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Hyperion, The Fall of Hyperion, and Keats's epic ambitions

Epic ambitions are dear to the poetical character. Milton, preoccupied with his election for great purpose, laments in *Lycidas* not only the death of a friend but also the compulsion the “sad occasion” places upon him to make trial of his powers before “season due” (1–7). In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth, another chief forebear to Keats’s *Hyperion* project, relates his casting round for heroic matter, “some British theme, some old / Romantic tale by Milton left unsung,” and his settling at last on a “philosophic Song / Of Truth that cherishes our daily life” (1805 text; 1.179–80; 230–31). He was planning a three-part epic, *The Recluse*, to which this autobiography was a “prelude,” but he completed and published only one part (in nine books) in his lifetime: *The Excursion* (1814), which Keats knew and absorbed. It was *The Prelude*, begun in 1798 and published just after his death in 1850, that became Wordsworth’s true epic, unfolding the core subject of modernity, the drama of self-consciousness. Citing the precedent of Milton elevating the subject of *Paradise Lost* above those of classical epics (“argument / Not less but more heroic than the wrath / Of stern Achilles” [9.13–15]), Wordsworth credits his autobiographical “theme” as at least equal: “What pass’d within me” is, “in truth, heroic argument” (*Prel.* 3.173–74, 182). Keats’s involvement with *Hyperion* would ultimately propel a journey “within,” *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, but with far less certain claims.

From the outset Keats aspired to high seriousness, poetry on a grand scale. In *Sleep and Poetry* (late 1816, published 1817), he pledged to pass the “realm . . . / Of Flora, and old Pan” (101–2) for the “nobler life” of writing of “the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts” (123–25). The ensuing vision, of a “charioteer” looking “out upon the winds with glorious fear” (127–28), was aptly glossed by one of his most attentive readers, Richard Woodhouse, as a “Personification of the Epic poet, when the enthusiasm of inspiration is upon him.”¹ Yet the charioteer’s sight of shapes of “delight” as well as “mystery” (138) and the narrowing of this array to a “lovely wreath of girls” (149) point to a devotion that Keats, for all his

commitment to “nobler life,” never casts off, and it involves his inability to finish the *Hyperion* project.

This tension between ambition and static introversion is anticipated in another poem of expectation, *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer* (1816). Long admired as a harbinger of Keats’s poetic powers, this sonnet has recently been read as the bid of a young parvenu poet, relatively lowborn, for a stake in literary tradition, eyeing, like a conquistador or a fortune-hunter, “the realms of gold . . . many goodly states and kingdoms . . . many western islands” (1–3) held by the established devotees of Apollo, god of poetry.² Marjorie Levinson (13–14) even sees in Keats’s final simile for his sensation on reading Chapman’s translation –

Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
 He star’d at the Pacific – and all his men
 Look’d at each other with a wild surmise –
 Silent, upon a peak in Darien. (11–14)

– a sympathy for the subordinate men. Yet not only does Keats’s overall syntax (“Then felt I like . . .”) propose a primary identification with Cortez, but also the image of conquest and command, of discovery and possession, is usurped by a final effect of suspended animation, a mental “high” with no reference to values or purposes beyond itself: “wild surmise – / Silent.” This is the “end-stopped” quality that John Jones (*John Keats’s Dream of Truth*) sees as Keats’s peculiar gift and, in certain respects, his problem.

The *Hyperion* project would become end-stopped composition on an epic scale, fully testing Keats’s ambitions, with triumph and ultimately frustration. His purposes were already formulated by January 1818. Answering Haydon’s request for a passage from *Endymion* for illustration (Keats’s publisher wanted it for a frontispiece), he advises him to wait for *Hyperion*, “the nature of [which] will lead me to treat it in a more naked and grecian Manner – and the march of passion and endeavour will be undeviating” (KL 1.207). Keats’s march would not be undeviating, but it would span virtually the whole of his great creative period (from *Isabella*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *La Belle Dame*, all the major odes, to *Lamia*). This was also a time of intense intellectual activity. He was reading and carefully annotating *Paradise Lost* from late 1817 on, and took Cary’s translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* with him on his Northern tour of summer 1818. This literary study was part of a sustained effort of exploration and insight that embraced wider aesthetic issues, current events, and the course of human affairs. Keats began *Hyperion* in fall 1818, abandoned it in mid-sentence by April 1819, began a reconstruction as *The Fall of Hyperion. A Dream* in July, completed most of all he would ever write of it by 21 September, and tinkered until the end

of the year. During these years his personal life involved the lingering illness and death of his beloved brother Tom (1 December 1818), a budding romance with Fanny Brawne (with whom he reached an “understanding” the same month), and the progression of his own eventually fatal illness.

