

A Keatsian Anatomy of Melancholy: the management of depression in some letters and poems of John Keats

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This talk considers the changing picture of depression, or melancholy as it was called in the seventeenth century, as in Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy. Freud distinguished between mourning and melancholia in the sense of healthy and pathological reactions to loss; but the concept has also evolved within psychoanalysis. The process of working through depression with a goal of self-knowledge seems to come gradually closer to a Keatsian worldview of the quest for beauty and truth. Using some of Keats' letters and poems from the winter and spring of 1818-1819, we explore his analysis of his own depression, as he works out how to exorcise its persecutory qualities, and learns to 'see great things in loneliness'. It models a process analogous to that in psychoanalysis and illuminates the role of relations with internal objects. We will be looking in particular at Keats' 'Ode on Melancholy' and at selections from his journal-letter of February-May 1819.

Melancholy, an ancient concept, became more or less synonymous with what was first termed 'depression of spirits' in the 15th century, and continued to be a popular theme in life and literature, though 'depression' only entered psychology with Freud and gradually superseded 'melancholia'. Both terms are generally considered to describe undesirable conditions of varying severity that are associated with loneliness or solitude. In the seminar today I would like to survey the use of the terms and then illustrate them with some letters and poems of John Keats.

Melancholy was one of the four classical 'humours' which Hippocrates said needed to be balanced for health (the other body-based states being sanguine, choleric, and phlegmatic). They exist within everyone in varying proportions and account for certain prevailing innate dispositions or personality types. The 'melancholic', as a personality type, is characterised by gloomy countenance, love of introspection, and avoidance of action. The imbalance of humours is in some ways equivalent to modern psychiatric views on the disturbance of chemical pathways in the brain in severe mental disorders: an excessive reaction to inner conflict or external trauma. These quantitative 'chemical' systems do not relate the idea of somatic imbalance to that of object relations in the way that Freud initiated in *Mourning and Melancholia*; yet neither do they fall into mind-body dualism and separate the psychic from the somatic (something which Bion was very insistent upon, saying that the psyche-soma is a single entity whose various components may or may not be able to communicate with one another).

In the period between medieval times and early modern (the 16th century) the 'humours' were expanded into an elaborate superstitious cosmology (to do with astrological speculation, etc) which was caricatured by Shakespeare and others. And Aristotle's association of melancholy with intellectual brilliance provided more opportunities for parody, as with Jaques in *As You Like It* who parades his melancholy, 'wrapped in a most humorous sadness', with the aim of presenting himself as a profound thinker rather than just a misanthrope. The fashionable picture of the melancholic individual whose solitariness indicated a general disapproval of society's folly and greed continued for at least two centuries, possibly reinforced by the Protestant emphasis on the subjectivity of the individual's search for God, as distinct from relying on Church authority. By the time Robert Burton wrote his *Anatomy of Melancholy* in 1621 (and probably beginning with *Hamlet*) the analysis of melancholy was becoming refined into a more psychological inquiry. Burton took an obsessive interest in melancholy and saw it as providing

a key to personality structure in a way that the other humours did not: it was a qualitatively different phenomenon, though always a dis-ease. He recommended, in a modern holistic way, the use of diet, sleep, music, meaningful work: not immersion in society but not solitude either, but rather, talking with a trusted friend (the original ‘talking cure’).

Mrs Klein, in her last paper ‘On the sense of loneliness’ (Klein, 1960), makes a kind of summary of her general vision of personality development as it had settled and crystallised at the culmination of her life’s experience. In it, she takes the feeling of loneliness to be a lens through which someone’s current mental state can be assessed: regarding it as an emotional quality which is inevitably always present in some measure – unless it is being actually denied in order to defend against reality. She associates loneliness with longing for an early but (inevitably) irretrievably lost preverbal communion between baby and mother; this is essentially the same scheme as the traditional religious one of the search for God, or the traditional romantic one of seeking a lover who will complete the missing part of the self. From there, she surveys various later forms of loss or disintegration, from schizophrenic falling in pieces, through the loneliness of persecutory paranoid-schizoid anxieties, to a depressive loneliness that occurs owing to the difficulty or pain of reintegration of parts of either self or object.

