Study material on “Ode to a Nightingale”

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Introduction:

Wordsworth defined poetry as "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" and John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" proves itself to be an excellent example of Wordsworth's definition of poetry. The poem was composed in the Spring of 1819 and was published in July, 1819 in an issue of the *Annals of the Fine Arts*. The occasion of the poem is very interesting as reported by Keats' friend Charles Armitage Brown. According to him, this poem is written under a plum tree in the garden of Wentworth Place in Hampstead. Charles brown told the real story of how Keats composed the poem spontaneously after listening to the nightingale's song. He said, "In the Spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house" (that he shared with Keats in that Spring). Keats was inspired by the bird's song and after listening to the bird's song, Brown continued,

> Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song, and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast-table to the grass-plot under a palm-tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived that he had some scraps of paper in his hand and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. (*The Odes of John Keats*, Ed. By A.R. Weeks, p. 92)

Those "scraps" were the proofs of his feelings about the nightingale's song. Actually, Brown saw the early drafts of the poem. The poem is a personal account of Keats' feelings, his journey towards the state of negative capability (a phrase which was coined by John Keats in 1817 to describe the capacity of the greatest writers, particularly Shakespeare, to follow an idea of artistic beauty even at the time when it leads them into intellectual misunderstanding and doubt, in opposition to their fondness for philosophical certainty over artistic beauty).

i) About the Author:

John Keats was one of the main names of second generation of romantic poets along with Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley. But his works were published only for four years before his death from tuberculosis at a very young age. He also reflected on the nature of poetry and his letters are the very important and real documents regarding the same issue i.e. the nature of poetry. He wrote that "we hate poetry that has too palpable a design for us" (from Letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 February 1818), and by this statement he meant, "poetry should be more indirect, communicating through the power of its images without the poet making his own presence too obvious (*The Routledge History of Literature in English*, P. 213). Like some other romantic poets he also wrote some unfinished poems which are the

fragments of his intellectual visions. But unfortunately, he had to accept death when he was only 25 without fulfilling his dreams and without proving his capabilities. His most famous poetry was written almost twenty years after the publication of *Lyrical Ballads*, and he was also influenced by Wordsworth and Coleridge.

The main theme of his poetry is the conflict between eternity, the everlasting beauty, truth of poetry, human imagination and everyday world of death and decay, suffering. Another important feature is his escapism. *Endymion* (1818) is his earliest poetry which is written in four books and the style and structure are derived from the Greek legends and myths. Another long poem is *The Fall of Hyperion* (1819) which is influenced by John Milton and it is an unfinished one. His poetry abounds in sensuous imagery and like Coleridge, he was also fascinated by the exotic settings, such as mythic classical background or setting of medieval Romance.

The poems which dealt with his familiar Romantic themes are "Isabella", "Lamia", "The Eve of Saint Agnes", "La Belle Dame Sans Merci". Some other famous poems are "Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode to Autumn", "Ode on a Grecian Urn" etc. Keats' works sometimes give us picture of solitude and desolation. Shelley wrote a visionary essay "Adonais" on Keats' death and it depicts the early blooming and a sudden death of this great Romantic poet.

ii) **About the bird Nightingale**:

Nightingale is a singing bird, which remained a traditional subject for poetry from the early Middle ages. Even in classical legends also nightingale has a significant position. In Greek mythology, Philomela was a beautiful girl, the Princess of Athens, the younger daughter of Pandion, a legendary king of Athens. Pandion had two daughters and the elder was Procne who was married to Teresus, king of Thrace. Once Philomela was invited by her elder sister and when Philomela went there, Tereus raped her and after that cut her tongue so that the truth might not be revealed and hid her in a lonely fortress. But Philomela managed to depict the truth to Procne with the help of a servant. Then Procne went to meet Philomela taking the disguise of Bacchant during the festival of Dionysus. To take revenge Procne stabbed her son Itys to death so that Tereus would not have heir and served the flesh of the dead boy to her husband. After Tereus finished his meal, Procne brought the head of the boy to make her husband understand what had happened. Then he wanted to kill the two sisters but the two sisters prayed to the God and at that very moment Tereus was changed into a hoopoe and Philomela became a swallow (as

she did not have tongue, she could only chatter) and Procne became a nightingale. But according to the Latin authors, Philomela was changed into a nightingale and Procne became a swallow (*Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, P. 444). This is the reason behind many poets' depiction of nightingale in association with melancholy and unhappy love. John Milton in his *II Penseroso* called the nightingale "Most musical, most melancholy". But the two famous Romantic poets, Wordsworth and Coleridge reversed the tradition of melancholy nightingale and illustrated its song as the cheerful outburst of joy and Keats was well acquainted with this. Wordsworth in his "O Nightingale" called it "A creature of ebullient heart" and referred to its "Tumultuous harmony and fierce!". In "The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem", Coleridge told about the nightingale's song which reminded him that "In nature there is nothing melancholy" and appeared "always full of love/ And joyance!" and the attachment of melancholy to the nightingale is an "idle thought". Not only for these poets, for many other poets also the nightingale's song is a source of poetic inspiration and it has the power to help the poets to escape from the human world of death and decay, suffering and sorrow. Keats has very beautifully attributed individuality and went against the age-old poetic tradition.

