disparity on one side has a basic association with tragedy. Wit and tragedy, in a sense, unite in irony. As Hazlitt says, relating the tragic and the comic, "Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be." The disparity in irony is often between a pleasurable, agreeable, idealistic expectation or concept and the tragedy of reality—as in dramatic irony; it results when an idea or concept meets with a tragic situation in the world of subsequent events. Irony, even as a category of wit, elicits no laughter or only the bitter laughter elicited by the surprise involved alone. Irony often involves our own dissatisfied expectation rather than that of an observed object; we slip on the banana peel rather than the observed clown. In irony, as opposed to other forms of wit and humor, the usual concomitant of superiority is often missing.

In a sense, irony is particularly that category of verbal wit derived from the disparity between the ideal, as we see it, and the real, as it occurs. Wit posited on the disparity between the real and ideal is particularly functional to a Romantic poet like Keats who has such a clear vision of both the ideal world of beauty, love, friendship, and pleasure and of the tragedy of the permeation of these ideals by
mutability in the real world. The Romantics would naturally turn to irony, the wit that "laughs and weeps," for they were particularly "struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be."

Contrast and tension develops in poetry as the result of poetry being basically concerned with the relationship between the emotional, mental, or spiritual realm and the physical world. In poetry—and even in every day speech—material things and events are spiritualized and emotional states are objectified. There is a constant "swing" between these two areas of experience. The distinguishing characteristics of two important kinds of imagery are determined by the manner in which this "swing" occurs. I would call one of the types Metaphysical imagery and the other Romantic imagery. Metaphysical imagery emphasizes the mental side of the dualism involved. It openly depends on the mind's marvelous or perverse tendency to synthesize by analogy. The poet's "wit" plays with the physical world in order to explain emotions. The dichotomy of existence is actually emphasized rather than mitigated by the play of wit. One sees no relationship between the action of a compass and separation until Donne uses the image, and afterwards one is left with no illusion that the relationship was in any way intrinsic.

Romantic imagery is concerned, however, with dissolving the dichotomy of existence. At its best Romantic poetry starts with concrete experience from which it attempts to move to spirit. The Romantic poet attempts to obscure the synthesizing activity of the mind and to create the illusion that matter and spirit are related intrinsically.
An image like "tender is the night" can temporarily "suspend one's disbelief" that the relationship used is intrinsic. An image like "sun-burnt mirth" may, for a moment, be so apt as to seem like more than an arbitrary analogy. It is very difficult for the poet to evoke this type of response. These images will have their effect only in context, for the reader who is participating within the developing poem.

Keats, however, realized that his feeling about the intrinsic relationship of the physical and emotional, reality and desire, may not be the whole truth and he allows irony to indicate the "presence" of his skepticism. Irony, as Earl Wasserman asserts, is "that mode of expression which, by departing in opposite directions at the same time, provides for the artistic integration of contrarieties." Keats employs this integration in order to present his visions of potentiality and beauty while keeping a firm grasp on the limitations of reality. Keats means to include and balance the oppositions of particular and general, earth and heaven, the real and ideal, the immediate concrete subject and the poetic assertions and generalizations about this subject— incongruous and disparate elements—through irony.

It has often been said that Keats's poetry is particularly metaphorical, concrete, objective, and complex. It is not surprising therefore to find that his poetry suggests in its deep manipulations of the relationships of vehicle to tenor equally deep manipulations of our expectations which have a source in irony. It is imagery and poetic wit, because of their indirection, which cause an inherent need for, and difficulty in, interpretation. This need and difficulty is particularly
present in consideration of Keats's poetry because he embeds or hides his poetic wit in what seems at first to be direct and facile statement. We need particularly in Keats's own poetry to heed the implicit warning in a letter to his brother and sister-in-law about taking things too literally; Keats believed that every man's life, and the representations of that life, were an "allegory"; (II, p. 67) the meaning of life, as the meaning of art, is embedded in metaphor, in symbol that must be deciphered.

It is Keats's honesty and objectivity that lead him to a metaphorical indirect, or symbolic presentation of content in his poetry. Although Keats is basically sincere in his poetry, and, in an important sense, is basically concerned in his poetry with the relationship of physical events to emotional meaning, he realizes that his feelings about this problem may not be the whole truth, so he allows irony to keep the door open for the other half. It is Keats's desire to present both the positive and the negative, the ideal and tragic, the limited and the infinite sides of a question, the desire to "integrate contrarieties"—his desire to present what he called "light and shade" in poetry—which led him to symbol, indirection and irony.

Keats saw the substance of poetry as symbolized in the phrase, "light and shade." He wrote to George and Georgiana Keats, "To be surrounded with unpleasant human identities; who press upon one just enough to prevent ones getting into a lazy position; and not enough to interest or rouse one; is a capital crime: for is not giving up, through good nature one's time to people who have no light and shade a capital
crime" (I, p. 77). And nearing his death he wrote to Charles Brown, asserting that, "Now—knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem are great enemies to the recovery of the stomach" (II, p. 360). "Light and shade" metaphorically represent the "primitive sense necessary for a poem." In a very early poem, "Specimen of an Induction to a Poem," Keats refers to the objects he envisions for poetry as, "The morn, the eve, the light, the shade, the flowers" (p. 10, line 67). In his basic metaphorical representation of the essentials of poetry, Keats refers to "light and shade," which are not significant to him simply because of their association with natural beauty, but more importantly because they represent the essential oppositions of reality. It is the essential "contrarities" or oppositions in reality, "the knowledge of contrast," which are the "information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem."

Keats's more skeptical Romantic idealism coupled with a strong grasp on concrete reality led him to constantly seek to represent both sides of the content with which he deals and to find a firm basis for "idealistic" or poetic statement in what Cleanth Brooks has called, in his discussion of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," a "realistic basis for metaphor," generally and in individual instances of poetic technique. This basic honesty and desire to found metaphor strongly in the objective concrete and individually real—found tenor firmly in vehicle—generates a kind of poetic wit, irony, and pun that merges the real and the imaginary so closely and so well in Keats that it is difficult to identify as wit. I intend to direct attention to Keats's wit, irony, punning,
and verbal surprise, in the letters and from discoveries in the letters to discuss the more important use of irony and wit, which is in intention and method like the wit and irony of the letters, in the poetry.

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Keats wrote to John Hamilton Reynolds, May 3, 1818: "If I scribble long letters I must play my vagaries, I must be too heavy, or too light, for whole pages—I must be quaint and free of Tropes and figures—I must play my draughts as I please" (I, p. 279). Keats's letters indicate his predilection for wit, "Tropes and figures" with which he is persistently "quaint and free," employing wit in both playful and more serious contexts. Keats, his circle of friends, and the age in which he lived, had a propensity for jokes and punning. Keats recurrently refers to jokes and punning in his letters. He wrote to his sister-in-law, Georgiana, in America in 1818 of his visit with her mother: "She was well in good Spirits and I kept her laughing at my bad jokes" (I, p. 392). Again he wrote to her and George in 1819 of his activities in England: "The only amusement is a little scandal of however fine a shape, a laugh at a pun—then after all we wonder how we could enjoy the scandal, or laugh at the pun" (II, p. 70). Keats in another letter to his brother in America implies that the exchange of wit might lessen the loss involved in the absence of his brother and sister-in-law, who were both very close to him; he requests, "a letter or two of yours just to bandy back a pun or two across the Atlantic and send a quibble over the Floridas" (II, p. 92).

An important recreation of Keats and his friends, closely
associated with their social intercourse and companionship, was pun making. Keats feels, seemingly, that there is a serious breakdown in social intercourse when the interchange of wit within his circle is interrupted. He writes to George in 1819, "As for Punmaking I wish it was as good a trade as penmaking—there is very little business of that sort going on now" (II, p. 214). It is heartening to him when James Rice, whose "illness and humour stick by him as usual" sends a bad pun; Keats tells George that, "In a note to me the other day he sent the following Pun—Tune—the Harlot's Lament—"

Between the two P-x's I've lost every Lover,  
But a difference I found 'twixt the great and the small:  
For by the Small Pox I gott (pitted) all over  
By the other I did not get (pittied) at all. (I, p. 230)\(^{11}\)

Keats's wit in the letters was at times very competent, effective, ironic, and subtle. He wrote to Georgiana of an American whom he met at dinner, "I told him I hated Englishmen because they were the only Men I knew. He does not understand this—" (I, p. 241). He makes a truly well organized, or "timed," and effective extended piece of wit about the quietness of Winchester, where he stayed with Brown for a time and about which he wrote "The Eve of Saint Mark," in a letter to Reynolds:

Yesterday I say to him was a grand day for Winchester. They elected a Mayor—It was indeed high time the place should receive some sort of excitement. There was nothing going on: all asleep: not an old maid's sedan returning from a card party: and if any old woman got tipsy at Christenings they did not expose it in the streets. The first night tho' of our arival here, there was a slight uproar took place at about 10 o' the Clock. We heard distinctly a noise patting down the high Street as of a walking cane of the good old Dowager breed; and a little minute after we heard a less voice observe "What a noise the ferrill made—it must be
loose"—Brown wanted to call the Constables, but I observed "twas only a little breeze, and would soon pass over" (II, p. 166)\textsuperscript{12}

Keats's verbal wit when he is inspired to it by a serious consideration often approaches the connected complexity of the conceit. He wrote to Benjamin Bailey of a squabble in which Bailey was involved with another of Keats's close friends, Benjamin Robert Haydon, occurrences which Keats, with the value he gave to friendship, considered truly tragic and ironic in the disparity between their results, the loss of friendship, and their causes, which must be petty in relation to these results. He cautions Bailey on the existential limitations of men: "Men should bear with other—there lives not the Man who may not be cut up, aye hashed to pieces on his weakest side. The best of men have but a portion of good in them—a kind of spiritual yeast in their frames which creates the ferment of existence—by which a Man is propell'd to act and strive and buffet with Circumstance" (I, p. 210).

He again approaches the method of the conceit—and again reflects something of the realistic and restrained thought of the Seventeenth century—when he discusses the complexity of dealing with the unfortunate way in which men approach certain aspects of life. Keats understood the "permanence" implied in the intricacy and complexity of "prejudice"; and he presents this knowledge in a passage in the letters which employs the connected complexity of the conceit, asserting that "an obstinate Prejudice can seldom be produced but from a gordian complication of feelings, which must take time to unravell and care to keep unravelled" (I, p. 342). I have used Keats's metaphor here, in my discussion of his own feelings
about friendship, love, pleasure, beauty, health, and weather; and absence, cold, death, time, and mutability because this passage in the letters immediately suggested itself as the perfect and self-dictated, original, yet apt, description of the workings of the mind in forming concepts on which to approach and manipulate reality. Keats's verbal wit in the letters is truly of the finest kind in that it forms working objective corollaries for the more difficult events of external reality and the more difficult and complex realities of the mind.

Keats's letters indicate that he saw wit and verbal play characteristically as the means of attempting to lessen and deal with tragic situations. He turned to irony, and punning when facing the most disturbing situations of his own life and that of his friends. Wit is a conventional way to hide the true import of an emotional situation for sensitive, reticent people who do not want to burden others with their real, but possibly personal, complaints; Keats wrote to Fanny Brawne of his stay with James Rice, a close friend who was seriously ill, a fact that was very disturbing to Keats after his sick bed attendance with his dying brother: "I have seen your Comet, and only wish it was a sign that poor Rice would get well whose illness makes him rather a melancholy companion: and the more so as to conquer his feelings and hide them from me, with a forc'd Pun" (II, p. 127).

In Keats's most "desperate" situations he reached for wit and the pun to express the irony of the situation and to relieve the constant and unmitigated persistency of suffering. He wrote from Italy of the terrible results of the difficult passage and subsequent quarantine,
which caused him much physical distress and probable shortened his life:

Yet I ride the little horse,—and, at my worse, even in Quarantine, summoned up more puns, in a sort of desperation, in one week than in any year of my life ... and now—the knowledge of contrast, feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem are great enemies to the recovery of the stomach ... I am well disappointed in hearing good news from George,—for it runs in my head we shall all die young. (II, p. 360)

Joseph Severn wrote to William Haslam, another of Keats's friends of the small drama enacted upon shipboard on the passage to Italy:

The other Lady passenger arrived soon after a Miss Cotterell—very lady like—but a sad martyr to her illness—which is to a jot the same as Keats ... the passport coming had unloosed all my prattle—and in a short time with Keats backing me with his golden jokes in support of my tinsel—we recovered Miss Cotterell—to laugh and be herself—my wit would have dropt in a minute—but for Keats plying me—but I was done for all that—leaving him sole Master—but I struck up in my own Language or Keats would have born the Lady off in Triumph—I began drawing my picture for my dear Sister Maria (II, p. 340).

It is Keats, in his illness, who is "Master" of effective wit, effective enough to return the other young consumptive to spirits, rather than Severn. The "language" in which Severn "strikes up" is painting, visual art; Keats's essential "language" is, on the other hand, in this tragic situation, verbal wit. It is wit and verbal playfulness here, not description or depiction of beauty, to which Keats resorts when confronted with a situation to him desperate and moving.

It is characteristic of Keats in the letters to use irony and wit with his most deep and serious concerns, exhibiting a strength or personality and fullness of vision often denied to the Romantics by earlier criticism. Keats commonly referred to the unpleasantness of weather—which, as I have indicated in Chapter I, affected him deeply—
in wit and irony in the letters. He wrote to Bailey of the Devonshire Weather, "by the by you may say what you will of Devonshire: the truth is, it is a splashy, rainy, misty, snowy, foggy, hailey, floody, muddy, slipshod County" (I, p. 241). He wrote to Reynolds of the rain in Devonshire, including another rather negative reference to "Mist" a very symbolically significant, recurrent and ambiguous natural phenomenon in Keats's letters, poetry, and thought. He complains, "Fog, hail, snow, rain—Mist—blanketing up three parts of the year—This devonshire is like Lydia Languish, very entertaining when at smiles, but cursedly subject to sympathetic moisture" (I, p. 245).

Keats made the tragic association of weather and health in wit; he reflects ironically to Reynolds,

We are here still enveloped in clouds—I lay awake last night—listening to the Rain with a sense of being drown'd and rotted like a grain of wheat—There is a continual courtesy between the Heavens and the Earth—the heavens rain down their unwelcomeness, and the Earth sends it up again to be returned tomorrow. (I, p. 273)

This passage in the letters is particularly ironical because it is preceded by concern for Reynolds's health and followed by discussion of Tom's failing health; Keats undoubtedly felt the "courtesy" between the heavens and Tom's steadily successful disease. This quotation must seem an ironic antithesis to "To Autumn," in reference to this "courtesy" between the heavens and the earth. The heavens are "conspiring" with the earth as the sun "conspires" with autumn in the ode, but here with an obviously undesirable result. We might do well to remember this ambiguous and ironical use of "courtesy," to describe the un-Romantic
relationship of the heavens to the world, when we consider the complexity of the ode and the "conspiring" going on between the sun and the earth.

In many places in the letters Keats treated the problem of his friends' and family's illnesses in ironical wit. He wrote to Reynolds who was on his sick bed exhorting him to, "Banish money--Banish sofas--Banish Wine--Banish Music--But right Jack Health--honest Jack Health, true Jack Health--banish health and banish all the world" (I, p. 245). This passage is, of course, a "paraphrasing" of Prince Hal's comic interrogation of Falstaff in Henry IV, Part I; the subtle irony is, of course, that if you banish health you do banish all the world. Keats again resorts to wit to express his frustration about his friends' illnesses, and the presence generally of sickness in the world, in another letter to Reynolds:

But ah Coward! to talk at this rate to a sick man, or I hope to one that was sick--for I hope by this you stand on your right foot--If you are not--that's all,--I intend to cut all sick people if they do not make up their minds to cut sickness--a fellow to whom I have a complete aversion, and who strange to say is harboured and countenanced in several houses where I visit--he is sitting now quite impudent between me and Tom--He insults me at Jem Rice's--and you have seated him before now between us at the theatre--where I thought he look'd with a longing eye at poor Kean. I shall say, once for all, to my friends generally and severally, cut that fellow, or I cut you (I, p. 245).