While all these forces press on the composition of *Hyperion*, Keats's idiom is ancient (pre-Christian) myth on the stage of history and politics. His scene is the interval between the fall of most of the Titan gods and the impending fall of Hyperion in his confrontation with the Olympian successor, Apollo. The poem's opening is dominated by Saturn's “fallen divinity”: “His old right hand lay nerveless, listless, dead, / Unsceptred; and his realmless eyes were closed” (1.18–19). Keats coined “realmless” for this verse; when Saturn finally summons the power to speak, it is only to say as much:

– I am gone
Away from my own bosom: I have left
My strong identity, my real self,
Somewhere between the throne, and where I sit
Here on this spot of earth. Search, Thea, search!

Search, Thea, search! and tell me, if thou seest
A certain shape or shadow, making way
With wings or chariot fierce to repossess
A heaven he lost erewhile: it must
Be of ripe progress – Saturn must be King.
Yes, there must be golden victory. (1.112–116, 121–26)

Saturn's plight, proposes Morris Dickstein, draws “political resonance” from the virtual dethronement of “mad” George III (the prince became Regent in 1811) and the dawning of an era of civil unrest and agitation for parliamentary reform, reaching a climax in a militia attack on a peaceful demonstration at St. Peter's Fields, Manchester, August 1819 – a debacle dubbed “the Peterloo Massacre” by the reform press.³ Yet Keats's fallen gods, especially Hyperion, are not so much prospective as sunset figures – evoking Napoleon's escape from Elba, the Hundred Days of his restored reign, and his downfall at Waterloo in 1815.

Keats criticized Napoleon on the grounds that his aggressive militarism had spawned the reactionary forces which in 1815 were able to reinstate the old, pre-Revolutionary monarchies across Europe: “Notwithstand[ing] the part which the Liberals take in the Cause of Napoleon,” he writes to George and Georgiana, “I cannot but think he has done more harm to the life of Liberty than any one else could have done: not that the divine right Gentlemen have done or intend to do any good [. . .] he has taught them how

to organize their monstrous armies” (14 October 1818; *KL* 1.397). Keats’s critical regard of those he calls “Men of Power” (22 November 1817; *KL* 1.184) does not prevent an imaginative engagement. Saturn is a study of position coterminous with being: dead because “unsceptred”; bereft of “identity” because “realmless.” Like Shakespeare’s Lear, he must be King or he is nothing. Keats does give him an aura of grand pathos, but he emphasizes limitation and dangerous delusion. Saturn, like Napoleon on the road to Waterloo, can conceive of redemption only in the ironic form of renewed conflict and a return to domination, another “golden victory.” Men of Power are unable to change inwardly or to understand progress in the world outside.

Over against Men of Power, Keats sets “Men of Genius,” who influence humankind subtly and profoundly, dispensing enlightenment like “ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect” (*KL* 1.184). Keats uses similar terms of praise in his letter to Reynolds, 3 May 1818, in which he offers an idea of advance different from and more valuable than military conquest (1.281–82). This is “a grand march of intellect,” in which Milton and Wordsworth are leaders. Milton tried to assess vice and virtue for a people “just emancipated from a great superstition” (Roman Catholicism), but Wordsworth, the pioneer of modernity, shows a “Genius” for exploring the “dark passages” of individual human experience – for “think[ing] into the human heart” with no discernible “ballance of good and evil” but rather, a feel for the “burden of the Mystery” (a phrase Keats echoes from *Tintern Abbey*). Neither Wordsworth nor Milton operates with entire free will, however: “a mighty providence subdues the mightiest Minds to the service of the time being, whether it be in human Knowledge or Religion” (1.282). Keats’s anatomy of Power in the posture and utterance of Saturn is one way he himself serves “the time being.” Another is the voice he writes for Oceanus, who gives the council of fallen Titans a doctrine of progress meant to console them amid the ravages of violent change:⁴

We fall by Nature’s law, not force
Of thunder, or of Jove . . .

.

. . . to bear all naked truths,
And to envisage circumstance, all calm,
That is the top of sovereignty . . .

.