The paper gives the impression that she is interested in loneliness and values it, not just as a phenomenon, but as a psychic barometer of the general emotional climate, in a way not dissimilar to Burton. One wonders if she choose the term ‘loneliness’ in order to be able to present her own picture of melancholy in a way that was slightly different to Freud’s in *Mourning and Melancholia*, where mourning is considered both normal and completable, and melancholy is essentially a disturbed, narcissistic state of mind or state of being, whether temporary or permanent.

Nonetheless, like Burton, she seems to see loneliness as a necessary burden: one that may be mitigated by good relations (internal or external) but which nonetheless casts a shadow over life’s satisfactions: a burden that has to be acknowledged and lived with – the only alternatives being the defences of idealisation or pseudo-independence, both of them illusions, either denying dependence on the object or the limitations of the object’s powers. While personal loneliness is connected with a longing for a lost ideal union with the mother (or lover or god, others would add), professional loneliness comes from feeling there is no group to which one belongs. The best that can be said of loneliness is that, like envy, it can be a spur to seek improved relations, both internal and external: that is, to get rid of itself as far as is possible.

In all this picture there is no place for the possibility that a sense of loneliness may be an achievement, in psychic terms: a beneficial state, perhaps even a developmental triumph. Meltzer, for example, says that ‘the inevitable consequence of a work group is individualism and hence solitude’. It may be said that loneliness and solitude are not precise synonyms, though often used interchangeably: solitude (alone-ness) refers to a physical reality, whereas loneliness implies a psychic sense of something lacking. As Mrs Klein points out, it is possible to be lonely even in congenial company. But the converse is also true: it is possible to be accompanied in solitude, not by external figures but by internal ones – ‘the saints and angels of psychic reality’ as Meltzer describes it. For only in a state of loneliness is such internal vision possible. Thus Milton, in one of the invocations to *Paradise Lost*, finds himself ‘in solitude, yet not alone, whilst thou [the Muse]/ Visit’st my slumbers nightly’. And Keats speaks of ‘the solitude of the soul, not of woods or trees or mountains’ – to differentiate between the romantic attitude of communing with the self in the midst of nature, and the internal desert that no external scenery can refresh.

The fear of death, says Mrs Klein – the ultimate separation, whether from mother or life – plays a significant part in the sense of loneliness. It seems strange perhaps that Mrs Klein focuses solely on the question of incomplete integration, as the key to the sense of loneliness,

rather than on the problem of introjection or internalisation of the separated object. Perhaps this is related to the semantic ambiguity deriving from the overlap of 'depression' and depressive states, anxieties, or the depressive position. Just as melancholy retains its etymological origin of black bile (an essential body-fluid), so does depression retain its sense of being kept down by an outside force. Milton speaks of his fear of a false muse 'damping [his] wing depressed', and associates this with arrogance or omnipotence in the art of poetry; in psychoanalytic terms, the false muse would be a projection of the ego provoking a harsh superego reaction – by contrast with the true internal object which forgives all, if allowed to be free from the tyranny of the self.

There is also perhaps a difference in emphasis between the original Kleinian and the post-Kleinian and contemporary worldview, as expanded by Wilfred Bion and others. The modern picture places a slightly different emphasis on the quality and function of developmental pain. It focuses on the mental confusion that occurs as a result of the difficulty of the search for knowledge, and that seems to be an inevitable part of this quest; the goal is not just to reconcile splits and relieve pain but to acquire truth. This prominence given to knowledge, rather than to pleasure or pain, links this modern view of psychoanalysis with the traditional poetic-philosophic one, and immediately brings in the apprehension of beauty and its intimate connection with truth, which opens up a host of illuminating examples from literature that shed light on the mental states that promote or deflect from this quest for truth.

Mrs Klein saw the most evolved state as one of working through the anxieties of the depressive position, something never completely achievable; anything further would be a deception, an illusion of oneness (merging with the object), an idealisation. Wordsworth calls this 'the light that never was on sea or land' ('Peele Castle'). The accompanying depressive feeling is one of resignation, dissatisfaction at a job which can never be completed. Yet we might consider that a life-rhythm which is continually increasing by increments its self-knowledge is itself an achievement rather than a limitation. The depressive position entails the attainment of a little piece of knowledge, which then invites a premonition of the next piece, arousing a state of ambivalent, Ps-D turbulence in the face of catastrophic change. Ultimately the depressive position is a complex state, not simple depression but involving a temporary state of trust, even faith, in the internal combined object whose insight has provided that particular piece of wisdom (knowledge-food). A state of clinical depression is one in which the rhythm has become stuck, not in the depressive position but in a persecuted or paranoid-schizoid state.

