

Keats' Use of Mythology

—A Brief Glance, with a Closer Look at the "Ode to Psyche"—

Tadayoshi KUROIWA

It has been generally accepted that classical mythology, at least in Keats' later poems, is inexplicably bound up with a complex conception of the nature of poetry and the poet. But it is obvious that much of his poetry is superficially concerned with it. The exact relationship between myth and Keats' poetry is, however, difficult to ascertain. Are we to trace, as Douglas Bush does,¹ a gradual chronological development in Keats' ideas on, and use of, myth, a development in which Keats' conception of myth becomes more complicated, humanitarian, and interesting, as his poems grow better? Are we, as for example Walter Evert has done,² to postulate a never fully revealed idea of myth, present in Keats' mind, if not in his poetry, from the very beginning, an idea against which each of his poems is to be seen? It is perhaps helpful to begin with at least some idea of the relationship between myth and poetry as Keats found it when he began to write; Bush, after discussing myth in 18th century poetry,³ turns to Wordsworth.

Wordsworth, of course, was the first English poet to, as Bush puts it, "recreate mythological poetry for the 19th century."⁴ In "The world is too much with us; late and soon,..." we have, in the exclamation of the sestet ("Great God! I'd rather be / A pagan suckled in a creed outworn;") a sense of classical myth as one expression, albeit imperfect, of the divine harmony which is to stand in opposition to "the getting and spending" of an industrialized world. And in the fourth book of *The Excursion*, which Keats found to be one of "the three things to rejoice at in this age,"⁵ Wordsworth gives us his conception of the origins of myth, a conception which "established mythology as the language of poetic idealism."⁶ But it is time to turn to Keats himself.

It is natural to first consider Keats' pre-*Endymion* poetry. As almost every commentator on Keats notes, we have in the early poems the beginnings of a unity of nature, poetry, and myth. For example, in "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill" the experience of natural beauty is represented as leading poets to invent myth: myth becomes the expression of the poet's interaction with nature, myth becomes, if you will, the means by which self and not-self, subject and object, are united. And myth is, in this poetry, primarily an expression of sensual joy: unity with nature is achieved through "luxurious", through, in some sense, pure joyous feeling, and there is little sense of a darker side to myth. Yet in "Sleep and Poetry" we see the young Keats almost forcing himself to transcend these sensual pleasures. The realm of Flora and old Pan must give way to the agonies of the human heart, to the mysterious car which brings a host of shadowy human beings to earth. But, as Bush argues,⁷ it is not until *Endymion* that Keats' conception of myth begins to include these essentially humanitarian impulses. We might say that in Keats' early poetry, myth embraces the

“divine harmony” of Wordsworthian nature not in order to oppose itself to the industrialized “real” world, but simply in order to celebrate that harmony. We further sense that the nature with which the early Keats unites is not a living, organic whole, but rather a concatenation of particularly beautiful natural incidents.⁸ But it is time to turn to *Endymion*.

Everyone agrees that *Endymion* is a more important work than the poems of 1817; there is, however, little agreement as to the poem's exact significance. Relative to Keats' use of mythology, we may make the following observations. If, in his earliest poetry, Keats had arrived at a conception of myth as the inevitable result of the poet's interaction with natural beauty, he, in *Endymion*, expands myth into an expression of the growth and development by which one can transcend that beauty. We have here the realm of Flora and old Pan, but we also have the strife and agony of Endymion's heart as he strives to become united with his unknown goddess. The whole work is an attempt to produce, through myth, an understanding of how we are to achieve that “passion poesy,” that “cheering light unto our souls” which “always must be with us, or we die”.⁹ And the “moral” of the story seems to be that “— the actual world of human life must be accepted, not denied, and that only through participation in that life can the ideal be realized.”¹⁰ But, as Bush points out, Keats does not seem comfortable with this idea. Those parts of the poem in which Endymion abandons his quest for a bit of dalliance, in which he cuts himself off from his goal by abandoning himself in sensuality — say when he tries to become involved with the Indian maid — ring truer than those parts — say Endymion's apostrophe to his unknown goddess in Book II, ll. 686 ff. — in which he commits himself to his ideal love. Nature poetry, and myth have formed a deeper unity than before, a unity which tries to grow from, and deal with, all of human life; but Keats seems reluctant to leave earthy sensuality for heaven.

