

5-2013

# Escapism, Oblivion, and Process in the Poetry of Charlotte Smith and John Keats.

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## Recommended Citation

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Escapism, Oblivion, and Process in the Poetry  
of Charlotte Smith and John Keats

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of Honors

By

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April 12, 2013

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## Introduction

Charlotte Turner Smith and John Keats have not often been considered together; on those occasions that they have, it has been in the most peripheral and narrow ways. There is ample cause for this deficiency in critical comment. Smith and Keats wrote, in many respects, from opposite ends of the Romantic spectrum. In her immensely popular *Elegiac Sonnets*, Smith—sometimes lauded as the first British Romantic poet—perfected the prototype of the ode form M.H. Abrams has identified as the greater Romantic lyric (“Structure and Style,” 76-7). In a series of prefaces to successive editions of this collection, Smith appealed to the reading public on the basis of her serious personal and financial struggles; the sonnets themselves intentionally build upon this self-presentation. Though Smith was occasionally compelled to defend herself against accusations of extreme and monotonous melancholia—“I wrote mournfully because I was unhappy” (5), she contends in her preface to the sixth edition—the manner in which she dramatized the self-reflections of her poet-speaker was highly influential. William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge were her direct beneficiaries. In his *Introduction to the Sonnets*, Coleridge credited Smith with revitalizing the sonnet form in England; Wordsworth, nearly thirty years after her death, wrote that she was a poet “to whom English verse is under greater obligations than are likely to be either acknowledged or remembered” (351). Though Smith’s poetry does not have the philosophical bent of Wordsworth’s or Coleridge’s, she was unquestionably a pioneering influence on the odes and conversation poems of *Lyrical Ballads*.

Keats was a member of the generation of Romantics that helped to shape Wordsworth’s prophecy about the longevity of Smith’s reputation. Keats never gave Smith’s work serious written consideration; if he read her at all, he was silent on the subject. It is entirely possible that he held her in no high regard. Smith’s frequent practice of making herself the subject of her

poetry was the exact opposite of Keats's poetic ideals of negative capability and disinterestedness. Keats's memorable criticism of what he viewed as Wordsworth's poetic conceit perfectly illustrates this distinction: "As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime [...]) it is not itself—it has no self... It has no Character" (*Letters*, 147-8). This Wordsworthian attribute was doubtlessly inherited at least in part from Smith, whose *Elegiac Sonnets* was published before any major composition of Wordsworth's. The poetic egotism which Keats censors in Wordsworth would, in all likelihood, have been judged unforgivable in a female poet of "sensibility." As his biographer Walter Jackson Bate has discussed, Keats had little patience for women of literary ambition (378)—particularly those who wrote the kind of "plaintive" poetry that Smith is commonly accused of producing. For these reasons, it is not at all surprising that little has been done in the way of delineating Smith's influence upon Keats.

Yet to insist that discussion of Smith and Keats together must be limited to the tenuous question of direct influence is to ignore the greatest poetic achievements of both, and to deny Smith her place in a tradition of serious inquiry into the use of the visionary imagination, awareness of process, and encroaching mortality. Smith and Keats were motivated by different instincts, but their poetry repeatedly addresses corresponding issues with similar methods. Ambivalence is a major theme for both: uncertainties about the role of the poet, escapism, consciousness, process, and death dominate their work. The introduction, examination, and ultimate negation of modes of escape, natural symbols, and agents of oblivion are recurring designs, continually explored as possible diversions from a world of process and mortality. However, both Smith and Keats would eventually confront the facts of decay and death through

poetry on the seasons—most fully and effectively in “The close of summer” and “To Autumn,” respectively. These late seasonal poems are departures for both poets, and bring the concerns regarding process as close to a settled conclusion as could be hoped for, given their innate complexities.

The issues of the function of and approach to poetry itself would prove to be more complex for Smith and Keats; the final major works of both continued to debate and fluctuate on these matters. Smith’s *Beachy Head* and Keats’s *The Fall of Hyperion* are extended narratives in blank verse, both featuring poet-speakers that are quite clearly communicating in the voices of their creators, and both were left unfinished. Abrams has recognized *The Fall of Hyperion* as an example of what he calls a Romantic crisis-autobiography—“fragments of reshaped autobiography, in which the poet confronts a particular scene at a significant stage of his life, in a colloquy that specifies the present, evokes the past, and anticipates the future” (*Natural Supernaturalism*, 123). This definition applies equally to *Beachy Head*. It features Smith’s speaker situated on the headland in her beloved childhood home of Sussex; meditating on history, society, politics, and nature—always most paramount in Smith’s mind; and tracing the development of her poetic identity. *The Fall of Hyperion* is a visionary interrogation of the poetic character and the poet’s responsibility to humanity. Both narratives are climactic, complicated conclusions to career-long vacillations on the use of poetry and the poet’s role.

### **I. The Use of Poetry and the Poet’s Role**

In his first successful long poem, “Sleep and Poetry,” Keats addresses what were to become, as Bate has noted, two of the major concerns of his work for the rest of his career: the use of poetry and the imagination’s role (124-5). This is reflected in the ten-year program of poetic growth Keats outlines in the poem, which progresses reluctantly but incontrovertibly from

the pastoral provinces of Pan and Flora (101-2) to “a nobler life,/ Where [the poet] may find the agonies, the strife/ Of human hearts” (123-5). As if to demonstrate the need for further development, Keats expresses his anxiety lest the kaleidoscope of his imaginative vision should fade: “A sense of real things comes doubly strong,/ And, like a muddy stream, would bear along/ My soul to nothingness” (157-59). The more mature Keats of *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Lamia*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and the great odes takes a different view of where “nothingness” lies. In the later poetry, nothingness exists in the deluded Madeline’s dreaming, the vanished Lamia’s castle of air, deceiving fancy, and a town forever emptied of its inhabitants by the demands of art. The older Keats finds much to celebrate in the “sense of real things” so dreaded in “Sleep and Poetry”—the music of autumn, a silent urn, and sorrow’s mysteries. Yet, as David Perkins has observed, despite a slow but cumulative “loss of confidence in the merely visionary imagination” (220), Keats never abandons the subject of imaginative escape. His continuing preoccupation with dreaming and mental flight—maintained in the romances and odes of 1819, as Jack Stillinger has illustrated in his diagram of the basic Keatsian structure of escape and return (“Introduction,” xvi)—reveals the deep and unresolved ambivalence he felt toward what they represent and their place in poetry.

Keats’s firmest condemnation of the visionary imagination comes, paradoxically, in the fragmentary dream-vision *The Fall of Hyperion*. The poet-speaker must first draw a distinction between two types of visionaries, the fanatics and the poets:

Fanatics have their dreams, wherewith they weave

A paradise for a sect.....

But bare of laurel they live, dream, and die;

For Poesy alone can tell her dreams,

With the fine spell of words alone can save  
 Imagination from the sable charm  
 And dumb enchantment. (I.1-2, 7-11)

In distinguishing between the dreams of the “fanatics”—a group that would certainly include Endymion, Madeline, and Lycius among its ranks—and those of the poet, Keats’s speaker introduces the role he believes vision should play in poetry. While the imaginings of the fanatics construct a temporary ideal, it is “a paradise for a sect”; in the instances of the dreamers of Keats’s romances and the odes to Psyche and the nightingale, the sect consists of two individuals at most. In the induction to *The Fall of Hyperion* Keats’s speaker clearly intends to emphasize that the true poet’s visions should not be self-serving, for only the poet can make medicine of reverie. The poet-speaker soon asserts that “sure a poet is a sage;/ A humanist, physician to all men” (I.189-90). Moneta, the goddess of memory and priestess of the fallen Titans’ desolation, issues her own proclamation on the characters of the visionary and the poet:

The poet and the dreamer are distinct  
 Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.  
 The one pours out a balm upon the world,  
 The other vexes it. (I.199-202)

This is without question the most severe representation of the visionary—one who, as Bate describes, “cherish[es] ‘vision’ in and for itself, and in such a way that he begins to dwell in a separate and sealed world” (598)—in Keats’s poetry. While Keatsian dreamers such as Madeline, Lamia, Lycius, and the dejected knight of *La Belle Dame sans Merci* are presented as somewhat delusional and foolish, they are also rendered with enough empathy to inspire multiple sympathetic readings. *The Fall of Hyperion* has far less patience with “dreamers weak” (I.162)



who pursue visions and wonders out of self-interest alone. However, its structure of dissolving and evolving landscapes and its narrative device—it is, after all, subtitled *A Dream*—classify it as a product of Keats’s own visionary ingenuity. The poet-speaker plainly hopes it is the dream of a poet and not a “fanatic,” but he is far from certain (I.16-18). Despite the finality of Moneta’s severance of the poet and the dreamer, the poet-speaker *is* a dreamer—a dreamer highly censorious of the fanatic visionary, but a dreamer nonetheless. This dilemma, enacted on an epic poetic stage in *The Fall of Hyperion* but alluded to in nearly all of Keats’s most important works, perhaps has no resolution; as Keats’s struggle with it demonstrates, it certainly had no simple one.

Keats’s misgivings about the visionary manifest themselves early on. “Let me not wander in a barren dream” (12), he implores in the sonnet “On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again,” doubtlessly recalling the imaginative escapism of *Endymion*. Yet even Endymion, though having pursued a vision to the underworld, disparages the “nothing” of his “great dream” (IV.637-8) just as surely as an older Keats does. The 1818 verse epistle to John Hamilton Reynolds, “Dear Reynolds, as last night I lay in bed,” also strikingly articulates Keats’s early suspicions. Following descriptions of fantastic and absurd images that visited him at the edge of sleep during the previous night, Keats—invoking the spirit of “Tintern Abbey”—reflects on the haphazard and insipid nature of most dreams (Bate 308): “O that our dreamings all of sleep or wake/ Would all their colours from the sunset take:/ From something of material sublime” (67-9). This is the first movement toward the discrimination between the dreams of the fanatic and of the poet which culminates in *The Fall of Hyperion*; the mere dreamer’s visions are transient and arbitrary, while the poet’s are formed of “material sublime.” These musings lead Keats to question his perception of the imagination itself:

...is it that imagination brought  
 Beyond its proper bound, yet still confined,—  
 Lost in a sort of purgatory blind,  
 Cannot refer to any standard law  
 Of either earth or heaven?... (78-82)

The suggestion that imaginative vision leads one to a purgatorial space of ambiguous and nebulous meanings remains prominent in nearly all of the poems of 1819 and unquestionably permeates *The Fall of Hyperion*. The speakers of “Ode to Psyche” and “Ode to a Nightingale” describe experiences that hover on the hazy border of the real to the visionary. “Psyche” marvels, “Surely I dreamt today, or did I see/ The winged Psyche with awakened eyes?” (5-6), while “Nightingale” is even less certain. Keats’s speaker asks “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/ ...Do I wake or sleep?” (79-80). Such doubts question not only the legitimacy of the experience but its value, as fancy not only cheats, but does so ineffectually (“Nightingale,” 73). The distinction noted between a true vision and a mere daydream also corresponds to the induction of *The Fall of Hyperion*. For the fanatic, the “Nightingale” experience would be an ephemeral rapture, but the poet can transform it into something immortal, fashioned “of material sublime.” The penultimate ode, “Indolence,” veers back in the other direction, with the speaker confident that he retains “visions for the night,/ And for the day faint visions there is store” (57-8) as he reclines in a state of dreamy lassitude. The short “rondeau” ode “Fancy,” though blithely celebratory in tone and rhythm, examines the melancholy motive behind the fanciful imagination. As Bate points out, the refrain “Ever let the Fancy roam,/ Pleasure never is at home” (1-2) speaks to the human mind’s inability to remain content (435); here, wandering Fancy is the only means of diversion. Before and after these lyric meditations on imaginative

flight, Keats examined the same theme narratively in *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *Lamia*, in which Madeline, Lamia, and Lycius all suffer for their attempts to exist within imaginary spheres. *The Fall of Hyperion* is the apex of these fluctuations and explorations. In challenging earlier misuses of the imagination and chronicling the progression toward becoming a poet that would be “a sage;/ A humanist, [a] physician” (189-90), Keats confronts past, present, and future in *The Fall of Hyperion*. However, he remains at least somewhat undecided about the place of the visionary in poetry that serves a higher function. Aside from its dream structure, *The Fall of Hyperion* was never completed and exists as Keats’s final word on the subject only because he was soon forced to give up all writing due to illness.

