CHAPTER VI

'The Viewless Wings of Poesy'

Ode to Psyche
Ode to A Nightingale
Ode on A Grecian Urn
Ode on Melancholy
Ode on Indolence
Ode to Autumn.
In the landscape of his poetry, the odes of Keats mark the highest point. The poems are meditative, combining a variety of moods and also the Pindaric and Horatian elements. They are not results of any concrete programme but are linked together by a certain philosophy that manifests itself in each of the odes. Quest for this philosophy leads the poet to mythology. Within it he discovers the highest manifestations of 'beauty' and ultimately of 'truth'.

In ancient times, the ode was a choral form, providing a dramatic musical setting for the ritual or heroic theatre. The divisions of the chorus answered each other in strophe, anti-strophe and epode as they provided a commentary to some action being carried out simultaneously at the altar or on the stage. We may observe that the ode incorporates the inherent cantatory character and magical intent of the primordial rituals and thus provides Keats with the perfect means of developing his mythic vision in poetry.

The poets of the Romantic Revival exhibited a firm belief in individuality, subjectivity and the ego. Contrary
to this prevailing mood, Keats possessed a universal vision. He rejected the myth of the god-like 'I' and the resulting self-assertive poetry. He put forward his doctrine of Negative Capability. Influenced in this capacity by Shakespeare, he claimed that the self and the prejudices of a poet should be annihilated and he should be capable of entering into and expressing the thoughts of other men and beings. Armed with this vision Keats could fully understand and appreciate the constant and continuous rhythms of human behaviour that are recorded in mythology. This understanding inspired a profound, sympathetic vision of Man and the Universe.

'Ode to Psyche' is the only one of the major odes that is based on a myth. Keats first encountered the myth in Mrs Tighe's allegoric romance *Psyche*. He also read William Adlington's translation of Apuleius's *Golden Ass* which contained the ancient form of the myth.² Psyche greatly attracted Keats. She embodied beauty, struggle, suffering and also achievement. Referring to the ode, Keats wrote to George in the journal letter of 14th February - 3rd May 1819 --

You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the time of Apuleius (sic) the Platonist who lived
after the Augustan age, and consequently the Goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervour and perhaps never thought of in the old religion -- I am more orthodox that to let a heathen Goddess be so neglected.

The story of Psyche was the perfect means of communication of his ideas. The suffering, and heroism of Psyche could meet the demands of his philosophy. So much so, that in order to show his appreciation, he decided to reward her. By now, he had realized that the evil in human nature was inherent and necessary and was the contribution of the egotistic instincts. The range of his Negative Capability had to be extended. Earlier he had opted for total disinterestedness as against the egotistic 'I'. Now, however, he realized that the instinct of man included both. And he could see beauty in all instinctive phenomena and impulses. He could bear the truths of life even when confronted by greatly painful experiences. Also he could locate beauty within them. By discovering a similar archetype of this philosophy in the myth of Cupid and Psyche he achieved a wholeness brought about by the fusion of the two domains -- the mythological and the intellectual.

The myth describes Psyche as the most beautiful of
the three daughters of a certain king. Venus, jealous of her, sent Cupid to punish her by causing her to fall in love with some ugly monster. However, she was so ravishingly beautiful that Cupid himself fell in love with her and with the help of Apollo and the West wind, he took her away to an enchanted palace where he visited her secretly and made her promise never to see his face. Psyche's wicked sisters came to visit her and persuaded her that her lover was a cannibal monster. Terrified Psyche broke her promise that night by lighting a lamp to see his face. A hot drop of oil fell on him and waking up, he left her in anger. Psyche, too, left home in search of him. Venus set her to many impossible tasks. She asked her, first of all, to sort out a large heap of various grains before nightfall. The ants took pity on her and completed the task for her. Another task was to fetch water from an inaccessible fountain. A friendly eagle completed this task for her. Finally, she had to go down to Hades to bring a casket of beauty from Persephone. She had almost completed this when curiosity got the better of her and she opened the casket. It did not contain beauty but a deadly sleep which overcame her. This is where Cupid found her. With the permission of Zeus, he revived her and married her.
Cupid represents the fusion of the good and the bad instincts. He carried off Psyche. Apollo's Delphic Oracle had advised Psyche's father to dress her as a bride and leave her on a lonely hill-top. The promise was marriage. However, Cupid did not formally marry her. Later on, he rescued her from the revengeful clutches of Venus and married her. Venus represents the egotist whose vision is limited by subjectivity. Finally, Psyche represents struggle, patience and the ability to confront greatly painful experiences. She also represents the evolution of the human soul. At this point, the poet enters the myth and through the agency of 'Ode to Psyche' strives to deify her and thus reward her.

Keats consulted Lempiere's *Classical Dictionary* where the meaning of Psyche is explained in the following words --

> The word signifies 'the soul' and this personification of Psyche, first mentioned by Apuleius, is consequently posterior to the Augustan age, though it is connected with ancient mythology. 4

Keats, however, visualizes her as a beautiful love-goddess and wants to celebrate her union with the love-god Cupid.
The ode begins with the poet's vision of the lovers at a moment rich in experience. The moment is significant because it captures the beauty and the depth of true love and also the peace of fulfilment. The trauma and the trials are over and the two lovers have been united. A future full of happiness and promise lies before them. The opening salutation 'O, Goddess' lays the foundation of a mythological scene. The poet is in his characteristic trance-like state —

Surely I dreamt today,  
or did I see  
The winged Psyche with  
awakened eyes?  
( ll. 5-6 )

This in-between state excludes all his personal prejudices, feelings and emotions, and makes his presence unobtrusive. It also gives the vision a dream-like quality that gives him the licence to add to existing mythology. It also allows the poet to transcend the limits of Time and trespass into the land of the gods. He is now walking in a forest, which like every other Keatsian recess, is rich in the lushness of foliage and blossoms —

In deepest grass, beneath  
the whispering roof  
Of leaves and trembled  
blossoms, where there ran
A brooklet, scarce espied
Mid hushei, cool-rooted flowers,  
    fragrant-eyed,  
Blue, silver white and budded  
    Tyrian,  
They lay calm-breathing on the  
    budded grass;

(11. 10-15)

Nature, love, poetry and myth integrate to create a picture of freshness, beauty, ripeness and fertility. The green recess represents the archetypal seed-bed. Here Keats, as Psyche's poet-priest, will administer the fertility rituals. He takes on the heroic role with sincerity.