’tis the eternal law
That first in beauty should be first in might:

Yea, by that law, another race may drive
Our conquerors to mourn as we do now
(2.181-82, 203-5, 228-31)

Characterizing Saturn as “only blind from sheer supremacy,” Oceanus offers a far-seeing wisdom that makes comforting sense of revolution and war (mythic or European) in terms of evolutionary design: Nature’s law, “purer life” leading on to “fresh perfection” (2.211-12). This is not the only “truth” Keats auditions in *Hyperion*, but it does reflect a sense of history he himself expressed, reflecting on the Peterloo crisis, just before he abandoned the *Hyperion* project. Convinced anew that “All civiled countries become gradually more enlighten’d and there should be a continual change for the better” (*KL* 2.193), he rehearses the gains and reversals over the centuries in the efforts of the “Multitude” to throw off the “Tyranny” of kings and nobles. The restoration of “despotism” in the aftermath of the French Revolution, he suggests, is a only a temporary setback, the distress of which may rouse the cause of freedom:

our Courts [. . .] spread a horrid superstition against all innovation and improvement – The present struggle in England of the people is to destroy this superstition. What has rous’d them to do it is their distresses – Per[h]aps on this account the pres[ent] distresses of this nation are a fortunate thing – tho so horrid in the[i]r experience. You will see I mean that the french Revolution put a tempor[a]ry stop to this third change, the change for the better – Now it is in progress again and I thin[k] in an effectual one. This is no contest b[e]tween whig and tory – but between right and wrong.

(letter to George and Georgiana, 18 September 1819; *KL* 2.193-94)

Keats stood firmly on “the Liberal side of the Question” (22 September 1819; *KL* 2.180) – a Republican, anti-Monarchal view that subtends the arguments in *Hyperion* (voiced by Oceanus and figured in Apollo) that change is irresistible, beneficent, very much “for the better.”

In reviewing the grand march of intellect (*KL* 1.281-82), Keats took pains to praise Wordsworth’s poetic “Genius” over Milton’s “Philosophy.” Oceanus’s philosophy is decidedly un-Miltonic, because un-theological. Questions of good and evil, of vice and virtue, of moral action, of damnation or redemption from sin, do not figure in his account of universal destiny to progressive “perfection.” Take, for example, his key analogy:

Shall the tree be envious of the dove
Because it cooeth, and hath snowy wings
To wander wherewithal and find its joys?
We are such forest-trees, and our fair boughs
Have bred forth, not pale solitary doves,

But eagles golden-feather'd, who do tower
 Above us in their beauty, and must reign
 In right thereof. (2.221–28)

In a Christian lexicon, the snowy dove, a symbol of purity and reconciliation, is superior to imperious, golden eagles. But in Oceanus's lore, there is only the claim of towering "beauty." If Keats got this notion of progress from anywhere, it was not from Milton but from Wordsworth's Wanderer, in *The Excursion*, Book 7:

The vast Frame
 Of social nature changes evermore
 Her organs and her members, with decay
 Restless, and restless generation, powers
 And functions dying and produced at need, –
 And by this law the mighty Whole subsists:
 With an ascent and progress in the main.
 Yet oh! how disproportioned to the hopes
 Of self-flattering minds. (1814 text; 1033–41)

In the Oceanic conception, the Wanderer's "vast Frame / Of social nature" has been stretched to "Nature," but the theory is the same. Oceanus does not deny the suffering that progress or generation entails, still less *Hyperion* as a whole. What Keats most values in Wordsworth is his recognition "that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression," a weight of knowledge leaving us shrouded "in a Mist," feeling but not easily explaining "the burden of the Mystery" (*KL* 1.281).

Keats's preoccupation with suffering is reflected in other texts of the period. The sonnet he transcribed for his brothers on 23 January 1818, "On sitting Down to King Lear once Again," reports a drama of fate and desire, a "fierce dispute, / Betwixt Hell torment & impassioned Clay" (*KL* 1.215). In April 1819 he describes the world as a "vale of Soul-making": "how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul" (*KL* 2.102). *Hyperion* is a veritable gallery of studies in pain. Enceladus disputes Oceanus's philosophy not only by advocating a counter-revolution against the Olympians, but also by expressing a burden of feeling that cannot be simply rationalized or consoled: "Much pain have I for more than loss of realms: / The days of peace and slumberous calm are fled" (2.334–35). For the goddess Clymene, it is not the loss of the old and familiar that is unsettling, but the strangeness of the new: sensing the coming dispensation of Apollo, she hears in his "golden melody" a "living death in each gush of sounds," and so is "sick / Of joy and grief at once" (2.279–89). Keats sets all the Titans in a "nest of woe," unreduced in physical stature but, in pain, evacuated of dignity and the flow of life itself: "Instead of

thrones, hard flint they sat upon, / . . . / Their clenched teeth still clench'd, and all their limbs / Lock'd up like veins of metal, cramp't and screw'd" (2.14–15, 24–25). The epic landscape is invested with this presence of absence – starkly in the opening, a sonnet-stanza that situates us *in medias res*, Saturn's desolate paralysis imaged by the "shady sadness" of the "vale" that encloses him, his burden of grief by "Forest on forest hung above his head" (1.1–6). The vast scene telescopes to the detail of how "the Naiad 'mid her reeds / Press'd her cold finger closer to her lips" (13–14); elsewhere such fateful suspense is conveyed by long-distance shots, such as the dying splendor of Hyperion portrayed as "a vast shade / In midst of his own brightness" (2.372–73).

