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FROM EROTICISM TO PSYCHO-AESTHETICS AND SPIRITUALITY: THE KEATSIAN DIMENSIONS

This paper focuses on Keats's eroticism, psycho-somatic aesthetics and spirituality. Sublimation, as a positive aesthetic channelling of longing and desire, can lead to intense intellectual as well as spiritual contemplation and productivity. Keats's poetry and prose do not only serve as a psycho-aesthetic function, but also trigger a sublime and spiritual awareness, which should be the goal of the positive redirection of sexual energy. The erotic aspect of his life is inextricably intertwined with his epistemological and ontological speculations. In fact, when Keats talks about the truth of the imagination — "What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth — whether it existed before or not, — for I have the same idea of all our passions as of Love: they are all, in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty" — we understand that it is only through the concrete that the spiritual can be apprehended. Associating the imagination with the "sublime" and "essential Beauty" is an advancement from the corporeality or phenomenality of love. We are here dealing with texts as an expression of Keats's erotic life and his presentation of the female, his effeminacy or his androgynous self. Within this framework, we are also going to comment briefly on the question of gender and feminist politics. It should be stressed that some work has already been done in this domain, that is, engaged in positive readings of Keats's erotic and sexual politics, by critics like Stuart Sperry, John Barnard and Christoph Bode, for example.⁶

One of the most intriguing things about Keats's life is his sexuality. In fact, there seem to be more implicit or explicit inferences from his works rather than tangible biographical information from the rich sources that exist. There is no evidence, as of now, which testifies that Keats had any physical contact (sexual and erotic relationship) with Fanny Brawne or any other woman in whom he had interest. His sexual and erotic life is therefore

⁶ These critics in their respect works have underscored positive aspects of Keats's love poetry, commenting generally on a number of poems that exemplify the poet's erotic and sensuous yearnings. They see the poet as having appropriately sublimated his longings into lasting art.

blurred,⁷ or perhaps mysterious, if at all he really had one, except through aesthetic self-textualising. This explains why his texts tend to be the referential points of any discussion in this domain. And though we can say that Keats's epistolary and poetic pieces are self-referential or self-representational, they go beyond this definition as they transcribe his search for ultimate love and Beauty through human relationships.

The question of gender, especially femininity and effeminacy, or more appropriately the androgynous, is particularly interesting in Keats's case. The poetic muse and his quest for the ideal are both connected with the feminine image. The intriguing question is to determine to what ends the poet's representations take one; or, how do we understand Keats's regard for women; and how does it challenge stereotypical views on him? Finally, how does his aestheticism in this domain engender spirituality. In *Romanticism and Gender* (1993), Anne Mellor has commented on what she refers to as Keats and the ambiguity of gender. She contends that

Keats's ambivalent attitude toward gender infiltrates his poetry as well as his letters. On the one hand Keats repeatedly assigns to the feminine gender the possession of beauty, power and knowledge, everything that the male poet yearns to possess. On the other hand, he anxiously tries to establish a space between the male poet and the female object of desire, a space where the poet can preserve a recognisable masculinity. (181)

⁷ Robert Gittings's seminal biography of the poet, *John Keats* (1968), provides some useful but controversial material on Keats's sexual life. In Appendix 3 (446–50), he discusses Keats's possible venereal disease, raising conjectural objections to the myth, which states that the poet's promiscuity in Oxford earned him either syphilis or gonorrhoea. The most interesting objection is that Keats was a virgin and could not have caught a venereal disease. When we examine a poem like "Women, Wine, and Snuff," we are left with more perplexity rather than clarity over the issue:

GIVE me women, wine, and snuff

.....
Till the day of resurrection;
For bless my beard they aye shall be
My beloved trinity.

As to determine whether these lines delineate Keats's creed of a strong erotic and sensual life, or whether they are a parody of the Christian resurrection and the Trinity, is very complicated. Yet, no matter what direction Keats's eroticism is read, it is arguable that the poet always struggles to depart corporeality from the sublime or spiritual.

