

**KEATS'S "ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE":
AN APPRECIATION IN KEATSIAN AESTHETICS WITH
POSSIBLE SOURCES AND ANALOGUES**

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ABSTRACT: Artistically Keats's Nightingale Ode is one of his best conceived and most satisfying and as such most discussed poems. However, while its principal theme of the contrast between the permanence of nature and the shortlastingness of the human lot and that of the precarious nature of creative imagination have received wide critical attention, the internal and structural mechanisms of the movement of the thought process and the figures of speech by which those themes and contrasts reveal themselves in a controlled but suggestive manner have not been examined in details. This article provides an original, refreshing, and detailed approach, largely from a New Critical point of view, to those mechanisms in order to show the poem's essential unity beneath its apparent tension, irony, ambiguity, and skepticism, which are indeed part of its aesthetic conception in light of Keats's own poetic and aesthetic ideas. But the most original and scholarly point is that it is rich and comprehensive in bringing together a whole range of possible sources and analogues of the poem, many of which have been suggested here for the first time.

Key Words: *sources, analogues, aestheticism, imagination, and unity*

ÖZET: Sanatsal açıdan Keats'in en iyi algılanan, en tatminkar ve en çok tartışılan şiiri *Bülbüle Ağıt*'tır. Ancak şiirin ana teması olan doğanın sürekliliği ile insan türünün geçiciliği ve yaratıcı hayal gücünün güvenilmezliği karşıtlığı sıkça ve uzun süre tartışılırken, düşünme sürecinin iç ve yapısal mekanizmaları ve şiirdeki tema ve zıtlıkları kontrollü ama aynı zamanda öneren bir tavırla ortaya koyan söz sanatları detaylı olarak incelenmemiştir. Bu makale görünürdeki gerilimin, ince alaycılığın, belirsizliğin ve septsizmin altında yatan şiirin temel bütünlüğünü göstermek için şiirin iç mekanizmalarına orjinal, canlandırıcı detaylı bir yaklaşım ve yeni eleştirel bir bakış açısı getirmektedir. Fakat en önemli ve ciddi nokta, şiirin mümkün olan tüm kaynaklarını, benzerlik ve zıtlıklarını en kapsamlı biçimde bir araya getirmesi ve bunların çoğunu ilk defa bu makalede öne sürmesidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *kaynaklar, analoglar, hayal gücü ve bütünlük*

For I have ever thought that it might bless
The world with benefits unknowingly;
As does the nightingale, upperched high,
And cloister'd among cool and bunched leaves--
She sings but to her love, nor e'er conceives
How tiptoe Night holds back her dark-grey hood.
Keats, *Endymion*, Bk.I, ll. 826-31.

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

Keats, *To J.H.Reynolds* (1818), ll.282-85.

A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen musician, who feels that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why. Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry*¹

Let me begin by referring to the British nature writer Richard Mabey (May, 1997), who introduces the nightingale to his readers as a small brown bird, which has been popular, free or caged, for its song in the West as far back as the Roman Empire. He mentions that it has had a number of roles in Western culture--from a wood spirit to a symbol and messenger of love to a harbinger of spring. At one time listening to the nightingale became "a euphemism for sexual frolicking" and then it was used in "love potions and in nostrums for improving the voice." Mabey reports that in 1924 there was a live outside broadcast of "a duet between a nightingale and Beatrice Harrison, Britain's leading cellist at the time, which the BBC transmitted from her woodland garden."

Written in May and published in July 1819 in *Annals of the Fine Arts*, *Ode to a Nightingale* is probably the second of Keats's odes composed that spring. As pointed out by Miriam Allott, it shares its metrical pattern, one of its unique artistic beauties, with what is supposed to be the first: *Ode to Psyche*. While its "regular ten-line stanza, consisting of one quatrain from a Shakespearean sonnet followed by the sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet" is used in the rest of the great odes that followed it, its "shortened line which was a feature of the irregular strophes in the *Ode to Psyche*" is not there in other odes (Allott, 1995, 523). Equally distinctive are its other elements: style and diction and condensed expression. Although the poem uses the common subject of the nightingale, the poet's treatment of it is highly individual with a fresh Romantic approach to it.² One of the most widely discussed of Keats's poems, *Ode to*

¹ See *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Sixth Edition (1993), vol. 2, p. 758. Henceforth, *Norton*. Shelley wrote his *Defence* in 1821, which is also the year of his *Adonais*, an elegy on the death of Keats. Perhaps the above lines from the *Defence* also were intended as a tribute to Keats, just as the *Defence* itself as a whole was written as a response to Thomas Love Peacock's ironic and satirical essay, *The Four Ages of Poetry*. As their letters indicate, both Keats and Shelley were in touch with each other at the time, writing about their recent poetical compositions.