This is a poem based on pure imagination which came to the poetic mind with the song of the bird and vanished when the song was finished. The poem is an emotional account of the poet's aesthetic and imaginative feeling and passion. It is an escapist poem as it affirms the poet's longing to avoid reality, such as poison, wine, drugs, loss of memory and also death. "Ode to a Nightingale" is a beautiful poem because of its lovely rhythm, intensity of feeling, imaginative outset, enthralling melody and finally the organic unity of thought.

Brief Analysis of the Text:

Stanza 1. In the very beginning of the ode, the poet describes how he finds himself in a state of oppression and painful lassitude after listening to the bird's song, as if he had taken poison or drugs and were drowning into oblivion. He "is oppressed by its (song's) beauty and joy" (A. R. Weeks). But he is not at all jealous of the bird's cheerfulness, rather he is extremely delighted because of the bird's joy. So, his "heart aches". We can also understand the human-centred subject of the Odes as the poet is depicting his own heart, its feeling. Human happiness is limited. The poem begins with extreme straightforwardness and lucidity. His "drowsy

numbness" is not resulted out of any wine or drug but rather it is the result of his extreme delight that he feels after listening to the bird's song.

Stanza 2. No more he wants to stay in the human world, rather he wants to escape to the bird's world. So, he "longs by the aid of a cup of wine to escape to the world of the forest" (A. R. Weeks). He expresses his intense yearning to run away from the world of human suffering. And in doing so he seeks inspiration from wine which has been "Cool'd a long age in the deep-delv'd earth". He thinks of the romantic association of the origin country of the wine. He also visualises a cup full of wine, which has its association with taste, touch, colour, smell, sound. All these help us to understand Keats' sensuousness and all these would help him to disappear with the nightingale into the deep dark of the forest.

Stanza 3. The bird is not at all worried about the sorrows and sufferings of the humans, it does not know anything about these and the poet depicts his earnest yearning to run away from this human world where "men sit and hear each other groan" and where "youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies", where "beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, /Or new love pine at them beyond tomorrow", where there is only sorrow and suffering, death and decay. So, this stanza is the reflection of the personal realization and experience of the poet persona. Actually, Keats witnessed his younger brother's death at a very early age in 1818 and he was well acquainted with his own ill health. He experienced the sorrow and suffering in the human world. He feels that he can no more be the part of all these burdens of life, he can no more tolerate the misery, premature death, brevity of love and beauty. So, he wants the lap of nature to find solace. He is an escapist.

Stanza 4. The poet longs to go to the nightingale's world "not charioted by Bacchus (god of wine) and his pards", but rather "on the viewless wings of Poesy (goddess of Poetry)". He gives up the idea of getting inspiration from wine, he needs the invisible assistance from poetic imagination. And he does the same. He feels his existence with the nightingale, with the natural world in the presence of moon and stars. Actually, after listening to the bird's song the poet, with the help of his romantic imagination, tries to enter into the nightingale's world.

Stanza 5. In his romantic imagination the poet is in the beautiful darkness of the forest by the side of the nightingale. He cannot see the various types of flowers because of the darkness, but he can feel the fragrance of those flowers. He can feel the beauty of nature which is in stark contrast with the human world. The last line is an example of onomatopoeia, the sound of which echoes the sense. The repetition of 's' sound refers to the buzzing of the flies.

Stanza 6. "The intolerable power of pure beauty makes him long for death" (A. R. Weeks). He can easily accept "easeful death" in this beautiful and ecstatic world with the accompaniment of the nightingale's song. It's an extra achievement for him to die in the midst of "such an ecstasy!" So, he invokes the "easeful death" but even after his death the bird will continue to sing in such joyful way. Keats' sentimental and reflective sensuousness achieves the highest form here.

Stanza 7. Now the poet calls the bird as "immortal bird" and he contrasts his own mortality with the immortality of the bird's song. The bird is not born for death because of its immortal voice. This beautiful voice of the bird has overjoyed the men and women of ancient times. He brings in the allusion of Ruth, the principal character of the *Book of Ruth* of the Old Testament. Ruth was a Moabitess and she was the widowed daughter-in-law of Naomi. After the death of her husband she moved to her mother-in-law and both of them travelled to Bethlehem where she wins the love of Boaz, a kinsman of her mother-in-law through her kindness. Finally, she married her. The poet imagines that the bird's song might have given solace to the desolate heart of Ruth. This stanza is also highly romantic because of his romantic delight in windows. His letter to Fanny Keats in 1819 may be referred to here in this respect.