Keats "forced" a little phonetic humor when he wrote of the first indication of the extremity of his brother's illness, the terminal illness that was one of the most powerful influences on Keats's thought.

He wrote to Reynolds again on May 3, 1818 saying, "Tom has spit a leettle blood this afternoon, and that is rather a damper" (I, p. 282).17 When
facing the culmination of his own illness Keats resorted to wit and irony also. He speaks of his "exit" from the world: "Yet there is a great difference between going off in warm blood like Romeo, and making one's exit like a frog in a frost" (II, p. 281). The irony of death without meaning is aptly expressed in this passage. In "recreating" this irony Keats refers to three of his recurrent and related concerns: Shakespeare, human love, and weather and temperature. Here Keats expresses the irony of death without meaning, not the abstract passing away in beauty of the "Ode to a Nightingale" ("To cease upon the midnight with no pain"), but rather "making one's exit like a frog in a frost." Keats saw the irony of failing health, death, isolation, and the helplessness of sickness; towards the end he admits, in ironical wit, "Nothing is so bad as want of health—it makes one envy Scavengers and Cindersifters" (II, p. 329).

The complication of feelings associated with sickness, loss of companionship, bad weather—the permeation of external nature by winter cold and death and the permeation of life with illness and loss—is commonly made in Keats's letters with the reticence, hesitancy, and restraint of wit and irony; but this method in no way indicates any lack of earnestness or sincerity about the tragedy of the strange complexities and reversals of life. The presence of wit and irony in Keats in association with his concern with mutability and other "disagreeables" in no way suggests a lack of concern with mutability or of the power of death in its relation to the world and the individual. In fact, wit and irony—indirection, reticence, obliqueness—are found in Keats usually
in conjunction with some deep, serious, and disturbing concern.

Keats indicates in the letters that he had a detached, ironical attitude toward his own thought and poetry. In his letters to his friends which include speculation or specimens of his poetry there is consistently a reticence expressed through wit. He writes to Bailey of reality and the function of the mind or imagination in relation to reality, an important problem for a Romantic poet and thinker, in a passage introducing the sonnet, "Four Seasons," the wit and whimsical nature of which has been generally disregarded:

As Tradesmen say every thing is worth what it will fetch, to probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer—being in itself a nothing—Ethereal things may at least be thus real, divided under three heads, Things real—things semireal—and no things—Things real—such as Existences of Sun Moon and Stars and passages of Shakespeare—Things semireal such as Love, the clouds and etc. which require a greeting of the spirit to make them wholly exist—and Nothings which are made great and dignified by an ardent pursuit—which by the by stamps the burgundy mark on the bottles of our Minds, insomuch as they are able to "consecrate what'er they look upon." I have written a Sonnet here of a somewhat collateral nature—so don't imagine it an a propos dos botes. (I, p. 242, my emphasis)

He wrote to his brother and sister-in-law enclosing "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," and explaining the choice of four kisses in stanza eight of the first version:

Why four kisses—you will say—why four because I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse—she would have fain said "score" without hurting the rhyme—but we must temper the Imagination as the Critics say with judgement. I was obliged to choose an even number that both eyes might have fair play; and to speak truly I think two a piece quite sufficient—Suppose I had said seven; there would have been three and a half a piece—a very awkward affair—and well got out of on my side (II, p. 97).

Poets are usually incapable of such detachment and playfulness when discussing their poetry.
He writes again to George and Georgiana of his sonnets, a genre in which he wrote some of his finest poetry: "Brown has been rummaging up some of my old sins—that is to say sonnets" (II, p. 104). In a letter to Georgiana, when George was visiting in England, Keats tells her what his brother is doing as he writes, referring offhand to his copying of Keats's verses: "George is busy this morning in making copies of my verses—He is making now one of an Ode to the nightingale, which is like reading an account of the black hole at Calcutta on an ice bergh" (II, p. 243). It is doubtful if any critic could be as disengaged, objective, and detached about the "Ode to a Nightingale" as is the poet himself. This passage on the Ode is a fine example of Keats's "feeling for light and shade," his "knowledge of contrasts"—here the contrast of the present winter and the absent spring, a "knowledge" basic to Keats's characteristic, related interest in time, temperature, and the seasons—expressed through wit.

Keats's letters are replete with irony, and wit. Wit is characteristically present in conjunction with his deepest and most disturbing concerns, such as sickness, weather, the seasons, friendship, time, and death. Wit and irony is resorted to by Keats to deal with and objectify his feelings about tragic situations both of his own life and the lives of those around him. This complexity, wit and irony return in the poetry, becoming a central and refined instrument in the great odes. In the poetry, as in the letters, Keats attempts to keep perspective, to keep a grasp on the more "disagreeable" truths of concrete reality—illness, cold, absence, time, death, and mutability—while keeping contact
with the "reality" of the ideal world of potentiality, the "world of love, friendship, natural beauty and art; to integrate these oppositions through irony, verbal wit, and complexity.

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Keats's poetry, throughout his career, reflects the irony and wit which are so recurrent in the letters. Robert Bridges, in an early, fundamental, and influential critical examination of Keats's poetry, asserted that he was too "earnest" to allow humor. As Bridges puts it: "Whether this earnestness is the account of his failure in his purely comic freaks I do not know, but it may certainly account for his want of humour, for which, in spite of some traces in his letters, it does not appear to have left any room."19 I cannot agree that there are only "traces" of humor in Keats's letters; wit and humor seem to occur quite often in Keats's letters. The wit of the letters is what give them their conversational tone and much of their interest and merit. I hope to demonstrate that the wit and irony in the letters appears also in the poetry.

Associated with the charge of "earnestness" and "want of humor" is the too recurrent charge that Keats's art is basically descriptive or pictorial, finding its source and method in the visual arts, such as painting. Allen Tate, in an influential discussion of Keats's work, in which he accurately concludes that Keats's central poetic subject is time, has made this charge in concurrence with a rather correct low evaluation of the third stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale." Tate says that Keats, "was a poet of space whose problem was to find a way of
conveying what happens in time; for it is time in which dramatic conflict takes place; and it is only by conversion into dramatic actuality that the parts of the verbal painting achieve relation and significance. 'The form of thought in Keats,' says Kenneth Burke, 'is mystical, in terms of an eternal present'—and I should add in terms of the arrested action of painting."20 Although I cannot be sure as to what Tate means by "verbal painting," I believe that this passage denigrates Keats's poetic ability by limiting it to that of description. "Verbal painting" must be inferior to painting itself, I would assume. Actually the methods of any two arts are distinct; the characteristic accomplishments of one can only be emulated by another through a control of the peculiar methods of the art applied, and then would probably fall short of this accomplishment in the art being emulated.

Keats's art is verbal not pictorial. Wit and irony are techniques having little place in the methods of painting or pictorial depicting of sensuous beauty; they are inherently methods of verbal and poetic art, dealing with ideas. The problem in the third stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale" is not that Keats is unable to convey what happens in time, but that he attempts to deal too directly with a deeply emotional and personal concern when such direct treatment is not his characteristic means of presenting the "disagreeables" of reality. Keats's "language" is not that of the description or depiction of the visual arts but that of poetic wit, indirection, metaphor, and verbal symbol; methods which can present content while holding both sides of a question in balance, that can "integrate contrarieties."
Even Bridges's assertion of the consistent failure of Keats's "purely comic freaks" is not entirely accurate. I should not ignore the opportunity, while discussing Keats's wit, to digress and present some of Keats's successful poetic humor, which has been commonly ignored elsewhere. Not all of Keats's "purely comic freaks" were "failures." This reader, at least, finds the following "Song," included in one of the letters of Keats, with its rather charming and effective sexual suggestion, a successful "comic freak":

I

O blush not so! O blush not so!
Or I shall think you knowing;
And if you smile the blushing while,
Then maidenheads are going.

II

There's a blush for won't, and a blush for shan't,
And a blush for having done it:
There's a blush for thought and a blush for naught,
And a blush for just begun it.

III

O sigh not so! O sigh not so!
For it sounds of Eve's sweet pippin:
By these loosen'd lips you have tasted the pips
And fought in an amorous nipping.

IV

Will you play once more at nice-cut-core,
For it only will last our youth out,
And we have the prime of the kissing time,
We have not one sweet tooth out.

V

There's a sigh for yes, and a sigh for no,
And a sigh for I can't bear it!
O what can be done, shall we stay or run?
O cut the sweet apple and share it! (p. 430)
Also should be included as a success, Keats's sonnet, "On Mrs. Reynold's Cat":

Cat! who hast pass'd thy grand climacteric,
   How many mice and rats hast in thy days
   Destroy'd?--How many tit bits stolen? Gaze
With those bright languid segments green, and prickle
Those velvet ears--but pr'ythee do not stick
   Thy latent talons in me--and upraise
   Thy gentle mew--and tell me all thy frays
Of fish and mice, and rats and tender chick.
Nay, look not down, nor lick they dainty wrists--
   For all the wheezy asthma,--and for all
   Thy tail's tip is nick'd off--and though the fists
Of many a maid have given thee many a maul,
Still is that fur as soft as when the lists
   In youth thou enter'dst on glass-bottled wall. (p. 42)

In this primarily witty poem, there is an interesting, and characteristic treatment of time in both "grand climacteric" and "latent talons"; "latent talons" is actually a successful comic example of stationing, or interwoven time.

Another successful sonnet, left in the literary remains, is full of successful irony and wit directed against sentimentality and those things which are so generally prized by "fashion" but irritate the individual:

The House of Morning written by Mr. Scott,--
   A sermon at the Magdalen--a tear
   Dropt on a greasy novel,--want of cheer
After a walk up hill to a friend's cot,--
   Tea with a Maiden Lady--a curs'd lot
   Of worthy poems with the Author near,--
   A patron lord--a drunkenness from beer,--
Haydon's great picture,--a cold coffee pot
At midnight when the Muse is ripe for labour,--
   The voice of Mr. Coleridge,--a French Bonnet
Before you in the pit,--a pipe and tabour,--
   A damn'd inseparable flute and neighbour,--
   All these are vile,--but viler Wordsworth's Sonnet
On Dover:--Dover!--who could write upon it? (p. 424)
In this sonnet Keats has, as in the letters, juxtaposed wit with some of his deepest concerns; Haydon and his picture had been deep emotional entities in Keats's life for many years. Here they are included with the boredom and irritations of life, which is only too often filled with pettiness, vanity, and sentimentality. Keats saw even the most central and important aspects of his own life in the round, and represented his ambivalent feelings toward them, in irony.

Keats's early poems show a propensity for grotesque and obvious puns. This propensity to pun in the poetry reflects the tendencies of his age, his circle of friends and his letters. The source and ambiguities of language fascinated Keats (as they should all poets). In an early poem, "Epistle to George Keats," Keats makes a bad pun from this fascination: "Like a sweet nun in holy-day attire" (p. 27, line 62). He makes the same type of pun in a very late poem, "A Dream, After Reading Dante's Episode of Paolo and Francesca":

Vanish'd unseasonably at shut of eve,
When the dusk holiday—or holinight
Of fragrant-curtain'd love begins to weave
The woof of darkness thick, for hid delight;

(p. 370, lines 9-12)

In "Endymion," Book II, Keats makes a pun with the theme of his poem, the marriage of a mortal and an immortal, Endymion and Cynthia, and with the important symbolism of his heroine, who is goddess of the moon; Venus says to Endymion at the end of Book III,

... Pr'ythee soon,
Even in the passing of thine Honey-moon,
Visit thou my Cythera: (p. 128, lines 916-918)

In this pun Keats almost forces the reader to a consideration of his tone
in the poem; this exaggeration of method, which must influence the tone
of the poem and qualify the position of the poet, is allowed in order
to create tentativeness for the writer and the reader.

In the central stanzas of another of Keats's long narrative
poems Keats allows a pun to enter. In stanza LIX of "Isabella: or
the Pot of Basil," as the murderers begin to suspect the continued
solicitation of their sister for the pot of basil containing Lorenzo's
head, a subtle and grotesque pun expresses their desire to discover the
cause of their sister's concern with the potted plant; "they watch'd a
time when they might sift/This hidden whim" (p. 193, stanza LIX, lines
1-2). In this passage there is obvious irony directed back toward the
poet and the "smokeable" content and theme of his work, a work which
he had admittedly come later to consider with some "critical irony."
Such puns make it difficult to decide whether we should criticize the
poet of this sentimental poem, or if he is laughing at our inability
to see the irony and fullness of his own vision of his work; or whether
we should enjoy and smile together. I not only find this pun effective
in mitigating the "earnestness" of Keats toward a poem, about which the
poet and many readers are unsure, but also subtly humorous. I have
heard this poem referred to as "high camp"--to substitute modern slang
for Keats's slang use of "smokeable";\textsuperscript{22} such a description may be very
appropriate, for Keats was sincere in enjoying the subject of his work
and is certainly not simply comic in his approach to this subject, but
he saw the other and skeptical view of the subject and allowed for this
side with irony and exaggeration.
Keats's exaggeration of methods in his early poetry is a type of irony intended to qualify the tone of the work, and this practice remains and is refined in his later works. One of Keats's continuing poetic characteristics, whether as a virtue or a vice, is poetic "nerve." In "I Stood Tip-Toe" he does not revise the "introductory" lines: "So I straightway began to pluck a posey/Of luxuries bright milky, soft and rosy" (p. 3, lines 27-28), which may involve a bad play on "poesy" and "posey," and certainly extreme license with rhyme. In "To George Felton Mathew," another very early poem, he includes a liberty with rhyme and language which created one of those unfortunate, mawkish effects in his early poetry, effects which actually are not removed in his mature verse but transformed into his essential virtues of freedom and intrepid originality with language. In this poem he asserts that for poetry, "There must be too a ruin dark, and gloomy,/To say 'joy not too much in all that's bloomy'" (p. 24, lines 51-52). In "Endymion" he refuses to delete the exaggeration of the complex sexual suggestion of lines which he must have realized could be, and probably would be, startling and disturbing to his readers; after a "meeting" with Cynthea, Endymion "swoon'd/Drunken from pleasure's nipple" (p. 101, lines 868-869).

Keats will not give up the striking integration of sexuality, liquor, drunkenness, pleasure and blessedness, for poetic propriety. Lines such as:

Now I have tasted her sweet soul to the core
All other depths are shallow: essences,
Once spiritual, are like muddy lees,
Meant but to fertilize my earthly root,
And make my branches lift a golden fruit
Into the bloom of heaven:  (p. 102, lines 904–909)

are notable not for the subtlety and suggestiveness of their sexuality, but for the blatant, "aggressive" inclusion of fundamental "earthly" sexuality in content, imagery, and even phonetic technique; and the intrepid merger of this "earthly" sexuality with "the bloom of heaven."

Keats characteristically in the early poetry engages in extreme exaggeration of poetic techniques. In "Endymion," Book III, he forces the assonance, one of the essential poetic powers of Keats in his great poetry, to the breaking point, in lines such as: "Of the dome pomp, reflected in extremes,/Globing a golden sphere" (p. 127, lines 886–887), in which the interaction of the content and the assonance of the recurrent "ou" sounds is truly "extreme." His liberties with language which question the tone of the verse in "Endymion," are the foundation and source of the great wit and complexity of the later poetry. Keats seems to flaunt the reader's expectation with his poetic daring and ability in the unconventional use of language in such lines as "And Vesper, risen star, began to throe/In the dusk heavens silvery" (p. 144, lines 485–486). Even in his later and successful poetry he still qualifies the tone of the work with exaggerations of method. The description of the central and culminating dramatic event in "Lamia," the death of the goddess, includes such exaggeration in a glaring display of assonance and consonance. Under the philosopher's eye, "Lamia breathed death breath" (p. 178, line 299). In "Isabella" Keats's description of the dead Lorenzo returned from his grave to Isabella's bedside approaches
humor in its graphic and grotesquely exaggerated description: "The forest tomb . . . past his loame ears/Had made miry channel for his tears" (p. 187, stanza XXXV, lines 3, 7-8).