This contention shows the complexity of gender discourse in the poet, and shares similar concerns with those held by Elizabeth Bronfen and James Heffernan. Bronfen's *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (1992) adopts a feminine perspective with specific regards to Keats's "The Eve of St. Agnes." Contending from a biographical level, she argues that Keats's many letters in which he longs to possess both Fanny and death suggest his sexualised relationship to a feminised death. She stresses that the female body's association with the universal condition of mortality is made possible because the woman, as the object of man's desire, stands by the side of death and she so often serves as a non-reciprocal "dead" figure of imaginary projection (62). Madeline, she intimates, can be interpreted as staging an aesthetic allegory of speaking death. Bronfen brings in an interesting gender issue:

Staging disembodiment as a form of escaping personal and social constraints serves to criticise those cultural attitudes that reduce the feminine body to the position of dependency and passivity, to the vulnerable object of sexual incursions. (142)

Here again, the image of the woman is seen as a simple quality for masculine authority and power. Heffernan's *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis* (1993) asserts that Madeline as a self-inscribed figure of art necessitates the poem to be read as an *ekphrastic* poem that accounts for the authority that Madeline invests in her aesthetic self-representation, and the ambivalent way in which the male poet engages with a feminised object of art. To Heffernan, the contest that *ekphrasis* stages is often powerfully gendered: the expression of a duel between male and female gazes, the voice of male speech striving to control a female image that is both alluring and threatening, of male narrative trying to overcome the fixating impact of beauty poised in space (1). With regard to the poem, the contest can be interpreted at two levels: textually, between Porphyro and Madeline, and extra-textually, between the poet and Madeline. Though we cannot go in these pages into the details of Heffernan's analysis, what is important to note is the ques-

tion of ambiguity and his conviction that the woman surrenders to male dominance at the end.

Our interest is neither in the conflict between the sexes, or in the supposed ambiguity in the poet's presentation. We will attempt here to see the feminine and masculine as mutually inclusive. This may account for our recourse to the middle path, *i. e.* understanding gender discourse in the poet not in terms of ambiguity, but rather in terms of the effeminate or androgynous quality that constitutes his psychology. With this view then, it becomes appropriate to strike a balance between the female and male gender in the poetic and epistolary expression of the poet.

With the notable exception of Apollo, the rest of aesthetic influences with regard to the question of the female image, are represented by the women. Pan, Maia, Psyche, Autumn, Melancholy, Indolence, Phoebe, Moneta, and... Fanny Brawne are all female representations that powerfully lurk in Keats's mind. Mellor's assertion can be right as far as we have to understand the poet as seeing the female as a significant representation of beauty, power and knowledge. But the fact that Keats departs from this in trying to create a space for his masculinity sounds problematic, because his broodings show a persistent negotiation between the sexes, with perhaps more emphasis on the female rather than the male self. Let us take the example of Brawne.⁸ Keats wrote her thirty-nine love letters, and a series of poems. And as aforementioned, some of these demonstrate a desire to depart from the erotic and the sexual. The paradox about his unfulfilled tempestuous passion for this woman is that it enriched his aesthetic, philosophical and spiritual attitude to life and experience. Three of Keats's letters attract critical attention in the direction of our argument. These are letters addressed to Fanny and Charles Brown. The first missive to Fanny, dated 13 October 1819, is a subtle mixture of love and religion:

⁸ There is still much controversy about the character of Fanny Brawne, especially her attitude towards Keats. A good number of Keats's letters indicate that there was a correspondence between the two of them. But, there are no letters yet available that justify Brawne's side of the debate. This notwithstanding, there is evidence that Fanny wrote Keats's sister Frances a series of letters, published by Oxford University Press (1937), in which she confessed her interest and even love for the poet. This can help in the re-evaluation of Keats's supposed obsession with Fanny, given that he must have been encouraged by her.