Smith, though never quite approaching a Keatsian level of awareness of, or insight into, the limitations of the visionary imagination, also experiences serious doubts about illusory flight and its role in poetry. At the outset of her masterwork, *Beachy Head*, the poet dispatches Fancy as an emissary to trace scenes of primeval history, idyllic realms, and the natural sublime. Smith’s poet-speaker never physically strays from the headland’s rocky solidity. Perhaps no other of Smith’s poems is so dependent on imaginative vision and certainly none for such an extended length; yet *Beachy Head* is also Smith at her most critical of such an approach. Though the poem appears to quickly fall back on the contrast between the imagined pastoral existence of shepherds and peasant farmers and the speaker’s sorrowful reality—one of Smith’s common refrains—it shifts shrewdly to a more sophisticated rural character. Turning from “simple scenes of peace and industry/ ... bosom’d in some valley of the hills” (169-70), the speaker observes the figure of the shepherd-smuggler involved in contraband trade, “quitting for.../ Clandestine traffic his more honest toil” (182-3). The subsequent transition into a description of a peasant farmer’s lot, free from the instability of criminal intrigue but subject to the whims and flux of nature, is

followed by a parenthetical acknowledgment of this rural reality's starkness: "(Scenes all unlike the poet's fabling dreams/ Describing Arcady)" (209-10). The significance of such an admission from Smith is perhaps best appreciated alongside the sentiments present in her early sonnet "Blest is yon shepherd, on the turf reclined." The poem, typical of several of the *Elegiac Sonnets*, depicts an untroubled and idle shepherd whose "vacant mind/ Pours out some tale antique of rural love!" (3-4), much like a breathing Grecian urn. Like Keats after her, Smith recognized—though it took her considerably longer—that such saccharine Arcadian visions were inadequate. Smith had no program for poetic development, but in *Beachy Head* she begins to verge on some of the human pain and anguish that Keats proclaimed he would find after the move from pastoral romance to epic tragedy.

Over the next hundred lines of *Beachy Head*, Smith's speaker creates another rustic ideal only to expose it as a poetic illusion:

The village girl is happy, who sets forth  
 To distant fair, gay in her Sunday suit,  
 With cherry colour'd knots, and flourish'd shawl,  
 And bonnet newly purchas'd. So is he  
 Her little brother, who his mimic drum  
 Beats, till he drowns her rural lovers' oaths  
 Of constant faith, and still increasing love;  
 Ah! yet a while, and half those oaths believ'd,  
 Her happiness is vanish'd; and the boy  
 While yet a stripling, finds the sound he lov'd  
 Has led him on, till he has given up

His freedom, and his happiness together. (270-81)

These are the figures of Keats's Grecian urn, abandoned by silence and slow time and given over to merciless actuality. Once again displaying an authenticity that Smith's early speakers do not, *Beachy Head*'s speaker considers this village girl's prospects honestly and even sympathetically, as she goes on to loosely connect the girl's plight with her own loss of innocence (285-6).

Smith's earlier sonnet "To sleep" also features a village girl, but one who is "clasp'd in her faithful shepherd's guardian arms" (9) and the envy of the more refined and mournful speaker.

The cold pastorals of *Beachy Head* express Smith's movement away from her own "fabling dreams" (209) of a rural idyll, but she is, after all, unwilling to fully commit to an indictment of the visionary imagination. Her speaker remarks on the lovelorn daydreams of one of the poem's embowered hermits: "The visionary, nursing dreams like these,/ Is not indeed unhappy" (655-6).

Though the hermit begs his visions not to form at all if they will only "leave [him] drooping and forlorn/ To know, such bliss can never be" (692-3), the speaker describes his picturesque visionary retreat as the only place where he can experience any remaining hope or happiness.

Though speaker and character appear to contradict each other, the speaker's sudden irresolution about the effectiveness of imaginative escape after her statements earlier in the poem is more jarring. However, Smith's vacillations on the subject are not confined to one poem; though she wrestled less than Keats with the relevance of imaginative vision to poetry, she considered the issue elsewhere, with language and images comparable to those he would use.

Smith's sonnet "To fancy" is her most serious contemplation of imaginative escapism prior to *Beachy Head*. The sonnet's speaker addresses fancy as a "Queen of Shadows" (1), uncertain of the worth of visions known to be false and "beauteous rather than... true" (5). The speaker's resignation is more wished for than achieved by the sonnet's end, as she recognizes the

self-deception required to maintain the visions that have kept worldly sorrow at bay. “Pale Experience” (7) has intruded upon whatever happiness and beauty the speaker’s imagination had conceived, and the speaker is left with only the desire for visions of all kinds to leave her. “May fancied pain and fancied pleasure fly,/ ...as from me all thy dreams depart,” (10-11), the speaker entreats, prefiguring Madeline’s state in *The Eve of St. Agnes*—achieved, ironically, in a fanciful dream—“blissfully haven’d both from joy and pain” (240) and the speaker in “Ode on Indolence,” for whom “pain has no sting and pleasure’s wreath no flower” (18). Smith’s characterization of fancy as sportive (2) and a “false medium” (9) also anticipates Keats’s dismissal in “Nightingale”: “the fancy cannot cheat so well/ As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf” (73-4). Both poets have clearly experienced the attractions of fancy, but also understand the consequences of its transient nature—Smith’s pastoral ideal has a dark underside; Keats’s nightingale flies away. Still, though Smith tries to will fancy away while Keats scorns it, both return to it repeatedly. Smith conjures “wandering fairy fires” (“Written near a port on a dark evening,” 12) on the surface of the sea and invokes magical draughts with the power to soothe all cares (“Nepenthe”). Keats’s final volume of poetry features several incarnations of Fancy aside from the cheating sprite of “Nightingale,” including the ceaselessly inventive gardener of “Psyche” and the subject of the lively “Fancy.” Despite reservations and indecision about its usefulness, truth, and most appropriate function in poetry, neither poet could ignore the concept of the visionary imagination. “Every man whose soul is not a clod/ Hath visions” (13-4), Keats writes in *The Fall of Hyperion*; so Keats and Smith illustrate in their similar commitments to presenting and assessing their imaginative flights.

One of Smith’s principal grievances in “To fancy” is the intensity with which the visionary poet must experience both pleasure and pain. Her speaker ends the attempted exorcism

of Fancy with a hope that, deprived of its influence, she will no longer “seek perfection with a poet’s eye,/ Nor suffer anguish with a poet’s heart!” (13-4). The poet’s heightened awareness and potential agonies are recurring concerns of Smith’s, as they dominate the first of the *Elegiac Sonnets*, “The partial Muse has from my earliest hours.” Smith’s speaker in this sonnet does not invoke so much as expose the Muse for its capricious and exacting nature. Instead of receiving a laurel crown, Smith’s poet-speaker is given a garland of wildflowers and roses woven by her Muse (4), but this humbler and more whimsical adornment is stripped of thorns only so that they might “fester in the [poet’s] heart” (8). As Smith’s biographer Loraine Fletcher has written, this image of the wreath with its thorns held in reserve introduces Smith’s belief that “the privilege of being a poet... must be paid for in a greater sensitivity to pain” (47). Smith’s speaker is subjected to the extremes of the Muse’s favors—the “fantastic garland” (4) of poetic inspiration—and exactions—she is “doom’d” to trudge along a “rugged path” (2) of unhappiness and loss to attain that inspiration. As is characteristic of Smith’s earliest sonnets, she voices envy toward those who do not share her amplified sensibility. For this speaker, poetry is both gift and curse, a “dear delusive art” (6) she seems unable to renounce though she may be willing to do so. Smith clearly implies that her speaker did not choose her own destiny: the Muse has influenced the speaker’s life from childhood (1); the word choice of “doom’d” (2) in reference to her path in life distinctly indicates a lack of choice; and as Fletcher has noted, the sonnet’s image of a thorn in the heart alludes to Philomel, who expressed her suffering through song (48). In establishing that her poet-speaker is afflicted rather than blessed by the partiality of the Muse, Smith makes her a tragic heroine whose fatal flaw is being compelled to experience the world as a poet. There is slight recompense for the speaker’s misery in the art of poetry—which is, after all, beloved despite its deceptiveness (6)—but there is no refuge from the Muse.

Like Smith before him, Keats also explored the toll true vision demands of the poet. While Smith portrays the hardship as a private lament that blights the poet's personal relationships and chances of happiness, Keats—though certainly sensible of this element of the burden—attempted to view it through the prism of “disinterestedness,” an ideal he cherished and strived toward his entire writing life (Bate 473). This endeavor to set aside all personal reflection and discomfort in the service of the poetry played a significant role in the formation of the theory of Negative Capability; in that letter, Keats writes, “With a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration” (42). Yet just three months later, in the verse letter “Dear Reynolds, as last night I lay in bed,” Keats expresses disquiet about the potential personal costs of the poetic pursuit of beauty and truth. Foreshadowing one of his great odes, he conjectures that

.....It is a flaw  
 In happiness to see beyond our bourn—  
 It forces us in summer skies to mourn:  
 It spoils the singing of the nightingale. (82-5)

His subsequent description of a tranquil sea landscape demonstrates the truth of this unrest, as the poet's perception of the scene's hidden complexities mars his individual appreciation of its joys:

..... I was at home,  
 And should have been most happy—but I saw  
 Too far into the sea; where every maw  
 The greater on the less feeds evermore: —  
 But I saw too distinct into the core



Of an eternal fierce destruction,

And so from happiness I far was gone. (92-8)