I would suggest—particularly since they are not discarded but refined in the great poetry—that such exaggerations and liberties are more the result of a tentativeness about the subject, theme, and content of Keats's poetry, indicating that he wanted to question the tone of his work (his position in reference to the work), and to practice and encourage the expansive power that he sought; than they are, as usually asserted merely signs of his immaturity and failure to preserve critical control over—or critical irony toward—his works.25 John Bayley has written a curiously suggestive and original article on Keats's poetry and the poet's attitude toward his poetry, in which he asserts that what has been called the vulgarity, mawkishness, or commonness of the early poetry, particularly as regards sex, represents the essence of Keats and must be recognized in refined forms in the later and more "mature" poetry.26 I cannot help but agree that what Bayley calls the arrogance and "guts" of the early poetry is what in the later poetry makes Keats essentially a poet of existential as well as aesthetic concerns. If you take away Keats's "nerve"—his liberties, his exaggerations, his arrogance in handling language and themes—you would lose the original and unique Keats. I hope to show that Keats keeps his arrogance, his detachment, his liberties of tone and language in the later poetry and that this arrogance and intrepid freedom from expectation and tradition—which is so obvious a target for criticism in the
early poetry—is an essential part of his strength; and that these exaggerations of methods and flaunting of expectation in the great poetry, particularly the odes, still find their foundation in subtle irony and wit. If one reads closely, he sees that Keats's poetry is constantly taking liberties with the traditional expectations which we bring to poetry; he is constantly questioning the reader about exactly where the poet stands in relation to the various views possible toward the subject of his verse; and consequently, also, where the reader should stand.

Keats wanted to keep dramatic distance between himself and his work and to take a morally objective or tentative position toward his content. Such a desire is the basis for his description of the fundamental poetic quality, "negative capability" (The Letters, I, p. 195), which was derived from his considerations of Shakespeare, a quality which, outside drama, almost demands indirection, irony, and reliance on symbol and metaphor. Mario L. D'Avanzo asserts that the essential metaphorical quality of Keats's poetry is "carried to the point of camouflage":

In the poetry of Keats ... metaphors are so allusive and so easily read into other contexts of meaning that their real significance is buried. Other more highly personal series of metaphors to describe his inner life of imagination are frequently carried to the limits of camouflage. Keats's life was his poetry, and each individual poem an "allegory" of the inner life of imagination, as he suggests in a letter to George and Georgiana:27

D'Avanzo asserts that the characteristic metaphorical nature of Keats's poetry, its objectivity and his aesthetic theory of "negative capability," lead to the "devices of artistic indirection":
"negative capability" and the "chameleon poet" are in a sense anti-Romantic, because they call for objectivity, not subjectivity. They repudiate the "egotistical sublime" of Wordsworth, who peacocks his way through poetry. Wordsworth does not "look steadily at his subject"; moreover, his didacticism leads Keats to assert, "We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us." "Man should not dispute or assert but whisper results to his neighbour." By "whisper" Keats means the devices of artistic indirection, the result of which is achieved by the poet's concern for the particular and not the general. Keats, often talking about the fundamentals of poetry in this way, stresses the concrete as essential in capturing the attention of the reader. Through immediately apprehended language, i.e., suitable imagery and metaphor, the superior or Keatsian poet suggests, embodies, or "whispers" his ideas. The concept of the "chameleon poet" attests to the essentially metaphorical nature of poetry, conceived as the habitual objectification of thought and feeling.

Keats strives through artistic indirection and metaphor to keep his grasp on the particular and to keep a tentative or ambiguous position in relation to his subject. If his poetry is ready with an awareness that it contains indirection, irony, and a certain ambiguity of meaning, it is saved from being an arch expression of Romantic credulity; healthy ambivalence is present. Much of the imagistic and technical unity of Keats's early poetry can be entirely missed, particularly in his oblique treatment of the immediate "concrete" subject of his poems, without reference to poetic wit and the pun.

A good poem to use in order to demonstrate the unity derived through the play of poetic wit and subtle pun is one of Keats's early poetic successes, the sonnet, "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles for the First Time":

My spirit is too weak—mortality
   Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,
   And each imagin'd pinnacle and steep
   Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die
Like a sick Eagle looking at the sky.
Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep,
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain
Bring round the heart an undescrivable feud;
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude
Wasting of old Time—with a billowy main—
A sun—a shadow of a magnitude. (p. 376)

In the pun of line four, "godlike hardship," the theme, the imagery, and the subject of the poem are exhaustively included; the poem is about stone statuary, and it employs an imagery of a "sick" eagle, and this bird's association with mountains, to carry a theme of the helplessness, yet awe and "reverence," inspired in the poet by the "imposing" examples of previous art. "Weighs heavily," which begins the second line, is another pun hearkening back to the "concrete" subject of the sonnet and also to the theme of the "impressiveness" of the Greek statuary. The references to "pinnacle" and "steep" apply to the subjects of the poem but also reinforce the imagistic pattern of the eagle's predicament and the "unattainable grandeur" of the marbles. The word, "dizzy," of line eleven can only have full organic appropriateness when placed in the context of the eagle's condition. The "rude wasting" of time has its appropriateness in the reference to the central embedded vehicle, or "common denominator," of all these concerns of theme, subject and imagery which is "stone," the most concrete, immediate, simple, and common concept through which Keats can connect his subject, imagery, and theme.

The subjects of the sonnet are stone; the theme, which is these subjects' imposing "unattainableness," and the subjects' physical
substance, if imaginatively brought together, suggests mountains; mountains and the unattainable glory of the subjects suggest the eagle and his powerless state. The extended connection of subject, theme, and imagery through this common denominator works with the complexity and ingenuo of the conceit; one might call it a subtle Romantic conceit. This conceit is controlled and reinforced essentially through puns and metaphors which are built on the foundation of pun (see footnote 41 for a discussion of the pun). If one misses the surprisingly simple play of wit that unifies the use of language in the poem, much of the language, such as "dizzy" or "rude wasting," will seem like literary, conventional, or random choice and inorganic decoration.

If we disregard Keats's arrogant display of wit based on the most common and surprisingly simple aspects of his subjects and content— even in the finest, most serious, and "earnest" of his poetry—we miss the basis of the unity of the poetic expression, some of what is being said, and may mistakenly believe that Keats sees only one side of the oppositions or "contrarieties" with which he deals in poetry. Such failure is especially detrimental to the odes, which show Keats at his most complex and subtle, making the greatest claims for his subjects, and the "visions" of the imagination inspired by these subjects, while remaining the most tentative in tone and most firmly connected to the concrete in method.

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The odes show the earlier types of wit refined into a means of complexity of meaning and intentional tentativeness about the more
"spiritual," "metaphysical," or philosophical content of these poems, which David Perkins has called poems of "symbolic debate."²⁹ Perkins asserts that the purpose of the method of the odes, symbolic debate, examination of the various significances of a subject, is to allow the poet tentativeness in his claims or conclusions; for "the poet need not unify his attitudes before writing the poem. If he himself remains perplexed and divided, the central symbol may hold the poem together and permit a temporary, ad hoc resolution."³⁰ We should remember, as evidenced by the letters, that Keats's tendency is to couple subtle irony with his deepest concerns and that he had a limited and skeptical attitude toward his own best poetry. His ambiguous description of the expression of Hermes in "Lamia" might be applied to his own poetic expression: "Light flew his earnest words, among the blossoms blown" (p. 163, line 91).³¹ Keats's poetic expression paradoxically is concurrently both light and earnest.

Harold Bloom adequately describes what I believe to be Keats's attitude toward his content; Bloom concludes that, "It is not that he lacked the confidence of Blake and of Shelley, or of the momentary Wordsworth of "The Recluse." He felt the imagination's desire for a revelation that would redeem the inadequacies of our condition, but he felt also a humorous skepticism toward such desire."³² Keats felt a "humorous skepticism" toward his desire for and faith in a "revelation" to "redeem the inadequacies of our condition." Bloom quotes Walter Jackson Bate as asserting that "we under-estimate Keats's humor in the Great Odes, and he is probable right, but the humor that apparently
ends the "Grecian Urn" is a grim one."³³

Actually there is no disagreement here; Keats's "humor," since it is of that high kind that allows the recognition of the disparity between our ideals in visions of the potential beauty of the world and the "inadequacies" of reality, is naturally in theme, grim and in tone, ironic. It results from Keats's poetic position, as summed up by Bloom—in which the critic employs imagery of weather and the seasons which must reflect his saturation in the imagery and concerns of the poet—that, "whether the great winter of the world can be relieved by any ode Keats tended to doubt."³⁴ Both Bate and Bloom have implied and suggested that humor, a grim one, is somehow at the bottom of Keats's poetic stance and method. This grim "humor" is irony.

Bloom suggests that the repetitions of the "Ode to Psyche" are in some sense intentionally "ludicrous," glancing "back with high good humor, at the haunted rituals . . . of the poems of heaven."³⁵ I would agree that they are, at least, intentional exaggeration, and would add that the exaggerations of reiteration and method in these stanzas relate to those exaggerations of method and theme that we found running through much of Keats's poetry. The lines referred to are from stanzas three and four:

Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
Upon the midnight hours;
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
From chain-swung censer teeming;
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming. (p. 211)³⁶

The liberties and exaggeration in these repeated lines of the "Ode to
Psyche," and the effect they must have on tone, is reflected in many of the methods which run through all the great odes.

Keats disturbs our expectations in the odes in that after the obliquely treats or intentionally avoids naming again the immediate subjects of the odes. The word "nightingale" does not occur in the "Ode to a Nightingale"; nor "urn" in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; and there is no mention of autumn in "To Autumn"; Keats exhaustively describes and treats the significances of his subjects while meticulously avoiding again mentioning them by name. Such intentional indirection is present also in the choice of imagery for the "Ode to a Nightingale" and the "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

In the former which has an auditory subject the central, recurrent imagery is visual. Out of context, the phrase which begins the sixth stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale," "Darkling I listen," is an example of obvious wit in its paradoxical impossibility. The lack of light hinders vision not hearing and yet the "fading" quality of the experience of the song is carried by images of light:

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

In stanza II the poet wishes to "leave the world unseen" and "fade away into the forest dim"; in stanza III "to think is to be full" of "leaden-eyed despairs"; in stanza V the poet "cannot see" the various beautiful processes of nature—even though he is able to describe them at length--; and in stanza IV the poet decides to be "charioted" by "the viewless wings of Poesy." And the crucial question ending the ode about the
value of the experience of the entire poem is, with possible irony, "Was this auditory experience a 'vision'?" This irony adds to the ambiguity of the wording of this important question; there is already the ambiguity as to whether Keats is opposing "vision," as a valid revelation, to the unreality of "a waking dream": ("Was it a vision, or a waking dream?").

"Vision" can mean simply sight; it can mean a transcendant but unreal and misleading hallucination; or it can mean a meaningful and prophetic revelation. Probably, all of these multivalences are being encouraged. This culminating query of the ode, thus becomes a complex question with three possible answers; a question implying irony since, depending on what level we take the question, we may be in the realm of the most commonplace or the most philosophical and "ideal" problems; the ambiguity of "vision" in the question qualifies the claims of the poet for his experience while integrating the opposition of the denial of the validity of the experience with the most impressive and far reaching claims for it. The word involves a complex interaction and balancing of disparate, even incongruous, connotations. Such a manipulating of connotation is what Brooks calls irony, the essential method of poetry as opposed to discursive statement.

The subject of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which is visual, is dealt with in a central imagery of hearing and the lack of hearing, with the three recurrent and important uses of "silent" and the final paradoxical and contradictory willingness and ability of the "silent form" to "tell" its "tale" (to the eternal consternation of critics of
literature). Brooks in his discussion of the literary irony that holds this poem together has emphasized Keats's demand for what he calls a "realistic basis for metaphor." Brooks makes this assertion in reference to the presence of such impossibilities as the pipes which do not play yet can be "heard":

\[\ldots\ ye\ soft\ pipes,\ play\ on;\]
\[\text{Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,}\]
\[\text{Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.}\]

Brooks explains the metaphoric illusion of these lines in the following way: "Yet, by characterizing the pipes as 'soft,' the poet has provided a sort of realistic basis for his metaphor: the pipes, it is suggested, are playing very softly; if we listen carefully, we can hear them; their music is just below the threshold of normal sound." I hesitate to include Walt Disney with Cleanth Brooks in a consideration of literature but this function of the "realistic basis for metaphor" is very close to what Disney has described, in discussing the comic methods of his cartoons, as the "probable impossible." We have all seen the cartoon character run over the cliff, notice his mistake, and then scramble back using the air as a "barely adequate" surface. We accept this, although we laugh in this case, even though it is patently impossible. Romantic illusion and Keats's practice of always having a "realistic basis" for his metaphor is wit of this kind.

Some accepted impossibilities, paradoxes, or illusions are pervasive in Keats and have been noticed by many critics. F. W. Bateson notices the paradoxical quality of the references in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." He speaks of the "timeless time ('for ever wilt thou
love, and she be fair'); "soundless sound" and "stationary growth ('Nor ever can these trees be bare')." Brook finds paradox in the development of the poem:

If the earlier stanzas have been concerned with such paradoxes as the ability of static carving to convey dynamic action, of the soundless pipes to play music sweeter than that of the heard melody, of the figured lover to have a love more warm and panting than that of breathing flesh and blood, so in the same way the town implied by the urn comes to have a richer and more important history than that of actual cities. Indeed, the imagined town is to the figured procession as the unheard melody is to the carved pipes of the unwearied melodist. And the poet, by pretending to take the town as real—so real that he can imagine the effect of its silent streets upon the stranger who chances to come into it—has suggested in the most powerful way possible its essential reality for him—and for us. It is a case of the doctor taking his own medicine: the poet is prepared to stand by the illusion of his own making.

Romantic illusion is directly involved in the poet's position in relation to his poetry; the intentional obviousness of the creation of illusion implies a working, active knowledge on the poet's part of the presence of illusion and a desire on his part to keep the reader's awareness of illusion as viable. Keats's "taking his own medicine" does suggest, as Brooks asserts, the imaginative reality of the illusion for him; but also, once the reader realizes that the flat nonexistence of the town is treated with even more "reality" than the "real" depictions of the art object allegedly before the poet; he must be somewhat surprised in whatever credibility he has granted, not only to the subject of the depictions described by the poet, but even more in the credibility he has allowed the poetic generalizations and claims "derived" from these objects. It takes poetic "nerve" to indicate the play of invention and illusion in poetry that has a serious intent and which wishes
to convince.

Puns, a basic type of verbal wit, are the central and most obvious method that Keats employs to keep a realistic basis for metaphor. The great odes are full of subtle puns, only some of which have been discussed fully in their function in regard to Keats's themes and tone. The last stanza of the "Ode to a Grecian Urn," possibly the most critically discussed stanza in English poetry as to content and tone, is full of puns, and verbal wit related to puns, which have not as yet been dealt with or used adequately in interpreting this stanza:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
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'st,
Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.  

The introductory apostrophes, "O Attic shape! Fair attitude," employ verbal wit in the repetition of sounds and in the ambiguity of "attitude"; does this word simply mean shape or does it imply a "psychological condition," an "attitude" not only observed but observing? It intentionally includes both meanings, the realistic basis for metaphor in the simple meaning, shape, and, on the poetic illusory or "ideal" side of the ambiguity, a preparation for the "animation" of the urn and its expressing an "attitude" in the last lines. Kenneth Burke has recognized the puns in the second line, in the phrase, "Marble men and maidens overwrought"; does the adjective, "overwrought," mean merely "carved"
or does it refer also to the "men and maidens!" mental or emotional condition to the events depicted or carved, such a secondary possibility, when once discovered, is unavoidable, no matter how ironic, even sardonic, such a meaning seems. Burke also suggests the obvious, related, pun on "brede" in the first line.

