INSPIRATION IN MILTON AND KEATS

Meg Harris Williams
To Gawain
'... disguised as fiction, the truth occasionally slips through.'

Wilfred Bion

'... We may make a beginning by acknowledging the obvious, that every psycho-analytical discovery is a self-revelation and every paper an autobiography.'

Donald Meltzer

In the conclusion
Is the dedication
Of what is worthy
To the creator.

I send back these songs
For signature;
To be corrected by
The making eye.

Roland Harris
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Preface

This book is concerned with a more specific definition of inspiration than that commonly implied by the term, and poems which may be called 'inspired' are therefore correspondingly limited in number. The term is not used simply to revalue or rearrange a hierarchy of poems, but to describe the experience of the poet himself, and the nature of the knowledge he has gained by writing a particular poem. Inspired writing is an experience for the poet which fundamentally changes his view of the world, and which is therefore more often associated with disturbance than with enjoyment. And although all inspired poetry is artistically excellent, not all good poetry is inspired; the categories are divided by the point at which the poet's primary feeling is no longer that of total command of his powers, but that of an obligation to tell 'the truth', as it is told to him, by a power greater than his own. Inspiration is the means by which poets become, in Shelley's terms, 'the legislators of the world'. And the inspired poet is like Plato's philosopher-in-the-making, painfully dragged from his Cave-dwelling into the sunlight, and then forced to apply his new vision back in the old darkness, his eyes being 'unsighted in two ways': new knowledge brings no release from old discomfort, and the knowledge-seeker is thrown back into his habitual medium of work — which, for the poet, is the craft of verse.

It is now a critical commonplace that 'poetry should not mean, but be': a fact about poetry which is as true for the poet writing as for the reader reading. In my investigation of the meaning of inspiration, I found that the collection of isolated, out-of-context remarks by poets and others about 'inspiration' was relatively unilluminating. Anthologies of this nature exist and are of some interest, but it seems to me that the most effective way to examine inspiration systematically is through the analysis of poetic language itself; and that it is a characteristic of inspired poetry for an image, or extended metaphor, of the process of inspiration
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to exist within the poem, representing the poet’s concern with his own experience as an aspect of the wider subject of the poem. For, however dramatically the poet’s identity may be subsumed in different characters and situations, his own inner poetic history has some part in the unfolding of a poem, which is an exploration and shows him in the process of learning. Inspiration is not merely a figure of speech, but a complex state of mind for which poets themselves have the greatest respect, love and hatred. If we are to pay more than lip-service to the value of poetry as experience and as a model for experience in life itself, then some attention must be paid to that central experience of the poet’s on which the action of the poem depends.

In the following chapters, therefore, after an introduction based primarily on the major images of inspiration of Plato, Dante and Spenser, I attempt to explore the history of inspiration in two poets: John Milton and John Keats. These two were chosen for several reasons; they include: the wealth of material documenting their early development; their standpoint in different eras (‘Renaissance’ and ‘Romantic’) which are often considered to present antithetical ideas of the poet’s role; and the fact (much neglected in criticism) of Milton’s pervasive influence on Keats. The book consists of a personal reading of their poetry, pursued more or less chronologically, which for reasons of space and to balance the short life-span of Keats, treats the later poetry of Milton much less fully than his early poetry. The validity of the subjective, imaginative factor in criticism is, of course, dependent upon the accuracy of the interpretation. One way to read a poem is to write a story about it, just as one way to observe a Grecian Urn is to write a poem about it, and one way to defend the Harmony of the Spheres is to deliver an ‘open-handed’ oration in the face of logic’s ‘closed fist’. In the context of controlled technique, a subjective analysis can unearth evidence which studiously evades close-fisted scholarship. The highest possible aspiration of any literary critic is to enrich the appreciation of the reader when he turns again to the literature; and my main hope is that this account of two poets’ related development embodies a story reflecting something of the truth of the poetry itself.

I would like, here, to express my affectionate thanks to Kathleen Lea, who with courage, care and insight supervised my five years’ research at Oxford; to Joie Macaulay, who taught me at school to read poetry, introduced me to Milton and has often
discussed the drafts with pleasure and interest; to other friends and teachers: in particular Gillian Beer; Catherine Belsey; Raffaella Ferrari; Hannah Hammond; Brian Jackson; Nalini Jain Soni; Mary Ann Radzinowicz; Susanne Wofford; to my family, who read the manuscript at every stage and whose influence pervades the book: in particular to my husband Adrian who, with the additional delights of a small child to bring up, seems to have enjoyed the experience.

The edition from which Milton's poetry is quoted is that of Carey and Fowler (Longman, 1968); Wright's transcription and facsimile of the Trinity Manuscript (reprinted by the Scolar Press) is also used for the poetry and for the Letter to a Friend. Otherwise the text for Milton's prose is the Yale Complete Prose, edited by Don M. Wolfe et al. (1953); though Of Education is available in paperback selections (edited by Lea or Patrides). Milton's Latin prologues are quoted only in translation, as are incidental references to other Latin writings. I have used Miriam Allott's edition of Keats's poems (Longman, 1970); in some cases (e.g. for spontaneous verse, or early drafts) his poems are quoted from the Letters, for which the text is Rollins's complete edition (1958). Gittings's selection (1977) contains all the important letters. Once or twice I have without comment corrected Keats's slips of the pen when they might distract the reader (e.g. 'itsef' for 'itself'), and expanded abbreviations; and I have not (unless for specific comment) reproduced erasions when quoting from manuscript transcriptions. Elsewhere, 'u-v' and 'i-j' spellings have been normalised. I have not cumbered the text with footnotes, because all the major references are easily found, and the others may be researched by any interested person. Unless otherwise stated, comments on Keats by his friends will be found in the Rollins's, The Keats Circle (1965). Keats's marginal notes on Milton are printed in Buxton Forman's Hampstead edition (1938-9), volume 5, and reprinted in the Penguin Complete Poems (1976), edited by John Barnard. I am, in addition, particularly indebted to Parker's biography of Milton; to Bate's biography of Keats; to Irene Samuel's work on Milton; and to Sperry's Keats the Poet.

M.H.W.

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On the Meaning of Inspiration

The concept of poetic inspiration is a difficult and touchy one to deal with since, in common with all terms relating to mysterious powers apparently donated to some and denied to others, it is by nature subject to much abuse, and may easily be claimed by poseurs, to the confusion of a dull-witted audience. Indeed, 'inspiration' seems to find credence in standard critical vocabulary only in the trivialized sense of 'excitement', or as a formal figure of speech adopted by poets to justify their irrational aberrations — invocations to the Muse providing a convenient and dignified way of starting a poem. The absurdity of requiring such a concept was exposed by Hobbes in his 'Answer to Davenant', caricaturing the poet's traditional peculiarities:

But why a Christian should think it an ornament to his Poem, either to profane the true God or invoke a false one, I can imagin no cause but a reasonless imitation of Custom, of a foolish custome, by which a man, enabled to speak wisely from the principles of nature and his own meditation, loves rather to be thought to speak by inspiration, like a Bagpipe.

Hobbes understood the inflated poseur: but not, however, the meaning of 'inspiration' to the true poet, as a function neither 'ornamental' nor merely disguising a thin hold on common-sense, but essential to creativity. In this chapter, therefore, I intend to show that inspiration actually exists, as a very specific mental process. The 'inspired' quality in poetry is not a hyperbolic synonym for 'good' or even 'great' (although these categories overlap): it describes the poet himself in the process of learning. For inspiration is in essence a means of gaining knowledge: not in the common sense of accumulating facts, but in the higher sense of achieving wisdom. Through inspiration, the ideas and under-
standing of civilisation are unobtrusively advanced—generally without acknowledgement to the poet himself. And the fact that inspiration is an elusive quality does not relieve us of the responsibility of trying to investigate it. We may feel with Johnson, when asked by Boswell to define poetry (as he reports in his Life of Johnson), that it is not directly definable: "'Then, Sir, what is poetry?' 'Why, Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not. We all know what light is; but is it not easy to tell what it is'"—and therefore take the advice of the Athenian Stranger in Plato's Laws when defining the relation of Reason to Soul:

in answering this question we mustn't assume that mortal eyes will ever be able to look upon reason and get to know it adequately; let's not produce darkness at noon . . . by looking at the sun direct. We can save our sight by looking at an image of the object we're asking about.

'Inspiration' is one of those terms which cannot satisfactorily be defined naked, but may be approached through an 'image'. The extended images which some poets have used to convey the process may, therefore, suggest how to describe inspiration in action.

A good place to set the scene is in Plato's Cave, from the Republic: not because here he is talking ostensibly about poetry or inspiration, but because the structure of the Cave may be seen as a direct prototype for the context in which other poets have set their image of poetic inspiration. Plato himself, in spite of banishing the artists, has traditionally been seen as Sidney saw him in his Defence of Poetry: 'essentially a poet' with his allegory of the Cave being one of those 'mere tales . . . which who knoweth not to be flowers of poetry did never walk into Apollo's garden.' Plato, as a poet, provides not a direct philosophical definition, but a myth describing how inspiration is experienced. He is talking about society, but his myth may also be viewed in microcosmic form as an image of the mind and its internal organisation. The Cave is a structure in which different levels of perception may be contained at the same time; it allows for the nature of man as (in the words of Sir Thomas Browne) 'that great and true Amphibium' living in 'divided and distinguished worlds'. There are basically two worlds of knowledge: the upper world of sunlight, and the lower world within the Cave. The Sun is the ultimate standard, being the agent responsible for per-
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ception of objects in both worlds, illuminating directly and indirectly. For the lower world is an imitation of the upper world, with the shadows of puppet-figures thrown by a fire (a secondary form of the Sun's light and heat); and it contains within itself scope for looking directly or indirectly—the ultimate imprisonment within illusion being represented by the prisoners whose heads are fixed so that they can see only the shadows on the wall. These have no idea of any other reality; comprising an inner state which is 'merely dreaming, like most societies to-day, with their shadow battles and their struggles for political power'. It is important that Plato, unlike some of his later followers, does not prescribe, as a remedy for the fallen and confused state of man, a one-way ladder by which some of the Cave-dwellers may rise out of their misery and live in a place of eternal enlightenment. On the contrary, he points out that 'The object of our legislation . . . is not the welfare of any particular class, but of the whole community . . . to make each man a link in the unity of the whole.' Plato believes in the integration of faculties in man's internal society; man is not fulfilling his whole nature (leading the Good Life) if he denies recognition to any of these faculties within himself. The search for the ultimate Form of the Good (which, as Plato explains, is represented by the Sun, that 'child of the Good', in his myth) is incomplete and pointless without the return to the Cave. The upper and lower worlds correspond essentially to Plato's distinction elsewhere between the world of Forms or Ideas or 'true being' (episteme), and the world of belief or appearance or opinion (doxa), in which men live most of the time, and which provides a good enough guide towards living a more or less virtuous life—though this may prove fallible in cases of extreme conflict. One gathers from Plato that the correct use of the upper world involves an occasional visit to it, or rather occasional contact under the influence of some power other than one's own (Plato expresses it as being forcibly 'dragged upwards'). And the process is a painful one both ways: both being forced to see the light, and being forced to apply the new sight to the old darkness. For 'the eyes may be unsighted in two ways, by a transition either from light to darkness or from darkness to light, and . . . the same distinction applies to the mind.' The knowledge-seeker who attempts to interpret his present chamber of experience in terms of the standard of truth itself (the principle governing all systems of light and shade) is in an uncomfortable position. And Plato,
when training his would-be philosophers to receive and make use of inspiration, is careful to prepare them for the emotional and intellectual confusion attendant on the experience of 'enlightenment'.

According to Plato, the potential for this journey towards the light

is a capacity which is innate in each man's mind, and ... the faculty by which he learns is like an eye which cannot be turned from darkness to light unless the whole body is turned; in the same way the mind as a whole must be turned away from the world of change until its eye can bear to look straight at reality, and at the brightest of all realities which is what we call the Good.

The gaining of real knowledge is, in fact, a process of remembering reality (anamnesis): a difficult contortion in which the 'whole' mind must be completely turned, using an innate idea of the Good, away from the 'world of change'. The mind's eye, for Plato, is not a contemplative abstraction, but a sensuous reality, only understandable by analogy with the 'whole body'. Contemplation is only one stage in the process of inspiration, not its ultimate achievement. Thus in the Phaedrus, Plato describes the pageant of the gods with the souls journeying through the upper world, standing 'upon the back of the universe', until each soul has 'assimilated its proper food' and is 'satisfied at last with the vision of reality' — for

every human soul by its very nature has beheld true being—otherwise it would not have entered into the creature we call man — but it is not every soul that finds it easy to use its present experience as a means of recollecting the world of reality.

The soul's real test comes after its feast of knowledge, during its successive reincarnations. The difficulty lies in yoking together again 'present experience' and the ideal 'world of reality'. Plato's myths of the different chambers of the universe revolving within one another or containing objects which shadow one another, with their built-in theory of 'innate' knowledge, are infinitely flexible. As poetic images, they allow for the multiple variations of mental action possible in man's endeavour to recapture, or to
get away from, that experience of inspired understanding which his innate humanity tells him does exist. For similar actions may result from different visions (an object or the shadow of an object), and Plato’s imagery directs attention away from appearance to motivation: to the ‘eye of the mind’ itself; providing the philosopher with a tool to distinguish between the actions—how a man may know and yet not know, how he may understand yet be unable to express his understanding, how he may act as if he understood without understanding. Plato shows that a man’s state of mind is not a spiritualised abstraction divorced from action: on the contrary, the soul’s journey through the mind’s state is a real action, by comparison with which apparent action is a ‘shadow battle’, a ‘mere dream’.

How, then, may the creative fusion between ‘present experience’ and the ‘world of reality’ be made? One way of mobilising present experience is through deliberate, motivated education: though as Plato’s Educator in the Republic makes clear, he does not ‘implant sight’, but turns someone who already has it in the right direction. But another, more direct contact with the upper world of reality is set in its context at the end of the Meno:

virtue will be acquired neither by nature nor by teaching. Whoever has it gets it by divine dispensation without taking thought, unless he be the kind of statesman who can create another like himself. Should there be such a man, he would be among the living practically what Homer said Tiresias was among the dead, when he described him as the only one in the underworld who kept his wits—‘the others are mere flitting shades’. Where virtue is concerned such a man would be just like that, a solid reality among shadows.

Plato is here describing a man divine: one who can create another in his own image, and whose mode of thought is in effect ‘divine dispensation’. This is a state of mind impossible for a human being, at least as a constant mode of experience: yet it serves as a model for the inspired poet (or philosopher or statesman), and is approximated to by the blind seer Tiresias, who can see the real world as opposed to the illusory one, and so stands out as a real object amongst shadows. Tiresias is traditionally a type of the inspired prophet; and through him, Plato indicates how poetic inspiration fits into his system: as a means of direct contact with
reality, 'by divine dispensation', as opposed to 'thought' (which is already contaminated by the values of what he called the 'world of change'). The mind's eye is symbolically blind, for there can be no compromise between the different ways of seeing at the time of inspiration itself. Moreover, Plato's image emphasises once again the complete transformation of the man himself: it is not merely his 'ideas' which have been changed, but his whole self; through the 'eye', his mind's body has been dragged upwards into the sunlight, and insight makes his form stand out as a solid reality against an insubstantial background of shadow. Another picture of the inspired thinker, the man who embodies truth or reality, is given by Plato in the context of the incarnations of the soul in the Phaedrus:

In its first incarnation no soul is born in the likeness of a beast; the soul that has seen the most enters into a human infant who is destined to become a seeker after wisdom or beauty or a follower of the Muses and a lover ...

These words describe the inspired poet, whose mind becomes a vehicle for a soul that has seen the most. It becomes apparent that the virulent condemnation of art and poetry which is a constant feature of Plato's dialogues, relates not to the true inspired poet whose imitation of beauty forms part of a search for truth, but to the false impersonator of this search, who endeavours to dress up a derivative or secondary reality in the characteristics of the real thing, and upholds it as evidence of superior creativity. The apparent war between 'poet' and 'philosopher' or 'statesman' is merely a question of terminology, necessary in order to differentiate a true follower of the Muses and 'lover' from the destructive poseur. Plato, himself a poet, knew from experience the ease of misusing artistic technique as a form of self-indulgence, and was always in two minds as to whether the dangers of pursuing the artistic road to reality justified the results. And his central images of inspiration (as opposed to his mere statements) show clearly the artist's dilemma: the overwhelming reality and beauty of the embodiment of inspiration in aesthetic form, making everything else look pale; yet the discomfort and difficulty of being 'unsighted' in order to see better, and not taking refuge in illusion when it is always at hand, ready to welcome the vulnerable soul back into the shadows.
Poets have, of course, always insisted that they are not in the service of the laws of the everyday ‘world of change’, but are employed only by their Muse, and accountable only to the Muse’s reality. Thus, Blake called himself the ‘Secretary’ to his prophetic books (‘the Authors are in Eternity’); and according to Sidney in his *Defence of Poetry*, the poet,

disdaining to be tied to any such subjection, lifted up with the vigour of his own invention, doth grow in effect another nature, in making things either better than nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in nature ... [Nature’s] world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden.

And the ‘golden’ world delivered in poetry is not primarily an idealised one (‘better’ than nature), but a new existence altogether: a form such as never was in nature. Poetry’s function is not to deceive, but to awaken humanity to a reality of which it was hitherto ignorant. Poets have the function of keeping mankind, and its primary medium of expression, language, in a state of continuing development. In Shelley’s words, in his *Defence*, ‘Their language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetrates their apprehension ...’ The poet, as a ‘maker’, is also a ‘prophet’ (to combine the Greek and Roman words, like Sidney, as aspects of one activity); his activity stretches the boundaries of the known world, but it can only do so by fore-thinking something which is not yet there, and perpetrating its apprehension. For this reason ‘inspiration’ (which has never lost the sense of its etymological root ‘to breathe into’) implies an agent from one world entering into another, in a ‘before unapprehended’ relation: a setting traditionally expressed through images such as the Pierian spring on the Mount of the Muses trickling through the poet’s lips, or the fire or wind of the spirit entering within. Poetry is always experienced as coming from outside the poet’s normal, controllable mode of recognition—hence the favourite metaphor of the Dream, ‘When the light of sense/ Goes out’, simultaneously revealing ‘The invisible world’ (as in Wordsworth’s *Prelude*). Moreover, this ‘invisible’ or ‘golden world’ is immediately apprehended by the poet in full sensuous existence: that is, in the words of poetry itself, never in terms of an abstract idea or plan. Thus Housman, in his essay ‘On the Name and Nature of Poetry’, des-
cried how whole lines and stanzas would ‘flow into’ his mind, ‘accompanied, not preceded, by a vague notion of the poem which they were destined to form part of’; and thus Milton, his ‘unpremeditated verse’. Analogously, Michelangelo saw sculpting as freeing a pre-existing form from imprisonment within the stone (in his sonnet ‘Non ha l’ottima artista alcun concetto’). For the ‘meaning’ brought by inspiration is inseparable from the artistic medium itself. Though released from brazen nature, the poet is bound by laws far more rigorous and exacting; he is bound to try to transcribe the very words which he has in his mind: to observe accurately the very form of a meaning previously unapprehended.

The difficulty for the poet of making a constructive use of inspiration, when he is already ‘unsighted’ by an extension of normal vision, should not be underestimated. Dante, in the *Divina Commedia*, makes a complex analysis of inspiration and its repercussions, which is reinforced on different levels from different angles at key points throughout the poem. His concern with inspiration is heightened during the sections which deal with crossing a boundary between different realms of experience, when the poet is most vulnerable and likely to become disorientated: in particular the preparation for entry into the Earthly Paradise at the top of Purgatory, and the entry into the Empyrean in the final cantos of *Paradiso*. But the poet’s initial exposure to experience occurs during the first canto of the *Inferno*, in the scene which is the foundation for the whole vision:

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che la diritta via era smarrita.

(In the middle of the journey of our life I found myself within a dark wood where the straight way was lost.)

Dante is embarked on a voyage of necessity, not of pleasure, in order to understand the darkness and confusion within himself to which he suddenly becomes awake. The pain of being in that state is like death (‘Tant’ è amara che poco è più morte’); but nevertheless, it is only within the wood that he finds ‘the good’:

ma per trattar del ben ch’io vi trovai,
dirò dell’altra cose ch’i’ v’ho scorte.
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(but to give account of the good which I found there I will tell of the other things I noted there.)

This proem introduces both the scene in the wood, in which the three wild beasts prevent him from reaching the sunny hill and he finds Virgil as guide, and the whole Comedy, which treats of his search for the good through all the dark paths of human experience, including the knowledge of Hell. There is no short cut to the sunny hill, the blissful seat of knowledge, as Dante stresses in his description of the voyage of Ulysses (canto xxvi), whom he obviously very much admires, yet places in the eighth circle of hell. Ulysses is the prototype of the artist or scientist whose passion for gaining experience of the world and of the vices and worth of men has somehow gone wrong, and betrayed him into becoming a false artist. His last voyage is founded on a belief in his own self-sufficiency and omnipotence, such that he sails straight for the mountain of Purgatory, following the sun's track ('di retro al sol'), to gain experience of the ‘mondo sanza gente’—the unpeopled world, or the world outside common comprehension. This short cut to the bright world of reality or truth is dangerous, and it is one which Dante himself had been prevented from taking, by the upsurge of his all-too-obvious internal confusion (the wild beasts). Ulysses' faults are less obvious and therefore more treacherous, leading him to a point of no return: his ship whirling three times round, and finally

alla quarta levar la poppa in suso
e la prora ire in giù, com'altrui piacque,
infin che 'l mar fu sopra noi richiuso.

(at the fourth time the storm lifted the poop aloft and plunged the prow below, as it pleased Another, until the sea closed over us again.)

Ulysses' last word is 'richiuso' (closed), stressing the overwhelming finality of the experience which closed his mind for ever and imprisoned him in hell, while the real moving-power behind the whole voyage is disclosed quietly in the second-to-last line and left without further comment: 'com'altrui piacque', according to the will of God. Ulysses' illusion of omnipotence, founded on the success of his previous journeys of exploration, closes his access to
Inspiration and to further exploration of knowledge, for ever. The fate of the false poet — or worse, the poet who became false — reverberates through the whole poem: as it is to do throughout the careers of Milton and of Keats.

Dante also has Ulysses' passion for experience of the world; but it is founded not on a short cut, but on the painful experience in the dark wood, in which he is attacked by all his faults. His journey is an attempt to understand and mend them, not based on the assumption that his ship is watertight; therefore he sets out humbly, in the footsteps of Virgil, and taking the way of poetry, in its capacity to shadow the way of heaven. Unlike Ulysses, he does not follow in the track of the sun itself, but of that lesser light which symbolised the first genuine appeal to his emotions (Virgil is the heathen guide holding the 'divina fiamma' behind him, lighting the path of others but not his own). He fuses his will with Virgil's ('un sol volere e d'ambedue') who, as the greatest and most truthful of epic poets, takes him to the Earthly Paradise, which symbolises the ultimate knowledge attainable by the unaided reason or imagination. It is in the space between the paraphrase of Virgil's 'Messianic' eclogue (heralding Christ through the return of the Golden Age), and Dante's own entry into the original Earthly Paradise lost by the Fall (between cantos xxii and xxviii of Purgatorio), that Dante places his most concentrated discussion of poetry, and his description of poetic inspiration.

The episode is one of the most intense in the Divine Comedy, conveyed by the urgency of the souls who rush on 'pricked by the goad of necessity', in which Dante and Virgil are swept up, moving on quickly like a 'ship driven by a fair wind'. This is heightened by the burning fire of their purgation now that they are at the heart of the 'grande ardore', and by the stress on the thirst for heaven that consumes all the souls. All the senses are stimulated to the most intense activity (becoming a metaphor for mental activity: for only Dante has solidity in the ordinary sense, and can throw his shadow on the flames); the sensuous intimacy with heaven is expressed through the brush of the Cherub's wing against Dante's face, and the trembling of the mountain as Statius's soul is released. It is the moment of the greatest spiritual struggle in the whole journey; and it is no coincidence that these last terraces of Purgatory are peopled mainly by poets. Virgil is father to all of them in so far as he represents the height of understanding which may be reached through effort and motivation.
alone; the divine flame of his *Aeneid* has inspired more than 1,000 poets, and thereby transmitted the live link with heavenly truth, although he himself does not have total awareness of the light which he embodies. At this crucial point in the allegory, however, the point at which Dante places himself amongst the poets, he shows that he is no longer Virgil's pupil, but is in touch with an independent source of knowledge. For several cantos, he has been walking behind Statius and Virgil in silence, learning from their talk about making verse (as he says in canto xxii), and thereby re-enacting his own poetic education, as expressed not in terms of divine inspiration, but of craftsmanship. In this state he meets Bonagiunta, one of his own time involved in the particular stylistic controversies of his day over the ‘dolce stil nuovo’, and who is the first to address Dante directly not as a pilgrim, but in his capacity as an innovating poet, as the one who brought forth the new rhymes (‘colui che fore/ trasse le nove rime’). At this point, Dante is drawn into the action as participator as well as onlooker. Only after his arduous traversal of Hell and Purgatory does he feel in a position to state clearly his own identity as a poet, in the famous definition:

‘T'mi son un che, quando
Amor mi spira, noto, e a quel modo
ch'e' ditta dentro vo significando.’

(‘I am one who, when Love breathes in me, take note, and in that manner which he dictates within me, go setting it down.’)

In his answer to Bonagiunta he says nothing about the ‘new rhymes’, but transcends the terms and values of craftsmanship and of social context, for a direct and simple statement of his awareness of the dictation of a certain pattern of words which feels like the presence of an extraordinary, independent force within him. The progression from ‘I am’ to the words on the page is direct and inevitable, and there is no space (in terms of syntax or sensation) for any consideration other than the breath of Love and the effort to ‘take note’. Such is the identity of the inspired poet; and when Dante speaks in his own voice after the long silence, his answer comes as it were from another world, from a self-absorbed dream, demarcating a change in the system of values as radical as that felt by a Cave-dweller on his return from the world of reality.
This central image, begotten of the society of Virgil and Bonagiunta yet transcending it, is embedded at the heart of the poem. Dante's words are recognisable within the context of the whole Comedy, and touch echoes which knit the poem together at key points. They reform Francesca's words of slightly perverted love in the fifth canto of *Inferno* about love quickly kindled in the 'gentle heart' ('Amor, ch'al cor gentil ratto s'apprende'—a courtly-love catchphrase); they prefigure Dante's description of the breathing of life into man, in *Purgatorio*, canto xxv: 'spira/ spirito novo di vertu repleto'. They prefigure also the description of the moving force behind the universe which subsumes all individual identity, at the 'end of all desires' (*Paradiso*, canto xxxiii):

> ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle,  
> sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,  
> l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.

(but now my desire and will, like a wheel that spins with even motion, were revolved by the love that moves the sun and the other stars.)

And the movement of this wheel reforms the whirling of Ulysses' ship. Dante's personal statement of inspiration therefore reverberates through the entire poem; and his own experience, beginning in the dark wood, is the foundation for all the different ways of seeing love and knowledge that the poem explores. Indeed the whole *Comedy* may be seen, on one level, as an extended metaphor describing the search for the source of inspiration, with different images emerging and re-forming according to context. It is when approaching the source (describing the indescribable), in canto xxxiii, that Dante gives his final comment on the vision in the beautiful Virgilian epic simile:

> Qual è colui che somniando vede  
> che dopo il sogno la passione impressa  
> rimane, e l'altro alla mente non riede,  
> cotal son io, che quasi tutta cessa  
> mia visione, ed ancor mi distilla  
> nel core il dolce che nacque da essa.  
> Così la neve al sol si disigilla;
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cosi al vento nelle foglie levi
si perdea la sentenza di Sibilla.

(As one who sees in a dream and after the dream the passion wrought by it remains and the rest returns not to his mind, such am I; for my vision almost wholly fades, and still there drops within my breast the sweetness that was born of it. Thus the snow loses its imprint in the sun; thus in the wind on the light leaves the Sibyl’s oracle was lost.)

In these words Dante summarises the whole journey, and in particular the vision of the source of truth; and within this, the way in which poetry works as the experience of the poet. The experience is one of waking-within-dreaming, for from the dream the truth may be distilled direct, transferred without interference from the ideal image to the man, where it metamorphoses into the sweetness of the heart which is the experience of understanding. In the words of St Paul:

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

The loss of ordinary sensuous recognition marks (the snow and the leaves—like St Paul’s seeing ‘darkly’, or Plato’s ‘unsighted’ philosopher), results paradoxically in being face to face with the inner world, and knowing ‘as I am known’.

The climactic moment of recognition, simultaneously expressed and analysed, is the hallmark of an image of inspiration, in which inspired knowledge is set in the context of other ways of knowing. A look at one more poet’s extended metaphor of inspiration, throughout his life’s work, should suffice to substantiate this. Spenser, in ‘The Shepheardes Calendar’, asks a question about the ‘place’ of poetry, which he finds cannot be answered in this slim, two-dimensional pastoral, but which finds a resolution a lifetime later after traversing the epic Faerie Queene, in a pastoral episode of a different kind. In the October Eclogue of the ‘Calendar’, Piers and Cuddie together define the poet’s dilemma, and try to achieve not only a social, but an inner reconciliation, with the ‘state of Poet’:

O pierlesse Poesye, where is then thy place?
Both find poetry rejected as a commodity in the world, and no one prepared to give the poet sustenance and social standing in payment for his song. Then Piers remembers his education, and gives Cuddie a conventional Renaissance definition of poetry, informing him that poetry has nothing to do with earthly existence anyway, so would it not be simplest to fly back with it to its divine origins?

Ah fon, for love does teach him clime so hie,
And lyftes him up out of the loathsome myre:
Such immortall mirrhor, as he doth admire,
Would rayse ones mynd above the starry skie.

But Cuddie also knows this definition, and complains that it has no relevance to his actual situation: his wings are unable 'So high to sore'; he repeats his conclusion that 'All otherwise the state of Poet stands'. Piers's textbook instructions carry no weight beside the solid, earthbound language used by Cuddie in

But who rewards him ere the more for thy?
Or feedes him once the fuller by a graine?
Sike prayse is smoke, that sheddeth in the skye,
Sike words bene wynd, and wasten soone in vayne.

Moreover it appears that Colin, the most promising of the shepherd community of young poets, is in love; and finds that 'love', far from teaching him to 'clime so hie', weighs him down in the mire like the others—quite apart from breaking his pipe. In this eclogue, therefore, Spenser makes a sharp distinction between conventional poetic theory and the impact of experience. The young poet's idea of poetry as an escapist flight, falls flat and meaningless beside the weight of love and the necessity for real food for the soul. The substantial ideas of true inspiration are outside his ken, and the entire 'state of Poet' seems on the point of collapse.

Where, then, is the place of Poesy? No amount of reasoned dialogue can advance the matter any further; it is dealt with only through experience, in the vast 'Faeryland' of the Faerie Queene— a world in which things happen, are not just talked about. Indeed after the tight allegory of Book I, they happen on such a scale that, as the simultaneous strands of the narrative diverge
and converge, the narrator gradually relaxes his controlling function and becomes a participator: sometimes the pilot of a ship in time of fog, sometimes a ploughman, but always an active voyager by sea or land, with 'an endlesse worke ... in hand'. Spenser's narrative technique is his method of allowing the poem to take over, to become poetry of experience, and to teach him. The question of the poet's art is also set free in the general melee, continuously under review as one strand in the many-layered 'dark conceit', as the characters confront some image of beauty or truth (or its deceptive opposite) and redefine it against other aspects of life. Yet only after the harshly controlled allegory of Justice in Book V (aimed at satisfying both aspects of himself and, doubtless, his none too indulgent Queen, 'Gloriana') does Spenser descend into the 'delightful land of Faery' once again, and to the specific problem of poetic inspiration housed within it. The mystical contours of this land delineate not public but private life; not external, but internal values; and it is ruled by the Muse, whose guidance is needed

In these strange waies, where never foote did use,
   Ne none can find, but who was taught them by the Muse.

These ways are to be trod not on foot, but by the imagination; and proceeding gradually inwards, Spenser finds himself in the ninth canto of Book VI in the realm of pastoral poetry proper, with a sense of coming home:

   Now turne againe my teme thou jolly swayne,
   Backe to the furrow which I lately left . . .

The poet returns to pastoral, from a different angle, and after different experience, to consider once again the place of Poesy. Characteristically, Spenser paves the way in to the ultimate Vision of the Graces with extreme care and caution, establishing a substantial system of related images beforehand in the earlier cantos of Book VI. The underlying pattern of this book is one of transformation, as in the folk-tale of Shakespeare's last plays: it involves the location of wounds 'inwardly unsound', like Serena's, and magical reparation. The boundary between the natural and magical worlds is fluid; and the geographical location of each human story has the dual function of keeping the action earth-
bound, while isolating it from the laws of common-sense and allowing the miraculous to operate. Thus the Hermit's cave is an ideal microcosm, immune from the world's corruption, 'inly neate and clene' and able to heal wounds inwardly unsound; Meliboe's pastoral world has another magic boundary, being the only place where the Blatant Beast (the poet's chief tormentor from the outside world) is not known. Spenser deliberately chooses Calidore, a young and inexperienced knight who is perpetually distracted from his official quest for the Blatant Beast, as the vehicle (or part of himself) through which to approach the Vision, the essential image of inspiration. Calidore, like Keats in the 'Ode to Psyche', tends to 'wander thoughtlessly', and his lack of wisdom is sometimes comically apparent by comparison with the more experienced figures who stud the book—the Hermit or Meliboe. Calidore has only one qualification for seeing the Vision—and that is sprung upon him by accident: like Colin in the 'Calendar', he is in love. When he sees Pastorella on the hilltop, garlanded with flowers and encircled by shepherds and shepherdesses (a visual pattern of concentric circles repeated throughout the book and prefiguring the Graces' hilltop dance), he is 'unwares surprisd' by the 'blynd boy' (Cupid): 'Caught like the bird, which gazing still on others stands.' Pastorella herself is part earthly, part heavenly: dressed in 'home-made grene' dyed by her own hands, yet 'As if some miracle of heavenly hew/ Were downe to them descended in that earthly vew'. And when Calidore becomes a lover, he too becomes part of both worlds, joining two kinds of reality within himself: humble enough to dress like a shepherd and do shepherd's work ('love so much could'), yet raised above those who, like Coridon, are shepherd all the way through and 'unfit for loves content'. Through Calidore, Spenser does in a sense lay aside his own professional qualifications—the rational viewpoint endorsed by experience in the world—and, at the end of his epic (for he never wrote the planned twelve books), he suspends judgement and begins at the beginning. The character who will lead the poet to the Vision is stripped of all knowledge save that of a personal, subjective love, which—by humbling him—raises him above himself. The Vision itself is not his right, but his privilege: as Spenser says in canto x, 'He chaunst to come' to this place at the heart of Faeryland, 'far from all peoples troad'. Only in the context of deliberate dismissal of what Plato termed the 'world of change' and
its prejudiced values (symbolised by Calidore’s ignorance of the Blatant Beast) can the poet possibly come across the truth; and then only by ‘chance’.

In spite of Spenser’s careful preparation, the narrative is nevertheless fraught with tension when it comes to the point; and at the last moment he seems in two minds about whether to commit himself to this knight who has forgotten the Blatant Beast, having now ‘Another quest, another game in view’. Then he decides that Gloriana’s business is ‘painted show’ by comparison with the ‘one sight’ he knows to exist:

For what hath all that goodly glorious gaze
Like to one sight, which Calidore did vew?

The place (shortly to be recognised as Mount Acidale, home of the Muses) is the epitome of nature’s art and, like the Earthly Paradise, has the ideal nature of an unfallen world, in which trees ‘all winter as in sommer bud’. Calidore stands on the edge of the wood as the stately picture is built up, instinctively restrained from crossing the boundary, and (like Dante in the last cantos of Paradiso) moving inwards only with his eyes, such that ‘even he him selfe his eyes envyde’. The outer ring of dancers encloses ‘like a girland’ three other ladies, who themselves enclose

Another Damzell, as a precious gemme,
Amidst a ring most richly well enchaced,
That with her goodly presence all the rest much graced.

Throughout the episode, Spenser is careful to give the image before the meaning — to let it explain itself beforehand. After an interlude, the three dancers are identified: ‘Those were the Graces, daughters of delight’, who grant ‘all gifts of grace’ to men; but it is the identification of the central damsel, ‘that faire one . . . in the midst’, which is the crux of the recognition-circle of the vision, expressing the moving cause of the whole dance. It suddenly appears that the shepherd who provides the music for these dancers is in fact oblivious of all but her alone: this

Was she to whom that shepheard pypt alone,
That made him pipe so merrily, as never none.
The entire dance of the Graces, with all its traditional abstract and philosophical connotations, is dependent upon one vital subjective link—the love of the piper for the Damsel, an intensified version of Calidore and Pastorella. Spenser's Vision of the Graces is his version of Keats's 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'; and no sooner has the tenuous emotional link supporting the vast philosophical system been perceived, than the whole magical scene becomes familiar. There follows an extended moment of recognition, confirming the vision of truth in other terms, re-entering the Cave, following the process of remembering reality and the reciprocal knowing 'as I am known'. The participants in the Vision are not strange characters after all, but well known, and already part of Spenser's history:

She was to weete that jolly Shepheards lasse,
    Which piped there unto that merry rout,
    That jolly shepheard, which there piped, was
    Poore Colin Clout (who knowes not Colin Clout?)
    He pypt apace, whilst they him daunst about.

Something has happened to 'poore Colin Clout', familiar as Spenser's old self in pastoral poetry. Colin, whose love had incapacitated him in 'The Shepheardes Calendar', is now seen partaking in a heavenly spectacle for which that love is the basis, and the dance is being played to his tune. And Spenser, through partially blinding himself during the approach to the Vision, discovers through this shock of recognition, the (in Shelley's words) 'before unapprehended relations of things'. Like Dante, he found that there was no short cut to the 'sunny hill' of heavenly knowledge; and that his worldly expertise, far from helping him, had to be disowned during a journey through inward unsoundness.

The recognition of Colin, through Calidore, is endorsed by Spenser's wholehearted dedication, emphasising the action 'pype' and its source, 'love':

    Pype jolly shepheard, pype thou now apace
    Unto thy love, that made thee low to lout:
    Thy love is present there with thee in place,
    Thy love is there advanst to be another Grace.

As in Dante's image, the artistic expression and the inner emotion
are simultaneous. Spenser does not abandon the Vision at this point; he makes the equally difficult transition back into more normal reality, dealing with the loss of the Vision and how to make the experience relevant to ordinary life. For Calidore, who had been left forgotten at the edge of the wood, begins to get restless, finding the sight of something he does not understand uncomfortable. He ‘wist not what to weene’, cannot bear the uncertainty or the possibility that ‘his eyes mote have deluded beene’.

Therefore resolving, what it was, to know,  
Out of the wood he rose, and toward them did go.

But his insistence on knowing—that is, on explaining away—results in it all vanishing, ‘which way he never knew’,

All save the shepheard, who for fell despight  
Of that displeasure, broke his bag-pipe quight . . .

Calidore’s ‘irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (in Keats’s terms) has destroyed the vision, its ‘insubstantial pageant faded’ (in Shakespeare’s): and Colin once again, as in the January Eclogue of the ‘Calendar’, breaks his pipe. But this time, the mountain of experience behind the poet, particularly in Book VI’s healing of wounds inwardly unsound, serves to salvage the wreckage. For Colin relieves his destructive ‘displeasure’ by explaining the nature of the vision to Calidore—not by dismissing its mystery, but by reconstructing a philosophical picture whose musical patterning echoes, didactically, the original movement and circles of the dance. The near-disaster motivates him to reconstruct in memory an image of the experience which will be of use when inspiration itself is absent: a supportive, not an empty theoretical, philosophy:

She made me often pipe and now to pipe apace.

The relationship between Colin and Calidore is therefore ultimately constructive, and the new knowledge of inspiration brought back into the Cave, accommodated within an appropriate philosophical network as part of man’s continuing experience.
It is clear from pursuing definitions of inspiration past mere statements, and into the entire body of a poet's work through continuous metaphor, that there is a sharp distinction between convention and experience, and that descriptions of inspiration or invocations to a Muse are not employed lightly by experienced poets: either they mean what they say, or they do not say it. Inspiration is not a mere figure of speech, but a complex state of mind involving deep and often painful emotion rooted deep in the life of the poet himself. The most difficult move imposed by inspiration is the poet's relinquishment of preconceptions and belief in his own supreme powers (provided by technical expertise); for as Hazlitt pointed out in his lecture 'On the Living Poets', the lover of true fame seeks not 'the direct and gross homage paid to himself ... but the indirect and pure homage paid to the eternal forms of truth and beauty as they are reflected in his mind'. The poet mediates between 'truth' and the world, developing himself in the process: thus the Renaissance favourite, Joshua Sylvester, opens his translation of Du Bartas with a prayer to God to 'Lift up my Soule ... / That, teaching others, I my selfe may learne'. From the time inspiration is first experienced, the poet fights a constant battle to maintain the integrity of his art: for, as Milton was aware in Areopagitica,

> Good and evill we know in the field of this World grow up together almost inseparably; and the knowledge of good is so involv'd and interwoven with the knowledge of evill, and in so many cunning resemblances hardly to be discern'd, that those confused seeds which were impos'd on Psyche as an incessant labour to cull out, and sort asunder, were not more intermixt.

In similar terms, Keats expressed a problem raised by inspiration:

> It may be interesting to you to pick out some lines from Hyperion and put a mark X to the false beauty proceeding from art, and one || to the true voice of feeling. Upon my soul ... I cannot make the distinction.

The poet's effort to transcribe faithfully the 'eternal forms of truth and beauty' through art as they appear in his mind, requires total imaginative and intellectual commitment, and a sense of service to some higher power, providing a link with a
realm of total knowledge or truth beyond the poet’s previous conception. The mental state of inspiration is, in essence, one which allows new knowledge to make an entry into aesthetic form. By ‘knowledge’ I do not mean a piece of information, or accumulation of facts, but something closer to revelation or intuited understanding: something which has far-reaching consequences and which fundamentally, though perhaps imperceptibly, changes the total outlook of both poet and reader, being the process by which poets become the ‘legislators of the world’. This is what Milton and the Renaissance poets expressed as knowledge of God; what Plato called episteme, true being, or the awareness of the Good; and what Keats called the Soul’s achievement of ‘Identity’, or spirit-creation.

It is for this reason that inspired poems tend to have a ‘three-dimensional’ reality; they give the sense of complex simultaneous levels of perception, and of dramatic interchange between the levels, through a rich intensity of poetic language; only within this framework (for which I took Plato’s Cave as prototype) can a living image of inspiration exist. This image, though diffused throughout the work, tends to crystallise at certain key points in a poem, with an increased tension or urgency of tone, as the poet concentrates on his central relationship with the Muse. And my aim in this introductory chapter has been not only to anticipate problems and conclusions raised by inspiration, but also to suggest a method for analysing inspiration in action, during the course of an individual poem, and beyond that, during the course of a poet’s life-work.
2 Milton's New-enlightened World

In 1645, on the verge of immersing himself totally in his political career, and conscious of the close of an era in both a personal and a historical sense, Milton published his youthful poems. These poems, 'bright with that unlaboured neatness which a boyish hand once gave you' (as he describes them in the Latin ode to Rouse) comprise virtually all his known verse of the period apart from 'Lycidas', which was published in 1638. They are not arranged in blindly chronological order, but in a manner which shows Milton conscious of the exact significance of each step he took; marking his development clearly and with a sense of inevitability. Yet there is a danger in assuming that poetry came easily to Milton, and that Milton took easily to becoming a poet. In addition to his opinion of his 'sluggish genius' and (as he put it in the sonnet 'On Shakespeare') 'slow-endeavouring art', he came to see poetry as being born almost by lucky chance from amidst a welter of emotional chaos, prejudice and superstition: much as he imagines his own 'lucky little book' escaping 'the depths of Lethe' (Rouse's first copy was lost in transit), so that 'perhaps the children of the future, in some distant and wiser age, will see things in a fairer light and with unprejudiced hearts'. In later years, in the Apology for Smectymnuus, he made the statement that 'he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things ought himselfe to bee a true Poem'—whose phrasing suggests that he was well acquainted with the frustration. The course of true poetry does not run smooth; and it is not easy to allow that 'one talent which is death to hide' (in the sonnet on his blindness) to surface from its natural tendency to darkness and forgetfulness. And Milton, throughout his life, was troubled by the question expressed by Keats as 'why I should be a Poet more than other Men — seeing how great a thing it is'.

One document from Milton's youth indicates the nature of his
struggle with poetry more explicitly than any other apart from 'Lycidas': it is the letter to an unknown friend, which exists in two drafts in the Trinity College Manuscript containing Milton's early poems. The letter is unique in that it was written in English, never published (unlike the Latin letters), and perhaps never sent; it serves a private function of self-analysis rather than a public one of persuasion, or information, or declaration of intent. In it, Milton endeavours to explain why he has not yet taken up the career in the ministry for which he had been destined from childhood; and by contrast with his public statements, he resists the temptation to write a 'set apologie' (a rhetorical argument), but uses the friend as a 'good watch man'—as a receiver for spontaneous thoughts on his position in time and on the dark 'night' of his 'life as yet obscure and unserviceable to mankind':

yet now I will not streine for any set apologie, but will only referre my selfe to what my mynd shall have at any tyme to declare her selfe at her best ease.