The vision of this true love proves to be a vision of truth itself for Keats. True love rated high with him--

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of the imagination - What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth - whether it existed before or not.... The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream - he awoke and found it truth. 5

Through this imaginative recreation of mythology, he discovers a vision of purity and truth.

The vision is analysed further when he recognizes 'the winged boy' as Cupid. He is now enraptured by the
beauty of Cupid's companion 'But who was thou, O happy, happy dove?'. The dove is one of the birds beloved of Aphrodite. Psyche seems him to be the 'loveliest vision far/ Of all Olympus's hierarchy'. Like Apollo, the young god, defeated the older generation of gods with his matchless beauty, so Psyche leaves behind the beautiful Phoebe and Vesper with hers. Psyche's beauty is the coherent fusion of struggle, experience, wisdom and purity. The pain and trouble of life has given her a unique identity.

Now, Psyche has passed the test of the 'Vale of Soul Making', and has achieved a 'schooled' identity or in mythological terms the potential of divinities. She has led Keats onto expanded consciousness regarding human intellect. Thus mythology has created within Keats a kind of renaissance or a reawakening of consciousness about values that had with time faded and diminished. Not only does he experience this consciousness with her but he also tries to act in accordance with this experience. Armed with this illumination, he laments the fact that such an exceptional goddess is bereft of the worship and adoration of the pious men of ancient years —

...temple thou hast none,
No altar heaped with flowers;
Nor virgin-choir to make
    delicious moan...
No shrine, no grove, no
oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouthed prophet
dreaming.

(11. 28-35)

He once again yearns for the Golden Age when 'holy were
the haunted forest boughs/ Holy the air, the water, the
fire.'

It is too late now for those 'antique vows' but
with his new, deepened understanding he is in a position
to --

... see, and sing, by my
own eyes inspired.
So let me be thy choir
and make a moan
Upon the midnight hours --

(11. 45-45)

So intense and so sincere is his devotion to this pagan
maid, that he is ready to be --

Thy voice, thy lute, they
pipe, they incense sweet
From swung censer teeming;
Thy shrine, thy grove,
thy oracle, thy heat
Of pale-mouthed prophet
dreaming.

(11. 46-49)
The process of deification has begun. He is determined that there shall be no lapses. The poet now behaves like an ancient bard freely exploiting the privilege of adding to mythology. Psyche is now placed in modern context. The poet realizes that the world is degenerate and corrupt. There is no holy and pious place on Earth at all. The early Greek religion laid great emphasis on sanctity and purity. Everything offered to a god was to be strictly clean and pure. Any suggestion of impurity was likely to rouse the wrath of the divinity and then he would bring terrible disasters upon those who were responsible. Extremely conscious of these factors, the poet decides that the only holy place, worthy of a goddess like Psyche is within his mind —

Yes, I will be thy priest,  
and build a fane,  
In some untrodden region  
of my mind,...

( 11. 50-51 )

To compensate for the ancient neglect, he strives to build this imaginary temple to felicitate the goddess. His thoughts are 'new grown with pleasant pair' of new understanding and they branch out around the temple. This new intensity of thought contrasts with the earlier 'thoughtless'
state. Along with Psyche, Keats, too, has evolved.

He visualizes a thicket of dark trees fringed by ranges of high mountains. The valley is filled with Zephyrs, birds and bees. The picture recollects the Golden Age with its realm of Flora and Pan. In the midst of this vegetative richness which gathers together the beneficence of Gaia and all her Earth-goddesses, he plans to build a temple for Psyche. The sanctuary will be 'rosy'. The rose is the flower of Aphrodite. The sanctuary will be decorated 'With the wreathed tellis of a working brain'. Her gardener will be 'Fancy' or the imagination which will breed flowers that will seem ever-new.

The sensuous natural setting of the first stanza now synchronizes with the mind and the imagination to produce a place of adoration and devotion for the goddess. It is a place where 'all the soft delight/ That shadowy thought can win' will be available. The thought must be shadowed by sensuous, physical appreciation to reach the ideal state. His actual gift to Psyche is 'warm love' accompanied by the sharpened faculties to appreciate it.

The 'bright torch' at the open window allows that all secrecy is over and now Cupid can be properly
welcomed. Keats' sensuous nature wishes to preserve, along with all her spiritual goodness, the sheer physical beauty of the goddess and offer her as a source of inspiration and as an example to all true lovers.

Another significance of the lighted window is that it serves as an emblem of hope. Like the song of the nightingale and the Grecian urn, this temple, too, is a permanent, refreshing ideal in a changing transient world. The whole world is dark and only the altar of Psyche is flooded with bright light. She is the only one who has, through perseverance and purity, passed the test of sanctity.