Stanza 8. The poet is suddenly reminded of his mortal world by the word "forlorn" as "the very word is like a bell" which is bringing him back to his "soul self", his miseries, his sorrows and sufferings, his desolate condition. Suddenly he comes back to reality. A. R. Weeks comments very rightly, "The closing of this stanza with the word 'forlorn' calls up a train of other associations which wake him from his dream: he cannot escape as easily as he has pretended. The song of the nightingale fades away in the distance, and the poet returns, half dazed, to real life" (*The Odes of John Keats*, p. 93). At the end, the world of imagination is replaced by the painful real world which is always in stark contrast to the world of imagination. Imagination is a playful fairy, a "deceiving elf". One question still remains, how can the poet immortalise the bird as nightingale is also a mortal creation like human? But the point is, the poet is not immortalising the bird but the bird's song, he is not addressing the bird but the bird's song, "the bird is to him, like Wordsworth's cuckoo, no bird, but 'a wandering voice' (A. R. Weeks). Each bird dies but the species will continue to live and thus the sweet song of the bird will also live.

Major Themes & Important aspects:

Being one of the most exquisite English lyrics, "Ode to a Nightingale" has registered undeniable success and has acquired a significant place in the history of Romantic literature as well as in the whole history of English literature for more than one reasons.

1. It is not only the representative to depict the craftsmanship of the poet persona but also brings to the fore **various forms of conflicts** and contrasts, such as:

i) Between **life and death**.
ii) Between **imagination and reality**.
iii) Between **mortality and immortality**.
iv) Between **human world and nightingale's world**.
v) Between **ideal and real**.

All these contrasted issues are presented by the poet through out the poem.

2. The poem is undoubtedly a **Romantic poem** as a whole. The poet persona is feeling disgusted in this human world and he just wants to take refuge from this decayed world which can only give sorrow and suffering and nothing else. Keats personally in his real life has suffered a lot. Like the other Romantic poets, he also feels the need to **"return to nature"**, to the lap of nature. For him the nightingale's world is a fantastic world and there is no sorrow. The voice of the nightingale is the source of **beauty and romance**. It is the source of **eternal beauty** for the poet. He wants to enter into a region where beauty does not fade away and **passion** does have everlasting presence. He feels the song of the nightingale and enjoys it to his heart's content. For him the **music** has the power to take him to the world of eternal beauty. The nightingale's song reminds him of the ancient times; he is reminded of Ruth and the kings and clowns of ancient times. Here is also the touch of **mystery** and **medievalism** which are romantic trends. Other important characteristics are his **intense emotion** and **individual experience.**

3. Another important aspect of Keats' poetry is his gift of **Hellenism.** In this poem there are many references to classical myths and legends such as, "light-winged Dryad of the trees", Bacchus. Shelley called him "a Greek".

4. Keats has handled **Death** quite differently. He can accept death easily in the nightingale's world where death is "easeful" for the poet.

5. Another feature of Keats' poetry is his **escapism.** He does no more want to stay in the human world, rather he wants to escape into the nightingale's world.

6. The poem has plenty of illustrations of Keats' **sensuousness**. Many sensuous imageries are found in all his poems. At the same time there are profound hints of **pathos** in many of his imageries. **Keats' use of words reminds us of painters**. With the help of words, he has the capacity to paint intense emotions and passions. In this respect he becomes the true pioneer of the Pre-Raphaelites of poetry.

Probable questions:

1. Attempt a short critical appreciation of the poem.
2. Write down a brief analysis of the poem bringing to the fore some of the characteristic features of the poem.
3. How is "Ode to a Nightingale" a romantic poem?
4. How does Keats contrast the 'ideal' and the 'real'?
5. Comment on Keats' handling of death.

(I have attached another file with it. Please have a look at this.)

KEATS'S *ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE*

By Richard Harter Fogle

THE *Nightingale* ode has been judiciously dealt with from inside the tradition of Keats scholarship by such experts as Sir Sidney Colvin, Ernest de Sélincourt, Douglas Bush, and H. W. Garrod. Recent reinterpretations by Brooks and Warren, by Thomas and Brown, by Allen Tate, F. R. Leavis, Marshall McLuhan, G. Wilson Knight, Albert Guérard, Jr., and others, have brought the *Ode* into contact with current critical theories. In following them here I can, I believe, be most useful by steering something of a middle course between the modern and traditional: with, however, an unusual emphasis upon general English Romanticism. My explication, then, will consider the *Ode to a Nightingale* as a Romantic poem, and will venture some exposition of its Romantic principles. I shall also try to bear in mind the implications of recent criticism.

The *Nightingale* is a Romantic poem of the family of *Kubla Khan* and *The Eve of St. Agnes* in that it describes a choice and rare experience, intentionally remote from the commonplace. Nowadays we sometimes underrate the skill required for this sort of thing. The masters of Romantic magic were aware that ecstasy, for example, is not adequately projected by crying, "I am ecstatic!" Keats gets his effects in the *Nightingale* by framing the consummate moment in oppositions, by consciously emphasizing its brevity; he sets off his ideal by the contrast of the actual. The principal stress of the poem is a struggle between ideal and actual: inclusive terms which, however, contain more particular antitheses of pleasure and pain, of imagination and commonsense reason, of fullness and privation, of permanence and change, of nature and the human, of art and life, freedom and bondage, waking and dream. These terms are of course only expedients; they are products of "that false secondary power which multiplies distinctions," and I fear might easily be multiplied still further. I defend them as the best I am able to frame, and as necessary for analysis.