He begins with a certain aggressive hesitation, making it clear that an internal dialogue is being established, between 'my selfe' and 'her selfe' (his mind). But this results, almost immediately, in a statement of the central problem, in the form of a vivid caricature of the poet:

yet if you thinke, as you said, that too much love of learning is in fault, and that I have given up my selfe to dreame away my yeares in the armes of studious retirement, like Endymion with the Moone on Latmus hill, yet consider that if it were no more but this, there is on the other side both ill more bewitchfull, to entice away, and good more potent, naturall cares more swaying, to withdraw to that which forward youth and vanitie are fledge with, which would soone cause me to throw off this Pluto's helmet, as Homer calls it, of obscurity ... 

The haunting image of the false poet, blindly self-absorbed yet useless to the world and self-destructive without knowing it, is comparable to Keats's conception of the 'dreaming' poet, and prefigures much in Milton's later poetry, including Samson at the nadir of the play, 'past hope, abandoned,/ And by himself given over'. After this, in a section with many alterations and erasions,
the structure of the sentence disintegrates as Milton attempts to construct a more positive case for the poet, and the argument flounders with an overwhelming sense of bitterness at the isolation in which his endeavour to make a genuine use of his God-given talent has placed him: he would 'praeferre a life that had at least some credit in it some place given it before a manner of living much disregarded, and discountenanc'd ...'. His isolation is not only from the world, but possibly from God, who made that 'terrible seasing of him that hid the talent'. In questioning (and, in effect, breaking from) his sensible, prearranged ministerial career, Milton finds himself steering between Scylla and Charybdis: either God or the world may be ready to seize him. It is not just his 'talent' which is in jeopardy, but his whole person—which can no longer, in fact, be divorced from that talent.

Milton's second approach to this part of the argument (as seen in the second draft of the letter) has an intensified savagery:

why should not all the fond hopes that forward Youth and Vanitie are fledge with together with Gaine, pride, and ambition call me forward more powerfully, than a poore regardlesse and unprofitable sin of curiosity should be able to with hold me, whereby a man cutts himselfe off from all action and becomes the most helplesse, pusilanimous and unweapon'd creature in the world, the most unfit and unable to doe that which all mortals most aspire to either to defend and be usefull to his friends, or to offend his enimies.

The picture is quite different from the glorifications of learning and poetry characteristic of Milton's early writings—including that in the Latin verse letter to his father ('Ad Patrem'), which in some ways is a companion piece to this letter. Instead of being in a position to know about everything that exists, the poet is in danger of being cut off from the thread of life itself, unable to withstand attacks from within or without. In depriving himself of the protection of what he later calls 'custom and awe', the poet ventures on a dangerous path. He can no longer be sure of anything—even that God has not forsaken him. There is a danger not only of worldly isolation, but also that his own pursuit for truth may in fact be an 'unprofitable sin of curiosity'—a kind of self-deception. He may simply be dreaming away his years, like Endymion, under the illusion that he is receiving heavenly
inspiration. It is clear from this letter, therefore, that the defencelessness and isolation appear in Milton's thought long before his physical blindness; and that they are an integral feature of the poetic condition, which exposes the poet to the 'terrible seasing' of ridicule and apparent insanity.

The exact date of the letter cannot be established; but it was written after the 'Nativity Ode', and before 'Lycidas', and during Milton's years of indecision about a career and private study at his father's house: that is, it was written at a time when it was apparent that, whatever else he might become, he was already a poet; and the letter shows that he was not altogether happy with the situation. Now, while it may be true that (as is sometimes argued) Milton was, in terms of his career, 'Church-outed' by the prelates and the 1640 'Et Cetera Oath', the letter suggests that, for quite different reasons, Milton had come to find poetry and preaching incompatible. Thus at the end of the letter, after the cathartic exposure of fear and hatred, he takes over rhetorical control again and jokes about himself recovering the skills of persuasion, relating this to the original occasion for the letter: 'but then I should also run into a reciprocall contradiction of ebbing and flowing at once and do that which I excuse myselfe for not doing preach and not preach.' The change of style indicates the division within Milton between the preacher-persuader with his skilful manipulation of words, and the passive, listening poet who is 'unweapon'd' by his artistic ability. It also shows Milton's awareness of this division within himself: his recognition of the temptation to use art dogmatically; to do what was easy for him, and what was expected of him. And the endeavour not to succumb to this continuing temptation but to be a true poet, and a 'true Poem', involved an intense emotional struggle — exemplified here, by his being church-outed by poetry.

What, then, had been Milton's experience so far, of being a poet? Milton's earliest verse employs an innocent experimentation with language which is in essence dissociated from meaning. He experiments with effects, manipulating words to fit the metre, incorporating images or vocabulary or phrasing which he finds striking. But, like Keats later, he does not really have anything to say — though this is less obvious in Milton's case by virtue of the formality of his training. In order to fill the gap, he tends to convert his set subject into some representation of the rewards of poetry or learning; and this is often expressed within the
traditional Renaissance format of the journey of the soul from being embedded in earth to its divine origins in heaven, allegorising the soul's education. One of these poetic 'flights', however, is different: both in the quality of its expression, and in the context of its delivery, which is far from conventional. In 1628, at the beginning of the Cambridge summer vacation, Milton found himself in the position of 'Father of Ceremonies' at an annual rite which was a send-up of the academic activity and college affairs of the term — yet which, like all university affairs, was supposed to be conducted entirely in Latin. Milton delivers the Latin prologue with due vulgarity (it consists mostly of personal jokes without much meaning for posterity), and then seizes the captive audience in order to 'overleap the University Statutes', while he recites some lines of English poetry expressing his own ambition to be a poet, and his own idea of the origins of poetry. Milton obviously enjoyed the inappropriateness of the situation, and was stimulated by the chance to show his non-conformity while apparently in the most conformist role of all, Father of Ceremonies.

For it is Milton the revolutionary who, in the lines written 'At a Vacation Exercise in the College', presents the semi-allegorical narrative of the young poet's relationship with language, embodying an entirely new conception of the growth of poetry to any hitherto. This is based not on classical precedent or traditional aesthetic theory, but on first principles: on the relation of internal strivings for expression to music and the mother-tongue. Milton first describes the instinctive speech arising not from the desire to convince or convey information, but from the desire to imitate and respond to sound and the meanings of sound itself; thus fusing his personal with his poetic development. He writes in English not because it is the language of the epic, like Virgil's Latin, or the language of love, like Italian (as he describes it in a canzone), or for any similar reason; but because it is the language which first moved his tongue:

Hail native language, that by sinews weak
Didst move my first endeavouring tongue to speak,
And mad'st imperfect words with childish trips,
Half unpronounced, slide through my infant lips,
Driving dumb silence from the portal door,
Where he had mutely sat two years before:
Here I salute thee and thy pardon ask,
That now I use thee in my latter task:
Thou need'st not be ambitious to be first,
Believe me I have thither packt the worst.

This vivid and unorthodox picture of the child learning language for the first time is Milton's first genuine invocation to a Muse. The child learning to speak 'imperfect words' and the young man searching for a 'passage' for 'naked thoughts that rove about' are one in their desire to imitate beauty, the 'melodious harmony'; and the personified figure of Native Language becomes the Muse who guides him. The noticeable adjective 'first endeavouring' prefigures his 'slow-endavouring' art (as he describes it in the sonnet 'On Shakespeare'), and is later adopted by Keats, in *Hyperion*. The poet here makes an imaginative leap over the statutes, discarding conventional restrictions for a realisation that the first essential in poetry is a living relationship between the poet and his mother-tongue; and as such, the lines announce the beginning of what Milton later terms the search for the 'idea of the beautiful ... throughout all the shapes and forms of things'. The would-be poet must make a link not only with the conventions of his literary heritage, but with the two-year-old child he was himself, when he first realised the beauty and potential of language. Only after this is the 'clothing' metaphor—the eloquence of rhetorical aid—introduced for the 'naked thoughts', such that, with his thoughts 'dressed', Milton may proceed to a formal passage of poetry. In this passage, Milton expresses his desire for a 'graver subject', through a general survey of the land of poetry—the journey of the imagination which he has used before:

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Such where the deep transported mind may soar
Above the wheeling poles, and at heaven's door
Look in, and see each blissful deity
How he before the thunderous throne doth die,
Listening to what unshorn Apollo sings ...
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The 'Vacation Exercise' is not a poem in the formal sense, and Milton does not publish it in 1645 perhaps for that reason—though he does in 1673, possibly owing to a wider view of significant points in his development. But the lines have greater
Unity of direction and power of expression than any formal poem so far, and for the first time convey a sense that Milton may have something to write about; and that, when he writes, it will not be according to the rules, but leaping over the statutes.

The ‘Ode on the Morning of Christ’s Nativity’, written on Christmas Day 1629, is the first poem to fulfil their statement of potential and foretaste of inspiration. Milton places it first in his book because it both describes, and enacts, the birth of poetry in the world, and represents his own experience of this ‘new enlightened world’. The introductory stanzas state the immediacy and sensuous actuality of the vision which he sees and the place where he is—that is, of the state in which he finds himself. Whatever is happening, happens ‘Now’: ‘This is the month, and this the happy morn’; and the light is ‘insufferable’ which breaks out from ‘the courts of everlasting day’ into this ‘darksome house of mortal clay’. These stanzas are generally explained as conventional, and have even been described as invented convention. It is clear, however, that the poet feels himself forced to address the Muse: not politely or reverentially, but as the words come into his mouth, urgent, eager and colloquial:

Say heavenly Muse, shall not thy sacred vein
Afford a present to the infant God?
Hast thou no verse, no hymn, or solemn strain,
To welcome him to this his new abode,
Now while the heaven by the sun’s team untrod,
Hath took no print of the approaching light,
And all the spangled host keep watch in squadrons bright?

In the mysterious moment before dawn, the boundary between night and day, sense-experience seems fluid and magical; abstraction and metaphor fuse into one another, as ‘light insufferable’ becomes the sky peopled by stars (the angelic army); and the poet’s own state of shock demands that the ‘approaching light’ be printed not only on the face of heaven, but in the words of poetry:

See how from far upon the eastern road
The star-led wizards haste with odours sweet,
O run, prevent them with thy humble ode,
And lay it lowly at his blessed feet . . .
The sense of enlightenment requires to be met, half-way, by the concrete existence of the 'humble ode', whose active part in the nativity scene is the equivalent of the journey towards knowledge made by the star-led wizards.

The first three lines of the Hymn present in miniature, a movement which is reinforced throughout the first section of the poem:

It was the winter wild,
While the heaven-born-child
All meanly wrapped in the rude manger lies.

The simple historic past (once-upon-a-time) is brought into the present: the word-order of 'heaven-born child' (suggesting a slow snowfall of single flakes, and prefiguring the arrival of Peace) conveys the transmutation of heavenly into earthly being. The abstract and mystical idea instantaneously becomes embedded in earth in a humble and concrete situation; 'wrapped in the rude manger' with its rough sounds, gives a sensuous actuality to the place of birth and the child's existence, fallen from intangible heaven. Milton does not need to elaborate on the physical trappings of the nativity scene (as does Crashaw, for example, in his 'Hymne of the Nativity'); for the setting already expresses the reality, the essential fact of birth. He has said all that is necessary about the external existence of the child, and after this point the poem enters the inner or 'golden world' impossible in 'brazen nature' (in Sidney's distinction); until, when the manger scene reappears at the end of the poem, it has taken on these 'golden' characteristics. Milton has invented a verse form which continually echoes this movement of the arrival of spirit in sense. The variation between long and short lines repeatedly brings one back to the point; and the final alexandrines curl back over each stanza, reviewing, including, and summarising its message:

But he her fears to cease,
Sent down the meek-eyed Peace,
She crowned with olive green, came softly sliding
Down through the turning sphere
His ready harbinger,
With turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing,
Inspiration in Milton and Keats

And waving wide her myrtle wand,
She strikes a universal peace through sea and land.

The verse is one sentence and a single movement, with emphatic onward words (‘Sent down’, ‘Down’, ‘She strikes’) alternating with the participles ‘sliding’, ‘turning’, ‘dividing’, ‘waving’, in an irregular way. No word is given the same emphasis as another of its kind: thus ‘sliding’ leads into ‘Down’, whereas ‘dividing’ (also at the end of a pentameter line) pauses on the comma; and the rhymes are variations on a similar sound. The presence of Peace is expressed less through the personification, than through sensuous reverberation, until it is finally clinched by the emphatic rhythm of the alexandrine, which carries the idea beyond the stanza, and reinforces the way the heaven-born child is planted in the earth.

The poem as a whole progresses in the same manner as the stanza form: not with a linear movement, but returning and deepening, folding layers of meaning on top of one another. In a series of images, the animation of brazen into golden nature is reinforced. The swell of the ocean is momentarily held still, captured in one concentrated image, ‘While birds of calm sit brooding on the charmed wave’; the ‘eyes’ of the universe at all levels (from the ‘lawn’ to the ‘airy region’) are opened, as both the ‘awful eye’ of kings and the ‘deep amaze’ of stars arrested in mid-routine point back to the source of inspiration. There is light on light and sound within sound; the stars overlap with the morning light (as at the beginning of Dante’s Purgatorio), and a ‘greater sun’ is imposed on the image of the sun’s burning axle-tree, building the cumulative picture of the ‘new enlightened world’. And the ‘ninefold harmony’ of the ‘crystal spheres’ is enacted within the poem in the variety of musical description, ranging from the echoing assonance of the alexandrine ‘With thousand echoes still prolongs each heavenly close’ to the simplicity of

Such music (as ’tis said)
Before was never made,
But when of old the sons of morning sung . . .

Moreover the poet himself is a participant in this ‘angelic symphony’; his voice was the first to join the ‘angel quire’, and the poem, on one level, tells the story of his own star-led musical
action. Thus at the centre (and turning-point) of the poem, at the moment of greatest revelation, his 'fancy' is 'wrapped' as was the heaven-born child: underlining the meeting of the 'humble ode' and the 'Lord' urged in the introductory stanzas:

For if such holy song  
Enwrap our fancy long,  
   Time will run back, and fetch the age of gold,  
And speckled vanity  
Will sicken soon and die,  
   And lep'rous sin will melt from earthly mould,  
And hell itself will pass away,  
And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.

In the metaphor of the unearthing of the 'dolorous mansions', the premises of sin's argument are undermined (a method often employed by Milton in direct debate); sin disappears when exposed to understanding. But at the same time, this excavation of the layers beneath the snow-covered earth begins the unwrapping metaphor. Mankind cannot bear very much reality, and the state of inspiration cannot be sustained for long without dizziness or insanity—time running backwards. 'The babe lies yet in smiling infancy'; the 'bitter cross' is mentioned but withheld, in the background, as Milton's poetry is not prepared to engage with it at this stage.

The poem turns back towards the child in the manger, in a movement which is a consolidation of the knowledge gained so far. The banishing of the pagan gods is in the spirit of a lullaby, as in A Midsummer Night's Dream's 'Never harm nor spell nor charm/ Come our lovely lady nigh'. It begins with primitive horror, on the initial confrontation with those ogres of the ancient unconscious momentarily exposed to 'peering day'; and then fades through the sinister to the nostalgic, underlining the sense that the significance of these gods is not so much rejected, as redeemed from its harmful aspects. The child-eating Moloch is a fairy-tale monster with characteristic grossness; frightening, but not through the subtle violence of evil portrayed by Milton in his later poetry. However, the pagan deities and nymphs who people the earth, now that it is no longer covered by snow and its natural life is visible, are released with mourning, being unable to take part in the perfection of the universe:
The lonely mountains o' er,  
And the resounding shore,  
A voice of weeping heard, and loud lament:  
From haunted spring, and dale  
Edged with poplar pale,  
The parting genius is with sighing sent,  
With flower-inwoven tresses torn  
The nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn.

The loneliness of the mountains is conveyed by the echoing of variations on its 'o' vowel throughout the stanza ('sound' 'shore' 'flower' 'torn' 'mourn'). These melodious, evocative passages derive their force from the recognition of sorrow and loss which is a necessary accompaniment to the inspired vision of the age of gold or the moment of truth, and which is a characteristic of inspired poetry; in this and in the unearthly, ambiguous nature of the 'parting genius', this section is comparable with Keats's fairy-land at the end of the 'Ode to a Nightingale' or 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'. The narrative's last glance before returning to the stable is of the 'flocking shadows pale' hastily fleeing against the background of the setting sun:

Each fettered ghost slips to his several grave,  
And the yellow-skirted fays,  
Fly after the night-steeds, leaving their moon-loved maze.

These creatures of the moon have a mysterious attraction of their own, and the mixture of moonlight with sunlight and shadowy effects brings the poem back to another boundary between day and night—that of the dusk, complementing the dawn with which it began. The parting genius sent with sighing, fades into the sunlight values, and becomes symbolic not only of the pagan spirit, but of the fading of inspiration itself.

By the end of the poem, it is still night-time, but not that of childhood fears and the unharnessed wandering imagination in its 'moon-loved maze'. The 'rude manger' in the 'winter wild' of the first stanza, has been transformed into the comfortable, orderly and brightly lit 'courtly stable', the world of daylight security and homeliness:

But see the virgin blest,
Hath laid her babe to rest,
Time is our tedious song should here have ending;
Heaven's youngest teemed star,
Hath fixed her polished car,
Her sleeping Lord with handmaid lamp attending;
And all about the courtly stable,
Bright-harnessed angels sit in order serviceable.

The lullaby of the second part of the poem separates off those dark and uncontainable aspects of the imagination from the child whose destiny on the 'bitter cross' is, as yet, only hinted at; and the 'golden world' brought by the child is now featured in the setting of the manger—the poetic invulnerability of his spirit requiring man-made, or angel-made, guardianship at this time. The 'amazed stars' have been brought into service as lamps, while the angels (now 'bright-harnessed' with its suggestion of armour) form a protective ring of light and warmth 'all about' within the winter's night. And the virgin laying the babe to rest is not merely an artful conceit to end the poem; it is integral to its structure that simultaneously the 'song' should 'have ending' and the child be able to sleep, accepted in the natural world. For Christ, the Good Shepherd, the 'great Pan' who transforms everyday pastoral into golden metaphor, symbolises on one level the poetic principle itself; and the conversion of the rude manger into the protective courtly stable is the poet's reciprocation to the inspiring spirit which—however powerful in one sense—is totally powerless unless received in earthly form. In this way the 'humble ode', with its art of words, protects and enshrines the poetic principle which it has realised.

The 'Nativity Ode', therefore, contains within it the story of Milton's first experience of inspiration: and the importance of the effect which writing it had upon him can hardly be overestimated. There is some minor, but interesting, evidence of the change which it wrought in his conception of poetry, to be glimpsed in the 'Elegia Sexta' written to his intimate friend Charles Diodati shortly afterwards. The greater part of this verse-letter consists of an elegant rhetorical elaboration of the respective roles of the lyric and epic poet (with slightly more glamour attached to the epic poet). In a short paragraph tagged on to the end, however, the tone and style change; with restrained excitement, Milton stops concentrating on presenting a good
description, and suggests that something has been happening to him at the present time:

But if you want to know what I am doing— if, that is, you think it worth while to know whether I am doing anything at all— I am writing a poem about the king who was born of heavenly seed, and who brought peace to men. I am writing about the blessed ages promised in Holy Scriptures, about the infant cries of God, about the stabling under a poor roof of Him who dwells with his Father in the highest heavens, about the sky's giving birth to a new star, about the hosts who sang in the air, and about the pagan gods suddenly shattered in their own shrines. These are the gifts I have given for Christ's birthday: the first light of the dawn brought them to me.

Here, Milton is describing inspiration for the first time as fact, not as romantic or glamorous hypothesis; the verses are experienced as being brought in their entirely from some outside source (the first light of the dawn), and placed in the poet's possession. The formality and the reality exist side by side, in this letter; and the voice of actual experience is clearly distinguishable from that of convention or fantasy.

Another document which illuminates the significance of the 'Nativity Ode' for Milton, in a somewhat different manner, is Milton's only known unfinished poem, 'The Passion'. This was clearly written with the 'Nativity' freshly in mind (probably for Easter 1630), and suggests his intention to write a series of poems on the life of Christ, thereby extending the felicitous inspiration of the ode in a wider field. Not only is the poem unfinished, however, but it is published by Milton in 1645 with a note drawing the reader's attention to the fact that he thought it was a failure: 'This subject the author finding to be above the years he had when he wrote it, and nothing satisfied with what was begun, left it unfinished.' One may wonder, however, what constitutes a poetic failure, for 'The Passion' is better than most of the poetry before the 'Nativity Ode' and, at twenty-one, Milton was quite capable of finishing a poem if he wished to, even on the most unlikely theme. And as one of the striking features of the poem is the way it tries to model itself on the 'Ode', to become a companion piece, it seems likely that Milton's dissatisfaction with it stems from its clash with the new idea of poetry brought by the
original poem. Indeed, a closer look at 'The Passion' shows how, during a series of attempts to get the poem off the ground, Milton learns something about inspiration that (by negative means) helps to consolidate that new idea of poetry.

'The Passion' begins with a pointed reference to the past achievement of the 'Nativity Ode', using the same stanza form as its introduction:

Erewhile of music, and ethereal mirth,
Wherewith the stage of air and earth did ring,
And joyous news of heavenly infant's birth,
My muse with angels did divide to sing;

yet there is no invocation to the Muse as before, and 'My muse' has become a convention, emphasising the poet's own power—the sophistication of the professional bard. The reality of the Nativity's 'eastern road' becomes a 'stage', and emotion takes second place, to be directed at will:

For now to sorrow must I tune my song,
And set my harp to notes of saddest woe.

The poet expects the poem of 'sorrow' to follow suit, now that he has discovered how to write poetry. But in fact, there follows a series of fruitless beginnings which have to be abandoned. At one point Milton concentrates on trying to squeeze meaning from a visual picture (in a way never necessary in the 'Nativity'):

He sovran priest, stooping his regal head
That dropped with odorous oil down his fair eyes,
Poor fleshly tabernacle entered,
His starry front low-roofed beneath the skies;

The sculptural imagery of the large forehead and eyes overrun by globules of oil is larger than life and, like a graven image, strangely primitive; without capturing any sense of the identity of Christ as 'Most perfect hero'. The poet's comment on this externality is (somewhat wryly), 'O what a mask was there, what a disguise!'; after which he approaches the scene from several other angles, hoping that he may yet 'confine' his 'roving verse'. For the first time he invokes the aid of an external force, choosing 'night
best patroness of grief (complementing light in the 'Nativity'); and, again following the 'Nativity', he fixes his 'eye'—here on Christ's sepulchral rock—and echoes the ode's 'See how from far upon the eastern road' with 'See see the chariot'; but rhetorical parallels with the first poem, do not bring the vision to life in the second one.

As the poem continues, it turns more and more to an analysis of the writer's own reaction to the subject, as if Milton were trying to investigate the root of the trouble. He requests his new patroness, Night, to 'work my flattered fancy to belief, / That heaven and earth are coloured with my woe'; and complains that in spite of his artistic control, his verse does not seem as lively as before:

Yet on the softened quarry would I score  
My plaining verse as lively as before;  
For sure so well instructed are my tears,  
That they would fitly fall in ordered characters.

This deliberately exaggerated conceit contains a constellation of wordplay, particularly in context with the previous two stanzas: such that 'instructed' (suggesting the fact 'constructed') becomes 'in ... characters'—embodying the process by which emotion becomes tears which become letters in the rock; and the way in which they 'fitly fall' is derived through a pun from the 'ecstatic fit' of the poet that he has just described. (All this wordplay, incidentally, is appreciated and used by Keats in the 'Ode on Melancholy'.) Milton drives art to the limits in order to expose, for purposes of understanding, the difference between 'well instructed' tears graven on rock, and the spontaneous, unsolicited experience of 'approaching light'—'light insufferable'—which is printed on the heavens, in the 'Nativity Ode'. And his final comment on his own apparently 'unfinished' poem consists of exposing the 'notes of saddest woe' with which he began in all seriousness, as 'sorrows loud' in a frivolous mythological conceit:

And I (for grief is easily beguiled)  
Might think the infection of my sorrows loud  
Had got a race of mourners on some pregnant cloud.

In 'The Passion', therefore, Milton clarifies for himself the
difference between poetry of 'flattered fancy' and of 'belief', and understands better the living relation between emotion and artistic technique. No doubt he published it in the hope that his readers, those 'children of the future ... with unprejudiced hearts' of the ode to Rouse, might learn from this too. For the distinction, and the drama, between true and false art, or live and dead art, was of vital importance to Milton and is fundamental to his mature poetry. The delicacy of the poet's relation with inspiration, steering between exposure to love and hate, is rather beautifully expressed in a sonnet 'O nightingale', written at about this time, in which the true bird of poetry is contrasted with the false cuckoo, and takes on mysterious associations of 'Jove' the 'Muse' and 'Love':

Now timely sing, ere the rude bird of hate
Foretell my hopeless doom in some grove nigh:
As thou from year to year hast sung too late
For my relief; yet hadst no reason why,
Whether the Muse, or Love call thee his mate,
Both them I serve, and of their train am I.

Here, as in a related sonnet 'How soon hath time', the time-setting is that of the poet's own life ('from year to year'); and he binds his total personal existence — his heart and his years — to the nightingale's song, to the exclusion of the world of everyday nature and the mechanical progression of the seasons (described in the first part of the sonnet), which are not influenced by love and hate. The poet, in spite of his continuing state of gloom, vulnerability and isolation, and acknowledging that he is at the mercy of the 'rude bird of hate', makes an unequivocal statement of service to the symbolic figure which holds him in that state and governs the seasons of his life.

After this, Milton's direct involvement with inspiration goes underground for a while, during a period of sophisticated, varied and accomplished technical expansion; until the rude bird of hate—the poetry-killer—is finally confronted head-on in 'Lycidas'. I will conclude this section of Milton's career, then, with a brief glance at his unique and poetic interpretation of the doctrine of the Harmony of the Spheres, which was delivered as an early university prolusion, and which shows his concern with a theory of inspiration. The prolusion reads like the excited
communication of a new realisation of what Pythagoras, Plato and the ancient poets meant when they propounded the theory of the harmony of the spheres. Milton knows that it cannot stand up to the fashionable empiricist approach: 'Now I beg you, my hearers, not to take this theory as seriously intended'. So, as in the 'Vacation Exercise', he changes the rules on which the discussion is grounded, saying that he is speaking with the open hand of rhetoric rather than the closed fist of logic:

So I conceived the idea of making a few preliminary remarks with open hand, as we say, and rhetorical exuberance, on the subject of that heavenly harmony which is presently to be discussed as it were with closed fist.

Aristotle is accused of having 'foisted on Pythagoras the literal doctrine of the unheard symphony of heaven and of the melody of the spheres', of not understanding that Pythagoras was talking 'allegorically' and following 'the example of the poets, or (what is almost the same thing) of the divine oracles'. In this way, using an interesting adaptation of the prolusion form (which demands unequivocal argument for one side of a subject), Milton insists that poetic truth exists in its own right. The 'Nativity' Ode's intuitive distinction between different spheres of knowledge, different kinds of reality, is here pursued theoretically.

Plato, therefore, is described as 'that best interpreter of Mother Nature'; and there follows a series of images which have 'interpreted' nature, in so far as they have related the divine and natural worlds in harmony. All are imbued with Milton's own longing to be an interpreter himself: 'if only Fate or Chance had allowed your soul, O Father Pythagoras, to transmigrate into my body, you would not have lacked a champion to deliver you without difficulty ... ' This disguised invocation, referring to Plato's theory of the transmigration of souls, shows Milton's desire to partake of the harmonic world-systems like the birds who, for him, symbolise the flow of inspiration:

it is in order to tune their own notes in accord with that harmony of heaven to which they listen so intently, that the lark takes her flights up into the clouds at daybreak and the nightingale passes the lonely hours of night in song.
The birdsong, Plato’s Sirens in the Republic, and Homer’s ‘remarkable and apt metaphor’ of the Golden Chain linking earth and heaven, are images of continual significance to Milton; they ‘interpret’ nature, and their relevance is ultimately to man’s inner world, since the ability to perceive the harmonic world systems is related to moral sensitivity:

But if our souls were pure, chaste, and white as snow, as was Pythagoras’ of old, then indeed our ears would ring and be filled with that exquisite music of the stars in their orbits; then would all things turn back to the Age of Gold . . .

Inherent in the metaphor of the mysteriously intercommunicating spheres, lies the possibility of the transmigration of souls between different areas of knowledge; crossing the boundaries of experience to explore the total harmony of things, as revealed by inspired knowledge. When Milton rescues the harmony of the spheres from the laws of logic and science, he is presenting a distinction between different kinds of reality which is a prerequisite for poetic theory, and which the poetic doctrine of the spheres itself embodies. And in an analogous manner, Keats later takes the well-worn and inevitable fact that the world is a vale of tears, and describes how it may become a Vale of Soul-making. His is a more developed allegory than is Milton’s, and at first sight appears different in content. But there is an essential similarity, both in the Platonic background and in function. For the first experience of inspiration does, in both poets, result in a new interpretation of the old world. Old images and undeniable facts now have to accommodate the possibility of inspiration—that is, of astonishing spiritual development which seems to bring once again within man’s comprehension the long-lost Age of Gold. Both poets therefore instil the idea of inspiration into whatever theoretic or metaphoric materials are available to them.
3 Milton and the Genius of the Shore

The later part of Milton's university career, and the beginning of his private study at his father's house, resulted in a rich harvest of poetry, culminating in *Comus* (1634). Milton's writing expands into a variety of genres, with a new stylistic fluency, and a vast development in his dramatic capacities. The poetry of the period is outward- rather than inward-looking; much of it has the sense of being written for a particular audience, and finds a comfortable place in the outside world. This applies not only to secular poems for a given occasion, such as the Hobson poems or 'Arcades', but also to the small group of religious poems. 'At a Solemn Music', for example, displays an almost obsessive technical interest in the process of adapting the intricate clauses of the Italian *canzone*; yet the poem, in spite of its complicated articulations of style, is, in terms of emotion, an 'undisturbed song of pure concet' (as desired by the poet in the invocation), describing not individual, but communal reaction. Milton excludes from the first draft, the lines

Snatch us from earth a while
Us of our selves and home-bred woes beguile

— lines which would have unbalanced the poem, but which indicate that 'home-bred woes' exist in the background to an 'undisturbed song' of 'high-raised phantasy'. Only with 'Lycidas' does the idea of poetry as consolation for earthly woe fade before the reality of poetry as impassioned mental action.

The twin poems 'L'Allegro' and 'Il Penseroso' represent the highpoint of the Cambridge years and, more than anything else Milton ever wrote, convey an unclouded enjoyment of life; they
are an encomium to pleasure, and as Dr Johnson said, 'every man that reads them, reads them with pleasure'. Each begins by exorcising a caricature of the mood exalted in the other and then, through a complementary succession of scenes, offers complete gratification in terms of sensuous and intellectual pleasure. They are not—as is sometimes said—antithetical choices, expressing an internal debate within Milton about the kind of poetry he was intending to write and the kind of life he was intending to lead; rather, in parallel ways, they each uphold true enjoyment as opposed to fanatical or morbid self-indulgence. L'Allegro comes first because, through 'heart-easing Mirth', unshackled by inhibition and 'in unreproved pleasures free', he banishes that false kind of melancholy which prevents mental activity of any kind (Galenic or 'sour' melancholy). And the texture of his poem may be illustrated by looking at one representative movement near the beginning: song and sound open the landscape, marking daybreak and the awakening of the senses:

To hear the lark begin his flight,
And singing startle the dull night,
From his watch-tower in the skies,
Till the dappled dawn doth rise;

The high flight of the lark appears to cleave the night in two, and awakens it from its lethargy in an explosion of sound ('singing startle'); then the mottled sky of the 'dappled dawn' which results from this dissolution of the night's dull, even surface, becomes the intricate tracery of the foliage against the window-pane:

Then to come in spite of sorrow,
And at my window bid good-morrow,
Through the sweet-briar, or the vine,
Or the twisted eglantine . . .

The component elements of this picture blur and then refocus into a new network of musical imagery:

While the cock with lively din,
Scatters the rear of darkness thin . . .

This suggests both the cock's crow chasing the darkness into little
pieces, and the cock strutting to chase darkness away—in the next couplet he ‘Stoutly struts his dames before’. Meanwhile, in the distance, another kind of mosaic deepens the perspective and evokes the mist rolling from the hills:

Oft list'ning how the hounds and horn
Cheerly rouse the slumb'ring morn,
From the side of some hoar hill,
Through the high wood echoing shrill.

The passage of the ‘o’ vowels in ‘hounds . . . horn . . . rouse . . . morn . . . hoar . . . high wood’, balanced by the progression to the high, light ‘i’ sounds, carries the sound over four lines and helps delineate the shadowy hill and wood in the early morning light, still partly clouded in mysterious darkness and echoes. The detail throughout is impressionistic rather than realistic; the sensuous qualities of each detail, oral or visual, are carried forwards and backwards for use in the detail on either side, forming a kind of musical mosaic whose picture is continually dissolving, then crystallising.

In this shifting poetic landscape, l’Allegro himself exists not to join in, but to experience. In the construction of the poem, he is not the same kind of figure as the milkmaid or the shepherd, and for this reason does not participate in their specific activities (sometimes adduced as evidence of Milton’s antisocial nature); he is not a figure of definite outline, but ‘Sometime walking not unseen’, a general background shadow coming occasionally into clearer focus, and thereby unifying the poem. In the succession of miniature interlocking vignettes, the senses of l’Allegro ‘dance in the chequered shade’, in the ‘secure delight’ of sensuous experience. And towards the end of the poem, Milton places the primary material of nature, country life and the ‘busy hum’ of men in cities, in relation to its artistic imitation through poets, plays and ‘Such sights as youthful poets dream/ On summer eves by haunted stream’. L’Allegro relinquishes direct observation for a longing for music and poetry:

And ever against eating cares,
Lap me in soft Lydian airs,
Married to immortal verse
Such as the immortal soul may pierce
In notes, with many a winding bout
Of linked sweetness long drawn out,
With wanton heed, and giddy cunning,
The melting voice through mazes running:
Untwisting all the chains that tie
The hidden soul of harmony.

The 'linked sweetness', the winding, melting, running and untwisting, describe the fluid and vital movement of the poem's form. But for the first time the experience of Mirth is seen as a protection against the outside world, lapping against eating cares; and the poem ends with a wistful qualification of Mirth and Mirth's poetry, which does not, after all, have the power to 'quite set free' Orpheus's 'half-regained Eurydice'. That is the province of a different kind of poetry, and Mirth's claims are limited by an 'if':

These delights, if thou canst give,
Mirth with thee, I mean to live.

The poet does not mean to live for ever, and only, with Mirth, since he recognises the existence of Orphic poetry which can breathe life into the dead. But il Penseroso's experience of inspiration is similarly qualified. There is some indication that Milton, at the beginning of his poem, would have liked to elevate 'divinest Melancholy' in the shape of a nun, into a heavenly Muse; but the picture is strained in its attempt to cram excessive significance into a concrete image (as in 'The Passion') and comes to an awkward full stop, after which Milton abandons that technique and resumes in the manner of 'L'Allegro'. The poetry resists the claim of 'divinest', but responds to the lesser gods, the mythological figures which inhabit as it were the lower circles of heaven: to Philomel, for example,

Smoothing the rugged brow of night,
While Cynthia checks her dragon yoke,
Gently o'er the accustomed oak.

Cynthia traverses heaven nightly and has her point of contact with the natural world, expressed through the rocking, onward rhythm and full consonants which give the night air a viscous
quality, and evoke the feel of the moon’s chariot brushing over
the clustered foliage of the oak; and the adjective ‘accustomed’
implies a sort of understanding between the moon-goddess, the
tree, and the poet. The ‘unseen genii’ of ’Il Penseroso’s night-time
landscape complement the pastoral figures of ‘L’Allegro’ to
suggest communication with the supra-sensuous, being ‘dark’
images of ‘commerce with the skies’—the nightingale, the fire in
a dark room, or the high watchtower from which to observe
Plato’s world-systems.

The sense of the fecundity of the universe in the two poems,
and the comprehensiveness of the potential offered to the poet, is
comparable to Keats’s early delight in a world which provides
‘wide wandering for the greediest eye,/ To peer about upon
variety’; and il Penseroso’s desire to ‘rightly spell/ . . . every star
that heaven doth shew’, prefigures Keats searching ‘for rhymes
. . . around the poles’. In their expansive confidence, ‘L’Allegro’
and ‘Il Penseroso’ relate themselves to the description of the
power of the knowledge-seeker in Milton’s final university
prolusion, the ‘Oratio pro Arte’, in which he states his own
intention to acquire that ‘complete background’ to a man’s
calling consisting of a ‘thorough knowledge of all the arts and
sciences’, and resulting in a ‘stronghold of wisdom’:

Then at last most of the chances and changes of the world will
be so quickly perceived that to he who holds this stronghold of
wisdom hardly anything can happen in his life which is unfore­
seen or fortuitous. He will indeed seem to be one whose rule
and dominion the stars obey, to whose command earth and sea
hearkan, and whom winds and tempests serve; to whom, lastly,
Mother Nature herself has surrendered, as if indeed some god
had abdicated the throne of the world and entrusted its rights,
laws and administration to him as governor . . . Such men
certainly enjoy a kingdom in themselves far more glorious than
any earthly dominion . . .

It is in this address that Milton gives the glimpse of himself
writing poetry under ‘the beloved village elms’, and experiencing
‘a season of growth in seclusion’, which parallels the youthful
poet’s dream ‘by haunted stream’ in ‘L’Allegro’. But one cannot
avoid noticing the sharp contrast between this exuberant ideali­
sation of knowledge, in which the kingdom within consists of
going outwards to grasp knowledge which is there for the taking, and the helplessness of the 'unweapon'd' poet in the Letter to a Friend, condemned by his 'sin of curiosity'. The two pieces of prose must have been written at about the same time; but in one (the public version) knowledge is power; in the other (the private version), knowledge is impotence. And the difference between the two poems and the prolusion, in this respect, is that in the former the value of the cumulative, outward-going search for experience is qualified, whether it be guided by Mirth or by Melancholy; even after counting every star in heaven and every herb that sips the dew, il Penseroso can only achieve 'something like' prophetic strain:

Till old experience do attain
To something like prophetic strain.
These pleasures Melancholy give,
And I with thee will choose to live.

Old experience, which is the knowledge deliberately acquired and catalogued by the poet, is not the same as poetic inspiration — as 'prophetic strain' or the 'hidden soul of harmony'; and the stronghold of wisdom, the conviction of godlike powers controlling the unpredictable flux of the world, is even further from poetic inspiration.

A year or two later, in Comus, Milton expands his poetic equipment dramatically, such that the interaction between human and divine need no longer be pursued through linear cataloguing, but in three dimensions, centring on the 'drear wood' of human experience. This masque, or verse-drama, brings Milton's technical accomplishment to a level from which poetry as the exploration (rather than the recollection) of experience, will be possible. The 'meaning' of the masque is not to be found by reconstructing a series of ideological grids and performing some Procrustean juggling until one, or a combination, appear to fit. For although — as Milton's revisions in the Trinity Manuscript suggest — he tidied up the masque in various ways after the performance in order to give it greater self-sufficiency as a pastoral drama, fluidity and inclusiveness of allusion are of the essence of the work; and the function of Milton's philosophical and religious interests in the context of the masque is to provide a suitable framework for the dramatic texture of the poetry, not to
expound his intentions for a future mode of life. Milton chose the general theme of a trial of integrity in life's confusing wood (which happens to centre on the Lady's virginity), because it was appropriate to the occasion of the children's journey back to their parents, and because it gave him the chance to place some of his own 'home-felt' concerns in an experimental context. A different outlook on Virtue is given by Comus, the Lady, the two Brothers, Sabrina, and the Attendant Spirit, through the development of the dramatic voice which becomes so essential in *Paradise Lost*; and the theme is explored through poetry whose variety of genre includes lyric tetrameter, formal Elizabethan song, dramatic soliloquy and rhetorical debate, and, in particular, evocative description in Milton's first sustained use of blank verse. And the absence of courtly masque machinery gave Milton the opportunity to create his own scenery, verbally, in a manner which evokes not only a physical setting, but also to some extent the attitude of the speaker, colouring the scene. This enables him to span different dimensions of reality within the action, from the actual setting at Ludlow Castle and the actual participants, to the world of fantasy and extended mythology—a structural debt owed to *The Tempest*, the play which, together with Shakespearean romance and folk-tale in general, shines through the language of the entire masque.

The opening speech of the Attendant Spirit, the conversation of the two Brothers, and the debate between Comus and the Lady, may be taken as examples to illustrate the nature of Milton's experimental expansion of descriptive blank verse, which is the key to the enduring quality of the masque. The Spirit's opening speech encompasses in one breath the whole scope of the masque's action and the scenery of the different levels of reality and fantasy on which it is to take place:

Before the starry threshold of Jove's court  
My mansion is, where those immortal shapes  
Of bright aerial spirits live ensphered  
In regions mild of calm and serene air,  
Above the smoke and stir of this dim spot,  
Which men call earth, and, with low-thoughted care  
Confined, and pestered in this pinfold here,  
Strive to keep up a frail, and feverish being  
Unmindful of the crown that virtue gives ...
The mind’s eye is held by the commanding main clause ‘My mansion is’, at the furthest extension of the universe, on the rim of an outer sphere, while being committed simultaneously to the emphatic ‘this dim spot’; these two places, in positions of syntactical command, control the sway of the entire sentence, which continues for another ten lines. Milton excludes some lines describing the Hesperian gardens in the Trinity Manuscript (incorporating them instead at the end of the masque, in revised form). Here, they would wind away from the immediacy of the giddy contrast between the liquid sounds of ‘immortal ... aerial ... live ... mild’ (suggesting the weightless spiritual ‘shapes’ who find no resistance in the purer air), and the blind struggling of those imprisoned by their own thoughts, who ‘Confined ... pestered ... strive’. But the sweep from ‘starry threshold’ to ‘this pinfold here’ also represents the descent of the Spirit down on to the stage, which in a court masque would have been effected through complicated machinery. The high style of the opening is more effective for being restricted to a single sentence, and does not continue long enough to lose the audience’s concentration; attention is turned to the actor in costume, with ‘I would not soil these pure ambrosial weeds’, as the Spirit turns to the immediate needs of the occasion: ‘But to my task ... ’ This moment of relaxation indicates that he is about to set the scene once again, but this time on a more particular level. The aerial vision based on the heaven-earth polarity is echoed in the perspective which narrows from the ‘sea-girt isles’ like gems in the ocean, to ‘this isle/ The greatest’ (England), and finally to the western setting of Ludlow Castle in ‘all this tract that fronts the falling sun’. Similarly, the lesser ‘tributary gods’ who ‘wield their little tridents’, and the ‘mortal peer’ himself, are shown to derive their power from the larger forces of Neptune and of Jove. Finally, the immediate landscape of the masque is sketched, including the figures of the protagonists, the Earl of Bridgewater’s children:

but their way
Lies through the perplexed paths of this drear wood,
The nodding horror of whose shady brows
Threats the forlorn and wandering passenger.

And this journey within the ‘perplexed paths of this drear wood’, the dark maze of first-hand encounters with experience, is linked
with the initial backdrop of heaven and earth and the 'crown that
virtue gives', by the Spirit's own transition to the guise of a
shepherd guarding 'any favoured of high Jove' in 'this advent'rous
glade'. The dimensions of the tale are further expanded by the
fictitious mythological lineage of Comus himself, introduced by
the Spirit's traditional story-teller's rhetoric:

And listen why, for I will tell you now
What never yet was heard in tale or song
From old, or modern bard in hall, or bower.

The masque itself takes its place as a tale or song never before
heard in hall or bower. In this way, the world of Ludlow Castle
and its inhabitants is opened up to fantasy of a catholic, inclusive
kind, in which fairy-tale, mythology and religious myth co-exist
and function as animators of a realistic setting. Magic has its
place in nature, like the flower haemony, which 'the dull swain/
Treads on . . . daily with his clouted shoon'. And the richness of
the texture of the masque, in language and in fantasy, is all
indicated in the Attendant Spirit's opening speech, in a complex
and varied use of blank verse.

Another extension of Milton's inventive powers in blank verse
can be seen in the contrasting quality of the language used by
Comus and the Lady in their debate. It is frequently asserted
that, owing either to deficiency in technique or to personal hang-
ups on Milton's part, the Lady's argument is unconvincing and
her victory hollow. However one suspects that these hang-ups may
be more easily discovered in the critics, since it is clear from the
rhetoric of the debate that the protagonists are endowed with
equal though quite different powers; but the Lady (her wits
sharpened by physical restraint) is one step ahead of Comus in her
appraisal of the situation; and because Comus has the intel-
ligence to respond to what she says, she wins the argument of
words while he has to fall back on physical action. The essential
violence of Comus's manipulation of words and ideas is indicated
by his opening threat of physical attack: 'if I but wave this wand,/
Your nerves are all chained up in alabaster'; and the direct
attack, although immediately abandoned, flavours the entire
course of the rational insinuation ('wind me into the easy-hearted
man') which is Comus's primary method. The first step in the
disguised attack consists in the abolition of any meaningful idea
of 'thought':

    see, here be all the pleasures
    That fancy can beget on youthful thoughts,
    When the fresh blood grows lively, and returns
    Brisk as the April buds in primrose season.