These puns must and should condition the reader's response to the poet's seeming denial of the urn's emotional value in line five where (in another apostrophe) he calls the urn a "Cold Pastoral!," implying that the urn is self-contradictory, uncooperative in its silence, and unmoved by, and uninvolved in, human life. If the reader's attention has been drawn strongly enough to the "realistic," simple, and common basis of the poetic statements, the initial response elicited by "Cold" may be simply reference to the conventional tactile condition of marble or stone, its coldness to the touch. Such a limitation of complexity would constitute the obtuse, "naive error" in the reading of poetry, a complete blindness to the more poetic, general connotations of the poet's language, the ignorance of tenor. If he on the other hand has been caught up completely in the illusion, in the imaginative, poetic side of the "discussion" of the subject, he may see only the rejection of the piece of art as "cold," implying the metaphorical, metaphysical or "spiritual" connotation of "cold," implying that art is not applicable to real, "warm" human life. This limitation of meaning exhibits the more common "sophisticated error" in the reading of poetry, the error of "leaving" vehicle completely in a "search" for tenor. Actually Keats has created a complex "pun" which recapitulates the problem of the poem
by attempting to hold the physical and the metaphysical, the particular and the general, the concrete and the ideal derived from this concrete subject, together. Thus, the poet keeps a grasp on the reality of the "silent form" before him—and on the fact that it may be only he, himself, doing the talking—and he is able to preserve tentativeness about his claim for the urn's ability to resolve the problems of man, who is "in the midst of other woe," being involved in the "warm" real world, where all things pass away. The ambiguity inherent in the pun on "cold" recapitulates the struggle of the poet to find in the physical object a solution to metaphysical problems; this struggle is the theme and irony of the ode.

It is Keats's standard procedure to demand a firm base for any poetic generalizations or claims in the most common and undeniable aspects of the most physical conditions of his subject. Earl Wasserman explains the basic thematic purpose of this practice in Keats, in his discussion of the irony in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and the "Ode to a Nightingale":

There is irony in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in the opposition of the love that is "forever warm" and the "Cold Pastoral," and the "Ode to a Nightingale" in janus-like value of "forlorn" and in the multivalences of death, dark, light. But this irony is not merely a literary device Keats has chosen for securing organicism because he knows the secret of art; it derives necessarily from the peculiar metaphysics within which he writes, for that pattern of thought requires that he strive to reconcile the mortal with the immortal without cancelling either.

Keats allows puns and wit that include both the physical and the metaphysical so that the reader can only with circumspection disengage the two; it is the poet's desire that these two cannot be disengaged, that heaven and earth could become one.
A consideration of the general practice of Keats in keeping the claims for his subjects firmly grounded in undebatable objective fact, his metaphor firmly grounded in vehicle, should be brought to the critical contention about Keats's assertion that the nightingale in the seventh stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale" is "immortal":

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
   No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
   In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found its path
   Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
   The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
   Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Robert Bridges, very early in Keats criticism, presented the recurrent discontent about the claims of the introductory line of this stanza, complaining that "the intense feeling in Keats's description of human sorrow (stanza 3) is weaken's by the direct platitude that the bird has never known it; and in the penultimate stanza the thought is fanciful or superficial,—man being as immortal as the bird in every sense but that of sameness, which is assumed and does not satisfy." H. W. Garrod, the editor of Keats's poetry, follows up the attack on this line in his critical work on Keats, when he asserts that, "this nightingale, and not some other of its kind, was heard 'in ancient days' by I know not what 'emperor and clown.'"

The realistic and undebatable basis for Keats's claim of immortality for the "Bird" in the introductory line of this stanza does not refer to this bird, to the genus nightingale, nor even to this song—it
must be evident, that as Sidney Colvin concluded the poem is inspired
by and directed "to" a "bird-song" not a "song-bird" but to the
"genus-song" of the nightingale, the recurrence or relative "immortality"
of which, in history and in the realm of literature and thought, Keats
contemplates throughout the remainder of the stanza. It is interesting
and strange that birds of the same genus sing the same song from genera-
tion to generation. It might of course be argued that even this "genus-
song" cannot be said to be necessarily of infinite duration, but this
contention is analogous to arguing that mankind or the universe is not
immortal—which they are not—but in relation to the individual, caught
in the existential flux of mutability, their "immortality" is impressive,
even awe inspiring. Actually the meaning of "immortal" is made somewhat
ambiguous by this realistic basis for the claim for the bird's song, an
ambiguity which may intentionally influence our final decision about
the power of this intense beautiful experience to transcend time, to be-
come immortal in some sense. Thus, this ambiguity conditions our con-
sideration of the problem on which the "symbolic debate" of the poem
turns.

Keats, of course, is making a disguised claim for his immediate
experience of a particular song, which in some very difficult and tenta-
tive way he is claiming to be "immortal"; but he is sure to embed this
claim in a simple reference to a fairly simple fact of reality, the fact
that generations have heard the same song that inspires this particular
man at this particular time. But if we deny the ambiguity, complexity,
wit, and irony of Keats's method then we may accuse him of Romantic
credulousness in blithely declaring a bird to be immortal when it is no such thing, or we may see the claim of immortality for the bird's song as a useless platitude. If, however, we allow the ambiguity and wit, the reference ramifies the overall theme of the poem, the involved discussion of the effect and permanence of the poet's intense experience, or "vision," in overcoming time. If we do not recognize Keats's wit—complexity, ambiguity, and indirection—we cannot fully comprehend the development and the resolutions that result from his symbolic "debate" with his subjects, his poetic reflections on immediate reality, which is the method of the odes.

Keats suggests that he views poetry as indirect, ambiguous, deceptive, and oblique in surprisingly recurrent use of words of "deception" in crucial sections of the odes, words such as "cheating," "feigning," "teasing," "disguising," and "conspiring." At the end of the "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats complains, the "fancy cannot cheat so well?/ As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf." Robert M. Adams has noted that "the word 'feign' is passed over in the 'Ode to Psyche' without further comment; but it is close kin to two other pejorative intrusive verbs in two of the very greatest Odes—to 'cheat' in the 'Ode to a Nightingale' and to 'tease' in the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.'"\(^{49}\)

In the "Ode on Indolence" Keats questions the figures of love, poetry, and fame:

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How came ye muffled in so hush a mask?
Was it a silent deep-disguised plot
To steal away, and leave with a task
My idle days? (p. 355, stanza 2, lines 2-5)
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"Silent deep-disguised plot" is certainly pejorative, as is much of this passage, and this phrase is associated, as are most of the other pejorative words of deception and illusion, with the processes and results of verse, and the sources of verse in the imagination. 50 "Mask," I would suggest, is a pun, playing on both the secrecy of a "mask" worn on the face (as in Greek drama) and a "masque," a pageant in the Elizabethan theatre, the movement of which would be appropriate to the actions of the figures as described. The latter meaning is primary since there is only one "mask" and three figures, but the underlying pun is strongly suggested by both the adjective "muffled," the adjective "hush" in describing the "mask," and by the fact that the pageant, or "plot," is "deep-disguised." These pejorative words—"feign," "tease," "cheat," "deceiving," "conspiring"—, in the "Ode on Indolence," the "Ode to a Nightingale," the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "To Autumn," and the apostrophe directed to the personifications of verse, fame and love in the "Ode on Indolence, suggest that Keats had an ambivalent view of poetry as involving deception, indirection, or illusion, a view which relates well with the indirections, irony, wit, and puns which pervade the methods of Keats's verse. The exaggerations, puns, and the pejorative words of deception in relation to poetry are characteristic of Keats's indirection, skepticism, irony, and tentativeness in his claims for the power of poetic illusion and for the beautiful potential side of life.

Thus, Jack Stillinger's influential emphasis on the "questionable" aspects of "The Eve of St. Agnes," based on two pejorative words, 51
could really, with equal justice, be applied to much of Keats's poetry, poetry the sincerity or "earnestness" of which is never questioned. Stillinger begins his discussion of the insincerity of Keats's hero in "The Eve of St. Agnes" in the proposal made by him to Angela, which was, "A stratagem that makes the beldame start" (p. 199, stanza XVI, line 4). He exploits also the pejorative tone of the line describing Madeline as "Hoodwink'd with fairy fancy; all amott" (p. 197, stanza VIII, line 7). Such pejorative words should not be used to deny the sincerity of Keats about whatever poetic statement he is making, such as the merger of "divine" and "earthly" love in "The Eve of St. Agnes," but rather should be seen to indicate a latent irony, tentativeness, and fullness of vision about the poet's themes. If we seriously question the more spiritual or metaphysical side of "The Eve of St. Agnes," basing this doubt on the choice of pejorative words of deception, such as "hood-wink'd," in central passages we would have to question the same sides of most of Keats's greatest and most earnest poetry, including the "Ode on Indolence," the "Ode to a Nightingale," the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and "To Autumn," the first verb of which is pejorative (p. 218, line 3).

The pejorative words in Keats's poetry do not indicate that we should drop the more difficult and beautiful claims made by Keats for love, friendship, natural beauty, and art; but that we should place these words as indications of the indirection and skeptical foundation that Keats allows, or intentionally arranges, for his poetry in order to show that he sees both sides of the question, the oppositions and problems confronting his claims for the areas of human happiness and
beauty, and to show his tentativeness about the possibility of a concept of process, the immortality of art, or of the species, or even intense points of experience to ameliorate the suffering of real people or to mitigate or solve the problem that these very concerns are permeated by mutability, nonbeing, and death. Irony and indirectness in Keats does not indicate that he is not serious or that he is not deeply disturbed about, and concerned with, his content, or that he does not truly feel the power of the beauty that he creates; but rather that he sees the content and the beauty in the round, including the contrarieties and "disagreeables" of reality.

"To Autumn," which seems Keats's most direct and unambiguous creation of beauty, is introduced in the letters by a passage that is both ironic and revealing. M. R. Ridley has asserted that, "the first hint that we have of the poem is, in view of what is to come, frankly comic. Just a fortnight before Keats wrote a letter to Taylor about climates and soils suitable for Taylor's health; and in it he says 'the autumn fogs over a rich land is like the steam from cabbage water.'"\(^5\) The entire passage from the letters is even more interesting and revealing:

You should live in a dry, gravelly, barren elevated country open to the currents of air, and such a place is generally furnished with the finest springs—The neighborhood of a rich enclosed fulsome manured arrable Land especially in a valley or almost as bad on a flat, would be almost as bad as the smoke of Fleet street. Such a place as this was Shanklin only open to the south east and surrounded by hills in every direction—From this south east come the damps from the sea which having no egress the air would for days together take on an unhealthy idiosyncrasy altogether enervating and weakening as a city Smoke—I felt it very much—Since I have been at Winchester I have been improving in health—it is
not so confined—and there is on one side of the city a dry chalky down where the air is worth six pence a pint. So if you do not get better at Retford do not impute it to your own weakness before you have well considered the nature of the air and soil—especially as Autumn is encroaching; for the autumn fogs over a rich land is like the steam from cabbage water.

(II, p. 155)

This quotation shows that autumn is associated in Keats's thought and experience with his most recurrent, important, and disturbing concerns: health, climate, weather, friendship, and death; and that autumn's connection with these concerns is presented in wit and irony immediately before the creation of the ode "To Autumn." It also indicates that Keats had a fundamental feeling for the traditional tragic significance of this terminal season. I hope to show in the concluding chapter that the serenity of "To Autumn" surrounds a full and complex treatment of the "disagreeables" of Keats's thought and experience, the disturbing concerns which form such a recurrent "gordian complication of feelings" in the letters and the poetry, and that the treatment of this complication in "To Autumn" is basically related to the wit and poetic irony present in this "introductory" passage in the letters: that "To Autumn" seeks the artistic integration of contrarieties; that it too implies and includes poetic indirection and deception; and that the very resolution of the central contrariety of Keats's tragic concern, mutability, that this poem attempts, derives from Keats's recurrent attitude toward, and treatment of, the question of poetic illusion and deception.
NOTES

CHAPTER III


2Ibid., pp. 191-192.

3Ibid., p. 186. "I should like to refer the reader to a concrete case. Donne's 'Canonization' ought to provide a sufficiently extreme instance. The basic metaphor which underlies the poem (and which is reflected in the title) involves a sort of paradox. For the poet daringly treats profane love as if it were divine love. The canonization is not that of a pair of holy anchorites who have renounced the world and the flesh. The hermitage of each is the other's body; but they do renounce the world, and so their title to sainthood is cunningly argued. The poem then is a parody of Christian sainthood; but it is an intensely serious parody of a sort that modern man, habituated as he is to an easy yes or no, can hardly understand. He refuses to accept the paradox as a serious rhetorical device; and since he is able to accept it only as a cheap trick, he is forced into this dilemma. Either: Donne does not take love seriously; here he is merely sharpening his wit as a sort of mechanical exercise. Or: Donne does not take sainthood seriously; here he is merely indulging in a cynical and bawdy parody.

Neither account is true; a reading of the poem will show that Donne takes both love and religion seriously; it will show, further, that the paradox is here his inevitable instrument. But to see this plainly will require a closer reading than most of us give to poetry" (pp. 10-11).

"This statement may seem the less surprising when we reflect on how many of the important things which the poet has to say have to be said by means of paradox: most of the language of lovers is such—"The Canonization" is a good example; so is most of the language of religion—"He who would save his life, must lose it;" "The last shall be first." Indeed, almost any insight important enough to warrant a great poem apparently has to be stated in such terms. Deprived of the character of paradox with its twin concomitants of irony and wonder, the matter of Donne's poem unravels into "facts," biological, sociological, and economic" (p. 16).


5Ibid., p. 19.

7Hazlitt, p. 16.

8Wasserman, p. 227.


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10See note 41 of this chapter for a discussion of puns.

11The "Great Pox," of course, was venereal disease. The seriousness of this disease at the time can be gaged by referring to the present day concern for the "Pox" that was considered "Small" in comparison; it was truly no joking matter.

12The atmosphere of Winchester, which Keats treats humorously here, is the quality, "the spirit of Town quietude" (II, p. 201), which he avowedly attempted to capture in "The Eve of Saint Mark."

13Note the pun on "slipshod," indicating a physical condition but also the "incompetence" of personified nature.

14See note 14 of Chapter IV for a discussion of Keats’s recurrent reference to "mists."

15See the related passage from the letters referred to in note 24 of Chapter II.

16See the first line of "To Autumn," (p. 218). Turn to section 3 of this chapter for a discussion of Keats's predilection for ambiguous and ironical use of words, particularly pejorative verbs in the poetry.

17Turn to the passage indicated in note 22 of Chapter II for a more complete reference to this passage in the letters.

18See the passage quoted from the letters above.

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19Bridges, p. 167.


21See note 41 of this chapter for a discussion of the pun.
Keats said in a letter to Richard Woodhouse, his publisher, that "Isabella" was "too smokeable" to be published. He could get "it smok'd at the Carpenters Chimney much more cheaply" (II, p. 174). "To smoke" a thing, in the slang of Keats's day, meant to see through its pretensions; to "smoke it out," so to speak, as in hunting.

Note the recurrence of the references to core, which appeared in the "Song," "nice-cut-core" (section 3 of this chapter) suggesting a triple pun (core-center-apple core, essential part, and feminine sexuality). Keats attempts to integrate the most physical aspects of sexuality with its potential beauty.

The devices of poetry are all amusing when the multiple contributions of strength be within proper bounds. Rhyme is ordinarily not funny, but if it is far-fetched it may be. Polysyllabic rhymes are likely to be far-fetched in this sense, and can scarcely be used in serious poetry . . . Excessive rhythms and alliteration have become a part of folk humor: "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers" (Skinner, p. 98). I do not mean to suggest that Keats's exaggerations of rhyme and alliteration or assonance are intentionally comic, designed to make us laugh, but that he allows methods which are traditionally comic because of his desire to retain his reserve in relation to the claims of his poetry while experimenting in the possibilities and power of language and poetic method.

Keats came to prefer the expansive poetic power of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, who "were Emperors of vast provinces . . . and had only heard of the remote ones and scarcely cared to visit them," over the moderns, each of whom "governs his petty state and knows how many straws are swept dailey from the Causeways in all his dominions and has a continual itching that all the Housewives should have their coppers well scoured (I, p. 224). See the passage referred to in note 63 of Chapter IV for a similar quotation from this same passage in the letters.


Perkins, p. 299.

Ibid., p. 299.

See section 2 of this chapter for Keats's reticent and skeptical attitude toward his poetry exhibited in the letters.

33 Ibid., p. 520.

34 Ibid., p. 525.


36 See the discussion of the exaggerations of poetic technique in the previous section. The repetition of negatives, events which do not exist but are amply "realized" in the poetry, a practice extremely common in Keats (see the "Ode to a Nightingale," stanza V, for example), adds somehow to the exaggerated sense of the repetitions.