Perhaps only the capacity to be alone without a sense of persecution enables a more positive type of loneliness to exist. It implies, in fact, a renewed contact with the 'mother', the original internal deity, and is authenticated – as the poets always say - not by a feeling of pleasure but by a vision of beauty and harmony. It occurs in the form of moments of truth, maybe infinitesimally small, but significant in quality. In a Keatsian scheme of values, this is a 'lonely' achievement, 'intense' rather than resigned; it is what enables vision and poetic symbol-formation: 'I value more the privilege of seeing great things in loneliness than the fame of a Prophet' (December 1818).

Keats is famous for recommending that we look on the world as a Vale of Soulmaking rather than a Vale of Tears, and I would like to look in a little more detail at what he meant by this constructive use of the inevitable pains of life that are part of the human condition. He distinguished between 'imaginary' and 'real' difficulties: real ones 'nerve the spirit of a man'; imaginary ones 'nail him down for a sufferer', that is, a kind of self-indulgent masochism, that glamourises the pain in a narcissistic way rather than exploring its soul-making potential.

In the summer of 1818, the year before writing his great Odes, he embarked on a walking tour of Scotland which he envisaged as helping to 'ease the burden of the mystery'. As he wrote to a friend:

An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people – it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery: a thing I begin to understand a little ... The difference of high sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this – in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with all [the] horror of a bare-shouldered creature – in the former case, our shoulders are fledged, and we go through the same air and space without fear.

Intense feelings, without understanding, become persecutory, and the personality is liable to fall out of the sky like an unfledged bird, into depths of depression. The way to ‘fledge’ the personality is through acquiring knowledge – above all of course, self-knowledge. Keats felt that his walking tour to explore the wonders of the mountainous northern landscape was at the same time an internal quest: a journey that would help him to digest and make sense of the pain and abandonment he was feeling after the departure of his brother George to America and the terminal sickness of his younger brother Tom who was dying from tuberculosis.

In the Keatsian view, ‘the mystery’ creates pain by its very nature: in particular owing to the unknown, uncontrollable qualities that evoke mixed emotions of wonder and loneliness attached to the object of contemplation or the relationship, meaning not just the external beautiful object but the internal one. (This internal dynamic is called by Meltzer the ‘aesthetic conflict’, or by Bion, the linkage between Love, Hate and Knowledge, LHK.) The failure to cope with this mystery could result in a type of madness, that Keats describes as losing one’s mind on bleak mountains. He prayed:

That man may never lose his mind on mountains bleak and bare;
That he may stray league after league some great birthplace to find,
And keep his vision clear from speck, his inward sight unblind.

‘Inward sight unblind’ being a reference to Milton’s ‘things invisible to mortal sight’ – the type of inner vision needed for poetry, but which is never guaranteed to make its appearance through the possibility clouds.

On his Scottish tour Keats felt he was investigating the roots of poetry, the internal relationships that gave it birth, and the states of mind that hindered its birth. At the end of the tour he wrote a poem on the top of Ben Nevis, the highest mountain, which was shrouded in mist so that nothing was visible, and he compared this physical state of blind sightseeing with the difficulty of inward vision:

Read me a lesson, Muse, and speak it loud
Upon the top of Nevis, blind in mist!
I look into the chasms, and a shroud
Vapourous doth hide them, — just so much I wist
Mankind do know of hell; I look o’erhead,
And there is sullen mist, — even so much
Mankind can tell of heaven; mist is spread
Before the earth, beneath me, — even such,
Even so vague is man’s sight of himself!
Here are the craggy stones beneath my feet,—
Thus much I know that, a poor witless elf,
I tread on them, — that all my eye doth meet
Is mist and crag, not only on this height,
But in the world of thought and mental might!

Playing on the words mist and mystery, he clarifies the vagueness, mist, confusion that lies at the heart of mental pain. The poet, by comparison with the huge body of the world-as-mother, is a tiny infant, a 'witless elf', whose extreme sensations make him vulnerable to endless falling in the world of knowledge. He is aware that this may induce the kind of melancholy that is madness.