The theater of "giant agony" counters the force of Oceanus's philosophy, exposing the latter as an "over-wise" (as Enceladus thinks [2.309]) cerebral detachment from ordeal and tribulation. What the Oceanic argument for progress through "first in beauty" lacks in comparison with other epics (the founding of Rome in Vergil's *Aeneid*, the spiritual quests of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, Milton's account of the Fall, Wordsworth's story of the growth of a Poet's mind) is the element of narrative progression. In *Hyperion* the action is either over (the Olympian revolt) or to come (the confrontation of Apollo and Hyperion). Keats's poem is an interval of arrested reactions – soliloquy (Saturn), anxiety (Hyperion), and oration (Oceanus, Enceladus) – and emblematic posture or topography, often approximating statuary or painting. Thea evokes a "Memphian sphinx, / Pedestal'd haply in a palace court" (1.31–32); she and Saturn are "postured motionless, / Like natural sculpture in cathedral cavern" (1.85–86). What Keats achieves above all in *Hyperion* is the aestheticization of suffering.

This twilight of the early gods dramatizes feeling rather than action – and feeling takes a human form. Of Thea, Keats writes,

One hand she press'd upon that aching spot
Where beats the human heart, as if just there,
Though an immortal, she felt cruel pain. (1.42–44)

Keats's analogical syntax, "as if," conveys her from immortal to mortal sensations.⁵ So, too, the old patriarch Cœlus observes his children's "fall" into the state of mortals:

Now I behold in you fear, hope, and wrath;
Actions of rage and passion; even as
I see them, on the mortal world beneath,
In men who die. (1.332–35)

Yet even as Keats's myth evoked the mortal world, it allowed him to transmute it and set it at a distance (just as historical circumstance is both reflected

and deflected). By these means, he finds a way to make “Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty’s self” (1.36).

Keats worried about this detachment. It becomes a direct question in his revision, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and already stirs in *Hyperion*, by force of Keats’s nursing his dying brother as he was writing a poem whose title character has seen his brother-gods die, yet whose beautiful hero would emerge as a superior god of medicine and poetry. The image of Apollo at the end, just before Keats gave up, seems less a god being born than a man dying:

Soon wild commotions shook him, and made flush
 All the immortal fairness of his limbs;
 Most like the struggle at the gate of death;
 Or liker still to one who should take leave
 Of pale immortal death, and with a pang
 As hot as death’s is chill, with fierce convulse
 Die into life: so young Apollo anguish’d. (3.124–30)

Tom’s “identity presses upon me so all day that I am obliged to go out” or “obliged to write, and plunge into abstract images to ease myself of his countenance his voice and feebleness – so that I live now in a continual fever,” Keats confesses to Dilke on 21 September 1818, adding “it must be poisonous to life although I feel well” (KL 1.369). The next day, writing to Reynolds, he tries to forgive himself for “the relief, the feverous relief of Poetry”: “This morning Poetry has conquered – I have relapsed into those abstractions which are my only life – I feel escaped from a new strange and threatening sorrow. – And I am thankful for it – There is an awful warmth about my heart like a load of Immortality” (370).

Poetry was therapy, Geoffrey Hartman suggests; “translat[ing] the mortal facts into the sublimity and impersonality of myth.”⁶ Yet “relapsed,” “fever,” and “poisonous” expose an incomplete avoidance: is “Poetry” release or burden? glory or ruin? life or more hectic dis-ease? The sensation of “a load of Immortality” implies that writing *Hyperion* may overwhelm him, too. *Hyperion*, argues Stuart Sperry, is most deeply a projection of Keats’s turmoil and insecurity.⁷ Hyperion’s cry –

“O dreams of day and night!
 O monstrous forms! O effigies of pain!
 O spectres busy in a cold, cold gloom!

