

Keats' Great Odes and the Sublime

by Daniel Leach

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When John Keats died in Rome on Feb. 23, 1821, at the age of 25, the world lost one of the greatest poetic geniuses it had ever known, and although much of what would undoubtedly have been his greatest work was unfinished, and as much scattered about in, or only hinted at in his letters, his published works contain some of the greatest treasures in the history of art and the pinnacle of Classical poetry in the English language—his “Great Odes.”

These works have continued to inspire every generation since his death, despite numerous changes, mostly for the worse, in popular tastes, attesting to their grounding in universal principles of the human spirit. Although volumes have been written about them individually, they have been poorly understood, precisely for that reason. For they were the product of one single outburst of creativity in the space of a few weeks in the Spring of 1819, and are the unfolding of a single poetic idea, like the planets which congealed from the revolving disc thrown off by that primeval Sun. It will be the purpose of this article to explore this idea, for it lies at the center of the most profound question facing mankind, particularly in times of crisis: Man's mortality, and the conflict with his immortal identity, which Friedrich Schiller called the *Sublime*.

Before looking at the poems themselves, it is crucial, in order to fully comprehend the intent governing their creation as a whole, to know that Keats was part of

a revolutionary youth movement, which consciously understood itself to be championing the view of Man and his relationship to nature, God, and his fellow men, that was embodied in the American Revolution, and in deadly conflict with the opposite, oligarchical view, as represented by the reactionary forces arrayed at the Congress of Vienna in 1815.

This movement included Keats, as well as Percy Shelley, Leigh Hunt, and the essayist William Hazlitt, among others. The political atmosphere in which they worked was a brutal, repressive one, reminiscent of the McCarthyite witch hunts of the 1950s, directed against anyone espousing “republican” sympathies, which Keats most emphatically did with his first widely circulated poem, “Written On the Day Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison.” Hunt had been imprisoned for insulting the Prince Regent and, as one of the boldest of the circle of reformers who operated a philosophical-poetic-political magazine, *The Examiner*, his work had become a national cause célèbre. To openly announce one's sympathy with him, as Keats did, was a declaration of war against the monarchy, and all it stood for. To portray Keats as

merely a sensitive, misunderstood aesthete, is, on the part of most academic scholars, deliberately misleading, and obscures the deeper meaning of his great achievements—from which comes the passion which drives his relentless quest to awaken in others an awareness of their own higher, spiritual nature.

The prejudices of the Romantic Era, in which the notion of the separation of *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft*—on the one hand, the natural sci-



William Hilton

John Keats
(1795-1821)

ences, the domain of Reason, deductive, axiomatic systems, and precise, intelligible, mathematical language; and on the other, the Arts, the domain of “feeling” and arbitrary and subjective personal experience, on the other—continue to distort our perception of Keats’ poetry to this day. Keats, as is apparent in his letters, had no such idea about his own work, and was, in fact, striving for a unified concept of the human psyche that comprehended man’s heart and mind, and his relationship to all of mankind, past, present, and future.

For All Mankind To See that Beauty

This fundamentally moral question was at the center of the political debate that raged in the salons and across the pages of the leading literary journals of the day. A man’s politics were determined by his views and tastes in art, poetry, and music; in whether he gloried in the formal, lifeless, impersonal art and institutions of Rome, or the free and open spirit of discovery of Classical Greece; in whether he upheld the endlessly cynical sophistry of the Augustan poetry of Alexander Pope and John Dryden, or the passionate republicanism of William Shakespeare and John Milton; whether he adopted the view of John Locke, Edmund Burke and the French empiricists, that man is capable only of knowing what his senses tell him and is therefore essentially an animal and naturally selfish and evil, or that of Gottfried Leibniz, and Friedrich Schiller, that man is essentially of a spiritual nature, partaking of the same quality of creativity as that universal principle Christians call God, and therefore, essentially good.

What is remarkable about this period in England, is the openness of this debate and the transparency of its political ramifications. The French Revolution had demonstrated the bloody consequences of unleashing the rule of the mob, uneducated and acting only on its “natural” instincts and animal-like passions. Yet the reactionary institutions of the monarchy, the landed and financial oligarchy, and the State Church, had reacted by branding any attempt at reform as “revolutionist,” and therefore, threatening the very existence of society. In fact, both sides of the debate were controlled—not only had British agents precipitated the Reign of Terror in France,¹

1. For a fuller discussion of this, see Pierre Beaudry, “[Why France Did Not Have an American Revolution](#),” *EIR*, Vol. 29, No. 2, Jan. 18, 2002.

and the reaction to it, but the underlying philosophical premises of both sides were the same, namely that man is a beast, and must either accept rule by the stronger, or by divine right, or overthrow this rule on behalf of the supposed right of unrestricted “freedom” to pursue his selfish, animal-like interest.