The poet's mindfulness of the unceasing "eternal fierce destruction" at the heart of the natural world, even when not outwardly manifested, is viewed not only as a detriment to personal enjoyment but perhaps, for the younger Keats, as an obstacle to beauty itself. As Smith's speaker in Sonnet I cannot wear a poet's garland of roses without feeling the thorns in her soul, Keats cannot witness the magnitude of the prospect before him without recognizing its hidden hostilities. The images of violence that follow—sharks, hawks, and robins ruthlessly mauling their prey—are purely imaginary and converse to the natural scenes the poet has actually witnessed that day—an unruffled sea, new spring leaves, and wild strawberries growing. At this point, Keats can only view the simultaneity of the fresh life and beauty he sees and the death and severity he senses as a mystery he cannot unravel (86-7). Affecting to lightly dismiss these solemn meditations, he ends by proposing to retreat from them into a new romance (111-2), *Isabella*. Nevertheless, Keats soon returns to the musings began in "Dear Reynolds." The sonnet "On Visiting the Tomb of Burns," written just over three months later, is haunted by the knowledge that the warmth and brightness of the Scottish summer merely anticipate the chill and gloom of winter; thus, "all is cold beauty; pain is never done" (8). Keats again tries to dismiss thoughts that he believes tarnish the beauty of the vista before him—considering himself plagued by a "sickly imagination" (11)—but is unable to escape the poetic second sight. Such contemplations would continue to disturb Keats throughout the composition of his greatest works. The "Nightingale" and "Grecian Urn" odes are frustrated exertions to escape the world of process. The "Ode on Melancholy" is an effort to justify and reward the constant awareness to the transience of beauty and joy. "Ode on Indolence" is another attempt at a cavalier dismissal of

the “demon Poesy” (30) in favor of comfortable mental and physical idleness. It is the ode “To Autumn” that unflinchingly and “disinterestedly” confronts the mindfulness of natural progression even unto death; in this final great ode Keats is at last able to not only reconcile the concurrent forces of life, death, beauty, and truth, but celebrate them. Yet it is *The Fall of Hyperion* that reveals the extent of Keats’s internal struggle with the poet’s perpetual consciousness of what Wordsworth identified as the pleasure-pain complexity (Stillinger, “Introduction,” xxii). “To Autumn” achieves its resolution via a speaker that is almost entirely objective, but *The Fall of Hyperion* wrestles with the weight of poetic responsibility in a poet’s voice and vision.

*The Fall of Hyperion*’s poet-speaker-dreamer begins his vision in an idyllic, but not unspoiled, garden that invites Edenic associations. Encountering the remnants of a banquet, the speaker is overcome by an unearthly hunger and what remains of the still abundant summer fruits. His enjoyment of this feast is followed by an overpowering thirst, and the speaker is compelled to swallow a draught that causes him to collapse and enter another dream realm against his will (I.53-5). It is significant that the speaker struggles against the liquid’s effect. Like Smith’s speaker in Sonnet I, *The Fall of Hyperion*’s speaker appears to have no option in the matter of becoming a poet. Keats’s speaker is transported to Saturn’s desolate temple, awe-inspiring in its dimensions and threatening in the trial it proposes. The poet is given what appears to be his only choice in the experience when Moneta challenges him to ascend the steps to Saturn’s shrine or die where he stands (I.116-7). Once he has completed the grueling task of ascent, Moneta identifies the poet as one set apart from the rest of humanity: “None can usurp this height.../ But those to whom the miseries of the world/ Are misery, and will not let them rest” (I.147-9). Moneta does not elevate the poet over those who do not think of venturing into

the garden or temple; she merely indicates the difference between the two. Those who work only for the good of humanity and have no visionary thoughts are, in fact, described as more substantial than the poet (I.166) and thus deserving of sanctuaries that do not exist for the speaker, of whom Moneta asks, “What bliss even in hope is there for thee?/ What haven?” (I.170-1). As Keats observed in the verse epistle to Reynolds, the poet’s vision into the core of things is a hindrance to personal contentment or refuge. Saturn’s temple is the site of the poet’s initiation into the miseries of humankind, a place Keats had always known he would have to sojourn, and from which, as Perkins observes, there is no escape (I.278). Moneta recognizes the inequity in the fates of those who do not think to come to the temple and the poet-dreamer who “venoms all his days,/ Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve” (I.175-6). The reward for this woe is not, as the poet believes at first, the postponement of his death, but the vision itself, the admission into the garden and the temple (178-80). Moneta’s statement that such dreams are granted so that “happiness [may] be somewhat shar’d” (177) includes the assurance that some joy will be derived from the visions, regardless of the agonies that must be witnessed and encountered therein. To see beyond one’s bourn is a compulsion and an obligation, but in *The Fall of Hyperion*, Keats also represents it as a privilege, and the climax of the program outlined in “Sleep and Poetry.” Keats and Smith have much the same view of a uniquely poetic burden: for both, a heightened understanding and experience of pain leaves the poet without a haven, but the poetry itself offers certain restitutions for the difficulties. The key difference in their approaches lies in the nature of the anguish each examines. While Smith considers private sorrow and thorns felt in the heart, Keats dwells on the empathic recognition of pain in nature and humanity generally, and Moneta and the fallen Titans specifically. Both poets, though sensible of different types of suffering, acknowledge that they are without refuge; yet both also

continued to construct natural bowers and explore modes of escape in their poetry. The instinct to retreat remained despite the awareness that it would not be possible.

## II. Desire for Escape

The impulse to retreat necessitates a mode of escape; the conception of pastoral and natural bowers recurs frequently in Smith's and Keats's poetry. As is consistent with both poets' ambivalence toward the visionary imagination and awareness of the impossibility of total withdrawal, Smith's attitude about the bower ideal could shift in one poem, while those Keats created became increasingly more natural and subject to process over the course of his career. Early on in *Beachy Head*, Smith daydreams of

.....visionary vales,  
 Where bright pavilions rise, and trophies, fann'd  
 By airs celestial; and adorn'd with wreaths  
 Of flowers that bloom amid elysian bowers. (86-9)

By the poem's end, her model retreat has become a completely natural one that, though picturesque, implicitly admits the possibility of death (613-20). Similarly, in "Sleep and Poetry" Keats contemplates eternal life within "the fair/ visions of all places: a bowery nook/ [that] will be elysium" (62-4). By the composition of the odes, however, the progression of time and, eventually, death began to invade his idyllic enclosures. The only truly static bower in Keats's great odes—the frieze of "Grecian Urn"—is deemed inadequate by the speaker in the end, while the bower of "Ode to a Nightingale," like Smith's natural one at the end of *Beachy Head*, covertly acknowledges a progression toward death. These halting admissions of natural process into the bower can be traced to both poets' eventual examinations of everything that lay beyond,

particularly in their seasonal poetry. By “The close of summer” and “To Autumn,” neither Smith nor Keats would attempt to construct a refuge from the cycles of time and death.

Smith’s “To the goddess of botany” and Keats’s “Ode to Psyche” exist between the visionary and natural bowers, as both poems conclude with a speaker ensconced in a bower with a goddess, yet also keenly mindful of the world outside the space. Characteristically, Smith’s speaker seeks comfort from her goddess in the wake of worldly oppressions, while Keats’s constructs both bower and temple in tribute to the neglected Psyche. The divergence may lie less in the poets’ overall approaches than the difference between the two goddesses. Smith’s goddess of botany is inevitably nature itself, which requires no human adoration to sustain it, whereas Psyche—as both Olympic goddess and symbol of the soul—declines without the love of mortals. Nevertheless, the speakers have the same object of retreat and final awareness of expanse beyond the bower despite the attempt at withdrawal. Smith’s speaker “shrink[s] from the view” (2) of Folly, Violence, and Fraud (1-2) in the hopes of sheltering in the goddess’s “silent shades of soothing hue” (6); she addresses the goddess as a “sweet Nymph” (4) who lovingly feeds the flora with dew from her own hands (9). The sonnet’s last lines, however, reveal the vastness of the goddess’s realm. She ministers to not only meadow and woodland flowers, but also to the vegetation that dwells

.....in wilds remote

Or lurk[s] with mosses in the humid caves,

Mantle[s] the cliffs, on dimpling rivers float[s],

Or stream[s] from coral rocks beneath the Ocean waves. (11-14)

This enlargement of consciousness into the distant, dark, and potentially hazardous spheres of the goddess’s domain is a suggestive deviation from the sonnet’s opening desire to hide from the

world in “bell and florets of unnumber’d dyes” (7) (an image lifted from Milton’s *Lycidas* that, interestingly, Keats also borrows for Fancy’s garden in “Ode to Psyche”). While the variety of meadow wildflowers is a testament to the goddess’s inventiveness, it is a merely pretty image compared to the prospect of wilderness, caverns, and seascape in the last lines. The ideal of a bower denotes an enclosed haven; though the speaker finds this for a moment in a corner of the goddess’s natural empire, there is no abandoning the poetic sight that perceives nature’s breadth and the latent threats outside the bower.

Like “To the goddess of botany,” “Ode to Psyche” aims to forsake a disappointing and distressing world. Keats’s speaker’s (at least partially facetious) complaint is that his world is one of unbelief; “in these days so far retir’d/ From happy pieties” (40-1), the Olympian gods, and most of all the lastborn Psyche, are faint and fading. The speaker, offering himself as choir, priest, and prophet, proposes building a sanctuary “in some untrodden region of [his] mind” (51)—an internalized shrine in which he and Psyche may be embowered, as Helen Vendler suggests (52). Compared with the forest bower that the speaker stumbles upon in the ode’s first stanza, where Psyche and Cupid lay, the final stanza’s internal bower is less pastorally lovely, though its sanctuary is “rosy” (59) and promises “soft delight” (64). The sanctuary, with its flower garden maintained by Fancy, is surrounded not by pines but “branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain” (52). With the introduction of these branches, the expansion of the landscape is sudden: “Far, far around shall those dark-cluster’d trees/ Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep” (54-5). The height and wildness surrounding Psyche’s bright shrine, and especially the speaker’s sharp awareness of this “pleasant pain” growing just outside the temple’s walls, create what Stanley Plumly calls an “intimate sublime” (355) in this ode. Despite having fashioned an interior sanctuary where he may worship Psyche apart from a world of

unbelievers, the speaker is not free from pain or uncertainties. In addition to the unfamiliar peaks encircling the temple, the flowers Fancy breeds are nameless (61), investing the space with further unknown and perhaps unknowable qualities. Even the delight Psyche is promised is to be gained by “shadowy thought” (65), implying obscurities; there is no simple delight for the speaker. This imagined bower, like the one in “To the goddess of botany,” is not one in which the speaker can entirely suppress all elements of concern. In both poems, the world outside the bower—whether natural or visionary—infringes upon the speakers’ consciousness.

Though its depiction of a lovelorn recluse who disappears into a green world is one of *Beachy Head*’s only incursions into sentimentality, the verse “rhapsodies” (576) he leaves behind for the speaker to gather envision a bower vulnerable to process despite its pastoral qualities:

And I’ll contrive a sylvan room  
     Against the time of summer heat,  
 Where leaves, inwoven in Nature’s loom,  
     Shall canopy our green retreat;  
 And gales that “close the eye of day”  
     Shall linger, e’er they die away. (613-18)

The crucial words here are “time,” “close,” and “die.” The summer warmth will end, the day will close, and though the evening breezes linger in the enclosure, they are dying. Even more significantly, the hermit looks ahead to a time “when a sear and sallow hue/ From early frost the bower receives” (619-20). The recognition that no retreat, no matter how ideal, is immune to time and change is a critical moment in *Beachy Head* given its early endorsement of the purely visionary “elysian bowers” (89). It is important to note, however, that the recognition does not

issue directly from Smith's poet-speaker; she is recording the hermit's half-finished verses. Though he anticipates the autumnal frost that must seep into his summery seclusion, he responds by finding "securer shelter" (624) in a forest cave—essentially, framing his existence in a series of bowers. It is an acknowledgement of the wider world, not an unreserved acceptance of it. Even with these qualifications, the admission of process into the natural retreat is a substantial development in a poem spoken by "an early worshipper at Nature's shrine" (346), as it also necessarily admits the possibility that there is no actual solace in nature.