.
 Why do I know ye? why have I seen ye? why
 Is my eternal essence thus distraught
 To see and to behold these horrors new?” (1.227–29, 231–33)

– is a poet's vision into the dark underside of the imagination. Poetry may put specters at bay, but it also gives them substance to bear down, and in *The Fall of Hyperion* they do so on the poet himself. The letters Keats wrote while he was nursing Tom haunt Moneta's interrogation of the poet-visionary:

What benefit canst thou do, or all thy tribe,
To the great world? Thou art a dreaming thing;
A fever of thyself – (*Fall of Hyperion* 1.167–69)

Yet if *Hyperion* does not directly confront this challenge, it still has courageous objectives. Keats's attempt to revivify the epic subjects of divinity and the war in heaven fronts a powerful, if unconscious, urge to allegorize, and induce, the supersession of one kind of poetry by another. Saturn bears marks of fallen dynasts Napoleon and Lear, but he is also a poetic figure, a personification of Wordsworth in the aspect in which Keats did not warm to him: "the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime" (27 October 1818; *KL* 1.386–87). Transfixed by "my strong identity, my real self" (1.114), Saturn embodies the sublime egotism that for Keats was the antitype of "the poetical Character" of which he declared himself "a Member" as he was writing *Hyperion*: "A Poet [. . .] has no Identity – he is continually in for – and filling some other Body" (*KL* 1.387). Another egotist is Byron, the likely referent of the poet-dreamer's attack in *The Fall* on "all mock lyricists, large self worshippers" (1.207). In both poems, Keats implicitly displaces the poetic titans of his own age, arguing, through the deification of Apollo, for a Shakespearean "*Negative Capability*," a notion formulated in late 1817 (*KL* 1.193) of disinterested poetic consciousness.

Yet in Apollo's voice at the breaking-off point of *Hyperion*, this language sounds attenuated, or merely theoretical:

Knowledge enormous makes a God of me.
Names, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions,
Majesties, sovran voices, agonies,
Creations and destroyings, all at once
Pour into the wide hollows of my brain,
And deify me, as if some blithe wine
Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk,
And so become immortal. (3.113–19)

The climactic language of Apollo's dying-into-life bears visionary promise, but it cannot support the weight of significance placed upon it. And what of its basis, the scene of Apollo's generation at the opening of Book III? This is a paradise of intense rose-glow, voluptuous fleecy clouds, breathing Zephyrs, blushing maids, and bubbling wine (15ff), where "pain and pleasure" blend

in an atmosphere of “tuneful wonder” (66–67) – and where, to quote Keats on the “intensity” of art, “all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty” (*KL* 1.192). How convincing is the sunrise sensibility that is being heralded?

The question is partly one of aesthetic force: in Books I and II, Keats’s poetry had empathized richly and powerfully with the fallen gods, as if they were bearing his feeling for “the overpowering idea of our dead poets” (9 June 1819; *KL* 2.116), and more particularly, for his dying brother. Breaking off *Hyperion* less than twenty lines after Apollo’s declaration of his immortality, Keats seems to have recognized that this poetry was not producing any “mighty poet of the human Heart” (*KL* 2.115) – especially compared to the poetry he had written for Saturn and Hyperion. More than a few readers have seen Book III as a regression to earlier idioms. Recall the problem with the charioteer’s vision in *Sleep and Poetry*, where epic inspirations dissolve into figures of sensuous delight. The supposed transformation of Apollo from “ignorance” into “power” does not escape this idiom: “wild commotions shook him, and made flush / All the immortal fairness of his limbs,” and “His very hair, his golden tresses famed, / Kept undulation round his eager neck” (3.124–25, 131–32). When Keats wrote to Reynolds on 22 September 1818, he named two pressures that gripped him as he worked on *Hyperion*: “Poor Tom – that woman”: “I never was in love – Yet the voice and the shape of a woman has haunted me these two days” (*KL* 1.370). Apollo enacts both the suffering of a dying body and a fascination with a woman, as his “enkindled eyes . . . / . . . steadfast kept / Trembling” upon the beautiful goddess, Mnemosyne. If this moment is supposed to convey a turning-point in the progress of poesy and the cultural history of humankind, it also seems orgasmic fantasy. Climax vies with anticlimax, transcendence with banal embodiment.

No wonder that Keats’s re-vision, *The Fall of Hyperion*, becomes a psychomachia, or mind-debate, about the function and value of poetry. It is frankly cast as *A Dream* (the subtitle), the very mode of disordered logic and progression. In the first paragraph (the induction), the poet argues that poetry alone “can save / Imagination from the sable charm / And dumb enchantment” (1.9–11). Anyone with “soul” can have “visions,” but only those with command of language, who have “lov’d / And been well nurtured in [their] mother tongue” (14–15), may tell them into poetry. Yet for all this, Keats’s dreamer-poet will soon concede the greater power of practical philanthropists, “Who love their fellows even to the death; / . . . / And more, like slaves to poor humanity, / Labour for mortal good” (156–59). While “less than they” (166), poets are still superior to (if not happier than) the “thoughtless,” who “sleep away their days” in ignorance (150–51). Indeed,

the reason this dreamer-poet has been permitted to approach Moneta's shrine and share her anguished visions of the fall of the Titans is that poets are ones for whom "the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest" (149–50). Poets are priest-kings, bearing the ills of the tribe, suffering in the service of a collective well-being.