² Apart from countless references to the bird, also referred to as Philomel (from the mythical Philomela), in Western literature, there are many poems addressed to it, including, among others, the anonymous medieval *The Owl and the Nightingale*, *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*, Philip Sidney's *The Nightingale* (1581), Crashaw's *Music's Duel* (involving a lute-player and a nightingale), Charlotte Smith's *To a Nightingale* and *On the Departure of the Nightingale* (1784), Coleridge's *To the Nightingale* (1796) and *The Nightingale: A Conversation Poem* (1798). Dorothy Hewlett

a Nightingale charts the rise and fall of the poet's imaginative power and inspiration: it "traces the inception, nature and decline of the creative mood, and expresses Keats's attempt to understand his feelings about the contrast between the ideal and actual and the close association of pain with pleasure" (Allott, 524).

Perhaps one of the most famous bird poems in English literature, *Ode to a Nightingale* is commonly placed among the greatest of Keats's Odes—subtle, fine, more than what its sensuous experience and luxurious indulgence suggest. Critics have strongly supported its claim to the status of a supreme order as the work of a consummate artist. However, it is F.R. Leavis (Ed. 1962), who demonstrates, in what is in a sense a response to critics before him, the beauty and richness of the Ode as a unified whole in terms of its artistic qualities.³ Leavis's analysis is a performance in literary criticism which, even before the term was invented, had come very close to what came to be known as New Criticism.⁴ He disagrees with Murry's elucidation of the "deep and natural movement of the poet's soul" underlying Keats's poems, for, he, in agreement with Symons, says that Keats "was not troubled about his soul, or any other metaphysical questions, to which he shows a happy indifference, or rather, a placid unconsciousness." Leavis (p. 312) also dismisses Murry's equation of Keats' Odes with the works of Shakespeare's mature stage as "extravagantly out," giving his reasons why he thinks Keats's Odes suffer as they do when measured against certain standards governing the actual achievement, on the one hand, and "promise and potentiality," on the other. Complementing Symons' admiration that Keats "practised [ahead of time] the theory of art for art's sake," Leavis shows that Keats is a better artist than just an able practitioner of that theory suggests. In reference to what Bradley says of the *Ode to a Nightingale* in comparison with *To a Skylark*, Leavis (p. 315) comments:

Now, if intellectual structure is what Shelley characteristically exhibits, the Ode to a Nightingale may freely be allowed to lack it. But the superiority of the Ode over To a Skylark, which beside it appears a nullity, is not merely a superiority of details... The rich local concreteness is the local manifestation of an inclusive sureness of grasp in the whole. What the detail exhibits is not merely an extraordinary rightness and delicacy of touch; a sureness of touch that is the working of a fine organization. The Ode, that is, has the structure of a fine and complex organism; whereas To a Skylark is a mere poetical outpouring, its ecstatic

(p. 317), points out that "the conception of the happy nightingale, a conception unknown to the old poetry, came perhaps from [Coleridge's] *The Nightingale*." Robert Gittings (p. 463), mentions the same connection between Coleridge's and Keats's nightingales. Coleridge's "The Nightingale" is a seminal conversation poem by Coleridge in the launching of the Romantic Movement, containing the simple but haunting line, "In Nature there is nothing melancholy," written perhaps in response to Milton's melancholy nightingale in "Il Penseroso," and taken to be defining Romanticism against Neoclassicism.

³ Also see *Scrutiny* Vol. IV, No. 4 (March 1936) and *Revaluation* (October 1936).

⁴ Defined, simply, as a close reading of the text, New Criticism leaves out elements of biography and literary history and, instead, focuses on the linguistic, rhetorical, and other internal aspects of tension and contradiction (irony, ambiguity, paradox) of a work of art to show that it stands on its own, independent of everything else and unified by its own laws and patterns beneath its apparent disunity.

'intensity' being a substitute for realization in the parts and for a realized whole to which the parts might be related.

The above is the main argument of Leavis's critical appreciation of the Ode. Before I turn to a detailed discussion of the Ode as an illustration of Keats's sensuousness and aestheticism, let me take a brief look at some essential details of those ideas relevant to his development as a great poet.

Keats is commonly acknowledged as the most aesthetic and most form-conscious of all the English Romantic poets. His Odes, while marked by a classical sense of economy of form, are a record of a state of intense feeling, which achieve their effect through alliteration, structural contrasts, synaesthetic and kinesthetic imagery, and careful choice of words, suggesting "a delicate balance between the body and the soul." In other words, they suggest that Romantic spontaneity and longing for spiritual transcendence be expressed with a certain degree of discipline and control. Like Wordsworth in *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge in *Biographia Literaria* and Shelley in *A Defence of Poetry*, Keats attempts to formulate his *ars poetica* in his letters and carries his poetic and aesthetic theories into practice in his poems.⁵ His ideas of "the authenticity of the imagination," "life of sensations rather than of thoughts," "truth," and "beauty" demonstrate not only his conception of life and art but also his commitment to the principle of pure aesthetic pleasure. His idea of imagination is that it is impersonal and disinterested in character without any moral or didactic content. He called it "negative capability," which he thought Shakespeare "possessed so enormously." Among his other views toward the definition of his aesthetic theory is "loading every rift" of the subject with "ore," meaning a thrifty use of words to achieve a concentration of meaning and thereby "intensity" as the mark of excellence in art.⁶ Combining both the expressive and the objective modes of literary art, his later poetry, especially the odes, "surprise[s] by a fine excess" and fills us with "a luxuriant content." However, it also presents itself as a "well-wrought urn" (from Donne's *The Canonization*) or a "stoned urn" (from Gray's *Elegy*), like Keats's own "Grecian urn," a finished product in itself, remarkable for its linguistic beauty and structural unity. The result is a unique aesthetic accomplishment, giving the work the status of a self-sufficient and self-sustained entity, defined by its own internal laws of contextual coherence and linguistic patterns. It is perhaps from such consideration that Cleanth Brooks (1947, 151) opens his essay on "Ode on a Grecian Urn" by saying that

