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The Sky Imagery in Keats's Poetry:  
Toward the Autumn Sky

Ritsuko Taniuchi

Unlike Shelley, regarded as the most romantic with his idealistic stance, Keats is often seen as an earthly poet cherishing humanity; Abrams calls his philosophical stance “that of humanistic naturalism.”1 Similarly, Clarke says, “with Keats everything is on human, not the supernatural level.”2 It is natural that these opinions be held, for the poet himself states that “a poet is a sage; / A humanist, Physician to all men” (The Fall of Hyperion, 189–90).3 The general consensus about Keats, however, sometimes misses the converse aspect of the poet: the ethereal or “aerial” aspect. Though down-to-earth, Keats seems to have little to do with the sky; if we put an eye not on the “heaven” but on the “sky,” we will be able to reconcile his opposite aspects.

Consulting the OED, we notice that the origin of the sky is “cloud,” “shade” and “shadow” derived from Old Norse.4 The “sky” in poetic diction is “the upper region of the air; the heavens,” while the sky is also defined physically as “the apparent arch or vault of heaven, whether covered with cloud or clear and blue.” On the other hand, “heaven” is defined as “the expanse in which the sun, moon, and stars are seen, . . . the sky, the firmament,” “the realm or region of space beyond the clouds or the visible sky” or “the celestial abode

4 Old Norse (ON) is used in Iceland and the Scandinavian Peninsula during 8-14 centuries. Most of documents are written in Old Icelandic.
of immortal beings.” Though the sky and the heaven are almost interchangeable, the sky with the origin of “cloud” is the more physical, and the heaven is the more spiritual. The sky appearing in Keats’s poetry, however, seems to have spiritual meanings rather than physical ones. There is some special atmosphere expressed not by the “heaven” but by the “sky.” Another word similar to the “sky” is the “air.” As the sky is defined as the upper region of the air, we can put those words in order: from “heaven,” “sky,” “air” to “earth.” However the border between the sky and the air is so obscure that those words are almost identical in the following discussion.

What I am going to follow in this essay is the dynamism of the poet’s mind caused by imagination. Keats’ spirit goes upward and downward incessantly. How and where does his spirit finally rest? His concept of “Negative Capability” is the means to make his spirit peaceful. Though the concept itself is ambiguous, how mature the “Negative Capability” is might be appreciated by reviewing famous odes from the perspective of his stance on the sky. This essay discusses the “Ode to a Nightingale,” the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” and “To Autumn.”

I. The suspended realm of Nightingale

Keats’s idea of “Negative Capability” first appeared in his letter to his brothers, George and Thomas, on the 21st December 1817.

[W]hat quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.5

“Negative Capability” is a contradictory phrase in itself: being negative, which denies possibility, enhances capability. There is

also a paradox in the letter. Although Keats understands the virtue of accepting uncertainties, he himself seems impatient of not knowing: the word "achievement" implies his ambition to be a great poet like Shakespeare. How he can overcome the uneasiness is left unsettled here.

"Ode to a Nightingale" is traditionally regarded as the first written ode except "Ode to Psyche." In the "Nightingale" ode, the incessant mobility of images reflects the dynamic movement of his mind. In this ode the poet lies on the bed with his eyes closed. The physical eyes, letting us see the world around us, sometimes prevent us from seeing into and spiritualizing objects by the eyes' "despotic" character. Such restriction by sight and body is removed and hearing allows the imagination its full play. It is the imagination or fancy that makes a bower for the Nightingale. The poet's soul and body are separated by the bird's song. Listening to the song on a bed, he becomes nothing but a bird or the wandering voice of the bird.

Concerning the relationship between losing one's identity and poetical character, Keats writes to Woodhouse on the 27th October 1818:

[As to the poetical Character itself... it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing... A Poet is the most unpoeitical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical... the poet has none; no identity—he is certainly the most unpoeitical of all God's Creatures.]

What Keats means seems to be the split self in real life and literary life. It is impossible for most poets to live poetical lives. In fact, they

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6 In The Complete Poems the "Nightingale" ode and the "Grecian Urn" ode are put in reverse order. See further explanation in notes (672-677).


8 Letters, I, 386-7 (italics mine).
live pragmatic lives with a lot of troubles over money. After having chosen his vocation as a poet, Keats suffered from the incessant financial problems. To earn money by writing poetry is actually the hardest way. The poet must please the audience, which he detested as the poet telling the truth. The struggle in his mind made him realize that to lose his identity is the poetical character of the poet. His stance as a poet must be suspended, from which he may fill in the other poetical things in heaven and the earth as the changeability of his mind creates the poem.