Comus introduces the word 'thoughts' as if his intention were indeed to give thought due consideration, and to appeal to this faculty in the Lady; but the rhetorical context shows that he uses the word only to drain it of meaning, to swamp it in the fulsome, bulbous sounds of 'Brisk as the April buds in primrose season' and in the image of sensuous excitement which has become detached from any notion of spiritual desire in an integrated personality. Sensuous imagery is used not to reinforce or express thought ('youthful' thoughts or any other), but as a substitute for thought. In the same way he attacks the idea of integrity by means of an appeal to integrity:

    Why should you be so cruel to yourself,
    And to those dainty limbs which Nature lent
    For gentle usage, and soft delicacy?

The concept of 'yourself' is, like 'youthful thoughts', introduced only to be slithered over as it becomes a subordinate part of the sentence. The physical, or sensuous, appears to exist as illustration or extension to the moral or abstract; but in fact it makes a divorce from it, as though 'dainty limbs' bore no relation to mind, but had an existence of their own.

The Lady's reply to Comus's set speech of seduction exposes this divorce between mind and sense:

    none
    But such as are good men can give good things,
    And that which is not good, is not delicious
    To a well-governed and wise appetite.

The concept of the 'delicious' is not neutral, appealing solely to the senses, but relates to the spiritual manifesting itself through the sensuous. 'Good things' do not exist apart from 'good men'. This is the Lady's philosophical standpoint; and in terms of
rhetoric her sharp, clear-cut rhythms, spare imagery and emphatic repetition (as of ‘good . . . good . . . good’) seem to restore the value to abstract words. Comus had begun to undermine their value, and in response to the Lady’s first counter-attack he devotes all his imaginative energies to sensuous imagery which is its sheer substantiality almost outweighs any argument:

Wherefore did Nature pour her bounties forth,  
With such a full and unwithdrawing hand,  
Covering the earth with odours, fruits, and flocks,  
Thronging the seas with spawn innumerable,  
But all to please, and sate the curious taste? . . .

In this speech of twenty-four lines (the rest of it a single sentence), Comus’s abundant but misdirected rhetorical talents partake of his own description of Nature’s plight, ‘strangled with her waste fertility’:

The earth cumbered, and the winged air darked with plumes  
The herds would over-multitude their lords,  
The sea o’er fraught would swell . . .

The words hardly keep within the five stresses of the metre. The irony inherent in Comus’s rhetorical method is that the language which conveys the evil results of not adhering to Comus’s doctrine is in fact no different from that exalting it; the imagery of waste profusion is so overbearing that it blurs the distinction he intends to make between the cumbered earth, and bounteous Nature covering the earth, thronging the seas, and setting to work ‘millions of spinning worms,/ That in their green shops weave the smooth-haired silk’. Comus, like Volpone, has certain poetic attributes: namely energy, imagination, and a vivid capacity for sensuous experience. But his failure to embody the moral characteristics of the poet is related to his inability to dispense his own imagery ‘in unsuperfluous even proportion’ (as the Lady objects). Once his initial set speech has been delivered, and he is in the field of live debate, his imagination runs riot at the expense of his argument. The key to this failure to represent the true poet lies in his belief that the sensuous imagery of Nature exists ‘But all to please, and sate the curious taste’; he embodies that ‘unprofitable sin of curiosity’ in which poetry is self-indulgence, rather than the
expression of meaning. The ‘good thing’ is meaningless without
the ‘good man’ behind it; and the misuse of rhetorical gifts, like
Nature’s gifts, results somewhere in the existence of a ‘just man
that now pines with want’, as the Lady says. Comus’s ‘gay
rhetoric’ is that of poetic talent gone to waste; he is genuinely
blind to the idea that a true poet must not only have a curious
taste, but be, in some sense, a true poem. Milton underlines the
fact that Comus has lost the battle of wit, and is forced to resort to
the physical violence originally threatened, with

Come, no more,
This is mere moral babble, and direct
Against the canon laws of our foundation;
I must not suffer this . . .

Unable to continue further his engagement with individual
thought, Comus has to seek refuge in the pompous confines of a
communal ‘law’ of thinking—which represents, for Milton, the
ultimate humiliation for an imaginative thinker.

One sees from these two episodes in ‘Comus’ how Milton’s
dramatic deployment of the new medium of blank verse gives him
the opportunity to marry wider aspects of his fantasy and his
intellectual training to the technical achievements of ‘L’Allegro’
and ‘II Penseroso’ and the following poetry of the period. I will
leave ‘Comus’ with a brief glance at the Attendant Spirit’s efforts
to educate the two Brothers. The Brothers’ long debate on the
nature of Virtue may be regarded, from one angle, as a rather
tedious version of that given to Comus and the Lady. It has
another interest, however. The Brothers were played by boys of
nine and eleven years old, and the Attendant Spirit by their
music-master (Henry Lawes). And in the Elder Brother’s enthu­
siastic and high-flown elaborate description of chastity ‘clad in
complete steel’, and the Second Brother’s admiring appreciation
of his rhetorical abilities (‘How charming is divine Philosophy!’),
one can see the young Milton of the poetry before the ‘Nativity
Ode’ or of the early Latin letters to his teachers Alexander Gill
and Thomas Young. Their discussion certainly represents a
younger version of the doctrine of the power of Virtue which is
the theme of the masque as a whole. They are so absorbed in their
own invention that they forget about their sister, who prompted
the subject in the first place; and when the Spirit finally breaks in
to inquire about her, they are forced to confess sheepishly:

To tell thee sadly shepherd, without blame,
Or our neglect, we lost her as we came.

As Dr Johnson puts it, 'It is remarkable that at this interview the Brother is taken with a short fit of rhyming.' The Brothers represent an innocent variation on the theme of rhetoric which gets carried away to the exclusion of the essential matter in hand. And Milton takes the opportunity, through the gentle correction of the Attendant Spirit ("Alas good venturous youth . . ."), to stress the seriousness of poetic activity, and the reality of the world of the imagination with which it deals:

I'll tell ye, 'tis not vain or fabulous,
(Though so esteemed by shallow ignorance)
What the sage poets taught by the heavenly Muse,
Storied of old in high immortal verse
Of dire chimeras and enchanted isles,
And rifted rocks whose entrance leads to hell,
For such there be, but unbelief is blind.

There is a sense in which Comus himself (though he is the danger referred to) has lost the power to believe in rocks whose entrance leads to hell, along with his general appreciation of the morality of poetry and of poetic forms. But Milton never loses sight of the inspired poetry, the 'high immortal verse', which Comus prepares him to write. After the masque, he writes nothing (that we know of) for three years, apart from revisions to the masque itself; this period of fruitful technical apprenticeship has been completed. When he does write again, in 'Lycidas', he is himself exploring the uncharted seas whose chimeras and enchanted isles and treacherous rocks threaten to lead man to hell.

II

'Lycidas' stands alone during years of virtual poetic silence (apart from some minor occasional poems). It marks the end of Milton's youth, and points toward the writing of Paradise Lost, many years later. It was written in 1637 to form part of a book of obsequies on
the death of Edward King, a university acquaintance (though the recent death of his mother is of more biographical relevance); yet in spite of ostensibly being an occasional poem, it comes with a sense of inevitability and seems to have been long awaited in Milton's history. With 'forced fingers rude' it thrusts into poetic focus the vulnerability of the poet as expressed in the Letter to a Friend: the 'unweapon'd creature' whose unused talent may lead to his 'terrible seasing'. Milton's characteristic sense of tardiness and unripeness, his fear of the intrusive 'rude bird of hate' jarring against the song of the nightingale, and the 'home-bred woes' which had no place in a 'Solemn Music', here become dramatic elements in a poem of mental action: a poem of experience. 'Lycidas' was written at a time of disillusionment with the practical possibility and indeed the inherent value of knowing everything, of fulfilling the tenets for universal knowledge laid down in the 'Oratio pro Arte' and achieving its 'stronghold of wisdom'. Milton now finally grapples with the sense of the poet's vulnerability which, up to this point in his career, has co-existed uneasily with a contrary confidence in the omnipotence conferred by knowledge. This poem forges a new idea of the poet and his relation to inspiration, on which future development may be founded; it is, therefore, important to examine closely what happens in 'Lycidas'.

From the very beginning it is a poem of action: the emphatically placed ruling verb is 'I come', not 'I see' or 'I sing'. But the action of the first fourteen lines stands apart from the lament proper, which begins at line 15 with 'Begin then, sisters of the sacred well'. These lines also stand apart in the Manuscript in an early draft; and their separateness from the main body of the lament is a clue to the multidimensional nature of the poem: a drama with many voices taking part, all of which are ultimately accountable to the voice of the poet himself, and to his opening action. These lines present the poet's vision from the inside, when only emotion is present and no art has been applied to order and contain it:

Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more Ye myrtles brown, with ivy never sere, I come to pluck your berries harsh and crude, And with forced fingers rude, Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
Here, the close-up image of the hand separated into component 'fingers', is superimposed upon the scattered foliage of the wreaths symbolic of poetry and learning; the unifying screen which presents the external world has been broken into disparate elements, suggesting blinding by tears. Berries, fingers, and leaves scatter before the rough, forceful, driving rhythm, initiated by 'Yet once more . . . and once more', and sustained by the prominent verbs 'I come . . . Shatter'. The surge of emotion represented by the rhythm, results in a blurring of vision, a fragmentary chaos of the foliage of art. For this fourteen-line unit represents a broken invocation to the Muse. It purports to praise poetry and request the aid of the Muse owing to the poet's insufficiency (this is the paraphrasable meaning of the plucking of the berries—referring also to King's premature death); yet the emotional impact of the imagery, far from evoking a gentlemanly apology for poor verses, tears the flowers of poetry apart, and shatters the screen. In turning 'Yet once more' to the familiar symbols, an intimacy with the Muse which goes far deeper than politeness is presupposed. The broken invocation assumes that, at a time of necessity, the Muse will be present: present not to receive conventional obeisances, but to receive the poet's shattering emotional knowledge, the violent grief which cannot be contained within the ‘seasons due’ of art, as it has been so far understood.

Art must be attacked and discarded, before it reforms. The fourteen-line unit is in some ways a version of a sonnet, with the sonnet's self-sufficiency; it is knit internally by rhymes and part-rhymes: thus 'once more . . . sere . . . forced . . . constraint' form one group, and in another group, 'lofty . . . float . . . watery . . . Unwept . . . welter . . . wind' form a progression of sound. The unit pivots on the statement 'For Lycidas is dead', which is followed by the powerful tossing rhythm and progressive focusing of the shattered visual screen, on to the image of Lycidas:

Who would not sing for Lycidas? he knew
Himself to sing, and build the lofty rhyme.
He must not float upon his watery bier
Unwept, and welter to the parching wind,
Without the meed of some melodious tear.

The triple garland of poetry, which had disintegrated through
forced fingers rude, is replaced by the figure of Lycidas, itself in
the process of disintegration at the mercy of the elements; the
absence of funeral rites for the lost body complements the
impossibility of harmonious artistic ritual. The surge of emotion
which shattered the leaves now becomes the sea-surge which
presents, in waves, the lofty rhyme, the watery bier, the parching
wind, and ultimately the melodious tear. The 'tear' concludes the
piercing 'sere—year' rhyme which has echoed throughout; and
in particular 'melodious tear' echoes the 'mellowing year' whose
fulfilment had been pre-empted, thereby suggesting the hope of a
musical reparation. The two senses of 'tear' (one being a
conventional term for elegy) may perhaps combine to repair the
damage done by the weltering wave, and art and emotion be
united during the process of the following lament. And the
internal damage, threatened by the emotional surge, may
perhaps be converted into melodious integration, through the
process of mourning.

The necessity for the poem has now been stated, and the long
journey of mourning beings; the opening turmoil is set aside for
the time being, while the poet resumes the analytic tools offered
by his artistic training, and approaches the problem again, using
a new invocation:

Begin then, sisters of the sacred well,
That from the seat of Jove doth spring,
Begin, and somewhat loudly sweep the string.

The tone is calm and collected as, this time, the poet concentrates
on gathering his lament within the arms of ritual, and hitting the
exact and appropriate note, 'somewhat loudly': for the 'tear' is to
derive from the 'sacred well' which has nurtured pastoral
tradition. The language of the poem changes completely:

So may some gentle muse
With lucky words favour my destined urn,
And as he passes turn,
And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud.

Instead of the previous tight intricacy and violent rhythms, this is
relaxed, lyrical and flowing. Instead of the storm-tossed body,
evoked by fingers rude, death is represented by a 'destined urn'
Inspiration in Milton and Keats

and associated with the dropping of 'lucky words', like blessings, which are part of the natural flow of life governed by soothing ritual, conforming to seasons due. The elegist, instead of feeling himself alone in the world owing to the absence of Lycidas, who 'hath not left his peer', now takes comfort from the sense of a poetic brotherhood, and from his own suitability as a mourner; and the paragraph ends with a neat, generalising couplet, very different from the piercing music of the introduction:

For we were nursed upon the self-same hill,
Fed the same flock; by fountain, shade, and rill.

The poet's entry into pastoral tradition also recapitulates his own poetic history, as he steps into the roseate haze of the distant past, when pastoral was classical pastoral, the landscape generalised and ordered, and when youth was a golden age, under the magical protection of a meaningful, organised, animated nature: a time when Lycidas and the poet were, it seemed, inseparable and identical twins:

Together both, ere the high lawns appeared
Under the opening eye-lids of the morn,
We drove a-field, and both together heard
What time the grey-fly winds her sultry horn . . .

The curtains are drawn back on a past life of Arcadian pastoral, as on a stage-set, with nostalgia; the pattern of life is ritual and dance-like, moving from dawn to dusk and the evening star, and the shepherds go as it were hand in hand ('Together both . . . both together'), under the guardianship of the heavens (the 'opening eye-lids'). The quality of the shepherds' life and song is summarised by the innocent and slightly comic dance to the 'rural ditties':

Tempered to the oaten flute,
Rough satyrs danced, and fauns with cloven heel . . .

Life is sheltered and social; and the harmless and unharmed youth are watched over by the fondly indulgent and, one senses, uncritical eye of old Damaetas:

And old Damaetas loved to hear our song.
Later his expectations will be contrasted with those of Apollo and Peter.

The first pastoral scene, therefore, is epitomised by a communal song, 'our song'. But now the poem modulates to a different pastoral note, heralded by a new vowel-music:

But O the heavy change, now thou art gone,
Now thou art gone, and never must return!
Thee shepherd, thee the woods, and desert caves,
With wild thyme and the gadding vine o'ergrown,
And all their echoes mourn.

The song of the twin shepherds 'both together' is separated by 'now thou art gone' into the singer's lament, and into a complex of echoes expressing the emptiness of nature without Lycidas's voice and his 'loss to shepherd's ear'. Thus the idea of 'caves' with 'echoes' is extended throughout the natural vegetation, through 'gone .. turn .. grown', culminating in 'mourn' — wordplay reminiscent of the 'Nativity Ode' 's The nymphs in twilight shade of tangled thickets mourn' and 'the Tyrian maids their wounded Thammuz mourn'. The elegy begins to approach the 'melodious tear'. A state of fallen nature succeeds the original secure pastoral scene, run wild and fruitless or nipped in the bud: 'As killing as the canker to the rose ...' Only when Lycidas has gone can the singer hear the echoes left in nature; and this has the effect of raising both the quality of the absent song, and the sensitivity of the listening 'shepherd's ear', whose lament begins to respond musically. Instead of the oaten flute for the clumsy steps of satyrs, Lycidas's song led the willows and hazels to dance, 'Fanning their joyous leaves to thy soft lays', becoming associated with an animating, life-giving principle; and with his death, the music is taken out of nature, and placed in the poet's song. The elegist is now responsible for ensuring that his listening ear is still aware of the music left by Lycidas. In this pastoral modulation, therefore, 'our song' leaves its circular security, and sets out on a journey activated by the tension between the two participants, who are no longer 'both together', but whose fate is nevertheless inextricable. And the 'melodious tear' grows out of this tension: out of the poet's efforts to find, through listening and through art, the lost Lycidas.

The cry 'Where were ye nymphs', opening the next paragraph,
is a classical departure in pastoral; but ironically, in this poem, the following lines lead to a dead end. When the poet leaves his generalised landscape for the specific area of Lycidas’s death, the ancient Welsh coast with its aura of the primitive occult, he seems to lose his subject, and abruptly draws up the narrative:

Ay me, I fondly dream!
Had ye been there . . . for what could that have done?

This extraordinary break in formal structure is the first conflict between pastoral form and emotional reality. It is, however, the 'wizard stream' of Deva which, although part of the actual scene of Lycidas’s death, is banished as a devious route back into nostalgic dreaming. And instead, the classical stream of the Hebrus, with its death-scene, is presented as closer to the emotional truth of the situation:

What could the muse herself that Orpheus bore,
The muse herself for her enchanting son
Whom universal nature did lament,
When by the rout that made the hideous roar,
His gory visage down the stream was sent,
Down the swift Hebrus to the Lesbian shore.

Through classical pastoral, the poem has been brought once again to confront the original, unacceptably painful image of the 'watery bier'. In the driving rhythm of this passage ('down . . . sent . Down'), with its rough diction ('rout . roar . gory . Hebrus . . shore'), the adjective 'enchanting' stands out with singing poignancy, stressing in its context the vulnerability of the poet who could enchant inanimate nature but failed to enchant the brutalised 'rout'. Orpheus could bring stones to life, but not save his own. Milton, unlike Virgil and tradition, gives no indication of any correspondence between the fault within the poet, and his fate: the situation is just wrong — unjust and inconsistent. And the name 'Calliope' in the original draft is changed to 'the muse herself', giving it a more universal reference, and approaching the concept 'The meaning, not the name I call', of the invocation to Urania in *Paradise Lost*. In 'Lycidas', the musical soul of nature, which was symbolised in the 'Nativity Ode' by Christ, does not create its own imagery of magical protection; there are
The poetic principle is no longer a safeguard: on the contrary, the poet seems vulnerable in proportion to his musical powers, which may expose him to sudden violence, and themselves be swamped in 'hideous roar'. In this passage, for the first time, Milton confronts the concept of the loss of inspiration not in terms of a gentle fading, but in terms of violent attack. Through Orpheus, death becomes a part of poetic history and experience: part of the inevitable context of 'immortal verse'. The image of a specific killer of poetry—more human than the 'canker to the rose'—maintains its personal terror and warning for Milton, reappearing in similar language in the plea to Urania to

... drive far off the barbarous dissonance
Of Bacchus and his revellers, the race
Of that wild rout that tore the Thracian bard
In Rhodope, where woods and rocks had ears
To rapture, till the savage clamour drowned
Both harp and voice; nor could the muse defend
Her son.

It is apparent that the poem does not pursue a linear allegorical course, but plumbs deeper levels of metaphor as it progresses. In its ultimate abstraction, the fate of Lycidas, Orpheus and the elegist become part of the same story, which is the story of the poetic principle in life. It is a story which takes place in the imagination, and therefore reaches back into time and myth; but is primarily happening now, within the mind of the poet. And it is this present action which unifies the poem as time and again it breaks the pastoral form:

Alas! What boots it with uncessant care
To tend the homely slighted shepherd's trade,
And strictly meditate the thankless muse,
Were it not better done as others use ...

The pastoral elegist leaves his pastoral poem—that slighted shepherd's trade—but the real poem continues. The ensuing dialogue between several voices of the poet is delivered with vehemence in colloquial language; the despairing sarcasm of 'strictly meditate the thankless muse' (with its double meaning of
unthanked, and unthanking, muse) parodies the foolish poet who rigorously observes the conventions of his trade and is only slighted for his pains. As if reacting against this, the following passage observes no conventions; it rushes on in an internal debate in which none of the characters are introduced, using no rhetorical devices to smooth transitions, in complete contrast with the lyrical section which began 'But O the heavy change ...'.

Thus the complaint of the first voice is answered by another, more logical and controlled:

Fame is the spur that the clear spirit doth raise
(That last infirmity of noble mind)
To scorn delights, and live laborious days;

But already this voice has been interrupted in mid-flow by the more sophisticated comment in brackets, which is left unresolved; and neither voice of reason carries much weight beside the restatement of the original problem: that even when the 'fair guerdon' is in sight,

Comes the blind Fury with th'abhorred shears,
And slits the thin-spun life.

The sharp sounds and emphatic rhythm of this last line convey the extreme sensitivity and vulnerability of the poet; and it is at this point that yet another voice enters the scene - again without introduction or apology: this time that of Phoebus, from a world of higher knowledge. He intervenes only at a point of crisis, but seems to have been present the whole time, as is suggested by his immediately picking up the line:

But not the praise,
Phoebus replied, and touched my trembling ears;

The touching of the ears (which, in 'our song', symbolise the point of all emotional contact), conveys Phoebus's sympathy with the sensitive state of the sufferer. He picks up the argument where the earlier voice of reason had foundered, echoing 'Fame is the spur ...':

Fame is no plant that grows on mortal soil,
Nor in the glistening foil
Set off to the world, nor in broad rumour lies,
But lives and spreads aloft . . .

The dignified voice from outside the poet's emotional and philosophical chaos does not propose a final solution to all the problems raised; though his 'higher mood', like the 'melodious tear', foreshadows the possibility of a resolution outside the poet's present understanding. Phoebus is not of the pastoral world himself, speaking of plants that do not grow on mortal soil; but the dramatic function of his intervention here is to restore the poet to a working relationship with his own pastoral art:

O fountain Arethuse, and thou honoured flood,
Smooth-sliding Mincius, crowned with vocal reeds,
That strain I heard was of a higher mood:
But now my oat proceeds . . .

The poet does not directly comment on Phoebus's speech, because once again argument has been superseded by poetry, and the 'oat proceeds'. By this point in the poem, however, the poet's strenuous efforts to get the art right, are no longer necessary—as they were when he first desired to 'somewhat loudly sweep the string'. Now, the pastoral mode takes over of its own accord, and the poet simply follows.

The 'smooth-sliding Mincius' suggests that the poem is now in full flood, in mid-stream, and able to accommodate the varied characters in the following sea-story and procession of river gods. The point at which pastoral had previously broken down, was during the attempt to answer the question 'Where were ye nymphs, when the remorseless deep/ Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?' Now, the poem asks the same question, but in a calm and ordered manner which suggests the influence of Phoebus's ordered world presided over by 'all-judging Jove'; instead of rhetorical gesture, there is deliberate inquiry:

He asked the waves, and asked the felon winds,
What hard mishap hath doomed this gentle swain?
And questioned every gust of rugged wings
That blows from off each beaked promontory;

The seascape (still described in classical terms) becomes a court-
room, with the elements and lesser gods bearing witness in turn to their behaviour at the time of the crime, as part of a judicial inquiry which by nature assumes the existence of guilt. The sea, however, with its animating forces, is exonerated: ‘They knew not of his story’:

The air was calm, and on the level brine,
Sleek Panope with all her sisters played.

The innocent splashing of Neptune’s daughters is far removed from the rout that made the hideous roar. The apparent incongruity between this picture of a calm sea, and the factual reality and other accounts within the poem of the whelming tide, underlines its allegorical nature: in which consistency is emotional, not factual. From the point of view of guilt, nature is ‘calm’—that is, innocent. The indirect influence of level-headed Phoebus has ironed out the confusion between the scene of death and the blame for death. But, before the poem moves on, this necessity for blame demands recognition in the outburst

It was that fatal and perfidious bark
Built in the eclipse, and rigged with curses dark,
That sunk so low that sacred head of thine.

It has been pointed out that the bark is not only the man-made ship, but the human body since the Fall; and in so far as the attribution of blame serves any useful purpose, man’s fallen nature may take responsibility. This is the first direct visualisation of Lycidas’s body since the watery bier; and each appearance of the lost body within the reach of the elegist’s imagination indicates the stage which has been reached by the mourning process. The lost body is gradually being found, within the singer’s mind and understanding. Lycidas’s ‘loved’ head of earlier on, here becomes a ‘sacred head’ enclosed within its rigging of mortality, of curses dark (also suggesting the Crown of Thorns). Lycidas’s significance deepens according to the meaning which he has for the living poet; and already, there are intimations of the immortality achieved at the end of the poem, when ‘sunk so low’ becomes ‘Sunk though he be . . .’

The vignette of Lycidas within the fatal bark is a brief interjection made, as it were, by another voice of the poet, whose
primary artistic voice now continues as if it had never been interrupted, with the water-gods who constitute Lycidas's funeral procession:

Next Camus, reverend sire, went footing slow . . .

His 'footing slow', and the markings of grief which he bears on his clothing,

Inwrought with figures dim, and on the edge
Like to that sanguine flower inscribed with woe,

evoke the weed-choked winding of the river, and also suggest that lamenting nature is no longer vacant and bereft — a gadding vine overgrowing desert caves— but formalised into a pattern, inwrought and inscribed, which is part of the ritual mourning of Lycidas. Finally, St Peter enters, borne initially on the soothing, soft-sliding rhythm set by the rivers:

Last came, and last did go,
The pilot of the Galilean lake . . .

Peter comes as a True Bishop, with 'mitred locks'; as one rescued by Christ from the waves; and as a fisher (and sorter) of men. He brings the two 'massy keys' to Heaven and Hell, the most concrete representation of justice so far, and the sharpest differentiation between good and bad. Like Phoebus, he slips into the poem without preliminary warning, outside the poet's prevision, and leaving the poet awestruck by his higher intervention; but, unlike Phoebus, it is he who disrupts the pastoral mode which had been proceeding so smoothly. The balanced line

(The golden opes, the iron shuts amain)

is the calm before the storm of Peter's bitter and violent denunciation of the clergy. Peter's justice is not Phoebus's serene reminder of 'all-judging Jove'; it approaches the disturbance at the heart of the poem, and this time the violence of grief is endorsed, not calmed, by the higher mood:

How well could I have spared for thee, young swain,
Enow of such as for their bellies' sake,
Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold?

The definition of destructive forces inimical to the poetic principle, is now sought not in nature, but in men. Peter's language is forceful and colloquial after the manner of the poet's own 'Alas! What boots it', but to an intensified degree; and the very exactness and completeness of his exposure of the 'wolves' is in itself cathartic, as the creepers, the intruders and the climbers are all subjected to the piercing spotlight of that 'dread voice' endowed with the power of shrinking streams. His speech is full of active verbs which expose violence with violence: 'scramble .. shove away .. reeks .. sped .. grate .. rot .. devours'; and finally, 'smite once, and smite no more'. The words almost trip over themselves in their furious passage ('or have learned aught else the least'), but Peter's rhetoric is under the control of the orator's art:

What recks it them? What need they? They are sped;

and the speed of the argument involves leaps in metaphor, as in

Blind mouths! that scarce themselves know how to hold
A sheephook . . .

Peter's speech channels the nature of the enemy to the poetic principle, into the image of inward rot:

The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed,
But swoll'n with wind, and the rank mist they draw,
Rot inwardly, and foul contagion spread:

And this inward rot is exemplified most sensuously in the language which describes the perversion of music or poetry:

their lean and flashy songs
Grate on their scrannel pipes of wretched straw . . .

This vividly harsh sound, incorporating a dialect word not recorded before (indicative of the originality of Milton's dramatic use of language in the poem), is the counterpart to Orphic song;
and this time, the hideous roar of the rout comes from within, not without. The rotting sheep within the rotting body of the Church represent an expansion of the metaphor of man's ship rigged with curses dark.

The respective interventions of Apollo and of Peter in the pastoral (sometimes regarded as 'digressions'), are crucial to the progress of the poem. Their speeches are in a sense complementary: Apollo's restores pastoral flow while Peter's — initially at least — interrupts it; and Peter shows that the teaching of the gods does not always come in the form of Apollo's equanimity, and that hatred and violence have a legitimate function in grief. They represent different philosophies, but this is secondary to their analogous dramatic functions in the poem. The content of both speeches is foreshadowed by the poet's own voice at an earlier stage, and this makes them relevant to the texture of the poem as a whole: thus Apollo takes the theme of immortal fame which the poet had failed to express convincingly, and Peter responds to the bitter violence of the poet's reaction to death. But neither speech is felt to be within the control of the poet's oaten reed: the external voices do more than politely answer questions (like Neptune), or powerlessly ask them (like Camus); for they are not accountable to the poet and to the form or style which he has adopted; they are accountable to Jove or God, and take as much time as they need to make their point. Hence it is that the form of the poem, already founded on a very fluid version of the *canzone* stanza, becomes 'stretched' at these points, far beyond the expected length of the paragraph. And it is this extension of the chosen form, embodying a vision which stretches beyond the poet's and yet corresponds to an emotional dilemma with which he is already struggling, which ultimately guides the poet towards the creation of a new pastoral form appropriate to his own experience.

After Peter's speech the elegist is left with the enigmatic couplet about the two-handed engine ringing in his ears: enigmatic in sense, yet comprehensible in feeling, particularly as it echoes his own surge with forced fingers rude: 'Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more'. The precision of the image does not mean that it requires translation in the terms of point-for-point allegory. It represents the transformation of his uncontrollable emotion, into potential action — mental action. After this has been impressed upon him, he feels, as after Phoebus, shrunk in
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stature; but the 'melodious tear' of this water-pastoral, beginning at the sacred well on Helicon and following the full-bodied course of a river through its weeping tribute towards the sea, is now expressed by the river mirroring the poet's own shrunken state, and taking on the significance of a friend and companion. Peter's shrinking of the pastoral stream has the indirect effect of reviving it, in the beautiful transition

Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past,  
That shrunk thy streams; return Sicilian muse,  
And call the vales, and bid them hither cast  
Their bells, and flowrets of a thousand hues.

The poem has flowed before towards the realisation of the traditional melodious tear, but never with this intensity. The watering of the shrunken streams begins to repair the image of Lycidas's corpse tormented by the 'parching wind'. As with Leontes in The Winter's Tale, 'tears ... Shall be my recreation'; and the elegist, in recalling the Sicilian muse, is himself reinstating through weeping the vital animating spirit which made nature beautiful before Lycidas's death left echoes in the woods and desert caves. Life is breathed into the verse through the 'h' sounds in 'hither .. hues .. whispers .. whose', and the 'l' alliteration in 'call .. vales .. bells .. flowrets .. valleys low' suggests an almost imperceptible tinkling of droplets of water as the valleys and vegetation fill. The delicate wording and the gently wafting rhythm suggest the singer's new eye for the minutiae of nature, and his new ear receptive to its sounds: the tiny flowers have not one hue but 'a thousand'; 'the swart star sparely looks'; the flowers have 'quaint enamelled eyes', and the eyes suck moisture and suddenly brighten into life as the ground is carpeted. In the famous flower-catalogue, each flower has a curious individuality: the 'tufted crow-toe', the 'pansy freaked with jet', the 'well-attired woodbine', and cowslips hanging their pensive head, have a half-human quality. For the pageant of the flowers is a continuation of the procession of the river-gods, constituting an essential part of the mourning for Lycidas, their 'sad embroidery' extending the 'figures dim' on Camus's mantle:

Bid amaranthus all his beauty shed,  
And daffadillies fill their cups with tears,
To strew the laureate hearse where Lycid lies.

The whole flower-passage is sometimes interpreted as being ironic or escapist, because Lycidas's body has not been found in reality for the funeral rites, and daffodils do not weep, and because the poet afterwards suggests it is 'false surmise'. But rather, like Spenser's 'Epithalamion', it is a 'Song made in lieu of many ornaments'; it takes the opportunity offered by the absence of the machinery of ritual, to concentrate on the emotional aspects, and to give them due aesthetic form. The daffodils, filled with the singer's own tears, seem to weep. And in this way, the parched torment of Lycidas, and the shrunken emptiness felt by the poet, are simultaneously relieved.

Pastoral has once again brought the poet to the contemplation of the place 'where Lycid lies'. In the progressive ebb-and-flow of the poem, history is repeated, but always with a difference; and the river is at last approaching the sea where Lycidas is. Lycidas has not yet been completely found, in the emotional sense, so the poem cannot prolong the laureate hearse with the indulgence of 'false surmise'; in its endeavour to progress, however, pastoral is interrupted once again, by another voice of the poet:

For so to interpose a little ease,
Let our frail thoughts dally with false surmise.
Ay me! . . .

One suddenly has the vivid sense of crossing this point before, when pastoral was broken for 'Ay me! I fondly dream', and followed by the description of the battered Orpheus. This time, the equivalent of the Orpheus image explicitly describes Lycidas:

Ay me! Whilst thee the shores, and sounding seas
Wash far away, where'er thy bones are hurled,
Whether beyond the stormy Hebrides
Where thou perhaps under the whelming tide
Visit'st the bottom of the monstrous world;

This is the nearest approach which has been made to the original unpalatable image of 'welter to the parching wind'; it includes strong echoes in sound, between 'Wash far away . . . where'er . . . Whether . . . whelming . . . Or whether', and 'watery bier . . .
Unwept, and welter . . wind'; and the tossing rhythm recalls that of the first passage. But this time, the picture of the watery bier has been included within the artistic lament, gathering within it associations from the Orpheus passage and the fatal bark in the midst of the watery procession. The poem is at last substantial enough to match the depth of the original emotion (which had caused the shattering of the leaves), with the beauty of artistic form. The emotion is matched, but the initial primitive terror has been taken out; the monsters of the 'monstrous world' are reminiscent of the 'rout that made the hideous roar', but they are not the same: they are nature's creatures, like the daughters of Neptune; innocent, not evil. The despair of the 'parching wind' and the gruesomeness of Orpheus's 'gory visage' seem to remain further back in the poem, where Phoebus and Peter dealt with them. Lycidas, during his voyage carried by the sea-surge of emotion, is being gradually purged of the 'curses' which sunk his sacred head, as he plumbs the depths of the world of unconscious terror, far below the 'level brine' of Panope. This most explicit image of the drowning of Lycidas, has the effect of suddenly revealing the nature and purpose of the elegist's lament as he follows his oaten reed; the blind spots, the digressions, the breaks in pastoral form, the undigested speeches of Phoebus and Peter, are all unified by the way the poem's structure corresponds to the search for the lost, 'unwept' body of Lycidas.

The sounding seas and whelming tide of emotion embodied in this passage represent weeping of a more violent and uncontrolled nature than that of 'fill their cups with tears', but nevertheless it was the flower-passage which released it. And suddenly, in mid-flow, the direction of the passage changes:

Or whether thou to our moist vows denied,
Sleep'st by the fable of Bellerus old . . .

The pivotal 'or' hints at a new departure, during which the falsely surmised laureate hearse of Lycidas will be replaced by another place of rest, fulfilling the 'moist vows'. In the following lines Lycidas's body is placed within the landscape and the seascape of his death in a complex network of metaphor, as the single sentence which began at 'Ay mel' continues at the same deliberate pace, giving no rhetorical indication of the total change in perspective that is occurring as the oaten reed proceeds. The tossing
body is suddenly seen to sleep—not in a hearse; not in any physical place, but by a 'fable':

While the great vision of the guarded mount
Looks toward Namancos and Bayona's hold;

Lycidas takes his place within the coastlands' ancient geography and legends; Bellerus is an even more obscure figure than Milton's original 'Corineus': a giant born simultaneously with the land, and therefore older than history. Lycidas is accepted back into Time, into the world of the 'old bards, the ... Druids' mentioned before, and earlier, into unrecorded history beyond the memory of man, to a level at which truth and fable are indistinguishable, or the same thing. The poet's first attempt to delineate the actual place of Lycidas's death had resulted in 'fond dreaming', so he had returned to classical imagery; but now, much later in terms of mental action, the actual place can contain the reality of Lycidas's body, and the meaning of his death. For Lycidas's storm-tossed body is now anchored securely in relation to three different spheres: legend, danger in the real world (symbolised by Bayona's hold in Spain, which looks back implicitly to Peter's speech and the barbaric 'rout'), and to protection from another world, symbolised by St Michael. The raging sea which had previously formed his watery bier is now peopled by sympathetic, life-saving and music-loving spirits, in the form of the dolphins who 'waft the hapless youth'. In imaginative and emotional terms, therefore, Lycidas has at last been found, responding to the painful search conducted by his brother in song; the poet is now equipped to internalise the knowledge of 'Lycidas', with all its profound and unparaphrasable symbolism.

Within four lines, the verbs in the sentence lead from 'Sleep'st' to 'Looks' to 'Look', in the climactic line

Look homeward angel now, and melt with ruth.

They represent the crescendo towards a flash of insight which is founded upon the work of the entire poem thus far. The emotional impact of this line is hard to account for, but it is connected with the contact between the poet and the angel, whose eyes move simultaneously 'homeward' (that is, toward both Lycidas and the poet), as the poet moves toward him with his
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direct appeal. The language during these lines is natural, and the syntax simple, for the first time in a poem which has so far veered between extremes of tortuousness, melodiousness, rhetorical virtuosity and colloquialism. By contrast with these extremes, the new naturalness has the authority of reality. Within a short space, the poem has moved from 'false surmise', through different kinds of 'fable' (including the body only 'perhaps' under the whelming tide), to a point which tips the fine balance between wishful thinking and the reality of the imagination. When the angel turns his gaze from Spain (which is still a kind of 'fable') to home, false surmise and fond dreaming are transformed into inspiration. The angel who was once instrumental in driving man from that other mount, Paradise, his ship rigged with curses dark, now endows him with the means to create the paradise within, through inspiration, the power to bring the dead to life. And the angel's essential link with the poet lies not in his promise of fame or a two-handed engine, but in his ability to melt with ruth. He gives the poet the ability to transform 'bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear' into understanding, through art. He is in a sense the missing Muse of the broken invocation, in which blinding tears had caused the disintegration of poetry's crown. Now, the two halves of that invocation are made whole as the poet, in a new harmony with his art and the images at his command, causes Lycidas to be supported by the dolphins over the sea—art's tribute no longer false surmise.

The dolphin image and the final movement of the poem are not fond dreaming, but are founded on the poet's meeting with the archangel.

Weep no more, woeful shepherds weep no more,
For Lycidas your sorrow is not dead,
Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor,
So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,
And tricks his beams, and with new spangled ore,
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:

The first line echoes the opening 'Yet once more, O ye laurels, and once more', indicating that the original passion is fully met. The simplicity of diction and paratactic sentence structure continue, giving the effect of an ordered progression stepping upwards, in which the lines 'Flames in the forehead ...' and
'Through the dear might of him that walked the waves', stand out with a greater emphasis—the first owing to its alliteration and change of rhythm, and the second owing to its extended length. These two lines epitomise the movement toward the resurrection of Lycidas, who is associated initially with the sun and raised from being sunken in mortality: 'So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high'; and then with Christ who 'walked' the waves. Christ's 'dear might' absorbs the 'sad occasion dear'. Lycidas now walks the waves as he steps from his original home in pastoral and his watery grave, to

other groves, and other streams along,
With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves ...

His origins and fate are not forgotten, but gilded, in the same way that the sun dresses his newly washed beams with 'new spangled ore' and becomes a jewel in the sky's forehead. The key image of the 'song', which has run throughout the poem, originating with that for old Damaetas and modulating through Orphic significance, here becomes the 'unexpressive nuptial song'. Lycidas is no longer a singer, but one who is sung to by the saints,

That sing, and singing in their glory move,
And wipe the tears for ever from his eyes.

The lines have a calm, mystical movement; by a rhythmic parallel, 'Unwept, and welter' becomes 'That sing, and singing', in the ultimate fulfilment of the 'melodious tear', the marriage of art and emotion. For the first time since the very distant 'Under the opening eye-lids of the morn', the poem presents a complete landscape—or rather seascape—with the sense of a wide horizon, contrasting with the claustrophobic opening vision. Now, as with Cordelia, there are tears and smiles together; and contact with higher knowledge does not (as with Peter's voice) shrink the stream. Implicit in the light and water imagery throughout this section is the idea of a rainbow, which lies behind the new role of Lycidas as an intermediary between the world of 'other groves, and other streams', and the perilous flood in which the poet still wanders:

Henceforth thou art the genius of the shore,
In thy large recompense, and shalt be good
To all that wander in that perilous flood.

The suggestion of the transference of poetic power from the dead to the living poet, which can be explicit in classical pastoral, is here implicit in the transformation of Lycidas' song from the echoes in an empty nature, to a divine world of inexpressible song which will always provide a potential musical source for future poetry. During the course of the poem, the poet has re-lived and revalued his own poetic history; and the happy, innocent, protected pastoral 'Under the opening eye-lids of the morn' has been swept away for ever, like Eden in Paradise Lost, which becomes an 'island salt and bare' when its function is made obsolete. The world is no longer flooded with light of its own accord as in the happy inspiration of the 'Nativity Ode'; from now on the golden world of poetry must be forged, and as in Paradise Lost, 'Light/ Shine inward'. The bright-harnessed angels no longer hold the 'bitter cross' in the background, nor will the poet be automatically endowed with the 'Oratio pro Arte' 's 'stronghold of wisdom' to protect him from 'fate and chance'. Instead, the vulnerable poet, for ever beset by the 'flashy song' and 'hideous roar' which may drown harp and voice, is forced by the pressure of emotional circumstance to fight for his own protection. At the beginning of the poem, Lycidas 'must not go unwept'; at the end, through the direct appeal to the archangel, he becomes the 'genius of the shore', mediating between the known and unknown worlds. He simultaneously enters immortality, and provides the poet with a link to immortal knowledge.

The concluding octave of the poem underlines this mediation, showing how the experience of inspiration becomes integrated into everyday life. The sudden distancing of the lament (like the 'Nativity Ode' 's tedious song'), prevents passion from reaching into sentimentality:

Thus sang the uncouth swain to the oaks and rills,
While the still morn went out with sandals grey,
He touched the tender stops of various quills,
With eager thought warbling his Doric lay:
And now the sun had stretched out all the hills,
And now was dropped into the western bay;
At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.

These eight lines summarise the entire poem, but from a new angle. Unlike the precedent given by Virgil, who in the fourth *Georgic* describes himself as uncouth ("ignobilis"), they do not return the poem to the same level or the same voice with which it began. In leaving the main lament, one expects to encounter again the elegist who said ‘Yet once more’ before he began the lament; but the situation is turned inside out. For the introduction presented the poet's vision from the inside, and it was an inharmonious vision, blinded by tears and incapable of being contained within artistic form; but the conclusion shows us the same singer-shepherd, from the outside, and within the context of a complete landscape and the time-scale of a complete day, which represents — at the same time — the entire duration of the lament. Thus the singer is glimpsed still absorbed in ‘eager thought’ as he finishes his song; from the standpoint of an outside observer, the poem is presented all over again; and the external vision requires only eight lines, where the internal action took 185. The singer is seen not in the context of nostalgic pastoral (the ‘opening eye-lids’), nor in that of heightened pastoral (as in ‘other groves’), but rather, in that of naturalistic pastoral, with the sun wearing not ‘new spangled ore’ but ‘sandals grey’. The drama of the inner life is absorbed back into the perspective of daily routine. The observer’s momentary astonishment at the difference between the way the singer looks and the way he feels, carries the message that underneath a blue mantle on a grey morn may lie turmoil unimaginable. It is not enough to read only the surface of life. But correspondingly, inner drama becomes self-destructive and unfit for use as developmental experience if there is no bridge between this and practical life as it is lived. The dual vision is essential to complete understanding; and the singer's apparently insignificant actions as he practices his art with eager thought, then pauses slightly before ‘At last he rose’, and twitches his mantle blue, are flooded with a new meaning. The final line of the poem could almost be in direct speech for it is the shepherd’s inner resolution as he absorbs that day’s experience, and it is also the voice of the observer as he understands the shepherd’s action: ‘Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.’ Both perspectives are united: the inner and the outer reality end in harmony. Lycidas’s new position as a
mediator between different kinds of reality is thereby confirmed; and it is a position which has become resilient, with qualities which may not founder when the ‘perilous flood’ is exchanged for new dangers: fresh woods, as well as pastures, lie ahead.