⁵ His early poetry, with its problems and procedures, luxuriating in the external beauties of nature and documenting his developing views of poetic art, myth, and reality is a record, like Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" and *The Prelude*, of the Keatsian parallels of the stages of poetic growth.

⁶ For excellent critical analyses of Keats's aesthetic and poetic ideas, see W.J. Bate's 1963 essay "Keats's *Negative Capability* and the Imagination" in *The Romantic Imagination*, ed. John Spencer Hill (Macmillan, 1977), his 1957 essay "Keats's Style: Evolution Toward Qualities of Permanent Value" and Douglas Bush's 1957 essay "Keats and His Ideas," both in *English Romantic Poets*, ed. M.H. Abrams (1960).

"There is much in the poetry of Keats which suggests that he would have approved of Archibald MacLeish's dictum, *A poem should not mean/But be.*"

Like the other major Romantic poets, Keats is highly distinctive in his attitude to nature. While all of them seek transcendence through imagination and imaginative treatment of nature, that treatment varies. For Wordsworth, nature is a powerful agent imparting profound moral and spiritual lessons and exercising chastening and consoling influence in moments of suffering; for Byron, it reflects individual force of freedom of will expressed through moods of ego, despair, bitterness, and cynicism; for Shelley, it becomes an inspiring power propagating revolutionary gospels of liberty and equality as opposed to forces of tyranny and oppression; for Keats, it excites human thirst for sensuous as well as aesthetic experience leading to his inner world of being and accentuating his joys and pains. The Wordsworthian didacticism, which Keats describes as "egotistical sublime," Coleridgean naturalizing of the supernatural, Byronic search for an impossible perfection in what he thinks to be a ruined world and Shelleyan escape into an unrealistic futurist philosophy of Love and Beauty have no place in Keats's sensuous and aesthetic devotion to nature, expressed in concrete and pictorial images. Consistent with his aesthetic ideals of literary art, his great odes, each "uniquely rich and magical tapestry," derive their aesthetic effects from the "inlaid beauties of image and phrase and rhythm" (Bush, ed. Abrams, 1968, 333-4). He employs every technical means of poetic skill to gain intensity of sense impressions and deepen his meditative response to the source of his poetic inspiration.

The aesthetic beauty, which lies in its expressiveness and exaltation, reflecting man's inner world in the external form, heightens the thematic contrast between the real and the ideal, the temporal and the eternal. It intensifies Keats's joyful, romantic longing for the world of art and nature as he struggles to transcend the inevitability of that of time and flux. His imaginative participation in the ideal becomes acutely poignant because of his awareness of the fleeting nature of not just the joys of life, but also of that participation itself. He lets himself to get lost in his passionate joy to the extent of having no personal identity only to wake up to conscious reality with a mature understanding. The knowledge he finally acquires -- that his imaginative attainment of the ideal and the fanciful is possible only in a dream that can be sustained only for a moment and must be followed by a return to the actual world of death and disease -- is a knowledge of the ultimate hard reality of life.

Thus, Madeline in *The Eve of St. Agnes* discovers the limitations of romance as she awakens from her dream not only to see that her romantic wish has come true but also to re-enter the human condition of "eternal woe." Reality dispels the vision of the knight in "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," leaving him "haggard" and "woe-begone." In much the same way, Keats discovers the limitations of art in the *Grecian Urn* Ode where the urn may turn the impermanence of the warm exciting life into the permanence of drawing and engraving and may initially seem to be an imperishable source of joy with immortalizing power, but eventually it is proved to be nothing more than a mere *cold shape*, "no better than flesh-and-blood experience, however brief and unhappy that may be." In "Ode to a Nightingale," the poet comes to question the means of transportation itself--the imagination--to the ideal world of nature represented by the nightingale: "The fancy cannot cheat so well/As she is fam'd to do, deceiving

elf." Both in general movement and specific parallels, the half-conscious, dreamy, sensuous reverie of the Keatsian persona in a pastoral setting, followed by a return to ordinary consciousness, anticipates that of the Mallarmean faun in relation to his two nymphs. Both "Ode to a Nightingale" and "A Faun's Afternoon: Eclogue" (1876) provide lofty discourses on the contrasting nature of the ideal and the mundane; both are enigmatic, pastoral, and symbolic (Symbolist?), exploring the conflicting claims of the imagined and the real, twilight areas of consciousness, and the possibility of making permanent an exquisite experience.