That the latter course will ultimately end in an even more brutal and repressive dictatorship, is, of course, the secret of this whole game, and the issue that republicans of this circle knew they must somehow address. It is the issue which Schiller addressed in his *Letters on the Aesthetical Education of Man*:

True is it, the repute of opinion is fallen, caprice is unmasked, and, although still armed



Friedrich Schiller

with power, yet it obtains no more dignity; man is aroused from his long indolence and self-deception, and with an emphatic majority he demands the restoration of his inalienable rights. But he doth not merely demand them, on that side and this side he rises up, to take by force, what in his opinion is wrongfully denied him. The edifice of the natural state rocks, its worn out foundations give way, and a physical possibility seems given, to place the law upon the throne, to honor man finally as an end in himself and to make true freedom the basis of political union. Vain hope! The moral possibility is wanting; and the generous moment finds an unresponsive people.

How Keats decided to confront this problem is, al-

though not explicitly stated, very similar to Schiller. Unlike Shelley, who waged a fierce and overtly political polemic in his prose writings and his poems, Keats, like Schiller, felt that only by working on the inner being, the emotions, could the artist produce that desire for the Good, that longing for all men to see the potential beauty residing in their own souls which is the essence of true and durable political freedom. This ineffable principle, which the Bible calls “agapē,” or love, and the American Constitution invokes as the concern for the General Welfare of present and future generations, cannot be inculcated as a doctrine, or merely demanded as a social duty, as Kant asserted, for unless it is embedded in the individual’s emotional identity, becoming, so to speak, “instinctive,” the lower, selfish, animal-like emotions can always be provoked, particularly in times of great crisis and stress.

The Personal and the Philosophical

Before turning to the question of how Keats approached this issue in the odes themselves, it is indispensable to briefly consider the personal factors in his life, which shaped not only his overall philosophical outlook, but also his emotional relationship to the mission that was his poetic art.

Creative discoveries which change the direction of mankind’s knowledge, therefore advancing his power in the universe, never occur solely as the sum of various influences, in a deterministic way, but are spurred by an intention, a gripping passion in an individual human soul, which, although it embodies the sum total of all the ideas from all of the generations of mankind which combined to produce it, nevertheless can make an absolutely unique contribution of potentially infinite consequence for the universe as a whole. So, although Keats was clearly thinking along these lines from his earliest forays into poetic composition,² it was not until the events of 1818-1819 in his personal life, that he made the decision to dedicate himself fully to his mission, despite the consequences for himself. The result was the odes.

Besides the longing for immortality, the sense of dwelling in the timeless realm of beauty, that, for Keats, was embodied in Classical Greek sculpture, and the

2. Keats’ first published poem, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,” exemplifies this connection between the individual creative discovery and the universe as a whole.

philosophy of Plato that so enraptured him, the other thing about which Keats was passionate was Love—that direct and intimate connection to, and sympathy with, another human being, which was, for him, a sacred thing. Also sacred to him was his relationship to his brothers. Yet his sense of the fleeting nature of these physical connections was impressed upon his soul early and quite violently, for his father died in an accident when he was a child; his mother died of tuberculosis when he was in his teens; and then, in the Winter of 1818, after his brother George had emigrated to America, his other brother, Tom, also died of tuberculosis, virtually in his arms.

Keats struggled mightily with feelings of despair and victimization that would have crushed lesser souls, but much as did Beethoven in his “Heiligenstadt Testament,” in which he committed himself to continue his creative life despite the devastating knowledge of his impending, total deafness, out of pure agapic love of mankind, Keats found a reserve of moral strength which is the very essence of the sublime quality expressed later in the odes. This struggle can be seen in an untitled sonnet composed around this time, known simply as, “When I Have Fears.”

When I Have Fears

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charactery
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain,
When I behold upon the night’s starr’d face
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows with the magic hand of chance,
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I may never live to see thee more,
Never have relish in the faerie power
Of unreflecting Love—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone and think,
’Til Love and Fame to nothingness do sink.