The image of inspiration embodied in ‘Lycidas’ survives twenty years of political life; and in a wider sense, it has survived three and a half centuries and is still ahead of its time. It is clear on reading the poem that it is fruitless to consider it an occasional pastoral on the death of Edward King. Milton did write a poem of that nature after the death of his friend Charles Diodati—the ‘Epitaphium Damonis’—which, though in superficial respects a companion piece to ‘Lycidas’, is a story with the realism and timescale of the external world, rather than the inner world. This takes the form in effect of a last letter to the dead friend, a country walk with only his memory; and in terms of character, tastes and activities evokes a clear impression of the life and interests of both the dead and the living man, and of the nature of the friendship between them. Nothing of this sort exists, or would be appropriate, in ‘Lycidas’. ‘Damon’ is peopled by Diodati and Milton, Carlo Dati, Francini and Manso; but ‘Lycidas’ is peopled by Phoebus Apollo, St Peter and the Archangel Michael—actors from a different world altogether. Diodati was a ‘friend among thousands’; but Lycidas is a figure of irreplaceable necessity to the poet’s inner life, and as such takes on attributes not appropriate to King at all—those of Orpheus the greatest poet, and Christ the greatest fisher of men. The structure of ‘Damon’ is long, meditative and leisurely; it is a catalogue whose parts could easily be rearranged; whereas the progression of ‘Lycidas’ is determined by urgent necessity from within the poem itself, and the poet experiences writing the poem as being led by ‘trembling ears’ rather than controlling it. And though in ‘Damon’, Milton sketches a substantial plan of his poetic ambitions, in ‘Lycidas’ is established the relationship with inspiration on which depends the musical soul, the poetic principle, of those plans, should they ever be realised. And (though it may seem paradoxical), it is this which makes ‘Lycidas’ a poem of importance not only to Milton. ‘Lycidas’ is a political poem in a sense far deeper than any isolated paraphrase of St Peter’s speech can comprehend: it shows a poet in the process of fulfilling Shelley’s definition and becoming a ‘legislator of the world’. And its true, universal, ‘legislative’ significance lies not in
any contemporary propagandist interpretation, but in the
evolution of thought within it, as it becomes a model for
independent development. For through the process of mourning
which constitutes the action of the poem, the poet demonstrates
(not didactically, but through subjective experience) how to
sustain the traumatic onslaught of unbearable knowledge, that
threatens to undercut the very foundations of existence as
previously experienced; and how to integrate this new knowledge
within the framework of oneself as an ordinary human being.
Milton comes to terms with the poet’s vulnerability in the face of
traumatic knowledge, or the Unknown itself — symbolised by the
image of the unfindable, ‘lost Lycidas’. Watching his struggle
with language, the reader has the opportunity to participate at
one remove, and to become educated — not by precept, but
through example. When Milton wrote ‘Lycidas’, he did more for
humanity than the achievement of any single social advance —
than the abolition of slavery or hanging or the substitution of
nursery schools for child labour in the mines. He established the
very principle of advance, by demonstrating how to take a step
forward in development. This information, available in ‘Lycidas’,
might be considered of some consequence in terms of the progress
or retreat of civilisation.
4 Milton's Search for the Idea of the Beautiful

I

At about the time of writing 'Lycidas', Milton tells Diodati with unusual excitement of a new reality in his hopes for inspiration: 'You ask what I am thinking of? So help me God, an immortality of fame. What am I doing? Growing my wings and practising flight.' He sees clearly the path ahead of him, not this time in practical terms of a programme of study which will lead to universal knowledge, but in the visionary terms of a search for the idea of the beautiful:

For though I do not know what else God may have decreed for me, this certainly is true: he has instilled into me, if into anyone, a vehement love of the beautiful. Not so diligently is Ceres, according to the Fables, said to have sought her daughter Proserpina, as I seek for this idea of the beautiful, as if for some glorious image, throughout all the shapes and forms of things ('for many are the shapes of things divine'); day and night I search and follow its lead eagerly as if by certain clear traces.

The Proserpine myth, with its recurrent cycle of the lost-and-found, is later of equivalent significance to Keats: expressing the emergence of poetry into the world as the reuniting of mother and child after a period of darkness. And the expression of the myth in this unusually spontaneous Latin letter, represents the clearest statement of vocation Milton was ever to make. The search for the idea of the beautiful formulated at the time of 'Lycidas' reverberates through Milton's future thought, and becomes manifest in many shapes and forms — the forms both of
Milton's Search for the Idea of the Beautiful

his philosophy and, in particular, of his major poetry, many years later.

During the flood of 'poetic prose' of 1642-5 between his visit to Italy and the publication of his poems, and before committing himself to any propaganda, Milton wrote on what he later (in the Second Defence) called the 'three species' of 'real and substantial liberty'—ecclesiastic, domestic and civil—'without which it is scarcely possible to passe any life with comfort'. And much can be gleaned from these forceful and vigorous tracts about his developing attitude to knowledge and new appreciation of the discomfort of being a thinking man with an obligation to go on thinking in the midst of superstition and ignorance or the 'swoln visage of counterfeit knowledge' (as he puts it in the Divorce pamphlet). The young knowledge-seeker no longer hopes to repose in a 'stronghold of wisdom' because, as he says in Areopagitica, 'The light which we have gain'd, was giv'n to us, not to be ever staring on, but by it to discover onward things more remote from our knowledge.' In a world in which Truth arrives dismembered, and good and evil are indistinguishable, Milton envisages life as a heroic quest for truth: following, in the Apology for Smectymnuus, the chosen metaphor of Spenser (that 'better teacher than Aquinas'), 'every free and gentle spirit without that oath ought to be borne a Knight', not needing 'the laying of a sword upon his shoulder'. Yet the Knight who in his search for truth and beauty tries to direct his way through 'choice and purpose' rather than 'custom and awe' ('Custome being but a meere face, as Eccho is a mere voice') is likely to find knowledge a mixed blessing when he achieves it: for, as Milton says in The Reason of Church Government, 'although divine inspiration must certainly have been sweet to those ancient profets, yet the irksomenesse of that truth which they brought' makes them 'everywhere ... call it a burden'.

Milton wrote about three types of liberty in 1642-5. But he never wrote a theory of poetic, then or later. This might seem strange in view of the sacred importance he attached to poetry's function in the world, and the fact that he had no qualms about publicising his own poetic ideals and intentions in apparently unsuitable contexts—such as the personal passages in Church Government and in the Apology. But poetry was his primary medium for the working of inspiration, his lifeline to knowledge at first hand; it was in a sense too close to his heart, and he was
not, therefore, in a position to analyse and dissect it while it was still in use. Milton could never have written as Sir Philip Sidney did a generation earlier, faced with the problem of rationalising inspiration: 'Plato ... attributeth unto poesy more than myself I do, namely, to be a very inspiring of a divine force, far above man's wit ... ' In general terms, Milton would have found much to sympathise with in this Defence of Poetry; but while Sidney was over-anxious not to appear an advocate of 'fine frenzy' or 'enthusiasm', Milton carefully avoided direct philosophical treatment of the subject altogether, aware that philosophy was not in a position to analyse what poetry had not yet fully explored. Milton's idea of inspiration was in fact central to his 'theory' of poetry, and it is not to be found by collating the references to poetry scattered throughout his writings, but only within the poetry itself.

There is, however, one unit of writing from this period which, though it is not specifically about poetry, gives by analogy a more vivid and informative picture of the process by which the search for the beautiful approaches the knowledge of truth than do any of these statements about poetry. It is the informal and spontaneous tractate Of Education, which takes the form of a quickly written letter to Samuel Hartlib, containing 'that voluntary Idea, which hath long in silence presented it self to me, of a better Education'. This piece of prose stands in relation to 'Lycidas' rather as the prolation on the Harmony of the Spheres stood in relation to the 'Nativity Ode', and represents the increased complexity of Milton's attitude to knowledge wrought by the second poem. The process of education, Milton wrote in the Second Defence, deals not with external or social liberties but with 'virtue', 'whence arises true and internal liberty'; and in the following discussion, I will not be concerned with Milton's practical suggestions and their relation to the educational theories of his day, but rather with understanding that 'voluntary Idea' of education — 'Idea' implying not only 'plan', but the Platonic sense of an informing spirit implicit in previous work, and coming 'voluntary', perhaps like those 'thoughts, that voluntary move/ Harmonious numbers' in Paradise Lost. For the tractate is poetic in spirit, and although in some ways it is not revolutionary but traditional in content, it does contain the sense of a new approach to education. Milton felt that it was drawn from him before he was ready to write it, yet he also felt that it
expressed the essence of much of his previous experience.

Milton's Idea of education includes not only a practical scheme or syllabus, but also a picture of the principle of learning, the essence of the educational process. To begin with, he sees not only original sin but also the preconception or original awareness of a state of bliss as innate, needing not to be gained, but to be regained:

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true virtue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection.

His justification of education echoes the language of Sidney, who describes how the 'speaking picture of poesy' can 'possess the sight of the soul' and repair that 'first accursed fall of Adam, since our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it.' In both writers, the kind of knowledge possessed by the soul is, in its final form, the knowledge of God (the source of all beauty). Yet Milton differs from most Renaissance writers in his implicit vision of the manner in which this ultimate knowledge is attained. The usual pattern of the search for God through love and beauty is that explained (for example) by Castiglione through Bembo's ladder: representing an ascent from low to high, from the sensible to the intellectual. And it is true that in Church Government Milton makes the conventional distinction between the 'lower wisdom' gained from 'the contemplation of natural causes and dimensions', and the 'high valuable wisdom' which is the knowledge 'of God, and of his true worship, and what is infallibly good and happy in the state of man's life'. But in Education, when Milton explores the relation between the knowledge of God and earthly knowledge more deeply, a different picture emerges. Here, his Idea of the road to true knowledge is not that of a linear ascent, but of an organic transformation of 'low' materials, with the aid of an innate knowledge of God. For this less conventional picture of learning, Milton uses the imagery of food and eating; and he compares his well-educated youth (by contrast to those 'shaken, uncertain Reeds, of ... a tottering Conscience') not to ascetic
contemplators, but to soldiers who must learn to move backwards as well as forwards,

into the middle ward, and sometimes into the rear of what they have been taught, until they have confirm'd, and solidly united the whole body of their perfected knowledge, like the last embattelling of a Roman legion.

The physical solidity of those who have been fed on 'the substance of good things', is a metaphor for integrity. In a true education, something happens within the mind, which metamorphoses a catalogue of things known, into the kind of knowledge which is equivalent to love and virtue.

How, then, is this union of the ideal and innate to be effected? The direct truth cannot be taught direct, but only by means of those materials and areas of study which are available in the world:

But because our understanding cannot in this body found it selfe but on sensible things, nor arrive so clearly to the knowledge of God and things invisible, as by orderly conning over the visible and inferior creature, the same method is necessarily to be followed in all discreet teaching.

The value of these 'sensible things' lies not in themselves, but in the opportunity they provide for man to see 'God and things invisible'. Milton stresses the variety of the occupations and fields of knowledge which should be available for exploration: 'Hunters, fowlers, Fishermen ...' and so on. But their practical significance in the external world is secondary to their mediatory function, and their variety is necessary to correspond to the variety of talents or 'secret excellence' requiring to be 'fetched out' and given 'fair opportunities to advance ... by'. The essential point is that the sensible things offered should be in a form that awakens desire. The desire for knowledge of anything is, in effect, desire for the knowledge of God; because in this active link between student and subject, sensible things which were merely neutral become incorporated within the mind, as the shapes and forms of things divine. The hillside from which Milton points out the path of a 'vertuous and noble Education' is a central metaphor in the tractate, and the key to Milton's conception of the learning
process. The path is

laborious indeed at the first ascent, but else so smooth, so green, so full of goodly prospect, and melodious sounds on every side, that the Harp of Orpheus was not more charming. I doubt not but ye shall have more ado to drive our dullest and laziest youth, our stocks and stubbs from the infinite desire of such a happy nurture, then we have now to hale and drag our choisest and hopefullest Wits to that asinine feast of sowthistles and brambles which is commonly set before them, as all the food and entertainment of their tenderest and most docible age.

In this metaphorical description of the inner conditions congenial to learning, Milton implicitly rejects the typical Renaissance imagery of the 'sugared pill', which portrays knowledge itself as bitter and only to be gained by deceptive means. He does describe the process of gaining knowledge in terms of food — as throughout his life (for example 'feed on thoughts ... or Raphael's 'Knowledge is food'); but he is not interested in thrusting uncongenial facts or pieces of information into a student's mind. Rather, the means is the end; and it is the poet Orpheus whose means are chosen to conduct the soul to the knowledge of God. Orpheus's feast of happy nurture not only seems delightful, but is delightful: the instinct of both dull and bright youth is correct in recognising, through desire, the heart of the matter — the 'substance of good things'. Only through this vital link of desire does information become transformed into understanding, which is the essential factor in any 'discreet teaching' method. The situation for the student is the same as that for the orator, as described in the Apology:

true eloquence I find to be none, but the serious and hearty love of truth: And that whose mind so ever is fully possessest with a fervent desire to know good things ... his words ... like so many nimble and airy servitors ... fall aptly into their own places.

Conversely, these same neutral pieces of information may, through being wrongly presented, take on the character of an 'asinine feast' which merely thwarts the innate desire for good
things, and perverts the mind into ‘conscientious slavery’, ‘mockt and deluded all this while with ragged notions and babblements’ while expecting ‘worthy and delightful knowledge’. This fierce denunciation of false learning is characteristic of Milton: in his third university prolusion, he mocks ‘these quick-change philos­phasters of ours’ who ‘argue back and forth, one bolstering up his thesis on every side, another labouring hard to cause its downfall’, until the hapless student ‘reaches such a pitch of madness as to believe himself utterly blind when in fact there is nothing for him to see’. And true knowledge does not consist of the accumulation of facts, like pills, but of the transformation of these facts within the mind into an integrated system related to the knowledge of ‘things invisible’, becoming a living part of the personality, and creating individuals with judgement, rather than uncertain reeds of a tottering conscience, forced to ‘rely more upon their ancestors dead, then upon themselves living’.

Towards the end of the tractate, Milton places poetry within his scheme of education. At the end of his ordered programme of studies, come ‘those organic arts’ Logic and Rhetoric, ‘To which Poetry would be made subsequent, or indeed rather precedent, as being lesse suttle and fine, but more simple, sensuous and passionate’. Milton’s paradoxical ‘subsequent and precedent’ is on one level a practical adjustment, by which he includes the early reading of poetry as well as the late writing of poetry in his programme, on the lines of Sidney’s description of poetry as ‘the first light-giver to ignorance, and first nurse, whose milk little and little enabled them to feed afterwards of tougher knowledges’. But Milton’s conceptions are, as usual, more far-reaching than Sidney’s; and for him, poetry becomes ‘precedent’ not because it is easy, but because its operation in the learning process is unique, unifying both early and late stages in education. The excited language of the whole passage describing ‘that sublime Art’ and ‘what religious, what glorious, and magnificent use might be made of Poetry both in divine and humane things’, suggests that Milton liked his ambiguous phrase because it demarcates poetry from the solely academic subjects. Being more ‘simple, sensuous and passionate’, it is not only easier to understand than rhetoric, but exists on a different plane altogether: the plane not of sophisticated systematisation, but of fundamental truths. In its direct contact with inner emotional life through sensuous language, it responds more immediately to man’s innate
desire to know God than do any other of the 'sensible' manifestations of knowledge. And the knowledge it thereby transfers is 'simple' not only in being instantly comprehensible, but also in being unified and self-sufficient, requiring no footnotes, and raised above the ordinary bustle of acquiring learning. 'Simple' once meant 'holy', and an undertone of this sense lingers here. Poetry exists in Milton's system not only as an academic study at the end of a curriculum, but throughout education, reinforcing and integrating all studies; for the process of true learning is itself poetic, being a search for the idea of the beautiful in its sensuous manifestation of 'good things', perceived to the accompaniment of Orpheus's harp. Indeed, Milton's idea of a poetic learning principle is ultimately closer to Keats's conception of a 'spiritual yeast' which leavens the substance of man's existence, 'sucking the Sap from mould ethereal', than it is to the Renaissance idea of teaching clothed in delightful form. Throughout the tractate, Milton has been stressing how formal education could be made more efficient and more enjoyable; but his ultimate concern is not with enjoyment or efficiency as such, but with the living process of development, in which the individual finds amongst the opportunities available some means of kindling those sparks of divinity within him, which will set him on a course toward himself being a 'true Poem'. His acquisition of knowledge should not be cumulative, but organic: not that of a 'Babel-tongued scholar' but of one 'competently wise in his mother dialect'. And the 'voluntary Idea' of the poetic learning process embodied in this brief essay, expresses the state of Milton's idea of poetry and inspiration after 'Lycidas' probably more clearly than any deliberate treatise could have done. Poetry is educative and education poetic; and the poet who engages in this reciprocal activity will be dealing more closely with his own innate recognition of beauty and truth than with any previously standardised hierarchy of knowledge; the knowledge which he gains is measurable not in terms of his stock of information, but in terms of attaining through his 'native language' the experience of 'God and things invisible'.

II

'Lycidas' is a major turning-point in Milton's career and rever-
berates through his later poetry, as may be seen by tracing the main features of his idea of inspiration in *Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*. The four invocations in *Paradise Lost* (beginning Books I, III, VII and IX) are the places most specifically concerned with Milton’s function as a poet, and establish his relationship with the Heavenly Muse—a figure whose genesis lies ultimately not in the Bible nor in the classics, but in the ‘Native Language’ whom he had hailed long ago in the ‘Vacation Exercise’. These invocations are not ‘digressions’, as Addison saw them, nor are they defensible merely in terms of their doctrinal relevance to the rest of the poem or their standard rhetorical function as introduction to the action. They are essential to Milton’s ability to write the poem, as he himself implies; and integral to the subject, being a miniature version of the theme of the whole poem, which may be broadly defined as a quest for knowledge and understanding. The scene of the poem’s action, although encompassing imaginatively all areas of the universe, is the inner world of man, and its relation to total or ideal knowledge; and this is also the setting of the invocations, which analyse the ‘ways of God’ as they appear to one man, the poet. In this sense, therefore, the prologues represent the key to the reader’s interpretation of the entire poem; for it is here that we must decide between the two alternatives posed by Milton in the early Letter to a Friend: whether Milton here is preacher or poet. And though there has been in recent years an almost obsessive hunt to track down the identity of Milton’s Muse in theological terms (ironically, considering his own careful ‘The meaning, not the name I call’), these sections of the epic clarify the mysterious and elusive character of the bringer of inspiration, and the nature of inspiration not merely as an original impulse or stimulus, but as inextricable from the final sensuous form of the verse. I suggest that, through reading the invocations, the reader may become aware that he is following the experience of a poet who approaches his subject with what Keats would call Negative Capability.

The invocation for Book I (and the whole poem) delineates the scope of the action, and places within it the figure of the poet, who is to mediate between the reader and the vision of true knowledge which he hopes will be revealed. The passage consists of two long, sinewy sentences, a network of retractions and progressions, weaving in time from the first Eden to the future
'blissful seat', and touching on the three Biblical hilltops and the classical Aonian mount, to gather the mystique associated with each place of inspiration. The traditional fiery breath of inspiration is suggested in 'blissful seat . . . secret top . . . didst inspire', and the traditional speaking waters of prophecy in 'Siloa's brook that flowed/ Fast by the oracle of God'. The figure of Moses is present, unnamed, in the most inclusive capacity of shepherd-poet-prophet, which associates him with the guardian-angel figures of the past, and with Christ in the future, as both medium and model for inspiration. In this way, Milton touches a wealth of imagery and association, both Biblical and classical, making it plain that no possible source for inspiration is to be excluded. The ultimate selection of image, and the nature of its use, is left to the Muse, in the dominant ninth line 'Sing, heavenly Muse . . . ', which organises the complex dependent clauses and the unformed material which they contain. The dominance of the Muse, who is associated with the heavens and earth rising 'out of chaos', is then linked with the upsurgence of the poet's own desire for creative power:

I thence
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song,
That with no middle flight intends to soar
Above the Aonian mount, while it pursues
Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme.

The emphatic phrasing 'I thence/ Invoke' (using the stress at the end and at the beginning of a line), introduces the poet in the first person, and suggests his own efforts to rise from the daunting chaos of his material, and capture 'Things unattempted yet'. The image within these lines of the song as a bird of prey among the mountains, corresponds closely to Keats's own metaphor for the nature of Milton's creative method: 'Milton in every instance pursues his imagination to the utmost—he is "sagacious of his Quarry"—he sees Beauty on the wing, pounces upon it and gorges it to the producing his essential verse.' Keats understood Milton's sense of poetry as breathtaking adventure, as a passionate and even savage union between the poet's imagination (which reaches almost beyond his own grasp) and a vision of ultimate beauty. The second sentence of this invocation complements the outward-going metaphor of poetic flight with
metaphors of receptivity, looking inwards and downwards. Imagery of construction is implicit, as the hilltop setting becomes that of the inner temple of the 'upright heart and pure', and the heavens and earth rising out of chaos are replaced by the Spirit brooding on the vast abyss. The poet's address to the bringer of inspiration drops from the bold and sonorous 'Sing heavenly Muse' to the intimate simplicity of 'Instruct me, for thou know'st'. Through the careful balance of the lines

what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support

the dark temple of the heart is gradually extended and elevated until it becomes fit to sustain 'this great argument':

That to the highth of this great argument
I may assert eternal providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.

Thus by the end of the invocation, the image of the poet and his inner state has become inseparable from the 'argument' itself; in the last two lines, 'I', 'God' and 'men' are linked in a firm relationship, and the foundation-stone for the argument's structure has been laid. In this invocation, as elsewhere, Milton preserves a proper hierarchy between pagan and Christian imagery, and between the Old and the New Testaments, on the lines of a progressive foreshadowing of the truth. But the given truths of Christianity as expressed in the Bible do themselves fall into the place of myth and metaphor, like the classical sacred images and places, becoming part of the material from which a new truth, in the form of 'Things unattempted yet', is created. Even the Biblical prophets provide Milton with no more than a starting-point; he does not ask to see what Moses saw; he asks to see as Moses saw. In each poetic experience, throughout history as in the history of every poet, and indeed during the history of an epic-length poem, the relationship with the Muse has to be forged anew, and all previously accepted truths become a mere foreshadowing of the new truth revealed.

In the invocation to Book IX, Milton differentiates between two kinds of activity within the poem. What does he mean when he speaks of his 'unpremeditated verse' when he has already
written two-thirds of the epic which he considers his life work—that ‘elaborate Song to Generations’ which he began planning fifteen years before? The context of the invocation makes it plain that he has not forgotten the conscious effort involved in ‘long choosing’ and in developing an ‘answerable style’ to the poetic models which established the tradition. But this deliberate process of artistic self-education is complemented by the strenuous passivity of listening to the voice of inspiration:

If answerable style I can obtain  
Of my celestial patroness, who deigns  
Her nightly visitation unimplored,  
And dictates to me slumbering, or inspires  
Easy my unpremeditated verse:  
Since first this subject for heroic song  
Pleased me long choosing, and beginning late;

This is not the ‘unmeditated song’ of Adam and Eve, as yet unfallen. The poet speaks already haunted by the knowledge of death and evil, and this context changes the quality of the song. The anxiety and effort and sense of his life passing away, are vividly present in the desire for answerable style, and in beginning late; but sandwiched in between them in contrast is the visitation of the Muse, whose movements are experienced as totally out of the poet’s control: she comes ‘unimplored’ and from a different world from that of effort and motivation and decay. The movement of the verse suggests the breathing of sleep; after the run-on line ‘inspires/ Easy’, the way is opened for the arrival of the ‘unpremeditated verse’ unawares, slipped in between movements of sleep, ‘verse’ being the last word to arrive. ‘Unpremeditated’ does not refer merely to a stage in creation before thought, but to the entire process of creative thought culminating in the ‘verse’ itself. It is clear that the Muse brings the verse as opposed to the subject, and that the states of premeditation, and of being inspired, are as different as those of waking and sleeping, in that one accords with the values of the everyday world, while the other has laws of its own. According to an early biographer, Milton did indeed awake in the morning with whole passages of poetry in his head, ‘waiting to be milked’*; but the sensuous

* See H. Darbishire, The Early Lives of Milton.
intensity of the passage tells us without external corroboration that Milton's description of inspiration is not mere convention, but to be taken literally. Milton has smoothed away the apparent paradox of unpremeditated verse which was long-choosing, simply by placing the terms close together in such relation that the paradox is forced to dissolve, as they take their place in different, co-existing realms of mental functioning. In one, the poet is the active master (the subject must 'please' him; it is up to him to 'obtain' the style); and in the other he is passive, and 'dictated to'.

The coalescence of active and passive which accompanies inspiration is given a different stress in the invocation to Book III, which shows that the poet's own vision must be abandoned if he is to receive the vision of truth, from outside himself. 'Holy Light' is in a sense the ultimate metaphor for the world of reality or truth from which inspiration is felt to derive:

Hail holy Light, offspring of heaven first-born,  
Or of the eternal co-eternal beam  
May I express thee unblamed? since God is light,  
And never but in unapproached light  
Dwelt from eternity, dwelt then in thee,  
Bright effluence of bright essence increate.

As an image representing fundamental reality, the 'offspring of heaven first-born', Light transcends even Urania. Though 'heavenly born,/ Before the hills appeared, or fountain flowed' (in Book VII), Urania's name or earthly representation is only a secondary reality, such that Milton is careful to imagine beyond her earthly appearance: 'The meaning, not the name I call'. Light is closer to the source, to the existence of 'meaning' rather than of names, 'since God is light'. Milton's idea of Light in this passage includes both the image of God, and the means by which God is known or experienced. And the desire for inspiration is represented by the wish to 'express' light — a word which suggests both imitation, and the reflection of a light-source radiating from within the poet: the active and passive expression of the poet is balanced by the nature of light to be both 'effluence' and 'essence'. But before the poet achieves the expression of light which is the equivalent of Education's 'regaining the knowledge of God', he is, paradoxically, obliged to sing 'darkling'. Only after
the painfully vivid description of the unsuccessful search to gain the light through normal methods of vision, through 'eyes, that roll in vain/ To find thy piercing ray, and find no dawn', does the image of inspiration become realised. The poet is isolated and imprisoned by 'cloud' and 'ever-during dark', 'Cut off', 'quite shut out', 'Presented with a universal blank' (a bitter reversal of his early hopes for 'universal knowledge'). As the passage progresses, the normal experience of light is almost savagely excised, 'expunged and razed', along with everyday existence and the 'cheerful ways of men'. Of course Milton is referring to his physical state of blindness, but this does not prevent the poetry from working on an allegorical level. For it is only when the poet's darkness and isolation has been fully established, 'And wisdom at one entrance quite shut out', that the entrance of wisdom in another sense becomes imaginable. Only when the initial search for knowledge by one path proves itself a dead end, does the poet even consider that there may be another means of gaining it. It is as if the elimination of daily sight is a necessary prerequisite for the gaining of inner sight. The irrevocable darkness, the inability of his strenuous efforts to lead to light as he had previously conceived it, suddenly results in the opening of a new vision:

So much the rather thou celestial Light
Shine inwards, the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight.

'Purge and disperse' echoes 'expunged and razed', but this time the poet is adding the whole force of his will to the elimination of ordinary sight, as he takes advantage of the revelation of insight. In the forceful, physical image, eyes are planted within him; and the establishment of insight, of a relation with celestial Light, culminates in the new regular rhythm of the last line and a half, which does itself reinforce the earlier 'Things unattempted yet in prose or rhyme'. The new vision is not a consolation for the loss of mortal sight. Rather, the achievement of a new knowledge has involved the erasion of the poet's previous vision of reality, however dependent on it he had felt himself to be. Knowledge brings not the sense of pleasure and power Milton had envisaged in his early poems and prologues, but—initially at least—a
painful and overwhelming impression of powerlessness and exposure. Faustus, in his greed for knowledge, sold his soul to the devil; but it appears that God's knowledge, also, has its price: being (in T. S. Eliot's terms) 'A condition of complete simplicity,/ Costing not less than everything'.

The epic as a whole, is concerned with different ways of seeing; different journeys towards, or away from, knowledge of the truth—often expressed geographically as a vista of the world. God bends 'down his eye,/ His own works and their works at once to view'; Satan claims 'Unspeakable desire to see, and know', and pauses 'with wonder at the sudden view/ Of all this world at once'; Adam and Eve are warned to stay within their own sphere, to 'seek/ No happier state, and know to know no more' and are finally led into the pageant of history with 'the world ... all before them'. And in this context, the poet's establishment of his own way of seeing truth, his own relationship with the Muse, is an essential part of his theme. He is not just the director and artificer of the poem, but also a participator, and the sensuous images of the poem only exist through his effort to transform his own sensuous existence into mind. As Dante explains in a letter to Can Grande*, the function of a proem is not just to indicate new departures to the reader, but to enable the poet to adjust himself as he moves between realms, for he requires 'something beyond the ordinary range of human powers'. This sense of a difficult adjustment to the texture of his own poem, and to the new areas of experience which each section explores, is expressed by Milton vividly and sensuously in the invocations. In his 'flight/ Through utter and through middle darkness borne', or floundering between 'waters dark and deep' and the incomprehensible 'void and formless infinite', the poet is as much as explorer within the extraordinary landscapes of his own poem, as is (for example) Satan, winding his 'oblique way' in pure air, or 'Treading the crude consistence, half on foot,/ Half flying'. Once he has entered the poem, he is himself in a position of ignorance,

Taught by the heavenly Muse to venture down
The dark descent, and up to reascend . . .

The poetic journey is not one of self-gratification, but of danger,

* Printed in 1. Samuel, *Dante and Milton.*
and of total reliance on the sense of a power outside the poet's control:

Up led by thee
Into the heaven of heavens I have presumed,
An earthly guest, and drawn empyreal air,
Thy tempering;

In an extension of Milton's 'knowledge is food' metaphor, the poet must rely on the Muse to give him back his normal sustaining breath, after drawing 'empyreal air', as with his normal sight after 'things invisible'; and restore him to his 'native element'. The journey back to himself, like the journey out of himself, bears the possibility of 'death ... and all our woe'. Like Plato's philosopher, 'unsighted' by a transition from light to darkness, he may mistake and fall on the Aleian field, 'Erroneous there to wander and forlorn', or like Orpheus be torn to pieces by the 'barbarous dissonance/ Of Bacchus and his revellers'. But only in this context of mortality, 'In darkness, and with dangers compassed round', can inspiration find a foothold: when man is in 'solitude',

yet not alone, while thou
Visit'st my slumbers nightly, or when morn
Purples the east; still govern thou my song,
Urania . . .

The poet's vulnerability, and sense that he knows nothing, is directly proportional to the extent of his vision—which he now measures not by the worldly standards of long conceiving and answerable style, but by things invisible, things unattempted yet. And when his book takes on this life of its own, containing 'that ethereall and fift essence, the breath of reason it selfe', which is 'the Image of God' (in Areopagitica), then the protection of 'custom and awe' falls from the poet, while the 'wild rout' await the chance to 'drown harp and voice'. The wild rout include the enemies within, and the dangers of false art and the illusion of omnipotence, which will sink the poet 'Depressed', 'if all be mine./ Not hers who brings it nightly to my ear':

So fail not thou, who thee implores:
For thou art heavenly, she an empty dream.

The ‘empty dream’ or false muse is not specifically any rejected classical muse such as Clio or Calliope, but a figure who approximates in external characteristics to the true Muse (like Satan or one of Spenser’s anti-heroines), and thereby deceives the poet into a false reliance. She is an imitation of Clio, Calliope, Urania, and all the other shadows which fuse into the mysterious reality of the Heavenly Muse whose ‘meaning’ is invoked: but she carries the ‘name’ only, and not the ‘meaning’. It is she who leads the poet into becoming the ‘dreaming thing’ condemned by Keats in *The Fall of Hyperion*. The true Muse, and her counterpart the false muse, have no previous existence in a philosophical scheme of any kind; the Muse is an inseparable part of the poem as experience, and is not to be found outside it: fulfilling Keats’s dictum that ‘That which is creative must create itself’. The power of *Paradise Lost* as a whole is inseparable from the poet’s personal struggle, expressed in the invocations, to maintain the integrity of his inspiration, and to distinguish intuitively between the Heavenly Muse and the empty dream. The poem owes its existence not only to Milton’s intellect and artistic technique, but to his emotional strength: to his ability to suffer confusion and blindness, like Plato’s philosophers who, after their brief spell in the sunlight, are forced to return to the Cave, in the service of the illumination of the world within.

Milton’s turbulent, intense involvement in *Paradise Lost* becomes transmuted into two poems of a deliberately contained, reflective quality, in which the action is specifically internal. *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* provide an interesting contrast to each other and to *Paradise Lost*, and contain a comment on the nature of inspiration in the epic. They represent contrasting approaches to the ultimate definition of the hero’s response to inspired knowledge. *Paradise Regained*, in particular, invites the reader to recollect *Paradise Lost*, in an invocation which distantly echoes the opening of ‘The Passion’ with its reference back to the ‘Nativity Ode’:

I who erewhile the happy Garden sung,
By one man’s disobedience lost, now sing
Recovered Paradise to all mankind,
By one man’s firm obedience fully tried
Through all temptation, and the tempter foiled
In all his wiles, defeated and repulsed,
And Eden raised in the waste wilderness.

Like 'The Passion', *Paradise Regained* sets out to be a companion poem to a previous work which had broken new ground; and *Paradise Regained* carries a sense of not only matching, but of correcting, the story of its predecessor. Milton, according to his nephew Edward Phillips, 'could not hear with patience' any suggestion that it was inferior to 'the other'*. Like 'The Passion', and unlike the first invocation in *Paradise Lost*, this begins—rather than ends—with the prominence of the poet: 'I' who sung the Garden. It is he who sings recovered Paradise, rather than 'Sing heavenly Muse'; the request for inspiration falls into a secondary position:

> inspire,
> As thou art wont, my prompted song else mute . . .

Inspiration is almost assumed to be forthcoming, on the grounds that it is 'wont' to do so—that is, that it has done so before; and the possibility of lack of inspiration 'else mute', has no syntactical prominence, unlike the 'empty dream' and forlorn Aleian fields envisaged in *Paradise Lost*. For *Paradise Lost* constituted a revelation for the poet, which was inseparable from a sense of blindness and vulnerability in blacking out everyday vision and singing darkling. In spite of the long years of scholarly preparation which culminated in *De Doctrina Christiana*, that poem was not restricted to the confines of Milton's deliberate premeditated intentions; and he experienced the poem not as 'mine', but as 'hers who brings it nightly to my ear'. *Paradise Regained*, on the other hand, is very much a poem presenting Milton's formulated philosophy—the ideology of Milton the man, Milton the trained rhetorician, the logical thinker, the experienced politician, the scholarly divine. In Christ, Milton presents his ideal man, the 'most perfect hero' longed for since 'The Passion'; and this 'second Adam' is endowed with everything the first Adam lacked, including a good education and the absence of Eve's conflicting love. It is the Milton of the prologues

and the political tracts who allows Christ the sarcastic dig at Satan in

But what concerns it thee when I begin
My everlasting kingdom ...  
Know'st thou not that my rising is thy fall,
And my promotion will be thy destruction?

At last Adam has the chance, through his Redeemer, to say what he really thinks of Satan; and Milton, through his protagonist, has the chance to say what he really meant to say about the entire subject of how the knowledge of God is regained—not just what the Muse put into his mouth. It is no accident that the invocation to *Paradise Regained* is merely a formality; the poem cannot serve two masters.

The movement of the poem as a whole is suggested in the steady, progressive rhythm of the words

from error lead

To know, and knowing worship God aright.

The function of Satan is to give Christ a chance to explicitly reject potential errors, before he is tempted to make them in the context of his active mission. By this means, they formulate gradually a revised version of the traditional heroic ideal, in which faith in God becomes the governing virtue. The ideas in the poem are arranged in the manner in which Milton thought they ought to be, whereas in *Paradise Lost* aspects of heroism were dispersed amongst the protagonists: Satan commandeered some, and proceeded to pervert them; Adam was endowed with others, which he also misused, though differently. But, here, it is not Satan who is allowed to make away with such precious statements of integrity as *Paradise Lost*’s

The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven

— but Christ, with ‘Yet he who reigns within himself ... is more a king’; and only after Christ has introduced the idea, can Satan pick it up and try to render it in the form of a temptation: ‘will render thee a king complete/ Within thyself’. But by then it is too late; Christ has already moved on to ‘higher arguments'. Milton’s
intellectual control of the poem is very subtle. Christ does not defeat Satan on his own ground, any more than does the Lady with Comus; in worldly terms, he cannot answer whence he might get the support of a 'dizzy multitude'. Rather, at each stage, he undermines Satan's terms by moving on to a higher plane of more sophisticated reference. He is always one step ahead of Satan in real terms; the successive supersessions of the poem themselves form a kind of rhetorical figure, in which Christ's final word always consists in transcending the grounds of the argument with a statement of integrity relating his vocation to God:

I seek not mine, but his
Who sent me, and thereby witness whence I am.

He receives 'Light from above, from the fountain of light'. Each step made by Christ toward the knowledge of God and himself is ordered and deliberate, giving his destiny a sense of inevitability, and the poem itself a satisfyingly mathematical progression.

Milton's Christ is both a 'perfect man', and the Inner Word of Protestant tradition, the 'inward oracle' To all truth requisite for men to know'; and, as such, his journey towards knowledge in Paradise Regained may be seen as a deliberate allegorisation of the supremacy of that inward prompting which breaks through worldly and rational barriers to the unknown, 'things invisible'. This deliberate allegorisation presents, in artistic form, conclusions which Milton has arrived at over many years. The end is known at the beginning, and the art lies in the arrangement of the steps leading toward that conclusion. The defeat of Satan is effected by an ultimate sophistication of rhetorical training: Christ knows that the right answer is always to point out that one has been asked the wrong question; and that Satan, by nature, never takes account of the relation of his suggestions to the knowledge of God. This point is clarified during the crucial Temptation of Athens, in which Satan is given statements echoing those of Milton's early poetic ambitions in works such as 'L'Allegro' or 'Arcades'; and these are prefaced by a recapitulation of Milton's youthful hopes for universal knowledge (long since abandoned):

So let extend thy mind o'er all the world,
In knowledge, all things in it comprehend . . .
Using the light of his own experience, Milton safeguards his intentions in this poem, and ensures that Christ wins the argument; he does not venture into the unknown. No one could say of *Paradise Regained* what Blake was to say of *Paradise Lost*, that Milton was really on the devil's side.

*Samson Agonistes*, on the other hand, represents not a revision of previous work, but a totally new approach by Milton to the subject of how man may know God and, amidst the flux of life, learn to distinguish true from false approaches to life. *Samson* dramatises, rather than argues, the process by which a man becomes a 'true Poem' and regains the knowledge of God which he lost at some obscure point in the dim and distant past. The real story of *Samson* concerns not the literal event of his toppling the Philistines, but his coming to terms with 'intimate impulse' — a theme which is explored not through a logical dialectic, but played out dramatically on different levels through time, character and metaphor. Unlike Christ, Samson is by no means a perfect man to start with: he is not the obvious choice for the 'pattern of a Christian Heroe' heralded in *Church Government*. Many parallels have been noted between Christ's story and that of Samson: Samson's agony compares with the passion; Christ represents the word, and Samson the deed, in terms of aligning with God's will; Christ in Milton's poem shows the way to this alignment, while Samson exemplifies it. Milton has some contemporary precedent for elevating Samson's stature; but his own hero at the beginning of the poem is not as far from the coarse bully of Judges, who amused himself by setting fire to foxes' tails, as is sometimes assumed. He does not have the potential of Christ for representing an image of inspired communion with God, but he has a different kind of potential: namely, room for improvement. Far from beginning life 'Serious to learn and know', like the Christ of *Paradise Regained*, he has blundered thoughtlessly through a spectacular active career without pausing to question it. Samson at the beginning of the poem, bitter, confused, and with a sense of degradation, is hardly representative of the 'better fortitude/ Of patience and heroic martyrdom':

> Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him
> Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves . . .

But the withdrawal of external outlets of strength in God's service
forces him to think for the first time in his life; and he finds it a painful process, as the opening lines indicate:

A little onward lend thy guiding hand
To these dark steps, a little further on;

These lines refer not only to physical movement, but to mental process: they suggest the slow dark steps of thought which form the substance of the poem; and in the 'guiding hand' which leads to the 'breath of heav'n fresh-blowing, pure and sweet', lies an implicit invocation to a heavenly Muse. Bereft of mortal sight, Samson is forced to concentrate on things invisible.

The language of the poem is very different from Paradise Regained's educated or meditative voice; it contains imagery so abstracted that it scarcely remains visual, but becomes instead a sensuous verbal patterning. The drama works in a way similar to allegory, but without the stress on visual forms characteristic of allegory. Thus Samson's inner state is defined partly through his relation with the Chorus and other characters, and their significance is versatile. They never make direct contact with his true state of mind, but always interpret it askance; they do not represent direct temptations, in the sense of allegory, but serve a similar function as provocation for him to sharpen his inner vision. The shadowy but strangely concrete forms which they suggest to Samson relate in an indirect way to some unresolved aspect of his past life; but the old fault (or new temptation) thereby pinpointed, is never stated. It is never stated by the other characters, because they do not know it; and it is never stated by Samson, because he is concerned with experiencing it, not with telling them or the reader about it. The poem images a succession of mental states, past and present; but the exact description of each state has to be inferred from the total context, as with all truly dramatic poetry. This is a fundamental difference between Samson Agonistes and Paradise Regained, where explicit argument and definition is the essence of the story's progression; the meaning does not lie between the lines.

The first lines Samson speaks are ostensibly addressed to the warder leading him. But in them he also expresses indirectly his wish to be guided again to the breath of heaven. His internal state is not sufficiently integrated, emotionally or intellectually, for an explicit invocation; but, below the surface meaning, there is an
indication of the direction in which the 'dark steps' of Samson's dialogue with external voices may lead. Soon, the Chorus will provide a testing-ground for his thoughts, and help formulate the mental struggle which is initiated now, as the past presents itself:

restless thoughts, that like a deadly swarm
Of hornets armed, no sooner found alone,
But rush upon me thronging, and present
Times past, what once I was, and what am now.

Samson's mental state at the beginning of the action is that of 'unaccommodated man', whose thoughts take on the only sensuous reality there is. They are described in the same mode as the army against which he used to fight, or as the friends who come with 'tread of many feet steering this way', as if they came from outside him, as part of the external landscape. His feelings rebound against external impressions and create the sense of imprisonment which is reinforced time and again in a cumulative image of a tomb or shroud: 'Blind among enemies . . . I, dark in light . . . In power of others, never of my own . . . O dark dark dark amid the blaze of noon . . . Myself, my sepulchre, a moving grave . . . Life in captivity/ Among inhuman foes'; reinforced by the Chorus's 'Prison within prison/ Inseparately dark', and 'Thou art become . . . The dungeon of thyself'. Every attempt to look out merely illuminates the imprisoning boundaries. The image of the grave is complemented by an image of a flower drooping—again never explicitly visualised—which describes Samson as he is seen from another angle, the outside:

See how he lies at random, carelessly diffused,
With languished head unpropped . . .

He is past hope, 'abandoned,/ And by himself given over'. The total impression given, is that Samson's hard shell of imprisonment is inseparable from the absence of internal support. It is an impression which is conveyed dramatically and poetically, not didactically; the language lies somewhere between simile and abstract definition, with a more fluid potential than the meditative voice or spare stylised landscapes of Paradise Regained.
As the argument unfolds, the original imagery of dissolution within imprisonment becomes contrasted with two different images of stability or strength: that is, during the course of the poem, the reader, with Samson, gradually becomes aware that these two possibilities exist. The first relates to Samson's original state as a hero 'separate to God', and to his mistake in transferring his sense of inner stability to the external, physical manifestation in his hair, 'My capital secret, in what part my strength/ Lay stored, in what part summed', which resulted in his hair actually becoming his only capital secret, and his downfall. In the days when 'warriors turned/ Their plated backs under his heel', Samson seemed invulnerable, 'Himself an army', like Coriolanus, shielded by an impenetrable armour. But the armour derived not from inner virtue, but from his own proud image: that is, from the way in which others reacted to him, which convinced him that he must indeed be a strong man. His great deeds became powerless ('Israel still serves with all his sons'), because, like Spenser's Orgoglio 'puff up with empty wind', his inside had become hollow, having transferred his reliance on God to reliance on his own image of himself:

\[
\text{like a petty god}
\]
\[
\text{I walked about admired of all . . .}
\]

'swoll'n with pride'. This state, once it has become so clearly defined within the poetry, is contrasted with a different image of internal stability, which derives from 'intimate impulse'. Samson's first marriage had been based on intimate impulse, but his second on a rationalised deduction from this: 'I thought it lawful from my former act'. His subsequent confusion and degradation resulted not from the mere precedence of self-will over God's will, but from the lie in the soul which replaced genuine 'intimate impulse' with a false imitation: making inspiration into a precedent or 'law' under the command of Samson himself. This subtle substitution resulted not only in helplessness before Dalila, but in the devaluation of the original experience, which became in a sense unknown, lost and blurred in memory. Now, in his painful mental journey into the past, he retraces experiences hitherto untouched and untreasured by thought, and savours their emotional anguish for the first time. And gradually, the clarification of the 'petty god' fallacy begins to result in the
Inspiration in Milton and Keats

renovation of the wilting flower image, in 'Secret refreshings that repair his strength,/ And fainting spirits uphold.'

The closing movement of Samson begins when the Chorus start to fall away most drastically in their original function of supporting Samson from the outside. First there is the comic relaxation of tension with Harapha ('his giantship'), enacting a ridiculous caricature of the 'petty god'. This whole episode indicates that this particular temptation has, in its grossest form, been purged from within Samson and is no longer dangerous to him. His giantship appears ridiculous within the action of the play only because Samson has now come to terms with this aspect of himself. After this, Samson no longer exposes his mind to the Chorus, painfully open, but lies to them in order to preserve the privacy of his thought processes; he is no longer dependent on their stimulus. The crux of the action occurs between the lines in Samson's justification of his decision to the Chorus. When he states his disgust at the thought of going to the Temple, it is fear of humiliation rather than disapproval of profanity which dominates the emotive force of the language: 'how vile, contemptible, ridiculous' is a resurgence of his original reaction, 'But must they pick me out ... / To make them sport with blind activity?' Yet he changes his mind in the very process of explaining this justification, as though the full implications of the idea of 'petty god' were only now filtering through:

Commands are no constraints. If I obey them,
I do it freely; venturing to displease
God for the fear of man, and man prefer,
Set God behind:

Samson pauses at this point, and a few lines later becomes aware of the meaning of what he himself has said, as he puts into words sensations which had their genesis at a deeper level of recognition:

I begin to feel
Some rousing motions in me which dispose
To something extraordinary my thoughts.