37 See note 55 of Chapter II for a discussion of the visual imagery of "The Ode to a Nightingale" and the irony implied in the manipulations of this imagery.


41 "Some of the best examples of multiple sources of strength are puns and other forms of wit. The effect upon the listener or reader . . . may be amusing or delightful, particularly in a period in which punning is fashionable, or it may share the sober profundity of dramatic irony. Jesus was presumably not joking when he said 'Thou are Peter (Tu es Petrus—Thou art a rock) and upon this rock I will build my church.' Nor was Shakespeare when he wrote,

Golden lads and girls all must
As chimney-sweepers, come to dust

Sometimes a response is repeated, as if under the control of multiple variables taken one at a time; thus, Othello says 'Put out the light and then put out the light,' responding to separate variables as if he were to say 'Snuff the candle and smother Desdemona'" (Skinner, p. 95). I mean by pun a rhetorical device employing double meaning; they may be "amusing" and "delightful" or "sober" and "profound"—even "tragic" as in the last example given by Skinner.

42 John Keats, John Keats: Selected Poetry and Letters, edited by Richard Harter Fogle (New York, 1964), p. 248. I use this edition rather than Garrod for this stanza of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" because I believe the entire last lines are meant to be "spoken" by the urn. See section 4 of Chapter IV for further reference to the problematic "quotation" of the urn. Although Garrod retains the quotation marks it
has been determined that they are a mistake resulting from Keats's inability to see the poem through publication. See Bate, John Keats, p. 516.

43 An urn appeared before, in "Endymion," where it was silent, but involved in speech:

Aye, 'bove the withering of old-lipp'd Fate
A thousand Powers keep religious state
In water, fiery realm, and airy bourne;
And, silent as a consecrated urn,
Hold sphery sessions for a season due (p. 106, lines 29-33)
Here also Keats employs a pun on the physical condition of the urn—this time its shape rather than its temperature—which is helpful in allowing the poet a link for metaphor.

44 Henri Bergson says in "Laughter" that: "Most words might be said to have a "physical" and a "moral" meaning, according as they are interpreted literally or figuratively. Every word, indeed, begins by denoting a concrete object or a material action; but by degrees the meaning of the word is refined into an abstract relation or a pure idea: 'A comic effect is obtained whenever we pretend to take literally an expression which was used figuratively'; or, 'Once our attention is fixed on the material aspect of a metaphor the idea expressed becomes comic'" (from The Comic in Theory and Practice, p. 60). I would not agree that the play on "cold" is comic, but I would not wish to discourage the notion that this "pun" not only recapitulates the problem of the theme but also allows the poet a recourse to some temporary ironic detachment at this point in his discussion of the problems surrounding the urn.

45 Wasserman, p. 227.

46 Bridges, p. 130.


48 Sidney Colvin, John Keats (New York, 1925), p. 419.


50 The "pejorative intrusive verb" to "tease" in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" can be traced throughout Keats's letters and poetry. In a letter to Reynolds in 1820 about Barry Cornwall's "Dramatic Scenes" Keats says, "I confess they tease me—they are composed of Amiability the Seasons, the Leaves, the Moon etc., which are recurrent subjects in Keats's verse also upon which he rings . . . triple bob majors (II, p. 26). As early as "Sleep and Poetry" he wrote:
Then the events of this wide world I'd seize
Like a strong giant, and my spirit teaze
Till at its shoulders it should proudly see
Wings to find out an immortality. (p. 44, lines 81-84)
"Teaze" again appears in "Endymion." "Streams subterranean teaze their granite beds" (p. 94, line 602), where there is seemingly no need for a word with a pejorative connotation. Such pejorative words commonly appear in Keats's poetry to describe his most valued concerns. In "Endymion," in the central passage in which he describes the hierarchy of values of which love is the highest, love is "thrown in our eyes" at which we "start and fret"; at the top of the hierarchy there is,
... an orbed drop
Of light, and that is love: its influence,
Thrown in our eyes, genders a novel sense,
At which we start and fret; till in the end,
Melting into its radiance, we blend,
Mingle, and so become a part of it, (p. 75, lines 806-811)
(Note the unequivocal pejorative use of "fret" in the important third stanza of the "Ode to a Nightingale, p. 207, line 3.)
The pejorative word "cheat" which Adams has noted in the "Ode to a Nightingale" ("the fancy cannot cheat so well?/ As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf") occurs also, with the same implication of visual deception in "Endymion":
The teeming earth a sudden witness bore
Of his swift magic. Diving swans appear
Above the crystal cirplings white and clear;
And catch the cheated eye in wide surprise,
How they can dive in sight and unseen rise—
(p. 140, lines 338-342)

51 Jack Stillinger, "The Hood-winking of Madeline: Skepticism in 'The Eve of St. Agnes,'" SP, LXIII, pp. 533-555.

52 It might be noted that earlier, at least, Keats would seem directly and unequivocally unsympathetic to the hero of "The Eve of St. Agnes," as Stillinger interprets him:
... Surely the All-seeing
Who joys to see us with his gifts agreeing,
Will never give him pinions, who intreats
Such innocence to ruin,—who vilely cheats
A dove-like bosom. (p. 22, lines 33-35, my emphasis)

IV The Autumn Fogs Over a Rich Land

You should live in a dry, gravelly, barren elevated country open to the currents of air, and such a place is generally furnished with the finest springs—The neighborhood of a rich enclosed fulsome manured arrable Land especially in a valley or almost as bad on a flat, would be almost as bad as the smoke of Fleet street. Such a place as this was Shanklin only open to the south east and surrounded by hills in every direction—From this south east came the damps from the sea which having no egress the air would for days together take on an unhealthy idiosyncrasy altogether enerwating and weakening as a city Smoke—I felt it very much—Since I have been at Winchester I have been improving in health—it is not so confined—and there is on one side of the city a dry chalky down where the air is worth sixpence a pint. So if you do not get better at Retford do not impute it to your own weakness before you have well considered the nature of the air and soil—especially as Autumn is encroaching; for the autumn fogs over a rich land is like the steam from cabbage water (John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds, September 5, 1819)

Harold Bloom has said,

"To Autumn" is the subtlest and most beautiful of all Keats's odes, and as close to perfection as any shorter poem in the English language. That is of course cliche, but it cannot be demonstrated too often (it is more frequently asserted of the ode than evidenced). The incredible richness of the ode is such that it will sustain many readings, and indeed will demand them. To paraphrase G. Wilson Knight, "To Autumn" is a round solidity casting shadows on the flat surfaces of our criticism; we need as many planes at as many angles as we can get.

I intend to examine exhaustively, as I have said, one "plane" of "To Autumn" by "evidencing" imagistically the powerful side of the poem which treats of mutability and in so doing to demonstrate that the proverbial "serenity" of "To Autumn" indicates not previous philosophical acceptance or personal reconciliation, but irony. I will show that "To
Autumn" departs in opposite directions at the same time, providing for "the integration of contrarieties" that is poetic irony, an integration of death and beauty.

Bloom has said that after reading "To Autumn," "we feel that we might be at the end of a tragedy or epic, having read only a short ode." Walter Jackson Bate says that, "it is because "To Autumn" is so uniquely a distillation, and at many different levels, that each generation has found it one of the most nearly perfect poems in English." "To Autumn" is a "distillation" of the "gordian complication of feelings," which Keats exhibits throughout his poetry and letters in his recurrent, related references to the seasons, weather, time, beauty—both of art and nature—friendship, and health in their relationship with mutability, cold, loss, absence, illness, and death. In "To Autumn" these basic and disturbing concerns are handled fully, yet so subtly and with such consummate indirection, that there is great disagreement among critics as to what the significance of the subject of the poem is, as to what the position of the poet is in relation to his subject, and as to the theme of the poem.

Ernest J. Lovell has described the ode "To Autumn" in the following way:

The chief qualities of the poem . . . which are for the most part obvious to any careful reader, may be summed up as follows: (1) the complete absence of philosophical content, ideological or personal conflict, and verbal ambiguity or complexity (2) a setting in actuality, with no hint of dream or vision (3) a serene acceptance of this actuality, of the beauty of common things, with no straining after "escape" into either art or nature (4) the suppression of the poet's identity as such (5) a tone of chaste restraint, without sexual overtones, and (6) an emphasis on a sense of leisure and easy achievement.
Although I must, at the same time, admit that there is a truth in each of the descriptive elements that Lovell offers for the ode, this quotation is essentially startling in the fact that it is, in almost every point, diametrically opposed to what I feel to be the essential qualities of "To Autumn," which are: personal and "ideological" conflict, verbal complexity, and ambiguity; a powerful sense of a "vision" of the power of such an abstract entity as a season; the interplay of the poet's "identity" in the latent ironies involved in the claims of the poem; and an ultimate "emphasis" on the termination of "achievement" involved with an artistic struggle to overcome this terminal period; and a complex and disturbing examination of the "actuality," that "the beauty of common things" must pass away.

It is notable that all Lovell's claims for the poem, and his description is meant to be complimentary, are in the form of negations; negations of characteristics which Lovell obviously feels are present in most of Keats's poetry, but which this poem does not possess. M. R. Ridley's often repeated comments on "To Autumn" exhibit the same type of complimentary, "negative evaluation," when he says that in "To Autumn" Keats "found all his disciplined powers, of observation, of imagination, of craftsmanship, combining in one moment of power to produce the most serenely flawless poem in our language." This statement is virtually an unintentional criticism of Keats. If a poet masters all his powers for one moment of supreme creation he should produce a work for which the description "the most serenely flawless poem in our language" would be totally inadequate, as would any reference limited to this work's
technical excellence and negative qualities.

There is basic and continuing disagreement among the most influential critics of Keats about the content and theme of "To Autumn," a disagreement which must finally turn on the interpretation of the last stanza of the ode. Ian Jack asserts that "it is clear" that Keats "regarded autumn as the season of harvest and achievement, disregarding its other role as the herald of winter and death."5 Jack Stillinger describes the last stanza of the ode as "unambiguously affirmative; the imagination is now devoted not to visionary flights but to a detailed examining of every natural sight and sound at hand, and the focus and attitude show the speaker reconciled to the real world he lives in."6 Whereas, Harold Bloom claims that "the achievement of definitive vision in 'To Autumn' is the more remarkable for the faint presence of the shadows of the poet's hell that the poem tries to exclude."7 And Leonard Unger, when describing how "To Autumn" is the final comment on the common themes of the odes, refers to "melancholy"—the "melancholy of the "Ode on Melancholy"—the melancholy that derives its emotional power from mutability and death: "melancholy is in 'fulness of living' for beauty, joy, and delight make most poignant the passage of time, through which such experiences and then life must come to an end."8

It is Keats's objectivity and restraint, his indirection as to theme, that is the cause of such diametrically opposed interpretations of "To Autumn" among critics. In "To Autumn" the poetic indirection involves the theme more importantly than in any other poem of Keats,
ironically, but characteristically, because it is in this poem that Keats most fully attempts to "distill" his feelings about the most important "disagreeable" of his life and thought, mutability, which he thoroughly treats metaphorically but never mentions.

Walter Jackson Bate has also been misled by the beauty and restraint of the ode in drawing his conclusion about the final position of "To Autumn"—conclusions about which he seems peculiarly and unconvincingly unequivocal:

But if the conception in the previous stanzas has been carried out partly through contrary images—fulfilled growth, while growth still continues; the reaper who is not reaping—the procedure now is almost completely indirect and left solely to inference. The personified figure of autumn is replaced by concrete images of life, and of life unafflicted by any thought of death: the gnats, the hedge crickets, the redbreast. Moreover, it is life that can exist in much the same way at other times than autumn. Only two images are peculiar to the season—the "stubble plains," and the "full-grown lambs." The mind is free to associate the wailful mourning of the gnats with a funeral dirge for the dying year, but the sound is no more confined to autumn alone than is the 'soft-dying' of any day; and if the swallows are "gathering," they are not necessarily gathering for migration.9

Actually, "concrete images of life" are not more removed from the problem of mutability but are more removed from the various abstract answers to this problem, and an "indirect procedure," where meaning is left solely to "inference," is characteristic of Keats when dealing with "contrary images": thematic contrasts, and contrarieties. Indirection becomes more prevalent in Keats as the tragic power of the content increases. I cannot agree that the last stanza presents an image of "life unafflicted by any thought of death"; such a position seems to me totally untenable. I will support this disagreement with exhaustive evidence
from the imagery of the last stanza and the relationship of this imagery to the image patterns of the entire ode.

David Perkins, in one of the best critical summaries of the resolution of the problem of mutability in "To Autumn," still has not included how much Keats had to overcome in making this poem a victory over disagreeables, how much he was able to juxtapose beauty with evil. Perkins recognizes the "thought of death" present in the last stanza of the ode, but he asserts that,

... death here is neither a pining for an "easeful" escape nor is it an intensity, a blind, climactic outpouring and release analogous to the song of the nightingale. Rather it is recognized as something inwoven in the course of things, the condition and price of all fulfillment, having like the spring and summer of life its own distinctive character or "music" which is also to be prized and relished. In the last analysis, perhaps, the serenity and acceptance here expressed are aesthetic, the ode is, after all, a poem of contemplation. The symbol of autumn compels that attitude. The poet's own fears, ambitions, and passions are not directly engaged, and hence he can be relatively withdrawn. And because spring is also subsumed in the context, he can seem to suggest that life in all its stages has a certain identity and beauty which man can appreciate by disengaging his own ego. Thus the symbol permits, and the poem as a whole expresses, an emotional reconciliation to the human experience of process.\(^{10}\)

I think that it is a denigration of the accomplishment of "To Autumn" to say that the poet's "own fears, ambitions, and passions are not directly engaged, and hence he can be relatively withdrawn"—even though Perkins carefully qualifies these assertions. Actually "To Autumn" can only be evaluated adequately when seen against the background of the poet's "own fears and passions" for "To Autumn" is Keats's greatest triumph over the central disagreeables and contrarieties of his personal experience and thought, time and death, through "intensity," indirection, and the
ironies of verbal art. 11

A passage from the letters, appearing subsequent to the writing of "To Autumn," is often used to support interpretations of the ode limiting it to description of the beauty of the season and to the "positive" side of the significance of this season in its warmth, fruition, and beauty. Keats wrote to Reynolds, September 21, 1819:

How beautiful the season is now—How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking chaste weather—Diane skies—I never lik'd stubble fields as much as now—Aye better than the chilly green of spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm—in the same way that some pictures look warm—this struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it. (II, p. 707)

The passage from the letters which Ridley has called the "first hint that we have of the poem" in striking contrast to this famous passage occurring after the successful "integration of contrarieties" in the ode, indicates, however, not mere depiction of the warmth and beauty of the season, but that personal "gordian complication" of "disagreeables" that persists throughout Keats's work:

You should live in a dry, gravelly, barren elevated country open to the currents of air, and such a place is generally furnished with the finest springs—The neighborhood of a rich enclosed fulsome manured arrable Land especially in a valley or almost as bad on a flat, would be almost as bad as the smoke of Fleet street. Such a place as this was Shanklin only open to the south east and surrounded by hills in every direction—From this south east came the damps from the sea which having no egress the air would for days together take on an unhealthy idiosyncrasy altogether enervating and weakening as a city Smoke—I felt it very much—Since I have been at Winchester I have been improving in health—it is not so confined—and there is on one side of the city a dry chalky down where the air is worth six pence a pint. So if you do not get better at Retford do not impute it to your own weakness before you have well considered the nature of the air and soil—especially as Autumn is encroaching; for the autumn fogs over a rich land is like the steam from cabbage water—(II, p. 155)
This quotation indicates that Keats's attitude toward autumn, before the successful integration of contrarieties in the ode, is ambivalent, even in reference to those attributes of the season which are conventionally considered most desirable, its fertility, fruition—its "maturing" quality—for it is the very "richness" of the land that is detrimental to health, the health of Keats's friend Reynolds, and to his own respiratory disease. The mists of nature, "especially" autumn mists, can be as "enervating and weakening" as the city smoke. This quotation from the letters also serves to indicate that Keats had a fundamental feeling for the traditional tragic significance of this terminal season;¹² such a feeling would be in accord with Keats's characteristically clear and direct "knowledge of the contrasts" of reality, his "feeling for light and shade."¹³

Before the integration of the contrarieties of the season in "To Autumn," which are of that central, recurrent, and disturbing complication of feelings associated with friendship, sickness, time, weather, and death; Keats's attitude toward autumn in its "feeling for light and shade" is ideal for the creation of his characteristic poetry. This attitude is made up, not of the unadulterated positive attributes of the season as warm, fruitful, slow, and beautiful, nor of the unadulterated negative significance of the season as terminal—a harbinger of the cold and bad weather of an English winter—associated with illness, mutability, and death; but of that mature and complex ambivalence toward a reality which is both positive and negative, recapitulating the proper attitude toward reality itself. Such an attitude encourages
and demands irony, complex metaphor, and verbal subtlety to "integrate" in any work of art and particularly to integrate in a work so short as "To Autumn." It is the success of this difficult integration, this irony, that gives "To Autumn" its high place in English poetry.  