This must be what Keats has in mind when the protagonist talks of his "sickness not ignoble" (176) and Moneta addresses him as one carrying "more woe than all his sins deserve" (184). In this image we glimpse a figure at once Christ-like and scapegoat. Throughout the new, preliminary verse, the conception of the poetical character and its station swings between positive and negative poles. Moneta voices Keats's misgivings. Is the gift of imagination more truly a curse, a "fever" (1.169) of the self? How are genuine poets to be known from pseudo-poets or futile "dreamers"?

– "Art thou not of the dreamer tribe?
The poet and the dreamer are distinct,
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.
The one pours out a balm upon the world,
The other vexes it." (1.198–202)

There may be something to be said for "vexing" the world, for unsettling it, being the irritant in the oyster – but only as part of therapy or cure. Keats's poet-protagonist wishes to be a bearer of wisdom, beneficence, and healing, arguing in advance of Moneta's challenge (above):

sure a poet is a sage;
A humanist, physician to all men.
That I am none I feel, as vultures feel
They are no birds when eagles are abroad. (1.189–92)

This self-deprecation signifies no impotent surrender, but a reach for a fresh start, perhaps even at the expense of the status quo. Eagles are predators; vultures are carrion-feeders: do these images expose aggressive poetic ambition? (Recall Cortez's "eagle eyes.") Keats's argument for the poet as humanist finds some tension with this vehicle of expression.

How far does *The Fall of Hyperion* keep with its own picture of the ideal poet? The issue at stake is a serious, and pervasive (male) Romantic preoccupation, and as Paul Sheats has shown, Keats sought to train his sensuousness of style to "an artistic self-discipline that was ethical and philosophic in its authority."⁸ Such discipline pervades *The Fall* and invests the religious aura of its rites of initiation, which take place in an "old sanctuary" before an "altar" spread with "lofty sacrificial fire" (1.62, 93, 103). The birth of poetic power that had been rendered in *Hyperion* as the agony of Apollo is now recast as the human poet-dreamer's trial by agony, as he experiences, in

advance of seeing gods die, the sensation, on his pulses, of his own death. Challenged to ascend Moneta's altar-steps, he finds "hard task" and "prodigious toil" (120–21). Apollo's orgasmic transformation is now a human poet's entry into a new order of perception, taking him upwards from the earthly to the divine plane:

I shriek'd; and the sharp anguish of my shriek
 Stung my own ears – I strove hard to escape
 The numbness; strove to gain the lowest step.
 Slow, heavy, deadly was my pace: the cold
 Grew stifling, suffocating, at the heart;
 And when I clasp'd my hands I felt them not.
 One minute before death, my iced foot touch'd
 The lowest stair; and as it touch'd, life seem'd
 To pour in at the toes: I mounted up,
 As once fair angels on the ladder flew
 From the green turf to heaven. – (1.126–36)

In this drama of life recovered from near death, we see what Sheats means by Keats's effort to draw the "intensity" of "concrete particulars" into "logical, thematic, or moral significance" (235). Having survived this ordeal, the poet is immediately rewarded, or cursed, when Moneta unveils her face to him:

Then saw I a wan face,
 Not pin'd by human sorrows, but bright blanch'd
 By an immortal sickness which kills not;
 It works a constant change, which happy death
 Can put no end to; deathwards progressing
 To no death was that visage; it had pass'd
 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.
 They held me back, with a benignant light,

 they saw me not,
 But in blank splendour beam'd like the mild moon,
 Who comforts those she sees not . . . knows not.
 (1.256–56, 268–70)

This iconography is etched with dying Tom, Christ, King of Sorrows, and the Madonna, eternally mourning, forever the compassionate intercessor. Keats's imagery permeates the literal with the spiritual, but it does not console or spread a "balm" upon the world. Eternally suffering, with no cure and no release, the "high tragedy" of the Titans' fall forever plays in the wide

hollows of Moneta's brain (276–77). It is this realm of suffering (her eternal vale of soul-making), and not Milton's Christian structures of understanding, into which Keats's dreamer-poet steps – back into the “giant agony” (157) of the Titans.