'Ode to a Nightingale' does not reinterpret or recreate any particular Greek myth. However, the spirit, atmosphere and values of the pagan world are richly invoked. Mythology, by now, had become so integral a part of the imaginative, creative and critical faculties of Keats that his poetry cannot be dissociated from it. This ode brings together the central problems that tormented him all his life. While discussing these problems, Keats is searching for release from the predominant misery of the human lot. The release, he feels, can come only through a vision of ideal beauty. This ideal, for him, is contained in the
very nucleus of mythology. With the limitations of reality weighing down upon him, the poet is not equipped to glimpse the golden, glorious world of the gods. He tries to accomplish this task by integrating with a being outside himself whose innocence and purity can break the barriers between the mortal and immortal worlds and transport him into realms of beauty -- the nightingale.

The nightingale is one of the birds whose singing heralded the arrival of Apollo. When Apollo came, he brought spring and freedom from autumnal dangers and diseases. Like the star in the east proclaimed the birth of Christ, so the song of the nightingale proclaimed the arrival of Apollo. Both them can be considered as emblems of hope. They bring to mankind the message that better days are about to come. Also, in Romantic poetry, birds are used as catalysts of spiritual change. In Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner* a bird had been the precursor of the redemptive action.

When the poem opens, the charm of the nightingale's song has already begun to work on Keats. He is subjected to a kind of preternatural change. The voice of the nightingale enraptures him and he is irresistibly led forward. 'Like Hermes, the conductor of the souls of the
dead to the underworld, the song of the nightingale conducts the soul of the poet to new realms. The poet is not in control of himself. The magical notes, like the magnetic music of an enchantress, saturate him and carry him 'Lethe wards'. 'Lethe' in Greek mythology, is a river in Hades beyond the Elysian Fields where those souls about to be reborn, drink oblivion of former lives. The nightingale appears to be an agency merging with whom would provide him with relief. Gradually, the poet is drifting away from the state of conscious awareness towards one which is nonrational but creative. He can now glimpse the basic structure and the natural laws which have been preserved in mythology. With its exquisite song the bird appears to him like a 'light-winged' Dryad or a tree-nymph from Greek mythology. The completed picture places it in one of those green bowers that to Keats are reminiscent of the Golden Age. The whole plot appears 'melodious' -- it is invested with magical potentialities. Leaving behind the squalid and diseased world which is full of palsied old people and 'pale and spectre-thin' young people, the poet, like Endymion, ventures into a magic forest. The preternatural change effects the landscape as well. 'Summer' is the season of ripeness and fertility. The blossom and the fruitage is at its peak and the nightingale sings its
praise 'in full-throated ease'.

The poet now invokes that aid of old wine that 'hath been/ Cooled a long age in the deep-delv'd earth' and now combines all the elements of beauty, creativity, happiness, celebration, sensuousness, sweetness of Flora who is the goddess of blossoming plants, inspiration drawn from Hippocrene (the spring on Mount Helicon, sacred to the muse). These components can be compared to the ingredients of a druid's magic potion. With ages of closeness to Gaia or Mother Earth this wine has acquired limitless potentialities. Through being cooled for ages in the depths of Earth, it has imbibed the wisdom, strength and beneficence of Gaia. It also combines the dreams of the poet. It is one of the agencies that can remove him from a pain-filled world and transport him to the ideal world represented by the nightingale. The nightingale is above the ravages of time. It has never known 'The weariness, the fever, and the fret' of the mortal world. Thus, it can be equated with a divinity. It has transcended the limits of mortality. By leaving behind the world of pain and trouble, it has become immortal. These mythological potentialities of the nightingale represent a unity between man and his universe. The negation of all these problems
is the solution to man's fallen state, where 'The dull brain perplexes and retards'. So, the cup of wine which had appeared to be promising is simply an extension of Bacchus, the god of wine. He is sometimes identified with Dionysus who has both creative and destructive potentialities. He is a god of vegetation as well as wine. He is famous for his vengeance. Those who did not recognize his divinity were driven mad. The daughters of Proteus under his influence destroyed their own children. His influence, thus cannot guarantee a creative state of mind. The poet turns to the 'viewless wings of Poesy' to perform this task.

'Poesy' and 'Fancy' are two recurring words in the poetry of Keats. 'Poesy', it appears, is poetry laden with warmth, sensuousness and beauty. Infact, it is a very much glorified personification of poetry. The exclulsive title brings to mind a beautiful enigmatic Greek goddess, radiant with love and beneficence. Its attributes includes the ability to preserve beauty, and also the ability to understand and sympathise with human nature. 'Fancy' is another name for the imagination. It is born through inherent creativity. It is responsible for feeding 'Poesy' with aspirations, dreams, longings and desires. Infact, it
represents the very parentage of 'Poesy'. A union of 'Fancy' with situations gives birth to 'Poesy'. Here, too, 'Fancy' and 'Poesy' come to his rescue. All at once, he beholds that 'haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne/ Clustered around by her starry fays'. The moon, a picture of loveliness, is presented in mythical terms. In the next line, its glorious majestic state is contrasted with the earthly state of man who is represented by the poet, sitting in total darkness. The only relief comes in the form of light which '...from the heavens is with the breezes blown'. He is immobile in a grave of vegetation which is the rich and ripe product of May. The picture recalls the image of Adonis buried deep under flowers and leaves in Endymion. Keats, the poet, experiences symbolic death. Thus, he compromises with mythology. The compromise is not inappropriate. Exhausted by trials of life, unable to evolve creatively, he returns to the 'seid' state which will refresh, refurnish and re-equip him for the trials of life. There is no contrariness, no confusion in this image but suspension of the sense and hope for re-enforcement with life and energy. The grave in Keats's mythic vision is equated with the womb to which the poet has returned. It symbolizes the beginning of a new kind of life. Within this archetypal framework the
suspended state appears to be the promise of deliverence. It is a compensation for an unsatisfying life, an ascent towards a healthier and fuller vision.