Chronologically, we are now almost at the “Ode to Psyche”. I shall return to it in a moment, but first I would like to give some idea of what happens to myth in the later Keats. The odes concerning the Grecian urn and the nightingale obviously do not concern themselves directly with certain specific myths. But, just as obviously, they are concerned with the same type of conflict which was central to *Endymion* and which returns over and over again in Keats: that between the ideal and the real. But if in *Endymion* the real, the earthy sensuous pleasures of love and beauty were pleasurable things which stood in opposition to an ideal attained through an acceptance of the human condition, in these odes the reality of the senses is itself the source of conflict. The pleasure of the senses is a complex, not a simple thing. One enjoys the beauty of a work of art like the urn — but such beauty denies the experience of human love. As Bush puts it, “the urn is a joy forever, but the figures are cold.”¹¹

One looks for a resolution of this conflict of the senses in Keats and finds it, perhaps, in “To Autumn”. It is usual to say that in the personification of autumn as a kind of Ceres-like figure in the second stanza, we have Keats' myth-making faculty at its best. And we do: nature is infused with a kind of calm spirituality which seems the essence of myth. But further, the poem fixes the experience of autumn in an eternal, yet non-static way.

Nature mythologized, a beauty which conditions within itself the life-process, is a totally satisfactory “luxury”. It is as if earlier odes have been distilled into one sensual essence which is so perfect that there can be no objections to it — but this was only possible by excluding human elements from the poem. Of course, for Keats’ fullest treatment of myth we have to turn to *Lamia* and the two *Hyperions*, but I shall briefly discuss them in a note¹² and turn to the “Ode to Psyche”.

As we approach this poem we should mention some of Keats’ sources for all of the mythology we have encountered. From Charles Cowden Clark’s memories of Keats we know that while Keats was at school he devoured three books of myth: Tooke’s *Pantheon*, Spence’s *Polymetis*, and Lemprière’s *Classical Dictionary*.¹³ The *Pantheon* and *Polymetis* were standard eighteenth century works of “moralized or descriptive mythology.”¹⁴ Tooke does not include Psyche, and Spence hardly deals with her, so we will not dwell on these works. It is worth noting, however, that in Spence we have mythology intermingled with descriptions of Roman art and poetry, though this is a rather dry and spiritless mixture compared to that which we find in Keats. Lemprière’s *Dictionary*, which according to Clark Keats “appeared to learn,”¹⁵ contains capsule descriptions of gods and goddesses, emperors and kings — in short, it is a compendium of classical history and mythology. And it is this work which seems to have provided the immediate source for the “Ode to Psyche”, for Keats’ description of Psyche in the letter to George and Georgiana Keats which contains the poem parallels the entry under “Psyche” in the *Dictionary*. This entry led Keats immediately to *The Golden Ass*, which he read in William Aldington’s translation.

Aldington, whose version of Apuleius first appeared in 1566, produced a narrative which, though somewhat unfaithful to the Latin,¹⁷ delighted readers with what B. I. Evans has called the “naive honesty of Aldington’s prose”.¹⁸ I will not repeat the story here,¹⁹ but call attention to the fact that some slight parallels can be drawn between the language of the “Ode” and Aldington’s prose.²⁰

Keats was acquainted as well with another version of the myth of Cupid and Psyche, for we know that as a young lad he had enjoyed the “Psyche” of Mary Tighe.²¹ This poem, written in loose and flowery Spencerian stanzas, reworks the myth by making Cupid, worried about Psyche after she has burned him, disguise himself as a knight, and follow her through various trials and tribulations. Keats, as we know from the letter referred above, had grown, by the time of the composition of the “Ode to Psyche”, to dislike Mrs. Tighe’s work. Some critics have seen her influence at work in the poem, particularly in the occasionally Endymion-like diction of the first stanza, but we should not make too much of the parallel. So, from an early acquaintance with Mrs. Tighe’s “Psyche” from Lemprière’s *Dictionary*, and from Aldington’s version of *The Golden Ass*, Keats learned of the myth of Cupid and Psyche. And now we should turn to the “Ode to Psyche” itself, to see how it stands, mythologically speaking, in relation to the rest of Keats’ work.

Bush sees the ode as flawed — “the least coherent and most uneven of the later group —” and mentions the flavor of *Endymion* called up by such phrases as “tender eye-dawn of aurorean love”. But he adds, “— it is only in comparison with himself that Keats suffers, and

there is no lack of the magic with which he unites myth, nature, and literature," and goes on to mention the "soft delight and warm love" which Keats contemplates at the end of the poem.²² Bush seems to want to make this ode essentially unambiguous, unlike the later odes of that spring: for him the poem seems to be simply a lovely lyrical expression of that inspired union of nature, myth, and poetry which Keats discusses in "I stood tip-toe upon a little hill".

But it is precisely in that poem that we find Keats' first poetic use of the legend of Cupid and Psyche. In lines 141 through 150, Keats gives a brief sketch of the entire legend's essential points: the blissful nights when Psyche does not know who her lover is, the lamp, the burning, the eventual reunion of the lovers. This sketch is presented as a result of contemplating nature: a pretty scene calls up a standard myth of eventually requited love. Compare this use of the myth with its use in the "Ode to Psyche." Here Keats has use only for Psyche as she is after the culmination of the myth. She is the goddess with no worshipers, the forgotten bride of love. The experience of natural beauty — the forest of the first stanza — now produces a classical myth reworked in terms of a modern poet's fancy.