You have absorb'd me. I have a sensation at the present moment as though I was dissolving – I should be exquisitely miserable without the hope of seeing you soon . . . I have been astonished that Men could die Martyrs for religion – I have shudder'd at it. I shudder no more – I could be martyr'd for my Religion – Love is my religion – I could die for that. I could die for you. My Creed is Love and you are its only tenet. (*Keats* 519)

This letter can give enough room for one to accuse Keats of overusing religious terminology in his erotic and sexual poetics. Absorbing and dissolving are taken to stand for a strong adherence to corporeality and nothing else, but they could go further than that. Our conviction here is that there should be nothing wrong in expressing a sense of religion that is limited with his imaging of Brawne, who, as a feminine principle, influences a great part of his psyche and aesthetics. Our readings show that whenever there is mention of Keats's aestheticism, there is always the possible reading of the sublime and the spiritual, given that his aestheticism always points at the spiritual. The paradox is even greater if one contends that spirituality always involves a feminine undertone, or a female principle. But is Keats trying to distract any attempt to see himself as going beyond the bounds of physical love, or is he contributing to that, however difficult it is?

In the next letter, also addressed to Fanny, he says, "I long to believe in immortality. I shall never be able to bid you an entire farewell. If I am destined to be happy with you here – how short is the longest Life. I wish to believe in immortality – I wish to live with you for ever." To Brown, he confesses about Fanny: "My imagination is horribly vivid about her." It is not clear whether the poet is referring to a mundane immortality with his love or to something else. So the realm in which this immortality is desired is not expressly stated. But if we take a close look at his attempt to spiritualise, we notice that the poet means something far beyond the simplicity of love. This leads to an important observation. 1819 and 1820 were the years during which he showed a great maturity in aesthetic and spiritual consciousness. He wrote all his love letters as well as poems that were directly concerned with Fanny during this period. Though they demonstrate a strong sense of erotic and sexual longing, they should not be taken as subversive or aver-

sive to his spiritual quest. They do not reflect a contradiction, but the expression of a complexity. Poems like “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn” are not unconnected with human passion, but they express a strong desire for transcendence. As we shall see with a few of his poems, Keats’s unrequited love and emotional starvation is paradoxically a gift and a necessity to the poet’s understanding of life’s deeper meaning. Fanny as a female image is a source of inspiration, a poetic symbol, a repository not only of phenomenal, but of ideal Beauty as well. As a feminine symbol, she is part of the poet’s creative psyche and she psycho-aesthetically complements his masculinity.

“Lines to Fanny” is one of the so-called minor poems of Keats that can trigger interesting critical commentary. It grapples with creative day-dreaming as a positive psycho-aesthetic measure, related with sublimation. Keats is very direct, for he conceals nothing about his feelings for Fanny. The persistent question is whether poetic transcription is a mere re-affirmation of his unrequited longing, or if it plays a positive role in assuaging his erotic tension. The position here is that it obviously plays a therapeutic role, since the transforming of his erotic desire into aesthetic creativity suggests a modified frame of mind. In the first stanza, Keats connects his longing with retrospection and introspection:

WHAT can I do to drive away
Remembrance from my eyes? for they have seen,
Aye, [but] an hour ago, my brilliant Queen!
Touch has a memory. O say, love, say,
What can I do to kill it and be free
In my old liberty?

.....
My muse had wings,
And ever ready was to take her course
Whither I bent her force,
Unintellectual, yet divine to me; - Divine I say!
(L 1-7; 11-15)

Keats’s characteristic questioning attitude is very intriguing. The first impression one may have is that he wants to be free from the object of his affections. But the situation seems to be more complex than what is suggest-

ed by its implied simplicity. This is a typical situation of poetic day-dreaming, with the absent lover serving as inspiration, delineating the poet as paradoxically running away from what he desires. The question of remembrance and seeing does not presuppose the actual sight of the poet, but mental images, or mental mirroring of what is not there. He is inextricably bound to love, whose touch and memory cannot be wiped out from both the conscious and subconscious mind but can be surmounted. With regard to the muse, the poem is primarily inspired by the one to whom it is addressed. Yet, Keats talks about another muse, whom he associates with divinity. Whatever this second muse represents, it is also associated with the female principle, and can be taken as a transcendental surrogate for Fanny. The poet continues with his longing for a new orientation that is superior to love:

How shall I do
To get anew
Those moulted feathers, and so mount once more
Above, above
The reach of fluttering love,
And make him cover lowly while I soar?
Shall I gulp wine?
No, that is vulgarism,
A heresy and schism,
Foisted into the canon-law of love; —
No, — wine is only sweet to happy men;
More dismal cares Seize on me unawares, —
Where shall I learn to get my peace again?
(L 18-30)