This greater and deeper purpose is the antithesis of any story of progress. Having entered Moneta's vision, the poet-dreamer's imagination is arrested by, and absorbed by, his subject. He beholds Saturn and Thea:

Long, long, these two were postured motionless,
Like sculpture builded up upon the grave
Of their own power. A long awful time
I look'd upon them; still they were the same;
The frozen God still bending to the earth,
And the sad Goddess weeping at his feet;
Moneta silent. Without stay or prop,
But my own weak mortality, I bore
The load of this eternal quietude,
The unchanging gloom and the three fixed shapes
Ponderous upon my senses, a whole moon.
For by my burning brain I measured sure
Her silver seasons shedded on the night,
And ever day by day methought I grew
More gaunt and ghostly. Oftentimes I pray'd
Intense, that death would take me from the vale
And all its burthens. Gaspng with despair
Of change, hour after hour I curs'd myself:
Until old Saturn rais'd his faded eyes, . . . (1.382–400)

Is this a poet's vale of soul-making, or its impossibility? As an appositive to the “three fixed shapes,” “the whole moon,” suggests Hartman (9), marks both a temporal cycle and the totality of the numinous trinity. Keats is arrested in the moonlight zone of more-than-human forms, able to bear their weight for a while, but fated, “ever day by day,” to be crushed, as the load of immortality becomes overload. How ironic that the young poet whose chosen task is, at one level, to revivify the old deities, to make the sculptures live, is repaid with the threat of extinction, or something worse – a lingering non-existence, “spectre-thin” (*Ode to a Nightingale* 25), “gaunt and ghostly,” from which death is a release devoutly to be wished.

Does Keats's problem lie with the effort of trying to release what is ineluctably turned to stone or with the power of the mythic to refuse, and thereby overwhelm, his authority? Either way, the effect is the same: unmediated (Moneta herself falls silent as a stone), the supernatural will squeeze the life out of you. Entering the realm of myth in *The Fall*, the poet is confident of

his command, claiming the disposition of “an eagle’s watch” and the Apollonian endowment of “enormous ken, / To see as a God sees” (1.303–5). Here Keats retrieves the text of *Hyperion* (1.310ff), yet not to see as a God sees, but as a human being. At the beginning of Canto II, a voice (the poet’s or Moneta’s?) offers to mediate to this end:

Mortal, that thou may’st understand aright,
I humanize my sayings to thine ear,
Making comparisons of earthly things . . . (2.1–3)

But this is to get things the wrong way round. Only through turning the epic of gods into a drama of human feelings can Keats make headway.

To humanize the supernatural is to give it relevance and to put a curb upon it – ultimately, to return it to rest. Keats’s revisions point in this direction. He tones down the epic similes, writes in a style less Miltonic, more Shakespearean. Saturn’s speech is now “psychologically [. . .] truer,” says Kenneth Muir; “Saturn is humanized, because [. . .] his sorrows are a reflection of the sorrows of humanity” (228). Muir approves of Keats’s excision of Saturn’s hope for success in a second war (“it must / Be of ripe progress – Saturn must be King” [*Hyperion* 1.125–26]), since “it is the new gods alone that stand for progress” (228). Yet Saturn was psychologically true in the self-enclosed desperation of the original outburst, which Keats’s revision retains. Raging, “There is no death in all the universe, / . . . there shall be death,” the Saturn of *The Fall* confesses impotence: “I have no strength left” (1.423–27). The revision is a more direct expression of inward desolation, its human witness imagining he has heard “some old man of the earth / Bewailing earthly loss” (440–41).

The suggestion at the beginning of Canto II, that “comparisons of earthly things” exist for the sake of rendering comprehensible a “legend-laden” noise (2.3–5), sits uneasily with Keats’s strong interest in the human itself, and perhaps betrays in him an uncertain position between dedication to the natural and the supernatural, drama and myth. This quandary may have contributed to his abandoning the poem.

Muir and others think he stopped writing because he had already used up his climax in Canto I: a human poet preempting the agonizing transformation reserved for Apollo in *Hyperion*. Yet Keats’s own explanation was that *The Fall* was still too Miltonic: “there were too many Miltonic inversions in it,” he wrote to Reynolds on 21 September 1819, referring to the Latinate syntax that he thought interfered with “the true voice of feeling.” “Miltonic verse cannot be written but in an artful or artist’s humour,” he concluded, adding, “I wish to give myself up to other sensations. English ought to be kept up” (*KL* 2.167). Three days later, he wrote in a similar vein to George and Georgiana Keats:

The Paradise lost though so fine in itself is a curruption of our Language – it should be kept as it is unique – a curiosity. a beautiful and grand Curiosity. The most remarkable Production of the world – A northern dialect accommodat- ing itself to greek and latin inversions and intonations. [. . .] I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written but i[n] the vein of art – I wish to devote myself to another sensation –
(KL 2.212)

There is more at issue here than Latinate constructions. The reference to stylistic manner screens a deeper anxiety: the specter of belatedness and mere imitative posturing, and therefore of defeat, in relation to his rival forebear – the phrase “on my guard” letting slip both the fact of a contest and Keats’s defensiveness. Battling on Milton’s ground, Keats stares “death” in the face. It is no coincidence that the poet’s dream in *The Fall* begins in the leftovers of the repast enjoyed by Adam, Eve, and Raphael in Milton’s Paradise: “refuse of a meal / By angel tasted, or our mother Eve,” “empty shells,” “remnants” – “whose *pure kinds* I could not know” (1.30–34, my italics; cf. *Paradise Lost* 5.341–49).