Death the demon also integrates with the Mother-figure. It does not symbolise the complete annihilation of the self of the poet but an extinction of earthly problems. In moments of intensity this is the death Keats always wished for. Just before he died he said to Severn --

I shall soon be laid in the quiet grave -- 0! I can feel the cold earth upon me -- The daisies growing over me -- 0, for this Quiet-- it will be my first. 6

Death, like any other thing of beauty, gives him intense pleasure.

The nightingale, in its role as a divinity combines the musical talent of Apollo, the happiness of Elysium, the fertility of Maia, the wisdom of Gaia and the beauty of Adonis. Conscious of its attributes and divine status the poet realizes he cannot integrate with it. The union of a mortal and immortal cannot be achieved. As its special attributes he recognises the ability to heal wounded souls.
The poet visualizes the beautiful notes wiping away the tears of the unhappy exile Ruth and always charming trouble away and creating a beautiful world for the 'emperor' as well as the 'clown'. Now, having completed its task of providing a few minutes of solace to the poet's wounded soul, the nightingale prepares to leave.

The 'magic casement' is the window between the two worlds of reality and ideal beauty. All at once Keats discovers that he is on the 'forlorn' side whereas the nightingale is disappearing on the other side. He is left along with the realizations that the 'actual' world of grief is inescapable. It has to co-exist with the ideal world. Man has come too far in the scale of evolution and now neither can be distilled from the other. The poet returns to his earlier stupor-like state --

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music...
Do I wake of sleep?
( ll. 79-80 )

This completes the circular nature of the poem. The circular pattern has associations with the time-cycle. The experience has exposed mythology before the poet as a channel for evolution. The tested, superior, classical
norms and values are suffused with soft, palpable human emotions and needs. This combination results in an unusual vision that gives his poems their special appeal.

II

'Ode on a Grecian Urn' continues the theme of 'Ode to a Nightingale'. In fact, it provides answers to some of the questions raised in the earlier ode. The object of inspiration, this time, is a marble urn with pictures of 'silvan' life engraved on it. Keats's fascination with Greek mythology was intense. Severn quotes Keats's comment '...the Greek spirit - the Religion of the beautiful; the Religion of Joy....' This 'spirit' has receded from the face of the Earth and can only be found in the midst of mythology. The Grecian urn, however, still crystallizes those days. The inscribed scenes kindle the imagination of Keats, and while recreating those ancient days he observes within them visions of beauty and universal experience of eternal endurance. Though such mythological thinking, he recreates the natural behaviour and responses of the uncomplicated early man and draws inspiration from him.

The urn, hence, is the point of focus or the
concrete centre. True to his sensuous nature, Keats uses a physical object to represent the permanence of the truths of life as deciphered by the mind and the heart. These abstract ideas are physically manifested through these pictures.

The urn, of course, is purely imaginary -- a combination of Keats's recollection of the Sosibios vase, the Borghese vase, the Townley vase, the Portland vase, the Bacchic pictures of Poussin and the Elgin Marbles.

According to Pettet, a passage from Collins's *The Passion* 'formed an embryo out of which a considerable part of his ode evolved'. He traces the use of 'Temple' and 'the happy melodist, unwearied' to Collins's poem. Also, he points at the concluding three lines as particularly significant --

Revive the just Design of Greece,
Return in all thy simple state
Confirm the Tales her Sons relate!  

When seen against this background, the urn is symbolic of the basic principle that governs all forms of life. It depicts the beauty, purity and enchantment of the ancient Grecian life and serves as an all time guide to later generations. It is definitely more than an
Inanimate piece of decoration. Its stature is that of a mythical divinity. The opening lines of the ode sound like the invocation of a deity —

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

(11. 1-4)

The urn, hence, is as beautiful, powerful, enigmatic and enchanting as any mythical goddess. It is a divinity, like Psyche, who has withstood the challenges and ravages of time and proved her purity and loyalty. It is a poet, like Apollo, who tells a 'leaf-fring'd legend'... 'more sweetly' than any mortal. It is also immortal and beneficent.

The poet goes on to furnish this newly-created goddess with a mythical history. The artist who created the urn is now dead and gone and the abstractions 'Silence and slow-time' are the divinity's foster-parents. Among its divine attributes are permanent youthfulness (as is implied by the use of 'child') and also wisdom (as is shown by the use of 'historian').
In its 'leaf-fring'd legend' the urn does not relate everyday experiences but tells of a 'mad pursuit', of a 'struggle to escape', of a 'wild ecstacy'.

To the poet it seems that the incident the legend elaborates took place in either Tempe or Arcadia. In classical antiquity, these two places were renowned for their natural beauty and the happiness of the people who lived there. Arcadia contains a temple of Apollo. Hermes (the god of luck, wealth, sleep, dreams, and fertility, patron of merchants and thieves) and Pan (the god of flocks and shepherds) were originally Arcadian gods. Thus, the new Keatsian goddess joins their ranks.

The next stanza finds the poet smoothly sailing away from the time-bound world into the timeless world. He now listens to the music, not with his 'sensual ear', but with his 'spirit'. The 'ditties' are 'unheard' yet 'endeared'. Like the music from the spheres, the unheard notes fully saturate his senses and he goes into a kind of a trance. He sees a 'Fair youth beneath the trees...' who is playing a pipe. The trees are leafy, green, thick and in full bloom. The picture recreates one of those fertile, green bowers that occur again and again in the poetry of Keats. The bower recollects unspoilt vegetation
and perfect physical beauty of the Golden Age, as the green recess of 'Ode to Psyche' had done. In this case the bower is frozen in marble. The trees will never be exposed to the ravages of autumn. Age will not creep over and destroy the boy. He will continue to sing forever and will always be beautiful. This picture may be considered as a projection of Keats's private Elysium -- eternal sensuous beauty that is above the ravages of time and the undying ability to create poetry 'for ever new'. It represents a dream-world above frightening and depressing reality.