The drugged, dull pain in lines 1–4 is a frame and a contrast for the poignant pleasure of the climax; at the same time, it is inseparable from it. "Extremes meet," as Coleridge was fond of saying, and as Keats also has said elsewhere in *A Song of Opposites* and the *Ode on Melancholy*. They meet because they *are* extremes, as very hot and cold water are alike to the touch—their extremity is their affinity—and because of a Romantic prepossession to unity of experience, which in Keats was a matter of temperament as well as of conviction. Both pleasure and pain are deliberately heightened, and meet in a common intensity. The pain

is the natural sequel of "too much happiness," the systole to the diastole of joy.

> 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
> But being too happy in thine happiness,—

Despite this disavowal of envy, perhaps the envy is about the same as being "too happy." The felicity which is permanent in the nightingale is transient and therefore excessive in the poet. It is too heavy a burden to be borne more than briefly, and dangerous in its transience. Its attractions make everyday living ugly by contrast. Cleanth Brooks has defined as the theme of the poem "the following paradox: the world of the imagination offers a release from the painful world of actuality, yet at the same time it renders the world of actuality more painful by contrast."[1] Allen Tate has called the *Nightingale* "an emblem of one limit of our experience: the impossibility of synthesizing, in the order of experience, the antinomy of the ideal and the real."[2] Both statements strike into the crucial dilemma of the Romantic imagination, a basic *donnée* of the Romantic poet which he may turn to his advantage or his bane as he is able to cope with it. Good Romantic poems, like *Kubla Khan* and the *Nightingale*, define this dilemma, dramatize it, and transform it to a source of strength. Such poetry accepts the risk to get at the value, in full awareness of the issues. To affirm either that the difficulty itself is avoidable, or that it could be definitively solved by a properly framed discourse, would be to talk of something other than poetry.

The theme of stanza 2 is plenitude. The ideal lies in fullness. The nightingale sings "in full-throated ease," the longed-for beaker is "full of the warm South, / Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene." This fullness contrasts with the sad satiety of stanza 3, "Where but to think is to be full of sorrow"; it is modulated in the "embalmed darkness" of stanza 5, in richness of sensuous texture; and it ends in stanza 6 in a climactic fullness of song:

> While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
> In such an ecstasy!

The fabric of stanza 2 is too fine for common wear, a happiness too great, a conjunction of circumstances impossibly appropriate. The draught of vintage has been "Cooled *a long age* in the *deep-delved* earth," the quite un-Miltonic fount of the Muses is "the *true*, the *blushful* Hippocrene," and the beaker is brim-full, with "purple-stained mouth." Such concentration of effect is probably what Keats had in mind when he

[1] *Modern Poetry and the Tradition* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1939), p. 31.

[2] "A Reading of Keats," *On the Limits of Poetry* (New York: Swallow Press, 1948), p. 177.

advised Shelley to "load every rift with ore." Here it is used to image a Golden Age, before Jove reigned, of fullness, gusto, ease, and freedom. To achieve this ideal, however, the imagination builds upon the finite actual. The passage is deliberately pure and quintessential—the ore has been refined—and in its purity delicately defiant and mirthful. Such writing is a Romantic equivalent of metaphysical wit. It differs from the metaphysical mode in its more thorough subordination to the total meaning.

The draught of vintage, itself an instrument of imagination, symbolizes an imaginative escape from actuality. The longing to "fade away into the forest dim" is in order to avoid another kind of fading away, the melancholy dissolutions of change and physical decay. The world of stanza 3 is the antitype of the golden world of 2: for ease is substituted "the weariness, the fever, and the fret," for plenitude "a few sad, last grey hairs." It is a world of privation, "Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies."

In his judicial reading of the *Ode to a Nightingale* Mr. Allen Tate finds little to say for this stanza. It is bad eighteenth-century personification, without on the one hand Pope's precision, or the energy of Blake on the other. "It gives us," says Mr. Tate, " . . . a 'picture' of common reality, in which the life of man is all mutability and frustration. But here if anywhere in the poem the necessity to dramatize time or the pressure of actuality, is paramount. *Keats has no language of his own for this realm of experience*" (p. 174). Keats's mode is pictorial, and this mode "allows him to present the thesis of his dilemma, the ideality of the nightingale symbol, but not the antithesis, the world of common experience, which is the substance of stanza three . . . The climax contains a little less than the full situation; it reaches us a little too simplified" (p. 176).

