

The Greek myth of Endymion tells the story of a beautiful shepherd with whom Cynthia (or Diana, Phoebe) fell in love "when she saw him sleeping on Mt. Latmos. She caused him to sleep for ever that she might enjoy his beauty... According to another version he obtained from Zeus eternal youth and the gift of sleeping as long as he wished."<sup>1</sup>

In his narrative romance of 1817, Keats departed from the myth as it is related above, for his Endymion did not sleep for ever to please his lover. He was not a passive object of love - he became active in the pursuit of the goddess who had appeared thrice to him and with whom he also was desperately in love. Endymion, the shepherd prince in Keats' poem, saw Cynthia first in a dream-vision, when he was in a magic bed of sacred litany; later he beheld her face in a well, and once more, in a cave.

In England this myth had been exploited before by Michael Drayton in "Endymion and Phoebe" (1595) and "Man in the Moone" (1606); and also by J. Lyly in "Endymion" (1591). Finney explains:

The myth of Endymion and Phoebe, which grew up in the popular tradition of Elis in the Peloponnesus and of the Ionian cities in Caria, was the subject of a lyric poem of Sappho which has not survived. It does not exist in full development in extant classical literature, but allusions to it are found in Theocritus, Apollonius Rhodius, Apollodorus, Pausanias, Lucian, Ovid and Cicero. During the Renaissance, when the study of classical literature was revived, it became a favourite subject for poetic allusion in the literature of Europe. Keats was familiar with the beautiful allusions in Spenser's "Epithalamion", Marlowe's "Hero and Leander", Shakespeare's "Merchant of Venice", ... and Browne's "Britannia's Pastorals". These allusions are vivid but brief.<sup>2</sup>

As we will later see, Keats admired Spenser's poetry and studied Shakespeare very attentively, besides other Renaissance poets. Hence, several sources were fused in his "Endymion". Keats develops the features he selects from his predecessors while introducing new elements and different episodes. He enlarges and enriches his poem with other myths, such as Glaucus and Scylla,

---

\* Mestre em Letras pela UFSC - Capítulo II de sua tese de Mestrado sobre Keats.

Alpheus and Arethusa, Venus and Adonis. Ovid's **Metamorphosis** was accessible to him through Sandys' translations, and supplied him with much of the information he needed concerning those myths. Also, he knew Lemprière's **Classical Dictionary**, W. Godwin's **Pantheon**, and Chapman's translations of Homer:

Drayton's poems mentioned above, suggested to Keats several materials which he expands and modifies in his poem. He shared with Drayton an admiration for the moon as a thing of beauty. Finney observes that:

Keats derived the most striking feature of the plot of "Endymion" from Drayton's "Endimion and Phoebe". In Drayton's poem Phoebe disguises herself as a nymph, woos Endymion, and makes him renounce her service, to which he had dedicated himself, for the love of the nymph whom she is impersonating. In the end she confesses that she is Phoebe, forgives his defection, and makes him her immortal lover. Keats represented Phoebe's amorous deception of Endymion as two-fold. In the first book Phoebe, concealing her identity visits Endymion in his dreams;... At the beginning of the fourth book, Phoebe assumes a second disguise - that of an Indian Maid who has strayed from the rout of Bacchus - ... This device, Phoebe's wooing of Endymion in the guise of another woman, is both the complicating and the resolving force of Drayton's "Endimion and Phoebe", and Keats' "Endymion". It does not appear in any other version of the myth and it is, therefore, the most convincing evidence that Keats was indebted to Drayton's "Endimion and Phoebe".<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the debt either to Drayton, Spenser and Shakespeare or to Chapman's and Sandy's translations, Keats' achievement in "Endymion" discloses, as he wrote, "The innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snailhorn perception of Beauty".<sup>4</sup> Keats' receptive-perceptive intellect combined materials necessary to convey the Beautiful as he saw it. His hero is a mortal who travels towards an immortal region where he can intuit Beauty which is truth.