In this poem, we see, as if in germ form, what would later unfold in full bloom in his great odes: the struggle with mortal concerns of fame, worldly notions of accomplishment, and the anxious, insistent drive to create and possess ideas almost as objects, expressed in the first four lines; and the reverent sense of mystery in being the vehicle for the unseen principles of which the

visual images we see are merely the “symbols,” expressed in the second quatrain. Here are the elements of that creative tension, that restive striving towards something eternal, which we can never fully know in mortal life, but only see a reflection of, in the paradoxes of our experience, which Keats later focused upon and drove over the threshold of the sublime. And here we see that characteristic emotional connection, at once intensely personal, and yet universal, which carries us, as it were, over with him.

The “turn” of this sonnet, beginning with, “And when I feel,” could be addressed to one “fair creature of an hour” or, for that matter, all creatures, all human beings. The agonizing sense of the fleeting nature of any human relationship, yet the passion associated with the idea of “unreflecting love,” an unquestioning, unconditional, pure and ideal kind of love, creates a melancholy, yet strangely uplifting effect on us. When Keats then “stands upon the shore of the wide world alone,” he, and we with him, can see the now seemingly petty concerns of “love” and “fame,” thought of in their mundane sense, indeed sink into nothingness. It is as if the very process of confronting mortality, yet relishing even the fleeting reflection of the immortal in the visible world, creates the emotional energy to break through to a higher state of true spiritual freedom. Schiller discusses just this phenomenon in his essay, “On the Sublime”.³

The feeling of the sublime is a mixed feeling. It is a combination of woefulness, which expresses itself in its highest degree as a shudder, and of



Tom Keats

Joseph Severn

joyfulness, which can rise up to enrapture, and, although it is not properly pleasure, is yet widely preferred to every pleasure by fine souls. This union of two contradictory sentiments in a single feeling proves our moral independence in an irrefutable manner. For as it is absolutely impossible for the same object to stand in two opposite relations to us, so does it follow therefrom, that we ourselves stand in two different relations to the object, so that consequently two opposite natures must be united in us, which are interested in the conception of the same in completely

opposite ways. We therefore experience through the feeling of the sublime, that the state of our mind does not necessarily conform to the state of the senses, that the laws of nature are not necessarily also those of ours, and that we have in us an independent principle, which is independent of all sensuous emotions.

After his brother Tom died in November 1818, Keats went into a period of depression, self-doubt, and lassitude, in which he abandoned his great, unfinished epic poem, “Hyperion,” and wrote almost nothing. After several fits and starts and a few completed poems, Keats had an epiphany which produced one of the greatest creative outpourings in literary history. By what thought process this came about, is largely a mystery, but the results themselves are the footprints of this thought-object, which we can reconstruct in our own minds by working through the odes as an ordered process.

Although there has been a great amount of debate in academic circles as to the chronological order in which they were written, it is a largely irrelevant, if not downright silly matter, for when taken in their natural, conceptual order, they present an unfolding idea, much like the movements of a musical composition, which is evident from their content alone. From Keats’ letters, we do know, at least, that the “Ode to Psyche” was the first one he wrote, and that he wrote it in the spring of 1819. In it he clearly announces his dedication to a sacred mission:

3. Before Schiller wrote “On the Sublime,” which it is doubtful Keats ever read, the most influential writings on the subject, at least in the modern period, were by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Although it is useful to compare the methodological approaches of Schiller, on the one hand, and Kant and Burke on the other, it is important to note that both Burke and Kant start from the assumption, largely based on John Locke, that man can only know what simple sense perception tells him, and then only base judgements on this information according to whether it produces pleasure or pain. William Hazlitt, a contemporary and friend of Keats, thoroughly demolished this view in his commentaries on Madame De Stael’s “The Poetry and Philosophy of Germany,” in the section on Kant.

Ode to Psyche

O goddess! Hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
Even into thine own soft-conched ear:
Surely I dreamt today, or did I see
The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?
I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly,
And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,
Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side
In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
A brooklet, scarce espied:
'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian,
They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass;
Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;
Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu,
As if disjoined by soft-handed slumber,
And ready still past kisses to outnumber
At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love:
The winged boy I knew;
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
His Psyche true!

O latest born and loveliest vision far
Of all Olympus' faded hierarchy!
Fairer than Phoebe's sapphire-region'd star,
Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky;
Fairer than these, though temple thou hast none,
Nor altar heap'd with flowers;
Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
Upon the midnight hours;
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
From chain-swung censer teeming;
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

O brightest! though too late for antique vows,
Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
Holy the air, the water, and the fire;
Yet even in these days so far retir'd
From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,
Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd.
So let me be thy choir, and make a moan

Upon the midnight hours;
Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
From swung censer teeming;
Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new-grown with pleasant
 pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep;
And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!