My dissent can be summarized in the counter-assertion that, with certain inevitable reservations, the privation is as vividly realized as is the ideal plenitude. The personifications of age, youth, beauty, and love are vitalized by their contexts; they are comparable to "Veiled Melancholy" in "her sovran shrine" in the *Ode on Melancholy*, and the personifications of *To Autumn*. The particulars transform the abstractions, which are themselves explicable as necessary economies in a broadly typical account. (Any sort of detailed and documented realism would be unthinkable.) Time and the pressure of actuality, Mr. Tate to the contrary, are dramatized in parallelism, repetition, and progression. "The weariness, the fever, and the fret"; "a few, sad, last grey hairs"; "grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies"; here is the process of tedium, time, and decay; here is the very movement of the meaning. The fourfold repetition of "Where" is a further reinforcement, with its rhetorical suggestion of

rising emotion to counterbalance the falling series of time. The stanza, one may well assert, has an intensity equal to its antithesis of the imaginative ideal, as Douglas Bush has remarked in his persuasive argument that the real theme of Keats's six great odes is the sadness of mutability.[3] It has also, what Professor Bush failed to point out, an energy of thought and a complex suavity which is best indicated in the last two lines—an effect in which personification plays a considerable part.

One grows uncomfortably aware of the limits of explication upon such an issue. I cannot say what shadows of Tom Keats and Fanny Brawne may haunt my reading of stanza 3, nor what reverberations from that old-fashioned doctrine of sincerity. One is left, at any rate, with a feeling that objective analysis goes only halfway—an avowal the humility of which is perhaps damaged by the fact that I wish to hit Mr. Tate with it more than myself. Assuming that Keats is a pictorial poet, he finds stanza 3 inadequately pictorial. Here he is pushing a metaphor too far. The *Nightingale* does not seem a notably pictorial poem; in it the associations of objects are much more important than their outlines.

The crucial issue, however, is the conception of unity implied by Mr. Tate's criticism. What can properly be asked of a poem? The first consideration in the *Nightingale* ode is the imaginative experience of the ideal. Different elements come into the picture, but there is at bottom one emphasis only. The objection to stanza 3 comes from very interesting assumptions about the nature of poetic unity, wholeness, and the reconciliation of opposites, which should be examined.

According to these assumptions unity is less important than wholeness, which in turn might be defined as an ideal reconciliation of all possible opposites. I argue against them that no poem is whole in this sense, or finally in any but its own terms. No poem contains all modes of experience, or even two experiences or ideas projected with equal force. The reconciliation of equal opposites is a theoretical, not an actual process; it would be colorless, odorless, tasteless, faceless. All logical opposites stand to each other in a dual relationship. They are first conceived as equals in that they are opposed; but they then arrange themselves in varying relations of inequality. Imagination can be reconciled to reason as the whole of which reason is a part; or the relation may be one of predominance, in which some elements of the weaker opposite are sacrificed to bring it into line—as a conservative will argue that he has incorporated the best features of progressivism into his conservative system. Opposites can be reconciled through related qualities of feeling, or simply by having common attributes. In a loose sense they may be said to be reconciled

[3] *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition in English Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1937), p. 107.

through the fact that they co-exist, as in the Romantic assumption that reality is One. The concept of the reconciliation of opposites, then, covers many processes, none of which corresponds precisely with the theoretical ideal. And none of these processes can be dismissed as in itself incomplete or dishonest.

If a poem, then, is thought of as a logical argument (which is to use an imperfect metaphor), the poet is under no obligation to do literal justice to both sides of the question, which would in any event be impossible. He does enough if he makes his argument interesting. If he also shows an awareness of other opinions, so much the better. If he seems crucially engaged with his problem we permit him to be a little unceremonious. In the *Nightingale* Keats is both interesting and as well-mannered as a man need be who is expressing his convictions. He is affirming the value of the ideal, and this is the primary fact. He is also paying due tribute to the power of the actual, and this is an important but secondary consideration. The stress of the poem lies in the conflict of value and power. Keats is at once agonized and amused at the inescapable discrepancy between them. He reconciles them by a prior imaginative acceptance of the unity of experience, by means of which he invests them with a common extremity and intensity of feeling. He need not give equal attention to both, for the actual can take care of itself; it is the frail ideal which requires bolstering.

The manner of Keats's reconciliation of opposites appears in stanza 4:

> Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
> But on the viewless wings of Poesy . . .

This rejection is only ostensible. Like Coleridge, and as W. H. Auden has lately remarked about the Romantics in general, Keats prefers "both . . . and" to "either . . . or." The "draught of vintage" is not cancelled by, but combined with the vision in the forest, which deepens rather than discards the suggestions of "Flora and the country green." The intuitive speed of imagination is dramatized by "Already with thee!" The forest scene is Romantically picturesque without being really pictorial: one does not visualize it, but its composition is describable in visual metaphor. Its unity is a matter of blending, with objects softened and distanced by the veil of darkness, which itself shades off into moonlight filtered through forest leaves. The moonlight, a symbol of imagination, intermingling with darkness evokes the enchantment of mystery, the wondrous secret just out of reach. After thus using suggestion Keats goes on to specification, much as he has done with "Bacchus and his pards." The imagery is particular and sensuous, but not highly visual. Hawthorne, eglantine, violets, and musk rose are important chiefly for their pastoral associations.