This long narrative poem is made up of four books, each containing one thousand (or even more) verses. In the first book, we learn that Endymion, the shepherd prince of Mt. Latmos, feels very despondent and alienates himself from his people's celebra-

tion of Pan's festival, "Like one who on earth had never stepped". His sister Peona leads him to a pleasant bower and after calming him to sleep, induces him to tell her the reason for his apparent grief. Endymion then eases his breast "of secret grief", and reveals to her how one day he fell asleep and a beautiful moon, a "completed form of all completeness" appeared to him in his dream, and he could not avoid loving her. Such a mysterious being smiled to him "in the clear well", and fondly called his name in a "secret mossy cave". Thrice she manifested herself to him, and since he was deeply in love with her - a deity - earth's delight no longer appeals to him. Therefore he decides to go on "pilgrimage for the world's dusky brink", in quest of his love.

In Book II, the lovelorn Latmian is informed by a nymph that he must wander "past the scanty bar/To mortal steps". He finds himself near a cavern's mouth, and prays for Cynthia (without knowing the identity of his dream-goddess) to help him to discover his love's dwelling. Endymion is in a kind of trance, and a voice from the deep cavern commands him to descend into the bosom of the world. He now understands that "airy voices" will lead him to immortality (of love) through the "silent mysteries of the earth". Therefore he descends.

The cavern is studded with gems and full of winding passages. It recalls Shelley's "Alastor" and the Cave of Mammon in Spenser's "Faerie Queen".

Endymion feels lonely and miserable in the dark underworld. Wandering and watching the wonders floating before him in the deep, he arrives in a chamber where Adonis is sleeping. The shepherd prince then beholds the goddess of the sea, Venus, awakening her lover to a summer of love.

Venus promises Endymion that one day he will be blessed in his pursuit. Being one again alone, he strides through caves, places of "mottled ore", streams, fountains, descending more with the help of an eagle, till he comes to a green nook, a jasmine bower "all bestrown/with golden moss" where he falls asleep and in a dream, has his goddess in his arms. The "known Unknown" feeds him with moments of ecstasy, but soon departs leaving him sorrowful again.

Endymion continues his pilgrimage in the underworld and meets the river god Alpheus and the fountain nymph Arethusa. Alpheus flows trying unsuccessfully to melt his stream with Arethusa's; Endymion feels sympathy for their unhappy fate, and for a while, forgets his self. He now can lend to the sounds of the two streams - Alpheus and Arethusa - a human significance. Then, the vision of the earth vanishes and the Latmian faces the giant sea.

Book III presents Endymion striding the floor of the sea where he sees a vast hollow with dead things which hide long-forgotten stories. Again he prays to Cynthia, praising the glory of the moon. He meets an old man, Glaucus, who tells his story. Glaucus was a fisherman of immortal stock who left earth and his fellowmen to dive into the water-world which meant his ideal. Here he falls in love with an elusive nymph, Scylla, who keeps running away from him. Glaucus then tries to find relief in Circe's sensual love. However, he soon discovers the cruelty of Circe who used to transform her lovers into beasts; he cannot escape her malignancy and is doomed to ten centuries of old age and consequent impotence. The enchantress kills Scylla whose body Glaucus keeps in a niche inside a "fabric crystalline". The half-divine fisherman tells Endymion that he was even deprived of saving other people's lives - his senility was a bar separating him from human acts of whatever sort.

The shepherd prince learns that he was expected to restore Glaucus' youth (and strength, then), and that both could resurrect drowned creatures lying in the crystalline palace. Endymion performs his humanitarian mission, and with Glaucus (now a beautiful youth), Scylla, and the multitude beings he brought to life, enters the palace of Neptune, where there occurs a celebration. Here the wandering Latmian swoons and his inward senses listen to a voice saying that he will be snatched into "endless heaven".