His 'thoughts' are experienced as being guided from outside himself, like 'thoughts that voluntary move', perhaps to issue in
‘harmonious numbers’; and they are moving in the direction of things invisible, things which have never before found earthly expression: ‘something extraordinary’. In this extraordinary poem, whose very linguistic structures—though rooted in Greek drama—pre-date twentieth-century free verse, Milton makes the ultimate revolutionary manoeuvre of containing the crisis of the action within a silence. T. S. Eliot’s hero Thomas Becket, in an analogous position in Murder in the Cathedral, is given the satisfaction of stating retrospectively that ‘The last temptation is the greatest treason:/ To do the right thing for the wrong reason’. But Milton lets pass without comment and without explanation the moment at which Samson finally distinguishes between ‘intimate impulse’ and self-glorification. The experience is trapped live within the lines of the verse: as Samson, in a split second, rejects the course for which his rational brooding has prepared him, and allows his mind to become a vehicle for that ‘blind activity’, creative thought.

In Samson Agonistes, therefore, the central image of inspiration evolves from its background of painful self-analysis at the crux of the drama; and the image is so close to the reality of the experience itself that it is expressed not directly in words, but through a silence whose meaning is created by the wider context of action and of metaphor. When Samson leaves the scene for, as it were, the world of reality (in Plato’s terms), the remaining Cave-dwellers try to adjust their perception, sensing uneasily that something is happening. Their actual interpretations are wide of the mark—God will not restore Samson’s eyesight, in spite of Manoa’s fervent hopes; but their endeavour to understand Samson’s action, of which their knowledge is only secondary (through the Messenger), continues to image inspiration on a more distant level. By the end of the poem, the original situation has been reversed: Samson, supporting the roof, metaphorically repairs his ‘languished head unpropped’, and the active power emanates from—‘with inward light illuminated’, like the reborn Phoenix. The original shroud of darkness and deception is dispersed, and flowers into a formal tragic conclusion: the harmonious numbers of ‘Nothing is here for tears . . .’. The new lyricism interprets the fact that the destruction of the Temple is far removed from the crude barbarities of Samson’s youth. By this stage in the poem, the abstract struggles of language which have taken place ensure that external action becomes a metaphor for
internal action. The ruin of the edifice of falsehood is the end-result of the training for active thought, which constitutes the major part of the poem. Milton's poetry here stretches itself to the point heralded momentarily in the 'Nativity Ode', when 'hell itself will pass away,/ And leave her dolorous mansions to the peering day.' On the literal or physical level, in the world of appearance, nothing has changed: God has granted no new concessions, and Samson's strength has been with him ever since his hair grew long again. This merely underlines the fact that Milton's story takes place in another world, and that thought is the only effective action: the knowledge of how to use strength. The final catastrophe demonstrates the explosive power of just one man's 'true experience'—a 'great event'; and the ultimate achievement of Milton's imperfect hero, as he endeavours to justify the ways of God to one man, consists in his being himself: 'Samson hath quit himself/ Like Samson'—thereby gaining 'calm of mind all passion spent'. Yet this ostensibly insignificant achievement is, it appears, rare enough to be earth-shaking. In Samson Agonistes, Milton shows us unequivocally, the potential result of a man's 'thoughts' being disposed to 'something extraordinary', as he submits himself and his 'one talent which is death to hide' once more to the painful pursuit of truth and a 'true Poem', on behalf of that 'Israel' still in servitude—namely, present-day humanity.
5 Keats's Commitment to the Vale of Soul-making

Keats's relationship with poetry was, like Milton's, a love-hate one: he loved poetry, and hated what it did to him. He fought a periodic battle to extricate himself from the power of poetry: and, moreover, did not commit himself to that power until he had written half the bulk of his extant verse. This endeavour to rescue the poet's vulnerable 'self' from domination by poetry resulted in such formulae as the 'characterless Poet', the 'poet with no identity' — the poet who imagines he need not be a part of his poem: a doctrine which, far from epitomising his idea of poetry, is exactly antithetical to his experience of inspiration. Keats's letters of late 1817 to early 1818, containing almost all his most famous comments on art and philosophy, show that he could have been quite happy as a man of letters, perhaps developing on the lines of Hazlitt's new style of informal philosophy. But just as Milton abandoned preaching for poetry, so Keats abandoned the cultivated chat and daydreams which came easily to him as he lay awake on Leigh Hunt's library sofa, for the uncomfortable 'fairy lands forlorn' of the Muse. And his former idealisation of poetry and the poet's function faded before the reality, in the same way that his early idiotic sentimentalisation of women was finally relinquished for love of Fanny Brawne. The apparent openness and stream-of-consciousness format of the letters may flatter the reader into the illusion that he is given the opportunity to inspect the scenes behind the drama of Keats's mind. But on a Scottish walking tour in 1818, 'disgusted with literary Men' and forsaken in different ways by his family, Keats took up an option offered by Milton to enter the 'rocky portal' of inspired writing; and from this point onwards (and sometimes earlier), Keats's explanations of poetry cannot be taken at face value. His great poetry is often read merely as an attempt to put his early poetic formulae into verse; but, in fact, when poetry takes over as the vehicle for the
exploration of ideas, prose falls into a position which is not only subordinate, but deceptive: used to cover the tracks and preserve the privacy of real action. Keats is always silent about his most intimate concerns (such as his early life, or his feelings for Fanny Brawne), saying at one point how difficult he found it to put the very word 'heart' upon paper, 'out of poetry'; and when poetry becomes 'all I care for, all I live for', the reader must learn to interpret a silence. For they are very shallow people who take every thing literal. A man's life of any worth is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life—a life like the scriptures, figurative... Shakespeare led a life of Allegory; his works are the comments on it—

And Keats's relationship with poetry is an allegory.

Keats was described by one of his schoolfriends as a boy who one fancied might well become great, but 'rather in some military capacity than in literature': he spent most of his time fighting. Legend has it that as a child, during his mother's illness, he guarded her bedroom door with a toy sword, monitoring those who passed in and out. And at fourteen, after his mother's death, Keats diverted his military capacities to literature: within a short time finding that he cannot exist 'without poetry—without eternal poetry... habit has made me a Leviathan', yet finding also that his 'cogitations' outgrow the chamber of his own mind and require ejection 'into the Sea where I hope they will breed storms violent enough to block up all exit from Russia'. Keats experiences his new obsession with poetry as an explosion within his head, engulfing him, and driving him onwards with an insatiable greed for more. The letters of 1816-17 abound with half-humorous pictures of himself as the tiny poet with Leviathan ambition, usually set against the background of the sea (symbolic of the elemental source of passion): swallowing greedily yet in danger of being swamped by his own appetite: 'I have asked myself so often why I should be a Poet more than other Men... seeing how great a thing it is... What a thing to be in the Mouth of Fame—'. His evocative sonnet 'On the Sea' carefully traces the sound and echo of the ocean's wash as it 'Gluts twice ten thousand Caverns', cleansing and 'feasting' not only the caverns of the coast, but also the sensuous orifices of the watching poet, who sits
at the ‘old Cavern’s Mouth’ and has been ‘fed too much with cloying melody’. Indeed Keats’s aggressive ‘military’ energy is from the very beginning complemented by his almost unlimited capacity for passive observation: his ability to be seized by the ‘form of beauty’, to watch, and finally to imitate, with an exact and tender respect for the original. His first poem, written at eighteen, was a careful and surprisingly accomplished ‘Imitation of Spenser’; and in one of the best of his early sonnets, ‘On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer’, Keats expresses his astonishment at the revolutionary potential of the ‘new planet’ poetry which has just swum into his vision:

Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He stared at the Pacific, and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise —
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Keats’s standpoint as a watcher of the skies, coupled with his desire to breed storms within the sea, are preliminary requisites indicating that he might one day ‘be a Poet more than other Men’.

Keats, unlike Milton, had a great deal of technical education in writing verse to catch up on; and most of his early poetry is tedious reading, as he continually tries to make the verse say things it cannot embody. Only after the mammoth effort of Endymion, which fulfils his intention to ‘make 4000 Lines of one bare circumstance and fill them with Poetry’, does he find his restless urge to ‘write for the sake of writing’ satiated. Endymion is merely a prolonged and more complicated version of previous attempts in loose, weak-backed couplets to capture the supposed ultimate delight or unimaginable ‘chief intensity’ representing the birth of a poet or poetry, as in ‘I Stood Tip-toe’

Was there a poet born? — But now no more,
My wandering spirit must no further soar.

In the early poetry Keats is always prying ‘mong the stars to strive to think divinely’, searching ‘for rhymes around the poles’, standing tiptoe and ready to take off: believing (like the young
Milton) in the possible attainment of a vantage-point of ecstatic experience for the earnest knowledge-seeker. Correspondingly, the achievement of 'the philosophic mind' involves that he 'increase in knowledge and know all things'. And the unstructured, impatient character of the poetry itself is, as it were, compensated for by the rigid and ordered context in which inspiration is seen to be meted out. For Keats's early attitude to poetry is like a form of primitive religion, with Apollo at the head, presiding over an orderly hierarchy of established poets, and over a 'brotherhood of song' composed of young aspirants such as Keats and George Felton Mathew. Thus in the first 'Ode to Apollo', every poet sings in turn: Milton's 'tuneful thunders' leave 'once more the ravished heavens in peace', and Shakespeare has the passions well under control when he, in his turn, is commanded by Apollo to display them:

Thou biddest Shakespeare wave his hand,  
And quickly forward spring  
The Passions—a terrific band—  
And each vibrates the string  
That with its tyrant temper best accords,  
While from their Master's lips pour forth the inspiring words.

The cycle of inspiration resembles a well-rehearsed act in a circus; and it is granted partly as a whim of erratic favouritism. The corollary to acceptance within the community of inspired poets is exclusion owing to self-delusion: there being 'no greater Sin after the 7 deadly than to flatter oneself into the idea of being a great Poet'. Keats's furious accusation of Hunt with these words is directed equally toward himself; at another point he insists half-humorously that 'I have sinned' because 'the Muse is so frequently mentioned' in his first poems, for one must 'never presume to make a God appear but for an Action worthy of a God'. The two ideological poles between which Keats's early poetry veers, therefore, are not those of idealist versus realist, or pleasure-seeker versus humanitarian; but the hope of Apollo's indulgence, versus the fear of exclusion owing to presumption. The charade of putting on a laurel crown at Hunt's (after which Keats called himself a 'blank idiot', a 'pitiful germ') was a game for Hunt, but for Keats it was a defamation of a religious rite.

Keats's primitive idea of inspiration begins to undergo some
slight modification when he reaches the fourth book of *Endymion*, and introduces evidence of his first serious reading of Milton. The book opens with an invocation comprising a composite picture drawn from the invocations in *Paradise Lost* with a certain wistful exactness:

Muse of my native land! Loftiest Muse!
O first-born on the mountains, by the hues
Of heaven on the spiritual air begot! . . .

Keats's new brooding, statuesque, despondent Muse contrasts strongly with the flashy appearances of Cynthia, and his new account of the origins of poetry contrasts with that in the second book of *Endymion* of a poem floating around in the air with 'universal freedom' waiting to be caught. The poet finds that 'Despondency besets . . . our dull, uninspired, snail-paced lives', and instead of rushing forward with his own images of inspiration, turns to imitate the words of a poet who does at least know what inspiration is, as 'on/ I move to the end in lowliness of heart'. And when he next has the opportunity to describe a poetic 'flight' enjoyed by Cynthia and Endymion, he asks himself, echoing his own invocation:

Muse of my native land, am I inspired?
This is the giddy air . . .
Could I thus sail, and see, and thus await,
Fearless for power of thought, without thine aid?

The question answers itself, in the negative, now that the figure of the poetic flight which has run throughout *Endymion* has been placed in the context of a Miltonic flight. So next time Endymion asks after his wonted fashion, 'Say, is not bliss within our perfect seizure', Keats rebukes him sharply for 'fancies vain and crude', and places him in the Cave of Quietude for some salutary depression, after which he thankfully allows him to be spiritualised out of his jurisdiction. Not long after this, Keats wonders, in his ode 'On Seeing a Lock of Milton's Hair', whether he might follow the experience of Milton that turned the colour of his 'bright hair' to grey:

When every childish fashion
Has vanished from my rhyme
Inspiration in Milton and Keats

Will I, grey-gone in passion,
Give to an after-time
Hymning and harmony
Of thee, and of thy works, and of my life.

His own 'offering' of poetry seems many years away; yet it is seen here specifically as an offering to Milton. Already Keats is planning *Hyperion*, which he realises must convert his previous meaningless 'wandering' region of poetry into a 'march of passion and endeavour'; unlike *Endymion*, who was 'led on ... by circumstance', 'Apollo ... being a fore-seeing God will shape his actions like one'. In this offering to Milton, Keats intends to place his faith in Apollo, requiring him to prove his godhead, his power as an inspirational force.

The year between *Endymion* and *Hyperion* falls into three distinct sections. During the months of revising *Endymion* for the press (from November 1817), Keats writes some of his most 'distilled prose' (to use his own phrase), which seems to contain the poetry that did not go into the poem. Within a few months, he describes 'the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination', *Adam's Dream*, the critical criteria of 'intensity' and 'Negative Capability', disinterestedness, the idea of a fruitful indolence, the basis for his later definition of the 'Egotistical sublime', how poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by singularity, and used a multitude of further phrases and conceptions which have since become critical commonplaces. His own comment on this fever of speculation about the interaction of the material and the ethereal takes the form of a disguised parody to Reynolds of the activity of a poet: 'Would we were a sort of ethereal Pigs, & turn'd loose to feed upon spiritual Mast & Acorns ...' During this period, Keats differentiates between the kind of thought which is 'palpable design' or 'irritable reaching after fact & reason', and the kind of thought which integrates haphazard flashes of insight into a 'complex Mind':

I am continually running away with the subject—sure this cannot be exactly the case with a complex Mind—one that is imaginative and at the same time careful of its fruits—who would exist partly on sensation partly on thought—

But Keats's philosophical endeavours to inject structure into his
thought-processes disintegrate when, at the end of March 1818, he goes to Devon to nurse Tom. During these months confined 'under hatches' in incessant rain with the sick brother whose identity 'pressed' upon him, Keats's almost unified imaginative system collapses for ever. This subtly nihilistic period represents the first step in the shift from prose to poetry as the medium for thought, for which Keats prepares himself in a more positive way when, in June, he sets off to Scotland to 'learn poetry'. In Devon, the idea of 'sickness' begins to impinge on Keats's philosophy and discolours its harmony; his 'innocent bits of Metaphysic' are churned out in an irritable rush with a sarcastic undertone, often caricaturing his previous remarks about the poetic process:

I am sometimes so very sceptical as to think Poetry itself a mere Jack a lantern ... you must not stare if ... I endeavour to prove that Apollo as he had a cat gut string to his Lyre used a cats' paw as a Pecten — and further from said Pecten's reiterated and continual teasing came the term Hen peck'd.

The magical music of the Lyre of poetry is seen to result from the irritating teasing of a cat's paw; and the creative potential of language results in the evolution of such terms as 'henpecked'. Keats becomes aware of 'sickness' in his own language, pervading his total view of things, and imposed by the unwanted intrusion of life upon art in the form of Tom's illness:

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 ... he is sitting now quite impudent between me and Tom —

In an unusual verse letter to Reynolds on 25 March, Keats finally makes it quite clear that sickness has entered into poetry: that his early idealised picture of the poet (as in 'young Aeolian harps personified') now has to accommodate the intrusion of a 'hellish nose' and 'Things all disjointed ...'; and Apollo's former 'luxury of twilight' fades into nostalgia before the new kind of 'dreamings', which no longer take their colours 'from the sunset', but 'shadow our own Soul's daytime/ In the dark void of Night.' The idea of sickness (of Tom, and in this case Reynolds also) crystallises a struggle latent within Keats's own mind: as he puts it
later, 'Until we are sick, we understand not'. It is not only his brother who is failing, but also his previous idealisation of poetry. The 'shark at savage prey' has made its appearance in the sea, and 'Still am I sick of it'. The 'standard law/ Of either earth or heaven' has to be undermined, before a new understanding may be forged.

On 24 March, Keats writes a letter to Rice which is so extraordinary a document that it is rarely mentioned in criticism: yet it is the key to the new turn taken by his ideas at this watershed of his life. Keats begins by dismissing his previous manner of philosophising: instead of the 'vast portion of Wit, Wisdom and learning' which Rice might reasonably have come to expect from him, he says he will describe the visitation of Milton to 'these parts' of Devon, and — by implication — to those parts of Keats's mind which had wished to 'stop here quiet and comfortable in my theory of Nettles'. The whole letter is written in mock-allegorical fashion. Thus

Milton ere he wrote his Answer to Salmasius came into these parts, and for one whole Month, rolled himself, for three whole hours in a certain meadow hard by us — where the mark of his nose at equidistances is still shown. . . . after these rollings, not a nettle sprang up in all the seven acres for seven years and . . . from said time a new sort of plant was made . . .

The Milton who strikes Keats so forcibly and with such novelty in this letter, is not that of the patient, brooding Muse copied in Endymion Book IV, but the Milton of energetic invective and violent dramatic thinking, who is capable of undermining comfortable assumptions of all natures, and of leaving a mark on the world of thought (of a nation or an individual) which is not readily forgotten. He is capable of squashing all the nettles in a 'Philosophical Back Garden', transforming them after a fermentation in his mind to a 'new sort of plant', whose properties include those of a weapon: hence the nettles and thorns 'ether-realized by the Scolars rotatory motion' occasioned the end of the 'luckless Salmasius'. He can stir up the contents of a 'mental Cottage of feelings quiet and pleasant', and activate the 'spiritual Cottager' with a restless desire for the unattainable vista of the 'Andes and the Burning Mountains', the 'terra semi incognita of things unearthly' — perhaps for things invisible to mortal sight.
This may involve the Cottager in a certain amount of bruising—equivalent, perhaps, to that sustained by Milton’s nose; but the bruising may be worth it, as equanimity is exchanged for adventure. Keats, after painting this picture of Milton, feels ‘obliged to run wild’ and consider the possible effects of Milton’s interaction with himself. The Milton who thundered tunefully in the early ‘Ode to Apollo’ has been replaced by an individual, live thinker, who seems to have become a dominant figure in a Bunyanesque drama taking place within Keats’s mind:

No sooner had I settled the notty point of Salmasius than the Devil put this whim into my head in the likeness of one of Pythagoras’ questionings ‘Did Milton do more good or harm to the world? He wrote let me inform you (for I have it from a friend, who had it of — ) he wrote Lycidas, Comus, Paradise Lost and other Poems, with much delectable prose—

Keats makes a mock-summary of Milton’s achievement as though he had not really read it himself, but only got it by hearsay. The language of his previous metaphysical speculations can no longer embody the drama of his thought-processes, so these now take the form of an allegorical encounter. Yet the immediate prospects of making poetry with the aid of Milton seem discouraging: for he ‘like a Moon attracted Intellect to its flow—it has not ebbed yet—but has left the shore pebble all bare’; and Keats finds that his contemporaries appear brainwashed by the side of Milton, yet ‘without Milton’s gormandizing might have been all wise Men’. Keats does not take up the challenge yet; but in a few months’ time, emerging from a state of near-suicidal depression (‘If I were under Water I would scarcely kick to come to the top’), when one brother is on his way to America and the other to the grave, he returns to the poet of pugnacity, daring and strength of intellect encountered in the letter to Rice. He is now aware that ‘axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses: We read fine things but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the Author.’ And now, having sustained the loss of one ‘standard law’, Keats sets out in the steps of that Author who had traversed ‘terra semi incognita’, hoping to find a mode of thought which will give structure to the intensity of his imagination, and determined to learn from experience.

Keats’s Scottish walking tour with Charles Brown during the
summer of 1818 represents the third phase of preparation for *Hyperion*. He puts Dante's *Divine Comedy* in his pocket and sets off to 'gorge wonders'. In the process, he not only collects scenery and imagery for *Hyperion* (which he begins on his return to Hampstead), but enacts an allegorical search for the birthplace of poetry, for the spirit of poetry in its original home, which culminates in a new contact with Milton. As he puts it humorously in 'A Song about Myself' written for his sister, he is a 'naughty boy' who 'ran away to Scotland/ The people for to see', where

He stood in his shoes  
And he wondered.

Keats's first sight of the lake and mountains of Windermere record his astonishment, not at the scenery alone, but at what he elsewhere calls the 'human reality in the grandeur of the World's face' *:

What astonishes me more than anything is . . . the intellect, the countenance of such places. The space, the magnitude of mountains and waterfalls are well imagined before one sees them; but this countenance or intellectual tone must surpass every imagination and defy any remembrance. I shall learn poetry here and shall henceforth write more than ever, for the abstract endeavour of being able to add a mite to that mass of beauty which is harvested from these grand materials . . .

The intellectual tone of this landscape serves Keats the cathartic function of wiping clean the plate of his previous ideas: 'my imagination, surpassed, is at rest'; and he begins to 'learn poetry' again. He sticks faithfully to this prophecy of learning poetry, in spite of disillusion in the face of rainy mountains, poor food, smoky cottages, and ending up on the top of Ben Nevis 'in a mist' with a sore throat, in what appears at first sight to be a rather negative state.

The nature of the journey as a search for the birthplace or natural home of poetry is suggested by the symbolic nature for

* Cited by S. Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, from H. Haworth's 'Keats's Copy of Lamb's *Specimens*'. 
Keats of his visit to Burns's birthplace, and his deep disturbance at what seemed to him the destruction of a 'Grecian' poetic spirit by the place which should have nurtured it, yet which instead enshrined its beauty in death: 'All is cold beauty, pain is never done' (he writes in a sonnet). He could not understand why Burns had not learned 'Epic' poetry from the scenery, which (by implication) might have saved him from the squalor of his life; and feels that he must be dishonouring the 'Great shadow' in his own country, instead of celebrating him. In the strange heptameter lines beginning 'There is a joy in footing slow ... ', written by Keats in an endeavour to digest the experience of his visit, he suggests that he himself is a man 'whose Spirit had gone forth/ To find a Bard's low Cradle place about the silent North'. But the image of Burns in his birthplace seems to bring more forcibly to Keats's mind the concept of a kind of poetry which destroys the poet, cutting him off from his roots in life, almost imperceptibly, without his noticing it, and when his back is turned:

Scanty the hour and few the steps beyond the Bourn of Care,
Beyond the sweet and bitter world — beyond it unaware;
Scanty the hour and few the steps because a longer stay
Would bar return and make a Man forget his mortal way.

The spirit venturing in search of the cradle-place of poetry, stays a moment too long in this never-never land of the imagination, 'unaware', and on turning round, finds that return is barred and out of his own power; paradoxically it is the 'mortal way' that he wants, and not this other kind of death: 'O horrible! ...' This is the state of the 'Madman' who no longer has the ability to understand even his own experience, and 'tell his forehead's swoon and faint when first began decay'. Keats prays that his own search for the source of poetic sublimity will not lead him to this:

That Man may never lose his Mind on Mountains bleak and bare;
That he may stray league after league some great Birthplace to find,
And keep his vision clear from speck, his inward sight unblind.

The awkward, but carefully specific phrase 'inward sight
unblind', includes a reference to two things: one is the false imaginative road leading to the blindness of madness and death, and the other is that apparent blindness which is not 'inward' blindness, but a metaphor for creativity, like the 'triple sight in blindness keen' of the sonnet 'To Homer', or Milton, of whom Keats wrote in his notes on *Paradise Lost*:

A poet can seldom have justice done to his imagination — it can scarcely be conceived how Milton's Blindness might here ade the magnitude of his conceptions as a bat in a large gothic vault.

The impact of the Birthplace on Keats, therefore, is to bring home to him a distinction not between imagination and reality, but between true and false imaginative experience: imaginative death being more horrific than the 'mortal way' itself. This new and subtle distinction creeps into Keats's thought here for the first time, with the vaguely apprehended imaginative life of inspired poetry as yet only hinted at, disguised behind a double negative.

Towards the end of the tour, Keats visits Staffa; and in this journey 'wonder-ways', Fingal's Cave is actually one of the few wonders to strike his imagination. Like Windermere, it strikes him for the human reality which he perceives within it:

Suppose now the Giants who rebelled against Jove had taken a whole Mass of black Columns and bound them together like bundles of matches — and then with immense Axes had made a cavern in the body of these columns ... such is fingal's Cave ...

But Fingal's Cave provides more than the well-recognised setting for *Hyperion*. Keats says in his letter of 23 July to Tom that it is 'impossible to describe', and immediately tries another medium for doing so, in the impromptu lines beginning 'Not Aladin magian/ Ever such a work began'. The 'rugged wonder' is seen as outvying the imaginative works or revelations of Aladdin, Merlin and St John. The poem takes the form of the medieval dream-poem, and Keats describes a figure reminiscent of Christ in the sepulchre before the resurrection:

As I stood its roofing under
Lo! I saw one sleeping there  
On the marble cold and bare . . .

He wears 'garments white' and his 'well grown locks' curl on his neck. As in a dream-poem, the dreamer tries to walk in to the magical scene and solve its mystery:

What is this and what art thou?  
Whisper'd I and touch'd his brow.

And his desire to know, does evoke a partial explanation: the sleeper reveals his identity as Milton's Lycidas:

I am Lycidas said he  
Fam'd in funeral Minstrelsey—

And Lycidas explains the nature of the Cave in which he is (though apparently drowned) only sleeping, still washed by the tides:

This was architected thus  
By the great Oceanus  
Here his mighty waters play  
Hollow Organs all the day  
Here by turns his dolphins all  
Finny palmer's great and small  
Come to pay devotion due—

The dolphins are those which carried Lycidas from his drowned to his sleeping condition in Milton's poem, rescued by dolphin-imagery at the command of the weeping angel; and Oceanus with his organ-music (who reappears in Hyperion), is Milton himself. He architected the cave of inspiration which would for ever house the 'genius of the shore', who in Keats's line becomes the 'Pontif priest' guarding 'this Cathedral of the Sea'. And Keats the dreamer makes contact with the Spirit within the Cave (touching his brow) though he is not initiated into the full mystery (he has not written inspired poetry), and the Spirit severely rejects the 'stupid eye of Mortal' prying beyond the rocky portal. He is the guardian of holy fire, and 'holy fire/ I have hid from mortal man.' He threatens to unweave the magic of the place in the face
Inspiration in Milton and Keats

of intrusion; the ever-powerful sea will 'war it down':

So saying with a Spirits glance
He dived—

Keats deliberately leaves the poem at this point, unfinished. Brown complained that he 'never could induce him to finish it': but of course, the poem is unfinishable; for Keats, in spite of the severe admonishings to the trivial dreamer, is not prepared to finish his own story in advance, having come so close to finding the Birthplace of poetry in this secret, magic cave. For this is not merely an occasional poem; it is an impromptu, unpremeditated fantasy, in which Keats allows the story to unfold itself and thus to become real, in the sense of a prophetic dream. With its imagery of death and resurrection, it represents a revelatory understanding of 'Lycidas' and of what that poem meant for Milton; and it is a statement of the hope of discovering inspiration through Milton's 'rocky portal' and his 'genius of the shore'. Keats was himself surprised by the story he saw written in the columns of Fingal's Cave: commenting that 'The western coast of Scotland is a most strange place'. His journey was to learn poetry not only in the descriptive sense, but to discover the metaphorical reality of the birthplace of inspiration. In a sea-glutted cavern which develops from his early sonnet 'On the Sea', Keats makes contact with the spirit of Milton, and finally commits himself to the dangerous path of poetry as experience: after the Spirit dives out of sight, Keats himself takes the plunge with Hyperion. And it is of Hyperion that he is thinking when, on 22 September, he writes:

This morning Poetry has conquered—I have relapsed into those abstractions which are my only life . . . There is an awful warmth about my heart like a load of Immortality.

Before discussing Hyperion, it will be helpful to clarify Keats's critical or literary view of Milton, which may be found in the annotations he made to his copy of Paradise Lost; these notes help save the reader from falling into the trap of assuming that Keats's idea of Milton was the same as that of either Wordsworth or Hazlitt. Wordsworth, in his preface to The Excursion, pays lip-service to Milton's 'holiness' while insisting that he is 'unalarmed' by those choirs of shouting angels because his own subject is far
more profound than Milton's and requires 'a greater Muse'; though including himself amongst Milton's 'fit audience', he remains unaware that Milton's 'heaven of heavens' has any bearing on 'the Mind of Man . . . the main region of my Song'. Hazlitt, whom Keats once determined to ask for 'the best metaphysical road I can take', is the contemporary critic whose thinking was most akin to Keats's: his criterion of 'gusto', as applied to Milton's 'most intense conceptions of things', is similar to Keats's of 'intensity'. But Hazlitt divorces Milton's artistic ability from his emotional experience as a poet, in order to support his distinction between 'epic' and 'dramatic' poetry (which is, in turn, related to Coleridge's distinction between Milton and Shakespeare). In his view, as expressed in his lecture 'On Shakspeare and Milton',

Milton . . . sat retired and kept his state alone, 'playing with wisdom . . . [he] takes the imaginative part of passion—that which remains after the event, which the mind reposes on when all is over, which looks upon circumstances from the remotest elevation of thought and fancy, and abstracts them from the world of action to that of contemplation.

Keats, however, fully appreciated the Negative Capability quality of Milton's dramatic imagination: his ability to enter into a previously unexplored realm of mental experience. Hence his admiration of Satan entering the 'serpent prison', and Milton's Fancy 'creating a world of its own' through the disregard of preconceptions, and the 'intense pleasure of not knowing', like the blindness of a bat in a Gothic vault:

One of the most mysterious of semi-speculations is, one would suppose, that of one Mind's imagining into another. Things may be described by a Man's self in parts so as to make a grand whole which that Man himself would scarcely inform to its excess. A Poet can seldom have justice done to his imagination . . .

Keats saw Milton as an explorer, an adventurer, who through his capacity to negate or blind himself to everyday vision, and to send 'parts' of himself, through characters, into unexplored territory, managed to create a world of the imagination which was greater
than the everyday man himself: he created what was not there before. He admired Milton's capacity to 'commit himself to the Extreme': to 'pursue' Beauty on the wing, 'pounce', and 'gorge', thus producing his 'essential verse'. This hunt for Beauty results in the intense and passionate encapsulation of dramatic feeling within an artistic image which Keats calls the 'sublime pathetic', and illustrates by the fusion of devil and archangel in Satan, who wept 'Tears such as Angels weep', and also by the heavenly-hellish concentration within the word 'vale':

Milton has put vales in heaven and hell with the very utter affection and yearning of a great Poet. It is a sort of delphic Abstraction—a beautiful thing made more beautiful by being reflected and put in a Mist.

To Keats, the quality of this 'Abstraction', this encapsulated essence of the object, derives not from any aloofness, but from the emotional experience of a great Poet. Keats did not see Milton in the act of writing, as sitting reposed 'when all is over': he saw him as flying blind, imagining into other minds, in pursuit of a Beauty always on the wing (never stopping long enough to be contemplated), driven by affection and yearning.

It is interesting that Keats singled out as of a 'very extraordinary beauty' two passages from the whole of Paradise Lost, describing myths which held for Milton a very personal significance regarding poetic experience:

There are two specimens of a very extraordinary beauty in the Paradise Lost; they are of a nature as far as I have read, unexampled elsewhere—they are entirely distinct from the brief pathos of Dante—and they are not to be found even in Shekespeare. —these are according to the great prerogative of poetry better described in themselves than by a volume. The one is in the following—'which cost Ceres all that pain'—the other is that ending 'Nor could the Muse defend her son'—they appear exclusively Miltonic without the shadow of another mind ancient or modern.

The first passage (from Book IV, lines 268-72) describes how Proserpine, gathering flowers,

by gloomy Dis
Keats’s Commitment to the Vale of Soul-making

Was gather’d, which cost Ceres all that pain
To seek her through the world;

The allegorical undertone in the legend of the poet’s search for beauty and truth (the traditional ‘flowers’ of poetry) through an underworld of pain and darkness, gave it poignancy for both Milton and Keats (whose favourite image for poetic fulfilment is Ceres’ harvest-time). Keats wrote to Bailey from Scotland that on his return ‘the first thing I shall do will be to read that about Milton and Ceres and Proserpine’—he regards the legend as being about Milton. And Milton used the myth to describe his search for ‘the idea of the beautiful’. The second passage singled out by Keats describes the destruction of Orpheus and his poetic powers by the ‘barbarous dissonance’, again involving the separation of mother and child, symbolising the life-giving link of inspiration. Both passages are retellings of well-known myths; but Keats intuitively divined how Milton’s own predicament as a poet shines through them, lifting them into a position expressing Milton himself, ‘exclusively Miltonic without the shadow of another mind’.

The history of inspiration in Hyperion is a history of Keats’s relationship with Milton; and it is a very complex one. The influence of The Excursion is superficial by comparison, and related to the need for a framework intelligible to contemporary thought; for in spite of Keats’s admiration for The Excursion’s description of the origins of mythology, his own approach to mythology is, by nature, far closer to Milton’s than it is to the simple animism there expressed by Wordsworth. Hyperion begins not with the general statements characteristic of Keats’s early poetry, but, in Miltonic rather than Wordsworthian fashion, with a sensuous picture:

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon, and eve’s one star,
Sat grey-haired Saturn, quiet as a stone,
Still as the silence round about his lair;
Forest on forest hung about his head
Like cloud on cloud. No stir of air was there,
Not so much life as on a summer’s day
Robs not one light seed from the feathered grass,
The various stylistic features modelled on Milton's epic style are well known. What is not generally understood is that the originality of the first 150 lines of *Hyperion* shows inspiration by Milton, not mere imitation of him, resulting in poetry 'exclusively Keatsian, without the shadow of another mind'. The opening fourteen lines have the unity of a sonnet, with half-rhymes ('vale .. lair .. there .. day') and interlocking images: 'Far from the fiery noon' reinforces 'Far sunken', as does 'cloud on cloud' 'Forest on forest'. In the poetic logic of the passage, abstract and sensuous are one: 'fallen divinity', the only abstraction in a concrete picture, has the effect of spreading a shade and silencing a stream; and the shade of the divinity echoes the shady sadness of the sunken vale—the condensed 'delphic Abstraction' which Keats admired in Milton. Successive elements of description each come to a halt, soundless or motionless; and the music of the lines makes small precise sounds which seem to have lost their echo: 'sat .. quiet .. stone .. still .. forest .. no stir .. not so .. robs not one light seed' (reinforced in the next lines by 'voiceless .. nerveless .. listless .. realmless'). The resonance of sound, the ability to speak out, is dramatically absent in Saturn; and the final vertical figure of the Naiad (with a function equivalent to the concluding couplet of a sonnet) completes the process of sealing-off the outlets of sense, standing guard to this claustrophobic mental prison. In this strangely inverted invocation, the Naiad sealing her own lips symbolises Saturn's dispossession of his organising powers, and this picture in turn evokes Keats's first experience of inspiration. The poet who had loosened his lips so freely in the past, now finds himself in the equivalent position of Milton in Book III of *Paradise Lost*, blinded and cut off from the 'cheerful ways of men', bereft of all the normal faculties whose use could ease the intensity of looking inwards.

Saturn has no means of contact with any world but his own internal shady vale; like Samson, he needs an external guiding hand to move; and like Lear, as 'poor old King', he becomes
'unaccommodated man' in order to 'see feelingly' ('Thea, I feel thee ere I see thy face'). The landscape surrounding his form therefore exchanges its primary natural representationalism for the 'unaccommodated' landscape of the mind's body it depicts, not scenery, but mental reality. Behind the cloudlike forests and the 'aged boughs, that yielded like the mist' are visible hair, eyebrows, temples, eye-sockets; behind the imagery of swelling and pressing places and the Naiad stilling the stream of expression, are visible the valves and ventricles of the heart, now 'quiet as a stone', the arterial circulation held in suspension. The words 'eyes .. shade .. shape .. space .. sad .. spread .. shed' echo throughout this section, reinforcing the idea of mental space, behind the closed eyes, the realmless realm with its own 'sad spaces of oblivion' (as Keats describes the Titans' rocky den illuminated by Hyperion). Keats's epic mountain landscape is an expansion of his earlier seawashed caves, their orifices now expanded and filled with meaning. The air seems composed of tissue, as when the oaks, 'branch-charmèd by the earnest stars' in the 'tranced ... night', spread their foliage gently in the air amidst their dreams:

Dream, and so dream all night without a stir,
Save from one gradual solitary gust
Which comes upon the silence, and dies off,
As if the ebbing air had but one wave;

The universe itself expresses the painful, but beautiful, trancelike
dream which is really taking place within the mind of Saturn,
although he cannot understand it in customary terms. In the moon who

with alteration slow, had shed
Her silver seasons four upon the night,
is an image, suspended in time and space, of weeping tears
deriving from the live tissue of the sky, and crystallising into frost
around the 'frozen god' and Thea, 'Like natural sculpture in
cathedral cavern'. Keats sets the scene in the first section of
Hyperion 'within the wreathed trellis of a working brain' (in the
words of the 'Ode to Psyche'). He follows the example of Milton
not in superficial terms, but in that essential poetic principle of
'imagining into' things: entering Saturn as (in his own note on *Paradise Lost*) Milton's Satan entered the head of the serpent. Keats wrote that the entering alone 'might seem sufficient — but Milton goes on "but his sleep disturbed not". Whose spirit does not ache at the smothering and confinement — the unwilling stillness - the "waiting close"? For it is not the entering into, or imagining into, as such, that is claustrophobic: but the consequent unforeseen transformation within the mind unawares. The original space of the head (that is, the previous limit of the imagination), is required to contain a new presence within the same confines of the skull, the same confines of consciousness. Keats knew that Milton's image of the serpent carrying Satan without knowing it was a metaphor for the monstrous burden of the mind when it is forced to think a new thought. And now Saturn, and through him Keats himself, is in a similar position: forced to sit still as a stone and experience a 'monstrous truth' which leaves him with 'not a space to breathe':

'swell out the monstrous truth,
And press it so upon our weary griefs
That unbelief has not a space to breathe.'

Keats, when he leaves the realm of descriptive commentary and 'goes on', like Milton, past the mere picture of Saturn fallen and into the 'unwilling stillness' of poetry of mental experience, finds that his own spirit 'aches' at the emotional strain attendant on inspiration.

During the writing of *Hyperion*, Keats becomes aware that inspiration is not accompanied by the sense of release and power he had hitherto imagined, but, rather, by a feeling of impotence and vulnerability in the face of that monstrous burden of knowledge. And through Saturn bidding farewell to his former kingdom, Keats himself relinquishes the 'world of blisses' which had constituted his early poetic ideal. Saturn's description of his former creative power is full of pathos:

'Saturn must be King . . .
 . . . there shall be
Beautiful things made new, for the surprise
Of the sky-children. I will give command:
 . . . But cannot I create?'
Keats’s Commitment to the Vale of Soul-making

Cannot I form? Cannot I fashion forth
Another world, another universe . . . ?

This god of the ‘infant world’ thought creativity was a game, a toy for the enjoyment of sky-children: as Keats saw his early world of poetry, a ‘little region to wander in’, full of ‘delights half-graspable’. Saturn’s rule was benevolent, but illusory; he misunderstood the nature of his poetic gifts, as did Lear the nature of his kingdom, and Samson the nature of his strength, and lost ‘a heaven’ unawares. The time when poetry meant power, when ‘Fate seemed strangled in my nervous grasp’, is gone for ever. The infant world had infant gods; and the opening of Hyperion is a ‘funeral Minstrelsey’ celebrating their fall. Yet with the fall of the infant world, Keats becomes a true poet: he is always careful not to mention the poem directly, but with quiet confidence he states that ‘I think I shall be among the English poets after my death’; and in October he writes a lullaby for George and Georgiana’s expected child, which is a little fantasy about the birth of the poet, its imagery steeped in the ‘Nativity Ode’; it begins ‘Tis the witching time of night:

Hearken Stars and hearken Spheres
Hearken thou eternal Sky
I sing an infant’s lullaby . . .
See, See the Lyre, the Lyre
In a flame of fire
Upon the little cradle’s top
Past the eyesight’s bearing . . .
Amaze, Amaze! . . .
Little Child
O’ the western wild
Bard art thou completely! —

These lines, for example, echo the ‘Nativity Ode’’s ‘Ring out ye crystal spheres’, ‘The stars with deep amaze’, ‘the winter wild’, ‘that light insufferable’, ‘touched with hallowed fire’, and the ‘Ode’ as lullaby. Keats expresses through the lullaby the idea of the birth of a poet, which Milton expressed through the birth of Christ: and this birth complements the fall of infant illusions described in Hyperion itself. The ‘holy fire’ ‘hid from mortal man’ in ‘Not Aladin magian’, reappears on the cradle’s top, for the
poet of unexplored territory: a new ‘wild’ world, a ‘new planet’ for the ‘watcher of the skies’ of Chapman’s Homer. This is the context from which Keats is finally able to derive a philosophical statement describing creative thought, through his sense of a live spirit in inspired poetry, which develops independently of any imposed rationale: “The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law & precept, but by sensation & watchfulness in itself—That which is creative must create itself—”

But Keats, in spite of the mass of verse behind him, was an inexperienced poet: and, unlike Milton, a relatively uneducated one. His tendency was always to ‘leap headlong into the Sea’ without waiting for ‘tea & comfortable advice’ (as he said of *Endymion*), and he was unprepared for the emotional shock brought by *Hyperion*; he could not possibly have sustained a poem of epic length. Towards the end of Book I, Keats begins to withdraw from the epic. In his letters, he develops the doctrine of the poet without identity, which he had adumbrated six months earlier in the context of trying to cut out ‘sickness’ and other undesirable aspects of life from their threatened impingement on an idealised view of poetry. Now, on 27 October, Keats gives to Woodhouse his famous definition of the ‘camelion’ or ‘characterless’ poet: ‘A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually ... filling some other Body—’ The poet without identity bears a superficial resemblance to the doctrine of Negative Capability (dramatic imagining-into things); but it is in fact a rationalisation of Keats’s withdrawal of his threatened, vulnerable ‘self’ from its uncomfortable position in an inspired poem. For the chameleon poet can say anything he likes, without taking responsibility for it: ‘If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more?’ It is a neat, plausible formula which comes to Keats’s rescue when he finds the burden of creative thinking in *Hyperion* more than he can stand; and it encourages a divorce between art and life for which Keats (watching his dying brother) feels a desperate need. He writes with insistent heroic confidence to George and Georgiana about the supposedly protective function of epic poetry, shielding him from external events:

my Solitude is sublime ... The mighty abstract Idea I have of
Beauty in all things stifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness . . . No sooner am I alone than shapes of epic greatness are stationed round me, and serve my Spirit the office which is equivalent to a King's bodyguard.

Keats's version of a kind of abstract poetry which 'stifles' domestic happiness (and domestic pain?) and serves him as a 'bodyguard' is so similar to what he elsewhere calls 'the Privilege of seeing great things in loneliness', that it is almost convincing: and Keats himself would perhaps have been convinced by it, had it not led him into a blatant self-deception:

The only thing that can ever affect me personally for more than one short passing day, is any doubt about my powers for poetry—I seldom have any, and I look with hope to the nighing time when I shall have none. I am as happy as a Man can be—that is in myself I should be happy if Tom was well . . .

With the lame addition 'if Tom was well', Keats catches himself in his sophistical endeavour to separate art from life and man from artist.

For this is in effect what happens during the second part of *Hyperion*: Keats tries to withdraw from the poem his intense emotional involvement as both man and artist (his whole 'self'), and to hand over responsibility for the poem to Milton, in the hope that the mature poet with his sophisticated epic style might indeed serve him the office of a bodyguard. In

> For when the Muse's wings are airward spread,  
> Who shall delay her flight?

he implies that he has already done the hard work. From now on the poem imitates the external features of Milton's epic only, and loses its sense of mental landscape. Hyperion's journey through the heavens, for example, gets its scope and scale from Milton and is well described in a purely aesthetic sense:

> The planet orb of fire, whereon he rode  
> Each day from east to west the heavens through  
> Spun round in sable curtaining of cloud;

but it is empty by comparison with Satan's journey of inner
darkness, as

full of anguish driven,
The space of seven continued nights he rode
With darkness . . .

Keats's style begins to become brittle and overtly artificial, and the Miltonic mannerisms stand out; his epic ceases to be a medium for inner exploration and becomes indeed an external shell or bodyguard protecting his spirit. But during the Council of the Titans in Book II, after the particularly strained pomposity of the narrative surrounding Saturn's speech, Keats suddenly drops the pseudo-Miltonic style as he turns to confront Oceanus, in whom language is revitalised, though in a very different manner from the opening section of the poem. Oceanus was Milton in 'Not Aladin magian', guarding the 'holy fire' of inspiration; and through the portrait in this section of his epic, Keats reviews his attitude to his 'Pontif priest' and determines, as it were, to have it out with him. Oceanus enters the poem 'with locks not oozy' — the inversion being a single Miltonic hallmark, suggesting that Keats is taking up the story where he left off, with Lycidas's apotheosis ('With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves'):

the God of the sea,
Sophist and sage from no Athenian grove,
But cogitation in his watery shades,
Arose, with locks not oozy, and began,
In murmurs which his first-endavouring tongue
Caught infant-like from the far-foamed sands:
'O ye, whom wrath consumes, who, passion-stung,
Writhe at defeat, and nurse your agonies! . . .

Milton is identified not only through 'Lycidas', but also through a strangely intimate echo of the 'Vacation Exercise', in which Milton described how he first learned the power of expression, from his mother-tongue, echoed on 'infant lips':

Hail native language, that by sinews weak
Didst move my first endeavouring tongue to speak . . .