The same perception is also implied in the description of the lush and shaded copse of "Ode to a Nightingale," which Vendler has called Keats's greatest bower (84):

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
                   Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
 But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet  
                   Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
                   White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;  
                   Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;  
                   And mid-May's eldest child,  
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
                   The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves. (41-50)

Seeking refuge from "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" (23) in a manner reminiscent of Smith's avoidance of Folly, Violence, and Fraud ("To the goddess of botany," 1-2), the speaker arrives at this transitional, nocturnal arbor to find it exposed "at least to the cyclical rhythms of the vegetative cycle of fading violets and coming roses" (Vendler 85). Even without the benefit



of sight, the speaker senses time stealing into the bower: the withering violets are shrouded with leaves and soon to be supplanted by the musk-rose, which will itself yield its nectar and become the flies' possession. Moreover, the "embalmed darkness"—"embalmed," as Perkins has noted, carries the double suggestion of perfume and burial (251)—leads the speaker to his meditation on death in the following stanza. The bower's openness to time, darkness, and death frustrates the speaker's aim of melting into a sphere separate from process and demise (21) and in fact provokes a more sustained contemplation of death. Nature continually renews itself, but the renewal is the result of recurrent loss—"seasonableness," as the ode proposes—or, in Richard Harter Fogle's words, "the generous fertility of Nature is inseparable from the grave" (37). (Several critics have remarked how the "Nightingale" bower anticipates the final ode "To Autumn"—most notably, Bate (506), Perkins (251), and Plumly (344).) Because the bower is a natural one subject to the laws of time, it can provide no lasting relief from a world of pain and death. Like Smith's retreat in *Beachy Head*, the "Nightingale" bower forces a tacit admission that nature, with its perpetual cycles of life and death, cannot be made into an asylum from process.

In exploring avenues of escape from worldly process, Smith and Keats also turn to more enduring representations of nature. The star, existing immortally outside the cycles of death and regeneration, would appear to have advantages over the bower as a point of fixation for a speaker in search of permanence and refuge. Smith's "To the North Star" and Keats's "Bright Star" examine these cosmic symbols, contrasting them with human sensation and arriving at strikingly similar conclusions. Smith's star is portrayed as somewhat less constant than Keats's: his is "stedfast.../ ..../ ...watching, with eternal lids apart" (1, 3), while Smith's is temporarily lost among storm clouds (7-8) or reduced to a "trembling" (11) reflection flickering in dark water.

Yet like Keats's star Smith's is omnipresent, having witnessed the speaker's youthful hopes falter (3) and "gleam[ing] in faint radiance" (12) in the midst of the tempest, dimmed but still visible. Smith's speaker implores the star to "arise,/ And on my passion shed propitious rays!" (3-4)—a passion that the earthly landscape gives vent to in the form of the wild winter squall. The panorama of earthbound scenes in Keats's sonnet, by contrast, could be descriptive of the morning after the nighttime storm in "To the North Star." In Smith's sonnet, the winds "howl" (6) and "rave" (10); the sea is "turbid" (9), "wild" (10), and "foaming" (12). Conversely, the waters in "Bright Star" are involved in a ritual cleansing of the earth (5), while the snow is a "soft-fallen mask/ ... upon the mountains and the moors" (7-8). Despite these differences, the "Bright Star" landscape too corresponds with the speaker's human passions. The speaker longs to be "awake for ever" (12) like the "sleepless" (4) star; the "soft swell and fall" (11) of his beloved's breast recall the rhythmic motion of the waters. As Perkins has observed, however, the "eremite" (4) star and "priestlike" (5) oceans do not "experience human passions... [they are] part of an order of cold, chaste, pure, and eternal things" (232). This gulf between the speaker and the star—not just physical but also perceptual—results in the almost immediate qualification of the star as a ideal symbol ("*Not* in lone splendor," 2, emphasis added). Smith's sonnet does not negate her symbol quite so emphatically, but the concluding couplet compares the star to "rays of reason" (13) that cannot penetrate the speaker's soul, leaving her dejected and distinctly implying that the star is ineffectual as a comforting image. For the speakers of both sonnets, the star fails as a symbol of natural stability and sanctuary; the very immortality that draws the speakers translates to aloofness and renders full identification impossible. Smith's and Keats's speakers remain continually aware of their transience as it contrasts with the stars' permanence, leaving mortality to have the final word in both poems:

Then fade:—and leave me to despair, and die! (Smith, 14)

And so live ever—or else swoon to death. (Keats, 14)

As in the bowers, the consciousness of death is inescapable and exacerbated rather than alleviated by nature. In earlier sonnets, Smith and Keats each reflected on the suspicion that symbols of nature ultimately provide scant consolations in the desire to retreat. Surveying the hills of her childhood home in “To the South Downs,” Smith’s poet-speaker doubts their capacity to bring her true peace or soothe her pain, while Keats is disenchanted by the remote beauty of the Scottish landscapes in “On Visiting the Tomb of Burns.” The extensive consideration of natural bowers and cosmic imagery that followed (and, in Smith’s case, also preceded) bears out those sentiments. Like the notion of escapism itself, however, natural symbols as channels of escape persisted in the work of both poets, and perhaps nowhere more notably than in the nightingale poems.

There is a tradition, however slight, of critical comment on Smith’s nightingale sonnets and Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale.” Correspondences in mood, situation, and phrasing were first noticed by George K. Whiting in 1963, and more specifically by Burton R. Pollin in 1966; both published brief articles recording similarities between Smith’s sonnet VII, “On the departure of the nightingale” and Keats’s ode. Fletcher also notes these likenesses, as well as those between the ode and Smith’s sonnet III, “To a nightingale.” There is a curious absence of critical remark on Smith’s sonnet LV, “The return of the nightingale. Written in May 1791,” with reference to Keats’s ode. This is perhaps because, as Curran adds in a footnote to his edition of Smith’s poems, this final sonnet on the nightingale conveys sentiments that oppose those introduced in the first two (50). Yet there are phrasing and tonal resemblances to all three sonnets in the ode—seemingly more parallels, as Pollin writes, “than the mere similarity of subject would

gratuitously produce” (180). The most significant of these similarities is the presentation of the nightingale as a symbol of escapism, followed by the now familiar recognition that the symbol is unsatisfactory.

The first four stanzas of “Ode to a Nightingale” portray the progression of the speaker’s desire to identify with the bird and the shifting intensities that accompany that desire; the apex of intensity arguably occurs in the third stanza, wherein the speaker aches to “fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget/ What [the nightingale] amongst the leaves hast never known” (21-2). The concluding couplet of Smith’s “To a nightingale” expresses a comparable yearning, as the speaker addresses the nightingale: “. . .that such my lot might be,/ To sigh, and sing at liberty—like thee!” (13-4). The words of Smith’s speaker are more blatantly tinged with envy, however, whereas Keats’s speaker firmly declares that his mood is not inspired by enviousness (5). This distinction is the result of the most important difference between the poems: the character of the two nightingales. Smith’s is “melancholy” (1), full of “sweet sorrow” (3), its song a “mournful melody” (4), while Keats’s is a “light-winged Dryad” (7) secure in its “happy lot” (5). (However, in the final stanza of the ode, the speaker refers to the birdsong as a “plaintive anthem,” (75). Smith’s “songstress sad” (13) is unquestionably female, which associates the sonnet’s nightingale more definitively with the Philomela myth. As Fletcher observes, Smith’s bird is identified as and with a suffering woman (50), an association that is particularly suggestive coming from Smith’s female poet-speaker. The envy the speaker communicates is directed at the nightingale as a “martyr of disastrous love” (12), an attribute that Smith assigns to herself frequently in letters (Curran xx) and also to her speakers (see, for examples, “To the North Star” and “To dependence”). By contrast, the ode’s nightingale “singest of summer in full-throated ease” (10), a phrase that separates the bird from the Philomela legend entirely, though Keats

briefly alludes to the myth in the fragment *Calidore* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Vendler feels that the bird is almost necessarily sexless, given the speaker's strong affinity with it (82). This produces a marked difference in the birds' awareness of pain and process in the world. Smith's is one of "Pale Sorrow's victims" (9)—a phrase that seems to echo in the ode ("Where youth grows pale...../ Where but to think is to be full of sorrow," 26-7)—while Keats's has never and cannot know of "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" (23). Smith's speaker envies the nightingale's liberty to sing freely of her anguish in the security of nature, while Keats's speaker seeks identification with the nightingale's sorrow-free existence. Nevertheless, as Vendler writes of "Ode to a Nightingale," there is "the repeated antithesis between the earthbound poet and the free bird" (83); the same is true of Smith's sonnet. Both speakers endeavor to identify with the nightingale through visionary poetry: Smith's calls upon the "poet's musing fancy" (5) as Keats's attempts to fly to the bird "on the viewless wings of Poesy" (33). Neither attempt is successful. Smith's speaker ends her sonnet still keenly aware of the crucial difference between her and the bird—the latter is free while the speaker is not—just as Keats's speaker must cease his imaginary flight when he realizes he is unable to escape the certainty of death.

In his comparison of "On the departure of the nightingale" and the final stanza of "Ode to a Nightingale," Whiting dwells largely on the manner in which both poems bid the nightingale farewell (5). Pollin takes a broader view, tracing verbal correspondences of Smith's sonnet in the whole of Keats's ode (180-1), the most striking of which relate to the bird's habitat: Smith refers to "the lone brake that shades thy mossy nest" (10) and Keats follows the song "through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways" (40). Neither Whiting nor Pollin discusses both poems' acknowledgment of the nightingale as a symbol that perpetually renews itself, connecting past and future. The seventh stanza of "Ode to a Nightingale" alchemizes the

temporal birdsong into an immortal conduit to the past and visionary realms. The song the speaker hears was heard “in ancient days by emperor and clown:/ .....found a path/ Through the sad heart of Ruth” (64-66), and also “charm’d magic casements...../ ..... in faery lands forlorn” (69-70). This stanza moves with the bird’s music from the actual ancient past to Biblical history to the territory of the imagination (Bate 509). Though Smith’s “On the departure of the nightingale” focuses more on a communion with the future, it still establishes the nightingale’s song as an eternal force. Though the speaker is uncertain about the bird’s migration (5-6), she is confident that its song will offer comfort to the pastoral figures that populate the sonnet: “still [the nightingale’s] voice shall soft affections move,/ And still be dear to Sorrow, and to Love!” (13-4). This conviction is affirmed in Smith’s final sonnet on the subject, “The return of the nightingale.” The transformation that takes place in “Ode to a Nightingale” and from Smith’s first sonnet on the nightingale to the second and third is a transcendent one: the bird ceases to be a single object of transport and becomes invested with an eternal quality that exists outside time and death. As Plumly writes, “it is the song of the nightingale passed on and not the nightingale itself that is the promise” (347). Yet this continuity forces both poems to negate the song as a vehicle of escape, because the speakers are irrevocably bound to process and mortality.