Keats had read that the goddess Psyche was added to the Greek Pantheon at a much later time than the ancient gods who had been worshipped from the time before Homer. Since she was a beautiful mortal who was made immortal, incurring the wrath and jealousy of Hera, the wife of Zeus, and undergoing all manner of persecution, but ultimately overcoming it, and since she did represent the human soul, with its roots in mortality, but its destiny in immortality, she was an irresistible poetic subject for Keats. Although he is often criticized for an excessive sentimentality, for using such phrases as “fainting with surprise,” it is precisely the passion with which Keats approaches this ideal object, and his reaction to his own discovery, that is the essence of the matter he is placing before us.

After first establishing the setting and the “poetic device” of the poem—and accidental discovery of Cupid and Psyche asleep in an embrace which is at once full of warm, human passion, yet somehow in suspension, unrealized—Keats quickly gets to his real subject; his own mind and its reaction to this discovery. In his letters, Keats spoke of a concept he called “the greeting

of the spirit,”⁴ with its object, as the real subject of poetry—the active participation of the human mind with the objects of the senses as the true substance of experience.

Keats here, after creating a powerful sense of longing for this beautiful image of a goddess who never received the reverence and devotion of the old gods, then announces this “greeting of the spirit” with the line, “I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir’d,” the real “turn” of this poem. He then repeats the refrain from the second stanza, “no lute, no pipe, . . .” etc., now offering himself as the priest who will inspire the religious devotion to Psyche, and it is as if a flood of creativity is unleashed by this act.

What follows is one of the most lyrical and literally “flowery,” yet profound descriptions of the creative process in all of poetry. He strikes a perfect balance between the untamed natural beauty of the physical world and the creations of the human mind; between the apparent, static perfection of nature, and the beauty which we, with the power of the imagination, can add, like a “gardener . . . breeding flowers.”

He concludes with the double image of creating this beautiful world as an act of love for Psyche, but also his own heart, like a torch inviting the “warm Love in”—in complete openness to new experience, new passion, and new creative growth and development. So we have here a union of intellect, imagination and heart, which leaves us open to a process of endless change and growth, yet expressed with such grace and simplicity that we hardly notice the profound discovery which Keats is reporting, and the mission he is announcing, which would unfold in his subsequent odes.

The Creative Tension

Keats now had the “thought object” before his mind’s eye which he knew he had to somehow make



George Keats

palpable in the mind of his audience: the greatness and beauty of the individual, creative soul as it struggles through the paradoxes of its mortal existence to find its true, immortal identity. This was for Keats, as it was for Schiller, the highest calling of Art, to induce the awareness of this greatness sleeping within, and the tension, and even conflict, between it and all that is sensual, accidental or temporal. This is what Schiller called the Sublime. In one of his letters, Keats used quasi-religious poetic metaphor to express the same idea:

The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is “a vale of tears” from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven—What a little circumscribed straightened notion! Call the world if you please “The vale of Soul-making.” Then you will find out the use of the world (I am speaking now in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal which I will here take for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which has struck me concerning it) I say “soul-making”—Soul as distinguished from an intelligence. There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions—but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. Intelligences are atoms of perception—they know and see and they are pure, in short, they are God—how then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them—so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one’s individual existence? How, but by the medium of a world like this? This point I sincerely wish to consider because I think it a grander system of salvation than the christian religion—or rather it is a system of spirit-creation—This is effected by three grand materials acting the one upon the other for a series of years—These three Materials are the intelli-

4. Robert Gittings, *Letters of John Keats* (Oxford University Press, 1970), Letter to George Keats, Feb. 14-May 3, 1819.

gence—the human heart (as distinguished from intelligence or mind) and the world or elemental space suited for the proper action of Mind and Heart on each other for the purpose of forming the Soul or Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity.

—*Letter to George Keats, February 1818*

This creative tension between the ideal, the eternal, the One, and the concrete, particular reality of sensual experience, was to be the very “fuel” which Keats used to bridge the chasm and achieve, in the later odes, a whole new poetic level, a higher “power.” But first, he knew he had to deal with the human foibles that block the emotions to the kind of passion required to make that journey. He did so, from two different standpoints in “Ode on Indolence,” and “Ode on Melancholy.” Whether he actually wrote these later, after “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” is really immaterial, as their thought content clearly precedes, psychologically the latter two, even if written later to elucidate that thought process, in hindsight. So, we shall consider them first.