By contrast, the kind of knowledge that upholds the 'witless' (unknowing) poet in his ignorance concerns his relationship with the Muse – the teacher who 'reads the lesson'. This is the internal relationship that he needs to restore, and it is worked out in relation to his two brothers who are distanced in different ways – one (Tom) through his approaching death, and the other (George) through his departure for America, an inaccessible link.

I would now like to trace the steps by which, in the ensuing months, Keats set in motion an internal transformation, using these two inaccessible links, turning spiritual distance into internal intimacy. He begins by 'writing in the dark' – a reference to having no news from George in America – and ends by discovering 'particles of light' in the midst of 'a great darkness'. (At the back of his mind is also the poetic term 'darkling' coined by Milton in his own vision of a Nightingale-muse, associated with productive melancholy: 'Most musical, most melancholy' ('Il Penseroso')). The mental state is that of a pregnant darkness, nurtured in an intimacy created out of distance.

Through letter-writing Keats transforms his external and distant brother, still silent, into an internal object who can hear him and inspire him to write poetry.

First he establishes a virtual relationship in his mind with George, in which acknowledging distance is a way of increasing intimacy, because the absent partner becomes an internal rather than an external participant in the quest:

I fancy an immense separation, and sometimes, as at present, a direct communication of spirit with you. That will be one of the grandeurs of immortality – there will be no space and consequently the only commerce between spirits will be by their intelligence of each other – when they will completely understand each other – while we in this world merely comprehend each other in different degrees. (December 1818; 1987, p. 176).

This is the first step in overcoming loneliness, or rather, in converting debilitating loneliness into a constructive type: imagining that there can be a type of mutual 'intelligence' that is of a different quality from everyday intercourse amongst friends and which is actually enhanced by distance, 'blind bodies together in the same room'. George becomes the 'friend' recommended by Burton, or Bion's 'imaginary twin' (mentioned by Melanie Klein in her paper).

Keats at that period was so depressed he said that if he found himself under water he would 'scarcely kick to come to the top', even though he believed in theory that 'life must be undergone'; he was continually on the point of giving up poetry. Mourning and melancholia are hand in hand. In the course of his long internal conversation with George he thought further: about the mystery of the inner life which is not visible to other eyes yet is quietly building itself ('leading a life of allegory'); about the vulnerability of his younger brother Tom, who had recently died: but it is not his physical but his mental vulnerability that disturbs him at this point. Before his death Keats had discovered a trick played on Tom by a mutual acquaintance who pretended to send him love-letters under the name of 'Amena', which Tom naively believed to be genuine although John could instantly detect their falsity.

The implication, in Keats's mind, was that false writing can kill, by stirring up illusion, for which the only defence is knowledge. The letter hoax was used by Keats to clarify his thoughts on the uses and purpose of poetry. Pseudo-poets are dangerous to themselves and others.

The next stage in emergence from depression was a sense of community with mankind and animal life in general: a sense of proportion in relation to the life of the world. The 'witless elf' is one amongst many, who are despite their insignificance pursuing the lives with which nature has endowed them. Keats writes:

The noble animal Man for his amusement smokes his pipe – the Hawk balances among the clouds – that is the only difference of their leisures. I go among the fields and catch a glimpse of a stoat or a fieldmouse peeping out of the withered grass – the creature hath a purpose and its eyes are bright with it... There is an electric fire in human nature tending to purify – so that among these human creatures there is continually some birth of new heroism... I am pursuing the same instinctive human course as the veriest human animal you can think of. I am however young writing at random – straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness ... Yet may I not in this be free from sin? May there not be superior beings amused with any graceful, though instinctive attitude my mind may fall into, as I am entertained with the alertness of a Stoat or the anxiety of a Deer?... Do you not think I strive – to know myself? (1987, p. 230)

Nature has ordained that the purpose of man's existence is to know himself. The smallest individual, like a stoat or a mouse, is nonetheless linked by an inner 'electric fire' with a grander scheme which makes his contribution significant, his business self-purifying. Despite the obscurity of his knowledge he strains at tiny particles at light; despite his powerlessness he responds to heroic urges, of which the greatest is the command to 'know thyself' (Keats later quotes the Delphic oracle). Having written this passage, which happened to coincide with recovering from receiving a black eye during a game of cricket, Keats feels he can say to George with confidence that he has 'that in me which will well bear the buffets of the world. It will be the best comment on my sonnet; it will show you that it was written with no Agony but that of ignorance; with no thirst of any thing but knowledge when pushed to the point' (p. 230).