The flight to the Nightingale begins from a prayer and a hope of a mortal man. The man calls the bird "light-wingéd Dryad of the trees" (7), regarding the Nightingale as a nymph—an invisible and immortal being. He asks for "a draught of vintage" (11) to "leave the world unseen, / And with thee [Nightingale] fade away into the forest dim—" (19-20). In stanzas one, two and three, the man still has an identity, while in the following stanza four his identity is mixed with the bird’s identity. Thus he acquires the poetical character, losing his identity.

Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Clustered around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

(31-40)

Shouting “Away! away!” to the bird, the poet flies to the Nightingale on the “viewless wings of Poesy.” “Already with thee!” implies accomplishment of Keats’ flight as a poet. Is the forest of the Nightingale the realm of the imagination? We cannot miss the reality of the forest, Hampstead Heath, where the poet lives. And as Blades points out, in the glorious spring of 1819 “a nightingale had
built a nest close to his house in Hampstead.

The forest of the nightingale is both imaginary and real as if it were suspended in midair. It may derive from the horizontal movement of a nightingale neither ascending nor landing. It is only this stanza that relives the imaginary forest and sees into the invisible sky. The poet's imagination creates the scene of "tender night" filled with the gentle light of the moon. The moon in the sky is perceived not by his physical eyes but by his mind's eye. The imaginary land might be the night sky filled with light of the "Queen-Moon" and "her starry fays." However, in the last three lines we know he is not in the realm but in the suspended forest between the imaginary and the real. He is absorbed into the imaginary Nightingale and perceiving its senses too realistically. "But here there is no light" implies the viewpoint from the real bird in the dim forest. Actuality affects imagination: the poet's closed eyes overlap the bird's eyes that cannot see the moonlight in the dark forest. The suspended realm of Nightingale is so unstable that the dreamer cannot stay any longer.

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 famed to do, deceiving elf.

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music—Do I wake or sleep? (71-80)

Suddenly, in stanza eight his imagination breaks up and the poet recovers his identity and feels his body. He lost his "poetical" character. Such a sudden return perplexes him and makes him impatient. His flight to the nightingale by negating his body is accomplished, but once the vision created by imagination is gone, the poet laments the loss and becomes uneasy. That is the weak point of the suspended realm of imagination; at some point it must come down

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to earth and return to reality. The ode is an imaginary journey, but it is not “the invitation of aerial travel,” which “is always bound up with an impression of gradual ascent.” Shelley’s “Skylark” is definitely the icon that leads us to the “aerial travel” as Bachelard exemplifies it. But Keats’s “Nightingale” is not. Both are invisible birds and the Nightingale’s song is as intense as Skylark’s song, for the Nightingale is “pouring forth” its “soul abroad / In such an ecstasy” (57-58). However, the Nightingale is replaced by the “fancy” as “deceiving elf” in the last stanza. The Skylark soars, but the somewhat earthly Nightingale as the deceiving fancy doesn’t soar. The Nightingale is a horizontal bird very different from the vertical Skylark.

II. A truth found out in the sky of the Urn

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” is a twin brother of “Ode to a Nightingale.” Both odes were written in May 1819, and published in Annals of Fine Arts, 1820. As sight is suppressed in “Ode to a Nightingale,” in “Ode on a Grecian Urn” hearing is suppressed.

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone: (11-14)

It is true that the auditory melodies are the charm of verses, but thinking does not always catch up with the singing voice; thought surpasses or gets behind the actual sound. The thrusting sounds can be obstacles for us to appreciate a poem slowly. The imagination speaks most freely within us in silence, and our “spirit” or mind can enjoy the “unheard” melodies as written lyric in slow time.

Seeing the figures on the urn, Keats imagined the situations and

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melodies. The urn holds an “unheard” melody for him. And the urn activates the poet’s “abstract ear, capable of distinguishing silent voices.”

“Abstract ear” suggests the mind’s ear like the mind’s eye. Let us see the urn and the poet—the inanimate and the animate—which can exercise “Negative Capability” in a sense. Concerning this point, Keats’ metaphors of flowers and bees are suggestive.

It seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the Bee—for it is false notion that more is gained by receiving than giving—no the receiver and the giver are equal in their benefits. . . . let us open our leaves like a flower and passive and receptive . . . 12

Which is the receiver, the flower or the bee? These words, “receiving,” “giving,” “receiver,” “giver” and “receptive,” confuse our minds. An answer is that “receiving” and “receiver” indicate a bee, while “receptive” indicates a flower. This turnabout of the meaning of a word may imply the interchangeability of the two. In this ode, the urn is passive, for it waits for someone to see it. In a sense the urn is a flower and the poet is a bee. However, as soon as the poet sees the urn, the states of receiver and giver are reversed. The poet receives what the urn tells. The poet, at this point, gazing on the urn, uses his imagination. He imagines the scenes, listening to silent melodies of the urn. Keats walks around the urn in his imagination. Here is a paradox: a kind of sculptural beauty, or static beauty of the urn generates the dynamic flow of the poet’s imagination. His mind is apparently opened and inspired by the urn. The poet dives into the scene on the urn with his excited imagination, though his body is bound in front of the static urn. After his imagination recreates the happy story of unfading lovers and permanent green leaves of trees, the poet suddenly asks perplexing questions. Notice that the same thing happens in “Ode to a

11 Bachelard, 249.
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Nightingale": the poet asks himself. The coincidence implies a significant point. Vendler regards such questions as a sign of his "brain" bursting in, which is the cause of his coming out of the scene.13

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands dressed? (31-34)

The scene of the heifer is regarded to be based on the South Frieze of the Elgin Marbles.14 In the poem "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," the poet says "I must die / Like a sick Eagle looking at the sky" (4-5). The parallel between "heifer lowing at the skies" and "a sick Eagle looking at the sky" is explicit. Both heifer and eagle look up the empty sky to be free in vain. The simile of the "eagle" clearly represents the poet. As for the heifer, let us focus on the "sacrifice." In Sleep and Poetry Keats wrote, "my young spirit follow / The morning sun-beams to the great Apollo / Like a fresh sacrifice" (59-61). As self-sacrifice or selflessness is his peculiar character as a poet, the heifer as the "sacrifice" comes close to representing himself. The poet seems to identify the heifer with his posture seeing the sky. Finding his identity in the heifer, he notices the loss of "poetical" character. As a consequence he began thinking, using his "brain." In a sense the glimpse of the sky leads the poet through a severer but solemnner way to a truth. Now the poem changes its tone. He asks again: "What little town by river or sea shore, / Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel, / Is emptied of this folk, this pious mourn?" (35-7). The place filled with a merry piper and happy lovers suddenly becomes desolate. The town is silent, losing the unheard melodies in the poet's mind. But the poet isn't lamenting the loss of "wing of Poesy." In the last stanza, the poet calls the urn;

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14 The Complete Poems, notes for "Ode to a Grecian Ode," 673.
Thou, silent form, doest tease us out of thought
As does eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.' (44-50)

The eternity of the urn teases us because of Keats's dilemma in art. Bloom states "the unchanging marble has arrested time, and slowed it toward the eternity of art." The "cold" marble urn is the completion of art, while the artistic completion of his poetry is uncertain and unsteady as in the case of "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles." The eternity of art is the realm he longs for, which Keats symbolizes as the sky viewed by the sick eagle. The sky's infinity is transformed into the heaven's eternity when the blue infinity attracts him until he keenly longs for the Elysium he cannot enter. However, the poet is different from what he was. He notices that the eternity discloses its mystery if he passively sees into it. At last he "extends himself in a generous loss of self in the other." He approaches the urn and appreciates its beauty, the unconsummated truth. "Cold though it be," Bloom states, "it is a friend to man, for its temporal freedom intimates to us another dimension of man's freedom." And the "eternal" friend gives him a truth. In fact, his imagination changes into insight, continuing the gaze on the surface of the urn. His sight becomes insight and finds truth in the urn. It could be said that in this ode Keats' soul, noticing the temporal freedom of the urn, is also free from mortal impatience. "Negative Capability" is more developed in this ode than in "Nightingale" where

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15 As to the quotation marks see other versions in the notes of Complete Poems, 676.
17 Vendler, 125.
18 Bloom, 439.
he finally separates himself from the bird. Still there is no movement upward. Here the last ode comes.

III. The Autumn sky

It seems obvious that "To Autumn" is the finest and most beautiful of all Keats’s odes as many critics agree. And an encouraging comment is as follows: the "incredible richness of this ode is such that it will sustain many readings, and indeed will demand them."19 Bloom saw apocalyptic or Biblical sense in it, while I was attracted by the more physical sky imagery. Keats explained the poem’s origin in his letter.

