

“Do I Wake or Sleep?”: Keats’s
Ode to a Nightingale

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Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster'd 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.

5

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves

6

Darkling I listen; . . .

(35-51)

These central lines of the great *Ode*¹ suggest ambiguously a drowsed and yet disturbing stillness. The nightingale, classically associated with poetry, is with the moon, goddess of the ideal world.² On Keats's dreaming earth the only sound is of the luring song of the bird. The only light is from the reigning goddess, who in *Endymion* pursued and was pursued through dream and “a sleepy dusk, an odorous shade” by the shepherd prince, the “moonlight Emperor”, although with the unexpected outcome that she was attained only after acceptance of a mortal.³ Her intermittent light can be wafted along winding paths but only emphasizes the green and lush darkness (so, apparently, relaxing at least two natural laws). Hence flowers, fruit, and blossoms are

- 1 *Ode to a Nightingale*, *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger, London, 1978, pp. 369-72.
- 2 See “The Nightingale in Poetry”, in H. W. Garrod, *The Profession of Poetry and other Lectures*, Oxford, 1929, pp. 131-59.
- 3 *Endymion*, IV, 362, 776, 975-1,003; Stillinger, pp. 203, 214, 220. (At the end of the pastoral romance, the Indian Maiden is strangely transformed to the moon goddess.)

identifiable only by the "guess" of smell, which replaces the authority of waking sight and offers the strange particularity of dream images. The scents suspended in the branches (there is more than metonymy here) can remain undisturbed by the breezes and become charmed incense, hinting vaguely at some lulling rite of poetry.

The familiar expectations of the senses are subtly disoriented, and instead is a seeming precision in which process has become stilled, celebratory, near-magical. If the lines are taken, as they often are, to yield that "exquisite sense of the luxurious" Keats professedly sought in place of less comforting "Philosophy", they do so by evoking a world still more tempting (and as it turns out, still more dangerous) than that implied by his impatient phrase-making of some eighteen months before the *Ode*, when he wrote to his clerical friend Bailey, "O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts".⁴

Such a "Life of Sensations" is still often taken to be the happy isles of Keats's yearning search. His earlier critics found it all too easy to manufacture a corresponding aesthetic weakling, who haunts the poetry, forever sprawl in "the realm . . . Of Flora and old Pan" and never able to pass to "the agonies, the strife of human hearts": sleep and poetry are the same.⁵ Despite Keats's repeated testing and rejection of such escape from human responsibility, evident through the letters, all but the very earliest poetry, and indeed in the present passage in its context, many readers saw only a dilettante in a world insulated by art and dream. (In *The Fall of Hyperion*, Moneta declares "Only the dreamer venoms all his days".⁶) They snatched at evidence he seems to have tempted them with; as for example, when he wrote to Fanny Keats in August 1819 that he would like to "promenade round . . . apple tasting—pear-tasting—plum-judging—apricot nibbling—peach scrunching—Nectarine-sucking and Melon carving . . . lolling on a lawn by a water-lillied pond". But that is after a disgusted review of the contemporary London theatre. Or again, he told Dilke, after admitting "I have no trust whatever on Poetry", that "this moment I was writing with one hand, and with the other holding to my Mouth a Nectarine—good god how fine

4 Letters to John Taylor, 24 April 1818, and to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings, Oxford, 1970 (1977), pp. 87-8, 36-9. (I have omitted Keats's slips of the pen in quoting from the letters.)

5 *Sleep and Poetry*, 101-2, 123-4; Stillinger, pp. 71-2.

6 *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 175; Stillinger, p. 482.

—It went down soft pulpy, slushy, oozy—all its delicious embonpoint melted down my throat like a large beatified Strawberry”.⁷ The shocked Coventry Patmore, not seeing the alertness in the writing (“good god . . . beatified”) dismissed the coupling of art and fruit-sucking as the attitude of “a man without a backbone”, one “lighted from below”.⁸ Arnold put the issue rather more clearly (in fact altogether too clearly), in his famous question: Keats was “abundantly and enchantingly sensuous; the question with some people will be, whether he was anything else”. But Arnold’s answer, that Keats’s “yearning passion for the beautiful” was also “an intellectual and spiritual passion”⁹ is too simple: it separates the two “passions” in the effort of trying to reconcile them. It would be closer to have said—as, I believe, the ending of the *Grecian Urn* says—that Keats’s intellectual yearning was to rid himself of the beautiful.