In the fourth book he is again on earth; this is the last stage of his pilgrimage, when he lives complex experiences. Endymion hears a woman's lament and comes upon an Indian Maid who sings to him a Song of Sorrow relating her frustration while trying to forget an unfulfilled love. He falls in love with her, and after declaring his love to the dark girl, both mount winged steeds which Mercury (Hermes) brings to them, and they fly through

the air. They enter the region of Sleep; Cynthia visits him in his dream. Now he knows who the goddess of his quest is; he awakens and finds her near him. Yet he decides for the Indian Maid who pressed his hand in slumber. Cynthia then disappears, and to his astonishment and despair the Indian Maid fades away as well.

Now he is lonely and exhausted in the "Cave of Quietude", where emotions do not disturb the soul. Here he falls asleep while his spirit is refreshed. Then he is brought back to earth in Mount Latmos, and on awakening he sees his human love, the Indian Maid, near him. Peona, his worldly-minded sister, appears and he asks her to take the Indian Maid, who mysteriously claims that she cannot accept his love, with her; he decides to live the life of a hermit. Yet he wishes to see his love once again, for the last time, at the sunset hour. When the moment comes for their final meeting, Endymion sees the Indian Maid change into Phoebe, who carries him to the long-promised immortality of passion.

This is the summary of the story Keats narrates in his poetical romance. "Endymion", I believe, should be read as an allegory of the soul's yearnings for its ideal (whatever this may be), and the process of spiritualization necessary for the attainment of it. Northrop Frye, C. L. Finney, among other critics, also interpret the poem as such.

Each book represents one condition which he must satisfy before his soul is ready to undergo new maturing experiences. "Endymion" has the basic characteristics of an allegory;<sup>5</sup> we watch in the poem a series of equations between its several elements (Endymion, the journey, the cavern, the undersea, the air, the earth, the moon) and a set of ulterior meanings<sup>6</sup> (the soul, human life, the trials, the ideal). A structure of images interpret the poet's central ideas. In other words, the shepherd prince's pursuit stands for the human heart's pursuit of Beauty, or Truth, Happiness, Love, Light; Endymion stands for Everyman; Cynthia stands for his most secret and vital yearnings.

In brief, the equivalence between the immaterial (Beauty, Light, Spiritual Growth) and the material (the moon, the pilgrimage in the physical world) affirms the allegorical quality of "Endymion". We have Keats' testimony that "... they are very shallow people who take everything literally. A Man's life of any

worth is a continual allegory and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life - a life like the Scriptures, figurative - which such people can no more make out than they can the hebrew Bible."<sup>7</sup> And D. Bush criticizes A. Lowell's non-allegorical reading of the poem by saying that "... Miss Lowell's refusal to see the symbolism in the poem was mere temperamental wrongheadedness."<sup>8</sup>

To deny allegorical basis for this poem is to reduce it to a more mosaic of decorative scenes. I agree that it tends to be rather digressive, being a long poem, an attempt at epic scale; the thread of the thematic statement is sometimes difficult to follow in a maze of sensuous imagery. The narrative action suffers turns and counterturns implying, in a careless reading, a more loose structure that it really has. I mean that Keats could have yielded himself less to poetical (or youthful) outbursts (however full of beauty they be) which indeed give the impression of being just verse filling, and impair Keats' seriousness of purpose. Nevertheless, as M. Sherwood's says, the poem "is throbbing with vitality, physical, intellectual, spiritual; thought and feeling too great for perfect expression surge up in the young poet, crying out for clear utterance which they often fail to gain."<sup>9</sup>

"Endymion" follows closely the mythical tradition: the hero starts on a journey striding a road of trials where despondency and stagnation often haunt him in his Quest; his symbolical pursuit is completed when he escapes from his imprisoning ego and becomes proud of his inescapable mortality. Before the shepherd prince (Endymion) may be awarded with enlightenment, he has to pass through painful experiences which widen his knowledge of the world and sharpen his awareness of the nature of mortals; that is, Endymion attains the sought-for fellowship with Beauty through suffering.