In the total effect sensations are blended in a soft and complex unity. Odor merges with touch and kinesthetic strain in "what soft incense hangs upon the boughs." "The grass, the thicket, and the fruit tree wild" have tactual and plastic qualities. The "fast fading violets" are invested with organic sensation through empathy by being "covered up in leaves," and the associations of the musk rose include taste and sound. As in stanza 2 the theme is fullness, but with an added poignance and complexity from the introduction of darkness and death. The generous fertility of Nature is inseparable from the grave, the height demands its complement in depth, and intensest life turns imperceptibly to its opposite.

The death theme, however, may easily be made too much of. The embalmed darkness and the fast fading violets certainly suggest it, but the imaginative escape of stanza 4 is less into death (or the womb) than into an ideal nature. The death of stanza 5 is, indeed, a reasonable inference from the experience of the forest. As freedom, ease, intensity, plenitude, and consummation the two are one. Death is easeful and rich, it is associated with the nightingale's song in lavishness of giving. "To cease upon the midnight" is in one respect the same as "pouring forth thy soul abroad." In each is an outpouring, and a release from the prisoning self. This imaginative acceptance of death is not, however, unreserved. "I have been *half* in love with easeful Death" and "Now more than ever seems it rich to die" are measured statements. The acceptance, in fact, includes the reservation, since it is an acceptance of the limits as well as the freedoms of this death:

> Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
> To thy high requiem become a sod.

Momentarily death has identified Keats with the nightingale, but only momentarily. Its meaning shifts from the most heightened consciousness to blank oblivion, and what seemed pure spirit is sheer inert mass.

In another swift transition the death theme turns to a basis for the immortality of the nightingale: a shift which restresses both the identification and the withdrawal from the identification. We are probably no longer greatly troubled by the objection seen by Robert Bridges, that the bird is obviously *not* immortal.[4]

H. W. Garrod has remarked that the nightingale commences as a particular bird, but is imaginatively transformed to a myth in such phrases as "light-winged Dryad of the trees."[5] The objection has also

[4] Introd., *Poems of John Keats*, ed. G. Thorn Drury (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., n.d.), p. lxiv.

[5] *Keats* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), pp. 113–114.

been met by the suggestion that Keats is thinking of the species, not the individual nightingale. Both of these solutions seem provisionally true; a little further on I wish to comment on the mortal-immortal difficulty as it is peculiar to Keats's imagination. In stanza 7, at any rate, the bird is a universal and undying voice: the voice of nature, of imaginative sympathy, and therefore of an ideal Romantic poetry, infinitely powerful and profuse (compare the "profuse strains of unpremeditated art" of Shelley's *Skylark*, and the "music loud and long" of *Kubla Khan*). As sympathy it resolves all differences into the main fact of what Hawthorne has called the magnetic chain of humanity. It speaks to high and low; it comforts the human homesickness of Ruth and frees her from bitter isolation; and equally it opens the casements of the remote and magical. Lines 65–70 perhaps contain the two kinds of Romanticism which Coleridge differentiated in Chapter xiv of *Biographia Literaria:* but the domestic and the exotic varieties are linked by their common purpose of fusing the usual with the strange. Ruth is distanced and framed by time and rich association, but in relation to the magic casements she is homely and familiar.

These magic casements are the apex and the climax of the imaginative experience. They are deliberately towering and frail, dramatizing the value, the gallantry, and the precariousness of the Romantic imagination at its height. They are connected with the actual by defying it, by their affirmation that what the mind can imagine is beauty and truth, an experience to be prized all the more for its brevity. The different senses of "forlorn," upon which Mr. Brooks has acutely commented (p. 31), relate the passage to Ruth as well as to the final stanza, which returns to common earth. Ruth is forlorn in her loneliness. The faery lands are pleasurably forlorn in a remoteness which is really the condition of their value. "Forlorn" is like a bell which tolls the death of the imagination.

Stanza 8, despite the suddenness of the transition, is nevertheless a soft and quiet withdrawal from the heights. "The fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is famed to do" is not a rejection of imagination, but part of the total experience. The diction is unobtrusively lowered, to give an effect of half-humorous ruefulness. The inner movement of the conclusion is objectified in the gradual fading of the song, "Past the near meadows, over the still stream, / Up the hillside," in a perfect fusion of outward setting with mental experience. I am unable to see deep significance in the fact that the bird is now "buried deep / In the next valley-glade," but it would seem that it works like Wordsworth's

> But there's a tree, of many, one,
> A single field which I have looked upon,
> Both of them speak of something that is gone,

by emphasizing a difference in sameness. The line recalls the "embalmed darkness" of the forest dim, and thus realizes the gulf between the earlier participation and the final withdrawal.

> Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
> Fled is that music:—do I wake or sleep?

These questions are objective in that they portray rather than abstract from Keats's state of mind. Like the beginning of the poem they suggest a prostrating reaction to an experience too powerful to be mastered, while as questions they also express an attempt to control and to understand it. Intellectually they raise a vital issue of Romanticism, which might be underlined by remembering that Keats's original draft ran, "Was it a vision *real* or waking dream?"[6] It is the problem of the truth of imagination, which adds a further tension to the various stresses of actual and ideal. "I am certain," wrote Keats, "of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affections, and the truth of imagination. What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth."[7] Which was the dream, and which the reality? Which was the true, the peak or the plain, the rare or the commonplace, the ideal of permanence or the fact of change?