One of Keats’s earlier critics, although still obsessed with the myth of beauty, saw more clearly. Aubrey de Vere noted a “depth, significance, and power of diction”, and went on to remark “his mental faculties [were] extended throughout the sensitive part of his nature . . . His body seemed to think”.¹⁰ That last phrase relevantly brings to mind first Donne (“one might almost say, her body thought”¹¹), and then Eliot’s notorious discussion of the “unification of sensibility” in his essay on the metaphysical poets.¹² Keats, after all, was not so much a “romantic” poet, as that term is commonly understood, as a poet writing in the early nineteenth century who worked through the questioning and resolution of sensuous imagery ordered by the imagination—as Donne was said to have worked through the “violent yoking together”¹³ of ideas. If his poetry does not

7 Letters of 28 August and 22 September 1819, Gittings, pp. 284, 302.

8 Patmore was reviewing the landmark 1848 edition of Keats by Milnes in the *North British Review*. See *Keats: The Critical Heritage*, ed. G. M. Matthews, London, 1971, pp. 329-40.

9 “John Keats”, *Essays in Criticism*, ed. Kenneth Allott, London, 1964, pp. 282, 289.

10 de Vere was reviewing the 1848 edition in the *Edinburgh Review* (Matthews, pp. 341-48).

11 *Of the Progress of the Soul: the Second Anniversary*, 246, *John Donne, the Complete English Poems* (Penguin English Poets), ed. A. J. Smith, Harmondsworth, 1971, p. 294.

12 “The Metaphysical Poets”, *Selected Essays*, London, 1932 (1951), pp. 281-91.

13 Samuel Johnson, “Cowley”, *Lives of the Poets*, ed. L. A. Hind, London, 1925, I.11.

“think” in the manner of what he called (in the 1817 letter to Bailey already mentioned) “consequitive reasoning”, it does “think” through the structures imposed by the searching imagination upon familiar imagery. Coleridge’s remark in the *Biographia Literaria* about his own poetry applies still more to his younger contemporary: “Poetry, even of the loftiest and seemingly, that of the wildest odes, had a logic of its own, as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive, causes”.¹⁴ One recalls too that the Bailey letter does not finally endorse its impatient opening but contains a qualification (echoed in various formulations in later letters) which refers to “a complex Mind—one that is imaginative and at the same time careful of its Fruits—who would exist partly on sensation partly on thought—to whom it is necessary that years should bring the philosophic Mind”. (That last expression alludes deliberately to the ending of Wordsworth’s Ode, in which the “glory and the dream” are replaced by “thoughts that spring Out of human suffering”, and by awareness of “the human heart by which we live”.¹⁵) And the letter tells Bailey that he must drink “the old wine of Heaven” (anticipating “O for a draught of vintage . . .” in the *Ode*), but for “the redigestion of our most ethereal Musings”, in order to “increase in knowledge and know all things”.¹⁶

The complex and imaginative mind of the poet, then, digests together sensation and thought into knowledge of the world of mortal reality. In the central lines of the *Ode*, the thinking body both creates the world of moonstruck fancy, and tests it; or rather, allows it to test itself. The very richness intimates impermanence. The violets (so remarkably known) are “fast-fading”. The rose, here as in other poems (for example, the *Ode on Melancholy*) is short-lived. The “sweets”, the buds, are only of the “seasonable month”, and with it will pass. More sombrely, “embalmed” hints ambivalently at the perfumed darkness and at the possibility of death to which the poem develops. Escape may be indulged but cannot last. The lines are only one stage in the debate of the “complex mind” between dream and wakefulness, art as evasion and art as knowledge, which preoccupies the *Ode*.

14 Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross, 2 vols., Oxford, 1907, I.4.

15 *Intimations of Immortality*, 57, 186-9, *William Wordsworth* (Oxford Authors), ed. Stephen Gill, Oxford 1984, pp. 297-302.

16 Gittings, p. 39.

SYDNEY STUDIES

The pursuit of the bird leads to full recognition of the cost of achieving its condition, and to the final rejection of its song.

In the slow, run-on opening lines the poet complains of heart-ache, a drowsy numbing of the sense, as if he had drunk a sedative or poison so powerful as to draw him down to Lethe, the river of forgetfulness of whose waters the dead drink to forget their past existence. Yet "pains" and "aches" are verbs which imply awareness, even though their context is that of oblivion; Keats is at the same time death-drowsy and painfully aware of his condition.