Earlier, several times, sensory delights granted him communion with the dream-goddess (Cynthia), the principle of Beauty; yet such ecstatic (Platonic) moments of happiness were transitory and could only leave his soul more hungry for love. Serene and permanent union with the Essence is not possible without a preparatory stage of pain and thought. Endymion's quest, to quote J. A. Allen's remarks on mythical poetry in general, "is the age-old Quest of the Hero in myth and literature",<sup>10</sup> for enlightenment,

for it provides dramatic testimony of the unconscious urge of Everyman for the creation or recreation into a world of experience transformed by hard-won understanding of the human condition as it relates to eternal life and its inexhaustible source."<sup>11</sup>

This metrical romance evidences Keats' aestheticism and philosophy which are going to shape the works to come. The personal experience of Endymion assumes cosmic proportion when we consider the symbolic level which attests its continuity. Endymion, like most mortals, is a wanderer who attempts a symbolical ascent, but is soon taught the meaning of the descent. Guided by Cynthia, the epicure who indulges in physical pleasure, finds his way to spiritualization; through sensory perceptions, in a Wordsworthian manner, Endymion is in a mood in which the burden of the mystery is lightened.

"Endymion" conveys to us the schooling which the world provides to mortals before they are allowed to intuit the ultimate truth and beauty of life. In this allegory Keats interprets life as a growth towards more perfect human condition.

When the story opens, the shepherd prince was removed from human warmth in a solitary flight into an unearthly region - his goddess abode. He wanted divine fellowship and sought this by a rejection of the natural world (a Platonic impulse). Peona acts as a rationalizing mind trying (vainly) to awaken him to the reality of mortal ties.

The humanizing process begins in the underworld. Endymion faces a world with materials for artistic creation, which nevertheless does not make up for the misery of solitude, "now he has been taught/the goal of consciousness". The cavern-descent discloses to him how unbearable is life alienated from the world of nature, and how a blending with it is a concrete step towards the ethereal world of his yearning. Amid the underworld's inanimate beauties, he longs for the phenomenal world, a "inward fever parches up" his tongue, his palate is dry. Earth, thus, begins to emerge as something vital in his inward consciousness. I stated that "airy voices" ordered Endymion to descend. Keats is telling us that involvement in the region of physicality is necessary for spiritual progression. Endymion's situation portrays a soul's development.

He becomes responsive to human needs when he feels compassion for Alpheus and Arethusa. Endymion is not yet prepared for "fellowship with essence". His schooling must proceed; he ascends a higher grade when, in the undersea (Book III) he helps Glaucus, Scylla, and other human creatures to find happiness. Endymion, in this stage of his inner development, participates in human affairs, forgetting his own troubles and rejoicing with their achievement. Now he no longer feels that human neighbourhood envenoms all. He learns that fellowship with humanity is an important step to bring him nearer his ultimate goal.

The last stage of Endymion's wanderings (Book IV) speaks to us much about Keats' dominant ideas concerning life and aestheticism. Endymion is taught that sorrow is wisdom by the Indian Maid. Finally he is aware of the hollowness of his former dreams which removed him from the warmth of human bonds. The shepherd prince realistically discovers the significance of human love in his own mortal sphere; Keats clearly implies that escapism leads to nothing, while commitment to the world of flux is the only way to eternal truth.

In the Cave of Quietude the poet portrays impersonality in the contemplation of humanity; such detachment is possible only when the fever of self-absorption leaves the soul. Emotion then is recollected in tranquillity, and the mind is capable of discarding everything disagreeable.

The way Endymion attains his "immortality of bliss" is rich in symbolism. After he accepted human existence, his human love (the dark girl) is transformed into his immortal Phoebe. This means, I believe, that, as W. Evert remarks "the process of qualification has not been one of refining earthly characteristics out of his nature, but of bringing him into acute awareness of and participation in the values of purely human existence".<sup>12</sup> By submission to this process we are given deeper insights. Human experience affords a passage from the temporal to the eternal.

The image-complex in this romance conveys the elements which conflict with man's longing for personal fulfillment. In the four books of "Endymion" the idea of transience recurs and the consequent longing for permanence spoils the hero's life. He early came to know that pleasure is often a "visitant", while fair forms



soon fade away leaving but pain which "clings cruelly to us".