The next picture shows a lover pursuing his beloved in an attempt to kiss her. As Keats integrated with the 'Fair youth' so he does with this lover. Inspite of the proximity, the lover will not be able to kiss his beloved. The pair of lovers like Cupid and Psyche, and also like himself and Fanny, inspite of intense feeling for each other, are not able to attain fulfilment. Perhaps recollecting this myth, Keats tells the lover '— yet do not grieve'. He indicates that there is always hope for relief. Just as the bower is rich and green and representing early spring and not the season of ripeness, the love, too, is young, fresh and still to ripen, 'still to
The entire scene, like the urn, depicts a state of being 'unravished'. Placed in proper mythological context, the urn represents the 'mythic consciousness' of Keats. Owen Darfield defines the term as 'a renewal of lost insights'. More important than increasing the sensuous beauty of these pictures, is the contribution that knowledge of these background myths makes towards their meaning. Through mythology, Keats reaches that sensitive, basic nerve of human experience that makes him familiar with its circular, recurrent nature. Thus, the common experiences of Cupid and Psyche, himself and Fanny, unite in the picture of the lover and his beloved --

Ah, happy, happy boughs,  
that cannot shed  
Your leaves, nor ever bid  
the spring adieu;  

(11. 21-22)

The boughs, here, are treated as separate entities capable of experiencing happiness. In the garden of the gods of Elysium, there is eternal spring and uninterrupted music. The 'happy melodist' reminds us of Orpheus. Orpheus played the lyre so well that his music had a spell-binding effect even on rocks and stones. The following
three lines are expressive of a similar state --

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

(11. 28-30)

The next picture transports him into the very heart of the old Greek religion. It depicts a gorgeous sacrificial procession led by a priest with a heifer. Perhaps the picture was motivated by a painting by Claude's 'Sacrifice to Apollo'. Ian Jack says 'The elegiac tone of Keats's lines is profoundly in sympathy with the serene nostalgia of Claude's religious processions'.

These marbles preserves the memory of beautiful days now lost. Among other things, they bring to us the pagan ritual of sacrifice. By surrendering to the deity the blood of a particular animal, or in stray cases even of a human being, the worshippers prayed for the community's happiness, or for averting evil, or for the expiation of some crime. Purity was one of the essential pre-requisites of sacrifice. Hence, on this 'pious morn' as the 'mysterious priest' leads the heifer to a 'green altar', we witness an ardent show of devotion. The reference to
'green altar' revives the concept of nature worship along with all its vitality and freshness. The unity and harmony of the community impresses him.

Carried forward by the thought process, he arrives at a '...little town by river or sea-shore' which is now 'emptied of this folk'. Since the congregation is immobile the town will always be empty, desolate and forlorn. He is removed from the happy scene and transported, as he was, in 'Ode to a Nightingale' to the grim actual world symbolised by the little town. Unlike the earlier ode, however, this ode does not conclude on this unhappy note. The wealth of experience and visions revealed to him by his newest divinity have led him to discover a certain philosophy that he defines in the final stanza.

The urn, the great mythological 'historian' has served as a lever to edge the poet's mental faculties into realms of greater understanding. Keats recognizes the 'silence' of the urn as its individual strength. This 'bride of quietness', this foster-child of 'silence and slow-time' with its unheard melodies may be compared to the Cave of Quietude (Endymion Book IV) where 'Silence dreariest/ Is most articulate'. This silence is healing and comforting -- a thing of serenity and solace. That
is why --

Thou, silent form, does
    tease us out of thought
As doth Eternity. Cold pastoral!

(ll. 44-45)

The form projects eternal, timeless values that will never perish. It will always be 'a friend to man'. However, to the unschooled soul or the man without an identity it will seem a 'Cold Pastoral'.

Going back to Greek mythology, the urn may be compared to the Sibyl Erythraean. The Sibyls were prophetesses inspired by some deity, mostly by Apollo. Sibyl Erythraean made prophecies regarding the Trojan War. Apollo offered her a gift and she asked for a life of as many years as a fistful of grains of sand. However, she forgot to ask for prolonged youth. She became so old that she was hung up in an urn which later contained her ashes. In Roman mythology, the Sibyls are married to Dis (the male god of the underworld) yet they remain virgins.

Keats's Grecian urn has these sibylline qualities. The closing couplet of the ode may be regarded as its prophecy of message to mankind. The oracular properties of
the ancient sibyls find expression in this apparent paradox —

'Beauty is truth, truth
    beauty' -- that is all
Ye know on earth, and
    all ye need to know.

(11. 49-50)

'Beauty' now means the inextricably woven joy and grief within human experience. This was the 'truth' he had been attempting to discover and had been frightened by in 'Ode to a Nightingale'. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is a much more stable analysis of the same philosophy. Through the agency of the Grecian Urn, Keats comes to terms with this 'truth' and realises that this is the superior, permanent beauty that constitutes the basic law of life.

The next ode 'Ode on Melancholy' witnesses the deification of yet another deity created in the tradition of Apollo, Psyche, Maia and also the Grecian Urn.12 The central idea of the poem is the contrast between false melancholy that causes stagnation of the senses, and true melancholy that is a necessary condition for the most intense experiences that lead one on to the goal of beauty and creativity. The kinship between intense sorrow and intense happiness is recognised as necessary and is brought
together in the benevolent form of melancholy, the goddess.