The sonnet to which he refers is the unusual one 'Why did I laugh tonight?' – unusual because of its direct, authentic, conversational manner. In this, the key phrase is 'Heart, thou and I are here sad and alone'; he is alone, but with himself; able to laugh and question. The sonnet ends with a statement about Death being the most 'intense' of life's experiences. He has achieved the kind of loneliness that enables psychic survival, even in the face of 'Death', or rather, owing to being able to face death. Tom, who symbolises the naïve young poet, died from insufficient knowledge. Keats concludes his account: 'Sane I went to bed and sane I arose.' This phase in the psychic drama is reinforced by writing a comic review of his friend Reynolds' pastiche of a new poem by Wordsworth: a 'false florimel' has emerged in print 'while for aught we know the real one may still be wandering about the woods and mountains' – a caricature of the pensive, melancholy creative mind. (Keats did in fact feel that Wordsworth, by embodying the 'egotistical sublime', had lost contact with his own inspiration, and was producing mere carbon copies of himself.)

We can see how for Keats, physical death, madness (mental alienation) and false poetry are intimately connected. When he writes the Odes he analyses specific aspects of this idea of the false poet, the poet who negates self-knowledge and pursues vain illusions of his own fancy (omnipotence, in psychoanalytic terms). In this, his brother Tom is the most painful victim, representing an aspect of the poet liable to succumb to this deathly illusion.

Although Keats was not himself duped by the fake love-letters that distressed Tom, the episode brought to mind an analogous illusion of his own, a parallel type of false poetry, imaged by a dream of Dante's Paolo and Francesca who whirl about together in hell in a 'melancholy

storm', so closely conjoined that there is no sense of reality. The dream describes sensuous pleasure without any admixture of pain or darkness: it is an idealisation, a myth of oceanic merging that inevitably leads to disaster or the kind of loneliness that ends up losing the object altogether. There is no pain to anchor the experience in reality: so pain, when it does come, takes the form of one of those 'ten thousand fathom falls' that leaves the self feeling abandoned or even that the mind is 'lost on mountains bleak and bare'.

Through a series of dreamlike cogitations, during this period, Keats exorcises within himself the illusion of being a poet-baby who does not have to work for his words but instead possesses and is possessed by his object. Such a pattern will then be repeated in all intimate relationships, including that of love (this is the point at which he is falling in love with Fanny Brawne). He now understands why Dante places these famous lovers in hell, tormented by their inability to separate and be alone with themselves, forever claustrophobic. This understanding about an illusory perfect union between poet and muse then takes the form of his haunting ballad 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', written some days later, which leaves the poet stranded on the cold hillside, amongst the ghostly company of a host of other starving, tubercular knight-poets who have been abandoned because they believed they possessed the poetic capacity but in fact, could not understand the muse's language. It is a delusion, or confusion, that is overcome through reorientation in the first of the great odes, the 'Ode to Psyche'.

In this beautiful poem Keats rewrites the tragic ending of the traditional myth, with its clouds, dreams, mountains, forested bower, and above all its dark setting where candlelight is forbidden, in fact where light leads to the eternal banishment of the loved object. This time, instead of identifying with the hero-lover, the poet retains his lowly, detached status like the 'witless elf' of the mountain-mystery on the Scottish tour. The union of his internal combined object, Psyche and Cupid, is outside his control, separate and therefore capable of being internalised as an inspiring vision:

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind: ...

Suddenly the mind becomes a real place, 'untrodden' in the sense of the rich pathways yet unknown even to the individual who is the possessor of the 'wreathed trellis of a working brain'. He is as it were licensed to use 'shadowy thought' (imaginative premonitions) in order to prepare a personal, internal garden to welcome the goddess of the soul.