Now Oceanus is traditionally a thinker, a representative of wisdom (as Keats knew in Endymion); and he is given the
doctrinal core of the poem, a theme of evolution:

So on our heels a fresh perfection treads,
A power more strong in beauty, born of us
And fated to excel us . . .
For 'tis the eternal law
That first in beauty should be first in might.

But like Shakespeare's Ulysses or Milton's own 'smooth-tongued' Belial, this man of eloquence is not portrayed with unqualified liking. For Oceanus seems to be personally shielded from the worst effects of the transition in power, by his own clarity of thought and rhetorical abilities. He has no qualms about exalting the beauty of his 'dispossessor' from the new order, the 'young God of the seas'; which is not surprising, since his own strength raises him above the chances and changes of the world. In himself, he embodies the truth that if beauty is power (as he says), then it is not so admirable as wisdom. His statement of the logic of submission and the heroism of acceptance of the new order is less effective as 'consolation in this woe extreme' than it is as evidence of his own superiority to the rest of the Titans. Oceanus speaks with the authoritative tone and exactitude of the doctrinal Milton: the Milton who wrote, for example, the educated debate in Paradise Regained. He is not far from saying, with Christ, that 'he who reigns within himself . . . is more a king':

Now comes the pain of truth, to whom 'tis pain—
O folly! for to bear all naked truths,
And to envisage circumstance, all calm,
That is the top of sovereignty.

This is a truth which only Oceanus can take; hence the irony of his concluding suggestion that the Titans 'Receive the truth, and let it be your balm'. His wisdom and experience make him 'sovereign', and he needs no external evidence of kingship—unlike Saturn, to whom he says, with a hint of condescension,

Great Saturn, thou
Hast sifted well the atom-universe;
But for this reason, that thou art the King,
And only blind from sheer supremacy,
One avenue was shaded from thine eyes,
Through which I wandered to eternal truth.

This ‘Sophist and sage’, while formally paying his respects to Saturn, in fact confirms our knowledge of Saturn’s helplessness now that he is bereft of his infant powers, and shows that he alone knows the way out, the ‘one avenue’: he is the real king. And in the picture of Oceanus rising from his native groves of sea-wisdom to rebuke the ‘passion-stung’ Titans for nursing their agonies, one can detect a new, rueful ambivalence in Keats’s attitude to Milton, to the ‘Pontif priest’ from Fingal’s Cave whose holy fire brought not ‘balm’ but painful truth into his poetry. Admittance to the cave is, it appears, a dubious privilege; and Keats was not unduly grateful to the ‘Sophist’ who merely pointed out to him that the ‘pain of truth’ was an ‘eternal law’ to which he himself had become more or less immune, through his long experience of ‘watery cogitation’. In the second part of Hyperion, therefore, Keats discovers that Milton is not prepared to shoulder the burden of his poem— that it remains a ‘Keatsian’ poem and it is the poet’s own responsibility to survive the painful experience. Keats begins to suspect that Milton’s position in poetic history derives from his resilience: his capacity to survive falls from power and the changing of realms (both political and poetical); and that the older poet has survived not because of, but in spite of, the ordeal of inspiration. The abstractions of epic poetry refuse to serve his spirit the office of a ‘King’s bodyguard’; and now that he has committed himself to inspired poetry, he has no choice but to start building up experience as Milton did.

Keats gradually begins to question his formula of the chameleon, invulnerable epic poet in his letters, in line with his experience in the poem itself. In the December journal-letter to George and Georgiana he transcribes a passage of Hazlitt’s criticism, in which the picture of St Leon strangely echoes his own picture of himself as the epic poet without identity: except that the whole point of Hazlitt’s passage is that the grandeur of solitude can be a self-delusion. St Leon is described as

a limb torn off from Society. In possession of eternal youth and beauty [the epic plane of poetic existence], he can feel no love; surrounded, tantalized and tormented with riches, he can do no good. The faces of Men pass before him as in a speculum
['No sooner am I alone than shapes of epic greatness are stationed round me']; but he is attached to them by no common tie of sympathy or suffering. He is thrown back into himself and his own thoughts. He lives in the solitude of his own breast ['my Solitude is sublime'], — without wife or child or friend or Enemy in the world ['stifles the more divided and minute domestic happiness']. *His is the solitude of the Soul*, not of woods, or trees, or mountains — but the desert of society — the waste and oblivion of the heart [the 'sad spaces of oblivion']. He is himself alone. His existence is purely intellectual ['The mighty abstract Idea I have of Beauty'], and is therefore intolerable to one who has felt the rapture of affection, or the anguish of woe.

Much in this passage echoes Milton’s struggles in the Letter to a Friend. Keats quotes it almost without comment, except to say that ‘This appears to me to be quite correct’; simply copying it out serves him the function of self-criticism, and banishes his idealisation of the poet who is abstracted, not in the sense of communing with truth, but in the sense of being out of communion with life. During the dismal, tormented months after *Hyperion*, Keats describes himself as ‘sinning’ and attacked by ‘all the vices of a Poet’ in the form of ‘devils’, and is able to survive only through a repeated insistence on the value of experience and his own ability to work it out: ‘Nothing ever becomes real until it is experienced’; ‘I smoke more and more my own insufficiency — I see little by little more of what is to be done, and how it is to be done’. He is clear about one thing in particular: the difference between a ‘search after knowledge’ and an ‘endeavour at effect’. After this, Keats speaks of his development in terms of ‘moulting’ rather than of ‘growing wings’ as he had done in the past. He writes, as a sideline, the beautifully accomplished ‘Eve of St Agnes’, but this does little to raise his spirits, since it is out of the mainstream of his struggle with inspiration, and while writing it he can still speak of the ‘idle fever of two months more without any fruit’.

Keats’s brother Tom had died on 1 December, probably before Book III of *Hyperion* was begun. It is not surprising that at this point, Keats abandoned both Milton and the Titans:

Oh, leave them, Muse! Oh, leave them to their woes;
For thou art weak to sing such tumults dire; ... Leave them, O Muse! for thou anon wilt find Many a fallen old Divinity Wandering in vain about bewildered shores.

The final view of that original 'fallen Divinity' (here dismissed as one of many) is like Keats himself, wandering bewildered, scarcely knowing in what style to continue the poem — knowing only that it should not be Milton's. The style which does come to the surface is basically his own pre-Endymion manner and idea of poetry; and the episode in which Mnemosyne (who has already deserted the Titans) pours the accumulated knowledge of the Titans into Apollo to make him die into life, constitutes a horrible caricature of all Keats's early poetic ideals. It parodies, in effect, Adam’s Dream (with 'Yes, thou hast dreamed of me'); the intuitive as opposed to 'consequitive' gaining of the truth; and the pain associated with new knowledge — Apollo's continual weeping and forced 'anguishing' are ridiculously insincere beside the sorrow of the Titans. The whole episode becomes a parody of inspiration and of the idea of Apollo as a 'fore-seeing God' shaping the action of the poem, as Keats had intended long ago. It therefore became impossible for Keats to continue with Hyperion until he had gained further experience of inspiration in a different context; after which, when he did return to the poem, it was in a different form: that of The Fall of Hyperion — A Dream. Meanwhile, Poetry, Ambition and Love must lose their association with one poem before they can become active in another: 'Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me ... This is the only happiness; a rare instance of advantage in the body overpowering the Mind.'

On 19 March 1819, Keats is on the verge of this new action. As with the poems written at the end of the Scottish tour, what appears to be a nadir of depression in fact contains the seeds for an explosion of creativity. And this new creativity does not develop from the luxuriant aesthetic blur mingling dream and reality in 'St Agnes', but grows out of the acknowledgement of his previous 'sins', and of the 'violence of my temperament continually smothered down'. He describes himself as following an 'instinctive course' like a 'human animal', with no grandiose intentions, but simply 'straining at particles of light in the midst
of a great darkness': 'Yet may I not in this be free from sin?' He speaks with a new humility of his poetic course, with its modest intentions: 'Do you not think I strive — to know myself?' Socrates' dictum has taken on a new meaning for him, as the glamour of his old aim of universal knowledge fades; and behind Keats's new admiration for the 'disinterestedness' of Socrates and Jesus, and for Milton's 'divine Philosophy', lies the idea of a teaching Muse, who may lead him through poetry to a new field of knowledge, namely that of the heart. In the strangely un-beautiful sonnet 'Why did I laugh to-night' which Keats then transcribes (perhaps reacting against 'St Agnes'), this poignant line stands out:

Heart, thou and I are here sad and alone;

a complete reversal, in fact, of 'my Solitude is sublime'. The sonnet, which ends deliberately and defiantly looking death in the face, indicates a new resilience in Keats. It was written, he said, 'with no Agony but that of ignorance; with no thirst of anything but knowledge', and shows that he has 'that in me which will well bear the buffets of the world'. The year before, Keats had realised his need for 'knowledge' to support the intensity of his approach to life:

The difference of high Sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this — in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with all the horror of a bare shoulderd Creature — in the former case, our shoulders are fledge, and we go thro' the same air and space without fear.

And during the writing of *Hyperion*, this need for knowledge — not in the sense of information, but in the sense of a structure for containing and assimilating experience — had become even more urgent. Now, Keats declares his confidence in his ability to survive the journey to 'death', with the company only of his heart, 'sad and alone'; he is again ready to commit himself to poetry of experience, in pursuit of the knowledge of truth. Thus after a sonnet which might appear to belong to the 'Morbidity of Temperament' Keats had complained of in himself, he writes: 'Sane I went to bed and sane I arose'.

Before Keats actually begins the creative poetry of spring 1819,
however, he sees himself as turning to 'see what I can do without poetry'. He has to bid good-bye to the delusion of the artist's omnipotence and ability to create poetry at will: he can vouch for his readiness, but not for the fact that poetry will come. Thus the context of this farewell is Keats's discussion of the Wells-Amena episode in Tom's life (in which Wells faked love-letters to Tom), which comes to symbolise for him the misuse of artistic powers in life. He describes Wells, who employed art to prey upon feelings, as 'a rat'; and says he is copying the letters for George 'with no sort of a Richardson self satisfaction' — that is, disgusted with the idea of making art (an epistolary novel) out of them. The death of Tom, and the death of poetry through false art, were becoming mutually symbolic for Keats. And from this context of the rejection of false art (undoubtedly intensified by his experience during the second part of Hyperion), springs — a week later — the poem 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. Keats begins this, without comment, in mid-letter (from which I quote):

Wednesday Evening —
La belle dame sans merci

O what can ail thee knight at arms
   Alone and palely loitering?
The sedge has withered from the Lake
   And no birds sing!

O what can ail thee knight at arms
   So haggard and so woe begone?
The squirrel's granary is full
   And the harvest's done.

In this poem Keats begins to explore, through the inspired formal device of dialogue, the problem of how the Genius of Poetry may 'work out its own salvation in a man'. The 'poetic experience' itself is approached by means of two different kinds of inquiry: the curiosity of the questioner (the reader's initial viewpoint) leads in to and encourages the narration of the Knight, whose extraordinary encounter with the Belle Dame is therefore understood by the reader as a story-within-a-story. For it is not only the Knight, but also the questioner, who represents an aspect of the poet; and the relationship between them is as fundamental to this enactment of poetic experience, as is the 'Fairy' relationship. The central feature of the poem's landscape is the
lake, which marks the boundary between a stretch of waste or wild land and cultivated fields which have already been harvested, with a wood in the distance in which squirrels have stocked their granaries—the inevitable cycle of non-thinking nature has been fulfilled. The questioner belongs to the harvest-world, and is on his way home to enjoy the fruits of his busy year: though unlike the average 'squirrel' he is out rather late, and tempted to stray rather close to the wild lands. Similarly the Knight belongs, through an unaccountable tie of memory, to society on the other side of the lake: but he too is alone, separated from his fellows. Both actors have therefore reached the utmost limit of their imaginative realms; and, by chance, they meet and communicate: one talks, the other actively listens. To the questioner, the Knight embodies a paradox. He is a Knight 'at arms': that is, on duty, not at rest: he should be engaged in some heroic action; but he is not riding, adventuring, or even sleeping (which in chivalric poems is the usual means of implying passive action); he is not even waiting, but 'loitering', bereft of active purpose. His impeded movement is beautifully conveyed in the weak-backed but melodious line 'Alone, and palely loitering': for the Knight's state is tinged with an echo of melody, at a time when nature has no music, as the questioner's emphatic 'And no birds sing!' reminds us; hence his fascination. While the questioner has arranged matters such that he may fill his stomach with sensuous beauty throughout the winter, the Knight has stocked the year's flowers in a very different manner, as they appear written on his face:

I see a lilly on thy brow
With anguish moist and fever dew,
And on thy cheeks a fading rose
Fast Withereith too—

The year is feeding off him, and his life's moisture. Yet in this haunted border country, close in time and space yet seemingly 'distant in humanity' (to use the phrase from 'Isabella'), the musical aura of one interacts with the faithful earthly transcription of the other, to create in poetic form an experience reaching 'beyond the bourn of care'.

When the Knight tells his story, contrary to Keats's usual practice, he never says what he thought or felt, but simply tells
what happened to him. The usual mixture of description plus explanation is cut out by the restraint of the balled form, leaving only a bare narrative of mental fact:

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I met a Lady in the Meads
    Full beautiful, a faery's child
Her hair was long, her foot was light
    And her eyes were wild—

I made a Garland for her head
    And bracelets too, and fragrant Zone
She look'd at me as she did love
    And made sweet moan—

I set her on my pacing steed
    And nothing else saw all day long
For sidelong would she bend and sing
    A faery's song—

She found me roots of relish sweet
    And honey wild and manna dew
And sure in language strange she said
    I love thee true—
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Here, at last, we see the Knight in action; he is in possession of his horse, essential equipment of a 'knight at arms', and apparently the foundation of the whole experience (carrying him and the Fairy)—or so the Knight suggests, for the story is told as he saw it. The stanza central to the action has an extraordinary sense of timelessness and dizziness, and loss of the centre of gravity: it lasts 'all day long', the Fairy leans 'sidelong', the 'pacing' of the steed is an exact antithesis to 'loitering', and the intensity of the sound ('-cing . steed . sing . song') fills the gap left by 'no birds sing', and explains the echoing vowel-music of 'Alone and palely loitering'. The story is told by the Knight as if it were a human love story: as if there were a reciprocal exchange of tokens, and as if he had initiated it: 'I met . . . I made . . . I set her on my pacing steed'. And in response to the Knight's tokens, the Fairy, it seems, at each stage provides song: the last line of each stanza contrasts with 'no birds sing':

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And made sweet moan—
sing/ A faery's song—
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The Knight feels that his garlands and bracelet have captured the Fairy's 'sweet moan', as in Keats's recent sonnet on 'dull rhymes':

So, if we may not let the Muse be free,
She will be bound with garlands of her own.

But there is always the possibility that the Muse will not be bound with any garlands — that she will be free; and that the Knight has misunderstood not the 'faery's song' itself, but the purpose of the strange food, and the nature of the Fairy's commitment to him. For gradually the ambiguity of the situation, un questioned by the Knight, begins to make itself felt through the rhythmic substratum of secondary clauses, carried eventually to the surface by the ballad's inevitable onward movement. The 'Lady' was in fact not a knight's lady, but a 'faery's child'; the list of her attributes ends in the startling concept of eyes (the primary means of human recognition) being 'wild': that is, outside normal recognition. She looks at him 'as she did love' — with the ambiguity 'while she was loving', and 'as if she loved'. She speaks a 'strange' language (one that, in rational terms, he realises he does not understand); yet he understands for 'sure' what she said. This does not mean that he was wrong; but that his interpretation was subjective. The Knight's experience has been extraordinary; and his difficulty lies not in ascertaining the validity of the experience (its reality is unquestionable), but in interpreting and integrating the experience within the framework of the known world.

During the second part of the Knight's story, the erroneousness of his interpretation of an active, chivalric role is exposed. He continues with his active syntax:

And there I shut her wild wild eyes
With kisses four.

But as the repetition of 'wild' suggests, it is a delusion for him to believe that he can shut away such wildness, and store the Fairy in her own 'elfin grot' as the squirrel stores its granary. And indeed, it is not the Fairy but himself who is 'lulled asleep' and enters the chamber of dreams:

And there she lulled me asleep
And there I dream’d Ah Woe betide!
The latest dream I ever dreamt
On the cold hill side.

The steady, paratactic movement of the ballad, beginning with ‘ lulled’ regularity, is suddenly sharply cut in upon for the nightmare vision

I saw pale kings and Princes too
Pale warriors death pale were they all
They cried La belle dame sans merci
Thee hath in thrall.

By contrast with the endless comparisons of Keats’s earlier verse, repetition here becomes stark and meaningful, in ‘wild wild’, ‘dreamed—dream—dreamt’, ‘pale—pale—death-pale’. The repeated words suggest that the ‘wildness’ of the blissful experience fulfils the sinister side of its ambiguous potential, as the central ‘pacing’ image steps rapidly towards disillusion and death. It led to a dream—what kind of a dream? a dream of paleness—a paleness that was death. The lady of the meads who spoke a strange language of love—comprehensible, but not translatable—has been replaced, rather than explained, by the specific name ‘La belle dame sans merci’ given by those to whom her manna-food has become a starvation diet. And the Knight ends up on the ‘cold hill side’, like Milton’s Endymion with the moon on Latmus hill, on the dark side of the poetic experience. The quest for truth and beauty is a dangerous journey, requiring arms and a pacing steed to start with, but the poet must be able to sustain the sense of loss of his active equipment when the Muse takes over, like the blind Milton outside the cheerful ways of men, or the ‘realmless’ Saturn forced to take a new step forward in development.

The Knight’s repetition of the questioner’s original view of him, in the last stanza, is of devastating effect, since it reaffirms his understanding of the rational path, only to prove that it carries no weight by comparison with the imaginative experience, to which he is irrevocably committed:

And this is why I sojourn here
Alone and palely loitering;
Though the sedge is wither'd from the Lake
And no birds sing—

But this stanza does not bring the poem full circle. Although it seems to be mere repetition, the fact that it is spoken by the Knight clinches the new communication between Knight and questioner. For the Knight’s narration of his emotional experience is dependent upon the sympathetic understanding of the listener for its acceptance in the harvest-world; and at the end of the ballad, the silence echoes after ‘no birds sing’, as his story sinks into the other’s consciousness. If the questioner cannot imagine the kind of experience which enables the Knight to understand a strange language, then he will be unable to see why the Knight cannot move of his own volition, though he withers like the sedge. The fact confronting the reader at the end of the poem, is not the death of the Knight, but the unfulfilled silence indicating the establishment of communication between the reasonable, philosophical, foreseeing poet who collects all his images into a store to see him through the winter, and the deeply sensuous, adventuring poet who plunges straight in without thinking, mounted but ‘unfledged’. ‘La Belle Dame’ is the beginning, not the end, of a story: inspiration has crossed the boundary at the lake, expanding its mental territories, and been received within the sensuous language of poetry. Keats’s excited, ironic comment on this event immediately afterwards, is ‘I wish to restrain the headlong impetuosity of my Muse ... we must temper the Imagination as the Critics say with Judgement.’

It is the newly integrated poet created in the silence left by the ballad who, a few days later, writes the ‘Ode to Psyche’ in ‘a more peaceable and healthy spirit’ than any hitherto (as Keats says in his letter). The Ode welcomes the other side of the fairy’s potential: the gentle and merciful Psyche, who ‘lets the warm Love in’, does not cast out on the cold hill side. Psyche is not the lover of the poet, unlike Cynthia or the Belle Dame; she is simply seen by him, living her own life; though for the poet’s sake the myth which took place in darkness is illuminated. This time there is no questioner, for the barrier round the vision is kept throughout. The short invocation apologises for singing Psyche her own secrets and making the cause of the poem into the subject:

O Goddess! Hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,

echoing ‘Lycidas’s

with forced fingers rude,
Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year.
Bitter constraint, and sad occasion dear . . .

For the poem, with its ‘tuneless numbers’, is like ‘Lycidas’ a new kind of music, growing out of the knowledge of the loss of music attained in ‘La Belle Dame’. The poet who has abandoned his preconceptions, wandering ‘thoughtlessly’, is rewarded by a new vision:

Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see
The wingèd Psyche with awakened eyes?
I wandered in a forest thoughtlessly . . .

The vision is a kind of dream which ‘awakens’ his eyes from their customary way of seeing (the syntax is such that it could also be Psyche who has awakened eyes, in so far as she is his soul, as well as the Soul). The restrained, factual account of the poet’s own actions (a trancelike quality carried over from ‘La Belle Dame’), contrasts with the rich and colourful embowering of the subject—the luscious style of ‘St Agnes’ Eve’ put to a new use. The bed of flowers in the natural chamber in the forest, where the poet discovers Cupid and Psyche, suggests a reformation of the Belle Dame’s nightmare-inducing elfin grot, and the poet’s garland of flowers which she had rejected; just as the pageant of flowers in ‘Lycidas’ repaired the shattered leaves of his garland of poetry. On first glance the poet does not recognise Psyche, but only her partner Cupid (Love), without realising that the two are connected:

The wingèd boy I knew;
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
His Psyche true!

Love is the poet’s guide to the Muse of this poem; he now realises that the two are part of the same system. And whether this realisation found its way into the mind through seeing or through
dreaming, it has here the reality of fact. At this point, Keats can make a further connection, and place Psyche in the world of the gods from which she derives:

O latest born and loveliest far
Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!
Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-regioned star,
Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;
Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,
Nor altar heaped with flowers;

Psyche is the last and loveliest of the Olympian gods in that she contains the essence of their pageantry, without the trappings; the colour and sensuousness of the external marks of worship which she does not possess, nevertheless act in the poem as a prelude and tribute to her, although, by comparison with the brightness of her birth, they then become a 'faded hierarchy'. The Ode does not express the eulogising of a new illusion, but the emergence of poetry's spirit in a new form, as a snake sheds its skin. The abortive birth of Olympian Apollo in Hyperion is assimilated into poetic history and its painful associations are partly healed over, as it fades into the background. And the previously 'neglected' goddess (as Keats described her in a letter), now becomes the 'brightest, though too late for antique vows', as she shows Keats the way out of the old hierarchy of values clouded by his own 'sins'.

At a key point, during the third stanza, Keats realises that the form of worship which Psyche requires lies within him, and consists of poetry such as he is now writing; the earlier, doubtful 'Surely I dreamt . . . or did I see' is emphatically revised as 'I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired'. He makes the link between the immortal world and the world within himself, taking the pattern of the Olympian temple as prototype for the inner one, and echoing the previous stanza like a refrain:

So let me be thy choir and make a moan
   Upon the midnight hours—
   Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe . . .

Newly equipped as a 'pale-mouthed prophet dreaming', he returns to the forest where he first found Psyche:
Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branchèd thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-clustered trees
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lulled to sleep;

The extraordinary richness of this stanza fuses the intricate involutions of the 'wreathed trellis of a working brain' with the more usual luxuriance of the natural forest from the first stanza, and transforms a picture which had been distant from the poet, into his own 'wild' garden, an inexhaustible fount centring on a 'rosy sanctuary'; at the same time, 'lulled to sleep' catharsises the terror of the Belle Dame. The image of inspiration in 'Psyche', the protective inner sanctuary, has its roots in the 'Nativity Ode'. Apart from language echoes, the poems are twins in spirit and closely related in structure. Both use the technique of unfolding pictures, in pageant and procession, to describe an inlet for the truth; both describe a 'new enlightened world' growing out of a colourful but faded previous poetic world, which is treated with some nostalgia but no regrets. Both describe a new bringer of inspiration, only now born into reality in the poet's mind. The poet feels privileged to see its existence, and is immediately motivated actively to express his admiration in concrete terms: in a 'rosy sanctuary', a 'present for the infant God'. Like the passage in which Peace and Mercy weave through the tissued clouds in Milton's Ode, a way is paved for the entrance of inspiration as the poet, with the aid of 'shadowy thought' and the 'gardener Fancy', and infused with a new understanding of Milton's poetic history, prepares for what Milton called the 'nightly visitation unimplored':

And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!

The poet cannot bind the Muse with garlands; but he can garden his own 'working brain' in preparation; the desolate knight of the
'Belle Dame' is offered new employment.

The 'Ode to Psyche' is not an escapist, nostalgic poem, nor a self-deceptive attempt to construct a comfortable romantic daydream, but a serious, 'soul-making' poem of mental action. This and 'La Belle Dame' lie behind Keats's famous description of 'The vale of Soul-making' in the same journal-letter, which gives his new theory of inspiration. Here he abandons earlier theories of a 'finer tone' and 'repeated happiness', for these imply a 'perfectibility' world which would lay an impossible stress on the ultimate fact of death: and 'who could in such a case bear with death'. Death in some form or another has to be borne time and again throughout life, in the 'buffets of the world' (as Keats put it earlier), therefore these 'pains and troubles' must in some way be incorporated into a constructive system. Keats describes his system as one of 'Spirit-creation' or 'salvation': creation and salvation being in essence the same thing, given a world in which development must consist of a series of encounters with death, from each of which the soul must be saved, in order that that which is creative may create itself. 'Salvation' is a term which Keats has used before in connection with poetry-making ('The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man'), and uses again in the sonnet on Fame written out with the 'Ode to Psyche' in his letter, explaining how greed for fame destroys poetry:

Why then should Man leasing the world for grace
Spoil his salvation by a fierce miscreed

It is as if an inspired poem were, by implication, one that had been saved from death, by the Spirit or Genius of Poetry operating in the material or natural world. Behind this lies something very similar to the significance attained by Lycidas for Milton (which Keats had partly divined in 'Not Aladin magian'), as the Genius of the Shore, in a Christlike sleeping death, before resurrection. Keats describes how the 'intelligences' or 'sparks of [God's] own essence' are born into the World of Circumstances, and gradually become Souls through interaction with these circumstances, through 'provings and alterations and perfectionings'. In these 'provings', the main tool which effects spirit-creation is the Heart, being 'the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity', whose creativity may be under-
stood with the aid of the idea of 'Mediators and Personages in the same manner as in the heathen mythology abstractions are personified' (the background for Psyche's abstraction). And one may understand that in the same manner, with the aid of a 'presiding Genius' and the Heart, does the sensuous language of poetry interact with a 'spark', to become a living action of the Soul.
6 The Principle of Beauty in All Things

During the following odes of early summer 1819, Keats expands and analyses his experience of inspiration. The ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ is the poem in which Keats is most hopeful about the power of the principle of beauty to alleviate humanity’s self-destructive tendencies. Yet ironically, it is a poem so persistently misinterpreted by critics schooled in the tradition of Keats as a self-indulgent aesthete swooning between ‘fantasy’ and ‘reality’, that its poetic knowledge of ‘spirit salvation’ is in danger of never reaching the ‘hungry generations’ for whom it was intended. The first stanza describes a situation of tension and potential drama:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
   My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
   One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.

The scene is set in that ‘aching spot’, the heavy heart last encountered in Hyperion’s shady vale; and the language echoes the dense, slow-moving quality of that poem’s opening lines, with assonance and dragging, masculine rhymes (‘aches .. pains .. drunk .. sunk’) and the sense of Saturn’s heavy fall. But the ‘sunk’ senses of the poet contrast with the delicate particularity of the spirit-like bird:

   thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees,
   In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
   Singest of summer in full-throated ease.
'Light-winged Dryad' with its sharp 'i' sounds suggests the flitting of the bird like light half-glimpsed amidst a background of shadows, recalling Psyche's glade in the forest, except that here it is primarily a musical rather than a visual symbol that emerges from 'some melodious plot'. And for the first time, the intensity of 'My heart aches' (the governing phrase of the first quatrain) is matched by the stanza's last line, 'Singest of summer ...', expressing the power of the Nightingale's song. The ache of the heart and the ease of the song are equivalent in power, but out of key—the listener feeling 'too happy in thine happiness'—and unlike the Naiad in Hyperion who reinforces Saturn's claustrophobia, with her finger at her lips, the Nightingale's position demands dramatic dialogue.

The poem from this point consists of a progressive ebb and flow in which the poet moves toward the Nightingale in imagination, and then retracts, recognising that he is approaching by the wrong path, until ultimately it is the bird who moves away, leaving the poet as the constant factor. The movement is not a simple oscillation between two alternatives (namely with the bird, or away from the bird) representing a simple dichotomy such as 'imagination' versus 'thought', or 'fantasy' versus 'reality'. It is a progression towards knowledge, during which the significance of the bird changes, and in which every modulation in the poet's thought is guided by the sensuous reality of the song. The poet's initial approach to the Nightingale is based on a desire to exchange his imagined drink of hemlock for another drug, a 'beaker full of the warm South':

Oh, for a draught of vintage that hath been  
Cooled a long age in the deep-delvèd earth,  
Tasting of Flora and the country green,  
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!

He longs for the golden age of past poetry, the realm of Flora and old Pan, delved by man so long ago as to lose all unpleasant associations and become a realm of the gods in the sense of the 'long immortal dream' to be later satirised by Keats in *Lamia*. This draught of vintage represents what Keats once called the 'old Wine of Heaven', poetry of the kind which he used to contrast with philosophy, and the 'blushful Hippocrene' is the fountain of old inspiration. Keats asks for the distilled riches of poetic history
to support him without any contribution of his own: but as the hypothetical draught comes closer,

With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
   And purple-stainèd mouth,

the drink takes on a more grotesque character, through the close-up image of the purple mouth and the assertive 'b' alliteration. The imagined action 'as though . . . I had drunk' is exchanged for another imaginary action:

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen
   And with thee fade away into the forest dim—

And as the poet tastes the drink in imagination, the jerky sound and rhythm become smooth and regular, as if enacting a second swoon, leading this time not to 'sunk' but to 'fade away'. The word 'away' is inserted hypermetrically, which smooths out the line, prolonging it in echo—a process extending into the next stanza:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
   What thou among the leaves hast never known,
   The weariness, the fever, and the fret
   Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

In this beautiful transition, the listener suddenly finds that instead of his expected union with the Nightingale, he appears to have created an unbridgeable gap between them. He is not 'with thee', but 'Here', where groans are the only music; and the Nightingale, as a result of the poet's own escapist desire to fade away, takes on the significance of something removed from and ignorant of the poet's mortal state. The bird's original volatile position as 'light-wingèd Dryad of the trees' becomes specifically one of sheltered self-indulgence ('thou among the leaves'), reflecting the poet's own mental state. In reaction, therefore, the imaginary draughts of hemlock and of wine disperse before the emphatic reality of 'Here', repeated in a triple 'Where':

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
   Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies,
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;

These ‘leaden-eyed despairs’ counteract and interpret (through parallel alliteration) the ‘beaded bubbles’ of the previous stanza, as the pageant of the semi-personifications Palsy, Youth, Beauty and Love, grotesquely underlines the nostalgia of the dance of the Golden Age. Keats echoes Shakespeare’s sonnet ‘When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang/ Upon those boughs . . .’ in rhythm and imagery, as he emphasises the fragility of civilisation’s colourful veneer: within which, youth ‘dies’ as it ‘grows’, stripped ‘spectre-thin’.

Only after the poet has in this way stripped the falsehood from a previous, and ugly, idealisation of poetry, does he find himself able to reach the Nightingale – suddenly aware that the bird is still singing, and only his own will is lacking:

Away! away! For I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.

The movement is not without conflict: the strong lines of the quatrain (1 and 3) move forward, while the weaker two retard, suggesting reluctance; the ‘dull brain’ still looks backward to ‘some dull opiate to the drains’, desiring Lethe and numbness. For this ‘viewless’ flight is not another version of the hypothetical escapist flight of ‘fade away . . . unseen’ (with its connotation ‘unseeing’). On the contrary, ‘I will fly’ is the first actual departure in the poem from ‘My heart aches’: not a fantasy, but a description of his actual state. It shows the poet taking the plunge to commitment, ‘pursuing his Imagination to the utmost’, as Keats described Milton. Keats’s metaphor for the poetic flight is taken from the ‘viewless wing’ of Milton’s ‘Passion’; it means both ‘invisible’ and ‘blinding’, describing how the poet’s mobilisation of his active energies merely commits him to flying blind, while still perplexed and ignorant of his destination. With commitment, the distance between poet and Nightingale magically disappears:

Already with thee! Tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
Clustered around by all her starry fays;  
But here there is no light,  
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown  
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

The balanced, regular line ‘Already with thee! . . .’ holds the statement of union on the one hand, and the sensuous experience of the night on the other; for being ‘with’ the Nightingale, paradoxically, directs the poet’s attention from the bird itself, to his own intensified experience of ‘here’, where there is ‘no light’—‘straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness’, as Keats said in his letter. The reality he perceives is unnaturally intense, and subjective: dependent upon the full exercise of his imagination; ‘haply’ the Queen Moon is on her throne, but in the dense darkness heaven’s imagery has to be inferred from chance gleams of light. The poet is still ‘here’: the same word, and the same place, as that where men sit and hear each other groan; but simultaneously, his vision is stretched to accommodate an extension of poetic knowledge, a whole poetic flight away; and the winding, irregular path of the new light (conveyed by the rhythm of the verse) illuminates the branching obstacles of what is fast becoming a mental landscape. Unlike the Knight in the ‘Belle Dame’, the poet does not confuse the nature of being ‘with thee’; in the following stanza (the equivalent of the ‘pacing steed’ in the ballad), he keeps fast hold of the concept of ‘here’ and makes the difficult acknowledgement of subjectivity in vision which this entails: in ‘embalmed darkness’, he can only ‘guess each sweet’. The intensity of natural process in suspension such that it becomes supernatural, ‘fast fading’ and ‘coming’ at the same time, includes the basic knowledge of mortality, of youth which ‘grows’ and ‘dies’ in one movement. And the active desire to shut off mortal sight and transform ‘I cannot see’ into ‘Darkling, I listen’, evokes Milton’s nightingale in Paradise Lost:

Then feed on thoughts that voluntary move  
Harmonious numbers, as the wakeful bird  
Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid  
Tunes her nocturnal note.

The poet who listens ‘darkling’, is at this moment identified with
the nightingale who sings darkling ('as' meaning both 'while' and 'like'), in both Milton and Keats, though they approach the adjective from different viewpoints. This is the nature of the union, 'Already with thee'. The climax of the poet's actions, beginning with the observation 'My heart aches', and mobilised into 'I will fly', then 'I cannot see', and finally 'I listen', is the achievement of this state of 'darkling', in which communion with an external voice of higher knowledge results directly in the harmonious numbers of poetry. Only through closing his mind to prejudice and preconception, can the listener understand what is really happening 'here', 'at his feet'.

The most difficult and dangerous part of the poet's journey is yet to come: it consists in his battle with death, symbolising his inevitable endeavour to integrate his new awareness into the previous state both of himself and of humanity as a whole. The poet must return to his 'sole self', like the 'uncouth swain' of 'Lycidas', and try to understand what has happened to him. In the 'Nightingale', this becomes the most beautiful part of the poem; and the poet achieves where the Knight of 'La Belle Dame' had nearly failed. Listening 'darkling', he recalls his recurrent love for 'easeful Death'; and asks, implicitly, whether his death now through 'musèd rhyme' would not be an appropriate response to the Nightingale's 'full-throated ease': whether 'take into the air my quiet breath' would (through a parallel cadence) imitate the song which comes from 'pouring forth thy soul abroad':

Darkling, I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Called him soft names in many a musèd rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy.

The sense of the Nightingale's sustained, throbbing song presses vividly behind every phrase and cadence, in this stanza in which the poet tries to interpret the nature of the 'embalmèd darkness' in which he finds himself. The sound of the song pouring 'abroad' projects into the imaginary future, and then suddenly, is cut
The Principle of Beauty in All Things

Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

The last rhyme sticks out, halting the well-established flow of the verse, and enacting a moment of awakening analogous to the Knight on the cold hill side, as the poet realises the consequences of a sentimental and self-indulgent 'suicide'. In an earlier draft, Keats apparently began to write something like 'But requiem'd [by thee although a sod]' — which would have involved the Nightingale singing her song to the poet for eternity. But the poet saves himself from this self-glamourisation and the consequent deathly thraldom of the Knight. It is not the rhythm of his own pacing steed which has pressed this knowledge on him, but that of the song pouring forth; the separate identity of singer and listener is preserved throughout this poem, even at the moment of union; and finally, in the last two stanzas, the song continues to exist for the poet, though now a 'requiem', helping him to understand the experience of loss. For it is not the poet who fades away into the forest, but the song which fades as the bird moves elsewhere; and the poet's enforced constancy, remaining 'Here' in his mortal status, shows that the kind of death which the Nightingale requires him to experience is not the easeful loss of all sensation, but the pain of separation, stage by stage in full awareness. After the intimation of a 'high requiem', the sense of mystic intimacy with the bird vanishes; but instead of leaving the poet 'sans merci' to starvation, the Nightingale's gradually fading song awakens in him a new understanding of death and immortality:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;

The Nightingale's significance has been reversed, since the poet first saw her in elevated ignorance among the leaves, unaware of the weariness, the fever and the fret. For the second time in the poem the bird is nearly visualised: not now as a winged Dryad, fanciful and decorative; but as the spirit of the hungry generations, hovering ever-present above their heavy tread, close to mortal existence but never caught and trampled by it — slightly out of reach. The Nightingale, like the 'Nativity Ode' s Christ a
symbol of the poetic principle itself, is ‘immortal’ in the same way that Lycidas is immortal: becoming to starving humanity the protective genius of the shore. And she is recognised as immortal by the poet, when her song passes out of the context of his own personal situation (with its possessiveness and wish for a favoured exemption from suffering), and into the wider system of the inner life of mankind, where the ‘high requiem’ properly belongs. The poet has performed his mediatory function—he has passed the song on, transcribing ‘some melodious plot’ in the medium of verse.

The listener follows the path of the song away from himself, in space and time:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
   In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a 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
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
   Of perilous seas in fairy lands forlorn.

The marvellous suspension of time in ‘The voice I hear this passing night’ brings the mystical experience of the central ‘fast fading—coming’ into the context of mortality with its passing bell; the night is ‘now’ yet already past; and ‘hear’ is already ‘heard’, not recently, but in time unfathomable—the ‘ancient days’ inhabited by emperor and clown, who have less a historical than a timeless quality, like the mythical ‘Bellerus old’ of ‘Lycidas’. The song weaves its way down the stanza, from ‘The voice’ to ‘the self-same song’, to ‘The same’, to ‘opening’, through the weird spectrum of humanity—emperors, Biblical Ruth and fairyland; entering the march of the hungry generations and finding its way in to the reality of the human mind in whatever shape or situation: in darkness, in hunger, or in ‘alien corn’. The song’s erratic path enters the human pageant like the light of the Queen-Moon, with the breezes blown; and penetrates even the wild, dangerous lands of ‘La Belle Dame’: those ‘fairy lands forlorn’ whose enchanting but ‘perilous seas’ are, no less than ‘Lycidas’ ‘perilous flood’, the territory of future inspiration. The window which the poet opened for Psyche, to ‘let the warm Love
in’, reopens of its own accord to release the magic song; and meanwhile, the poet begins the return to his ‘sole self’ — a parallel movement linked with the other by the repetition of the word ‘forlorn’, hinging the last two stanzas and prolonged by echoing vowels:

Forlorn! The very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! Thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now ‘tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music . . . Do I wake or sleep?

This journey homeward is not that made by Endymion to ‘habitual self’ after escapist fantasies. In a series of ‘adieu’s, the poet longingly traces the bird’s fading song through the everyday landscape, including a gentle, wistful rebuke that the fancy has not cheated him — has not allowed him to fade away into the forest dim, to cease upon the midnight with no pain. He has to come to terms with the fact not that the experience was an illusion, but that he is alone once more: that not he, but the Nightingale, is fading away. The burial-place which he gives the song in his imagination, however, ‘deep/ In the next valley glades’, is not a purely natural habitat, but recalls the sensuous enclosure of the aching heart with which the poem began, and the embalmed darkness at the centre of the experience. When the song is no longer audible, its underground rhythm still pulses; the Nightingale still exists, and is remembered. The ache of a ‘happiness’ which at the beginning threatened to lead to Lethe, has instead found a place in the Vale of Soul-making. And finally, the last two lines of the poem look at the experience from the outside, framing it, like Milton’s uncouth swain, with everyday understatement and the insufficiency of ordinary language to capture the poem’s action — was it a ‘vision’ or a ‘waking dream’? Like one of Plato’s philosophers returning to the Cave from the world of light, Keats finds himself ‘unsighted by a transition from light to darkness’, confused about how to apply his new know-
ledge to the world as he once saw it, and the person he once was.

In the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, Keats begins this process of analysis and reorientation. His description of a Grecian Urn is on one level an aesthetic critique of the extraordinary experience of the ‘Nightingale’; and as such, is a model for art or literary criticism of any kind. In this poem, Keats learns, and simultaneously shows the reader, how to approach an inspired work of art constructively. For this purpose, he chooses a symbol whose material solidity has stood the test of time, proving its validity as an approach to the ethereal: a symbol which, while apparently suspending the world of natural process, will not fly away like the Nightingale, but stand still while he asks it questions:

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:

The texture of the language in this opening quatrain recalls its counterpart in the ‘Nightingale’ in its slow-moving, sensuous concentration; but in this poem, the poet does not begin directly with his aching heart and pained sense. The story which the Urn contains is indeed one of the human heart, symbolised by the human ashes it was made to hold, and expressed by the dense richness of the language; but the poet initially approaches it at one remove, abstracted from his personal situation. He offers to read the history of the Urn, through writing a description of it in his own medium of ‘rhyme’: presenting a commentary on what is already a commentary on experience. His self-consciousness about this task is indicated by the puns and paradoxes which are a feature of the poem as a whole, and which cluster in particular at its beginning and its end, when the poet is most removed from the Urn — trying either to find an entrance to its meaning, or to summarise it. Thus ‘unravished bride’, ‘still’, or ‘still unravished’, suggest the poet meditating on the possible connotations of the words which are his medium of expression, and how words themselves reach across boundaries with multiple significance. This introductory meditation prefaces the poet’s first attempt to enter the world of the Urn: which, like the ‘draught of vintage’ in the ‘Nightingale’, turns out to be a false move, though it brilliantly brings into focus the Urn’s face:
What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
   Of deities or mortals, or of both,
   In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

In the first question the poet suggests something intangible and mysterious about the Urn's tale (as it 'haunts about thy shape'), something which relates it to the divine, though without drawing a finite boundary: deities or mortals, or both. But in his curiosity to know more exactly, he hammers a series of six questions at the Urn, which suddenly show that its chastity consists in 'mad pursuit .. struggle .. wild ecstasy', yet also reinforce the Urn's silence. Its paradoxical 'still unravished bride of quietness' has been separated into two component elements (near-ravishment, and silence), but in the process has somehow escaped from the poet. His attempt to violate the silence himself, by demanding answers from something which cannot speak, shows he is out of tune with the Urn's medium of expression, and he is forced to withdraw. Standing back, he acknowledges his mistake:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
   Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
   Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

This time the rhyming poet speaks in harmony with the Urn: the wordplay as 'ear' becomes 'endeared', shows his recognition of the boundary between ordinary sound, and sound which is part of feeling, in a more than sensuous world. Similarly, the delicate high-pitched 'Pipe to the spirit ditties' is smoothed into the long vowels of 'no tone', reinforcing 'play on'. The poet's rhymes show he understands the nature of the Urn's music. His commentary is in tune. The Urn will say nothing to one who merely demands an explanation without appreciating her qualities; as always, the medium is the message. The analytic poet must feel some emotional involvement and bring his own art in sympathy, for no commentary is possible apart from a subjective, interpretative one; and in this way, Keats's poem becomes a model for creative criticism in all media.
At this point, the poet enters within the 'leaf-fringed legend'; the consciousness of the Urn's surface disappears and he imagines himself on the same level as the flowery tale. This corresponds to the flight to the Nightingale's bower. The two movements are not the same, but they are analogous; and by retracing his steps in memory, in pursuit of another symbol of inspiration, the poet makes comparison and elucidation possible. The context of this poem makes him primarily an observer, and secondarily an experiencer, but he now brings to his commentary all the recollection of intense experience that he can muster, in an endeavour to inspire the figures 'beneath the trees' with life; speaking as fellow-lover, and fellow-melodist:

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

The marble figures are brought temporarily to life; and the poet now experiments by marrying his injection of recollected feeling with the eternal qualities of the marble, as if to see whether the 'never-ever' and the 'ever-ever' ultimate opposite may fuse their paradoxicality into something approaching the immortality of the Nightingale. In order to do this, he describes the same picture again, but more vehemently and emphatically, devoting to it all the rhetorical resources of repetition and antithesis:

Ah, happy, happy boughs, that cannot shed Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu; And, happy melodist, unwearied, For ever piping songs for ever new! More happy love, more happy, happy love! For ever warm and still to be enjoyed, For ever panting, and for ever young—

Here, Keats endeavours to refine the picture to a 'fine excess', repeating 'happiness on Earth' 'in a finer tone' (as he expressed it in his early descriptions of the imagination), in a bewildering whirlpool of 'happy' and 'for ever', urged by insistent exclamation marks. But this very rhetoric only succeeds in undermining the
reality of the picture, such that it seems to have no living connection with man's emotional life at all. The forced marriage of mortal and immortal has failed; the 'wild ecstasy' of the leaf-fringed legend will never—by this approach—attain the magical immortality of the Nightingale among the leaves, pouring forth her soul abroad 'In such an ecstasy'. And the direction of this excess becomes clear in the last lines of the stanza:

All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

The immortality of the figures, as now seen, does not enter into the march of mortality as did the song of the Nightingale, but separates them entirely and irrevocably from the human passion which they had seemed to interpret. As the ambiguous word 'leaves' suggests, either they are 'far above' the kind of passion which makes a heart high-sorrowful, or they leave behind that sorrowful part of passion for ordinary mortals to deal with—or both. Either way, the aching heart is left in pain. For the second time, Keats has nearly lost the Urn, in so far as it might incorporate a touch of immortality into earthly existence.