On at least two occasions, he exhibits this awareness in his letters. As early as March 1819, he wrote to George and Georgiana Keats --

Circumstances are like clouds continually gathering and bursting -- while we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into (he) the wide arable land of events -- while we are laughing it sprouts is (sic) grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck -- 13

This is a very positive statement that shows that Keats had been preoccupied with this problem for quite some time and that ultimately only mythology could find a solution to it. That he is already thinking on these lines is obvious from another letter, again to the George Keatses. While defining the 'Vale of tears' he wrote --

-- For instance suppose a rose to have sensation, it blooms on a beautiful morning, it enjoys itself -- but there comes a cold wind, a hot sun -- it cannot escape it, it cannot destroy its annoyances -- they are as native to the world as itself : no more can man be happy inspite, that world (l) y elements will prey upon his nature. 14

Mythological motifs are an integral part of Keats's imagination. They enrich his expression and serve to unite the poet's instinct with his intellect and give him his
unique vision. To explain a philosophy, Keats naturally uses motifs as the rose, the sun and the wind.

The first lecture on the English poets delivered by Hazlitt guided the poet in the expression of his ideals. The topic was *On Poetry in General* (Jan 1818) and the following extract is especially significant --

> The poetical impression of any subject is that uneasy, exquisite sense of beauty or power that... strives... to enshrine itself ... in the highest forms of fancy, had to relieve the aching sense of pleasure by expressing it in the boldest manner. 15

With the weight of this knowledge growing upon him, such a poem was inevitable. The trinity of a dramatic experience of beauty ('Ode to a Nightingale'), a thing of beauty ('Ode on Grecian Urn') and the spirit of beauty ('Ode on Melancholy') was a necessary milestone in the evolution of Keats the poet.

The first stanza is but one negative statement listing images, taken from mythology, of false melancholy. It is equated with oblivion, night, sleep and death through various classical references. The poet of the earlier odes has taken a significant step ahead in maturity, for those two poems had begun in an effort to leave behind the
world of pain and sorrow. Now, the poet is not only ready to accept melancholy but also ready to face its consequences. 'No, no, go not to Lethe...' begins the poet. Lethe, earlier referred to in 'Ode to a Nightingale' is the river in Hades. Water from it was drunk by souls about to be reborn, so that they forgot their previous lives. To the immature man who is extremely sorrowful, it offers oblivion as solace. Similarly, 'Wolf's bane' a herb with a poisonous juice, tempts him like 'wine'. 'Nightshade' is a tree that bears poisonous berries and is associated with Proserpine, the Queen of Hades. Here it is personified as a deadly, venomous spirit in the guise of a temptress that destroys these oppressive influences, the sorrowful victim makes a rosary of 'yew berries' and appears as evil and doomed as a priest of the occult. His very 'Psyche' or soul haunts him like a 'death-moth'. The total picture is chilling, infernal and rather ghostly. It projects a man with inverted inclinations. Through continuous association with Hades, the faculties of the melancholic man become vague and unsubstantial and 'drown the wakeful anguish of the soul'.

The destroying, defeating melancholy can totally incapacitate any man and keep him forever in 'Vale of
tears'. The poet condemns it and feels that it should be steadfastly avoided.

True melancholy is not a defeatist experience but a creative one -- a constructive gift of the 'Vale of Soul Making' -- a guide towards creative evolution of the energies. The second stanza is another single statement about the nature of true melancholy. Once again Keats draws his images from mythology. In contrast to the images of decay and stagnation of the first statement, this one is laden with images of fertility and purity. True melancholy is described as a 'fit' that 'fall' (s) from, 'heaven' in the form of a 'weeping cloud'. It comes as a gift from the gods and hence nourishes and revives. When Apollo descended to Earth, he brought the beneficence of spring as a gift for mankind. Keats seems to recollect the myth when he talks of the lifting of the 'April Shroud'. The green hill now becomes greener. Even before removal, the shroud is associated with whiteness and purity. April disintegrates as May the month of spring, commences. The first of May recalls and recreates the very seeds of fertility.

All these attributes gather together to create the profound figure of Melancholy. Growing with his philosophy
as the foundation, the abstract concept gains the stature of a palpable personality. Invested with his 'Fancy' the personality blooms into an enticing goddess. Melancholy does not feature in the Greek pantheon but Keats's treatment of her makes her story appear like an independent, established myth. Led by her, the poet becomes sensitive enough to drink in the poignant and enriching beauty of such things as a 'morning rose', the glittering, multi-coloured sand-dunes and a wealth of peonies. These images recollect the description of Cyprus, the island north-east of Mediterranean, where Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, first landed. Aphrodite Urania was the goddess of high, pure love whereas in her other aspect as Aphrodite Pandemos, she is the goddess of sensual lust. The goddess Melancholy leads her devotees to Aphrodite Urania, as is obvious by the following lines --

Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,  
Imprison her soft hand, and let her rave,  
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

( 11. 18-20 )

In the third and last stanza Keats actually comes face to face with his goddess. This confrontation represents a treaty of his conscious and sub-conscious thought-
processes. Through melancholy, he is able to reach this juncture. On the earlier occasions (e.g. when led by the beauty of the nightingale's song, and when led by the silvan pictures on the Grecian Urn) he had only reached what he describes as the 'temple of Delight'. This represents that cross-road in mental progress where there is no conflict, where the conscious thoughts and the subconscious thoughts do not destroy or suppress each other but healthily flourish side by side. In other words, it represents complete knowledge. Now, with the blessings of the divinity Melancholy to guide him, he can not only enter but also confront the 'veiled figure' in her 'sovran shrine'. The high pitch of his intensity does not break and he acknowledges the extent of her might. She elevates him as her oracle and he describes the test she takes of her devotees —

Though seen of none save him
whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against
his palate fine;
( 11. 27-28 )

Now, he has passed this test and has become her devotee as he had earlier become of Apollo, Psyche, Maia and even the Grecian Urn. In keeping with the tradition of Greece and Rome where trophies of victory were hung up in temples, his
soul too is '...among her cloudy trophies hung.' The adjective 'cloudy' reminds us of the Heavenly palaces of the various gods, one of which is now occupied by Melancholy.