These lines are very suggestive and continuously point at a dire need to depart from mundane love and move to a more intense aestheticism and perhaps spirituality. “Those moulted feathers” underscore a mythical reference, that is, the myth of Icarus and Dedalus. The desire to soar above fluttering love and the determination to do so but not through vulgar means, despite a recurrent temptation, is a pointer to a positive vision. The last stanza captures the same issue, showing the poet caught between erotic desires and the resolution to abandon or transcend them for a superior engagement: “Enough! Enough! It is enough for me / To dream of thee.” There is no real

sign of frustration in this poem, and the poet's / Keats's decision for a new orientation is an added mark on the text itself and a medium through which he can positively come to terms with his love problems. Going back to the issue of gender poetics, one can say that Keats does not conceive masculinity as absorbing femininity to increase its power. Rather, masculinity seems to be unstable or dangling without the female principle. Therefore, this means that both are mutually inclusive of an inevitable androgynous self.

For more textual evidence to the argument, we are going to briefly discuss "The Eve of St. Agnes," and *Endymion*.⁹ The ongoing critical debate on "The Eve of St. Agnes" has problematised the question as to whether the poem should be read as a spiritual affirmation of the erotic, as an expression of auto-eroticism, or as a manifestation of erotic and spiritual futility.¹⁰ Besides, the poem has also insistently conjured up the question of gender. The stance taken here recognises the strength of the phenomenal nature of eroticism, but proposes to re-affirm the contention that the attempt to transcend the limitations of the materiality of the erotic to a spiritual realm, confirms part of Keats's understanding of the ontology of the imagination.

⁹ We should be reminded that poems like "Lamia," "Isabella," and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" have quite often been read as antitheses to "The Eve of St. Agnes" and even *Endymion*. The contention here is that these poems' engagements (with the exception of "Isabella") are dominantly on the mundane side of love with no authentic spiritual affirmation. This should not necessarily be taken as self-referential. Keats's choices might as well be didactic rather than deconstructionist or self-destabilising.

¹⁰ Jack Stillinger, in "The Hoodwinking of Madeline," rightly dismisses the question of religion or spirituality, comparing the plight of Madeline with that of the Knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci" and Lycius's in "Lamia." Similar views have been aired out by Tilottama Rajan, "Threshold of Tragedy" 97-140, *Dark Interpreter: The Discourse of Romanticism* (1980). Her deconstructionist contention is that the poem cannot be a central exemplification of Keats's idealist poetics. Her assertion echoes that of Herbert Wright, whose rhetorical question (the very title of his essay) "Has Keats's 'Eve of St. Agnes' a Tragic End?" contends that all of his romances have a tragic resonance. Mark Sandy's "Dream Lovers and Tragic Romance: Negative Fictions in Keats's *Lamia*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, and *Isabella*," *Romanticism on the Net* (2002), extends Rajan's convictions. With regard to the lovers in the narratives, he holds that such lovers' struggles against mutability are constantly tested by tragic realisations and the often suffocating infertility that their self-imposed isolation produces. He affirms that Keats's lovers remain forever on the verge of regeneration and the unregenerated, eternally suspended like the unconsummated couple on the Grecian urn or the sculpted dead of "The Eve of St. Agnes."

This poem presents a complex mixture of the expectations of the ritual involved on the eve of St. Agnes and the journey of Porphyro to win the heart of his love. We have established that it negotiates between the worldly and the spiritual, and tends to place emphasis on the latter, even if it is difficult to come by. There is no doubt that the background and atmosphere under which the romance is set is Gothic and points at signs of danger and uncertainty (Stanzas I, X, and XII). But limiting interpretation in this domain, with the assertion of futility and tragedy, may sound too simplistic. This atmosphere justly represents the phenomenal reality which cannot be taken as a repository of spiritual illusions. The atmosphere does not mean that spiritual possibility is not inherent or feasible.