As in the 'Nightingale', however, every false move is interpreted and digested into experience. For the fourth stanza of the Ode makes an inspired departure, just when the poem had seemed to reach a dead end. Sometimes called a 'digression', this section embodies the insight of the whole poem; Keats again becomes prepared to learn from the poem, as opposed to forcing meanings into it. The questions of the fourth stanza are quite different in quality from the hammering questions of the first: instead of seeming to break the Urn's sculpted surface, they extend the Urn's pictures and very existence into a wider background.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
This stanza, by contrast with the previous one, is suddenly filled with music, and its images tastefully embroidered with rhetoric. The heifer adorned with garlands, who is the central figure in this mysterious procession of life from worldly town to 'green altar', also bears Keats's imagery for the act of poetry-making: the 'garlands' of 'Psyche' and 'La Belle Dame' and the attendant 'mysterious priest' of 'Not Aladin magian'. Poetry has a central place in the procession of mortality, which, on its way to the ultimate altar from which it shall never return, and collectively abandoning the cheerful ways of men, poignantly asks for insight from the skies above. This procession, rooted in the actual figurations of the Urn ('these', 'that heifer', 'this folk', 'this morn'), yet extended in time and place by the poet's imagination ('What little town ...'), is analogous to the path of the Nightingale's song through the hungry generations. This movement in the 'Nightingale' ode describes the entrance of inspiration into the world; while the corresponding movement in the 'Grecian Urn' describes the ritual of humanity endeavouring to prepare itself for communion with the skies: central images deriving from Keats's own action as a poet. The preparation for the sacrifice itself, concludes with a constellation of echoes from the equivalent moment in the 'Nightingale', when the poet prepares again to face his sole self:

And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate can e'er return.

'Morn ... evermore ... return' echo 'Forlorn ... forlorn', and 'can e'er return' contains its own echo, 'ne'er return'; 'not ... soul ... tell ... desolate' echoes 'toll ... sole self'. The 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in its retracing of the experience of the 'Nightingale', never came further from it than in its attempt at immortal intensity; and never comes nearer to it than in this recognition of the sense of loss which is related to the existence of a material world without poetry – the silent echoing streets without a 'soul to tell', des-souled with the implicit tolling of the passing bell. The very act of making poetry, somewhere between town and altar lowing at the skies, brings with it the knowledge of its loss. And the importance of poetry's heavy, sacrificial burden impinges once more on Keats's awareness, as 'feeling upon the pulses' he 'follows
in the steps' of that 'Author' who long ago sculpted the Greek vase.

When the poet withdraws his venturing imagination from the leaf-fringed legend, he finds that another dimension has been added to his solitude, which at the same time settles the painful bewilderment of 'Do I wake or sleep?' left by the 'Nightingale' ode. The phrase 'tease us out of thought', though again stressing the elusiveness, suggests the achievement of a new friendship as the poet sinks back into his own generation. First, his rhyming art separates from the Urn's flowery tale, which crystallises back into unmistakable sculpture:

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.

In the final cluster of wordplay, 'attitude' is an 'Attic shape', 'breed' a 'brede', and 'overwrought' ('wild ecstasy') a sculpted figuration. For a while the Urn has served as ground for an imaginative journey — as in 'Psyche', an 'untrodden region' for 'branched thoughts'; now, it becomes again 'forest branches and the trodden weed'. But the Urn which the poet returns to its state of cold, inviolate, sculpted solidity is different from that in the first stanza, from the poet's point of view. For the 'silent form' has been full of meaning; and now he meditates on its silence, as the phrase 'As doth eternity' echoes 'Will silent be' of the previous stanza. And from this consolidation of a new silence full of musical memory, respecting the Urn's mystery, the Urn finally speaks — as it had not done in response to any of the questions in the poem:

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 poet's solitude is finally relieved when the Urn is handed back to the wider context of humanity, as a 'friend to man' in
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general. It is a friend which does not ignore suffering by concentrating only on its own 'wild ecstasy'; but which stands in the midst of 'woe', like the Nightingale's song in 'alien corn', and assimilates the powerful knowledge of 'generation' which 'wastes' at the same time as it creates, underlining the coming-fading, growing-dying, 'passing night' of the 'Nightingale'. The Urn's knowledge is painful rather than pleasurable, but it is relevant to the hungry generations; and unlike the Nightingale who flies away, it is emphasised that 'Thou shalt remain'. It offers itself as a vehicle for thought, always available: not for the 'consequent reasoning' or 'palpable design' despised by Keats, but for thought which is meditative and monitored by emotion, content to be teased out of itself and into eternity, continually undergoing transformation. For although its message is, on an ultimate level, always the same — that beauty is truth, and truth beauty — yet this is a message which, like the oracle at Delphi, depends on the recipient for its interpretation. The last two lines of the poem have the objectivity of a sculpted inscription; yet this inscription, although obvious, is the last thing of which the observer becomes aware, since it is only shown to him as a result of his own work — his sympathetic and artistic commentary. It is therefore a poetic ambiguity whether the poet or the Urn speaks the last line and a half (and for this reason, these are best felt unpunctuated by inverted commas, which enforce a single alternative); for they represent Keats's experience of the Urn, at a time when finally, he is in unity with the Urn's message. The message itself is meaningless or meaningful according to the imaginative desire for immortal knowledge which is brought to it: truth is beauty, and beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It is sad and ironic, though not perhaps surprising, that Keats's endeavour to show by his own example how art may be incorporated into life in the form of constructive thought, has often been greeted with timorous contempt (disguised as critical reservation) by those readers whose work it might have made more fruitful. In spite of its apparent tangibility, the Urn will not speak to those who demand to know its meaning but are not prepared to earn it: as is evidenced by the backwash of critical irritation left in the wake of its simple inscription. Keats himself, in these twin odes, has earned the beauty-truth equivalent, learning to support his 'fledged' imagination and 'go through air and space without fear' (as he desired in earlier days); he has become a philosopher-poet.
The 'Ode on Melancholy' and the 'Ode on Indolence' examine the aftermath of inspiration, continuing the poet's adjustment to a changed situation. After Hyperion, Keats had resolved not to write an 'ode to darkness'; but now he is in a better position to deal constructively with dark experience; and 'Melancholy' pictures, in deliberate masque-like pageantry, the poet's effort not to drown himself in suicidal sorrow, but rather to savour the experience of the moment and acknowledge its relation with joy. In formal structure (which has been termed 'odal hymn'), this Ode looks back to 'Psyche'; but the first Ode, though written as Keats said 'with pains', reads easily, like a revelation; while this one, though the form has become second nature to Keats, reads painfully, with its stylised, 'conceited' concentration of imagery and almost mathematical ambiguity. Keats made two attempts at the first stanza, and rejected a primitive original version describing a gruesome ship of death in search of 'the Melancholy' (suggesting a primeval monster); this stanza would have over­weighed the delicate balance of the poem, but illustrates the difficulty Keats found in restraining the subject's natural pull toward 'Lethe'. His second version transmutes the false Melancholy (like that exorcised by Milton in 'L'Allegro') into delicately patterned imagery which knits the Ode in with 'La Belle Dame' and 'Psyche':

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist  
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;  
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kissed  
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;  
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,  
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be  
Your mournful Psyche . . .

The slow articulation of the phrases suggests a controlled, formal dance between the poet and the successive presentations of false Melancholy which try to attract him. The fading lily and the rose which stamped the face of the Belle Dame's knight are incorporated as negative temptations (in the ruby grape on the pale forehead), and there is a warning to remember the joyous Psyche and not let her image be spoilt by a conversion into 'death-moth'. The temptation to 'drown the wakeful anguish of the soul' by luxuriating in pain, and thereby denying its painfulness,
would be false to Psyche; in the realm of darkness he must resist Proserpine's ruby grape which would, as in the myth, tie him for ever to the underworld.

Melancholy, however, cannot be denied a rightful place in the experience of the Odes. But like the monstrous Furies which pursued Orestes and were transformed by Athene into the kindly Eumenides, it needs civilising. And Keats takes his civilising language for Melancholy from 'The Passion', whose 'viewless wing' carried him to the Nightingale: the poem in which Milton, also, attempts to deal with the aftermath of inspiration. Milton's 'ecstatic fit' and 'fitly fall' and the last stanza about beguiling grief in grove and spring, till he 'Might think the infection of my sorrows loud/ Had got a race of mourners on some pregnant cloud', are echoed by Keats in

But when the melancholy fit shall fall  
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,  
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,  
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;  
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose . . .

In both poems the intensity of contact with melancholy ('feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes'), presses out fruitful, fostering tears from a pregnant cloud; the rose, salt and sand-wave and globed peonies are like Milton's 'echoes mild' of grove and spring, the exhalation of this contact. The poems are similar in their self-consciousness, their fascination with wordplay and artistic conceits (in the technical sense), and in their pageantry, freezing figures in action – as

Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips  
Bidding adieu;

They progress by means of 'attitudes' or stances, one set introducing the next. Keats's poem subsumes the tortured quality evident in 'The Passion' – which in a sense he has partly dealt with, after Hyperion; and he successfully controls the poem to completion. Its stylised dance finally locates the real Melancholy within the framework of this poem and of the Odes as a whole. 'She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die': that is, she is simply one aspect of the comprehensive knowledge of eternal
Beauty offered by the Urn, a beauty which must be recaptured at each reading.

Aye, in the very temple of Delight
Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

Melancholy is placed within the subjective experience of beauty, in a shrine which parallels Psyche's 'rosy sanctuary'. The poet is one who has not succumbed to the grape of Bacchus in the 'Nightingale', or to Proserpine's ruby grape, and finally succeeds in bursting Joy's grape. Strenuously, with pains, he has journeyed into the paradoxical intensity and out again, earning the right to place himself among the legitimate worshippers and his soul among the cloudy trophies, in this deliberately artful poem.

The 'Ode on Indolence' completely relaxes the tension which has sustained these four Odes as a total experience. Its 'indolence' is not the intense, passive 'darkling' state central to inspiration; but on the contrary, a peaceful farewell to involvement with poetry for the time being, a brief respite in Keats's increasingly tortured poetic career; such that on 9 June 1819, at the beginning of another period of change, he writes that 'the thing I have most enjoyed this year has been writing an ode to Indolence'. In 'Indolence', the formal structure of the Odes is deliberately loosened, and the stanzas more or less interchangeable, with no progression of experience. The composite Muse of poetry and of passion appears in the form of a triple ghost: Love, Ambition, and 'that maiden most unmeek ... my demon Poesy', with whom the poet is relieved to find he has no active relationship at the moment: 'How is it, Shadows, that I knew ye not?' The intimate bond of knowledge is lacking. His 'ache' to follow them is really the shadow of a desire: 'because I knew the three'—that is, because he recognises them from previous experience. The creative engagement is over; in antithesis to the pleasure-pain intensity in 'Melancholy', here 'Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flowers'. This time, the melancholy fit does not fall:

The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,
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Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;
The open casement pressed a new-leaved vine,
Let in the budding warmth and thrrostle's lay;
O Shadows, 'twas a time to bid farewell!
Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine.

The window open for warm Love has now lost its metaphorical significance, and becomes factual natural description. And Keats would rather bid farewell to poetic truth and return to everyday nature, than force a false involvement:

For I would not be dieted with praise,
A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!

For his 'demon Poesy' is unlike the 'meek' Cynthias of his early poetry, a 'maiden most unmeek', and Keats will not leap up to chase wonders any more, when he knows there are none to be had. There is no possibility of poetry relapsing into indulgent fantasy; it can no longer serve its old function of modifying reality through daydream. Poetry, for Keats, is now reality; it is the means by which he attains his knowledge of truth. And at the moment, his granary is full: 'I yet have visions for the night, / And for the day faint visions there is store'.

II

'Nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendour in the grass and glory in the flower'

On 31 May, when Keats quotes these lines in which Wordsworth enshrines his own earlier experience of 'intimations of immortality', adding 'I once thought this a Melancholist's dream', he marks the end of a stage in his career. The 'peacable and healthy spirit' in which he wrote the Odes, is never to return; and he foresees the context of 'hammering' and 'cavalry-charging' in which his final period of creative writing is to take place: 'Now I find I must buffet [the world] — I must take my stand upon some vantage ground and begin to fight — I must choose between despair & Energy — I choose the latter'. Keats’s original formulation of the Vale of Soul-making grew out of his awareness of the
‘violence of my temperament’ and of ‘that in me which will well bear the buffets of the world’; and during the next three months, until he gives up the revised *Hyperion* and his struggle with inspired poetry, Keats’s writings all suggest that the Vale of Soul-making has become a field for a battle to the death. He imprisons himself in the ‘little coffin’ of a room at Shanklin, with ‘irretrievable’ sickness at his elbow in the form of Rice, looking out on the ‘stage of the world’ through ‘two little loopholes’; and directs his attention inwards, to mental drama. His letters are written as it were in chiaroscuro, characterised by a sense of ruthless choice, pursuing a subject until it is caught in a deliberate polarisation — often contrasting idealisation with grotesque distortion. Keats sees himself as ‘one fill’d with hatreds’, in his philosophical hunt for the ‘hateful’ elements in life and art: like Milton in ‘Lycidas’, he endeavours to clarify the nature of the killer in poetry; and in doing so, the old problems about the nature of the inward vision recur from their context of *Hyperion* and Tom’s death: about whether art is a ‘bodyguard’ or whether it exposes the poet to reality. Keats’s last three major poems, *Lamia*, ‘To Autumn’ and *The Fall of Hyperion*, are written in a final burst of energy during the summer of 1819 at Shanklin and Winchester, overlapping one another; each gives a new twist to Keats’s former use of poetic genre, being anti-romance, anti-ode, and anti-epic; and each is concerned with the subject of the poet’s death in a different context of poetic imagination. Meanwhile the vital questions are intensified by, and inextricable from, Keats’s complicated love for Fanny Brawne (which at first seemed antagonistic to poetry); by his own illness; and by financial difficulties — exacerbated by mismanagement and bad luck — which Keats interpreted with a fatalistic sense that the means of life-support in the external world were being withdrawn from under his feet. Throughout this period, one hears his future words to Fanny Brawne that ‘My Mind has been the most discontented and restless one that ever was put into a body too small for it’; and Severn’s report shortly before his death (quoted in the *Keats Circle*) that ‘he says ... the continued stretch of his imagination has killed him’.

As is always the case when Keats is directly involved with poetry, the letters do not tell us much explicitly about his writing. But from the general complex and confusing ferment of ideas at this time, it is possible to glean three different conceptions of ‘the poet’, each antagonistic to the other and fighting for precedence
in the Vale of Soul-making. These contradictory images of the poet and his function serve as an allegorical commentary on Keats's three last poems of experience, and it is helpful to bear them in mind when reading the poetry. They crystallise in the letters written at the time of giving up *Hyperion*, the poem on which Keats had always staked his hopes of internal (rather than worldly) success; and centre on his apparent rejection of Milton, the 'Author' whose 'steps' he began to follow during the Scottish tour, and model of the inspired poet. On 21 September Keats writes to Reynolds:

To night I am all in a mist ... I would give a guinea to be a reasonable man—good sound sense—a says what he thinks, and does what he says man ... They say men near death however mad they may have been, come to their senses—

And the debate with himself which follows in these letters, represents a last desperate endeavour to extricate himself from the disturbing 'demon Poesy' who has threatened to make life impossible by exposing too many doubts and questions, and to become an ordinary, 'reasonable' man for whom 'thought' is merely an automatic motor-reaction: 'says what he thinks, does what he says'. In order to do this, and rescue himself from what looks like insanity,

I have given up Hyperion—there were too many Miltonic inversions in it—Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or artist's humour. I wish to give myself up to other sensations. English ought to be kept up. It may be interesting to you to pick out some lines from Hyperion and put a mark X to the false beauty proceeding from art, and one || to the true voice of feeling. Upon my soul 'twas imagination I cannot make the distinction—Every now & then there is a Miltonic intonation—But I cannot make the division properly. The fact is I must take a walk ...

The poem is suddenly abandoned as false art—art which prostitutes language and evades truth or reality, or life. Keats repeats this apparently plausible criterion to George and Georgiana, adding in his battleground imagery that 'I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me.'
The critical criterion of 'true' as opposed to 'false' art had germinated during Keats's endeavour to use Milton as his epic 'bodyguard' in the original Hyperion; and now it comes to his rescue at a time when he finds poetry, once again, unbearably painful, bringing 'death' too close to the eye; and would like, again, to shoulder the responsibility on to Milton. For this sharp volte-face against Milton comes after a steady and passionate crescendo over the preceding months, in which 'Shakspeare and the paradise Lost every day become greater wonders to me— I look upon fine Phrases like a Lover—' and

I am convinced more and more day by day that fine writing is next to fine doing the top thing in the world; the Paradise Lost becomes a greater wonder—The more I know what my diligence may in time probably effect; the more does my heart distend with Pride and Obstinacy . . . My own being which I know to be becomes of more consequence to me than the crowds of Shadows in the Shape of Man and women that inhabit a kingdom. The Soul is a world of itself and has enough to do in its own home—

Keats knows that he is writing 'the best sort of Poetry — that is all I care for, all I live for'; that this poetry is inextricably connected in his mind with Paradise Lost, in spite of the stylistic de-Miltonising of The Fall of Hyperion; and that for him Milton is the poet who made the world of the soul into the subject of poetry: not the delusory self-congratulation of 'My solitude is sublime', but the forging of a place of work within the soul, a 'world of itself' with enough to do in its own home. By comparison with this bright reality, other forms are but 'Shadows', as Plato also termed it. But when the nature of truth becomes so painful that it feels like 'death . . . before/ Thy fated hour', Keats blames Milton for leading him into it.

What, then, are the alternatives to Milton and the soul's own home, visualised by Keats at this crucial stage? One of them is symbolised for him by Byron, whom he disliked both for his worldly advantages ('six foot and a lord'), and for his artistic methods, which he regarded as misusing their material, human emotion. Byron represented for Keats the type of poet who, owing to the perverseness of society, has a strong foothold in the world, this being organically connected with his art by a sort of para-
sitism — capitalising on life's experience to provide art, rather than experiencing through art. He 'cuts a figure — but he is not figurative'. To Keats, this evaded the whole issue of a true approach to the emotional world and the reality of the imagination; he wrote bitterly to George and Georgiana a few days before giving up his own struggle to describe the imaginative world: 'There is this great difference between us. He describes what he sees — I describe what I imagine — Mine is the hardest task.' One might suppose that Keats would never — or could never — take the 'Byronic' road. But his keen sensitivity to the possibility that capitalising on misery (one's own or other people's) brings worldly success, as suggested for example by a grim joke to Fanny Brawne about offering their correspondence to Murray (despised editor of the Quarterly), or another time to 'mortgage a Poem' to him, shows that it was an approach to poetry open to him. Keats had a certain talent for writing in a pseudo-Byronic manner, strongest at this point in his career; it is illustrated for example by the little skit in the journal-letter to George and Georgiana, parodying a party of lovers (and perhaps Shakespeare's 'poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling'):

    Pensive they sit, and roll their languid eyes . . .
    A Fly is in the milk pot — must he die
    Circled by a humane society?

Usually, as Keats points out, he cannot be bothered to continue long in this vein before 'the whim has pass'd'; but when he writes Lamia, he also finds the motivation to continue in the vein to the bitter end of the story, in a brilliant parody of his own early idea of poetry and its relation to the outside world.

The third type of poet implicit in Keats's late-September letters may be called the 'autumn-poet'. One facet of the autumn-poet is represented by Chatterton, whom he always couples with Milton in a polarisation, as representing antagonistic conceptions of the poet. Thus after describing Paradise Lost as 'a corruption of our language', Keats writes:

    The purest english I think — or what ought to be the purest — is Chatterton's — The Language had existed long enough to be entirely uncorrupted of Chaucer's gallicisms and still the old words are used — Chatterton's language is entirely northern — I
prefer the native music of it to Milton's cut by feet—

And to Reynolds, in between his description of the autumn weather he 'composed upon' (in 'To Autumn'), and of the 'false beauty' of the Miltonic 'artist's humour', he writes:

I always somehow associate Chatterton with autumn. He is the purest writer in the English language. He has no French idiom, or particles like Chaucer—'tis genuine English Idiom in English words. I have given up Hyperion—

But what does Keats really mean by his reiterated picture of a language of 'art' and 'corruption' imposed upon something 'pure', 'native' or 'natural'; and what is the link between Chatterton, the poet who committed suicide in his teens, and autumn, the mature season hitherto associated in Keats's mind with poetic fulfilment? It is true that the Romantics as a whole overrated Chatterton, 'the marvellous boy'; but this does not explain Keat's personal and very insistent sentimentalisation of him; particularly when at the back of his mind he had Hazlitt's perceptive exposure of the key to his poetic career and reputation, as expressed in the sixth of his 1818 'Lectures on the English Poets':

He did not show extraordinary powers of genius, but extraordinary precocity. Nor do I believe he would have written better, had he lived. He knew this himself, or he would have lived. Great geniuses, like great kings, have too much to think of to kill themselves; for their mind to them also 'a kingdom is' ... [He] was willing to set a seal on his reputation by a tragic catastrophe ... to ensure immortality.

Hazlitt makes the point that Chatterton's naivety and purity is really a kind of emptiness, which prolonged life would have revealed. For Chatterton was, in fact, unable to write evocatively in the living language of his day; only in his fake Chaucerian verse does his natural musical flair for words become evident; and his revenge on the real world was to anticipate death in a gesture of illusory omnipotence or control of life. And although Keats's Chatterton-Milton distinction is usually taken at face value, in the light of the mid-twentieth-century dismissal of Milton as a 'great' but irrelevant poet of art not life, it is clear that it is really
Chatterton, not Milton, whose life and artistic methods are a supreme artifact. Hazlitt's version of the myth is the correct one, and Keats knew it; his own descriptions even echo Hazlitt's terms — the Miltonic poet for whom the soul is a 'world of itself', is one whose mind 'a kingdom is', with too much to think of to kill himself. Yet Keats refused to accept Hazlitt's interpretation, expressing himself 'very disappointed' after the lecture; and continued to preserve his early romanticisation of Chatterton. And he revives it now, when on the verge of giving up both poetry and life, and when seeking relief from the kind of poetry which leads to deathly truth and endows the poet with a thankless load of suffering. For Chatterton presents death as security: a kind of poetic invulnerability, triumphing over the world through art. Chatterton's life, and his poetry, were 'uncorrupted' by experience: he abandoned experience when he saw it coming, curtailing death's sting. And this is the significance for Keats of his inviolate 'purity' of life and language. Chatterton represents an idealised version of Keats as he might have been, had he never encountered Milton or other of the great poets who, through using language as a medium for mental action, have disturbed and changed it, introducing 'gallicisms' and 'latinisms' to its neutral 'native music'. After the Canterbury Tales, after Paradise Lost, English was never the same again — having been yoked into the service of a search for truth with its tragic consequences: 'death, and all our woe'. Similarly Keats himself, when he committed himself to Hyperion, underwent a personal fall from innocence, like Saturn; and found that sensuous language could never again be used to secure a personal 'world of blisses': the now unattainable vision of his early poetry, before the uncomfortable intrusion in the 'Epistle to Reynolds' of the 'hellish nose' on those 'young Aeolian harps'. Keats expresses his longing to be free from tragic knowledge, tainted by mental corruption, when he tells Woodhouse of his desire to write

something agrestural, pleasant, fountain-voic'd . . . something sylvestran. But . . . I think upon crutches, like the folks in your Pump room — Have you seen old Bramble yet — they say he's on his last legs . . .

The juxtaposition of idealised and grotesque is the starting-point for much of Keats's thinking at this time; and these words appear
transmuted in the picture of Keats standing by Moneta towards the end of *The Fall of Hyperion*, 'Like a stunt bramble by a solemn pine'. By that stage Keats himself is 'on his last legs', thinking upon crutches; and as a brief respite from the crippling effects of Moneta's tragic knowledge, he turns aside and writes the agraestral, sylvestran Ode, 'To Autumn'. For in the context of the Chatterton-Milton distinction, Keats describes to Reynolds the 'chaste weather—Dian skies' which he wished to capture in that poem: the boy-poet, and the mature season, are both 'chaste' in that they are removed from the scene of mental action, uncorrupted by developing thought.

The inviolate purity of Chatterton, is supplemented by another facet of the 'autumn-poet'—a suffocating and rather sinister self-indulgence. This facet appears in descriptions of fecundity in the letters of this time, which are not usually quoted in the context of Keats's Ode, but which are nevertheless as relevant as the 'Dian skies'. On 5 September he gives to Taylor a description of the fats of the land most prominent in autumn, which is tinged with a certain disgust:

> Autumn is encroaching . . . the autumn fogs over a rich land is like the steam from cabbage water . . . The teeming damp that comes from the plough furrow is of great effect in taming the fierceness of a strong Man more than his labour . . . let him leave the Plough and he will think quietly of his supper—Agriculture is the tamer of men; the steam from the earth is like drinking their mother's milk—It enerves their natures. This appears a great cause of the imbecility of the Chinese.

In this picture, total surrender to the values of autumn leads man to 'imbecility', back into a sort of false infancy, 'drinking their mother's milk', able to think of nothing but food. Indeed, Keats's characteristic pleasure in food seems at this period (like his fondness for autumn) to be exploited to a gross pitch: as in the original version of the gluttons' feast from *Lamia* (transcribed in a letter): 'Gush came the wine, and sheer the meats were slic'd . . . down, down his throat the brief delight is gone'; or his description of eating a nectarine: 'it went down soft pulpy, slushy, oozy—all its delicious embonpoint melted down my throat like a large beatified Strawberry'. This might seem to be a sidetrack, were it not for the connection it has with his idea of identity: thus
on 21 September Keats writes to Woodhouse:

The Coachman's face says eat eat, eat... Perhaps I eat to persuade myself I am somebody. You must be when slice after slice — but it won't do — the Coachman nibbles a bit of bread — he's favour'd — he's had a Call — a Hercules Methodist — Does he live by bread alone? ... O that I had so sweet a Breast to sing as the Coachman hath! I'd give a penny for his Whistle ...

The Coachman, like Chatterton, is one of nature's 'natural' or 'native' poets — another of autumn's thoughtless offspring. His mind has been tamed not by premature death, but by gluttony; gobbling the sensuous riches of nature to the exclusion of mental activity ('bread alone'), in a prolonged intimacy with his mother's milk, seems to swell his identity and charge his singing voice. To complete the irony of the picture, Keats insists that 'he's had a Call' — a sense of vocation. The Coachman exemplifies another poetic road which seems to be countenanced by autumn, and viable in the world: but unlike the harvest-poet of the 'Belle Dame' (the questioner), his selfish concentration ignores the starving knight by the wayside, who would 'give a penny for his Whistle'. Chatterton and the Coachman are two of autumn's poets, who between them seem to negate the chances of survival of an isolated truth-seeker, 'buffeting' the world when a 'reasonable' man would be at peace with it, yet still attempting to 'market' himself with the other fruits of the harvest: 'the very corn which is now so beautiful, as if it had only took to ripening yesterday, is for the market: So, why should I be delicate.' The idea of 'marketing' and 'mortgaging' his talent runs throughout the letters of these months. And through the autumn-poet, the third poetic road open to him, Keats endeavours in one poem to overcome the degrading pointlessness of (as he puts it later to Fanny Brawne) 'making an exit like a frog in a frost'.

The first poetic road which Keats takes is the 'Byronic' one: not a direct imitation of Byron, but an 'imagining-into' the identity of the Byronic poet whose characteristics can be seen in the letters. In Lamia, Keats finds at last a subject worthy and interesting enough for sustained satire: namely, his own early world of poetry and poetic ideals. Lamia is a brilliant caricature of Keatsian romance (whether this were his original intention, or not); and in its parody of immortal intensity and of the fate of the poet whose
daydreams are exposed to the cold, critical and stupid eyes of the everyday world, Keats seems to anticipate his own posthumous reputation, as summarised by Byron himself in *Don Juan*:

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

In *Lamia*, Keats beats Byron to the post, thereby turning the tables on him and on the rest of the outside world. The poem is written with a certain aggressiveness toward the reader, the desire to give him a sensation: for 'What they want is a sensation of some sort', as Keats said. It contrasts with the romances 'Isabella' and 'The Eve of St Agnes' with their 'smokeability' and 'simplicity of knowledge'; it 'cannot be laugh'd at'. In 'snuffing out' the illusions of one Lycius who thought he was a poet, Keats in effect attacks the reader by confusing his sympathies. But the confused and dissatisfied sensation which it has often aroused in its readers is not the product of any uncertainty of intention of Keats's part: it is usually the product of the reader wishing to take sides for 'poetry' or 'philosophy' and finding both unsatisfactorily presented; his predisposed sympathies are undermined. In the writer of *Lamia* one sees the Keats who described himself as 'flint-worded', made of 'iron', 'going on like so many strokes of a hammer', his mind 'stuff'd like a cricket-ball'. The style itself is delicately turned and at times lushly descriptive—when dramatically appropriate—being a flexible translation of Dryden's narrative heroic couplet; within this medium Keats's 'hammer' forges a poem which is invulnerable, in that it leaves nothing for the critics to say: he has said it all himself, and exposed their criticism in the process.

Keats begins by destroying any illusions we may have about the world of the gods, which corresponds to that realm of higher action and truth governing truthful efforts in the mortal world. The Hermes episode is a prologue or anti-masque whose function
is not to stress a contrast between the mortal and immortal worlds, but to stress an analogy: if this is love in the immortal world, what can one expect of mortal love? The way Hermes gets his nymph is about as edifying as the way Lycius loses Lamia: the highest principle in the engineering of both actions being that of selfishness. The world of the gods in Lamia is not the gently nostalgic ‘Olympus’ faded hierarchy’ of ‘Psyche’, but the decadent Grecian world. The ‘ever-smitten Hermes’ escapes from the sight of his ‘great summoner’ for the purposes of sensual self-indulgence, to take for himself

rich gifts, unknown to any Muse,
Though Fancy’s casket were unlocked to choose.

His whole adventure has undertones of being a version of the poetic quest for the Muse’s gifts. Lamia acts for him as well as for Lycius, and certainly it is as much in Hermes as in Lycius that one is reminded of the early Keats of the ‘world of blisses’. Here,

what a world of love was at her feet!
So Hermes thought, and a celestial heat
Burnt from his wingèd heels to either ear ... 

Looking almost at random in ‘I Stood Tip-toe’, one finds

I gazed awhile and felt as light and free
As though the fanning wings of Mercury
Had played upon my heels; I was light-hearted,
And many pleasures to my vision started.
So I straightway began to pluck a posy
Of luxuries bright, milky, soft and rosy.

In the absurd rush of Hermes (Mercury) to find the nymph,

From vale to vale, from wood to wood, he flew,
Breathing upon the flowers his passion new,

one sees a reconstruction, in a dramatic context, of the restlessness of the young Keats. For, unlike the early poetry, Lamia is deftly constructed; the Dresden-china figures of this section are caught in elegant postures, artfully, in a toned-down and trivia-
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lised version of Milton's admired 'stationing or statuary' — as, for example,

Hermes on his pinions lay,
Like a stooped falcon ere he takes his prey:

The artistic technique conveys admirably the Marie-Antoinette quality of this world of privilege, playing at shepherds and shepherdesses, oblivious of morality. Hermes and Lamia do not help each other—they engage in mutual flattery and appeasement, motivated by selfish fancy. Lamia forgets that she has been protecting the nymph when it appears she could use her; Hermes looks on Lamia as his 'prey' until it appears that she may be of use to him—which immediately unlocks a parody of his 'poetic' qualities:

Whereat the star of Lethe not delayed
His rosy eloquence, and thus inquired:
'Thou smooth-lipped serpent, surely high inspired! . . .'

His eloquence, and Lamia's smooth-lipped inspiration, are equally suspect. In 'Light flew his earnest words, among the blossoms blown' (hinged on the ambiguity of 'light'), one detects in caricature an echo of light 'from heaven . . . with the breezes blown' from the 'Ode to a Nightingale'; and in Lamia's imprisonment in the wood ('When from this wreathed tomb shall I awake!'), a distorted version of the Nightingale's living death, 'buried deep' in the valley-glades, Hermes and the nymph leave the scene with a blessing from the narrator in the form of a nonchalant dismissal of any dream-reality atmosphere which might still cling to the episode (and which Keats, at one period, would have used all his energy to evoke):

It was no dream; or say a dream it was,
Real are the dreams of Gods, and smoothly pass
Their pleasures in a long immortal dream.

The transition between the immortal and the mortal dreams of love is cleverly effected by what is, in essence, a parody of 'St Agnes's 'Into her dream he melted . . . ' (the union of Porphyro and Madeline), as Lycius meets Lamia. First the Jove-sent
mystery which sent Lycius into the hills to find his ‘dream’ is
mockingly dismissed as ‘freakful chance’, parodying the poet in
‘Psyche’, ‘wandering thoughtlessly’; then Lycius undergoes a
series of mental transformations which, far from suggesting that
mystical receptivity in which the mind is ‘a thoroughfare for all
thoughts’ (a later version of Negative Capability), present him in
a kind of moronic vacancy:

His fantasy was lost, where reason fades . . .

... He passed, shut up in mysteries,
His mind wrapped like his mantle . . .

The sound of Lamia’s voice obliterates his fading reason
completely; he appears to be a fitting receptacle for her
ingratiating flattery (‘Thou art a scholar, Lycius’); and her
vaguely sadistic teasing finishes him:

And as he from one trance was wakening
Into another, she began to sing . . .

In between these trances, Lycius is in a state of ‘death’, until

from death [he] woke into amaze,
To see her still, and singing so sweet lays;
Then from amaze into delight he fell . . .

Keats throughout pursues Lycius with a relentless satire: satire of
his own earlier poetic methods. After this sketch of the many
thoughtless chambers in his hero’s brain, he cannot resist
breaking out in worldly Byronic tone:

Let the mad poets say whate’er they please
Of the sweet Fairies, Peris, Goddesses,
There is not such a treat among them all,
Haunters of cavern, lake, and waterfall,
As a real woman . . .

Far from being un-Keatsian and a flaw in the poem’s structure,
this passage is totally in keeping with the cynical tone and nihi-
listic method of the narrative, and is directed straight at Keats’s
attitude to women in his days of ‘innocence’, as embodied in such
verses as ‘Oh, blush not so’, or ‘Woman! When I behold thee flippant, vain’. Keats is determined to undermine all previously idealised aspects of the poetic imagination and show up the coarseness always inherent in them. He goes further than this and attacks his own painful doubts about the madness of poetry leading ‘beyond the bourn of care’. His satire on poetry does not stop short of himself as narrator; with a remorseless pleasure he exposes the peeping-Tom flavour of his own narrative in its posture of being a search for truth:

the most curious

Were foiled, who watched to trace them to their house.
And but the flitter-winged verse must tell,
For truth’s sake, what woe afterwards befell,
’Twould humour many a heart to leave them thus...

Keats cleverly twists the obligation of poetry to tell ‘the truth’ into a false face: it now becomes the ultimate privilege of poetry to be able to indulge its curiosity and peer into corners which even the hardened gossip does not have a licence to probe; and the ‘fledged’ epic poet tells ‘flitter-winged verse’.

The lovers’ bliss is ‘too short’ to ‘breed distrust and hate, that make the soft voice hiss’, so Keats arranges for them to bring destruction upon themselves by more colourful means. Lycius initiates the downfall, as he fell in love, by the overpowering emptiness of his head, which resounds with the presence of a single stray thought that has somehow evaded Love guarding the door ‘with fearful roar’, and found its way in through the window instead:

Lycius started — the sounds fled,
But left a thought a-buzzing in his head.

Lamia promotes the catastrophe by reversing their original partnership so that she is now the masochist, and Lycius is given the opportunity to display sadism: ‘She burnt, she loved the tyranny’. The coarse, inflated rhetoric with which Lycius expresses his desire to publicise their union (‘Let my foes choke, and my friends shout afar’), suggests the operation of fame’s ‘miscreed’ (renounced by Keats before the Odes); and makes it clear that Lycius (as with his display of Apollonian ‘mitigated
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fury' earlier), is primarily a striker of attitudes. It is not only his intellectual grasp, but also his emotional depth, which is lacking in substance; and he compensates for a hollow mental life by a system of artful poses. The progress of the lovers' story shows not that they are too good to live in Corinth, but that their secret palace is in effect just another brothel in that city of 'temples lewd'. Lycurgus's friends (presumably fellow philosophy students) turn out to be the 'gossip rout', the 'herd'; and the company he keeps is another key to his true status. They hardly react with the 'shouting from afar' which he had egocentrically anticipated, but enter with a sluggish curiosity, wondering where he got the money — 'Whence all this mighty cost and blaze of wealth could spring'; and once they are in, think of nothing but the food. The hostile external world which surrounds the lovers is a far cry from the heroic dangers of 'St Agnes's ('a hundred swords/ Will storm his heart'); and Lamia's pitiful and masochistic preparation for her own execution ('shut the chamber up, close, hushed, and still'), parodies Madeline's bedtime ritual in her room 'Pale, latticed, chill, and silent as a tomb', and Porphyro's feast which follows.

Keats leaves no stone unturned in his relentless undermining of the entire internal and external setting in which poetry functions. He caricatures all the inhabitants of the poetic imagination — the Muse, the poet, the sustaining 'human friend philosopher' (who is in the midst of explaining how he has always saved his pupil's life, when he kills him). Those readers who think that Keats is either satirising or lamenting only the imaginative or emotional side of poetry-making completely miss the interest of the poem, which lies in its total nihilism. Keats abandoned long ago, as a sidetrack, his early distinction between 'sensations' and 'thoughts', and replaced it by a distinction between True Poetry and False Poetry. And the false philosopher, Apollonius, is as legitimate a part of this parody of the poetic mind, as is the false muse or the false poet, or indeed the false critical audience — for whom Keats has a special word. For if the public marriage of Lycius and Lamia symbolises the emergence of false poetry into sensuous existence in the world, then Lycius's 'friends', the gluttons at the feast, in their greedy and destructive self-indulgence, caricature the subjectivity of the experience of reading poetry: garlands are provided

From vales deflowered, or forest-trees branch-ent,
In baskets of bright osiered gold . . .
   . . . to suit the thought
Of every guest — that each, as he did please,
Might fancy-fit his brows, silk-pillowed at his ease.

Through the parasitic pillaging of nature, every 'thought' — that is, every indulgent fantasy — is catered for, in this poetic feast. The entire false mental complex is internally consistent throughout the poem, in which the 'finer tone' of the immortal world bears a remarkable resemblance to the general 'mutter' of underhand dealing in the 'dream' of the city. In 'What wreath for Lamia? What for Lycius?/ What for the sage, old Apollonius?', everyone gets his deserts. And so does the reader, who has, equally, been attacked during the poem; as, with a triumphant finality, the narrating poet, like Thersites in Troilus and Cressida, bequeathes to the reader his diseases.

In the ode 'To Autumn', by contrast, Keats approaches the concept of the poet's death from another angle, sensuously cocooned from his own irritable, sharp critical faculties, in the close bosom of the 'maturing sun'. The poem is a direct description of that autumnal poetic harvest which has been a continuous image in Keats, and which he wished to have 'all about me when I make an end' (he was referring to Endymion; but it is applicable to his whole career). In its 'pure native English' with echoes of Chatterton, it embodies Keats's longing to make an exit 'in warm blood', not like a 'frog in a frost', in a poetic close free from the ragged complications of 'corrupted' thought and language into which poetry of experience had led him. The dominant tendency in modern criticism seems to be to regard 'Autumn' as the culmination of Keats's achievement, as if he had at last discovered his 'natural' poetic voice after a misguided and tortuous struggle with Milton's domineering art in the revision of Hyperion. But the technical mastery of the poem is in a sense misleading; it draws a hazy film (like the 'autumn fogs' Keats noted) over the fact that its essential achievement lies not in capturing reality, but in excluding it. The 'encroaching' presence of autumn's overwhelming natural fulfilment is stamped so firmly upon the poet's apprehension that he has no room to think; the 'steam from the earth', like a sauna from 'mother's milk', surrounds him and blocks his sensuous orifices, taming, enervating, and soothing the pain of the foreknowledge of a 'posthumous
existence' attained in *The Fall of Hyperion*.

The primary difference in structure between 'To Autumn' and the spring Odes on which it is modelled, is the absence of a visionary world, or other dimension differing in quality from ordinary sensuous perception, with which there is a dialogue—an exploration of knowledge. The language of the poem is not really 'natural', but artificial in its deliberate avoidance of all abstract or interpretative vocabulary. In this way, the poem excludes the means of internal debate and the possibility of revelation—of the widening of vision. This quality of restriction is reinforced each time that the poem recalls the earlier Odes—which it does at key points, particularly the 'Grecian Urn'. The first quatrain is like that of the 'Urn' in sound, in personification, and in visual layout:

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Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun,
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
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'Season .. mists .. -ness .. close bosom .. sun .. conspiring .. bless .. vines' echoes 'still unravished bride .. quietness .. foster .. silence .. slow time'. The 'unravished bride' has become a 'close bosom friend' of a maturing sun, and the vines running round the thatch-eaves are a version of the leafy border fringing the 'legend'. But from this point, 'To Autumn' proceeds with its story in an opposite manner. Instead of opening-out the fringed picture into the land of 'no tone', the series of images are confined and locked in their original space, but stuffed with more material, like the Coachman's face saying 'eat eat eat'. The trees are mossed and bent to the ground, the fruit is filled 'with ripeness to the core'—whose sound is reiterated in 'set budding more/ And still more, later flowers'. Sound and rhythm and the heavy monosyllabic verbs ('load .. bless .. bend .. fill all fruit .. swell .. plump') all convey the heaping-on of substance. Fruitfulness becomes surfeit and excess:

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Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.
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The process of intensifying is analogous to the 'happy happy', 'ever ever' passage at the centre of the 'Grecian Urn', except that
it is more claustrophobic because restricted entirely to the world of sense, so that there is no movement either way between material and imagination. The clammy cells and mossed apple-trees are like those 'happy happy boughs! That cannot shed/ Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu', and approach the 'cloyed' heart of the 'Grecian Urn', except that the adjective in the 'Urn' refers to lovers as they pivot between the imaginary and the mortal, whereas in 'Autumn' there is only one reality filling the whole of the picture, and no chance of movement. In 'Autumn', Keats indulges briefly in the idea that nature alone can suffice, that man can live 'by bread alone' and still be a poet — still sing like a robin. The most minute attention is paid to the experience of the senses (touch in the first stanza, sight in the second, and hearing in the third), but there is no place for gods, dreams or the inner world. Sense experience takes over, not as a vehicle for mental reality, but as a blocking agent; 'Autumn' s landscape is not a 'thoroughfare for thoughts'.

The succession of pictures is stanza 2 is far more solid and sculptural than anything in the 'Grecian Urn', and portrays personified Autumn, the moving force behind this sensuous existence and therefore on one level the Muse or substitute-Muse — of the poem:

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?
Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find
Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;

In this stanza, all outward movements ('seeks abroad', hair 'soft-lifted'), are caught in mid-passage and brought back to earth, given a specific location in space; this is the nearest Keats's technique ever gets to *ut pictura poesis*. Some aspects of Autumn recall Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion*, with the sense of artificially suspended time; except that Moneta's tragic knowledge, contained within the 'teeming' hollows of her brain, is antithetical to that of the 'careless' Autumn, who seems to have no knowledge of the process she personifies, but whose sense orifices are blocked like the 'clammy cells' as she is drowsed into insensitivity, 'sound asleep'. Her 'laden head' is weighed down, not with thought, but with sensuous superfluity. The picture of Autumn in particular suggests Ceres, the mother of harvest whose
search for her lost daughter had such special significance for Keats (and Milton): except that in the figure who ‘with patient look . . . watchest the last oozings hours by hours’, one sees Ceres without ‘all that pain’ (underlined by Keats in his copy of *Paradise Lost*). The Muse who brings the poetic harvest in ‘Autumn’ is specifically deprived of those qualities which made the Ceres legend meaningful, and deliberately restricted to the role of a neutral personification of a season, rather than that of a presiding goddess. She ‘watches’, but she does not ‘care’. Her understanding of autumnal process is purely material, and is therefore not knowledge in the sense of truth—which is the kind of poetic harvest toward which Keats has been working in his other poetry. She is not a true Muse, any more than is Lamia.