How beautiful the season is now—How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather—Dian skies—I never lik’d stubble fields so much as now—Aye better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm—in the same way that some pictures look warm.20

It is the critical fact that the poem is based on "the air" and "Dian skies" of autumn. There seems to be an unmistakable connection between the sky and the poem, although Mayhead writes that "To Autumn" is "the poetry of earth."21

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o’er-brimmed their clammy cells. (1-11)

The poem begins from the end of summer.22 The temporal transience becomes eminent as the three stanzas evolve. And the movement is

19 Bloom, 452.
22 In the note Barnard says as follows: “the stanzas can be seen as moving through the season, beginning with pre-harvest ripeness, moving to the repletion of harvest itself, concluding with the emptiness following the harvest, but preceding winter” (Complete Poems, 699).
accorded with the mobility of images. Here seems to be a mythological framework of “the sky-god impregnating the earth so that she may bear fruit.” The framework indicates the peculiar structure concerning the sky, which we argue later. The mythological atmosphere, however, fades out and is replaced by autumn as season in later stanzas.

In stanza two we can find personified autumn here and there. As Ogawa says, the “personified Autumn” is the figure of autumn which anyone can find in the scenes of autumn by seeking abroad according to the mind’s eye of the poet. It is highly suggestive that each figure of Autumn is doing nothing or stops doing something. “We see in this poem a thresher who does not thresh, a reaper who does not reap, a gleaner who does not glean, a cider-maker who does not turn her press.” The poet addresses Autumn,

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Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,
Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;
Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep,
Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook
Sparest the next swath and all its twinèd flowers;
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cider-press, with patient look,
Thou wastest the last oozings hours by hours. (14-22)
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Though Autumn has to go to the next step toward winter, she doesn’t hurry. She rests carelessly in the middle of works, waiting for Winter coming. We cannot miss, however, the fresh heart of the poet attracted by each scene of autumn. The dynamism of the images is created both by still and silent nature and the active imagination of the poet.

Stanza three, the last one, is the scene of end of autumn. Here the sky image is most clearly depicted both in sight and hearing.

23 Vendler, 248.
25 Vendler, 251.
Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too—
While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue:
Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
Among the river sallows, borne aloft
Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-cricketts sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. (23·33)

The sudden questions seem to come from the poet himself, as we have already seen in the two odes. The poet, however, soon answers confidently that Autumn has its own music. The question doesn't stop his imagination. Barred clouds floating high change their figures and hues little by little as images move within the poet's mind: they "bloom the soft-dying day" and "touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue." Moreover, the clouds touching the stubble-plains make us see the horizontal scenery. Vendler says, "The second great organizing motion of the ode occurs in space. The poem rises in a wide haze of mists and maturing sun, an overview or panorama not to be returned to until the final stanza." It is time for us to reconsider the framework of the ode carefully. In the first stanza, the mythic framework of the marriage between the sun and the season is referred to. It can be said that the poet casts his eyes upward on the sky to muse over the ancient myth. The misty panorama is outspread at the beginning of the first stanza. In the second stanza the poet's eyes fall on the earth, on each scene of autumn. Then, in the third stanza his eyes return to the overview, or the sky. Notice that the construction of the whole poem is the voyage of poet's eyes returning to the sky.

It is worth marking, furthermore, that the third stanza in itself has the cycling structure. The starting point is the barred clouds.

26 Vendler writes, "The first great motion is the temporal one" (244).
27 Vendler, 244.
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We may look to the horizon where we see barred clouds, and we may reach in thought beyond the stubble-plains to the river, to the hilly bourn of sheep pasturage, to the hedgerows, and finally to a croft. In the last line, after this careful situating of the perimeter on a plane, the space of the poem becomes three dimensional, and, in a sudden expansion of direction, we lift our eyes up to the skies, the upper “boundary” of the farm.28

It is the “barred clouds” that expand the space of the ode to horizon and the skies. Though Vendler regards the actual agent of rosy hue as not the “barred clouds” but “the setting sun” obscured by the clouds on the horizon,29 it seems to me that the barred clouds must “bloom the soft-dying day” and “touch the stubble plains with rosy hue.” The function of barred clouds is both the agent and the effect. They, bloomed by the red light of the setting sun, bloom in return the soft-dying day and dye the stubble plains with rosy hue of the clouds. This is not the sun but the image of the red sky at sunset with its special expansion. It is the picturesque beauty of the “warm picture” in his letter. Here is also the sympathy of the poet. It is the poet’s sympathy that blooms the dying season with rosy hue and makes the scene warm. The beauty is definitely different from the beauty of “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” Keats’ mind clearly reached a different dimension of beauty.