The answer concerns our problem of the reconciliation of opposites. The imaginative ideal is in a sense more true because it is more valuable, and the *Ode to a Nightingale* celebrates the poetic imagination. As it opposes the ideal to the actual, imagination against commonsense reason, imagination and ideal still predominate. They stand to their opposites as high against low, apex against base, action against reaction. Ideal and actual meet only as extremes, joined in the circle of experience. But the full power of the poem comes from adding the deadly question, is not the worse the true, the better the illusion? Should we not change the meaning of truth?

The *Ode to a Nightingale* contains the highest, the fullest, the most intense, the most valuable mental experience which Keats can imagine. This is its center, this the basis of its unity. Within this unity, however, is a complex of feeling and thought which moves in alternate swellings and subsidences, a series of waves, each with its attendant trough. These waves are not of equal height; they rise gradually to a climax in stanza 7, and the rise subsides in the conclusion. Herbert Marshall McLuhan has suggested the musical organization of the fugue to define the structures of Keats's odes.[8] Most ambitious Romantic poems of inner experience,

[6] See Sir Sidney Colvin, "A Morning's Walk in a Hampstead Garden," in *The John Keats Memorial Volume* (London: John Lane, 1921), p. 73.

[7] *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. M. B. Forman (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1947), p. 67. Punctuation and capitals are altered from Forman's text.

[8] "Aesthetic Pattern in Keats's Odes," *Univ. of Toronto Quart.*, XII (1943), 167–168.

indeed, offer wide variety of mood, with sudden and dramatic transitions. The *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*, with its organ-like swellings and sinkings, and its abrupt and effective changes of direction, is similar to the *Nightingale* in organization. Both make central affirmations, and both make these affirmations interesting by providing a controlled complexity of movement based upon a crucial suspense. Keats concludes with a question and Wordsworth with an answer, of course, but then Wordsworth knew more answers than Keats.

I have repeatedly made use of the metaphors of wholeness and intensity in this essay. In explication they are radically metaphors, I believe, rather than complete concepts. The theory of wholeness earlier imputed to Mr. Tate is a characteristically modern idea, equivalent to the metaphysical wit described by Eliot, the inclusive poetry of Richards, the ironic poetry of Brooks and Warren, and the modern poetry of knowledge adumbrated by John Crowe Ransom in *The World's Body*, which is not the poetry of children, nor of the heart's desire, but of the fallen mind, "since ours too are fallen." Such poetry is to be armed at all points, invulnerable to irony. Nothing can be objected to it, for it has foreseen all objections. It is a poetry of wholeness in that it has synthesized all conceivable arguments and attitudes. It follows that its conception of synthesis emphasizes the number and the diversity of the elements to be synthesized, and gives correspondingly less attention to the synthesizing agent. A poem constructed on this theory would emphasize difficulties and contradictions, discords and roughness, and only on inspection should its unity emerge, ideally the more satisfying because it has been struggled for.

Keats's notion of wholeness has the same elements as the modern, but with a different order and emphasis. "The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth."[9] Here the agent of synthesis comes first, the unity and the harmony, not the complexity and the discordance. The "disagreeables" must be attended to, but Keats is confident that they can be "evaporated" in intensity. The difference in emphasis might be illustrated in Tate's comments on Longinus' famous account of Sappho's ode. In Longinus Mr. Tate sees an early exponent of the reconciliation of opposites, who is using wholeness and complexity as his criteria of excellence.[10] A Romantic, however, would probably settle first upon the passion which has unified the complexity, and would then interest himself in Longinus' remarks about the principle

[9] *Letters of Keats*, p. 71.

[10] "Longinus," in *Lectures in Criticism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949), pp. 61–62.

of selection in the poem. Sappho does not give everything, but only a selected part of the whole. The ode is an essence, not an imitation of reality. The details are chosen for the greatest intensity of concentration, with the irrelevant and trivial excluded.

Intense concentration of effect in Keats, the loading every rift with ore, is a way of obtaining profusion, as the *Nightingale* itself demonstrates. F. R. Leavis has said that "One remembers the poem both as recording, and as being for the reader, an indulgence."[11] I find Mr. Leavis too austere, but he points out a quality which Keats plainly sought for. His profusion and prodigality is, however, modified by a principle of sobriety. He has recorded both the profusion and its attendant restraint:

> 1st. I think poetry should surprise by a fine excess, and not by singularity; it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost as a remembrance.
>
> 2nd. Its touches of beauty should never be halfway, thereby making the reader breathless, instead of content. The rise, the progress, the setting of Imagery should, like the sun, come natural to him, shine over him, and set soberly, although in magnificence, leaving him in the luxury of twilight . . .
>
> Another axiom—That if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all.[12]

This passage can be taken, I think, to represent the artistic purposes of the *Nightingale*. Wholeness, intensity, and naturalness are its appropriate standards. Nature is, indeed, the real norm—the physical face of nature, nature as it appears to the Romantic imagination—and wholeness and intensity are attributes of nature, as are freedom, ease, spontaneity, harmony, and sobriety. Imagined as the Golden Age of Flora and the country green, and more fully as the forest of the nightingale, it becomes first the bird, the voice of nature; then the ideal poet; and finally the ideal itself. This nature is the antithesis of the privative actual in stanza 3.