At first it seems that the cause is not jealousy of the bird's outpouring of easy song—" 'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot" but an overplus of happiness—"being too happy in thine happiness"; excess of sensuous pleasure in the tree-nymph/bird brings about the sinking towards oblivion. But as we read the opening stanza again, this is not quite convincing. A different construction of the lines is possible, one which does not support the movement of sympathy and identification between symbolic bird and poet but rather already begins to separate them. One may read lines 5-10 not as explaining the poet's condition (roughly, "I am in this deathly state not because I am jealous of your full-throated ease but because I am too happy that you . . .") but as a separate syntactical unit following the heavy colon at the end of the fourth line. In this way, the poet turns from himself to address the "Dryad", saying that it can sing so because it is not possessive (a possible sense of "envy") about its own happiness. Its happiness overflows, in contrast to the poet's aching dullness.

Both ways of reading the first stanza are possible because lines 5 and 6 can form a syntactical link with either the first or last four lines. At this stage we do not have to choose between the two ways; the flexible construction allows both possibilities to be present, either of growing sympathy and identification with the bird, or of the distance between them. In the end, the poem itself makes the choice.

The second stanza appears to pursue the first way. He wishes for "a draught of vintage . . . a beaker full of the warm South" (ll.11,15). The phrases are usually taken to be a circumlocution for a beaker of red wine. Keats's fondness for claret has been well known from his correspondence; but the effect, on top of a dose of hemlock or other opiate, would be ludicrous. The wine is a deliberate, teasing poeticism for poetry or inspiration. Hippo-

crene was a fountain near Mount Helicon, sacred to the Muses; its "blushful" waters were said to be "violet-coloured, and endowed with voice and articulate sound" in one of Keats's source-books.¹⁷ What it tastes of—flowers, the country, dance, Provencal song and country merriment—is the pastoral. Keats is not offering to compound drug abuse with alcoholism but to seek stimulus for a poetry as happy and uncaring as that of the bird's song (the poetry, perhaps, of the figures and decorations of the "leaf-fring'd legend" of the Urn—which turns out to be "Cold Pastoral!"—*Ode on a Grecian Urn*, ll.5,45).

But the warning awareness is still present. The plot of beeches with "shadows numberless" has become "the forest dim". To thus "leave the world unseen" may mean either that reality will be unseen, ignored, or that the poet himself will be simply unrecognized, forgotten, as he fades into the pastoral dream. The possibility of identification with the bird is the stanza's apparent aim, but the Lethan implication of the second possibility remains hinted.

In the opening of the third stanza, the stressed repetition, "Fade far away", leads to the ambiguously valued "dissolve, and quite forget" (l.21). The pastoral and the song may allow the poet to dissolve either (or both) the aware self, and the suffering world of which the nightingale, in "full-throated ease", has never been aware. But then that world is put before us in the moment of its supposed dissolution; and so the real distance between poet and bird is enforced:

The weariness, the fever, and the fret
 Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
 Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
 Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
 Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
 And leaden-eyed despairs,
 Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
 Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. (23-30)

This "real" world, its reality enforced by the repeated "Where . . .", in contrast to the following "guessed" world of the fifth stanza, nevertheless is compounded of literary echo other than pastoral as well as bitter personal experience. The first line, it has been suggested, probably recalls Wordsworth's sense of the busy

17 "Edward Baldwin" (William Godwin), *The Pantheon . . .*, London 1806, p. 49; see *John Keats: The Complete Poems* (Penguin English Poets), ed. John Barnard, Harmondsworth 1973, p. 655.

world, "the fretful stir Unprofitable" of *Tintern Abbey*.¹⁸ The second and third lines catch at the situation of Saturn and the fallen Titans in the opening passages of *Hyperion*¹⁹ (and possibly, too, at *Richard II*). The youth of the fourth line was, of course, brother Tom, who had died of tuberculosis a few months before the writing of the *Ode*. When Keats was re-reading *Lear* the previous October, as Tom was dying, he underlined "poor Tom" in Edgar's remark, "The foul fiend haunts poor Tom in the voice of a nightingale".²⁰ The fifth and sixth lines, which seem to reinforce the opening of the poem, in this context tacitly acknowledge that pursuit of the nightingale involves the separation of sensation and thought. The last two lines of the stanza seem to stand at mid-point between the timeless and sterile figuring of the *Grecian Urn* ("She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!"—ll.19.20) and the resolution in time about to be accepted in the *Ode on Melancholy* ("She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die"—l.21).