The usual movement of the treatment of this typical Romantic theme is that the poet takes a Romantic flight from the real world into the world of fantasy and then returns to actuality. Watson (1992, 365 & 34) says that "The pattern of a going-out and return is common in Romantic poetry," which he applies especially to Keats, who he considers to be "the most self-conscious of young poets." The return is not without a gain in the sense that the poet ultimately discovers that as a human being it is futile to try to escape from what is inescapable or into what is impossible--the fact of the physicality of human condition and hence human mortality and the humanly unreachable state of pure joy and complete perfection respectively. Abrams (1971) calls this movement the Romantic plot of the circular or spiral quest cast in a symbolic mode. Taking the form of a pilgrimage, the journey in search of transcendence gradually leads the pilgrim back toward his point of origin in earthly reality. The spiritual journey back home may be defined as

the painful education through everexpanding knowledge of the conscious subject as it strives---without distinctly knowing what it is that it wants until it achieves it---to win its way back to a higher mode of the original unity with itself from which, by its primal act of consciousness, it has inescapably divided itself off...So represented, the protagonist is the collective mind or consciousness of men, and the story is that of its painful pilgrimage through difficulties, sufferings, and recurrent disasters in quest of a goal which, unwittingly, is the place it had left behind when it first set out and which, when achieved, turns out to be even better than it had been at the beginning (Abrams, 190). [my emphasis].

The "painful pilgrimage" that Abrams refers to contains the elements of the Keatsian opposition or ambivalence between idealism and skepticism. Both the Nightingale and the Grecian Urn Odes express the poet's divided self as they grow out of creative tension between pull and counter-pull. "From first to last," says Bush (1937, 82), "Keats's important poems are related to, or grow directly out of...inner conflicts." In those two Odes where conflict is of central importance, "Keats feels," Bush remarks, "not so much the joy of the imaginative experience as the painful antithesis between transient sensation and enduring art." The *Nightingale* and the *Grecian Urn Odes* are justly celebrated for their characteristic representation of the complexity of the unresolved tensions in the poet's mind. What is more interesting is that the poet seems to be contented with his imaginative discovery of the unresolvable ambiguity of his own experience.⁷

⁷ The doubts and conflicts of these two Odes are reconciled in "Ode on Melancholy," in which the poet asserts the inseparability of joy and pain, followed by "To Autumn," in which there is a sense of calm acceptance of and serene resignation to the natural, cyclical process, and which ("To Autumn") is regarded to be artistically superior to the Nightingale

Ode to a Nightingale begins with a sense of ambiguity of experience even before the poet is aware of its paradoxical nature. The poet says that he is so much overwhelmed with joy at the song of the nightingale that he feels a painful dissolution of his senses as if he has taken a large dose of poisonous product or intoxicant. His descent from an aching sensation into a state of self-forgetfulness is implied by "drowsy numbness," "dull opiate," and the mythological Lethe. It is possible that the reference to the Lethe has its origin in Coleridge, who in *Biographia Literaria* (published in the summer of 1817) had subjected Wordsworth's idealization of childhood in the *Immortality Ode* to such questions as: "In what sense is a child of that age a philosopher? At what time were we dipt in the Lethe, which has produced such utter oblivion of a state so godlike?" Interestingly, the whole of the *Nightingale Ode* is interspersed with intimations from the *Immortality Ode*, if not from recollections of early childhood. There are many common elements: the birds singing a joyous song, the moon in the bare heavens, sleeping and forgetting, fading of "the vision splendid" into the light of common day, "human suffering," "the philosophic mind," and, above all, the thought of immortality itself, emerging from "The glory and freshness of a dream" and put to questions like "Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?", which are precisely how the *Nightingale Ode* concludes. Except for the major figure of the child and the notion of predestination in the *Immortality Ode*, Keats's Ode is thus characterised by a number of themes and ideas, even words and phrases, which either echo or are drawn from Wordsworth's Ode. In fact, the Wordsworthian elements, either as a source or as an analogue, pervade the poem as it will be shown below.