Keats's choice of romance needs a close examination with regard to this issue. Preferring a story line which delineates ease and simplicity in erotic and spiritual matters must not have been in line with his world vision and partly contributed to his own bitter but enriching experiences. Therefore, his narrative choice does not actually aim at failure, but from a hermeneutic perspective, aims at the difficulty and complexity that involves any serious aesthetic and spiritual engagement. Difficulty and complexity hardly mean impossibility. Porphyro does not have an easy task in getting into Madeline's chamber, nor is her vision so simply and clearly rendered or apprehended. This is a positive rather than a negative aspect of the story. Again, using a legend which associates love, marriage and spirituality must not have been coincidental for the poet, for such a story is far from being a parody or a banality on religion.

We will now comment on those specific instances that substantiate the argument, focusing on a series of questions. Some include: Why does Porphyro chose to come on the same day that Madeline has to undergo her dream ritual? What are his intentions? Of whom does Madeline dream and what is the difference between her sleep dream and her waking dream? If she dreams of Porphyro, is it because he is present in her chamber, or does this point to a holy or divine sanction? What makes the ending suggest a positive resonance on the part of the lovers? How does the romance portray Keats's imaginative dramatisation of the subtle intricacies involved in love?

Porphyro is not new to the castle: he has been wooing Madeline and Angela, at least, knows him. He knows it is St. Agnes Eve, but his coming is not obviously meant to compel Madeline to dream about him, and besides, there is no indication that she is expecting him. In fact, Angela brings to his attention that Madeline prays for him every day and night ("Whose prayers for thee, each morn and evening, / Were never miss'd," Stanza XVIII), which suggests her deep devotion for him. Porphyro has no evil intention: he implores all saints to enable him to have sight of Madeline. He wants to worship her beauty and if possible touch and kiss her (Stanza IX). And when he is reprimanded by Angela for his unruly behaviour, he assures her that he has no desire to hurt the very object of his love (Stanzas XVI and XVII). The idea proposed by Jack Stillinger according to whom he is dangerous, unheroic and even a rapist is therefore unfair. Like any other love seeker's, his intentions sound normal, and his use of religious terminology does not imply an abuse of religion.

The most important instances are those of Madeline's supposed dream, the physical consummation of love with Porphyro and the elopement at the end of the poem. Madeline's vision and sleepy trance translate the complicated nature of the poem. When Porphyro plays music and wakes her up, the situation is intriguing:

Her eyes were wide open, but she still beheld,
 Now wide awake, the vision of her sleep:
 There was a painful change, that nigh expell'd
 The blisses of her dream so pure and deep
 At which fair Madeline began to weep,
 And moan forth witless words with many a sigh;
 While still her gaze on Porphyro would keep;
 Who knelt, with joined hands and piteous eye,

Fearing to move or speak, she look'd so dreamingly.
 'Ah, Porphyro!' said she, 'but even now
 Thy voice was a sweet tremble in mine ear,
 Made tunable with every sweetest vow;
 And those sad eyes were spiritual and clear:
 How changed thou art! how pallid, chill, and drear!
 Give me that voice again, my Porphyro,
 Those looks immortal, those complainings dear!

Oh leave me not in this eternal woe,
 For if thou diest, my Love, I know not where to go.'
 (Stanzas XXXIV and XXXV)

Questions come to mind regarding the nature of Madeline's dream. Has she been dreaming of Porphyro before he speaks in her sleepy state, or has she mistaken Porphyro's love protestations as her dream vision? It looks likely that her sleep vision points at a coincidence with Porphyro's presence. Whatever the case is, there is a difference between the visionary Porphyro and that of her waking experience. The words "painful change," "pallid," "chill" and "drear" contrast with "her dream so pure and deep," "sweetest vows" and "looks immortal." This contradiction suggests the duality between the mundane and the spiritual. The description of Porphyro does not mean he or his love cannot possess spiritual ability. Porphyro's melting into her dream (Stanza XXVI) is a veiled expression of erotic consummation with her. Again, this is not necessarily subversive to spirituality.

Though a rather "material" act, sexual intercourse can have a divine dimension. In other words, as far as this dimension is not preferential in face of spiritual matters, there is nothing spiritually wrong with the sexual act. In the next stanza, she is convinced by Porphyro that she has not been dreaming. Though she accepts this, she wants all the same Porphyro to be her saviour. Porphyro, who considers himself a pilgrim who has toiled in his quest for her, accepts to elope with her from the dangers of her dreary home. They get out with ease, and even though we understand that they have to face the storm, it is evident that they are triumphant and would possibly overcome any obstacle.