In the fourth stanza the reaction against suffering and thought, the search for sensation and release, approaches hysteria in its echoing of the last line of the second stanza and the first line of the third, and in its identifying verb "fly"; "Away! Away! for I will fly to thee, . . . Though the dull brain perplexes and retards" (ll.31,34). One recalls in contrast the first in the series of odes, in which the new goddess Psyche, raised from mortality to the pantheon, was fairer than moon or star (Phoebe or Vesper) because of her suffering; her sanctuary would include "the wreath'd trellis of a working brain" (*Ode to Psyche*, l.60). The recollection enforces the sense of hysteria. "Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards, But on the viewless wings of Poesy" (ll.32,33), looks back to the mortal Indian maiden of *Endymion*, who was a follower of the god. "Viewless wings" is again ambiguous, like "world unseen": is this to be a poetry of release whose mode of flight is invisible, or simply a poetry from which nothing can be seen? But the only possible mode of flight is dream; and so, "I cannot see what flowers are at my feet" (l.41).

The lines following have already been discussed in some detail.

18 See *The Poems of John Keats* (Longmans Annotated English Poets), ed. Miriam Allott, London 1970, p. 526n.

19 *Hyperion*, I, 1-21; Stillinger, p. 329.

20 *Lear*, III.vi.30; in his "Hampstead" Shakespeare. See Caroline Spurgeon, *Keats's Shakespeare*, London 1929, p. 43.

It is however worth emphasizing, in passing, that in all but his earliest poetry Keats was suspicious of what they offer. *Sleep and Poetry*, *Endymion*, the *Ode on Melancholy*, and *The Fall of Hyperion: a Dream* have been mentioned; two other examples, from less well known poems, may be added briefly. In lines for a friend in 1815, Keats joked in almost Byronic fashion about

Some flowery spot, sequester'd, wild, romantic,
That often must have seen a poet frantic; . . .
Where on one side are covert branches hung,
'Mong which the nightingales have always sung
In leafy quiet . . .²¹

A sonnet of 1816 sought "far—far away to leave All meaner thoughts" and, on a summer evening, "to find, with easy quest, A fragrant wild" wherein to "Perhaps on the wing of poesy upsoar . . . When some melodious sorrow spells mine eyes". The anticipations of the *Nightingale* are obvious; but the sonnet also recognizes that the quest would "into delight my soul deceive". In the background are the "stern forms" of "Milton's fate" and "Sydney's bier"—poets of action and commitment rather than flight.²²

If the presence of a particular world of fairy is sensed behind the ode's central lines, it may well be that of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and Oberon's "I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows" includes the violet, musk-rose, and eglantine. The first eight lines of the speech were underlined by Keats in one of his two sets of Shakespeare.²³ The parallel becomes more than casual when one recalls that the "antic fables" are of enchanted dream and subsequent awakening.

The opening of the sixth stanza carries another distinct echo. In "Darkling I listen . . .", the adverb may apply to the darkened world around or to the poet's drowsed condition; that kind of ambivalence has already been exploited in the ode. The phrase is neatly adapted from Milton, who in the exordium to "holy Light" in Book III of *Paradise Lost* applies it to the nightingale:

Then feed on thoughts, that voluntary move
Harmonious numbers; as the wakeful bird
Sings darkling, and in shadiest covert hid
Tunes her nocturnal note.

(Compare the more direct use in the address to Mathew just

21 "To George Felton Mathew", 37-8, 45-7; Stillinger, p. 42.

22 "Oh! how I love, . . .", Stillinger, p. 54.

23 *Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.i. See Spurgeon, p. 93.

quoted.) The whole passage in which the lines occur was underscored by Keats in his edition of Milton; and against it he scribbled a marginal note concerning the "Apollonian" management of the poem.²⁴ Apollo was god of the sun and of poetry, the new Olympian of *Hyperion*, and is associated with rationality.

Whether the juxtaposition of the night world of *Midsummer Night's Dream* and the "Apollonian" *Paradise Lost* was fortuitous or deliberate is now unknowable (although it is difficult to believe it was not planned). The implication is of rationality (thought, knowledge, in Keats's terms) replacing fairy temptation, as the distance between poet and bird increases. Either of the applications of "Darkling" carries a hint of death, either for the poet as in the opening of the poem, or for the bird as at the end. In the sixth stanza, he goes on "and, for many a time I have been half in love with easeful Death" ("easeful" here, significantly qualifies the "full-throated ease" of the song). A further punning ambiguity follows: "To take into the air my quiet breath" may mean either the poetry being breathed, the "mused rhyme"; or more simply, "To cease . . .", the breathing stilled. For the poem up to this point, it has seemed a small price, a richly felt dying into moonlit life:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy! (55-8)

(*The Fall of Hyperion* was to show that "dying into life" was neither painless nor ecstatic.)²⁵

But "half in love" is not wholly committed. The hesitation, and the cautious "seems" which follows, come from the "complex mind" of the poet. They introduce the most abrupt turn of the poem:

Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod. (59-60)

This is a wrenching away from the brink, with the realization that the bird's ecstatic song would become a dirge not even heard. The "melodious plot" becomes an earthy grave. The poem pivots on the terrible casualness of "sod": yet even at this point Keats cannot resist a further ambiguity. The requiem is "high"

24 *Paradise Lost*, III.26-50; from microfilm of Keats's Milton, kindly made available by Keats House, Hampstead.