Coming back to the origination of the thought-process in the *Nightingale Ode*, the loss of self-consciousness at the beginning of the poem is the result of a trance-like experience caused by an excessive joy, concurrent with the intensification of imaginative inspiration and spiritual awareness about the source of that happiness. The oxymoronic blending of intense pleasure and numbing pain, that is, the sense of painful pleasure conveys a peculiar state of mind distinct from everyday reality and prepares the poet for a visionary flight. The movement is from a sense of diminished life ("drowsy," "numb," "dull," "sunk") to that of full life ("happy," "green," "light-winged," "full-throated ease"). The impulse to journey into the higher realm of the nightingale becomes stronger in the second stanza as the poet longs for various intoxicants, cool as well as warm, as the means for the intended flight. The complex synaesthetic imagery, involving the senses of sight, smell, taste, and hearing all together, suggests that the journey into the dim forest is to be made not by the annihilation of these senses but through their intense gratification. The reference to the mythological Hippocrene is particularly significant, for, as the fountain of the never-dying Muses, it contrasts with the earlier reference to the mythological Lethe as the river of forgetfulness and becomes a symbol of the poetic aspirations for permanence and immortality.

The third stanza takes the Ode's dialectic pattern further by directly putting it in the larger context of the reality of human condition--the temporal world of sorrows and

and the Grecian Urn Odes.

sufferings. The contrast between reality and transcendence, advance and withdrawal, is brought to focus by what Leavis calls the "prosaic matter-of-fact" tone of this "completely disintoxicated and disenchanting" stanza. Fogle (1968, 381) considers the stanza as being "low-pitched,...by itself unremarkable but functioning as an integral part of the poetic whole." The enumeration of human ills, like the human suffering noted in the third stanza of the *Grecian Urn Ode*, is foreshadowed by "the agonies, the strife/Of human hearts" in *Sleep and Poetry* (ll.124-25) and anticipates "Love's sad satiety" of Shelley's "To Skylark." Both the world of nature represented by the singing bird and the world of art depicted on the urn lead the poet to the same painful awareness of human reality—an awareness influenced by Wordsworth's *The Excursion*, *Tintern Abbey*, and the sonnet "Weak is the will of Man."⁸ The dualities between the poet's opposed instincts of joy and pain are developed through a pattern of progression and regression—a pattern that is evident since *Sleep and Poetry* and *I Stood Tip-Toe*.

Contemplation of the miseries of the world constitutes a familiar Romantic theme. The Romantic poets had a deep insight into the tragic aspects of life and their poetry is full of melancholy notes. Although Byron, as Abrams points out, does not fit into the commonly understood Romantic frame of mind for his cynical, satiric, or mocking tone, sometimes even the Byronic despair at the condition of being bound to "this degraded form" (*CHP*.3.699), "a fleshly chain" (*CHP*.3.685) or "dull life in this our state/Of mortal bondage" (*CHP*.4.41-42) finds expression in elegiac reflections about human life, very similar to those of Keats's.⁹ However, Keats's presentation of the

⁸ Keats was an admirer of Wordsworth whose poetry was a constant source of delight to him. In a letter to Haydon on January 10th 1818, he said: "There are three things to rejoice at in this age: *The Excursion*, your pictures and Hazlitt's depth of taste." In that sense, as Moorman (p. 80) and Gittings (p. 464) point out, the present stanza, particularly the line "The weariness, the fever, and the fret," is a transmutation of the saintly Wanderer's wise and consoling words elicited by the sceptical Solitary's description of his sufferings in *The Excursion* (1814), which was among Keats' favourite readings:

While man grows old and dwindles and decays;
And countless generations of mankind
Depart and leave no vestige where they trod.
(Bk. IV, ll. 760-62)

Keats's lines also resemble "the weary weight/...the fretful stir/...the fever of the world" in *Tintern Abbey*.

⁹

"We wither from our youth, we gasp away —
Sick-sick; unfound the boon—unslaked the thirst
Though to the last, in verge of our decay,
Some phantom lures, such as we sought at first—
But all too late,—so are we doubly curst.
Love, Fame, Ambition, Avarice—'tis the same,
Each idle—and all ill—and none the worst—
For all are meteors with a different name,
And Death the sable smoke where vanishes the flame."
(*Child Harold*, Canto IV, ll.)

"Our life is a false nature—'tis not in
The harmony of things.....
Disease, death, bondage—all the woes we see,

condition of human suffering is different from the lyric cries of pain in his fellow Romantics, especially Shelley, for he does not directly speak out his own plight from which he consciously attempts to disengage himself. He seems to achieve his *catharsis* by means of his "negative capability" of observing from a distance the general human lot. Commenting on his "controlled detachment," Paul de Man (1966, xxiv) says:

Suffering plays a very important role in [Keats's] work, but it is always the suffering of others, sympathetically but objectively perceived and so easily generalized into historical and universal pain that it rarely appears in its subjective immediacy...his intense and altogether genuine concern for others serves, in a sense, to shelter him from the self-knowledge he dreads. He is a man distracted from the awareness of his own mortality by the constant spectacle of the death of others. He can go very far in participating in their agony...the suffering referred to is so general that it designates a universal human predicament.

Despite his capability to maintain an objective distance, Keats's participation in the agony of others becomes deeper by his awareness of his own suffering, which in turn becomes objectified through that of others. The result is that he can devote himself wholeheartedly to an experience of a pure, intense joy, no matter how brief that may be.