Instead of saying that the poem is a negative fiction because of the dominance of phenomenal description, we can alternatively say that it points at the difficulties involved in the struggle between mundane attraction and transcendental aspiration. That this poem is an optimistic imaginative dramatisation of Keats's relationship with Fanny is apparently compatible with the premise of self-referentiality or self-representation. But this is only, to some extent, a psycho-aestheticised rather than an actual issue.

Endymion is another controversial poem when addressing the question of gender, eroticism, and spirituality. The first observation here is that Keats

was very plain about his intentions in composing this poem, which was a testing and maturing of his creative and aesthetic potential. But the poem cannot evade the question of the present debate. It should be recalled that this poem suffered almost the same fate of Coleridge's "Christabel." Keats's case proved delicate not only because he was condemned for poetic immaturity, but also because the story was considered self-referential to Keats. With regard to the self-sexualising act or auto-eroticism, a contemporary like Byron expressed the conviction that the poem was a mental masturbation act by Keats. Our focus here is the spiritual dimension of the poem. We may take recourse to an allegory of the quest for ultimate Beauty, which connects with Keats's aestheticising strategies and Neo-platonic influences. In other words, the poem allegorises a Platonic quest for Beauty. Keats's imaginative reconstruction of the myth is not a mere narrative fiction, but a complex and difficult rendition of the depth and insight of sensual and erotic politics.

Endymion's adventure in the quest for love and beauty, his encounters in the four major stages of this quest, his decisions and choices and final vision, all point at the longing for and the departure from physical notions of human relationships to a spiritual vision, or alternatively, his desire to depart from earthly or material Beauty to spiritual Beauty. Following the Neo-platonic concept of love and absolute Beauty,¹¹ we can, from a hermeneutical point

¹¹ A very fundamental though complicated rendition of the Neo-platonic philosophy of love finds expression in M.M. Bhattacheje's work, *Keats and Spenser* (1944). He quotes the Neo-platonic concept of the progression of the soul as elaborated by Pico Della Mirandola. This progressive movement involves six stages: from material Beauty, we ascend to the First Fountain by six Degrees: (1) the soul through the sight represents to herself the Beauty of some particular person, inclines to it, is pleased with it and while she rests here, is in the first, the most imperfect material degree. (2) She reforms by her imagination the image she hath received, making it more perfect as more spiritual; and separating it from Matter, brings it a little nearer Ideal Beauty. (3) By the light of the agent Intellect abstracting this Form from all singularity, she considers the Universal Nature of Corporeal Beauty by itself; this is the highest degree that the soul can reach whilst she goes no further than sense. (4) Reflecting upon her own operation, the knowledge of Universal Beauty, and considering that everything founded in Matter is particular, she concludes this Universality proceeds not from the outward object, but her Intrinsic power; and reasons thus: If in the dimme Glasse of Material Phantasmes this beauty is represented by virtue of any Light, it follows that, beholding it in the clear Mirror of any substance divested of those Clouds, it will appear more perspicuous; thus turning into herself, she finds the Image of Ideal Beauty communicated to her by the intellect, the object of Celestial Love. (5) She ascends from this Idea in herself, to where Celestial Venus is, in her proper form: who in fullness of her Beauty not being comprehensible, by any particu-

of view, understand Endymion's search for this quality in the three apparently different female representations of his quest, who are a manifestation of physical and spiritual love as generative and self-transcending, in John Barnard's words. Allegorically, Cynthia, Diana and the Indian maid are a progressive manifestation of Phoebe or the Moon goddess. The final vision of the poem is a divine sanction to Endymion's endurance and suggests a spiritual possibility that goes beyond the erotic and sensual manifestations in the story. So the different dimensions of the Beauty of a single woman can be interpreted as relating to the Beauty of God and absolute reality. We are once more attracted to the question of the female principle as part of a spiritualising effort.