The new dimension of beauty will be revealed by discussing the music of Autumn. The music at first has a sorrowful tone because of the “wailful choir” of small gnats. The end of autumn influences the music. The gnats, which must end their lives, seem to mourn their own death. The light wind bearing them also lives and dies. This poem, however, doesn’t end with the sad tone of death. Despite a tint of sadness, it is filled with lively music of lambs’ bleating, crickets’ singing, red-breast birds’ whistling and swallows’ twittering. Just as we have seen in the whole structure of the poem, the poet’s eyes move in succession with his active imagination—from the

28 Vendler, 245.
29 Vendler, 253.
autumn sky with barred clouds, the gnats, lambs, hedge-cricket, red-breast birds to swallows in the sky. He turns his eyes from the red sky to the earth with his sympathy for living creatures. His imagination receives their music on earth. Finally the poet’s eyes, following the swallows, return to the sky filled with their music. Here is the fusion of hearing and sight in the air. The returning to the sky by poet’s sight is accompanied by another sense, hearing. The poet’s soul evoked by both senses rises to the sky from the earth, which causes another fusion of the earth and the sky. The “aerial travel” is accomplished. The return and ascent to the sky both in sight and hearing seems to bring about a new dimension in the poet’s mind. The dimension reached by the poet is the eternal cycle of nature, including the dying day and the passing season. The warm beauty, the life’s beauty, incessantly regenerates; it is different from the eternal beauty of “Cold Pastoral” exposed to the potential danger—the fragility of the breakable marble urn. The special expansion of dimension coincides with the mental expansion. He accepts the mortal life with no impatience. Perhaps his insight finds an overwhelming truth in the warm beauty of the autumn sky. “Negative Capability” is embodied here as a matured concept.

Conclusion

The perspective of the sky lets us see the development of Keats’s soul. Through these three odes we have traced his mind’s movement and tried to explore a way into the “eternal” sky. In the “Nightingale,” though the poet rides on the wings of poesy in midair, after the separation from the bird the deceiving fancy fades without letting him see the sky. In the “Grecian Urn,” espying the sky, the poet finds eternal truth—beauty is truth—by empathizing with the scene represented in the urn. And in “Autumn” the poet finally appreciates the beauty of the sky. The double cycling structure returning to the sky signifies the eternal cycles of night and day and
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the seasons. The autumn’s warm beauty is for him more endearing than the cold beauty of the urn. The autumn sky seems to release his mind for higher flights. His sight is expanded and his mind is enriched with a new value, the acceptance of mortal life on earth. However, it is the second return to the sky in the fusion between the earth and the sky that gives him peace of mind. The eternity of the sky assures him of the stable base to stand on. The sky god with temporal freedom only appears as the framework, and the mysterious nature—the eternal cycle with the passing of time—replaces Apollo. The connection between Keats and the sky is calm and peaceful, as we have seen his mind return to the serene sky in the “To Autumn.” The sky imagery shifts its meaning step by step from the transcendent but closed world to the infinite and eternal world open to him in the last ode. Meanwhile, his impatient longing for immortality changes into the calm acceptance of mortal life by being convinced of the sky’s eternal existence. The concept “Negative Capability” is finally accomplished in his calmness and patience with his new value of humanity.

Keats compares human life to the movement through a large mansion of many apartments in his letter to Reynolds. In the third step he feels the darkness and “burden of the Mystery,” which only Wordsworth explores fully as Keats says. After experiencing many woes, the poet comes to appreciate and admire humanity. Where he reached is the “vale of Soul-making,” not “a vale of tears” from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven.” Our discussion has returned to the first stage. The soul-making vale is different from the religious “vale of tears.” It can be said that his soul trained in the earth filled with woes and pains is taken not to the heaven but to the sky, not by God

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30 3 May 1818. Keats regards the first step as “the infant or thoughtless Chamber” and the second as “the Chamber of Maiden-Thought.” Letters, I, 280-281.
but by his wings of poesy. His soul finally soars into the sky and rests serenely, looking down on earth. Keats's humanity is derived not only from the earth where his soul is trained, but also from the sky—the symbol of wonders of nature—where it is inspired and elevated until it rests high with the sympathy for humans.