The word ‘romantic’ is elusive to define.1 ‘Romanticism’ has been said to lay claims to emotion and passion. It has also been associated with chivalry and remoteness from everyday life.2 I will attempt to account for the above perspective of ‘romanticism’ in Keats’ poetry and to show how this notion of ‘romanticism’ is somewhat limiting when applied to the poetry of Keats. I intend to illustrate my contention by examining three particular poems — ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’, ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’, and ‘To Autumn’. Finally, I do not mean this study merely to give a wider appraisal of the main themes of Keats’ poetry, but also to shed some light upon the perhaps obscurer but equally significant and important shades of meaning that are encompassed by the word ‘romantic’.

In ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ the associations of ‘romanticism’ hitherto cited are clearly evidenced; so that, at least on the surface, there appears to be some justification in referring to the poem as a mere fairy-tale romance.3 The ‘action’ of the poem is indeed unmistakably ‘romantic’ in the sense that it deals with love which is passionate, secretive, and above all, dream-like. Furthermore, the poem is conceived within a mediaeval setting which, although richly ornate and beautiful, appears to be somewhat distant from reality. These facets of the poem have led critics to praise it as a celebration of love or a romantic tapestry of unique richness — yet it has been found to be short of meaning. In this way it may to some extent be termed superficial, in so much as its romantic evocation of love and beauty does not say much about life itself.

The main characters bear this out. Their passionate love for each other has the effect of excluding almost any other human sentiment. This would give credence to the idea that the poem is given almost entirely unto sensation and little thought. This is attested by the intensity of the lovers’ ardour. On his arrival at the castle Porphyro’s heart is

3. The Hoodwinking of Madeline and other Essays on Keats’ poems (University of Illinois Press, 1971), pp. 67-93 Jack Stillinger shows how this fairy-tale interpretation of ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ has been taken up by several critics. Stillinger goes on to refute this stand, by viewing Madeline’s dream with much irony and scepticism.
called 'love's feverous citadel' (84). The palpitations of his heart before entering Madeline's chamber are emphasized:

Sudden a thought came like a full-blown rose,
Flushing his brow, and in his pained heart
Made purple riot (136-8)

Before seducing Madeline, Porphyro grows faint, and it is only shortly afterwards that his heart revives (226). Porphyro's passion reaches its climax in the seduction scene. Ironically however it is expressed in religious terms. In this climactic moment Porphyro is 'stolen to this paradise' (244); he speaks of the still slumbering Madeline as a 'seraph' and tells her that 'thou are my eremite' (277). This spiritualising of earthly pleasure produces a dream-like atmosphere; it allays actuality and induces a kind of unreal dream. Porphyro is so entranced by the sleeping Madeline, that he must implore her to wake up or he shall be overcome by the unreal soporiferousness that permeates his love's chamber.

Open thine eyes for meek St. Agnes' sake,
Or I shall drowse beside thee... (278-9)

Porphyro is on the verge of losing touch with the realities of this world; Madeline does so more entirely. Her dream, if taken separately, makes a poignant case for accepting the fairy-tale interpretation of 'The Eve of St. Agnes'. Her aloofness from the world of actuality is more evident, as she is in fact physically asleep and dreams throughout much of the poem.

On the night of the festivities in the castle, Madeline's heart broods on love (43), and she awaits visions of delight that she should receive on the oversweet 'honey'd middle of the night' (49). At the revelry during the dance Madeline's eyes are 'regardless' (64); her inward seclusion of thoughts tricks her into a kind of blindness:

Hoodwink'd with faery fancy; all amort
Save to St. Agnes... (70-1)

Madeline is so intent upon the ceremonies of love that her feelings to the people around her are numbed. Although inwardly Madeline harbours thoughts of love, yet simultaneously she is the victim of a trance. As her dream becomes richer, her senses and awareness of the real world weaken. Keats appears to be fully conscious of Madeline's delusions, and seems to treat her with a subtle hint of irony.

This ironic treatment is made more apparent, when after having been described as 'amort', Madeline conversely becomes, at least to Porphyro, 'free from mortal taint' (225). The sleeping Madeline is then rendered insensitive, and her realities are distorted:

Blinded alike from sunshine and from rain,
As though a rose should shut, and be a bud again (242-3)

In her drowsy state Madeline is indeed removed from the realities of sense or experience; while she sleeps Madeline is 'havn'd both from
joy and pain' (240). On awakening, the rose however will not shut but wither.