That is what takes place at the opening of the *Nightingale* Ode when the poet feels himself absorbed in the happiness of the bird to the extent of being self-oblivious. It is the same sensuous experience that the poet returns to after a survey of the suffering human community when he takes a visionary flight into the imagined ideal world of Nature in the fourth stanza. If the pessimistic meditation on the human predicament delays his imaginative flight, it is a necessary momentary delay that helps to build momentum required to launch the flight and determine its nature. Echoing the "charioteer" and the "Bacchus" images from *Sleep and Poetry* (l.127 & l.334 respectively), Keats says that he is going to use the medium of poetry, that is, imagination, as opposed to stimulants, to reach the world of the nightingale.¹⁰ The vivid and compact description of the enchanted dark green of "verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways" appears to have been taken out of Keats's own letter to Tom and George Keats describing his (and his friend Charles Brown's) delightful walk along the shores of the Windermere in the Lake District on their way to Scotland in June 1818.¹¹ The moon image is analogous to that in a number of Wordsworth's poems, especially *An Evening Walk* (ll. 355-60), *The Excursion* (Bk. IV, ll. 1062-1070), *The Prelude* (Bk. IV, ll. 88-92), "A Night-Piece," and the sonnets "With how sad steps, O Moon" and "The Shepherd, looking eastward," all of which, except *The Prelude*, were probably known to Keats as they were all published by 1815.

And worse, the woes we see not--which throb through
The immedicable soul, with heart-aches evernew."
(*Child Harold*, Canto IV, ll.)

¹⁰ Watson (p. 362) observes the influence of Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne* on Keats's *Sleep and Poetry* and "Ode to a Nightingale."

¹¹ Keats writes to his brothers, dated June 26th and 27th: "Our road a winding lane, wooded on each side, and green overhead, full of foxgloves ...the tone, the coloring, the slate, the stone, the moss, the rock-weed ... I shall learn poetry here."

The outpouring of joy in the magic realm of stary sky and moon-lit landscape indicates that the fourth and the fifth stanzas mark the climax of the poem. Keats's keen perception, penetrating to the essence of things, provides him with intimations of immortality and transcendence. The joy and happiness felt in an abstract way in the first and second stanzas seem to be "repeated in a finer tone," to use a phrase of Keats's, in the marvellously pictorial fifth stanza:

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 eaves.

As the poet points "not to dissolution and unconsciousness but to positive satisfactions, concretely realized in imagination," there occurs a "rich evocation of enchantment and delighted senses," with "the touch of the consummate artist ...; in the very piling up of luxuries a sure delicacy presides" (Leavis, 317).

In the stanza quoted above the music of the language created by the "s" sound and the rich texture of the synaesthetic imagery suggest that the poet is lost in a spontaneous luxuriance of feeling. In its soft, overflowing lyricism and vivid description, the stanza is astonishingly similar to Oberon's speech in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.¹² Both Shakespeare and Keats know their flowers and know how to describe them. According to Vendler (1983, 84), it is Shakespeare and not the living Nature, who is Keats's source for the above lines.¹³ The plausibility of such a claim is not to be doubted since Keats, by his own admission in his letters as well as in his early poetry, allowed himself to be influenced by his Elizabethan predecessors, including Spenser and Shakespeare, in an attempt to avoid the eighteenth century Popian style. The musk-roses -- a rambling rose with fragrant white flowers -- and eglantines appear in his

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I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine.
There sleeps Titania, sometime of the night,
Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight.
(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II. i. 249-254)

¹³ Helen Vendler (1983, p.84). Gittings, on the other hand, traces Keats's source to Dryden's "The Flower and the Leaf," which is a modernization of a medieval poem and which, Gittings claims, was one of Keats's favourite poems. See Gittings, 463.

early poems such as "To a Friend Who Sent Me Some Roses" and *Endymion* just as the fairy queen Titania and the idea of faeries appear in the former as well as "To Charles Cowden Clarke" and "On Receiving a Curious Shell ..." as they do later in the present poem. Critics including Vendler have definitively traced the obvious literary sources of such influences and references not only to Shakespeare's *A Midsummer* but also W. Sotheby's translation (1798) of Wieland's *Oberon* (1780) and Milton's *Lycidas* -- all of which were known to Keats.¹⁴ Making his way through his "burden of the past" (W. J. Bate) and "anxiety of influence" (Harold Bloom), he was, however, able to transform that influence into something inimitably his own. In his poetic techniques, sonnet-stanzas, and fresh images he demonstrates himself to be so original that his lines seem to have been inspired by his own aesthetic impulse to the beauty and variety of the immediate external nature and not to the world of literary art. Even when he turns to art, as he does in the *Grecian Urn Ode*, he is able to turn it into something uniquely his own, so much so that the readers are swayed to *his* mood and not to the physical entity of the urn itself.