At the same time, death to Milton releases Keatsian poetic life. One of its pulses is Keats’s zeal for “keeping up” English, a devotion he elaborates with reference to Chatterton, “the purest writer in the English Language [. . .] genuine English Idiom in English words” (KL 2.167, cf. 2.212). Another is an embrace of “other sensations.” Keats set aside the *Hyperion* project not only in defeat but for these purposes as well. He was conscious of having achieved them in another poem, about a fall with a difference. The letter to Reynolds of 21 September is the same that mentions some recent lines on the seasonal landscape of England. This was *To Autumn*, a pursuit of unadulterated English, with echoes not only of Chatterton but also of Thomson and Coleridge, and words such as “oozings” or “plump.” The “sensations” aspire to perfect transcendence. One strain is a subsuming of the Peterloo crisis (the month before), so that, for example, the images of “conspiring,” “cells,” laboring “bees” are at once the trace and the forgetting of politics and history; while in the same way, the absence of an “I” or the genderless figure of Autumn imply the artist’s conquest of subjectivity (even as the poet himself was agonizing over Fanny Brawne). *To Autumn* affirms the abundance and unfailing beauty of nature, where transience and death join a perpetual cycle; it is a redemptive “fiction,” a myth of naturalness that has become a cultural icon.⁹ It is here, if anywhere, that Keats fulfils his ideal poetic function – a physician, pouring a balm upon the world. *To Autumn* stands at the opposite Romantic pole from *Hyperion* and *The Fall*. It is a triumph of lyrical completeness, organically unified, “in midst of other woe . . . a friend to man,” as Keats wrote of the power of art in *Ode on a Grecian*

Urn (47–48). Yet if the *Hyperion* project would remain a fragment, baffled and baffling, it was also a monumental, and deeply honest, failure whose abandonment can paradoxically be seen, in D. G. James's words, as "the greatest achievement of Romanticism; in it the Romantic mind beheld its own perplexity and condemned itself."¹⁰

NOTES

- 1 See Stuart M. Sperry, Jr., "Richard Woodhouse's Interleaved and Annotated Copy of Keats's *Poems* (1817)," *Literary Monographs I*, ed. Eric Rothstein and Thomas K. Dunseath (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), 154.
- 2 See Marjorie Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style*, 11–15; and my "Keats, History, and the Poets," 183–85.
- 3 Morris Dickstein, "Keats and Politics," 180. See also Alan Bewell's essay, in the same forum.
- 4 See, for example, Kenneth Muir, "The Meaning of *Hyperion*" (1958); rpt. John Spencer Hill, ed., *Keats: Narrative Poems*, 213; Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 151–54; my "Keats, History," 179–82. For views of Keats's ironic or dramatic distance on this voice of reasoned consolation, see Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, 184–86, and Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry*, 256–59.
- 5 See Stuart Ende's discussion of this effect throughout the poem (108–9, 158–9).
- 6 Geoffrey Hartman, "Spectral Symbolism and the Authorial Self: An Approach to *Hyperion*," *Essays in Criticism* 24 (1974), 6.
- 7 Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, 187–93; cf. Keats's own confessions: to Fanny Brawne he described his mind (after his own first serious hemorrhage) as "the most discontented and restless" (March [?] 1820; *KL* 2.275) and to James Rice as a melting-pot of "haunting [. . .] thoughts and feelings" (14, 16 February 1820; *KL* 2.259).
- 8 Sheats, "Stylistic Discipline in *The Fall of Hyperion*" (1968), 76; rpt. Hill, *Narrative Poems*, 234.
- 9 Geoffrey Hartman, "Poem and Ideology: A Study of Keats's 'To Autumn,'" *The Fate of Reading*; see also John Barnard, *John Keats*, 140. For the poem's qualified traces of politics and history, see my "Keats, History," 185–90. For the poem's more precarious perfections, see Wolfson, *Questioning Presence*, 362–67.
- 10 D. G. James, *The Romantic Comedy* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), 126.

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