The image patterns of "To Autumn," exhibit this "integration of contrarieties," the integration of aesthetic and natural beauty with a figurative undercurrent of mutability, illness, loss, termination, time, death, and deception in temporal nature. "To Autumn" is an integration of disparate elements, death and beauty, through poetic irony. The beauty of the ode is undeniable, but the "presence" of the tragic side of the integration, the side which introduces irony to the poem needs verification, as is demonstrated by the disagreement among the critics on this point documented earlier in this section. An examination of the imagery of the poem will offer this verification.

There are a large number of figurative patterns which can be abstracted from this relatively short poem. Of course, after abstraction, they will be separated one from another in a way that is not reflected in the poem itself, where they are interwoven and intermeshed. D. S. Bland in an article for Philological Quarterly, "'Logical Structure' in 'The Ode to Autumn,'" has suggested an important way in which the poem has imagistic organization running parallel to its stanzaic structure. He asserts that the imagery of the first stanza is strongly tactile, whereas the second stanza has almost exclusively visual imagery, with the third stanza changing to imagery primarily of sound.
The subject matter itself of the first stanza lends itself to the use of an imagery of touch and taste. There is a feeling of close proximity throughout the first stanza introduced by "close bosom friend of the maturing sun." A tactile sense appears strongly in such verbs as "swell" and "plump," and taste is central to references to the ripeness of the fruits and the "sweet kernel" of the nuts. The close tactile imagery of the first stanza culminates emphatically in the last two words of this stanza, "clammy cells." The second stanza is primarily visual and in a sense more removed from the speaker and the audience, consisting actually of four scenes in which the personified autumn participates. The predominance of visual imagery in this stanza is prepared for by the opening line, "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store." Four visual scenes, practically pictures, follow. The last stanza with its "mourning," "bleating," "singing," "whistling" and "twittering" is organized around auditory imagery telling of the "music" of autumn.

Edward W. Rosenheim in an explication of "To Autumn" suggests another figurative organization of the poem based on the different types of activity present in each stanza, the productive activity of the first stanza, the "well earned repose" of the second, contrasted with the lack of activity of the third. In the first stanza Autumn's function is to aid the "maturing sun" to produce fruit, nuts, and flowers. In the second stanza he is seen "sitting careless," sound asleep, and watching patiently the processing of one of his productions. In the last stanza Autumn is asked a question about the songs of spring, exhorted not to think of them, and then seems to fade from the picture.
Another important figurative pattern is the pervading warmth of
the poem. The feeling of the first stanza is decidedly warm. Words
such as "mellow" and "bosom" introduce this warmth and it becomes empha-
tic in the reference to the "maturing sun." The stanza ends by explicit-
ly stating that all this activity is occurring during "warm" days. This
feeling of warmth "hangs over into" the second stanza, being especially
apparent in the scene where the reaper Autumn is seen "drow'sed with the
fume of poppies." There are some further suggestions of warmth in the
first lines of the third stanza. The clouds "bloom" the "soft-dying day"
and touch the plains with a "rosy hue."

Associated with the imagery of warmth and proceeding completely
through the poem is an imagery of softness and mildness. This appears
immediately in the first stanza in "mists," "mellow," and "close bosom
friend." The cottage-trees are "moss'd and the whole discussion of the
ripe, plump fruit suggests softness. This idea is present strongly in
the overbrimmed clammy cells of the bees described in the last lines of
stanza one. We find the imagery of softness in the first picture of au-
tumn in the second stanza, with his "hair soft-lifted by the winnowing
wind." Then in the second scene of this stanza we have the "swath" of
grain with its "twined flowers." And, of course, the "oozings" of the
last line suggests softness also. Softness as a figurative pattern is
present also, even emphasized, in stanza three. There are the clouds
and the "soft-dying day," and the small insects lifted by the mind
breeze. And, I suppose, the full "grown lambs" as soft things can be
added to this pattern.
In contrast to this imagery of softness there is an important use of muscular imagery in the poem associated with Keats's interest in and imagistic use of a feeling of power in repose. The most obvious use of this muscular imagery is in the picture of the gleaner keeping his head steady crossing a brook. But we see it also in all four scenes of stanza two in the statuesque quality of the figures. The position or attitude of the figures is described in such a way as to suggest statuary. At the end of the stanza the figure is seen standing (I presume) with "patient look." A description of a figure as standing with "patient look" must stem from and produce a muscular understanding of and empathy with the attitude of the figure.  

"Patient" in the fourth scene describes not only the way Autumn is looking, but also the way he "looks," including the attitude of his body. The descriptions of the figures as relatively fixed and motionless—asleep, steady, and positioned with patient look—suggest the stillness, weight, and timelessness of statuary and monumental art.

Fogle in his discussion of empathy says that, "Critics have noted and praised in Keats the 'potential' force of his static images. These convey a sense of power momentarily in restraint: of massive repose, which yet gives promise of decisive action. This 'potential' quality, I believe, derives for the most part from empathy." Working from this comment on empathy, empathetic elements in the first stanza may be demonstrated also. David Perkins has recognized the strong "potential quality" of the bending, loading, and filling of this stanza to the point where something must give. The fullness, weight, and feeling
of muscular empathy can be sensed in the build up of such verbs as "fill," "load," "swell," and "plump." A sense of participation and power in restraint can be sensed in the apple trees bent down with their load of fruit. Thus the imagery of stanza one and two creates a feeling of weight, strength and potential power which demonstrates that in "To Autumn" Keats has attempted an empathetic projection into something so abstract as a season and has expressed the participation in certain primary characteristics of the season through muscular imagery. The accomplishment in "To Autumn" of this empathetic projection expressed through muscular imagery and figurative use of power in repose is a central part of the artistry of the poem and—as I will show in the next section of this paper—an important imagistic vehicle for the theme of mutability.

B. C. Southam asserts as a final comment of "To Autumn" that, "a vivid apprehension of time lies at the heart of the Ode." The use of time and the figurative patterns associated with time are the most important patterns to be considered, naturally enough, when seeking to relate the poem to mutability. In this poem about a time, which has time "at its heart," the first clear reference to time does not appear until line nine where Autumn "sets budding later flowers for the bees," and no explicit reference until the first stanza is ending with the bees thinking "warm days will never cease." Although the second stanza is centrally involved with restraining time, an obvious reference to time is found only in the last two lines in which Autumn with "patient look" watches "the last oozings hours by hours." We do,
however, find references to a kind of time earlier in the stanza where it is states that "sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find" and that "sometimes like a gleaner" Autumn crosses a brook. The activities of the third stanza are actually held together through an organization based on time with everything occurring "While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day."\textsuperscript{26}

When one speaks of the use of time in "To Autumn" he should not ignore the more obvious fact that the poem is about a season, a category of time. Also, there seems to be a type of temporal progression within this season going on in the poem, with the first stanza dealing with the production of autumn, the second the processing of this production, and the third suggesting a time in late autumn in which the lambs are full grown and the swallows are gathering for migration.\textsuperscript{27} I consider it sound also to see an organization of the stanzas in accordance with the progression of a day as asserted by D. S. Bland, Aileen Ward, and Edward Rosenheim.\textsuperscript{28} The reference to "mists" in conjunction with the "maturing sun" suggests late morning.\textsuperscript{29} The drow'sd reaper, the gleaner possibly going home across the brook, and the "last oozings" of the cider press in stanza two suggest late afternoon. The "music" of the last stanza is obviously music of late evening since explicit reference is made to the "soft-dying day" where gnats are more plenteous and swallows might be gathering to catch insects.\textsuperscript{30} The above discussion of time in "To Autumn" hardly does justice to the complexity of the use of this concept in the poem, but I have limited myself to explicit or obvious references since I will discuss the use of time at length in the next section.
Related to the use of time in the poem is a figurative use of space which has been overlooked by the critics of the poem. As I mentioned above when discussing the tactile imagery of stanza one, there is a feeling of proximity which pervades the first stanza starting with "close bosom friend." This feeling is encouraged primarily by the choice of subjects in this stanza; fruit, the core of fruit, gourds, hazel shells, and kernel of nuts—all objects which by their size encourage a close scrutiny by the reader. This feeling of proximity is emphasized by the "clammy cells" of the bees which end the stanza, extremely small objects presented in an extremely tactile manner. The next stanza creates a separation or distancing of the reader from the subjects through its constant change of scene, pictorial emphasis, predominantly visual imagery, and the limited description of the subjects that it offers. The detached watching of the personified Autumn has much the same feeling that the reader experiences himself and attributes to the person "seeking abroad" and to the speaker. In the first stanza everything takes place up close; in the second stanza everything happens out in front of the observer like on a stage, a panel of painting, or a slide screen; and in the last stanza there is the distinct feeling of being within the scene with the "music" of autumn going on around you. I will say a good deal more about the temporal and spatial effects of the last stanza in the next section.

Now that I have established in a disjointed manner these ten or so image patterns or figurative currents as parts of "To Autumn," I will attempt, in the next section, to demonstrate how these patterns relate
to what I consider to be the tragic side of the ironic integration of the poem. I will attempt to demonstrate how these patterns are developed throughout the poem or change in the last stanza to evoke or produce the imaginative response to "endings" or to symbols of dissolution, the central "disagreeable" or "contrariety" of Keats's work, mutability—the tragic truth that he must integrate through poetic irony and indirection in "To Autumn."

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It is best to first exhaust the explicit or obvious references to death in "To Autumn" in order to demonstrate that there is some simple, clear imagistic evidence for a reading of the ode based on dissolution and death. Clearly a reading based on "endings" and death might be expected since the poem's subject's conventional significance is related to mutability. The second stanza employs traditional activities of autumn which are traditionally associated with death, harvesting, winnowing and gleaning. The "winnowing wind" and the crushing of the apples in the second stanza seem easily associated with some of the more obvious aspects of death. There are a number of explicit references to death in the last stanza: "The soft-dying day," the mourn of the "wailful choir of gnats," the wind which "lives or dies." David Perkins in The Quest for Permanence discovers more involved imagistic evidence for a concern with mutability in the extreme "ripeness" of the first stanza. He asserts, and I agree, that in such verbs as "load" and "bend" there is a "sense of strain" and that from such phrases as "fill all fruit with ripeness to the core" one can see that
"maturity can go no farther." 33

Further evidence for a reading based on mutability can be found by considering the imagistic structure of the poem discovered by D. S. Bland. 34 The progression from the more tactile imagery of the first stanza through the visual, pictorial imagery of the second, to the predominately auditory imagery of the third entails a parallel regression from the most concrete sense. touch, to the least concrete, hearing. 35 Add to this the suggestion of F. R. Leavis that the sounds of the third stanza are predominately "thin" sounds— "bleat," "treble soft," crickets singing, "whistle," and finally "twitter"— and we have imagistic evidence for a sense of failing, fading, or dissolution in the last stanza which easily relates to mutability.

Edward Rosenheim suggests that the organization of the poem through the activity present in each stanza moves in a decreasing manner, from production, to repose, to a complete lack of human vitality in the last stanza: "What had begun with vigorous, productive activity and gone on to well-earned repose is now without a suggestion of human vitality, animate nature itself being represented only by subdued sounds of insects, animals, and birds." 37 As for the warmth which pervades the poem, I feel that it primarily pervades the first stanza, is of less importance in the second, and fades out in the third. The rays of the sun have been reduced from those of the "maturing sun" of the first stanza which can "load and bless" the vines, etc., to those of the third which can only "touch the stubble plains with rosy hue." This reduction of warmth is effective since warmth is conventionally symbolic of life, and has served an explicitly
life-giving function in the first stanza.  

The imagery of "softness" persists through the poem but changes in an interesting way in the last stanza. The softness of the first stanza is seen in the "mellow, ripe, plump" fruit and the overbrimmed clammy cells of the bees, and in the second in the "swath of grain." In the last stanza we have clouds that "bloom" but are "barred" creating a contradictory effect. We have "soft" used as an adjective for the feel of the day but it modifies "dying." Then there is the soft call of the bird but it is a "treble" soft. There is the mild wind and it "lives or dies." The imagery of softness of the first stanza is imagery of soft fullness emphasizing the lushness and luxuriance of softness, but the imagery of softness of the last stanza is imagery of soft thinness, emphasizing the ephemerality of softness and mildness.

This distinction between the two imagistic uses of softness is related to an image pattern basic to my consideration, which was not discussed in the second section of this chapter. This is the imagery of size or amount. The imagery of the first stanza is imagery of abundance, the filled fruit, the loaded trees, and the overbrimmed cells. There are "more" and "still more" flowers. The second stanza which starts with a reference to autumn's "store" moves to an implication of dearth, or at least limited supply, with the idea of sparing "the next swath" of grain; and at the end of the stanza we see that the oozings of the cider press are the "last oozings." In the last stanza everything is small, thin, and weak. As mentioned above the clouds "bloom" but are "barred." The light only touches the "stubble plains."
gnats are "small" and at the mercy of a "light" wind.\textsuperscript{41} The bird
whistles in "treble soft" and the swallows twitter. One sees in this
discussion how the patterns of imagery effectively intermesh in the
poem to a point where separation of them is almost impossible. To see
how these patterns, abstracted and separated here, work together in the
poem to produce an effect of diminution and cessation, simply compare a
stanzaic line in the last stanza with the same line in the first while
keeping the ideas discussed above in mind.

I will be guilty of this mixing of patterns also in the follow-
ing discussion of muscular imagery, since I will use some of the quali-
ties of the last stanza which are discussed above under imagery of size
and amount. William Empson in an article for \textit{The Listener} suggests a
starting point for a connection between the muscular imagery of "To
Autumn" and its theme of mutability when he asserts that in "To Autumn,"
"We feel in our muscles the effort of balancing, that is, the effort of
keeping still, so we realize how precarious the Autumn is, in its im-
mense calm."\textsuperscript{42} Also, it should be mentioned that the fullness, size,
and weight involved in empathetic muscular participation is primarily
present in the figures of stanza two, partially present in the descrip-
tions of stanza one, and completely absent in stanza three. In stanza
three everything is small, weak, mild, thin, and auditory. Since one of
the prime characteristics and functions of Keats's power in repose
imagery is the holding of time in suspension, a power over, or restraint
of, time is thus lost in stanza three.

It is the change of the use of time occurring in this last
stanza of "To Autumn" that is most important to my contentions about the
content of the poem. In the first two stanzas time is vague and abstract.
There is no finite verb in the "sentence fragment" of which the first
stanza consists. The participle "conspiring" subsumes all the actions
of the stanza and gives them a vague timelessness. In the second stanza
the indefinite "sometimes" makes it unclear just when the seeker "may"
find Autumn in the various situations described. There can be no real
dramatic time in the second stanza, because the scenes are constantly
changing, and because the four situations described are not events but
simply possibilities. The two uses of "sometime" in the stanza sug-
gest that these activities go on over a fairly long period of time.
But immediately in the third stanza the activities are set in time, at
least to the degree that they are presented as being almost concurrent,
but the use of the word "while" in the third line of the stanza. It
seems that the following "songs of Autumn" are to take place at the same
time that the "barred clouds" are "blooming" the "soft-dying day." But
immediately this temporal structure is questioned by the presence of the
word "then" in line five. This can be taken as implying the same general
present created by "while," but it also suggests possibly a progression
in time toward a more definite temporal point. A choice between these
two feelings about time is left in abeyance until the ninth line where
the phrase "now with treble-soft" definitely makes the reader feel a
temporal progression toward a more real, particular present time.