Even while rejoicing in the nightingale’s reappearance in “The return of the nightingale,” Smith’s speaker is made abruptly conscious of her inability to be transported entirely despite her efforts (9). She concludes that “such evils in [her] lot combine,/ As shut [her] languid sense—to Hope’s dear voice and [the nightingale’s]” (13-4). The phrase “languid sense” reverberates in “Ode to a Nightingale,” where “a drowsy numbness pains/ [the speaker’s] sense” (1-2). Like Smith’s speaker, the speaker of the ode comes to the rapid realization that his impermanence severs any identification he could arrive at with the nightingale: “Thou wast not born for death,

immortal Bird!/ No hungry generations tread thee down” (61-2). Like bowers and cosmic images, birdsong is only a temporary refuge; it has not eliminated the speakers’ consciousness of their transient natures. Smith’s sequence of sonnets and the ode must end in what Keats identified in *Endymion* as “the journey homeward to habitual self” (II.276); the moment of transcendence has to fade. Though the nightingale is the natural mode of escapism most thoroughly examined by both poets, it is nonetheless inevitably rejected. Aside from natural symbols of escape, Smith and Keats also examined agents of oblivion, which are often more effective, but also more drastic.

If awareness of process is the ailment, it is inevitable that unconsciousness must be considered as a remedy. Smith and Keats explore this escape avenue in a multitude of forms, contemplating an insensibility that may be achieved through indolence, disengagement, forgetfulness, madness, supernatural draughts, sleep, or, ultimately, death. This desired oblivion is, in a way, the opposite of visionary flight; in fact, it recalls the nothingness that Keats was determined to avoid through the use of the visionary imagination in “Sleep and Poetry.” Application of the imagination implies a form of consciousness that is meant to be avoided in these more radical attempts at escape. However, and somewhat paradoxically, the imagination is a necessary facilitator of almost every form of oblivion. The state of unconsciousness and the relief it could offer must be visualized rather than realized or sustained; and, once again, the mode of escape cannot be wholly effective. A poet’s constant awareness of process and mortality cannot be reconciled with a total withdrawal from consciousness—moreover, as Smith and Keats eventually conclude in poems on death, *permanent* oblivion is not truly a thing to be wished for. The realization that the obliteration of consciousness is even less satisfactory than the imperfect natural symbols of bower, star, and nightingale leads both poets toward an acceptance of process

expressed in their seasonal poetry; but first oblivion is thoroughly considered as a means of avoiding pain and pressure.

Keats's "Ode on Indolence," descriptive and possessive of a contentedly lethargic detachment from reality, finds the speaker in a mood that directly opposes that of "Sleep and Poetry." In the latter poem, Keats's fear was that the visions would flee and leave him submerged in nothingness (155-9); "Indolence" finds him hopeful that a sudden vision will "melt, and leave [his] sense/ Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness" (19-20). The apparitions of Love, Ambition, and Poesy exemplify the elusive and abstruse nature of a life of aspiration and responsibility—a reality the speaker is attempting to shield himself from through his pretense of inertia. (Keats's earlier sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be" also features a speaker attempting to evade anxieties about love and process by sinking into nothingness, or what Brendan Corcoran calls "suspended animation," (3).) This effort is unsuccessful, as the appearance of the figures demonstrates. Despite the speaker's insistence on idleness, seeing the figures stirs his latent need for the experiences they represent: "to follow them I burn'd/ And ached for wings" (23-4). Though he makes a show of rapidly dismissing the figures from his sight in the following stanza, the damage has been done. The speaker's self-interested visionary excursions—"dim dreams" (42) that would shelter him from time and monotony—have been interrupted by the figures of poetic responsibility and desire. The dreams of a fanatic are silenced by the dreams of a poet, and once again, it is apparent that, for the poet, there is no refuge from responsibility or awareness. The figures can also be seen as portents of mortality, with their urgency in intruding upon the speaker's torpor, the haggard appearance of Ambition, and even an implication of death. Vendler suggests that the initial description of indolence—"benumb'd... my pulse grew less and less/ Pain had no sting" (16-7)—uses the



language of death (Vendler 26); she also suggests that the figures themselves carry a “hint of deathliness” (29) as they succeed from shadows (11) to ghosts (51) to phantoms (58). Though the ode ends with the speaker’s command for the visions to vanish and never return (58-9), it is clear that the illusion of dreamy unconsciousness has been shattered. Having repeatedly engaged with the figures, the speaker has been recalled to the mutability and accountability he sought to escape.

Smith’s poetry is quicker to envision more severe forms of oblivion than Keats’s. Several of her earliest sonnets, such as “To the moon” and “To the South Downs,” express a desperate longing for release through death. Smith also considers the seeming detachment of madness in her sonnet “On being cautioned against walking on an headland overlooking the sea, because it was frequented by a lunatic.” Smith’s speaker imagines a miserable figure who wanders on the bluff and pays no heed to the roaring waves or fierce winds. Though he lies in a “cold bed” (6) in the desolate landscape, responding incoherently to the crashing waves (7-8), he is insensible of his pitiable state. This disengagement from a harsh reality is what the speaker covets, as she “see[s] him more with envy than with fear” (10). The madman’s inability to comprehend his own wretchedness and his detachment from the bleak surroundings make his condition enviable for the sonnet’s speaker: “He seems (uncursed with reason) not to know/ The depth or the duration of his woe” (13-4). Although the speaker does not specify her own woes beyond an acknowledgement of her “moody sadness” (9), her reference to “giant horrors” (12) that do not frighten the madman seems to correspond to her mental state and situation. Whatever these horrors are, she is willing to escape them in an extreme fashion, as the loss of sanity and reason would result in the loss of her identity. Yet this obliteration of consciousness is not possible for the speaker. As the sonnet’s title indicates, her existence remains entirely separate

from the “lunatic”; his blessed lack of reason and the blissful ignorance in which he lives are workings of the poetic imagination. This physical and psychological distance demonstrates how thoroughly impossible this form of oblivion is for the speaker. Madness must be rejected as a form of escapism not only because she *is* cursed with reason, but also because she cannot even so much as approach this depth of insanity.

Forgetting, a slackening of consciousness akin to the madness Smith considers, is explored by both poets. Interestingly, Smith and Keats each approach this form of oblivion with the desire that both pain and pleasure be forgotten, as the memory of past happiness can be more distressing than present sorrow. Smith’s sonnet “To oblivion” addresses Forgetfulness and Oblivion interchangeably, imagining unconsciousness as a goddess and “sister of Chaos and eternal Night” (5). Smith’s speaker asks that Oblivion remove not only her awareness but her memory as well. In fact, the destruction of memory is viewed as necessary for the relief the speaker hopes for: “...might this painful consciousness decay,/ And, with my memory, end my cureless woes” (5-6). Memory is the source of anguish here—even what may be inferred are good memories, as they remind the speaker of what she has lost; she is continually aware that “such things were’—and are no more” (9). (In his footnote to the poem, Curran suggests that the sonnet addresses Smith’s grief after the death of her daughter Anna Augusta de Foville, (77).) As with Smith’s sonnet on madness, the loss of the speaker’s identity is implicit here. Her remembrance of what is lost and can never be reclaimed is the basis of her plea to Oblivion; memory and grief are clearly the overwhelming aspects of her character. To forget the cause of her sorrow and the sorrow itself would be a kind of death—but as the last lines of the sonnet indicate, it is death that the speaker wishes for. Yet, as she laments, death hovers but delays (14),

and the complete forgetfulness she describes is impossible—particularly for a speaker so invested in and aware of the power of memory.

Keats's treatment of forgetfulness is instilled with the same awareness, though "In drear nighted December" takes the form of a song with a blithe meter (Bate 231); this form, like that of "Fancy," belies the poem's tone of regret. The speaker compares nature's insensibility of alterations from its spring and summer glory to human awareness of the sting of faded joy. The poem expresses an envy of, as Bate writes, "the imperviousness of the inanimate to the pain of regret and memory" (232). The tree branches, stripped bare and exposed to the winter night, "ne'er remember/ Their green felicity" (3-4), while the brook, "with a sweet forgetting" (13), is content in its frozen state. The final stanza brings the human condition into stark contrast with this happy unconsciousness:

Ah! would 'twere so with many  
 A gentle girl and boy—  
 But were there every any  
 Writh'd not of passed joy?  
 The feel of not to feel it,  
 When there is none to heal it,  
 Nor numbed sense to steel it,  
 Was never said in rhyme. (17-24)

As in Smith's "To oblivion," memory ("passed joy") is the cause of pain. Without this knowledge of what is past, there would be no cause for the present sorrow, as the natural world demonstrates. This unconsciousness is doubly impossible for the speaker, as the poem's last four lines make clear. Unlike the trees that will grow new leaves and the brook that will soon thaw,

there is no simple way for a human being to “heal” or recover past happiness. Nor is there any cyclical numbness to anticipate; memory ensures that the pain will continue to be felt. Though Keats would later manage to praise rather than mourn beauty that must die, the nearness of death to beauty and happiness continued to be constantly in his mind. Forgetting such a relationship proved to be beyond the scope of his work as a poet, as this early poem reveals.

Smith and Keats also examined potions and wines as agents of forgetfulness and oblivion; inevitably, these liquids have mythological significance. The image occurs very early and similarly in the poetry of each. Smith’s early sonnet “To the South Downs,” as it addresses the river Arun, asks if its water possesses powers equal to Lethe’s: “Can you one kind Lethean cup bestow,/ To drink a long oblivion to my care?” (11-2). Comparably, the speaker of Keats’s early poem “Fill for me a brimming bowl” calls for “as deep a draught/ As e’er from Lethe’s waves was quaff” (7-8) in which to drown memory and fruitless desire. Both poems acknowledge the Lethean draught’s unattainability and ultimately refute its value, with Smith’s speaker exclaiming, “Ah! no!” (13) and Keats’s admitting, “’tis vain” (13). Even so, similar images of intoxicating and mythic liquids recur in the poets’ later work.

Smith’s “Nepenthe” is an ode to the magical potion of mirth and forgetfulness given to Helen in Homer’s *Odyssey*, as the poet’s note explains. Smith’s speaker yearns to learn the craft of mixing “the oblivious draught” (3) that can restore the careworn soul and lift every emotional burden. The liquid would leave the drinker “uncursed with thought” (6)—as the madman in “On being cautioned against walking...” is “uncursed with reason” (13)—and “sooth[e] busy Memory to sleep” (10), as the goddess would close the eye of memory in “To oblivion.” The charmed tonic would efficiently combine the effects of madness and forgetfulness without the negative consequences associated with either. The drinker would not be a dejected figure like the

madman; by contrast, she would wear “the smile of happy youth” (5). Nor would she lose her memory and thus her identity entirely; it is made clear that the sleep of memory would be “transient ease” (9). The problem, of course, is that Nepenthe is fictive—a fact that leaves the speaker in some bitterness of spirit, as the sonnet’s final lines demonstrate. After remarking on those people she meets who seem so untroubled that they seem to have imbibed a concoction with powers comparable to Nepenthe’s, the speaker ends by flatly stating her reality: “But still to *me* Oblivion is denied,/ There’s no Nepenthe, now, on earth for me” (13-4). Again, not only are the agent of oblivion and the desired unconsciousness impossible to obtain, but the meditation on the vehicle seems to bring about a more negative result than if it had never been imagined at all. The speaker’s sense of her stark reality is only heightened by the sonnet’s end; for her, the fear expressed by Keats’s “Sleep and Poetry” speaker has been realized—the “sense of real things comes doubly strong” (Keats 157).