25 *The Fall of Hyperion*, I, 107 ff; Stillinger, p. 480.

not only in the sense of the mass but because the bird will be still unattainably above, in the domain of the moon.

The seventh stanza, which some readers have found to be a weakness in the poem, completes the separation, in lines which are almost indulgent; it is as if the fever had been sweated out of the poem. The bird's song will endure, as man does not, only because it is not subjected to the pressures of reality which "thou among the leaves hast never known" (1.22): generation, hunger, transience. It is immortal, but cannot confer immortality. It has been pleasing for emperor and clown, consoling for the exiled Ruth, charming—in more than the trivial usage of the word—for those who desire to look through to a fairy world. But emperors and clowns pass; Ruth's reward in exile, in the Old Testament story, was first food, then marriage and generation. Beyond the casements lies danger and ultimate loneliness. Keats is perhaps remembering his lines to Reynolds, where following a reference to magic windows, he concluded:

It is a flaw
In happiness to see beyond our bourn—
It forces us in summer skies to mourn;
It spoils the singing of the nightingale.

That strange occasional poem, which opens with the images of dream, closes:

but I saw
Too far into the sea—where every maw
The greater on the less feeds evermore:—
But I saw too distinct into the core
Of an eternal fierce destruction.²⁶

The expanded repetition of "fade away" from the second to the third and fourth stanzas is now matched by the reflective repetition of "forlorn" from the seventh to the eighth stanza. The word's sound recalls the tolling bell of the burial, following the requiem mass; but here, the emphasis on the grave has marked the return to identity. Paradoxically, the recollection serves "To toll me back from thee to my sole self" (1.72), and therefore away from the descent to Lethe. The earlier "Away! away!" becomes "Adieu! adieu!" with the recognition that all has been deception by the "deceiving elf" of fancy. None of this was new to Keats; in *Endymion* he had written of the "Brain-sick shepherd prince" and his "journey homeward to habitual self

26 "Dear Reynolds, as last night . . .", 82-5, 93-7; Stillinger, pp. 243-4.

[from the] mad-pursuing of the fog-born elf".²⁷ The bird's "full-throated" song, which became a requiem, is now heard as merely plaintive, and fades:

thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side: and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades: (75-8)

In place of the first desire to "quite forget" (l.21), the song is now forgotten: in fact it, rather than the poet, is "buried deep". One remembers Shelley's triumphant lines in his elegy for Keats:

He lives, he wakes—'tis Death is dead, not he;
Mourn not for Adonais.—Thou young Dawn
Turn all thy dew to splendour . . .²⁸

The poem closes on the questions,

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

Many accounts of the *Ode* suggest that the questions are left unanswered; Keats is still unsure whether dream or wakefulness holds the greater insight. But the whole mood of the closing stanza is not of bewilderment, or unsureness. There is a remarkable clarity of imagery, very different from the dimness of the Queen-Moon's world: scene and perspective, hearing and sight, are clear. The answers are that the experience was not a pastoral vision of the ideal, as it at first seemed; but nor did it end in death. Now that the numbness of the senses, the dullness of the mind, have been overcome—he can see and hear, and need not guess—the poet is fully awake. The body is thinking, not dreaming.

The time scheme of the poem supports that conclusion. The opening lines are in the evening, with "shadows numberless". The evening moves to the "embalmed darkness" of wavering and sightless light, and then to the midnight darkness of the grave: "To cease upon the midnight . . .". But now, as the clearness and range of view intimate, it is dawn, the time of wakefulness, of Apollo. Perhaps this is what Coleridge meant by the "logic" of poetry, and Keats by his anticipation of the "philosophic Mind", which has, as Wordsworth realized, yielded up "the glory and the dream" for "thoughts that do lie too deep for tears".

27 *Endymion*, II.43, 276-7; Stillinger, pp. 133, 140.

28 *Adonais*, 361-3, *Shelley's Poetry and Prose* (Norton Critical Edition), ed. D. H. Reiman and Sharon B. Powers, New York 1977, p. 402.