When Philip Sidney in *An Apology for Poetry* (or *The Defence of Poesy*) defends poetry by saying that the poet creates another nature by endowing the earth with a variety of pleasant associations, he certainly anticipates Keats's flower stanza, which makes, in Sidney's phrase, "too-much-loved earth more lovely" (Ed. 1993, Vol.1, p. 483 & Ed. 1962, p. 8). Art, however, reproduces the unpleasant as well, as Keats's third stanza does. Sidney's defence of poetry is, therefore, partial just as his definition of poetry as something that teaches through delight, combining both the Homeric function of pleasure and Hesiodic function of instruction, is not wholly acceptable, for the element of didacticism is conspicuous by its absence in Keats. In the realm of art everything is transmuted into the aesthetically beautiful: tragic and comic, a Shylock as well as a Portia, a Desdemona as well as an Iago, a *Mona Lisa* as well as a *Guernica*. Like Macbeth's last moment conception of life as "a walking shadow" or as "a tale told by an idiot," that of Keats's as "The weariness, the fever, and the fret" or as "a burning forehead, and a parching tongue" is clothed in a light that is never there in mere reality and that gives a certain order and pattern to human suffering. As Shelley (Ed. 1993, Vol. 2, p. 763) says in his *A Defence of Poetry*:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union, under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things.

The question is one of aesthetic experience of the beauty of reality transferred to the world of art. To an artistically reflective mind, Keats's sensuously described flowers or the ever-young lovers sculptured on the Grecian urn provides more aesthetic pleasure than the real life figures just as the "infinite variety" of Shakespeare's Cleopatra or the "serpentine beauty" of Browning's Lucrezia ("Andea del Sarto") seems to be more captivating than that of a real woman.

¹⁴ See Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (1878, pp. 131-2), and W. Beyer, *Keats and the Demon King* (1947).

The aesthetically entranced Keats, unmistakably sounding Lawrentian, wishes to pass away as he imagines himself to be in the home of the nightingale, listening to her song in the moonlit "embalmed darkness."¹⁵ Death is felt to be not just a release from the earthly confinements and mortal pains but also a means to perpetuate the moment of ecstasy. Hints of death-wish have been given by the state of numbness, forgetfulness, and being faded away "into the forest dim" in the first two stanzas. That state of stasis and the sense of painful mortality summoned up in the third stanza are very different from the poet's wish for death in the fifth stanza which comes out of his sense of a higher mode of existence:

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!¹⁶

According to Leavis, the phrase "rich to die" is the epitome of the Ode. This is a death Keats has been longing for since early in his poetic career. In *Sleep and Poetry*, he expresses his wish to "die a death/ Of luxury" in the midst of the intoxicating earthly pleasures. His mood of "easeful Death" and that of Shelley's at the opening of "To Constantia, singing" are similar:

¹⁵ D. H. Lawrence, who, like Keats, died of tuberculosis at the age of forty-four in the south of France whose vitality is evoked in Keats's poem, invoked his end, just before his death, using deep-rooted elemental images of sensuousness like those of Keats's:

Give me the moon at my feet
Put my feet upon the crescent, like a Lord!
O let my ankles be bathed in moonlight, that I may go
Sure and moon-shod, cool and bright-footed
Towards my goal.

¹⁶ Like the flower stanza above, the source of this expression of death-wish may be traced to Shakespeare. After their reunion at Cyprus following a severe storm at sea, Othello is happy and thankful to Desdemona who has brought tranquillity to his tempestuous life:

O my soul's joy!
If after every tempest come such calms,
May the winds blow till they have waken'd death!....
If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear
My soul hath her *content so absolute*
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate. (II.i.186-195, my emphasis)

In both cases (Othello and Keats), it is the excess of happiness that culminates in the thought of death. Ironically, we know, what a painful and protracted death was in store for both of them! Another Shakespearean moment that we may recall in this connection is when Antony, following the assassination of Julius Caesar, also wishes to die a particularly meaningful death: "There is no hour so fit/As Caesar's death hour.../Live a thousand years,/I shall not find myself so apt to die:/No place will please me so.../As here by Caesar..." (*Julius Caesar*, III.i.154ff.)

Thus to be lost and thus to sink and die,
Perchance were death indeed!--Constantia, turn!

Shelley's poem comes very close to Keats's in several poetic techniques, including vocabulary, phraseology, and alliteration. As Shelley is listening to Constantia's "fast ascending numbers," he feels the "enchantment" of her "strain" to the extent of flying from the worldly limitations into the limitless skies:

And on my shoulders wings are woven,
To follow its sublime career,
Beyond the mighty moons that wane
Upon the verge of Nature's utmost sphere,
Till the worlds shadowy walls are past and disappear.

Like Keats's nightingale, Constantia's music proves overpowering for Shelley:

As morning dew that in the sunbeam dies,
I am dissolved in these consuming ecstasies.

The list of similarities in diction and imaginative movement goes on.