As Perkins has observed, wine frequently appears in Keats’s poetry as a means of transport to a higher visionary realm (248-9). The second stanza of “Ode to a Nightingale” is perhaps the most memorable instance of this metaphor, as it imagines a draught blending the essence of nature (“the deep-delved earth,” 12), mythological import (“tasting of Flora,” 13), Mediterranean culture (“Provençal song,” 14), and sacred poetic inspiration (“the blushful Hippocrene,” 16). The wine is the medium that will allow the speaker to escape an anxious reality for the nightingale’s summery sphere. Like Smith’s Nepenthe, it is an agent of forgetting: the speaker longs for a draught so that he “might drink, and leave the world unseen,/ And with [the nightingale] fade away into the forest dim:/ Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget” (19-21). Additionally, the wine in “Nightingale”—also like the invigorating Nepenthe—contains exuberant as well as comforting properties: “dance... song, and sunburnt mirth” (14)” and

“beaded bubbles winking at the brim” (17). As Vendler notes, this wine “is to be everything at once” (87-8)—an enthralling and inspiring experience in itself with tranquilizing and exhilarating effects. Yet even if such a liquid existed, its influence could only be transitory; the speaker of “Nightingale” has acknowledged this and disregarded wine as insufficient by the ode’s fourth stanza. He determines to join the nightingale on the concealed wings of poetic inspiration rather than be “charioted by Bacchus and his pards” (32). This dismissal of wine as an effective aid in escapism or true visionary flight foreshadows the draught taken by the poet-dreamer in *The Fall of Hyperion*—not a wine, in fact, but a cool and clear nectar (I.42). Bate has noticed that this drink, following the meal representing communion with the past, is taken out of pure thirst and is thus a realistic acceptance of the speaker’s mortality. It is not required or wanted in order to “reinforce the impression of Arcadia... The thought is the reverse of the second stanza of the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’” (590). Indeed, the elixir is described in terms of what it is *not* rather than what it is, and unlike the “Nightingale” wine, it possesses no mystical connection with sacred immortality. Rather, through the poet’s pledge to the world’s mortals and dead (I.44-5), it is associated with humanity and death. The poet’s assertion that this liquid, not the charmed draught of “Nightingale,” is “parent of [his] theme” (I.46) demonstrates the full inadequacy of the mythological wine. It is incapable of offering sustained transport either from earthly process or to the world of the visionary.

The simpler unconscious of sleep is a provisional form of escape and, along with death, one of two natural avenues to oblivion as contemplated by Smith and Keats. Each wrote a sonnet to sleep, both of which act as invocations to a benevolent deity. As supplicants, Smith’s and Keats’s speakers use corresponding language and images; their tones, however, vary distinctly.

Smith's speaker summons Sleep with a voice of urgency that borders on desperation; fittingly, her sonnet begins in the imperative:

Come, balmy Sleep! tired Nature's soft resort!  
 On these sad temples all thy poppies shed;  
 And bid gay dreams, from Morpheus' airy court,  
 Float in light vision round my aching head!  
 Secure of all they blessings, partial Power! (1-5)

The exclamatory appeals to Sleep's gentleness and partiality create a mood of despondency, which is extended by the speaker's conception of three characters blessed by Sleep. As is typical in Smith's early work, the rustic figures of peasant (6), sea-boy (7), and village girl (10) are idyllically unburdened by anxieties such as the speaker knows, and so able to fully partake in the sacrament of sleep. Though these lines are disturbingly devoid of the empathy Smith would show toward similar characters in her later poetry, they are instrumental in the sonnet's implication that Sleep is a divinity that does not discriminate on the basis of social rank, but bestows his favor on those who need it least. This realization leaves the speaker despairing and doubtful, as she concludes hopelessly that Sleep's blessings are not for her: "...still thy opiate aid dost thou deny/ To calm the anxious breast, to close the streaming eye" (13-4). Smith's "Nepenthe" speaker reaches a remarkably similar conclusion about the effectiveness of the drug for her in comparison to less beleaguered individuals. Yet the final couplet of "To sleep" communicates even more despondency given that sleep is a real and natural agent of oblivion that is supposed to bring regular, if temporary, relief. The denial of the speaker's pleas is exacerbated by the reality that any respite Sleep can offer is short-lived.

Keats's "Sonnet to Sleep," while also maintaining a prayerful quality, is more even and assured in its expectation that Sleep will visit the speaker. Smith's sonnet sets a slightly less reverent tone—likely due to the speaker's heightened anguish—and as a consequence Keats's seems more formal and ritualized, though both poems convey essentially the same request. Like Smith's speaker, Keats's solicits the transient peace that only Sleep can grant:

O soft embalmer of the still midnight,  
 Shutting with careful fingers and benign  
 Our gloom-pleas'd eyes, embower'd from the light.  
 Enshaded in forgetfulness divine:  
 O soothest Sleep! if so it please thee, close,  
 In midst of this thine hymn, my willing eyes,  
 Or wait the Amen ere thy poppy throws  
 Around my bed its lulling charities. (1-8)

Keats's speaker imagines sleep as another kind of bower in which he may be sheltered from painful consciousness. In appealing to Sleep as a divine power that can construct such a bower, he is more deferential than Smith's speaker, as the phrases "if so it please thee" and "or wait," in particular, demonstrate. The deification of Sleep in both sonnets results in comparable uses of language, however: "balmy Sleep" (Smith 1) and "soothest Sleep" (Keats 5); "soft resort" (Smith 1) and "lulling charities" (Keats 8); "sad temples" (Smith 2) and "gloom-pleas'd eyes" (Keats 3); "anxious breast" (Smith 14) and "curious conscience" (Keats 11), and the more common image of poppies shed or thrown about the speaker's head (Smith 2, Keats 7). Though "Sonnet to Sleep" ends with much firmer conviction that Sleep will hear the speaker's hymn than the ultimately bleak "To sleep," Keats's speaker relates sleep to death in an unsettling and



unrealistic manner. Having addressed Sleep as a “soft embalmer” (1), the speaker ends his supplication with the hope that the divinity will “seal the hushed casket of [his] soul” (14).

Whether or not Sleep hears the speaker’s prayer, sleep is not death; the casket holding sensation and conscience will be reopened before long. While sleep is preferable to forms of oblivion that are not feasible or purely visionary, it will only ever be temporary—and although the two sonnets present differing levels of confidence in Sleep as a god, the fact that both speakers must petition earnestly for what should come naturally suggests that it is yet another unreliable mode of escape.

In “To the South Downs,” Smith’s speaker concludes that “there’s no oblivion—but in death alone” (14); and so death had to be contemplated, by both Smith and Keats. To regard death as a means of escape from a world of process—which, encompassing as it does the alterations and losses brought about by the progression of time, certainly involves mortality—may well seem counterintuitive. To understand why Smith and Keats intermittently considered death as an acceptable agent of oblivion despite the apparent paradox inherent in such reflections, it is important to reiterate that although these two poets frequently explored the same themes with remarkably similar aims and results, their *impulses* to examine and manner of examining a subject were, more often than not, divergent. Smith’s repeated desire for oblivion stems from, as Daniel Robinson has observed, that “intense despair and poetic melancholy” (3) that drives the majority of her *Elegiac Sonnets*—the very title of which informs readers that death will be considered, discussed, and invoked as a means of the sought after oblivion. Smith’s speaker never wavers in her attraction to death, but to say there are no hesitations toward or frustrations with it as a deliverer would be entirely false; the speaker continually betrays such doubts. Yet it is essential to bear in mind that oblivion, for Smith, was viewed as the only way to

be rid of personal misery and unceasing anxiety. Thus death, as the sole path to permanent unconsciousness, is sometimes envisioned as a tolerable form of escape.

For Keats, any longing for oblivion is almost always prompted by nonfulfillment or the fear of it: the interruption of visionary dreams (“Ode on Indolence”); a premature end to poetic and personal aspirations (“When I have fears that I may cease to be”); the inability to revive dead happiness (“In drear nighted December”); a frustrated attempt to identify with a natural symbol (“Ode to a Nightingale”). The three phantasms of “Ode on Indolence”—Love, Ambition, and Poesy—habitually haunt Keats’s poetry; the anxiety that they may never become tangible impels his speakers to look elsewhere for an equivalent depth of sensation and intensity. This search for, as Perkins terms it, “a massive intensity” (252) most often leads the speaker toward an agent of oblivion, such as reverie, forgetfulness, or wine. Occasionally, this combination leads the speaker toward a meditation on the final intensity of death. The most concentrated example of this view of death is the extemporaneous sonnet “Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell.” The poem’s final lines, apart from anticipating the “Nightingale” and “Indolence” odes, are perhaps the most despondent Keats ever wrote:

Yet could I on this very midnight cease,  
     And the world’s gaudy ensigns see in shreds.  
 Verse, fame, and beauty are intense indeed,  
 But death intenser—death is life’s high meed. (11-4)

In a letter to his brother George and sister-in-law Georgiana, Keats expresses some chagrin about the angst exposed in the sonnet, but copies it for them nonetheless, having determined that “it was written with no Agony but that of ignorance; with no thirst of any thing but knowledge when pushed to the point though the first steps to it were throug[h] my human passions” (214). His

final comment on the poem, following the copy of it, suggests that he may have regarded the composition as an exorcism of his weakest inclinations. He writes that, having finished the sonnet, “I went to bed, and enjoyed an uninterrupted sleep—Sane I went to bed and sane I arose” (215). This brush against a darker aspect of Keats’s temperament—which he characterizes as violent and ignorant (214)—and his rapid recoil from the sentiments it gave voice to sheds a great deal of light on the treatment of death in “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on Melancholy.” Though each ode admits the allure of death, it is swiftly rejected in favor of “the wakeful anguish of the soul” (“Melancholy,” 10). In search of fulfillment or escape from nonfulfillment, Keats often considered oblivion and at times approached death; but after once extoling it as life’s fittest reward (“Why did I laugh?,” 14), his subsequent poetry—like Smith’s—went on to negate its appropriateness as a form of release.

“Written in the church-yard at Middleton in Sussex,” Smith’s famous meditation on death and the sublime supremacy of nature, is unquestionably one of her finest interrogations of true oblivion and its consequences. Her speaker witnesses the ferocity of the rising tide—a force created by the combined powers of moon, sea, and wind—as it unearths bodies buried in a coastal village graveyard, “break[ing] the silent sabbath of the grave” (8). The violence of the exhumation juxtaposed with the speaker’s view of death strikes a note of irony in the sonnet’s ending:

With shell and sea-weed mingled, on the shore

Lo! their bones whiten in the frequent wave;

But vain to them the winds and waters rave;

*They* hear the warring elements no more:

While I am doom’d—by life’s long storm oppress,

To gaze with envy on their gloomy rest. (9-14)

There is certainly no “rest” for the remains of these unknown dead, ripped as they are from their tombs, tossed about in the roaring waves, and lost among other remnants of nature’s refuse.