To his sister Peona (whose character gives the poem a realistic note) he speaks of love and friendship as entanglements necessary to insights into beauty which is a form of truth; Endymion identifies light with love "... at the tip top, / There hangs by unseen film, an orb'd drop / Of light, and that is love...". Therefore - knowledge (light) leads to love and love leads to knowledge. "Light" - imagery is fundamental in all his poetry: in this much expanded metaphor Keats merges his Platonic and worldly impulses. In it he expresses his principle of Beauty, a driving force which reconciles opposite tendencies and longings, as I will try to make clear later. And as a consequence of this early assumption (light-love relationship, the real implying the Beautiful), Keats will most naturally declare that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty", in "Ode on a Grecian Urn", and "Knowledge enormous makes a God of me" in "Hyperion", or that he had power "To see as a god sees, and make the depth / Of things" in the "Fall of Hyperion".

Endymion's return to the world of circumstances attests Keats' indictment of mere dreamers which he expresses in the resolution of "Lamia", and in the words Moneta speaks to the poet in the second "Hyperion": "... who find a heaven in the world, / Where they may thoughtless sleep away their days", that is, the unconscious dreamers who would "Rot on the pavement where thou rottest half".

On the other hand, dream-visions represent dying into life, or the diligent indolence in which the spirit may open his "leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive and have sap for meat and dew for drinks".<sup>13</sup> Such symbolism is going to be dramatized in the poems of 1818-1819. Also, the intensities experienced by Endymion are echoed throughout poems written in his last literary phase, in which imagination is a mediator between spiritual and material spheres. Such intensities are self-annihilating, they mingle the soul of man with perceived beauty. In this fusion the soul loses its individual identity for, as Endymion explains "that moment have we steep/Into a sort of oneness". This process of self-annihilation together with the acceptance of life as it is, or submission to mortality, is at the root of his philosophy of

negative capability - which lends so much dimension to his later poetry.

In "Endymion", we are taught that the mundane is the school which enables the soul to be ripened to the point of a transcendental vision revealing a divine harmony in which discordant notes are neutralized. Then we can perceive beauty in all things - in light and shade, in joy and pain, in mortal and immortal, in earth and heaven. The quest for truth, a Platonic quest, becomes an objective quest for truth, for what is real. This way Keats makes a synthesis of Platonic and earthly urges. This affirmation of reality is strongly felt in "Lamia", the two "Hyperions" and the great odes. Keats fuses the principle of Beauty with the principle of Truth in "Endymion" when he states that "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever: / Its loveliness increases; it will never / Pass into nothingness".

"Endymion" affirms the world of process as a step necessary for the final communing with Beauty (Ideal); the shepherd prince explains to Peona that happiness lies "in that which beckons / Our ready minds to fellowship divine, a fellowship with essence." The things beckoning to us are beauties of the earth, such as music, the touch of a rose, poetry, friendship, and human love. These elements belonging to the actual world lead us to glimpse, however momentarily, at truth (or beauty).

The assertions in "Endymion" are, according to Keats himself, of great importance in his poetical rationale, as he wrote to Taylor:

The whole thing must I think have appeared to you, who are a consecutive Man, as a thing of mere words - but I assure you that when I wrote it was a regular stepping of the Imagination towards a truth. My having written that Argument will perhaps be of the greatest service to me of any thing I ever did - It set before me at once the gradation of Happiness even like a Kind of Pleasure Thermometer."<sup>14</sup>

"Endymion" has a serious purpose, to reveal that in order to seize the Ideal (or Beauty or Truth) we must experience things of beauty in the world of flux; the more entangled we are with human values, the greater will be the intensity of our happiness. When imagination seizes the truth inherent in a sort of beauty, we

become part of a whole, we are in a state of "oneness". It is intuition which discloses the ultimate good - whatever its name, beauty or truth. It is Keats' apprehension of this idea which gives depth and direction to his imaginative creation. To borrow M. Murry's conclusion