III

'Ode on Melancholy' was also written in May 1819. Unlike the other odes, however, it does not seem to analyse the living moment. The poet analyses his entire experience. His thought-process is projected in the form of a dream. The adoption of this technique links him with Hermes, who among other things is the god of dreams and sleep.

In a letter to the George Keatses the poet wrote --

This morning I am in a sort of a temper indolent and supremely careless: I long after a stanza or two of Thomson's Castle of Indolence. Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me: they seem rather like three figures on a Greek Vase -- A Man and two Women.... This is the only happiness. 17

Now, once again these three figures confront him. Love, Ambition and Poetry -- these three abstractions single themselves out as the most important and dominating forces of his life. Together they form a kind of non-
Christian or pagan trinity.

The poet does not recognize them. He had been lost in 'nothingness' and they broke through the shield, quietly and secretly —

....Ripe was the drowsy hour;  
The blissful cloud of summer  
    indolence  
Benumbed my eyes; my pulse  
    grew less and less;  
Pain had no sting, and  
    pleasure's wreath no flower:  

( ll. 15-18 )

The effect of indolence is like a trance or a dream. Indolence is now an agency of Hermes. These three figures move in a circle and the poet wishes they would 'melt' away and allow him to lose himself totally in the beneficence of Indolence. A new dimension is now added to this abstraction who is gradually shaping as a deity. Like the Grecian Urn and Melancholy, she too is a Mother-figure, a giver of comfort, security and peace. Keats's constant preoccupation with the Mother-figure proves that his thoughts-process is essentially mythological.

Indolence, too, can be linked to the Great Goddess whose benevolence attracts Keats. Now that she has taken him under her protection, he can look at Love, Ambition and
Poetry and analyze their role in framing his thought-process. In his reflections on life and in his philosophies they had always occupied the top strata. In fact, his entire career as an artist, demonstrates their closeness. These were the lively active energies that supported the essential identity of Keats. However, he was aware of his dependence on them and knew all the time that he had to evolve into an independent 'soul' and discard these supporting agents. This feeling is reflected in a letter to Reynolds —

"...We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us -- and if we do not agree, seems to put its hands in its breeches pocket. Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle or amaze if with itself but with its subject -- 19"

Like the three goddesses who appeared in triple-form to prove their divinity, these abstractions, too, form a trinity and conduct themselves in three-circles. Because they are not divine, they cannot accomplish this successfully. They appear like 'Ghosts' and their triple circle forces rather occult interpretations. They are as unhealthy and dismal as the inhabitants of Hades. The poet finally rejects them and they fade and he returns to Indolence.
Indolence, hence, signifies not lethargy but a fertile visionary state where truth is clearly visible. The senses of the poet are at rest, there is no 'fever'. Happiness is complete and a successful union of the Heart and Mind has been brought about in Universal Space. It is a fertile, creative state, as is provided by true Melancholy. There is drowsiness, dreaminess and contentment. In fact, it recreates the atmosphere of Elysium where the souls of those favoured by the gods find fulfillment. '...honied' implies a golden, lethargic and slow moving reverie. Among other things, the colour gold is associated with Apollo, the beneficent patron of poets. The golden mood, thus, gathers together the blessings of Apollo. The moment of discovery reveals to the poet that associations with Love, Ambition and Poetry do not bring joy but force realizations that banish the golden euphoria.

The poet compares his soul to a 'lawn'. This open expanse of rich, green grass, like every other open space in the poetry of Keats, is symbolic of freedom. This expanse, though sprinkled with flowers, was shadowed by the interplay of 'shades' and 'beams' that 'baffled' and 'stirred' him. This was caused by the intrigues of Love, Ambition and Poetry. Their desertion had come before
him like a 'cloudy morn'. But, before the tears could fall, realization came to him like 'an open casement' over which 'pressed a new-leaved vine'. The vine, symbolic of himself, is old but the leaves symbolic of his thoughts are new. The warmth and song enter his soul and when he bids farewell to the three, he says 'Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine'. The 'open casement' has occurred before in the other odes. In 'Ode to Psyche' it had opened from the temple within the brain and in 'Ode to a Nightingale' it had been a 'magic casement' connecting the real and the ideal world. On both occasions, the poet had been stranded on the other side, a mere observer of the happiness of those within. The time, however, levered by mythology, he is within. Present by his side is the newly created goddess Indolence. Bathed in her radiant halo, he is the recipient of complete happiness.

At peace with himself and the world, he imagines he is 'cool-bedded' in the 'flowery grass'. Keats's present stage signifies that he is undergoing a symbolic burial after which he will emerge resurrected as a creative poet, unhampered by any limitations.

'Ode to Autumn' was written in September 1819, nearly three months after the 'May' odes. It reflects the peace
of mind and mood of calm acceptance Keats had reached by now. There is no 'fever', no struggle, no quest, no analysis -- only tranquil meditation.

The poem is about 'Autumn' symbolically the period of destruction, death and decay. However, the poet with his new vision does not mourn but simply accepts it as the final cycle in the ritual of birth and death. In fact, it appears more poignant because it holds the promise of future fertility.