Ode on Indolence

“They toil not, neither do they spin”

I

One morn before me were three figures seen,
With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced:
And one behind the other stepp’d serene,
In placid sandals, and in white robes graced;
They pass’d, like figures on a marble urn,
When shifted round to see the other side;
They came again; as when the urn once more
Is shifted round, the first seen shades return;
And they were strange to me, as may betide
With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore.

II

How is it, Shadows! that I knew ye not?
How came ye muffled in so hush a mask?
Was it a silent deep-disguised plot
To steal away, and leave without a task
My idle days? Ripe was the drowsy hour;
The blissful cloud of Summer-indolence
Benumb’d my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;
Pain had no sting, and pleasure’s wreath no flower:
O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense
Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?

III

A third time pass’d they by, and, passing, turn’d
Each one the face a moment whiles to me;
Then faded, and to follow them I burn’d
And ach’d for wings because I knew the three;
The first was a fair Maid, and Love her name;
The second was Ambition, pale of cheek,
And ever watchful with fatigued eye;
The last, whom I love more, the more of blame
Is heap’d upon her, maiden most unmeek,—
I knew to be my demon Poesy.

IV

They faded, and forsooth! I wanted wings:
O folly! What is love! and where is it?
And for that poor Ambition! it springs
From a man’s little heart’s short fever-fit;
For Poesy!—no,—she has not a joy,—
At least for me,—so sweet as drowsy noons,
And evenings steep’d in honied indolence;
O, for an age so shelter’d from annoy,
That I may never know how change the moons,
Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!

V

And once more came they by;—alas! wherefore?
My sleep had been embroider’d with dim dreams;
My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o’er
With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:
The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,
Tho’ in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;
The open casement press’d a new-leav’d vine,
Let in the budding warmth and throstle’s lay;
O shadows! ’twas a time to bid farewell!
Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine.

VI

So, ye three Ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise
My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;
For I would not be dieted with praise,
A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!
Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more
In masque-like figures on the dreamy urn;
Farewell! I yet have visions for the night,
And for the day faint visions there is store;
Vanish, ye Phantoms! from my idle spright,
Into the clouds, and never more return!

Keats had often spoken of his “bouts of indolence,” not as an ordinary sort of laziness, but as an almost transcendental sort of passivity, and openness to pure experience, unmediated by conventional thought. He some-

times felt that, in these moments, his apprehension of essential ideas was so pure, so beyond the world of commonplace reasoning, that any attempt to confine it to a deductive system, such as language, was almost a sacrilege. And, as we saw in “When I Have Fears,” Keats was highly self-critical and wary of his own intentions regarding fame and love, so he here personifies them and sets them in conflict with this pure and ideal state of mind, which he playfully chooses to call “indolence.”

The paradox of this poem is already contained in the inscription beneath the title; it is from *Matthew*, 6:28, and refers to Jesus admonishing his disciples not to be unduly attached to the concerns of everyday life: “Consider the lilies of the field. . . .” It is not that we can completely ignore those things which are the necessary consequence of our mortal nature, but if our sense of identity is located in them, we can never fully identify with our true, divine nature—“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be, also.”

Here, Keats is haunted by three ghostly shapes representing Love, Ambition, and, ironically, “Poesy,” which he portrays as attempting to seduce him out of his blissful indolence, where “Pain had no sting, and pleasure’s wreath no flower,” and it is here that most lovers of Keats’ poetry begin to experience a tension which attends the paradox he is confronting us with. For how could he consider “poesy”—Poetry—his divine calling, a demon which tempts and threatens somehow to corrupt him, along with love and ambition? Is Keats merely, as some suggest, having a self-indulgent fit of existential desire for nothingness, or psychological death, or escape from reality? Or is he seeking something higher?

The answer to these questions lies, in a sense, outside of the elements of the paradox, as all true metaphors do. In stanzas IV and V, Keats draws out and allows the full weight of the two sides of the paradox to be fully felt. He clearly rejects love and ambition, considered as attachments to mortal things, in phrases such as “man’s little heart’s fever-fit” and “the voice of busy common-sense,” contrasting them to a timeless or eternal state, “shelter’d from annoy,” where one may “never know how change the moons.” But still, what of Poesy? Why reject her, too? Perhaps he is somehow, in utterly rejecting all “normal,” conventional motives, defining, or at least intimating a higher notion of this calling.