The third stanza begins with a poignant reference to a lost music, suggesting perhaps the spring Odes, and the Proserpine side of the Ceres myth—that lost child of spring:

*Where are the songs of spring? Aye, where are they?  
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too—*

The question, which seems to venture outside the season’s bounds, is immediately withdrawn; instead of being absorbed and integrated, like the movements between realms of experience in the Odes, it is gently denied: ‘Think not’. The poet of ‘Autumn’ wishes to keep within bounds, not learn any more—he knows too much already; and already feels his body ‘too small’ to accommodate the ‘restless’ searchings of his mind. And the questioner who had shown signs of mourning for a lost spring is offered instead a variant of the pathetic fallacy:

*Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn  
Among the river sallows, borne aloft  
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;*

The ‘mourning’ sound made by gnats stems not from their foreknowledge of death (or mental pain), but is merely a coincidental function of meaningless currents of air. The observer is advised, implicitly, to accept nature’s knowledge and separate the aesthetic from the emotional; he should relinquish his memory of lost music (the music of loss), and regard it as mere appearance,
as simply one of the sensuous variations of nature’s full orchestra: the bleating of the lambs, the singing of the crickets, the whistling of the robin, the twittering of the swallows. Mourning, like Autumn’s ‘watchfulness’, is a freakful trick of the emotions with which human beings unnecessarily torture themselves — on closer inspection it is an illusion. The final line of the poem, ‘And gathering swallows twitter in the skies’, has an air of foreboding as the landscape closes in from above and the skies darken, and recalls the mysterious ritual in the ‘Grecian Urn’ in which humanity prepares itself for the sacrifice at the altar of a heifer ‘lowing at the skies’. But here, the skies are divested of their supernatural associations; man’s question about the passing of song is ignored, and Autumn seems deaf to his plea for understanding as he is marketed at the altar of eternity. ‘Autumn’ presents a landscape in which many creatures sing, but none has ‘a soul to tell/ Why thou art desolate’. The true significance for Keats of a landscape which has been divested of gods—that is, of the power to symbolise emotional life—is presented starkly in a later ode, ‘To Fanny’, describing the ‘monstrous region’ America,

Unowned of any weedy-haired gods;
Whose winds, all zephyrless, hold scourging rods,
Iced in the great lakes, to afflict mankind . . .
And great unerring Nature once seems wrong.

The America whose ‘western wild’ had once symbolised for Keats a fitting birthplace for poetry, is no longer a land of poetry; unowned of gods, it stands as a monument to nature’s fallibility. This wintry, ‘monstrous region’ is the end result of the exclusive stress on natural sensation in ‘To Autumn’—a poem in which Keats would like to ‘eat eat eat’ and ‘sing like a robin’, gilding his prematurely cut life into a Chattertonian poetic close, but not allowing the creative to create itself. In spite of its technical achievement, it is uncharacteristic of Keats’s mature poetry; far from being the high point of his career, it is not in the mainstream of his concern with inspiration. Of course, no reader is in a position to object to Keats having a brief respite from the nightmare of creative thought; but in terms of establishing the true direction of his genius as a poet, it is important to recognise that not ‘Autumn’, but The Fall of Hyperion, represents his final
legacy for those ‘hungry generations’ who do not live ‘by bread alone’.

‘To Autumn’ was written on 19 September 1819; and when Keats two days later breaks off his writing of *The Fall of Hyperion*, he has been engaged on the poem for weeks, though carefully veiled references to it in his letters (before the outburst against Milton on 21 and 22 September) guard its progress from public eyes, as with the first *Hyperion*. Keats always considered *Hyperion* the crux of his work, the testing-ground for insight and experience gained from all his writing; and in returning to its ‘dusk vale’, he returns to the problems of true and false art which he encountered in the first version, but this time he endeavours to formulate an image and function for poetry which can encompass the Vale of Soul-making and its system of spirit-salvation, with Moneta being one of those ‘Mediators or personages’ who helps the heart become creative, and poetry create itself. Keats totally rejects his former use of epic form as ‘bodyguard’, and curves it round himself in the form of dream, making the drama take place unequivocally within his own mind, as his responsibility. The new induction is a key to the revised form of the poem, and makes it clear that its action and values are not predetermined, but are inextricable from the growth of the poet within it. *The Fall* enacts Yeats’s plan for poetry, ‘Myself I remake’ (expressed in ‘An Acre of Grass’); its subject is, on the most essential level, the making of the poet, and his creation or salvation through inspiration; and if the poet is not made within it, there will be no poem.

The mysterious and fluid background for poet-creation is pictured in the induction, whose shadowy forms suggest primitive mental processes and Keats’s earlier vision, ‘with the fine Webb of his Soul ... weave a tapestry empyrean’:

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave  
A paradise for a sect, the savage too  
From forth the loftiest fashion of his sleep  
Guesses at Heaven; pity these have not  
Traced upon vellum or wild Indian leaf  
The shadows of melodious utterance.

The high tone and rigid structure of the epic style has been replaced by a new, flexible use of language, which can accom-
moderate both decorative turns of phrase ('wherewith they weave') and almost shorthand colloquialism ('pity these have not'), giving an effect of words falling into position at the moment of thought with no endeavour to force them into a particular style or genre. In a graceful, melodious movement the tapestry of dreams is momentarily brought into focus as it seems to be imprinted or 'traced' on the veins of the wild Indian leaf, and then fades back into utterance which has not in fact been captured in formal art. And if a new poet is to be created in the following poem, he will begin here; not with a style already formulated, but with the raw materials of the ancient and unconscious, making a link with the unfathomable past — as with 'emperor and clown'. When, later in the poem, a distinction between poet and fanatic requires to be made, it will be founded on a context of growth from fanatic, not of rejection of the fanatic of the past. This potential future growth is foreshadowed here, as the entrance of Poetry on the scene suggests that in recording the dream its quality is changed:

But bare of laurel they live, dream, and die;  
For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,  
With the fine spell of words alone can save  
Imagination from the sable charm  
And dumb enchantment.

Poetry is not merely a technical instrument at the service of the poet; it has the power to save the imagination from a kind of death, in 'dumb enchantment'. The reality for Keats of this context of death and salvation, and the agony which it cost him, is indicated by his breaking off his transcription of the induction to Woodhouse at this point, with

My Poetry will never be fit for anything it does n't cover its ground well — You see how she is off her guard and doesn't move a peg though Prose is coming up in an awkward style enough — Now a blow in the spondee will finish her ... These are unpleasant Phrases.

After having accused the poem of being 'death to me', he mounts a mock prose attack on the poetry as if in revenge, after the manner of Lamia, then finds the whole context distasteful; in fact he cannot bring himself to transcribe any more of the poem — to
Woodhouse or anyone else; to George and Georgiana he quotes only 'The Eve of St Mark' as an example of his recent work. The point is, that, in the induction to *The Fall*, Keats commits himself totally to the endeavour to cross the mortal-immortal boundary: to develop from the fanatic who merely fades back into the shadows after his guess at heaven; and to 'tell his dreams'. And in doing so, he is aware of the responsibility—the ability to suffer 'death'—that he takes on himself, as he makes clear when he puts his signature to the challenge:

> Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse  
> Be poet's or fanatic's will be known  
> When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave.

Writing poetry is, in a metaphorical sense, a dangerous encounter with death, as Milton knew only too well in *Paradise Lost*; the poet must enter a world no longer 'known'; but only after this encounter can a distinction between 'poet' and 'fanatic' be made.

The preliminary steps towards this encounter with 'death' in Moneta's sanctuary are taken in territory which is familiar, both as a traditional earthly paradise (with particular reference to Milton's), and in its retracing of Keats's own earlier poetry and chambers of thought. But it is seen with new eyes. The feast which symbolises the experience offered by the Garden, and which is a common metaphor in Keats, is described with a more than natural clarity, with every grape stalk standing out, conveying the dreamlike intensifying of irrational points of focus:

> a feast of summer fruits,  
> Which, nearer seen, seemed refuse of a meal  
> By angel tasted, or our Mother Eve;  
> For empty shells were scattered on the grass,  
> And grape-stalks but half bare, and remnants more . . .

The disturbance of sense in 'noise/ Soft-showering in my ears', and in 'by the touch/ Of scent, not far from roses', suggests an inward concentration in which sense is hypersensitive, as with 'touched my trembling ears' in 'Lycidas'; and an opposite manner of description to that in 'Autumn'. This earliest cradle-like 'arbours with a drooping roof' is Keats's version of the protected, golden past, 'Under the opening eye-lids of the morn', in which
The poet first partakes of mankind's riches, and in partaking of the 'transparent juice' relates himself to 'all the mortals of the world;/ And all the dead whose names are on our lips'. And in returning to the scene in his dream, he is implicitly following Proserpine,

returned to her own fields,
Where the white heifers low.

He begins at the beginning, where he first encountered the 'fabled horn' of Ceres' plenty, whose banquet still seems inexhaustible.

When the dreamer leaves the Garden, he has his first premonition of death, which is expressed by the narrator's sudden switch to an external view:

The cloudy swoon came on, and down I sunk,
Like a Silenus on an antique vase.

His unexpected fall prefigures that of Saturn later on:

this old image here,
Whose carvèd features wrinkled as he fell,

and is one of the many inexplicable transitions which demarcate different states or stages of awareness in the poem, and which are effected by a strange mannerist manipulation of the art-life boundary: when, in the midst of a matter-of-fact narrative exposition, 'image' and reality change places. The sleeper awakes 'As if with wings'; but those wings take him to the Sanctuary where his pace is deadened—following Keats's exchange of 'wings' for 'sublunary legs' stated in the July letter. The Sanctuary, as has often been remarked, recalls the rocky imagery which entered Keats's poetry at the time of writing Hyperion, with its 'carvèd sides' transcending 'nature's rocks toiled hard in waves and winds'; and his progress to the sleeping altar at an interminably slow pace, contrasts his own deliberate effort with the 'cloudy swoon' experience sweeping him off his feet; it is 'To be approached' by

patient travail
To count with toil the innumerable degrees.
As throughout this poem, every image has to earn its validity by vibrating the bridge of the abstract-sensuous boundary and proving its relevance to mental process. The poet's first sight of the Sanctuary, however, does not immediately present him with its interpretation: its sensuous presentation seems confused. The remnants of the feast from the Garden seem to have become a pile of objects tinged with supernatural significance (materials perhaps woven in 'that place the moth could not corrupt'), but bewildering in their detail:

All in a mingled heap confused there lay
Robes, golden tongs, censer and chafing-dish,
Girdles, and chains, and holy jewelleries.

The dreamer's eye has not been trained to divine the meaning of the paraphernalia of ritual, and is attracted instead by the ambiguity of a different kind of formlessness—a image like a cloud:

Then to the west I looked, and saw far off
An image, huge of feature as a cloud,
At level of whose feet an altar slept . . .

The 'image' is of course Saturn, representing the subject of the poem which the poet is to write; but at the moment, the poet's comprehension does not reach that far; Saturn is both cloudy, and lifeless, until later after another inexplicable transition he is brought to life, in another place and time:

Onward I looked beneath the gloomy boughs,
And saw, what first I thought an image huge,
Like to the image pedestalled so high
In Saturn's temple.

By complete contrast with the accessibility of the epic subject in the first Hyperion, which began immediately with Saturn, the subject of The Fall will only be allotted to him in a passive capacity as observer—and then, only if he earns the privilege. The subject has a previous existence of its own, and the poet's function is not to command it, but to endeavour to see it more clearly, 'straining [his] eyes at particles of light in the midst of a
great darkness', as Keats put it earlier. And in the darkness which enshrouds the poet who endeavours to see 'Things invisible to mortal sight', Keats follows Milton in *The Fall* more closely than he ever did in the first *Hyperion*.

Keats does not use the invocation, as such, as a rhetorical device. But everything that happens in the Sanctuary, before the story of the Titans gets under way, may be considered as, in essence, an extended invocation, establishing the poet's relation with his Muse. Approaching the shrine, the dreamer becomes aware of 'one ministering': it is Moneta, the priestess who holds the key to the interpretation of the past endeavours of humanity. In dignity she is a complete transformation of the giddy, sentimental Mnemosyne of shaky loyalties in the first *Hyperion*, whose role (as mother of the Muses) she takes over. On the relationship which the dreamer establishes with her, depends his ability to interpret the cloudy image, and to pass from the role of fanatic to that of poet. It has been suggested that Keats could not finish the poem because he had already used up the climax, the dying-into-life experience, in this section; but the inherent structural function of the dialogue between the poet and Moneta is such that it could only be the beginning, not the end, of a poem; it is a prerequisite for the poem's existence. The poet's first experience of Moneta recalls the primitive but heightened mingling of the senses in the Garden:

Maian incense, spread around
Forgetfulness of everything but bliss,
And clouded all the altar with soft smoke,
From whose white fragrant curtains thus I heard
Language pronounced ...

The waves of incense, and the waving curtains, are compared to the health-bringing southerly wind which makes even the dying man forget his shroud. But paradoxically, the voice which speaks from within this paradisal enclosure (whose white curtains and smoke in fact parallel a shroud), pronounces the nearness of death in a sort of curse:

'If thou canst not ascend
These steps, die on that marble where thou art.
Thy flesh, near cousin to the common dust,
Inspiration in Milton and Keats

Will parch for lack of nutriment—thy bones
Will wither in few years . . .
The sands of thy short life are spent this hour . . .

Yet the poet is not repelled by the 'tyranny' of this 'fierce threat'; instead, throughout, he insists on the consistency of Moneta's harsh messages with his sense of bliss, and is 'encouraged by the sooth voice' which told him he may 'Rot on the pavement where thou rotted'st half'. One would almost receive an impression of grim satire, were it not that his insistence gradually impresses the realisation that this paradoxical fusion of bliss and pain relates to the nature of truth itself, and that even deathly truth is 'pro­pitious parley medicined/ In sickness'. The understanding which the poet derives from Moneta relates to the action of the working Heart in the Vale of Soul-making, 'the test from which the Mind or Intelligence sucks its identity'; with the aid of a 'Mediator' the Heart proves itself through buffeting and becomes creative. In The Fall of Hyperion, therefore, there is not one climactic dying-into-life, but a series of experiences of death at each new stage in awareness, and with each step 'thou hast dated on/ Thy doom'. Every gain in knowledge threatens to shatter the poet's very existence, as in the clinically vivid description of the approach of death ('palsied chill' ascending to 'those streams that pulse beside the throat'), which leaves him in a half-rotted state, though with a suggestion of immortality symbolising the new level of per­ception:

life seemed
To pour in at the toes; I mounted up,
As once fair Angels on a ladder flew
From the green turf to Heaven.

These wings of imagination are not those for which Keats longed in 'I Stood Tip-toe', when he hoped that through wishful thinking he might take off and pry among the stars, and which he later renounced for a pair of 'sublunary legs'. For in his search for 'wonders' other than the 'human face', and 'music' other than 'a happy-noted voice', the poet or dreamer (not yet differentiated) incurs upon himself the peculiar intensity of this life-death experience, which Keats no longer sees as a privilege but as a curse, dividing him from the more rational or natural life which is
the fate of those who do not think too hard or too deeply. And in Moneta's speech 'Think of the earth . . . ', describing the 'haven' of all natural creatures (including the natural kind of man), one glimpses Keats's longing for the qualities behind the 'autumn-poet':

Every creature hath its home;  
Every sole man hath days of joy and pain . . .  
Only the dreamer venoms all his days,  
Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve.

There is a nostalgic desire to partake in the routine of a world in which pleasure and pain are dealt rationally and equally, and restricted to momentary sensation, not stretched by the imaginative faculties into past or future, thereby venomous all the days. Such a world does exist; it exists for those who 'have no thought to come' into the Sanctuary, who are satisfied with knowledge in its existing state. The qualification for entry is to be one 'to whom the miseries of the world/ Are misery, and will not let them rest'; and Keats long ago, when he paused at the 'rocky portal' of Fingal's Cave in 'Not Aladin magian', and at the top of Ben Nevis 'in a mist' before beginning *Hyperion*, took the path of imaginative thinking from which there is no return.

The central dialogue about the nature of Keats himself as a poet, prompted by his question 'What am I then?', does, in a sense, extend out of form, in that it does not fit the distinctions drawn hitherto, which have placed Keats between poet and dreamer, only half-rotted:

'Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?  
The poet and the dreamer are distinct,  
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.'

But this poem, unlike the original *Hyperion*, is capable of adapting to the philosophical material which it has to contain; and the point is, that the distinctions change, according to the idea of the poet which is evolving. Up to this point, it has been constructive to consider the poet as a slightly more dedicated or curious version of the dreamer; this idea has served to retrace the early stages of poetic development. Now, however, the distinction between 'dreamer' and 'poet' seems enormous, and spans an
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almost unbridgeable gap, because the poet is on the point of actually having to leap from one to the other; his focus has narrowed and he sees the image as it were through a magnifying glass. The poet is, in a sense, trapped, because no sooner has he assimilated one deathly experience than he is faced with another. And at this crucial point, which is either to make the poet or to let him fade back into the shadows with the dreamers and fanatics, the emotional strain explodes in an outburst of hatred at the ‘false poet’, whose sins he is now required to take upon himself, bearing more woe than he deserves:

‘Apollo! Faded, far-flown Apollo! 
Where is thy misty pestilence to creep 
Into the dwellings, through the door crannies, 
Of all mock lyrists, large self-worshippers 
And careless hectorers in proud bad verse. 
Though I breathe death with them it will be life 
To see them sprawl before me into graves.’

This passage is often considered tasteless, which accounts partly for rationalisations in favour of its omission. The outburst ‘Spite of myself’ is directed less at the poet Byron in the external world, than at those aspects of Keats himself corresponding to his idea of the ‘Byronic’ poet, and in particular to the former idealisation of Apollo by his early ‘dreaming’ self—an idealisation which had collapsed with Apollo’s appearance in the first Hyperion—and in bitter memory of which he now invokes the darker functions of Apollo, never previously acknowledged. And the poet’s complaint that his truth-telling function should make him ‘breathe death’ with the false poets, is an essential preparation for the next development, in which he suddenly perceives the meaning of Moneta, and how she may lead him to the poem.

For at this point, the poet ceases to demand answers from Moneta about his own status as a poet, and returns to the subject of his poem: ‘tell me where I am,/ Whose altar this ... What image this’. Moneta proceeds to tell, and then show, the story of the Titans; and as she does so, her character changes from the aloof universality of the priestess of generalised treasures of humanity, to a mediator and participant in one specific story. Significantly, she gives her name for the first time, becoming ‘sad Moneta’, and her voice ‘Moneta’s mourn’, modulating her tone
from 'an immortal's spherèd words' to as near as possible 'a mother's'. She responds to the poet's 'good will' and concern about the story, not to his concern about himself; and only now does he desire her to remove her veils, whose misty, white 'fragrant curtains' have, since his outburst, filled him with 'terror', and become more specifically a barrier between them, consonant with 'my mind's film'. Moneta (whose Latin name suggests 'adviser') has traditional associations with Minerva, goddess of wisdom; and her roots in *Hyperion* derive partly from the wise Oceanus who held the key to the epic theme and preached the 'pain of truth'. And the poet's dawning understanding of Moneta is identical with his growing capacity to interpret the story before him. As the 'mind's film' is lifted, so does the aloof, composed, 'Oceanus' aspect of Moneta disperse. Keats begins to see, linked within the Muse, the concept of 'mother' and a new idea of 'Milton' (both words also being traceable within the sound of 'Moneta'). It now appears that wisdom, far from bestowing invulnerability, forces the confines of the mind to become a setting for eternal pain. 'Memory', in so far as she is 'mother', enwombs a living tragedy in the present, rather than guarding historical evidence already past:

I ached to see what things the hollow brain
Behind enwombed; what high tragedy
In the dark secret chambers of her skull
Was acting, that could give so dread a stress
To her cold lips, and fill with such a light
Her planetary eyes . . .

Moneta's brow is a landscape, which supersedes the Sanctuary and fills the vision of the poem, stretching surrealistically to become the territory for an inner drama (as with Dante's and Milton's Hell). The dusk vale suddenly becomes a moonlit scene, with the light source being Moneta's eyes, as the transition is made from ordinary vision to things invisible to mortal sight. Her skull and eyes contain a description of the artistic structure of the entire poem, with its intensity of concentration on feeling, pressing the sensuous into the abstract:

deathwards progressing
To no death was that visage; it had passed
The lily and the snow; and beyond these
I must not think now, though I saw that face—
But for her eyes I should have fled away.

The imagery of the poem also passes the lily and the snow into unearthly colouring, beyond natural process, to a point where the foretastes of death hitherto experienced by the dreamer are a continuous reality.

The poet, under the magnetic power of Moneta’s eyes, describes himself as he did during the genesis of the Vale of Soul-making (‘straining at particles of light . . .’): as ‘strain[ing] out my eyes’ into the ‘sullen entrails’ of a mountainside ‘rich with ore’, after sighting a grain of gold. The next stage in the growth of the poet to receive inspiration involves that he fit his own visage (his own dream-experience) to Moneta’s countenance (containing the story), until there is no longer any need for her to tell him things: he sees them himself, directly, ‘as a god sees’. Already his lips have become ‘devout’, and suddenly he finds himself ‘Deep in the shady sadness of a vale’, in the setting of the first Hyperion, and only now prepared to retell the epic theme, which is now expressed as recording a subjective vision of the truth as shown to him by a mediator. The process of breathing life into the pedestalled image of Saturn is not a direct one as in the ‘Grecian Urn’, but a more complex process involving first of all an adjustment of the poet’s own equipment:

there grew
A power within me of enormous ken
To see as a god sees . . .

The clumsily woven paradise of the fanatic with his tapestry of dreams, becomes ‘the lofty theme . . . hung vast before my mind,/ With half-unravelled web’. And the magnificent opening paragraphs of the first Hyperion unfold again, with some alterations, but changed primarily by the transference of Moneta’s features to the poet, incorporated within the narrative. The poet, after long straining at particles of light, has at last attained the ‘eagle’ eyesight always associated by Keats with the epic poet:

I set myself
Upon an eagle's watch, that I might see,
And seeing ne'er forget. No stir of life
Was in this shrouded vale . . .

Finally, he comes to resemble Moneta with her bright-blanched face, carrying an immortal load of tragic knowledge, but with the strength only of 'my own weak mortality':

For by my burning brain I measured sure
Her silver seasons shedded on the night,
And every day methought I grew
More gaunt and ghostly. Oftentimes I prayed
Intense, that death would take me from the vale
And all its burthens. Gasping with despair
Of change, hour after hour I cursed myself . . .

With inspiration, the vision of the everyday world is totally replaced by that of the inner or immortal one; the moonlight of Moneta's eyes becomes a measurement of mental time within the poet. In receiving inspiration, the power to see as a god sees, Keats brings on himself not release from the earth, but on the contrary, finds himself exempted even from mortal means of release; he is trapped in the consciousness, or emotional awareness, of death, which is infinitely worse than the fact of death itself. It is no wonder that Keats blamed Milton for making the poem so relentlessly imaginative, and, from the loneliness of a state which made him hour after hour curse himself, turn to curse Milton for leading him into it. Keats hated Milton not during the writing of The Fall, but at the end, when he found himself forced to give it up and could stand it no longer; and he hated him not for thwarting his own artistic talents, but for developing them and setting him upon the 'eagle's watch', the outpost of inspiration isolated from the cheerful ways of men.

There is nothing in the quality of the narrative to suggest that inspiration had dried up and that this is why Keats did not finish the poem. The extended invocation in which the scene for inspiration is set and the relationship with the Muse established, does not end the poem; it begins it. The Fall is consistently more dramatic and flexible than the first Hyperion, and its retelling of Saturn's story is both more human and more imaginative; Saturn's original lament for the loss of his creative powers is now
clearly interpreted as a human failure of insight:

Methought I heard some old man of the earth
Bewailing earthly loss;

and this human knowledge increases his dignity by decreasing his pomposity. Keats allows Saturn to depart, and then makes his own exit from the poem. The stony, cloudlike image first seen in the Sanctuary, whose sculptural quality had melted pathetically into the old man of the earth, fades back into the dusk in this haunting image with its play on the idea of moonlight: Saturn rose

Like a vast giant, seen by men at sea
To grow pale from the waves at dull midnight.
They melted from my sight into the woods;

And Keats is left with Moneta, at the end of one chamber of experience, and on the threshold of another — if he should care to enter; in the ‘antichamber of this dream’ he pauses, and states explicitly that

even at the open doors awhile
I must delay, and glean my memory
Of her high phrase — perhaps no further dare.

The doors are open — symbolising Keats’s realisation that the poem has not reached an organic dead end, unlike the original, but has the potential to continue. But Keats does not choose to enter. In this picture of the poet standing exhausted in the doorway, one sees the final gleaning of memory, or harvest of poetry when working in the soul’s ‘own home’: ‘But I feel my Body too weak to support me to the height,’ as he wrote in his letters: ‘I will not sing in a cage.’

And at the beginning of Canto II, which Keats begins to write, is a final description of the music of inspiration, of the sound of the Muse’s voice taking comprehensible or sensuous form:

‘Mortal, that thou may’st understand aright,
I humanize my sayings to thine ear,
Making comparisons of earthly things;
Or thou might'st better listen to the wind,
Whose language is to thee a barren noise,
Though it blows legend-laden through the trees.'

Poignantly, Keats quotes these lines to Woodhouse for the sound of 'legend-laden'. In his own 'earthly' comparison, he shows clearly that the prophetic truth brought by inspiration is experienced as being ever-present, existing in the elemental forces of the universe—the legend-laden wind; but in order for the mortal to understand it, a mediator is required to 'humanize' and interpret the sound. Like the 'language strange' of the Belle Dame, the sound momentarily crystallises into meaning, through the subjective experience of one person; like Prospero's Ariel, it is not capable of continuous mortal possession, and returns to the wild elements. The image echoes Dante's description of the fading of inspiration ('in the wind on the light leaves, the Sibyl's oracle was lost'); and prefigures Keats's own desire for the epitaph 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water', expressed shortly before his death (reported by Severn to Brown). The poet standing at the open doors, knowing that he is on the verge of pastures new, yet recording his experience of inspiration returning to the elements, provides a truer farewell to Keats's tragically interrupted life, than does the harmonious ode 'To Autumn' with its associated idea of a Chattertonian poetic death. This final image of inspiration retraces those 'shadows of melodious utterance' whose pattern was almost, but not quite, imprinted by the fanatic on Indian leaf, and carries them beyond the dream through Moneta's interpreting voice, and into poetry. By implication, and through metaphor, therefore, this passage answers Keats's explicit demands of Moneta about his status as a poet. When he sees as a god sees, when the legend-laden wind forms itself into the sound of words in his ear, then he is a poet, not a dreamer.

Keats once (as Severn reported) announced from the confusion of the first Hyperion, that he did not want to write a poem 'that might have been written by John Milton, but one that was unmistakably by no other than John Keats'. In the months after The Fall, when he is no longer in the midst of the unbearable struggle with poetry, he comes to a new understanding of his relationship

* Cited by W. J. Bate, John Keats, from W. Sharp's Life and Letters of Joseph Severn.
with Milton, whose 'Character' he sees as standing out above the 'slovenly age we live in'. To Fanny Brawne, who is no longer (as at the time of Lamia) seen as an enemy to poetry, he expresses his idea of the unifying poetic principle which he has followed in life:

'I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remember'd...' ... now you divide with this (may I say it?) 'last infirmity of noble minds' all my reflection.

Like Milton, Keats sees it as a search for the idea of the beautiful through all the shapes and forms of things. With this quotation from 'Lycidas' (interestingly, Keats says 'minds' instead of 'mind', which makes it more personal), he makes his peace with Milton: finding his words, and example, the most appropriate to convey the course of his own love of poetry.
Epilogue

It is perhaps fair to say that, whenever Milton and Keats have been considered together in the past, it has been to make (or imply) a distinction between two different types of poet. This has been based less on the background of Renaissance versus Romantic, than on the traditional contrast of Shakespeare and Milton. This was treated differently by the Augustans and the Romantics, but nevertheless upheld by both, almost as an ultimate principle in poetry criticism; and it continues to lie behind much modern discussion. Keats has generally been taken as a scion of the Shakespearean branch, as opposed to the Miltonic: which is perhaps why little close attention has been paid to his relationship with Milton. In this context the whole history of Hyperion (which he considered his most important work) is merely an unfortunate mistake, as if Keats had not realised that he was destined to follow the Shakespearean model, not the Miltonic. Thus Milton tends to be seen as an idealist, whereas Keats is a realist, or sensualist: an idea related to the now old-fashioned picture of the war within Milton between the dogmatic Puritan and the indulgent sensualist; Milton prefers to think, where Keats prefers a 'life of sensations'; Milton imposes his identity and preaches through poetry, whereas Keats — like Shakespeare — subsumes his, and enters in to the mind of the sparrow pecking on the gravel.

This state in criticism, though presented in a somewhat simplified form has not been substantially questioned. This may be partly because the Romantic version of the Shakespeare-Milton dichotomy, in particular, provoked much interesting discussion, and revivified the images of both poets, in the context of a new understanding of poetry in general. But the distinction has outlived its usefulness. It is clear from a study of inspiration in Milton and in Keats that the essential similarity of their idea of poetry, and their attitude toward the poetic vocation, far outweigh differences in character, life-style, education, and indeed length of life. Both regard poetry as a field of exploration which
contains in miniature all the essential aspects of reality somewhere between the poles of 'true' and 'false' art, within which the poet has to experiment and forge his own identity. The poetic vocation involves the whole man, and can never progress from dissociation of sensibility to any degree. Writing poetry is, for the poet, the essence of experience: through what Milton called 'intimate impulse', he must, as Keats said, 'prove upon the pulses'. It involves a search for what Keats called 'the eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty', and Milton the 'idea of the beautiful' in 'all the shapes and forms of things'. Keats found Milton such a suitable model for his own ideal of the inspired poet, that one can delineate the course of his entire career in terms of Milton's influence, in a more substantial way than can be done through any other single poet, even the great 'Presider' Shakespeare.

Briefly reviewing in outline the course of both poets' search for inspiration, one recalls that an initial period of intense longing for wish-fulfilment in the form of 'universal knowledge' (Milton), which uplifts the poet to 'pry among the stars' (Keats), such that 'even the stars obey him' (Milton), is shattered by the first experience of writing inspired poetry. The poet no longer even wishes to be elevated above himself in an eternal pleasure-ride; this is not the Idea of Beauty which he has now glimpsed. From now on, the road, as Keats said, is through 'application, study and thought', in a long period of technical experimentation, concentrating on craftsmanship and organisation within the sphere of the poet's own wit. Before this, however, both poets experienced a sort of backlash to inspiration (Milton in 'The Passion', Keats in the second part of Hyperion), in the form of a first-hand understanding of false art—a pretence or surface imitation of inspiration which fell flat. Keats's story is more complicated than Milton's at this point, because the epic form which he originally chose was too ambitious, and in a sense he makes two approaches to the first experience of inspiration: one in Hyperion, which does not fulfil itself, and again in 'La Belle Dame' and the 'Ode to Psyche', in which he finally realises, intuitively, how Milton wrote the 'Nativity Ode'. But this means that he has more experience behind him when he is faced with the gradual fading of inspiration after the Odes, to which the 'Ode on Melancholy' provides a more successful and integrated farewell than does Milton's 'Passion'. The first experience of inspiration,
therefore, brings with it (or immediately after it) the realisation of the death of inspiration, striking the poet with a shock for which he is totally unprepared. The awareness of the gift with which he has been endowed brings not the hoped-for sense of self-satisfaction and omniscience, but rather, depression and a burden of responsibility not to let the gift die. The inspired poetry is not felt to be his personal possession; and the knowledge which it reveals isolates him yet further from a world in which poetry is (as Milton said) 'much disregarded, and discountenanc'd'.

From the time of first inspiration, therefore, the poet's search for the Idea of Beauty takes the form of a series of complex variations on the theme of how to regain this experience of insight, and simultaneously, how to deal with its absence or death. Thus, inspiration may in a sense hibernate (as in the analogy with the Proserpine myth), while the poet continues with aspects of technique and secondary experience; or it may be replaced with false inspiration — defined by Keats as the 'Crime' of being a 'Selfdeluder', and by Milton as the 'sin of curiosity'. This results in one kind of poetic death — called 'dissonant roar' in *Paradise Lost*, 'flashy song' in 'Lycidas', and 'careless hectoring in proud bad verse' in *The Fall of Hyperion*. The knowledge brought by inspiration is experienced as coming from outside the poet, and becoming incorporated within him as part of his total development, as the mind's sustenance. Raphael's metaphor 'Knowledge is food' runs consistently, though unobtrusively, throughout the work of both poets. The deprivation of inspiration, in the sense of its sudden 'death', leaves the poet prey to the upsurge of destructive forces always in the background of creative activity, and may result in him ultimately starving, as in 'La Belle Dame' and the gluttons of *Lamia*, or the greedy 'blind mouths' of 'Lycidas'. The poet has to fight to maintain stability in the face of attack from within and from without, given that humanity's natural tendency is to abhor change and to stamp out any illuminating ideas which may threaten to bring it about.

It is significant that neither Milton nor Keats wrote a theory of poetry. Keats disapproved of formal theories altogether, as of 'consequitive reasoning' and 'palpable design'. It is at first glance more surprising that Milton did not write one: he had the formal training, and he wrote a great body of work with 'palpable design' on other matters close to his heart; and at the end of his life, he had the time — but he preferred to spend his last years revising his
writings for the press. One may conclude that he just did not think it was worth doing—which would entirely accord with his idea of inspiration and his practice of poetry. In his poetry, by contrast with his prose, Milton expressed his relationship with God: and poetry’s truth could be captured only within its own words, in ‘unpremeditated verse’. And even though it should seem unintelligible to any but a ‘fit audience though few’, there was no point in writing a commentary in other terms on the functioning of poetry, simply to present a secondary truth at best, and—at worst—a false idea altogether. The absence of a deliberate, crystallised theory in Milton derives from the same antipathy towards capturing the uncatchable truth, expressing the inexpressible, that Keats condemned in ‘irritable reaching after fact and reason’, or the impossibility of ‘coming at a truth’ through ‘trying at it’. Neither poet would tolerate a divorce between meaning and expression: Milton’s rejection of the ‘sugared pill’ in Education is the equivalent of Keats’s dislike of palpable design. They both hated the misuse of scholarship and philosophy when this was ‘vain learning’, a ‘sin of curiosity’; and in terms of their sacred vision of inspired poetry, any prosaic theory would have constituted such vain learning. As practising poets they preferred to leave poetry to speak for itself, rather than pursuing it with apologies and explications: in the rejected Preface to Endymion, Keats dismissed such ‘Phraseology’: ‘I have written to please myself and in hopes to please others, and for a love of fame; if I neither please myself, nor others nor get fame, of what consequence is Phraseology?’

Both poets did, however, stress the value of philosophy or organised thought in a supportive role: not as replacing inspiration as a means of contact with truth itself, but as providing the background for inspiration and sustaining it over long periods. Milton was aware of this necessity in Paradise Lost and spent many years ‘long conceiving’; whereas Keats, characteristically, plunged almost immediately into Hyperion, unprepared for the emotional strain involved in epic writing. Only afterwards did he realise that the place of philosophy was not to oppose poetry, as in ‘O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts’, but to help the poet go through vast tracts of air and space ‘fledged’, with wings. It was in this area that Keats, unlike Milton, felt a lack in his education. For in some ways his early schooling was similar to Milton’s: both went to schools which
placed an unusual emphasis on English literature; both discussed their work with their schoolmasters for years afterwards. Keats's lack of rhetorical training in formal verse exercises is one reason for the incessant churning out of early verse, before *Endymion*, as if trying to make up for lost time, and for the absence of organised technique. And the absence of a philosophical background is one reason for his avid absorption of Hazlitt's critical ideas and terminology (such as 'gusto', 'waking dream', 'intensity', and 'Protean genius'). Even so, he did not swallow Hazlitt's ideas whole, as is shown by their contrasting approaches to Milton, but adapted them to his own needs for expression. Neither Milton nor Keats saw inspiration as a faculty so haphazard and arbitrary that it did not matter what they did in preparation. On the contrary, inspiration, though not controllable, requires a background of intense integrated activity: intellectual, imaginative and emotional. As Keats says in words cited by Woodhouse:

My judgement... is as active while I am actually writing as my imagination. In fact all my faculties are strongly excited, and in their full play—And shall I afterwards, when my imagination is idle, and the heat in which I wrote, has gone off, sit down coldly to criticise, when in Possession of only one faculty, what I have written, when almost inspired.

This state of total activity is 'almost inspired': it is close to, yet different from, the passive experience of inspiration itself. Inspiration requires the complete man—and more. It looks forward into the unknown, and incorporates knowledge which has not yet become part of the complete man, not yet been received in earthly form. It is the process by which thought becomes creative, the creative creates itself; and 'poets'—in the widest yet most essential use of the word—become the legislators of the world. And a 'poet' is one who strives for the near-impossible condition that a man 'should in himself be a true Poem'; that he should live a 'continual allegory', and his works 'be the comment on it'.
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I consider it more useful to most readers to index the intellectual content of the book in the form of the following summary:

The Theory of Inspiration evolved during this study has composite roots in the interdependent areas of thought comprised by aesthetic theory, the theory of knowledge, and psychological theory.

AESTHETIC THEORY: The poet's ideal of and search for Beauty, and its identity with Truth, is seen in Milton's 'idea of the beautiful' (27, 76, 79; caricatured in Comus, 49-50) and of the 'Age of Gold' (31, 39), and Keats's 'principle of beauty' (118-19, 158, 196), whose subjective-objective nature is summed in the Beauty-Truth equivalent (157-8). This ideal's emotional content distinguishes it from purely external or stylistic harmony or patterning (54-5, 58, 125-6, 180-1). It appears in the underlying concept of a poetic principle in all things, discoverable through poetic form: see 'Nativity Ode' s Christ (33-4), Lycidas (57-8, 64), Milton's 'Idea' of education (78), Psyche (139), the Nightingale (149-50). Realisation of the poetic principle, in terms of experiencing and transmitting forms of beauty, is effected through the Muse, who acts as mediator and is the active force in inspiration (7, 15, 28-9, 33, 37, 87, 100-1, 134-5, 144, 190-1). Milton's idea of the Muse appears in Native Language (27, 84), the Archangel of 'Lycidas' (70), the 'heavenly Muse' of Paradise Lost (85-6, 90-1), the dark guide of Samson (97); Keats's in the Naiad (120-1), the Belle Dame (185), Psyche (139), the Nightingale (144), Moneta (187-95; associated with his
idea of Milton, 191). The Muse is contacted and presented through invocations; in addition to the direct address, these may be implicit (38, 97), extended (187), inverted (120), broken (54, 70). Genuine invocations contrast with the purely conventional, formal or imitative (14, 28, 34-5, 92-4, 107, 161). The concept of a true Muse pairs with that of a false Muse: see Hobbes's caricature (1), Milton's 'night best patroness' (35-6), Milton's 'empty dream' (92), Keats's Mne- mosyne (130), Keats's insufficient Ceres (179-80) and caricature in Lamia (173).

**THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE**: Knowledge is a complex function, seen in a context of different realms of experience (4-5, 16-19, 38-9, 71-5, 102, 137, 147-9, 184). Its relation to the 'digestion' of experience is often imaged in terms of a 'food' metaphor (4, 79-81, 91, 133-7, 182; caricatured, 169-70); in this context see Plato's 'innate' knowledge (4, 79, 82).

Self-knowledge is part of the poet's experience in any poetic venture towards knowledge: see Plato (6), Dante (8, 9, 12), Spenser (16, 18), Milton (33-4, 83-4, 86-90; via different persona in 'Lycidas', 56, 59, 72-4; via Samson, 99), Keats (131, 139, 148-51, 182, 189-92; reacting against, 125-6). The young or inexperienced poet has a goal of universal knowledge conferring exotic personal gratification, release and invulnerability (14, 44-5, 51-2, 56, 105-6), which is relinquished with increased self-knowledge and inspired knowledge. The poet's engagement with the Muse is associated with inspired knowledge (which includes total—, higher—, ideal—, knowledge of God, of the Good, of reality, of truth, of 'things invisible') (21). This is an extension of previous knowledge, often marked by a moment of recognition (7-8, 11-13, 18, 30, 69, 72-4, 86, 100-1, 122, 135-8, 186, 193). Milton's key denominations for it include 'intimate impulse' (96, 99, 100-1; as distinct from 'inward oracle', 95) and 'unpremeditated verse' (86-7; as distinct from 'unmeditated song', 87); Keats's include 'imagining into' (117, 121-2), seeing Beauty 'on the wing' or 'eagle' eyesight (85, 192), seeing 'as a god sees' (192-3). Inspired knowledge is to be differentiated from forms of relative, partial, or deceptive knowledge: see Plato's 'opinion or belief' (5-6), Milton's 'sugared pill' (81), 'sin of curiosity' (24, 81-2), 'old experience' (45), Keats's 'endeavour at effect' (129), 'consequence reasoning' (108, 199). It must also be differentiated from formal philosophy, which may be used as destructive of inspired knowledge (19, 82-3, 153, 176-7) or supportive of it (19, 60-1, 124, 131, 155-8); see the complex use in Paradise Regained (93-6) and Keats's Oceanus (127).

**PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORY**: This concerns the concept and function of the poet—the relation between his personal development and the work produced. The poetic vocation is idealised by the young poet; an idealisation often revised by the poet telling his own history within a poem (16-19, 30, 33, 37, 56-7, 69, 95, 122-3, 144-5, 172, 184-90); in this context, consider the progress of Apollo, Keats's ideal (105-6, 109, 130, 175, 190) and Christ, Milton's ideal (33, 93). See also self-knowledge; universal knowledge. Genuine commitment to poetry brings de-idealisation of the poetic vocation (23-4; the realism of 'Elegia Sexta', 84; the parable of the 'talent', 24, 102, 'sickness' in Keats, 109-10, 124-5, 129). Thus the image
of the poetic flight is initially escapist, later committed (26, 40, 76, 85, 91, 105, 107, 129, 146). With commitment, the poet becomes explorer (14–15, 18, 59, 85, 90, 110, 118, 146, 161), ‘legislator’ (74), mediator between known and unknown (16–17, 20, 72–4, 117–8, 133, 139). As knowledge-seeker or philosopher he is learner as well as teacher (19, 20, 65, 86, 157–8, 187–8, 192), and always the passive servant of the Muse (7, 28, 85–6, 134–5, 147–9). The poet can also function as creative critic (153, 158; through inspiration, not imitation, 120), and as mediator to other poets (10–11, 71, 85, 113, 115–16, 119, 191). The weight of the responsibility of the poetic vocation entails a sacrificial burden (72, 89, 102, 122, 156); the poet must withstand isolation, confusion, vulnerability (8, 24–5, 53–5, 58–60, 131, 136, 151), often expressed through a blindness metaphor (3, 5, 6, 24, 37, 88–9, 92, 97–8, 101, 113–14, 120, 146–8, 193). The true poet contrasts with the false poet; as imaged in Hobbes (2), Ulysses (9–10), Milton’s Endymion (23), ‘The Passion’ (36), Comus (50–2), ‘petty god’ (99–100), St Leon (128), Wells-Amena (132), Lycius (172–7). Variations on this theme occur in Milton’s implicit contrasts between poet and preacher (25, 84) and between Christ and Samson (96), and in Keats’s conceptions of the self-deluder (106), fanatic or dreamer (183, 189–94), poet with ‘no identity’ (124), and his implicit differentiation between a Miltonic (165–8), a Byronic (165–6, 190) and an Autumn-poet (167–71).

Inspired poetry is then the end-product of the poet’s commitment to the principle of Beauty, through his relationship with the Muse, whilst sustaining the attendant burdens of inspiration. Pure craftsmanship (11) and ‘long choosing’ (87) are not enough. The emergence into existence of poetry, and related problems, are imaged in the ‘birth’ and birthplace of poetry (28, 33, 112–13, 115–16, 123, 139); in its ‘harvest’, including the Ceres-Proserpine myth (76, 118–19, 133, 160, 179–80, 185); in its ‘death’ (57–9, 64, 132, 148–9, 156, 177) and salvation (69–71, 141, 156, 186) — to be contrasted with the ‘fading’ of inspiration or other forms of absence (32, 36–7, 52, 149–51, 159–62, 195). The poet's preoccupation with the life of poetry also takes the form of an endeavour to distinguish true from false art (36, 64–5, 91–2, 124–9, 132, 154–5, 164–5, 190; imaged in Samson's action, 100–1, and via Lamia's caricature, 175): particularly complicated in the case of Keats's inverted reaction against Milton's 'corruptions of language' (164–8). Owing to his first-hand knowledge of the interdependence of aesthetic structure and meaning, the poet is rarely interested in constructing a formal theory of inspiration; Milton's 'Harmony of the Spheres' (37–9) and Of Education (78–83) and Keats's Vale of Soul-making (141–2) represent the poet's nearest possible approach to defining the operation of inspiration outside the context of poetry itself. For inspired poetry is characterised by the images of inspiration which it embodies. The whole poem may be seen as a search for definition which crystallises into a key image or cluster of images (21): see Spenser's Graces (15–19), Dante (11–12), Milton ('Nativity Ode', 29–31; 'Lycidas', 69–74; Paradise Lost, 87, 89, 91; Samson, 101), Keats (Hyperion, 120–1; 'La Belle Dame', 134; 'Ode to Psyche', 159–40; 'Ode to a Nightingale', 146–8; The Fall, 192–3, 195). Qualified images occur in 'L'Allegro'.
and ‘Il Penseroso’ (43, 45), Comus (52), Paradise Regained (95), ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ (154–5). Plato’s image of the Cave (2–4) may be seen as a prototype for many of these images. Such images of inspiration, which form part of the poem’s bonestructure and are welded or fashioned within it as it progresses, contrast with traditional or purely formal images transported into the poem from outside (14, 25–6, 36, 43, 95, 106–7, 161). They express in metaphorical form the poet’s concept of the process of inspiration.