In choosing to focus on Psyche as a goddess created too late for human adoration, Keats seems to me to be moving in the direction of the expressions of the ambiguities in human sensory experience which are fully articulated in the two great odes which followed the "Ode to Psyche" that spring. For there is a sense, in the middle of this ode, of the self's interaction with nature. What did the poet see in the woods? Psyche, the soul, love's bride, who is unworshipped. She has no priests, no censers swinging for her. But there is a way to preserve her: the poet can internalize her, put her into his own nature, and there she can live. The imagination of beauty is seen as capable of preserving for man a distillation of beauty: Psyche, the soul. Compare the fancy of this poem with that of the speaker in the "Ode to a Nightingale," whose fancy cannot "cheat" well enough to unite him with the "light winged Dryad of the trees." His mortality keeps him from uniting with the spirit he seems to encounter as he hears the bird sing.

I would like then to see the "Ode to Psyche" as not simply a rich, sometimes sickly-sweet "intermingling of myth, nature, and literature," but as a beginning of the recognition, in Keats' poetry, of the problems of just such a union. The optimism of the poem is not that calm acceptance of "To Autumn." It is, rather, the optimism of a poet who thinks he can put the soul into a work of art, and who realized some weeks later that art and the soul do not necessarily meet in a happy fusion. Yet, paradoxically enough, in Keats they do.

Notes

1. Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* (Harvard University Press, 1937, reprinted 1969), Chapter 3.
2. Walter Evert, *Aesthetics and Myth in the Poetry of Keats* (Princeton University Press, 1965). This is the premise of the whole book; see, in particular, pp. 30-32.
3. I will give here a brief sketch of the position of myth in 18th English poetry, following Bush, to whose above mentioned book all page numbers refer.

As we are all aware, the neo-classical period was not particularly amenable to mythologically symbolic, or heavily allegorical poetry. Civilized man sat in his rational, clock-work universe, and had little use for "Puerile and effete mythological fictions" (p. 22). And, myth conflicted not only with reason, but with religion: "... we have many complaints ... against the use of pagan fable of the mixing of it with Christian truth from such various persons as ... Addison ... Dr. Johnson, of course, and Cowper" (p. 24). Yet mythology is scattered abundantly through the poetry of this period, though it is used, generally, in a playful or satire vein. And we have some serious mythological poems, though they are, for the most part, didactic Christian sermons (pp. 30-31). And finally, in the middle and later part of the century we have poets such as Collins, whose approach to myth at least turns in the direction of the Romantics, we have an increased interest in Greek classical antiquity, in folklore and ballads, in primitive concepts of nature and religion: we have, then, all the elements which were to result in a Romantic use of myth.

4. Bush, p. 70.
5. Cited by Evert, p. 39.
6. Bush, p. 60.
7. Bush, p. 88.
8. Walter Evert, in the book cited above, presents an interpretation of Keats' use of myth which insists upon a fundamental distinction between Keats' actual early conception of myth, and myth as we find it in the early poems themselves. Evert feels that, at more or less the time that he began writing, Keats had conceived of nature as an organic whole, and of Apollo as the best expression of that natural law of harmony which unites the cycles of nature and the cycles of human development. The poet's function is then to act as a kind of mediator between Apollo and humanity: he, through his imagination, is to bring the god to man. Evert maintains that this assumption (which, of course, is here greatly simplified — see his book for further details) lies behind all of Keats' early poetry, but is never fully expressed in it. He notes especially the early "Ode to Apollo". Every makes a fairly good case for his thesis, tracing Apollo-related images — such as the colour gold — through many of Keats' earliest poems. He then devotes a great deal of time to *Endymion*. I have only skimmed his discussion of that poem, and so do not feel capable of commenting on it —. I would, however, like to note that Evert is in general agreement with Bush's conception of the "moral" of *Endymion*, as I describe it in the main body of the text. (see Evert, p. 90, n. 2.)
9. *Endymion*, l. 29, l. 30, l. 33.
10. Bush, p. 95.
11. Bush, p. 108.
12. Of *Lamia* Bush (p. 110) writes: "... the fundamental defect is that the poem has no emotional and philosophic unity." Is one to see the poem as a condemnation of the senses, in which the philosophical intellect, in the person of Apollonius, triumphs? Or is one to read the poem as a condemnation of cold philosophy? After all, it is never clear that *Lamia* intends anything but eternal bliss for Lycius, though this is a bliss to be won at the expense of isolation from the real world. Certainly, as Bush and many others point out, the narrative is tight, controlled, and richly written, and the poem is a delight to read. But as Murry, quoted by Bush (p. 112) says "[Keats] himself did not know whether she [*Lamia*] was a thing of beauty or a thing of bale. Here we might say that myth and classical antiquity were used in *Lamia* in much the same way as chivalry and the medieval setting were used in *The Eve of St. Agnes*: to provide a back-drop, a framework for a sensuous poetry whose intellectual premises are unclear. Keats here does not seem to intergrate the nature of myth with the nature of, and in, his poem.