And truly, it was a vast idea, even in the form in which Keats already apprehended it: that the rational faculty was impotent to achieve truth, that intuitive apprehension was the sole faculty by which an ultimate truth could be known, that this truth could be recognized for what it was only by its beauty, that perceptions of beauty were premonitions of a final reality, that the way towards intuitive knowledge of this reality lay through a reverence for the instinctive impulses, and that somehow in this final knowledge all discords would be reconciled."<sup>15</sup>

If we cannot imaginatively perceive reality by a communion with an essence which hangs beyond joy and sorrow we are in a state of "Purgatory blind", neither committed to earth nor to heaven in a midwayness where no fulfillment is possible. Endymion leaves his "Purgatory blind" when he achieves his spiritual growth and the conflict finds solution in his coalescence with life's values. Keats' purpose in his major poems is precisely to deepen our perception of truth, and to teach us beauty which is real, felt on the pulse - beauty won through pain or thought,<sup>16</sup> and "it has pain in itself or at least appears in objects that are painful".<sup>17</sup>

In "Endymion", as I shall show later, we face the parallel between the two planes of man's existence, the mortal and the immortal as well as a resolution in which substance and essence are at one; there is no discarding, in Keats, of the mundane, as in sheer Platonists who gradually detach themselves entirely from material things and contemplate spiritual beauty as the only reality.

Endymion's desire to burst the mortal bars which keep his spirit in is evoked in the conflict of his major poetry, and even embodied there with greater precision. Endymion's exclamation "The world how deep!" (II, 183) resounds in every poem Keats wrote in 1819, and is expressed by means of a similar image-complex; however wrapped in a decorative language, the serious thought is always present.

NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Sir Paul Harvey, The Oxford Companion to English Literature, p. 260.
- <sup>2</sup>C. L. Finney, op. cit., p. 247.
- <sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 252-3.
- <sup>4</sup>Letter to Haydon, April 8, 1818, op. cit.
- <sup>5</sup>C. C. Colwell, in A Student's Guide to Literature, p. 72, states that "and allegory has four basic characteristics: first, it consists of many elements of meaning; second, each element has one, and only one, meaning; third, the relationship among the elements parallel the relationship among the meanings; and fourth, it expresses the abstract (the meanings) in concrete terms (the elements). Colwell distinguishes between allegory and symbolism by saying that in symbolism we find one element having several meanings, that is, there is one-to-many relationship (p. 74). But in allegory a symbol is a single element of meaning.
- Northrop Frye remarks that a structure of images is a continuous allegory when it suggests an idea, something abstract. An allegorical interpretation connects ideas or precepts to a structure of images. A writer allegorizes when he says something further meaning to say something else: "allos" means "also" (N. Frye, Anatomia da Crítica, pp. 92-3). The symbolic representation in "Endymion"'s narrative is a warrant of the poem's allegory. And W. Evert, in Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats, p. 106, thus asserts: "That the poem is an allegory... is a matter of definition rather than - of argument. If Cynthia stands for... she is a symbol. And if allegory is the narrative form of symbolic representation, then "Endymion" is an allegory.
- <sup>6</sup>see L. Perrine, Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry, p. 77.
- <sup>7</sup>Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, Feb. 18, 1819. op. cit.
- <sup>8</sup>D. Bush, op. cit., p. 97.
- <sup>9</sup>M. Sherwood, op. cit., p. 241.

- <sup>10</sup>J. A. Allen, op. cit., p. XXXIII.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>12</sup>W. Evert, op. cit., p. 154.
- <sup>13</sup>Letter to J. H. Reynolds, Feb. 19, 1818. op. cit.
- <sup>14</sup>Letter to Taylor, Jan. 30, 1818, op. cit.
- <sup>15</sup>J. M. Murry, op. cit., p. 32.
- <sup>16</sup>A. C. Bradley, Oxford Lectures on Poetry, p. 230.
- <sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 231.