Thus we can see that where the activities of the first and second
stanzas go on in a general, abstract, or disjointed time, those of the
last stanza occur all at the same time with a movement toward more and more particular time towards the end. The important thing to remember is that this progression toward more specific, fixed, particular time leads right to the end of the poem. This movement, from abstract to particular is the reverse of most poetry and certainly creates an unsuitable ending to a poem which would seek to stop or hold time in stasis.

Involved with this "movement" in the realm of time in the poem is a "movement" in the realm of space. The space I am speaking of is less the space of the poem and more the space involved in the speaker's relationship to the subjects of the poem, the place of the speaker. In the first stanza, as has been mentioned, this place is close up, but other than that it is hard to locate. In the third stanza, on the other hand, prompted by the reference to definite time, the reader is encouraged to see the speaker in a definite place. It seems almost necessary that he should be since the activities he observes are happening at the same time. This feeling is encouraged by the fact that the lambs "loud-bleat" not in but "from" "hilly bourn" and the "redbreast whistles" not in but "from" the garden croft. The speaker is here not reporting whatever he can collect from thought as in the first stanza, or what he can see of autumn by wandering through space and time as in stanza two, but rather what he sees and hears from a definite spot. Reuben A. Brower says of the "songs" of the last stanza that, "They are soft, mournful, small, or undulating and uncertain; or they come from a distance, or they are connected with confined places and with shutting in . . . To the autumn
richness and slowing down Keats adds a sense of closing in and withdrawal, a poignant autumnal note" (my emphasis). Also concurrent with such movement in space must go a loss of aesthetic distancing. From the detached observers of the first two stanzas we arrive at a participant both in the sense of time and space in the final stanza. As I have mentioned above, this is the opposite progression from that desired in a poem aiming to be a consolation for, or answer to, an undesirable fact of life through objectification. The development in the poem both in the realm of time and space is from the abstract to the particular.

The temporal and spatial movement which occurs in the final stanza of "To Autumn" from abstract to particular is reflected in the structure and subject matter of this stanza also. After the exhortation of Autumn at the beginning of the stanza not to think of the "songs of spring"—suggesting that even he may prefer them—one should expect somewhere in the stanza a declaration of how the music of autumn is superior or equal to the "songs of spring." But instead of this we find simply a list of autumnal sounds which must stand as foils for spring music. Although this list possesses aesthetic beauty in its presentation, no comment is made about their general superiority; their beauty is in their presentation by the poet not in any inherent auditory beauty. The bleating of "full grown" lambs and the whine of insects are unpleasant or neutral sounds in reality. The last line of the poem, rather than making a claim for the beauty of these songs, simply emphasizes their unmitigated particularity and existential dissonance with, "And gathering swallows twitter in the skies."
Even the technical "music" of the verse tends to reinforce the somber particularity and terminal quality of the last lines. Walter Jackson Bate, in his exhaustive study of Keats's poetic style, has discussed Keats's theory of "vowel interchange" which Benjamin Bailey described in a letter to Lord Houghton:

One of Keats's favorite topics of discourse was the principle of melody in verse, upon which he had his own notions, particularly in the management of open and close vowels... Keats's theory was that vowels should be so managed as not to clash with one another so as to mar the melody,—and yet they should be interchanged, like differing notes in music, to prevent monotony... I well remember his telling me that, had he studied music, he had some notions of the combinations of sounds, by which he thought he could have done something as original as his poetry.48

Bate contends that what Keats meant by "open" vowels was English diphthongs and the historically "long" vowels, and that by "closed" he meant the historically "short" vowels.49 One of the ways this "melodic" use of the interplay of open and closed vowels can be involved with theme or tone is suggested by Bate, who says that as Keats's prosody developed, "one can at times detect an almost regular increasing use of historically 'short' vowels in a quiet or somber line."50

If one applies Bate's interpretation of Keats's theory of the interaction of "open" and "close" vowels to "To Autumn" he finds that the relation of open to closed vowels in the last two lines is approximately one to six, whereas the relationship in the entire poem is five to eight, demonstrating that short vowels in these lines are well over three times as preeminate as in the entire ode, a predominance not nearly approximated by any other two lines in the poem.51 I would suggest that as an increasing use of short vowels at the end of a line
indicates, as Bate declares, a "quiet or somber line," this predominance of short vowels in the two last lines of "To Autumn" reinforces the "somber" quality of the culmination of this poem. As the fullness and plenty so predominant in the first stanza gives way to the thinness and scarcity predominate in the last stanza, the "struggle" or interchange of open and closed vowels in the melodies of the poem is lost in favor of the closed, thin vowels in the last lines.

Actually after the penultimate line, the only line in the entire poem which contains exclusively closed vowels, a prosodic demand is made on the last line to balance the "interchange" of vowel sounds in order to continue the beautiful and skillful balance, a prosodic balance which recapitulates the balance and integration of oppositions, contrasts, and contrarieties in which the poem is formed, that has been studiously preserved throughout the poem. But this expectation is denied, just as the expectation of a "song" to assert the aesthetic supremacy or equality of autumn is disappointed. Instead we find a line which in subject (the departure of the swallows), choice of language ("twittering"), and prosody reinforces the somberness, thinness, and "shutting in" quality of the termination of this poem, the theme of which is termination; thereby creating a truly fine example of thematic considerations influencing even the most technical aspects of form.52 Thus the expectation of some abstract comment drawing attention to the superiority of the pleasures of autumn has been disappointed, and we are left with a mere statement of another and particularly unmusical and "thin" song of autumn, which in significance, subject, and form directs our attention
to the transience of the immediate situation. Since the significance of the "Songs of Spring" and the "music" of autumn are not limited to the characteristic sounds of the seasons, but also includes their emotional value, a failure to establish the equality of autumn's "music" with spring's entails a failure to establish a favorable significance for autumn.

All the progressions in "To Autumn"—through this terminal season to its end, through the day, from abstract time to particular time, from abstract space to particular space, even the progress of assonance in the verse—must be reversed at the end of the poem if the poem is not to have a final effect emphasizing "endings" and mutability. Since the end of a poem should leave the reader with whatever idea or emotion the poem is attempting to communicate, the simple listing of events of unsignified meaning at the end of "To Autumn" must be seen as a weakness if these events do not derive their meaning from their very particularity, in producing a strong imaginative realization of the inefficacy of the attempts in the first two stanzas to restrain time, in producing a powerful sense of an end. The many fine poetic things Keats does in stanza one and two to give this terminal season meaning, and the success he has in poetically holding time in suspension cannot be forgotten, but the final emotional power of the poem derives from the fact that these things have failed in the last stanza leaving us in a spatially and temporally particular world of stark events. The end of this poem, which Walter Jackson Bate defines as a "protest against the starkness of an end," is characteristically stark.
In the foregoing section of this paper I have attempted to show how various image patterns or figurative currents of "To Autumn"—tactile, visual, and auditory imagery; figurative use of the activities of autumn; imagery of warmth, softness, and amount; muscular imagery; the beautiful and skillful employment of contrast in assonance; and the figurative use of time and space—have contributed to produce a strong sense of failing, fading, loss, thinness, a "feeling of ending" in the final stanza of the ode, making the primary effect of the poem closely related to mutability. Now that imagistic evidence has been offered for placing the problem of mutability at the emotional center of "To Autumn"—the "plane" of "To Autumn's" "round solidity" centered on mutability having been "evidenced"—I would like to offer a discussion of the aesthetic resolution of this problem offered by "To Autumn": to indicate the poetic irony, the "integration of contrarieties" achieved in "To Autumn" and how this integration is achieved.

An important figurative aspect of "To Autumn," which relates to Keats's association of deception, indirection, and illusion with the powers of poetry, supports attributing an aesthetic and ironic resolution of the problem of mutability to the ode. The imagery of the poem implies an aesthetic victory over circumstance, a triumph of "intensity" over "reality," the success of the "beautiful lie." The basic activity of stanza one initiates this current of imagery. Autumn and the "matur- ing sun" are "conspiring"—rather than cooperating—to provide the season with its characteristic plenty. "Conspiring" is a pejorative word,
a member of that group of "obtrusive" verbs and verbals that occur persistently in the midst of Keats's finest, most earnest, and concerned poetry, the "pejorative" connotation of which is usually directed at the powers of verse itself, suggesting deception, illusion, and disguise as inherent to this power. The pejorative connotation of this word suggests a certain duplicity as inherent in the excessively productive activities of the season and his "close bosom friend." The slight suspicion aroused by this word is reinforced by the dramatic irony of line ten of the first stanza in which the bees "think"—falsely, of course—that "warm days will never cease," that cold and time have been permanently removed from their world. In lines eight and nine above the "conspirators" have "set budding more, and still more, later flowers for the bees" in order to effect this deception. The reiteration in these lines emphasizes the association of skillful duplicity with the activities and attributes of the season. The overbrimming of the bees' cells can be included in this regard.

This pleasant deception of the season present in the first stanza—coercing its participants into a falsely confident way of "thinking"—must be evoked when in the last stanza Autumn is solicited not to "think" of the songs of spring. Here also must be felt an appeal to deception, a beneficial emotional denial of the disparity between illusion and reality, a pleasant succumbing to a pleasing illusion. The bees are lulled into not considering the future and Autumn is exhorted not to think of the past. Thus we have the aesthetic submission to beauty and to temporality, the aesthetic victory over time and fate,
over mutability. If we look again, the first two stanzas exhibit related
indirection in their careful avoidance of our expectations, and irony in
oblique integration of oppositions. Bate has remarked, "If, in the
first stanza, we find process continuing within a context of stillness
and attained fulfillment, in the second—which is something of a reverse
or mirror image of the first—we find stillness where we expect process.
For now autumn is conceived as a reaper or harvester." Every conven-
tional expectation is intentionally disappointed by Keats, including
any overt reference to the traditional, basic, and underlying source of
the symbolic significance of his subject, autumn, which is mutability.

The aesthetic victory of the artistry of the poem over mutability
through "intensity," indirection, and illusion is reflected in a
parallel aesthetic and ironic success of the attributes of the poem's
subject, the season; as the aesthetic resolution of the thematic prob-
lem of mutability occurs through the poetry, the resolution of the phil-
osophical problem is presented as occurring in the subject. The poem
and its subject produce like effects, even to the indirection and irony
of the poem recapitulating the "natural" deception inherent in the ap-
pearance of the season. Leonard Unger has suggested the parallelism
of subject and meaning, saying that in the subject of "To Autumn," Keats
had "the natural symbol for his meanings" and that in "To Autumn,
"the subject is both the reality and the symbol." In the ode Keats
has made a thing that works like autumn, an accomplishment demanding a
great deal more than description.

An awareness of this relationship of theme to subject is
reflected in the methods and imagery of the poem. Keats's philosophical treatment of autumn has arisen naturally from the most natural characteristics of his subject, its mutability and beauty; the indirectness of his methods are recapitulated in the natural deception of the terminal season, which exudes and reveals only warmth and fruition; and his irony is reflected from the season's somehow including the very integration of beauty and death, permanence and transience, majesty and ephemeralness that he seeks to integrate in the full complexity of his poem. In "To Autumn" Keats has a "realistic basis" for both the negative and positive side of his "metaphor" or poetic statement, death and beauty, and for the underlying motif of artistic illusion in the deceptive plenty of autumn; and there has resulted a reciprocal action between imagination and reality, feeling and fact—an "integration of contrarieties" or poetic irony—which has produced an extremely objective and concrete poem in which treatment and subject, theme and form, coalesce to form the much sought unified and metaphoric statement: a statement, in this case, of the problem of the relationship between imagination and reality, the desire for permanence and the fact of mutability—the central disparity around which Keats's poetic irony works and a basic irony of the world.

Thus Keats has in this poem, more than in any other, satisfied his own stipulations about great poetry. In a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds he had said:

We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us—and if we do not agree seems to put its hand in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself, but with its subject. (I, p. 224)
Poetry must not have a "palpable design"; it must be objective, indirect, tentative, metaphoric, and "unobtrusive" in the poet's claims for the significances of his subjects. The subjects must seem to speak for themselves. In a letter to John Taylor, Keats describes how he feels poetry should work, in lines which are related imagistically to the subject matter of "To Autumn" and in content to its characteristic poetic excellence:

Its touches of beauty should never be halfway thereby making the reader breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the sun come natural to him—shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight. (I, p. 238)

The meaning and methods of "To Autumn" arise so easily from the subject that the poem possesses a "natural" beauty that will not put its hands in its pockets to any one, but this "unobtrusiveness" should not lead us to denying its philosophical or intellectual content. Neither should "To Autumn's" pleasant, satisfying aesthetic "simplicity," fullness, and calm—its proverbial serenity—"lull" us into doing Keats the injustice of ascribing this quality to a minimal, or philosophically pleasant, content and to denying Keats his greatest triumph over "disagreeables" through "intensity." "To Autumn" is Keats's greatest "integration of contrarieties," his most successful and subtle employment of poetic irony, a great aesthetic triumph over the most pervasive, universal, and powerful problem of life, mutability, in its relation to what Keats held most dear: natural beauty and the analogue of personal happiness, health, and life.

Actually, the aesthetic quality of "To Autumn" cannot even be
fully experienced nor its aesthetic excellence be appreciated unless we recognize the interaction between this quality and the emotion with which it struggles. The intensity which, temporarily, resolves the import of mutability must, paradoxically and ironically, arise partially from this import. In the final analysis, the separation of beauty and meaning is impossible in this poem as in all art. Contrary to critical attempts to fix "To Autumn's" aesthetic power as a matter primarily of style, the ode demonstrates that beauty must arise from emotional truth. It demonstrates also that this truth is dependent on, or yields to, beauty or aesthetic "intensity." If we once recognize the fact that, temporally, at any given unit of time and place, within the only reality we experience, the truth we feel is the only truth; we can find in "To Autumn" a poetic reflection and "justification" of Keats's most abstract and controversial comment on art and life, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all? Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."  

This statement, as Cleanth Brooks has contended, is conditioned by irony; it is as Bloom recognizes, a "grim" humor, not a direct, facile, and realistically objectionable credo. Beauty only exists in the true, the personal, individual, and real; and this "truth" or "reality"—the only truth we know here on earth, as the urn asserts—is inherently temporary, permeated by loss, failure, mutability, flux, and death. And the other half of the "grim" irony is that without this permeation, beauty would probably be lost.

Despite previous cautious critical evaluations of "To Autumn," the poem is intrinsically involved with important truth, the truth of
mutability, and this truth is overcome and possibly replaced by another and more complex truth through beauty and "intensity." Thus, the central "contrarieties" of Keats's personal and philosophical life, which duplicate those of all men, "truth and beauty," the "real" and the "ideal," are integrated precariously through artistic intensity; but Keats, even in triumph, realizes, and leaves ironic "evidence" of the realization, that this triumph—the aesthetic "solution" which James Land Jones has claimed, "laid the foundation for modern symbolism, that mode of perception moving through Hopkins to Yeats, which Hopkins called . . . inscape and instress, Joyce the epiphany, Yeats the Great Moment; and, as Eliot has no single term, several phrases must be used, ranging from the objective correlative to the still point of the turning world"—66 is at best temporary, and possibly a deception, a "conspiracy" of the poet and the reader to believe, to believe in the experience of the poem as this poet "believes" in the experience of the "Ironic" season.
NOTES

CHAPTER IV

1Bloom, The Visionary Company, p. 425.

2Bate, John Keats, p. 581.


4Ridley, p. 289.


6Stillinger, "Introduction" to Twentieth Century Interpretations of Keats’s Odes, p. 9.


8Leonard Unger, "To Autumn," from Twentieth Century Interpretations of Keats’s Odes, pp. 111-112.

9Bate, John Keats, p. 583. See note 27 of this chapter for a discussion of the significance of the activities of the swallows.

10Perkins, p. 294.

11"Intensity" was a word used by Keats to indicate the power of art, particularly the power to make "disagreeables evaporate." See note 63 of this chapter.