Though the speaker’s envy arises out of her observation that the dead are insensible to the chaos, she is clearly mindful of the upheaval, as the vivid imagery and decisive word choices (most notably “tears” and “breaks”) demonstrate. As Robinson perceives, the havoc nature wreaks upon what should be the eternal rest of death “call[s] into question Smith’s desire for a similar oblivion. Perhaps it will be just as violent and cacophonous” (4). Despite the speaker’s final admission of envy, the sonnet as a whole undermines death as an attractive or restful state. This dissonance between the speaker’s avowed wish and the poem’s presentation of death is no failing on Smith’s part; instead, it rather brilliantly expresses the misgivings that must attend a deliberation on death. While the assertion of “To the South Downs”—real oblivion is found only in death (14)—might be technically true, the perspective of “Written in the church-yard...” conveys the ambivalence Smith felt on the subject. Terrifying in its mystery and finality, death is the most extreme form of oblivion that must be rejected as undesirable.

Keats also dramatizes this same vacillation on the thought of death in the extraordinary sixth stanza of “Ode to a Nightingale,” in which the speaker confronts the mortality that has crept into the twilit bower:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time

I have been half in love with easeful Death,

Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme,

To take into the air my quiet breath;

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,

To cease upon the midnight with no pain... (51-6)

The qualifications present here—“*half* in love,” “*seems* it rich” (emphasis added)—establish the foundation of the refutation that follows. First, however, death is viewed in much the same fashion as it is in “Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell” (which is possibly one of the “mused rhyme[s]” referred to in this stanza). In an ode in which each stanza represents a movement toward a fuller intensity, the ideal of which is symbolized by the nightingale’s song, this stanza initially seems to come closest to that fulfillment. The speaker is deeply ensconced in the dark bower, where all sensory stimulation save the birdsong is muted or invisible. Yet having gone to such lengths to escape awareness of mortality by identifying with the nightingale’s world, as Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren have noted, “the highest rapture that [the speaker] can conceive of is to die” (45). Again, as in “Why did I laugh tonight?,” death is glamorized as life’s recompense; but almost immediately, the speaker reverses that impression. Barbara Herrnstein Smith has defined the two aspects of death as contemplated by Keats, the first indicating a pure loss of consciousness and the second a dreaded and absolute annihilation (685). It is the second aspect that left Keats repelled by “Why did I laugh tonight?,” and it is also the factor that brings about the turn in “Ode to a Nightingale.” After the confession that “now more than ever seems it rich to die” (55) comes the realization that, if the speaker were to die, “still wouldst [the nightingale] sing, and I have ears in vain—/ To thy high requiem become a sod” (59-60). Death would not result in a union with the nightingale or elevated richness of experience; as Stillinger has remarked, the speaker would simply become a clod of earth (“Imagination and Reality,” 6). This recognition negates the last lines of “Why did I laugh tonight?” as well; even if death is the most intense and fittest reward of life, its finality offers no prospect of relief or luxury. Instead, it turns the nightingale’s song into a requiem and, as “Ode

on Melancholy” suggests, distorts perception of the natural world and its cycles. Therefore Keats, too, rejects the oblivion of death. However, as there are two aspects to death, there are two types of death as Keats and Smith considered it. The obliteration of all awareness—and with it the refusal to acknowledge process—was reflected upon and determined to be impossible or undesirable. A major obstruction was the fact that death cannot be divorced from process; there is no “ceas[ing] upon the midnight with no pain” (“Nightingale,” 56). Mortality as it is intrinsically linked to process must be confronted, and it would be examined through seasonal poetry.

### **III. Seasonal Progression**

The examination and employment of the visionary imagination, the attempt to construct a bower or identify with an eternal natural symbol, the serious consideration of oblivion—each of these undertakings is based on the premise that process, the inevitable progression of change and mortality, is undesirable. When that advancement of time proved impossible to avoid, Smith and Keats approached it in a quintessentially Romantic way: through the landscape. The seasonal sequence of growth, harvest, and decay as metaphor for the human life cycle is doubtlessly as old as poetry itself; it was certainly not invented by the Romantics, but it was a well the major figures of the period drew from more than once. It was a particularly significant concept for Smith and Keats, as the most cursory glance at their catalogues reveals. In addition to the sonnets “To spring,” “April,” “Written at the close of spring,” “Written in October,” and “The winter night,” Smith also composed a longer “educational” poem, “The close of summer.” Keats, of course, wrote “To Autumn,” as well as “Ode to Maia,” “In drear nighted December,” and the sonnet often known as “The Human Seasons”; moreover, it is no coincidence that five of the six great odes were composed during and pay tribute to the spring or early summer. The poets’

culminating longer works, *Beachy Head* and *The Fall of Hyperion*, also contain asides concerning the process and implications of seasonal change. In terms of the amount of verse they wrote in this vein, Smith and Keats were more absorbed in the warmth and new growth of spring; but for both, the most direct and settled engagement with the idea of process came in their poems on the time of fruition, “The close of summer” and “To Autumn.”

As Keats’s “To drear nighted December”—envious as it is of the landscape’s deadened state—makes plain, winter can be viewed as another kind of oblivion. Smith takes the same line in her sonnet “The winter night”: the speaker hears the biting, howling wind as “a summons, bidding [her] prepare/ For the last sleep of death” (4-5). The equation of winter and death is an important one, given the manner in which the poets would later celebrate autumn, the harbinger of winter. The most frequent use Smith and Keats make of winter, however, is as a counterpoint to spring. Smith’s “Written at Weymouth in winter” draws a stark contrast between the gloom and seclusion of the resort town’s midwinter scenery and its spring and summer splendors. Though “the chill waves whiten in the sharp North-east;/ [And] cold, cold the night-blast comes, with sullen sound” (1-2), the speaker anticipates the variety spring will offer in only a few months: “Pleasure shall all her varied forms display” (6). For Smith—versed as she was in the knowledge of botany—spring is most often linked with natural brilliance and diversity; this view is nearly always compared to the promise and expectations of her speaker’s youth. The harsh but unavoidable fact that the speaker’s hopes do not renew yearly as the spring does complicates Smith’s appreciation of the season, but she also casts Spring as a comforting, almost maternal figure.

Like “Written at Weymouth,” Keats’s sonnet “O thou whose face hath felt the winter’s wind” is anticipatory, though in a more personal tone. In contrast to winter’s suspended

animation (“snow clouds hung in mist,” 2; “freezing stars” 3) and “supreme darkness” (6), the spring will be a “harvest-time” (4) and “triple morn” (8). The sonnet is sometimes called “What the Thrush Said” (Bate 641); its speaker, the thrush, affirms that its “song comes native with the warmth” (10). Keats continually associated spring with health, and consequently, poetic growth, as the thrush’s assertion demonstrates. Bate, writing of the “strong symbolic poignance that the seasons held for Keats” (335), suggests that he viewed the spring months as a personal reprieve, based on past experience of illness and death. For whatever reasons, whether private or general, the elevation of spring’s wholesome air over the diseased wind of winter is a common refrain in Keats’s poetry. This contrast is epitomized in the early sonnet “After dark vapours have oppressed our plains” and the lines that seem to echo it in *The Fall of Hyperion*. “After dark vapours...” is also remarkable for its anticipation of “To Autumn,” but the imagery of the sonnet’s first lines is extraordinarily similar to *The Fall of Hyperion*’s brief digression on the seasons. “After dark vapours...” introduces the characterization of spring as the antidote for winter’s repressive atmosphere:

After dark vapours have oppressed our plains  
 For a long dreary season, comes a day  
 Born of the gentle south, and clears away  
 From the sick heavens all unseemly stains.  
 The anxious month, relieving from its pains,  
 Takes as a long lost right the feel of May (1-6)

*The Fall of Hyperion* describes the same ritual cleansing of the heavens, introducing it as a point of comparison to Moneta’s sacrificial ceremony:

When in mid-May the sickening east wind



Shifts sudden to the south, the small warm rain  
 Melts out the frozen incense from all flowers,  
 And fills the air with so much pleasant health  
 That even the dying man forgets his shroud (97-101)

These two corresponding portrayals of spring as healer and liberator bookend Keats's career, to an extent, and in doing so reveal the depth of the "strong symbolic poignance" Bate describes. Spring *was* a harvest-time for Keats as a poet; the heavy investment his work makes in the season establishes this as clearly as the dates of the great odes do. Yet, as in Smith's spring poetry, the enjoyment of spring is never separate from the awareness that it ends. For this reason, even in poems written to commemorate the renewals of spring, autumn is never far from either poet's mind.

Smith's "To spring" and "Written at the close of spring" are quite similar in their portrayals of Spring as a nurturing spirit and recognition of the season's brevity. The former sonnet addresses the reappearance of the "season of delight" (8) and her adornments, while the latter calmly notes its departure. Though "Written at the close..." observes the fading of the garlands spring has lovingly woven (1) and the flowers she has "nursed in dew" (2), the speaker's tone is not mournful, as she knows that "Spring again shall call forth every bell,/ And dress with humid hands her wreaths again" (7-8). The speaker saves her sorrow for humanity—not specifically herself—whose happiness has "no second Spring" (14). (Keats makes this same connection between happiness and spring in "Fancy," which remarks that "the enjoying of the spring/ Fades as does its blossoming," 11-2.) "To spring" expresses the same grief, but takes a slightly more personal turn. In qualifying the season's ability to soothe the soul as it does the winter-battered landscape, the speaker concludes with the resigned perception that "Thy sounds

of harmony, thy balmy air,/ Have power to cure all sadness—but despair” (13-4). Spring is not natural Nepenthe; it has no “magic power.” Smith’s speaker does not expect the season to obviate or even reduce her cares, and the full acknowledgement that spring passes and its aesthetic consolations fade is even more expressive of its limitations. Smith does not go so far as to praise the inevitability of process in these sonnets, but she does not lament its necessity in nature. “The close of summer” contains her only explicit and tranquil acceptance of process, but “Written at the close...” and “To spring” are notable as early acknowledgments of what is transient and inescapable for nature as well as humanity.

Despite its greeting of the fresh winds of spring and the budding leaves (10) and warm summer rains (8) they herald, in its last lines Keats’s “After dark vapours...” turns quietly to autumn and—rather unexpectedly—mortality. Looking past spring and summer glories to the images of ripened fruit and the autumn sun shining upon sheaved wheat (10-1), the speaker ends by reflecting upon “the gradual sand that through an hour glass runs—/ A woodland rivulet—a poet’s death” (13-4). This is a stunning conclusion to what could have been a fairly pedestrian meditation on spring. The unflustered acknowledgement of an end—what Bate calls a “premonition of process” (142)—of not only the beauty and vitality of spring, but of a poet, is urgent and intimate in a way that the superior “To Autumn” is not and does not aim to be. This sonnet’s persistence in following the progression of time to its natural termination is no more of a celebration of process than Smith’s spring sonnets, but like those poems, it does not seek to exist in stasis or obliterate the speaker’s consciousness. While clearly prefiguring “To Autumn,” “After dark vapours...” is also an antecedent of the fifth, “bower” stanza of “Ode to a Nightingale.” The “Nightingale” speaker also pursues the implications of seasonal change, from

the flowers and vegetation of early spring to their fading, to the withdrawal of late spring for summer riches and autumnal plunder.