When she wakes up, Madeline at once realizes her deception. Porphyro seems no longer immortal but 'pallid, chill and drear' (309). Thus Madeline bewails her newly found awareness:

No dream alas! alas! and woe is mine (326)

Madeline's heart is still lost in Porphyro's and she is unable to curse him for her delusion:

I curse not for my heart is lost in thine (331)

The effects of the dream are perhaps not quite shaken off. Whatever the case, it is significant that Madeline who was previously a 'seraph' and an 'angel' and Porphyro who was a self-avowed 'pilgrim' (339), are now dispossessed of the religiosity that in an ironic way hinted against their love. Admittedly they remain singularly ethereal, but now it is as 'phantoms' (361) that they glide out of the castle. This allusion to 'phantoms' is at this stage ominous rather than ironic. The sweet, lavish vision of delight, twins into a ghostly, haunting and painful eeriness:

That night the Baron dreamt of many a woe,
And all his warrior-guests, with shade and form
Of witch and demon, and large coffin-worm,
Were long be-nightmar'd. (371-4)

An important point emerges from this examination of Porphyro and Madeline. This is that Keats does not lose sight of the lovers' deception: he is as much concerned with the harsher realities of life as he is with the sumptuous dreaminess of love. 'The Eve of St. Agnes' is not merely about a 'honey'd middle of the night' (49), but also about the storm into which the lovers flee (371). It therefore deals with an awakening from 'hoodwink'd fancy'. The thematic leanings of 'The Eve of St. Agnes' should temper the idea that 'romanticism' (or the poem itself) is removed from everyday life. The romantic spirit of Keats acknowledges the beauties of the visionary imagination, but it also perceives of a truth in life that rings and echoes far deeper. The co-existence and inseparability of these almost paradoxical ideas are admirably expressed in 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Here the poet would fade away into the immortal world of the 'full-throated ease' of the nightingale's melody; yet thoughts of another nature still linger in his mind:

That I might drink and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade into the forest dim:
Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou amongst the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever and the fret
Here, where men sit and here each other groan; (21-4)

This description of the opposing and conflicting forces that make up the full reality of human experience are the stamp and tenor of Keats' 'romanticism'. This concern is not only embodied within his poetry but
is part of a documented effort in which Keats strove for the truth of the human spirit. In a letter to J.H. Reynolds (3 May 1818), he writes about the different states of mind; which he compares to the chambers of a mansion:

The first we step into we call the Infant or Thoughtless chamber... We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle within us — we no sooner get into the second chamber that I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated... However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man — of convincing one's nerves the world is full of Misery, Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression...

It is the ‘sharpening of one's vision’ after the passage through the chambers of the mansion that distinguish Keats’ poetic character. A striking example of this interplay of thoughtlessness, intoxication and awareness is the ballad ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’. This poem like ‘The Eve of St. Agnes’ repeats the sequence of sensual illusory indulgence and feverous dejection.

In this case the dreamer is the knight-at-arms who has fallen in love with a fairy-like lady. She is a ‘faery’s child’ (14) and sings a ‘faery’s song’; the lady then takes the enamoured knight into an ‘elfin grot’. This lady like Porphyro seems to be in league with ‘elves and fays’ (E.of St.A 121). She speaks a strange language (27) and feeds him the heavenly ‘manna dew’ (26). In similar fashion to Madeline, the knight experiences the wonder of richly fanciful sensuousness. The fervour of this beautiful moment makes him unperceptive to all around him except the lady: like Madeline, he is in a sense blinded:

And nothing saw else all day long. (22)

In the same way as the poet in the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, flies off on a fanciful flight with the nightingale only to remark that there is no light (Ode to a Nightingale 38), so here the knight’s vision is hindered at the height of its fancy. At this point the knight is taken into the cave where he is lulled to sleep. He has a nightmarish dream of princes who cry that they are in thrall to ‘la belle dame sans merci’. On awakening the knight still searches for his lady; in his search he assumes the palleness that dominated his dream. The knight ‘palely loiters’ unaware that his moment of joy, like the landscape around him, has withered. There is indeed an autumnal sense of decay as the fruitful images conjured by ‘meads’, ‘garland’ and ‘fragrant zone’ give place to the melancholy of the dried sedge and the songless birds. Yet unlike the squirrel whose granary is full (7), the knight’s harvest is not done, and he wanders on futilely.

‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ confirms that Keats’ romantic spirit
is not merely one of fanciful flights, but it also deals with the wakeful state of earth-bound misery. In this poem, Keats also uses the decaying autumnal landscape as a figuration of the waning of the knight’s exaltation. The symbolic use of the autumnal landscape is given fuller scope in ‘To Autumn’. It has however been argued that the inextricability of joy and pain, or wakefulness and dream, (which, according to the contention of this essay, are the mainstay of Keats’ romantic spirit), are not part of ‘To Autumn’. In this way it has been held that the poem yields to a sense of joyous and serene contemplation of beauty, and that the theme of impermanence, already evident in ‘La Belle Dame Sans Merci’ and treated explicitly in ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, is not present here.

Contrarily the poem, especially towards the end, sounds a tone which is decisively melancholic. Nonetheless, the very first line of the poem is indicative of the the opposite forces that work within much of Keats’ poetry.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, (1)

Autumn is therefore a season that has its contrasts. Yet even in the first stanza of ‘To Autumn’, which seems to be a veritable celebration of ripeness to the core, there is evidence that Keats succinctly records, if not anticipates, the transience of the rich but almost imperceptibly perishable moment of autumnal beauty. It is remembered in fact that the swelling fruitfulness of the first stanza is after all really the result of a conspiracy, of which the bees seem to be the victims as they erroneously think that warm days will never cease.

If the first stanza makes more of the autumnal richness, the second stanza maintains more balance between the opposing forces, and suggests a sad but more manifest awareness of the passage of the culminating moment of beauty. Here Autumn is personified in four poses. The first two poses are mostly thoughtless. Autumn is initially seen ‘careless on the granary floor’ (14), and later on ‘sound asleep’. Even here however the ‘winnowing wind’ (15) and the ‘half-reaped furrow’ (16) hint at a division or a change. The latter two poses contrast more fully with the prior two, and evoke a sense of a weighted sorrowful heart when the poet writes about the gleaner with a ‘laden head’ (20), or the person who watches the ‘last oozings’ (22) of the cider press.

The suggestions of finality and heaviness in the second stanza, are struck up again in the third. Here images of sorrow are more evident — the day softly dies, the plains are full of stubble, and the wailful choir of gnats mourn. Despite this the richness of the moment persists. The dying day acquires a new lease of life as it is made to ‘bloom’; the stub-

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4. This view is adopted by C.H. Herford in *Cambridge History*. In his essay “A Note on To Autumn’s” from *John Keats: A Reassessment*, ed Kenneth Muir (Liverpool University Press, 1958), Arnold Davenport argues that Herford is wrong.
ble plains light up with a 'rosy hue'; the wind that bears the gnats aloft 'dies' but also 'lives': Keats seems to have centred himself at the turning point — or at the first barely perceptible signs when mellowness sours, and the two are still not fully distinguishable. The moment of peak ripeness is again conveyed in the seemingly contradictory 'full-grown lambs', while the twittering swallows of the last line bring to mind the pervasive opposition and intertwining of mood, that is the distinctive mark of the poem. The song of the gathering swallows is indeed a fitting epilogue to 'To Autumn'; even as they carry implications of the approaching night, they are in themselves a part, although the finale, of the autumnal beauty. This might indeed seem a rich moment to die — but the day will not cease without pain.

'To Autumn' is perhaps Keats' supreme achievement. Not only does it capture through the symbolic use of landscape, the precious fineness of a fugitive moment — but upon it are played a vast complexity of human emotions. This emotional depth, although alive to the richness of experience to its fullest, as in 'To Autumn', or to the sensuous deceiving dreams of Madeline or the knight in 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci', is nonetheless as has been noted not blind to the reality of actuality or pain. Rather than being removed from life, I believe that Keats' romantic spirit is immersed in life.

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NOTE

With reference to the paper by Mr. Frans Sammut 'New Directions in Maltese Poetry' (Hyphen, Vol.III, No.2, 1982, pp.78-88), Prof. Mgr. Carmel Sant B.A., D.D., S.S.D. has sent the following comment: "Mgr. (not Cardinal) La Fontaine came in 1910 (and not 1921), that is, two years before Dun Karm wrote his first poem in Maltese on the invitation of Mgr. P. Galea — presumably one of the 'pro Italian clique' — and Mr. G. Muscat Azzopardi. Far from being dismissed from his teaching post, he retained it for a further eleven years up to 1921, when he, with the other members of the teaching staff, was not allowed to reside in the Seminary any more. The specific reason for this was never publicly known except by hearsay; what we are certain about is that it has nothing to do with Dun Karm's stand with respect to the status and social functions of the Maltese language (for further details see G. Cardona, Dun Karm: Hajtu u Hidmietu, Malta, KKM 1972, pp.76-96)."

The Editor.