Endymion's quest, from land through the underworld, ocean and back to land, this time connected with the celestial sphere, is a mixture of eroticism and sensuality and a drive towards the religious and the spiritual. We shall discuss a few of the many passages that substantiate this argument. Passages that are highly erotic or sensual include Book I, (L. 835-42), Book II, (L. 739-743, 756-761, 806-821, and 944-948), Book III, (L. 983-985). According to the psycho-somatic realities of human beings, there should be nothing wrong with the expression of a strong erotic desire. In this case, passages of this sort are a positive psycho-aesthetic expression. Other specific passages include both the erotic and spiritual ramifications of Endymion's encounters. In Book I, for instance, he makes an interesting comment:

Now if this earthly love has power to make
Men's being mortal, immortal; to shake
Ambition from their memories, and brim
Their measure of content: what merest whim,
Seems all this poor endeavour after fame,
To one, who keeps within his stedfast aim
A love immortal, an immortal too.

lar Intellect, she, as much as in her lies, endeavours to be united to the first Mind, the chiefest of Creatures, and general Habitation of Ideal Beauty. Obtaining this, she terminates, and fixeth her journey; this is the sixth and last degree (109-110). Though these progressive stages may not be strictly applied to the case of Keats, what is understandable is that *Endymion* demonstrates a similar, even if more complicated, progression from the materiality of love to a spiritual sphere, which transcends the material, but must operate through it.

Look not so wilder'd; for these things are true,
And never can be born of atomies
That buzz about our slumbers, like brain-flies,
Leaving us fancy-sick. No, no, I'm sure,
My restless spirit never could endure
To brood so long upon one luxury,
Unless it did, though fearfully, espy
A hope beyond the shadow of a dream. (L 843-57)

This excerpt suggests the possibility of finding immortality through love, and the idea that earthly love can lead to a spiritual awareness that goes above its materiality. Endymion is convinced that his broodings cannot be wrong, given that his hope is that which goes above the shadow of a dream. His determination to pursue his goal is further expressed by the end of the Book when he decides to embark into the cave despite Peona's warning of the dangers involved:

I'll smile no more, Peona; nor will wed
Sorrow, the way to death; but patiently
Bear up against it: so farewell, sad sigh;
And come instead demurest meditation,
To occupy me wholly, and to fashion
My pilgrimage for the world's dusky brink.
No more will I count over, link by link,
My chain of grief: no longer strive to find
A half-forgetfulness in mountain wind
Blustering about my ears: (L 965-1004)

Endymion will not renounce his engagements and proposes not to let grief or sorrow deter him. Rather, he seeks a meditative mind and considers his adventure a pilgrimage. So what draws attention here is the process of learning and knowledge acquisition that love leads the hero into. His anticipated final vision is obviously not the mere sensuality and eroticism of love, but pertains to the spiritual. In Book II, a similar consciousness preoccupies Endymion, who this time is in the underworld. His questioning attitude points to his preferences:

How long must I remain in jeopardy
 Of blank amazements that amaze no more?
 Now I have tasted her sweet soul to the core,
 All other depths are shallow: essences,
 Once spiritual, are like muddy less,
 Meant to fertilise my earthly root,
 And make my branches lift a golden fruit
 Into the bloom of heaven: other light,
 Though it be quick and sharp enough to blight
 The Olympian eagle's vision, is dark
 Dark as the parentage of chaos

.....

...I urge

Thee, gentle Goddess of my pilgrimage,
 By our eternal hopes, to soothe, to assuage,
 If thou art powerful, these lover's pains;
 And make them happy in some happy plains.' (L 902-12, 1013-17)

The first part of the excerpt shows the complexity between earth-bound and spiritual love, manifested in Endymion's experience with his lover. He decides to get along the light of his goddess, seeing any other manifestation of light as inferior. Secondly, we have Endymion's plea to the goddess with regard to the myth of Alpheus and Arethusa. Their story may be comparable to his, and this plea may be transposed as his own as well, given that he has not attained his final vision of absolute Beauty. Book III continues with Endymion's adulation of the moon goddess, but points to a different emphasis in his quest. We have for instance:

Thou wast the charm of women, lovely Moon!
 O what wild and harmonised tune
 My spirit struck from all the beautiful!
 On some bright essence could I lean, and lull
 Myself to immortality: I prest
 Nature's soft pillow in a wakeful rest.
 But gentle Orb! there came a nearer bliss –
 My strange love came – Felicity's abyss!
 She came and thou didst fade, and fade away –
 Yet not entirely; no, thy starry sway
 Has been under-passion to this hour
 Now I begin to feel thy orby power I

See coming fresh upon me: O be kind!
Keep back thine influence, and do not blind
My sovereign vision. – Dearest love, forgive
That I think away from thee and live! –
Pardon me, airy planet, that I prize
One thought beyond thine argent luxuries!
How far beyond! (L 170-88)

Here again, Endymion seems to be caught between earthly and celestial love. He wants to give preference to another love, but does not want the goddess to completely fade away. This is evident again in Book IV, where Endymion expresses a disturbed sense of dilemma as to whether he has to accept the goddess or reconcile with earthly life, or both:

Why am I not as are the dead,
Since to woe like this I have been led
Through dark earth, and through the wondrous sea?
Goddess! I love thee not the less: from thee,
By Juno's smile, I turn not – no, no, no –
While the great waters are at ebb and flow, -
I have a triple soul! O fond pretence –
For both my love is so immense,
I feel my heart is cut in twain for them. (L 86-95)

Whatever the situation, Endymion makes the decision to stay with earthly love and his sister rather than pursue the goddess. It appears his quest for ideal Beauty is no longer imports to him. But it appears at the same time that it is this choice that paradoxically leads him to his final vision of immortality and ideal Beauty. Cynthia in reality is the goddess and representative of the ideal. This is captured when Endymion tells his sister that he would command their grief and fate if it were God's will:

At which that dark-eyed stranger stood elate
And said, in a new voice, but sweet as love,
To Endymion's amaze: 'By Cupid's dove,
And so thou shalt! and by the lily truth
Of my own breast thou shalt, beloved youth!
And as she spake, into her face there came
Light, as reflected from silver flame:

Her long black swell'd ampler, in display
Full golden; in her eyes a brighter day
Dawn'd blue, and full of love. Ay, he beheld
Phoebe, his passion! joyous she upheld
Her lucid bow, continuing thus; 'Dear, dear
Has our delaying been; but foolish fear
Witheld me first; and then degrees of fate:
And then 'twas fit from this mortal state
Thou shouldst, my love, by some unlook'd-for change
Be spiritualis'd. (L 987-1003)

The transformation here is a reward for Endymion's strength and determination. He seems to be rescued by the very person he rejects, but more complicated is the idea that she is characterised by different variations, the most Supreme Being that urged his quest from the outset. He can then find spiritual hope in his love. This spiritual optimism connects with the vision of celestial Beauty. We must stress here that Keats remains human even when he is spiritualised. So this spiritual discovery cannot be said to represent plenitude, since it remains deferral, justifying the hermeneutics of futurity. If we consider Endymion as a surrogate of Keats, the argument will be that he uses his experience through a consciously modified myth to express an advanced statement on the inter-implication between the material and aesthetico-spiritual aspects of love. We need not emphasise the question of the female principle. Here, the muse is connected with the female gender and spirituality as well. This can help in answering some of the questions raised concerning Keats's androgynous mind. He is constantly mediating the female and male distinctions into the central pattern of his visionary experience. His optimism for sexual satisfaction is deeply transposed into optimism for spiritual plenitude.

We have all along tried to discuss the dynamics of eroticism and the female image in Keats. The psycho-aesthetic and spiritual dimensions of the imagination are treated alongside the different ways in which the female is perceived. While all the expectations of the discourse might not have been fully attained, we have seen the complex nature of texts with regard to sublimation, stereotypes and spirituality. We have shown the extent to which aspects of self-referentiality or self-representation can be applied in the inter-

pretative context, and the great role the female plays in the poet's aesthetic and spiritual longings. To reassert our contention, this domain of the poet's life is far from being a minor aspect of his imaginative vision. It ties in with and strongly contributes to the general aesthetic as well as the sublime and spiritual character of his life and philosophy. The dynamic and transforming self lends credence to the conviction an unending quest finds expression with regard to female representations in Keats's poetry and letters.

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