Look at what he does in stanza V; they tempt him

once more, but something has changed—a serenity which is at once passive and receptive, yet full of a potential creative energy, ready to unleash new beauty from the union of itself with Nature, yet hung in suspension, not ready or needing to, yet. There is something completely free in this passage, that is the shadow or footprint of a process that Keats struggled through in real life. He did, in fact, reject fame and risked a life of poverty to follow his creative genius, and he rejected the allure of a commonplace sort of relationship with Fanny Brawne,⁵ in order to pursue his mission unhindered. This courage to locate his identity solely in his creative self, enables him to then confidently predict that he has, from within himself, “visions for the night, And for the day faint visions there is store.”

There is a distinct feeling of freedom, even triumph, in this last stanza, confirming for us that Keats had, indeed, made a psychological break from his own demons and could now, with a new-found courage, go to the next level and challenge himself, and us, to go there with him. The ultimate irony of “Indolence” is, of course, that Keats neither became indolent, nor abandoned Poetry, as a “literal” reading might suggest, but plunged into the thorniest and most difficult of paradoxes with openness and honesty, relying only on the certainty of this idea which is a definite, yet undefined “thought object,” arising out of the process he just underwent. This he did in the “Ode on Melancholy.”

Ode on Melancholy

I

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

5. Keats, even before his final illness, had a complicated, and much theorized about, relationship with Fanny Brawne. Although obviously captivated by her physical charms, and enjoying a certain intellectual rapport with her, he nevertheless regarded marriage, or any constant domestic arrangement, as a hindrance to his ability to write, and several times banished himself from her presence for this reason.

II

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globed peonies;
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

III

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

Here, Keats turns from addressing himself and asking us to witness the result, as in “Psyche” and “Indolence,” to directly address you, the reader. He seems to be saying, yes, the human condition is fraught with an inescapable melancholy; a consciousness of some unattainable perfection of which all experience falls short, the inevitable passing of every state of temporal happiness, pains, disappointments, and, of course, the ultimate “bummer,” death—yet, don't try to suppress the full import of this excruciating paradox of human existence, don't try to escape it—embrace it! This, of course, goes against every instinct of particularly today's Baby Boomer-dominated culture, which avoids this issue as an axiomatic matter of principle; “Don't go there!” But Keats knows we must go there if we are going to discover anything.

What Keats does in the second stanza is something that must be simply experienced with the heart and spirit. Let the full weight of melancholy contained in these images of briefly glorious, yet passing beauty sink in. Then feel the full import of including even one's own beloved—another

human being—in this sad progression. Keats says again, no, don't run from it—savor it! Is there not something richly satisfying in that, despite the knowledge, as he makes clear in the first four lines of stanza III, that it too will pass? Is there not something divine and transcendental in the overall effect of this? Ah, that is the point; without explicitly stating it, we are made to feel the beauty of the human soul, as a bridge, if you will, to a higher idea, a higher power. All of the other images, however beautiful, were of nature, but this is, after all, a human being—human hands and human eyes and behind them, a soul. The concluding image suggests being somehow suspended in a state which is at once triumphant, and also strangely passive, as if in the sway of a higher power.

We are now ready to really appreciate the truly remarkable breakthrough represented by Keats' greatest odes, “Ode to a Nightingale” and “Ode on a Grecian Urn”:



Albrecht Dürer; Melencolia, 1614.

Ode to a Nightingale

I

My heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

II

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade into the forest dim:

III

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
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 tomorrow.

IV

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
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.

V

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 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.

VI

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
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!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

VII

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

VIII

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! Adieu! 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:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?

One is struck immediately in the first stanza by the contrast between the almost pitiable state in which he describes himself, and the utter freedom and happiness of the nightingale. There seems to be an almost unbridgeable gap between them, for the nightingale is off in "some melodious plot . . ." which the poet cannot see, but only imagine from the sound which reaches him. By means of this image, in ten lines, Keats has powerfully conveyed the paradox of our existence—that higher

state of unconditional joy and connectedness which the senses can only hint at, never actually capturing—and with an emotional intensity that drives us onward to try to discover an idea which resolves this tension.

In the second stanza, we have a description of a state of unbridled and unalloyed happiness which seems to be the answer to the dilemma posed in “Melancholy,” of pleasure always passing into pain and lost almost as soon as it is felt, but which he now imagines can be attained if only he could “drink and leave the world unseen . . .,” and through some magical incantation, join the nightingale in this paradise beyond the senses.