Writing the 'Ode to Psyche' is simultaneous with formulating the principles of the Vale of Soulmaking – Keats' famous template for a personal religion that will banish the neurotic form of melancholy by demonstrating the need for 'a world of pains and troubles' so that each individual can through immersion in life construct his own soul. Otherwise, he says, if the world is merely assumed to be a vale of tears, 'who could bear with Death?' It is a philosophy that makes the idea of death not just tolerable but fruitful, and lifts the mind out of depression:

... and what was [man's] Soul before it came into the world and had these provings and alterations and perfectionings? An intelligence without Identity – and how is this Identity to be made? Through the medium of the Heart. And how is the heart to become this Medium but in a world of Circumstances? (p. 251)

We see that for Keats the soul is something that needs to be shaped, like a poem – through provings and alterations and perfectionings. He had recently had a chance meeting with the

poet-philosopher Coleridge on Hampstead Heath, where they conversed about (essentially) the nature of, and features of, imagination and fantasy, the stuff of poetry. Or rather, Coleridge (the older man) spoke without ceasing about a host of topics that listed as: nightingales, poetry, poetical sensation, metaphysics, different genera and species of dreams, nightmare, a dream accompanied by a sense of touch, single and double touch, first and second consciousness, monsters, the Kraken, mermaids, the difference between will and volition. The meeting entertained Keats both for Coleridge's rambling volubility and for the richness of his philosophical imagination.

Yet this stream-of-consciousness was shapeless in itself. It was left to Keats to digest these speculations and incorporate them in ordered artistic form, as he did in the forthcoming odes – including of course that to a Nightingale, which begins with:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.

In this ode Keats transforms the stream of consciousness into a dialogue between self and object, using the shape of the poem to convey the quality of the hard mental work entailed in avoiding illusion and escapism:

Forlorn! The very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.

For Keats, the Nightingale and the Urn represent the kind of 'Mediators' he spoke of in the Vale of Soulmaking, who act as a 'friend to man' by giving meaning to his sorrows, converting intelligence into identity. This is the fruitful kind of loneliness – to be an individual, a 'sole self'. It is not an abandonment but a self-recognition, a feed of knowledge. Meanwhile he has established the difference between the omnipotent poetic self and the song (or musical words) of the Nightingale-muse, whose music becomes genuine food for the 'hungry generations' to follow, whose existence lies well beyond that of the poet who is merely the mediator of the message.

In these six-months' of personal self-analysis, therefore, Keats pulls himself out of depression by writing to an alter-ego, in the process observing both internal states and external events and using them as material to be worked into something meaningful. It began with one kind of necessary distancing and ended with another.

In the first ode ('Psyche'), Keats described how he saw the goddess of the soul 'with awakened eyes', and this enabled him to establish a new relationship with this internal muse. The second-to-last is the 'Ode on Melancholy' in which he surveys the whole psychic journey of the past year and analyses the underlying quality of melancholy or depression. By contrast with Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, in Keats they are intertwined, as are joy and pain, which he says are so intermixed that it is impossible to pick out one sole emotion from its overall human context. All the odes play upon the sounds, and various meanings, of the words 'sole', 'desolate', 'forlorn', which haunt the core of the personality and try to tease it out of thought. The poems are evocations of loneliness, in which Keats tests the fear of abandonment by the object, as in the imaginary town of the Grecian Urn:

And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate can e'er return.

The lines, typically, ring musical changes on the theme of separation from the object: morn, mourning, more, urn-return, forlorn, sole-soul, de-solate, etc. The mind is brimfull of potential dramas that like the imaginary little town of the Urn, await the poet's pen to bring them to live – 'to glean [his] teeming brain' as Keats puts it elsewhere.

When he comes to the ode on Melancholy, which is in a sense the heart of the whole series, Keats begins by considering almost a caricature of the state of mind, in the form of a grotesque monster-goddess called 'the Melancholy', derived from a mixture of dragon and Medusa. In fact he omits this monster-picture from his final version, but the idea still hovers behind the next, more abstract stanza:

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd
By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul

The Melancholy is the depository of pain. It is a monstrous force even if not a monster, and its power is sensed behind the emphatic repeated negatives in: 'No, no, not, neither, nor, nor, nor'. What the poet is attempting to overcome, is the self-indulgent type of pain that is reflected in an over-pictorial type of poetic metaphor: the purple flowers, grapes, insects and birds that overpower 'sorrow's mysteries' and 'drown the wakeful anguish of the soul'. The extravagant use of poetic imagery and terminology serves not to express the inner pain but to disguise it, like the drug implied by shadows 'coming drowsily' (recalling the opium-Lethe of the 'Ode to a Nightingale').