Smith's relationship with autumn is more fraught with personal concerns than her largely objective considerations of spring. "To melancholy. Written on the banks of the Arun, October 1785" and "Written in October" revel in the season's more somber qualities: "Nature delights *me* most when she mourns" (13), the speaker of "Written in October" declares. In both sonnets, autumn is preferable to spring *because* it is the season of decay; it is viewed as a point of commiseration between landscape and speaker. Melancholy, desirable for its Nepenthe-like magical power to "soothe the pensive visionary mind" (14), is easily summoned in autumnal obscurity; here, autumn "spreads her evening veil,/ And the grey mists... arise" (1-2) in a manner that evokes Keats's "season of mists." "Written in October" is likewise content with the solemn sound of windblown leaves and fading foliage: the speaker enthuses that such scenes are "well attuned to my dejected mood;/ (Ah! better far than airs that breathe of Spring!)" (5-6). That parenthetical assertion invites comparison with the empathic recognition in "To Autumn"—"Where are the songs of Spring?.../ Think not of them, thou hast thy music too" (23-4)—but it is driven by a more self-interested sense of identification. While the two October sonnets find melancholic compensations in the season that signals the degeneration of spring and summer brilliance, Smith's later poetry extols the abundance in autumn. A description in *Beachy Head* looks past a vision of spring to the richness that will follow:

Those lowly roofs of thatch are half conceal'd  
By the rude arms of trees, lovely in spring,  
When on each bough, the rosy-tinctur'd bloom  
Sits thick, and promises autumnal plenty. (313-6)

“Autumnal *plenty*” (emphasis added), with its confidence that there will be equal loveliness in the autumn landscape, is an obvious departure from the barren fields and leafless woods of the October sonnets. “The close of summer” widens the gap still further, as it includes Smith’s clearest, most unqualified affirmation of process and its offerings.

“The close of summer” was not written for the audience that *Elegiac Sonnets* and *Beachy Head* were written for; and was in all likelihood not intended or expected to be read as a serious contribution to Smith’s poetic inquiries. It is a selection from her children’s book *Conversations Introducing Poetry*, and like all the poems therein, it was written for the purposes of instruction and recitation (Fletcher 325). Yet to discount its worth based on its function as a teaching tool would be misguided—particularly when it *does* in fact have implications on Smith’s interrogation of and struggle with process. The poem is not an ode to autumn, but, as the title plainly suggests, a valediction to summer. Nonetheless, autumn—along with the decline it begets—is still valued for its own sake. Unlike the scenery in Smith’s October sonnets, the landscape of “The close of summer” is not a mirror for the speaker’s mindset; like the speaker of Keats’s “To Autumn,” the voice is objective without being detached. This contributes considerably to the poem’s air of peacefulness and self-possession. While there is a touch of melancholy in the speaker’s repeated farewells to summer, the concluding acceptance of what the less magnificent season has to offer cannot be read as mere resignation.

The first stanzas of “The close of summer” are descriptive of the “richer scenes” (5) of summer and, as are nearly all of Smith’s educational poems, interspersed with the scientific names of plants and flowers. In a movement that is quite similar to the second stanza of “To Autumn,” the fourth stanza turns to the harvest:

His busy sickle now the months-man wielding,

Close are the light and fragile poppies shorn,  
 And while the golden ears their stores are yielding,  
 The azure corn-flowers fall among the corn. (17-20)

This sequence of images—some of which Keats would also use in “To Autumn”—moves from the human reaping of the harvest (the farmhand’s sickle, the shorn poppies), to nature’s compliance with the seasonal gathering (the corn yielding its stores), and finally to natural decline (the cornflowers withering). The speaker’s presentation of these images is straightforward, without comment or lament; this is simply process in action, rather than process as a cause for mourning or reflection of the speaker’s troubled mind. This tenor continues throughout the next two stanzas, though the latter end with further adieus to spring; Smith does not set the songs of spring aside in the manner that Keats does, but fondly recalls their delights. Yet still there is no real sense of grief at their loss; the speaker only notes that the woods are now silent (21), which the following stanza seems to contradict. That stanza finds some music in the muted scene, and again employs some of the same images as “To Autumn” in bird, cricket, and sheep: “The stock-dove now is heard, in plaintive measure,/ The cricket shrill, and wether’s drowsy bell” (25-6). The dove’s plaintive song is the poem’s only truly elegiac note, and like the wailful choir of gnats in “To Autumn,” it is a necessary one. Though spring will return to reawaken the natural world, winter and death looms just beyond the horizon. “The close of summer” and “To Autumn,” in order to truly confront process, must acknowledge the decay that follows the harvest. Having done so, Smith’s speaker, though not quite enamored with the season that “no beauteous wreaths adorn” (29), concludes with a calm endorsement of its gifts: “This riper period, like the age of reason,/ Tho’ stript of loveliness, is rich in use” (31-2). In not elevating one season over the other, but instead accepting both as they arrive and finding much

to appreciate in each, Smith departs from her own tradition of lamenting what is passing or dreading what is to come. “The close of summer” was written for children, but is nevertheless one of Smith’s most mature and content poems, a lovely last rumination on time and change before she embarked upon *Beachy Head*.

Any discussion of “To Autumn,” Keats’s penultimate major work, scarcely requires a preamble. Bate writes that “each generation has found it one of the most nearly perfect poems in English” (580). It is, indeed, a poem often described as virtually perfect; even Allen Tate’s infamous dismissal of the ode’s significance concedes that “it is a very nearly perfect piece of style” (494)—though he goes on to declare that it is *all* style, with “little to say” (494). Vendler’s study of the odes was inspired by her radically different view of the poem (13), which is one of the most comprehensive and generous readings of any of Keats’s works. Harold Bloom regards it as the kind of poetic achievement that Keats admired and hoped to attain throughout his writing life: “We feel that we might be at the end of tragedy or epic, having read only a short ode” (97). Critics such as Douglas Bush and Jon Mee, however, caution against viewing the poem’s serene fulfillment as a resolution of the debates that preoccupied and often disturbed Keats as a poet. Bush admits that the ode “does embody acceptance of the process of fruition and decay” (337), but asks, “Can we extend that idea... from the life of nature to the life of man?” (337). Mee, writing much later, offers a succinct answer: “The perfection of ‘To Autumn’ is not often echoed in [Keats’s] later letters” (xxvii). These concerns are more than valid. *The Fall of Hyperion* was written after “To Autumn”; this indisputable fact is enough to prevent the final ode’s settled perfection from distorting the image of Keats’s career—and certainly his life—as a whole. It would be ludicrous to ignore Smith’s vacillations in *Beachy Head* because the comparatively minor “The close of summer” is more self-assured. It would be equally erroneous

assume that “To Autumn” outweighs the unrest of *The Fall of Hyperion* because the former is complete and nearly flawless. As the *poetic* end to Keats’s disquiet about process, however, it has long been established that—Tate’s opinion notwithstanding—“To Autumn” has everything to say.

“To Autumn” is not so much an acceptance of process as a celebration. “From beginning to end,” Stillinger has written, “it celebrates the world of process... not with innocent delight in the beauties of nature, but rather with a mature understanding” (“Imagination and Reality,” 9). From the image of the maturing sun (2) to the dying wind (29), the ode is exquisitely, fully cognizant of alterations and developments in the landscape, all of which implicitly admit the stealthy but steady advance of winter. The unexpected nature of this advancement is enough to lull the bees—and possibly the reader—into the belief that “warm days will never cease” (10); the magnificence of “To Autumn” is that when this illusion fades, there is no disenchantment, because reality has its beauties, too. Bate has noticed the surprising element in the poem’s progression: in the first stanza, process continues in spite of fulfillment and stillness, and in the second, there is stillness when process would be expected (582). Autumn, benevolent goddess and lackadaisical harvester, ignores the fruit that she has ripened to the core (6), lays down her scythe, and drowns in a half-reaped furrow (16). Her willingness to prolong the blissful stages of growth and fulfillment makes her an ideal reaper, entirely worthy of the speaker’s praise. Though the second stanza ends with the harvest already in the process of transubstantiation, as the apples are crushed in the cider press, Autumn’s generosity and care is still on display in her “patient look,/ [as she] watchest the last ooziings hours by hours” (21-2). This transition, not presented as painless or woeful but necessary and peaceful, is yet another death. In the final stanza, the day will also die (25)—softly but assuredly—and the gnats will sing their dirge (27):

process inevitably implies death. “To Autumn” is nothing if not accepting of process, and that acceptance, as Bate (506), Perkins (294), Vendler (255), and Plumly (306) have all written, requires the acceptance of death as well. “To Autumn” assents to these terms. As Keats wrote in “Ode on Melancholy,” beauty must die, but here there is also beauty in death. The crushed apples are attended by Autumn (22), the clouds cast a rosy glow over the dying day (25), and the mournful gnats are fitfully lifted by the gentle wind (28). The speaker asks, “Where are the songs of Spring?” (23), but immediately realizes that the answer is immaterial to the appreciation of the scene before him: “Ay, where are they?/ Think not of them, thou hast thy music too” (23-4). After the weariness, fever, and fret expressed in the earlier odes, to arrive at this conclusion—with all of its implications of winter and death—in a tone of absolute tranquility is arguably Keats’s single greatest success as a poet. The serious and legitimate turbulence of *The Fall of Hyperion* cannot negate such a quietly confident moment of recognition. Like Smith before him, Keats examined—and attempted to circumvent—process from almost every angle, but ultimately found the most poetry in the acceptance of change and mortality.

### **Conclusion**

Charlotte Smith and John Keats are, for completely logical reasons, two Romantic poets whom critics have seldom chosen to link to one another. Unlike Wordsworth and Coleridge, Keats never acknowledged Smith as a vital influence; and Smith’s and Keats’s approaches to poetry itself are often at odds. If only these surface facts are considered, there is no cause to look beyond the superficial similarities between a few scattered pieces by each poet. Beyond a handful of short commentaries on the nightingale poems, critical comparison of Smith and Keats has been relegated to noting echoes of her plaintive style in his juvenilia—in short, glances at the weakest poems of both. To look no further is to miss the intriguing, sometimes uncanny



similarities between the crisis-autobiographies *Beachy Head* and *The Fall of Hyperion*; the corresponding examinations of the natural symbols of bower, star, and nightingale; the comparable exploration and rejection of paths to unconsciousness; and the navigation of process through seasonal poetry. There is a perceptible arc to be pursued from Smith's and Keats's realizations that there is no haven for the poet to their assessments of different modes of escape and final acceptance of process, but the poems contemplated in following this progression are by no means the only works by these poets that can be compared. There are, for examples, incredibly similar responses to ambition expressed in *Beachy Head* and "Ode on Indolence"; analogous uses of the common Romantic figure of the mariner in *Endymion*, *Beachy Head*, and "Written near a port on a dark evening"; and there is doubtlessly room for consideration of how Smith's sonnet experimentation might have impacted Keats's attempts "to discover a better sonnet stanza than we have" (*Letters*, 238). What any comparison of the poetry of Smith and Keats makes clear is their striking habit of arriving at the same place by radically dissimilar means and for entirely different reasons. Smith wrote with public appeal firmly in mind and put her poet-speaker—most often herself—front and center, while Keats disclaimed public approbation and advocated a negation of the self as a poetic principle. Yet in the end, both came to the same conclusions about escapism, oblivion, and process; both chose to believe that the poetry of earth is never dead.

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