12Support for Keats’s initial and basic feeling for the traditional "tragic" significance of autumn, in its association with the "encroaching" cold of winter, can be found in his letters and poetry. In "Isabella" the heroine, in her happiness, "forgot the chilly autumn breeze" (p. 182). In a short poem entitled "Stanzas" Keats employed the simile, "Cold as sunrise in September:" (p. 231)--even more cold would be the sunset in late September. Even the conventional "patriotic" attitude toward English weather, which is usually seen as culminating in this characteristically "English" poem, is questioned by a letter Keats wrote to his sister, at about the same time of year as the writing of "To Autumn," the next fall, in which he allows that, "At any rate it will be a relief to quit this cold: wet, uncertain climate" (II, p. 332). And, definitely, there is the reference to autumn in stanza XXXII of "Isabella" quoted in section 3 of Chapter II:
In the mid days of autumn, on their eyes
The breath of Winter comes from far away,
And the sick west continually bereaves
Of some gold tinge, and plays a roundelay
Of death among the bushes and the leaves,
To make all bare before he dares to stray (p. 187)

See the passage of the letters referred to in section I of Chapter III.

The situation from which Keats creates the "serenity" of "To Autumn," the immediate situation into which the poet steps in his attempt to describe and create the intense beauty of this season for him, is ambivalent. Even in the initial, seemingly unambivalent and uncomplicated words chosen to describe the standard attributes that distinguish this season, the poet is involved in complexities, ambiguities, and ambivalence which reach back through his creative career. The first description of autumn, as characteristically a season of "mists," may involve ambiguity and ambivalence. In the quotation from the letters the "autumn fogs over a rich land," the "mists" of this "mellow" and fruitful season, are as enervating and weakening, as associated with sickness and death, as the smoke of the most congested districts of London. The word, "mist," has a long, complex and ambivalent history in the thought and writings of Keats in repeated association with deception, and lack of knowledge; sickness, and its metaphorical association with lack of invention and creation or bad poetry (see section 3 of Chapter II for the discussions of the association in Keats's poetry and letters of sickness, health, "medicine," and poetry); and the cold dampness of bad weather.

In the sonnet, "Written Upon the Top of Ben Nevis," the vagueness and deceptive quality of man's knowledge is made equivalent in metaphor to the "sullen" mist that disguises the view of the mountain from its summit:

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

In the sonnet, "O Thou Whose Face Has Felt the Winter's Wind," mist appears as one of the characteristic disagreeable sights of winter that
make one wish for the return of spring; which will be antithetically, a creative, "harvest-time":

O thou whose face hath felt the Winter's wind,  
Whose eye has seen the snow-clouds hung in mist,  
And the black elm tops 'mong the freezing stars,  
To thee the spring will be a harvest-time  
(p. 379)

Mist is associated here with the "winter's wind," "black elm tops," and the "freezing stars," sights which are directly antithetical to the spring and the "harvest-time" qualities of autumn in its "mellow fruitfulness." In "The Fall of Hyperion" mist returns this time as the agent of Apollo in inflicting sickness and death on "mock lyrist, large self worshipers/ And careless Hectorers in proud bad verse":

... O far flown Apollo!

Where is thy misty pestilence to creep  
Into the dwellings, through the door crannies  
Of all mock lyrist, large self worshipers  
And careless Hectorers in proud bad verse.  
(p. 408, lines 204-208)

(Note the pun on "Hectorers," indicating these "poets" "fevered" presumption and pride, and the detrimental effect of their "bad verse"; they "hector" man instead of healing him.)

Another seemingly innocent word, "oozings," which occurs toward the end of "To Autumn" has also had an active and ambivalent history in Keats's writings. In "Endymion," Book III, it carries the pleasant connotation that is a part of its significance in "To Autumn"; Keats writes of a "pure wine/ Of happiness, from fairy-press ooz'd out" (p. 125, lines 801-802). But again, in "Endymion" Book IV, it occurs, this time with a deep and disturbing connotation or valence, which may also be present in the later poem—where the operations going on in the external world of autumn harvesting and processing are to recapitulate in complex psychological responses; Endymion mourns for Cynthia,  
... one human kiss!

One sigh of real breath— one gentle squeeze,  
Warm as a dove's nest among summer trees,  
And warm with dew at ooze from living blood!  
Whither didst melt?  
(p. 148, lines 664-668)

Thus, even the seemingly mild and simple words of "To Autumn" describing the season's conventional beauty may suggest contrasts and basic psychological contrarieties, contrasts which are played upon and balanced throughout this extremely "ideological," charged, and complex poem. The "mist" of the first line of the ode is both associated with the vague beauty of autumn and the deception inherent in the seemingly permanent beauty of this season—the appearance of permanence which makes even the bees "think warm days still never cease (see the discussion of "deception in Keats's poetry in the section 3 of Chapter III, and section 4 of this chapter for a discussion of the function of deception and illusion in "To Autumn") and with the inherent unhealthiness of the moist fogs over a rich land with winter "encroaching." "Oozings," which describes the crushing of the apples in the processes of the harvest,
that goes on "hours by hours" may carry both the initial connotation of fullness and warm plenty, and also the connotation of loss, death, and blood. The final estimation of the valences of these words dies with the reader in his intuitive response to the entire poem. Again, the individual "pulses" (The Letters I, p. 231) must be consulted.


Throughout the paper I refer to "Autumn" as masculine, knowing that this is not a settled fact. The fact that the personification is presented as a "close bosom friend" to the "maturing sun," and that he is a reaper in the second stanza, led to my use of the masculine pronoun. I do not believe that in the end, the sex of the personification can be fixed. The suggestion of long hair in stanza II, the only overt indication of femininity (except possibly for "Autumn's" being a gleaner in stanza II) is not definitive. Notice "Endymion," Book I, lines 440-441: "When last the sun his autumn tresses shook, / And the tann'd harvesters with armfuls took." If "Autumn" were a woman, the phrase, "close bosom friend," of the first stanza would be in the realm of playful humor and sexually suggestive pun.


For a discussion of Keats's use of muscular imagery, "power in restraint," and empathy, see Fogle, pp. 139-177, and for "power in restraint" in "To Autumn," see Bate, John Keats, p. 584.

"Patient look," of line 10, stanza II, is verbal wit or pun encouraging a confusion of objective and subjective judgements. Does Autumn "look patient" or does he "patiently look"? Does the adjective express an objective action of the figure or an observed attribute. Such an observed attribute would necessarily imply something of a subjective judgement, for how does a figure look patient. This blending of "subjective" and "objective" judgements suggests the deception inherent in the season, the disguised disparity between its appearance and its "reality." See section 4 of this chapter for the discussion of indirectness in "To Autumn." See the discussion of "attitude" in the last stanza of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (section 4, Chapter III) for a similar blending of "objective" and "subjective" judgements.

Fogle, p. 159.
One should not, however, over-emphasize the statuesque effects of the figures of the second stanza to the point of ignoring the fact that this stanza has primarily the effects of painting. Even though there exists the empathy mentioned, this does not alter the fact that there is a definite aesthetic separation between the visual scenes and the poet or reader. Actually empathy intrinsically includes an objective detachment. See Fogle, p. 158.


This is another example of indirection; time seems the one thing about which the poem is unconcerned. See the discussion of indirection in "To Autumn" in section 4 of this chapter.

Hubert Heinen contends that the recurrent relatives of time in Keats's poetry such as "meantime" and "while" indicate simultaneity and support the anticipation and backward looking of "stationing" or "interwoven time." See section 3 of Chapter II for discussion of Heinen's idea of "interwoven time" in Keats's poetry.

Bate says (see note 9 above) that "if the swallows are 'gathering,' they are not necessarily gathering for migration." Although the swallows may not be "necessarily gathering for migration," there is evidence that Keats had a propensity for using swallows and their activities in the fall with the traditional tenor of autumn loss. He wrote to his sister in 1817 of his brother's visit to the continent: "Like most Englishmen they feel a mighty preference for every thing English--the French Meadows the trees the People the Towns the Churches, the Books, the every thing--although they may be in themselves good; yet put in comparison with our green island they vanish like Swallows in October" (I, p. 154). In "Endymion," Book III, Keats refers again to the migration of swallows in the autumn: "and fast, as thou might see/ Swallows obeying the south summer's call" (p. 126, lines 815-816).


There may be intentional ambiguity, or pun, in "maturing." Since this verbal conventionally would be reflexive, it may suggest the complex temporal progression of the sun through the day, and the year--its "getting metaphorically older." And there is the primary, "active" meaning of the sun's effects on the products of autumn. Thus, both the two senses of the passage of time and the immediate fruition of the season merge ambiguously in a word, as they do in the season and the poem. See section 4 of this chapter for the discussion of the function of indirection in "To Autumn."
The gathering of the swallows, as the "maturing" sun, includes ambiguously two suggestions, one referring to the terminating of the day and the other to the terminating of the year; thus an intentional "confusion" of time is created, which is instrumental in presenting theme. See the discussion of ambiguity and indirection and their function in "To Autumn" in section 4 of this chapter.

See Poetical Works, pp. 218-219 for the text of "To Autumn." See the sonnet, "When I have Fears That I May Cease to Be" (p. 366) for Keats's association of "gleaning" and harvesting with death and poetry.

See note 14 of this chapter for the discussion of the significance of the "last oozings" of the cider press.

Perkins, p. 292.

Bland, p. 219.

Southam, p. 97. There seems to be contradiction in my saying that the "least" concrete sense, hearing, supports the mutable quality of stanza III, when I also say that more concrete, particular time and "place" in this stanza do the same. I can only counter that the change from touch to sound supports a feeling of "withdrawal" and the switch to particular time and place appears to indicate a "closing in" quality that is related to "withdrawal" in its sense of termination. Again, the reader's "pulses" must be consulted (I, p. 231).

Leavis, p. 265.

Rosenheim, p. 54.

See sections 2 and 3 of Chapter II and section 1 of this chapter for the significance of weather and temperature for Keats.

The imagistic manipulation of "softness" becomes an irony, exploiting the inherent ambivalence in our feeling toward this attribute. See section 4 and the discussion of the inherent "ironies" of "To Autumn."

See note 14 for the ambivalent significance of "oozings."

The "small" gnats at the mercy of the "light" wind is a subtle hyperbole, almost over-emphasizing their ephemeralness. (See the footnote on the visual imagery of the "Ode to a Nightingale" in section 4 of Chapter II for a similar hyperbole.) "Loud beat" and the "barred" clouds "blooming" the day employ integration of contrarieties, recapitulating
the subtle balance of oppositions that characterizes the entire ode. All three phrases are examples of poetic wit or irony. See section 4 of this chapter.


43 The entire first stanza being a sentence fragment, the temporal vagueness encouraged by "sometimes" which "controls" all the "events" of stanza II, and the fact that these "events" are only possibilities, even "sometimes" ("Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find," etc.), all make tentative even the descriptions of these stanzas. Keats makes his claims without really having to stand behind them, much as in his characteristic employment of negation. See note 36 of Chapter III, stanza V of the "Ode to a Nightingale," and stanzas three and four of the "Ode to Psyche" for Keats's peculiar preference for description of what, paradoxically, does not "really" exist. This practice is a screen against critical irony; the poetical and realistic existence of Keats's subjects, and the relationship of these two "realities," is left to the "credibility" of the reader. See the discussion of "credibility" and "To Autumn" in the following section.

44 Heinen contends that relatives of time such as "meantime" and "while," which are recurrent in Keats's poetry, indicate "stationing" or "interwoven time"; I would include "then" and "now" as significant relatives of time indicating not the abstract time of "stationing" (see section 3 of Chapter II for the discussion of "stationing"), but as indicative of specific, divorced present time.

45 Reuben A. Brower, The Fields of Light (New York, 1951), p. 40. The passage in the letters which "introduces" "To Autumn" suggests that "confined" places and "shutting in," "especially when associated with autumn "richness" would not only indicate "withdrawal, a poignant autumnal note," but the "enervating and weakening," unhealthy idiosyncrasy" of "the neighborhood of a rich enclosed fulsome manured arrable Land"—the unhealthiness of "confined" places "as Autumn is encroaching."

46 The phrase "full grown lambs" is questionable since a "full grown" lamb is, I suppose, no longer a "lamb"?

47 Bleating, whining, and "twittering" are not only "thin" sounds but rather unmusical ones existentially no matter how beautiful these thin sounds can be integrated into full and melodious verse. We probably are not struck by this "natural" dissonance until the last line. Again Keats has "suspended our disbelief" and "lulled" our critical irony to sleep. (See note 27 above for a discussion of the significance of the "gathering" of the swallows.)

Ibid., p. 52. The "open" vowel sounds are, according to Bate: the diphthongs, day (ai), go (ou), fly (ai), how (au), boy (oi), here (ie), there (oe), four (ou), and tour (ua); and the historically "long" vowels, see (i:), father (aː), saw (ɔː), too (uː) and bird (ɔː). The "close" sounds are the historically "short" vowels, it (ɪ), get (e), cat (ə), hot (ɔ), molest (o), put (u), up (ʌ), and China. Bate represents the "open" sounds with an "a" and the "close" sounds with a "e"; I employ his designations.

Ibid., p. 57. Bate gives as an example: "As are the tiger-moth's deep-damask'd wings" (a/ab/abb/abbb), (p. 201).

If "To Autumn" is diagrammed using Bate's system, the "interchange" of "open" and "close" "vowel" sounds will appear as below:

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

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 a b b a a b b a a
 Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
 b a a b b a a
 Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
```
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor, (possibly 11 syllables)
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
Sparcs the next swath and all its twined flowers: (possibly 11 syllables)
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 hours.

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, (9 syllables, heavy use of open vowels)
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-cricket sings; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft; (all closed vowels)
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. (possibly 11 syllables)

There are approximately 125 open and 200 closed vowel sounds in the ode;
there are 18 closed and 3 open vowels in the last two lines. The predominance of closed vowels in the last two lines is emphasized by the fact that the (a) of the last word of the poem is the only open vowel that falls on an accented syllable—where the "open" sounds would usually fall—in these lines even though the last line is unusually protracted,
being one of only two lines in the poem having a possible 11 syllables (thereby breaking the regularity of the pentameter). It is not necessary to mention that this diphthong is not the most "open" vowel sound itself.

52See note 27 for the significance of the subject, the passage referred to in note 36 for comments on the "thin" quality of the sounds of the last stanza and the significance of this quality, and note 51 above on Keats's prosody.

53The change in the ode form, which was already principally a form designed to "eternalize" "concrete particulars" (see section 4 of Chapter II for reference to Bate's comments on the form of the odes in regard to their themes) from the normal 10 lines per stanza to 11 in "To Autumn" further enforces Keats's protracting of time in presenting the "majesty" and "leisureliness" of autumn. The three "extra" lines, the lines which protract the normal stanza form, either reinforce the deceptive slowness and "patience" of the season or are instrumental in influencing the interplay of assonance in the prosody: (1) "Until they think warm days will never cease," (2) "or by a cyder-press, with patient look," and (3) "The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;".

54Bate, John Keats, p. 584.

55See the passage by Bloom on "To Autumn" on the first page of this chapter.

56See sections 3 and 4 of Chapter II.

57See section 3 of Chapter III.

58See notes to the previous section for some of the underlying irony developing in these two stanzas.

59Bate, John Keats, p. 582.

60Unger, p. 284.

61Ibid., p. 280.

62Note the discussion of the "speech" of the subject in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" in section 4 of Chapter III.

63Perkins has defined Keats's aesthetic theory of "intensity," "as a sympathetic participation so massive that it obliterates consciousness not only of self but also of anything other than the object focused upon" (Perkins, p. 210). Keats wrote to George and Tom in 1817
of "negative capability" and Coleridge's unfortunate demand for certainty, in which he broaches his theory of artistic "intensity"; Keats concludes, "This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us not further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty over comes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" (I, p. 194). In another letter to his brothers, Keats comments on Benjamin West's painting, "Death on a Pale Horse": "The excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth--but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness" (I, p. 192).

64 Fogle, John Keats: Selected Poetry and Letters, p. 248. I quote from this edition rather than from the Garrod edition, because the omission of quotation marks in these lines again favors my comments. The textual issue here is not a settled one, and I read the last two lines as the continued "speech" of the urn.

65 See Brooks, The Well Wrought Urn, p. 52.

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