The third stanza is one of the most agonizing descriptions of the human condition in all of poetry; especially considering the pain and loss which Keats had suffered, it is all the more compelling, even pathetic. How, then, can we bridge this gap? How can we attain, in this life, some measure of real meaning and happiness if every pleasure, like the sand slipping through our fingers, is continually passing, human attachments are all ultimately broken by death, and even love seems to be inconstant or is betrayed? Keats here does something truly amazing, and discovering just how he accomplishes it, not only goes right to the heart of the breakthrough that he had made, but enables us, borne along with him by the magic of his poetry, to make the same breakthrough. With the line, “Away, away, for I will fly to thee,” Keats simply rejects the painful and paradoxical world of the senses, and, although it may seem at this point like an artificial device to almost naively entrust one’s soul to the “viewless wings of Poesy” to transport it, it is what he does next that convinces the mind and heart that something of genuine substance is occurring.

A Force Acting Throughout History

After rejecting any sort of artificial escape through mere intoxication, “Bacchus and his pards,” and then referring to the way in which the intellect, alone, only “perplexes and retards” this flight of the spirit, Keats simply asserts that this power to connect with the eternal is already there inside of us, and he is now aware that he is “already with thee,” and has been transported into a realm where, even if the eternal is still infinitely distant and otherworldly, it nevertheless transforms his power of vision. Like Carl Gauss’ complex domain, an unseen, universal principle is shaping the visible domain. The passage starting with “But here there is no light,” through to the end of the following stanza, is one of the most powerful examples of an almost clairvoyant poetic

vision ever written. Keats makes clear that he is not actually seeing any of the things he describes, nor is he smelling or hearing anything, but rather apprehending, with a newfound power of poetic imagination, the objects of the visible domain, connecting somehow with their very essence. Gone is all of the pain and turmoil of the first three stanzas, and nothing could express the resulting of inner peace and fullness of life better than “the murmurous haunt of flies on Summer eves.”

This is why we sense an innate truthfulness in what might otherwise seem morbid or just weird in his then referring to death in such a beautiful, even longing, way. For if we can, in fact, live with this eternal quality inside of us, if it is indeed our identity, death is nothing to fear, but is only the ultimate union of the soul with its true self. Keats here has not brought about this awareness of the existence of the soul by a rational argument, not by resort to dogma or belief, but by making us feel it, poetically. But he also makes clear that even if one were to die while in communication with this spirit, there is still something about the nightingale’s song that is beyond us, and seemingly unattainable. If not for these last two lines, the poem might have been ended here, if a lesser poet had written it, but there is still something more to discover, something more Keats wants to say, and it is precisely in this that his sublime intention becomes clear.

He seems to suddenly realize that this spirit is much bigger than merely him and the nightingale, but is a force acting throughout human history, and that he is connected, through it, to every other human being, who ever heard it. The imagination then opens wide to the implications of the hypothesis, beginning with “Perhaps . . .”; every longing for something great or noble, seemingly lost or unattainable, every great endeavor of the human spirit was inspired by this voice. And its “magical” power can even appear to show the way when all hope seems to be lost. In this short space, Keats has universalized the idea and connected it to all of humanity, past, present and future, so that the union with the nightingale, which eludes him even in the spiritual death so beautifully portrayed in the preceding stanza, is now located in a higher concept, the “Simultaneity of Eternity,” that timeless realm in which all human beings, through the power to communicate ideas across centuries, even after physical death, are indeed connected. Although it is here glimpsed but briefly and then fades, leaving him, and us, wondering whether it was “a vision or a waking dream. . . .” We are now prepared, emotionally, to deal with it directly, as the ruling idea of Keats’ immortal “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

Ode on a Grecian Urn

I

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

II

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

III

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs, for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
For ever panting, and for ever young;
All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

IV

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of its folk this pious morn?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.



V

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,”—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

One thing that is often overlooked about this poem, which emerges when considering its basic argument, in the light of what has been discussed in the previous odes, is the principle of inversion; here, the entire poetic device being an inversion of the “Nightingale.” Whereas in the “Nightingale,” the ineffable principle being alluded to was *heard, but unseen*, here, it is *seen, but unheard*.

Again, Keats, as in the “Nightingale,” uses the paradoxes of the senses to induce the mind to conceptualize a principle completely outside the world of the senses, yet which exists with, and works through, those sensual objects, in the same way that we experience a Classically composed musical work; the overall idea of the piece can never be contained in one note or succession of notes, yet could never be arrived at except through experiencing the paradoxes, the ironies, generated among them, as the piece develops. This is the unity of the One with the Many discussed by Plato, Nicholas of Cusa, and Leibniz, and rigorously proven to exist as the “Complex Domain” by Carl Gauss.