The nature of the *Nightingale* is particular, since it conforms to its dramatic situation. The rich darkness of the forest is peculiar to the poem, not literally entire and universal. The poet uses his *donnée*, and no extension of his symbols will transcend its limits. Given his particular and concrete nature, Keats infers from it peace, fulfillment, and ideal freedom. His apprehension of nature is characteristically Romantic but peculiarly his own in its sensuous immediacy. While he feels the Romantic impulsion toward an overarching and ideal unity, in him the sensuous

[11] *Revaluation* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1936), p. 244.
[12] *Letters of Keats*, p. 108. Punctuation and capitals altered.

real is inseparable from its ideal opposite. It is as if for Keats the primary and secondary imaginations of Coleridge were one, and the process of "dissolving, diffusing, dissipating, in order to recreate" unnecessary to him. To his apprehension physical nature is immediately absolute and permanent. In the *Nightingale*, as in *To Autumn*, he arrests change in mid-motion by contemplation apotheosized, which fixes the temporal object within a timeless frame. And thus the immortality of the nightingale; it is a question of focus. Nature is always dying but always alive, forever changing but always the same. With the nightingale Keats fixes his imagination upon sameness and life.

The standard of nature involves effects of spontaneity and artlessness which sometimes confuse us into suspecting that the poet is confusing his art with reality. The Romantics have laid themselves open to this misconstruction, but it is nevertheless a great mistake to take their artistic imitations for experience in the raw. The *Nightingale* imitates spontaneity without being spontaneous. Its opening lines, for example, are calculated to disarm judgment by a show of unrehearsed feeling. These lines are, however, a classic instance of Keats's technique. The repeated suggestions in "as though of hemlock I had drunk," "emptied some dull opiate to the drains," and "Lethe-wards had sunk," with their undersong of assonance, are obviously more than coincidental.

The transitional links of the poem are also at first sight spontaneous and merely associational. They are too invariably happy, however, to be literally unpremeditated. H. W. Garrod has asserted that the transitions of the *Nightingale* are governed by Keats's intoxication with his own words. " . . . the infection of his own accidents of style, if I may so call them, compels the direction of thought; the rhythm and words together determine the stanza which comes next . . . ."[13] One wonders what or who determines the rhythm and words. More recently Albert Guérard, Jr., viewing the *Nightingale* as a poem which consummately expresses the universal impulse toward submersion of consciousness, has said that this impulse is a "longing not for art but a free reverie of any kind. The form of the poem is that of progression by association, so that the movement of feeling is at the mercy of words evoked by chance, such words as *fade* and *forlorn*, the very word which like a bell tolls the dreamer back to his sole self."[14] This passage occurs in an interesting and a favorable account of the poem. Mr. Guérard, like Mr. Garrod, admires Keats. Nevertheless, "longing not for art but a free reverie of any kind," and "the movement of the feeling is at the mercy of words evoked by chance" constitute damaging charges, indicting the Ode for bad art and

[13] *Keats*, p. 111.

[14] "Prometheus and the Aeolian Lyre," *Yale Review*, XXXIII (1944), 495.

low-grade mental activity. Such charges against Romantic poems have become rather frequent since Babbitt reigned. A Romantic critic still has trouble answering them, however, because their assumptions are strange to him. One is always dismayed to find what he had happily taken for a virtue suddenly and persuasively attacked as one of the lower forms of vice.

I will nevertheless venture some suggestions on the specific problem of associational transitions like "fade away" and "forlorn." To adopt Mr. McLuhan's musical analogy, they are motifs woven into a varied musical pattern. Dramatically they are important in objectifying the theme in a word, revealing instantaneously the central stress of the poem. They work like Wordsworth's tree, which focusses the problem of his ode, "Where is it now, the glory and the dream?" in a single concrete image. So "fade away" and "forlorn" dramatize sharply the two states of mind in the poem. Why they should be said to control the movement of the feeling is not clear to me; they appear only to *indicate* the movement, as patches of foam on the tops of the swells.

It is easy to make nonsense of the Romantic aesthetic of nature by noticing only its major term, and omitting its elaborate qualifications. Coleridge gives its true emphasis, I think, in describing poetic imagination as the power which "while it blends and harmonizes the natural and the artificial, still subordinates art to nature, the manner to the matter; and our admiration of the poet to our sympathy with the poetry."[15] The natural must be blended with the artificial; art is to be subordinated, not extinguished. In this context art is to be understood as the appearance of art, as it strikes the eye of the beholder; Coleridge is not establishing a quota on the art which can actually go into the poem.

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[15] *Biographia Literaria*. Ch. xiv.