It is usual, as Bush says, to regard the two *Hyperions* as "the culmination of Keats' poetic process, the last and greatest statements of his conflicting instincts and ambitions" (p. 116). And certainly central to the first *Hyperion* is the speech of Coeanus in book II. As he tells the Titans that they too shall pass, as he says to their king "Thou art not the beginning nor the end," and as we remember the dejected Saturn of the beginning of the poem, the angry *Hyperion* striding about his palace, we cannot help but feel a sense of sorrow of epic proportions, intermingled with a sense of the necessity of a calm acceptance of change. Here, in the first *Hyperion*, Keats has seized on the emotional and intellectual center of the story of the fall of the Titans. We do not sense that he felt uncomfortable with the actual outcome of the myth, as he did in *Endymion*, where, as mentioned, he seems unhappy with the spiritual transcendence embodied in the story's culmination, nor do we sense, as we do in *Lamia*, that myth is more an exotic backdrop, than

anything else. Keats has managed to create in *Hyperion* a mythological poetry in which we can feel, as Bush (p. 125) puts it, "... the rise and fall of nations, the whole chaotic story of man's troubled past."

And *The Fall of Hyperion* again gives us this sense, but in a more wrenching way, for it is written from the viewpoint of a narrator who has a dream-vision point from an impersonal standpoint in the first *Hyperion*. And the sense that Keats felt that his poetry was to be condemned for its isolation from the problems of the world, the sense of personal anguish creates, for me, a feeling of anguish unmatched in English poetry. I do not mean to sentimentalize the dying Keats, but there is in his life, it seems to me, a genuine element of tragedy, especially when one thinks of the suicides which almost seem fashionable among today's poets.

13. Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 25-26.
14. Bush, p. 25.
15. Bate, p. 26.
16. Compare the passage from the letter, which follows (Bate, pp. 488-489) with the attached copy of the entry under Psyche, taken from an American edition of Lemprière's *Dictionary* published in 1809.
 "You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the time of Apulieus the Platonist who lived after the Augustan age, and consequently the Goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour — and perhaps never thought in the old religion — I am more orthodox than to let a heathen Goddess be so neglected."
17. Charles Whibley, *Aldington's Apulieus* (1893 — this is a reprint, with introduction, of Aldington's original text of 1566) pp. xxi-xxiii.
18. B. I. Evans, "Keats and the Golden Ass," *Nineteenth Century*, August, (1926), p. 265. Cited in Bush. See this article for a general discussion of what the title describes.
19. The story runs as follows. Psyche, the youngest of three daughters, is admired by many for her beauty, with the result that the worship of Venus is neglected. The goddess, enraged, orders Cupid to make Psyche fall in love with a vile creature, and in the meantime causes Psyche's admirers to desert her. Psyche's parents, heart broken, consult the oracle of Apollo, and are informed that their daughter is to be wed to a serpent, and that she should be left on a deserted mountain top to await her husband. Thus abandoned, Psyche finds, to her surprise, a sumptuous palace on the mountain, where invisible spirits cater to her every whim, and where she is divested of her maiden-head by a mysterious husband who only arrives at night, and forbids Psyche to look upon him. And thus by day Psyche enjoys the services of airy spirits, and by night she sports with her unseen lover. Psyche's sisters, discovering what has really happened to her, are extremely jealous. Eventually, though Psyche assuages their wrath with gifts of riches, they persuade her to look upon her lover, who, they have convinced her, is a serpent of a most loathsome variety. Though warned not to look, Psyche does, and discovers, by the light of an Oil lamp which she has concealed in her boudoir, that her lover is none other than Cupid himself, who, entranced by her beauty, had been unable to carry out his mothers instructions, and had claimed Psyche for his own. Thus enraptured, Psyche unwittingly lets a drop of burning oil fall upon Cupid's shoulder: the wounded god flees. Psyche, hanging on to his foot, is carried off to a place she knows not, and is there deserted. She appeals to Ceres, to Juno, and finally to Venus herself who punishes Psyche by making her perform such difficult tasks as that of procuring a bottle of Stygian water. Through divine help, presumably set in motion by Cupid, Psyche accomplishes her tasks, and is made immortal, and marries Cupid.
20. See Allott's notes, p. 516.
21. See Bate, p. 378, for the excerpt from Keats' letter to George and Georgiana of December 31, 1818.
22. Bush, p. 106.

(Received October 22, 1977)