In the “Nightingale,” Keats cuts to the chase immediately. After describing the object he is placing before our imagination, and stating that this “bride of quiet-

ness” is going to say something to us which can’t be captured in words, representing the crux of the paradox upon which the whole poem is based, he simply and beautifully states, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter,” thus lifting us into the realm of the imagination, it seems, effortlessly.

And whereas we feel a sharpening of melancholy at the thought of the loss of beauty and pleasure that is inescapably bound up with mortality, as in the “Ode on Indolence” and the “Ode on Melancholy,” or the agonizing pathos of the third stanza of the “Ode to a Nightingale,” we are here presented with the inversion of that paradox; for the figures on the urn are forever frozen in the moment of the highest pleasure and happiness, just before its actual attainment, beyond change, beyond death. The “bold lover” cannot actually ever get what he seeks, actually experience the sensual pleasure he desires, but its object can never fade or die. This forces the mind to free itself from the senses and identify with the eternal.

There is something so compelling in this image of eternal love, happiness, even of the eternally fresh, creative outpourings of music from an eternally young heart, that we are tempted to want to exist in this idyllic universe with them until, in the last three lines of stanza III, we are suddenly reminded of our mortal identity and that an unbridgeable gap separates us from this world “far above,” and which leaves us vainly striving after it with a “burning forehead and a parching tongue.” Are we, therefore, stuck back in the same condition as at the end of “Nightingale”? Is this ineffable principle forever glimpsed only fleetingly, forever escaping us as in a dream?

Consider carefully what Keats does next. In stanza IV, we are suddenly reminded that this is, after all, a religious ceremony, a sacrifice, and that these are depictions of what were once real people. Keats then does something which causes great consternation, when considered in logical or deductive terms, but which resonates on the deeper level of metaphorical truth in a necessary way, and which is the crux of not only this entire poem, but also the entirety of the process Keats embarked on with the announcement of his “mission” in the “Ode to Psyche.”

To Continue To Live Through Us

By personifying a “little town” which isn’t even depicted on the urn, but exists entirely in our imagination, and causing us to feel the sense of loss of the physical presence of these human beings, we are at once enabled to conceptualize both the melancholy fact that they are physically dead, lost forever, but yet exist somewhere,

as if they might come back, and since we have already experienced such a powerful and vital effect from them, even as frozen images on the urn, we really have an implicit idea, which is both intellectual, and felt deeply, emotionally, that they exist in a timeless, yet ever-beautiful and creative place, which can speak to us, even over thousands of years!

The emotion evoked is *agapē*—love, not just for people, but for the idea of humanity, and the image of the little town takes us entirely out of the sensual world into the world of the imagination in the highest expression of true metaphor.

When Keats expresses his wonder and joy at this profound discovery being communicated by means of a cold, dead object, and proclaims his famous dictum, “Beauty is truth, truth Beauty,” we know that it is true, and feel that it is beautiful. But could that statement mean anything to us if merely uttered alone, without having gone through the process of discovery which this poem represents? And could this poem mean half as much to us if we had not gone through the journey with Keats from his indistinct proclamation of an intention in “Ode to Psyche,” through the soul-searching and restless drive to discover the immortal in ourselves which characterizes the other three odes?

So, we contemplate the One, the entire process which unfolded in these poems with wonder and amazement, not only at the profundity of it, but the passion which gripped Keats as he poured forth this beauty, all in a few weeks in that Spring of 1819, at age 24. Are we not uplifted and spiritually empowered to comprehend and act upon the boldest and most universal ideas concerning mankind? It is not necessary for the poet to prod us to any particular action, or to moralize upon any particular defect in ourselves or society when we are moved on this level, for we will feel and know “instinctively” that it is what contributes to, or detracts from, this idea of humanity, which constitutes good or evil.

Emotionally blocked, academic pundits and “touchy-feely” Romantics will never be able to understand Keats for just this reason. True republican political organizing is on this level—the issue of what it truly means to be human, your place, therefore, in the Simultaneity of Eternity, which connects you to all humanity, past, present, and future, and your mission in the moment of history in which you find yourself. That is why nothing could be more beautiful than for Keats to not only speak to us, but continue to live through us, energizing and inspiring our ongoing fight for a more beautiful humanity.

This is the Sublime.