In a letter to Reynolds, written from Winchester in the same month, Keats commented on the weather and landscape --

> How beautiful the season is now -- How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really without joking, haste weather -- Dian skies -- I never liked stubble fields so much as now -- Aye better than the chilly green of spring. Somehow, a stubble plain looks warm... this struck me so much in my Sunday's walk that I composed upon it. 19

Keats associates autumn with 'Dian Skies'. Diana, in Roman Mythology is the deity connected with fertility. Ian Jack associates Keats's Autumn with Ceres, the Roman deity whose Grecian counterpart is Demeter. Ceres stands for the generative power of nature whereas Demeter
was the goddess of corn and agriculture. The attributes of all these deities combine to create the benevolent deity 'Autumn'. Douglas Bush writes —

...the delicate personifications... exhibit Keats's myth-making instinct at its ripest and surest. 21

The Keatsian goddess is beautiful and radiant. Her radiance is laden with warmth and bursting ripeness. She represents the continual growth process. She links and relates the seasons to the sun and the Earth, and also brings together the three kingdoms -- vegetative, animal and human. She is all pervading as the spirit of beneficence and generosity and also as the guardian of fertility and fruition. Ultimately, like all other Keatsian goddesses, she is the magnificent Mother-figure -- patient, dignified, tender and laborious.

The first line of the ode is a direct invocation of the deity 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness'. She is in deep conspiracy with her 'close bosom friend' the maturing sun. The sun is associated with Apollo whose attributes include sunshine of spring and the blessings of harvest in summer and also warding off the dangers of autumn and winter. The two energies combine to produce a particularly productive season. The verse gathers together the
impressions of a misty, autumn morning. The poet begins from the home -- the resort of the Mother-figure. The vines around the thatch aves are laden with fruits and flowers. The apple trees in the cottage yard are bent with the sheer weight of the fruit, which, in turn, is filled with 'ripeness to the core'. The gourds and the shells are swollen and plump. Flowers continuously bloom and the bees work on --

Until they think warm days will never cease,  
For summer has o'er-brimmed their clammy cells.

(ll. 10-11)

The images are mainly tactile and signify a depth of contented luxuriance and happiness springing from the fullness of life. The Keatsian goddess, though still invisible, is present amidst the extravagant fruitition and flowering like a throbbing pulse.

In the second stanza she descends into the scheme of things and is visible and the scene of action extends to the fields beyond the cottage yard. Like the multi-faced Earth-goddess Hecate, she is presented in a number of postures -- in the granary, relaxing in between bouts of threshing, in the field 'sound asleep' on a furrow,
balancing herself on a bridge across a brook while carrying loads of grain and finally by the cider-press, watching the '...last oozing hours by hours'.

The images are visual and represent a drowsy afternoon. Each of them is connected with a characteristic occupation of autumn. The total picture reads like a catalogue of seasonal rites. Each rite sheds light on some trait of the goddess. She labours in the granary, denoting hard-work, and perseverance. She tenderly 'Spare the next swath and all its twined flower'. Thus she proves herself to be the guardian spirit and protector of all the flowering and productive things. A gleaner is one who collects the grain left in the harvest fields by the workers. By collecting a heavy load, she exhibits qualities of strength, efficiency and thrift. The last picture where she sits by the cider-press shows patience and fortitude.

The last verse depicts an autumnal evening. From the familiar fields, we move on to the distant hills and skies. We are now faced with Autumn, the unhappy goddess preparing for her departure. Now, the poet becomes the consoler. He tells her 'Think not of them, thou hast thy music too'.
The 'barred clouds' reflect the sun that colours the fields with a 'rosy hue'. Thus Apollo, the sun-god, establishes an association with Autumn. The gnats, crickets, lambs, robins and swallows pay their tribute to her. Their music is --

Among the river swallows, born aloft
Or sinking as the light with lives or dies;

( 11. 28-29 )

The river weeds, swaying in the wind, carry this music all over the world. The picture re-collects the river weed of the King Midas myth. Apollo was challenged by Marsyas, a Satyr, to a music contest. The River-god Tmolus pronounced Apollo the winner. Midas protested and was punished with donkey's ears. He hid his deformity under a tall cap but it was discovered by his barber who found the effort, of keeping it a secret, unbearable. He dug a hole by the river and whispered the secret in there. From that same hole sprang a weed that repeated the secret everytime it was rustled by the winds.

The message relayed by the weeds is not sorrowful but one that informs the world that Autumn is not departing but taking part in the final ritual of seasonal death.
Like the 'gathering swallows' that have hopes of a warmer land, Autumn, too, is just launching on a new cycle of productivity.

Keats's use of mythology in the odes does not suggest a deliberate contrivance for the sake of poetic effect. On the other hand he recognizes and recreates mental principles which had been present in the mind of the early man and which have been unhistorically documented in mythology. Thus he instinctively perceives the communicative relevance of certain ancient divinities to his artistic purpose, and through their fictionalised experiences he seeks deliverance from the oppressive forces that limit his own creative potential. Mythology leads him on to awareness and self-discovery. It has become so integral a part of his critical and creative faculties that he cannot dissociate himself from it. Since man has come many stages away from the ancient innocence, the principles have to be reformed, recast and at times even added to. The poet successfully accomplishes it by adding to the existing mythology and even creating new myths.
Notes and References

1. Pindar, a Greek poet, established the form. Its salient features include elevated thought, bold metaphor and free use of mythology. Horace, a Latin poet, used Pindar as a model. However, his odes are more meditative and personal. Keats's odes are Horatian in form and feeling but contain some modified Pindaric elements.