When the soul is in pain it may either modulate it or deny it. When it is divorced from its opposite emotion, joy or love of life, it becomes grotesque and self-indulgent, sleepy, a blanket of pain rather than a clear, penetrating experience of 'wakeful anguish' that stirs full emotionality. Keats continues:

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave, ...

Melancholy strikes suddenly, like a cloudburst, and the remedy is not to anaesthetise its impact but to intensify it: to make creative use of 'circumstances like clouds bursting', as he puts it in a letter at the same time. These circumstances are the unpredictable events that buffet us in life and that we need to learn to process into material for soul-making. That is, we need to symbolise and understand the emotional buffets that assault us from the heavens, whether painful or pleasurable, from psychic regions where we have no control.

For Keats, this creative metabolising of life's sudden sharp shocks is dependent on making contact with Beauty, rather than succumbing to the grotesque drug-inducing monster Melancholy. He concludes his ode, like all the odes, with a new revelation about the truth-beauty equivalent that absorbs both pain and pleasure in its mental reorganisation. Spiritual melancholy lies at the heart of the vision of beauty and the experience of joy:

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

This kind of pain is not extravagant and gaudy but 'veiled', half-hidden, to be intuited not displayed or flaunted, in its central position in the 'temple of Delight'.

Originally Keats began this stanza with 'She lives in Beauty', echoing a phrase of Byron's. He was persuaded by his publishers to change it, but the first phrase is more accurate and in keeping with the vision of the poem as a whole. Beauty and Delight are psychic spaces rather than personifications, in which Melancholy is the occupant lying at their core. The sadness is owing to the recognition of death – 'beauty that must die' is an inextricable feature of the 'apprehension of beauty' (as Meltzer calls it), the link between self and object on which creative and developmental response is founded. Without this complex emotionality, vision cannot pierce inwards to the heart of things, to understand their meaning.

The price of knowing the meaning, is the awareness of death that is part of life. The alternative is the fake immortality of pleasant sensations evoked by the sleepy, drowsy feeling of being wrapped in melancholy like a blanket – Proserpine's drugged 'ruby grape', the closing eye, becomes in the last stanza, 'Joy's grape'. Keats does not split joy and sorrow but makes them a single experience – a kind of integration which can only be done directly in the face of the aesthetic object. Beauty opens the sharp perception of the inextricability of love and hate, death and life sensations, that have to be actively sought by the 'strenuous tongue' (the male principle) exploring the 'temple of Delight' (the female principle) in which 'veiled Melancholy' is the presiding goddess; she speaks to the poet who stood on the top of Ben Nevis shrouded in mist and mystery.

The shrine of human mysteries is guarded by the spirit of Melancholy in its musical, poetic sense. This melancholy at the heart of delight is a breast-like combined object, evoking love and hate, joy and despair at the inevitability of its disappearance: the ultimate triumph for the knowledge-seeker is to 'be among her cloudy trophies hung', that is, to be one of the countless devotees of the power of sadness to bring us closer to reality and thus to reinvigorate our experience of life. Pain just not need simply to be tolerated, but to be explored, but not in a masochistic sense. This is what Keats means by 'transforming an intelligence into a soul', as in his description of the Vale of Soul-making, which he wrote on completion of his series of odes.

Do you not see how necessary a World of pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence
and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse
ways!

‘Otherwise, he says, ‘who could bear with Death?’ The awareness of death is necessary to give meaningful structure to life in the world, to enable souls or psyches to be made. For although everyone has this innate potential, not everyone can use it fully, and certainly it requires mental work to ‘acquire an identity’: for

There may be intelligences or sparks of the divine in millions – but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself.

As in the modern psychoanalytic conception of the purpose of psychoanalysis, the goal is for the individual to ‘become himself’. The goal is not to ‘pluck out the heart of the mystery’ as Hamlet objected, but to constructively face the mystery, with the turbulent emotions that are inevitably aroused. Aesthetic conflict gives melancholy its true developmental place – not just the pain of the absent object or of no longer believing in permanent possession of the object, but meaningful, soulmaking pain.