It is Shelley's "To a Skylark," however, that easily comes to one's mind to draw a comparison with. Both the nightingale and the skylark elicit similar yet different responses from the two poets. As the nightingale "sings of summer in full-throated ease," so also the skylark pours its "full heart/In profuse strains of unpremeditated art." Both of them belong to an ideal region beyond worldly existence. Like the nightingale, the skylark's "keen clear joyance" is conspicuous by its "ignorance of pain," an absence of "langour" or "sad satiety." The skylark is, however, more aerial, more ethereal, and dimmer than the nightingale, which is more natural, more distinct, and more vivid. While both are symbolic of the soaring spirit of imagination, freedom, and the principle of lyric poetry, the skylark is conceived in a social and intellectual vein, and the nightingale in an aesthetic and sensuous vein. The skylark is implored to teach and share with the poet its lyrical gifts so that he can make the world listen to his political idealisms; the nightingale is adored for its being a source of pure joy and expressive beauty without "human verbal ideational content" and without the representational function of the visual arts. The lively song of the nightingale, "tuneless and timeless," to use Vendler's terms, is "nonrepresentational," "nonconceptual," and "nonphilosophical." In both poems, it is the listener himself who gives spiritual and philosophical meaning in his own way to his nonhuman subject as he arrests the "spontaneous overflow of [his] powerful feelings" in words.

Keats's attempt to do so is made, as the line "Though the dull brain perplexes and retards" suggests, by holding his self-consciousness in conscious suppression and not by what Coleridge called "willing suspension." His reasoning faculty, held in check, re-asserts itself when he realizes that in the silence of death he would simply become a "sod," separated from his source of joy. The realization, paradoxical in nature, is that he can be "too happy" at the happiness of the nightingale so long as he remains in his mortal state; to overleap the mortal bounds is to pass into nothingness. The

skepticism inherent in the situation—tendency to escape the earthbound condition and the sense of futility at the discovery of the limits of that escape—enhances the quality of the poet's aesthetic appreciation and experience of the bird's song. Thus the Ode "moves outwards and upwards," in Leavis' (p.315) words, "towards life as strongly as it moves downwards towards extinction; [it] is, in fact, an extremely subtle and varied interplay of motions, directed now positively, now negatively."

The understanding of the fact and nature of human mortality leads Keats to reflect on the immortality of the nightingale in the seventh stanza:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!

His earlier desire to die and then not to die as he speaks of his becoming a sod now turn into a longing for immortality, or, as Leavis (p. 318) put it, "a strong revulsion against death." He (Keats) "entertains at one and the same time the desire to escape into easeful death ... and the complementary desire for a full life." The elevation of the "Bird" endowed with a life of unmixed joy, to the status of immortality suggests that Keats is thinking not of the nightingale itself singing at the moment but of its song and the natural species. In other words, what he means is not the "song-bird" or its physical state of being but the "bird-song," as it belongs to and is made permanent through the species, which had been beautiful for centuries and would continue to be so long after the passing away of human generations one after another. For Keats, as his *Endymion* opens, "A thing of beauty is a joy for ever," not subject to the flux of its worshippers. So is the nightingale, which symbolises "the principle of beauty in all things," to use Keats's own phrase.

It has been mentioned before that there are many common elements including the notion of immortality between the *Nightingale Ode* and the *Intimations of Immortality Ode*. However, with regard to the theme of immortality as suggested by a living object of nature, perhaps Wordsworth's *Vernal Ode* provides a better and more striking parallel. Written in the spring of 1817, and published in 1820, the purpose of that poem, Wordsworth says, was "to place in view the immortality of succession where immortality is denied" through the "bright spectacle" of a colourful woodland bee that appeared in his imagination to his "spiritual eye." The "mysteriously remote and high ancestry" of the bee singing of the golden age of the past and of its "native habitations" free from "decline" and "wintry desolations" helps "to place in view the immortality of succession" just as Keats's "No hungry generations" portion does. The fourth stanza of the *Vernal Ode* beginning with

O, nursed at happy distance from the cares
Of a too-anxious world, mild pastoral Muse!

and continuing with

Wrapped in a fit of pleasing indolence,
While thy tired lute hangs on the hawthorn-tree,
To lie and listen—till o'er-drowsed sense
Sinks, hardly conscious of the influence—
To the soft murmur of the vagrant Bee...

clearly reminds us of the third and first stanzas respectively of the *Nightingale Ode*. The intertextuality between the two poems goes on with the thoughts of "grosser sight," "death" and "decay," on the one hand, and a setting of deep and shady foliage, "draught of vital breath," and "vision of endurance and repose," on the other, in Wordsworth's poem being echoed in that of Keats's.

The notions of temporality and timelessness are brought together by Keats in harmonious relationship without being in conflict in:

No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:...

As Gittings (1985, 464) points out, the verses hauntingly echo Wordsworth's "The Solitary Reaper" ('No nightingale did ever chaunt' and the following). Watson (p.365) considers Keats's stanza, in its movement from the poor of the past to the ancient royalty to the mythical Ruth to "Charm'd magic casements" beyond time, as "a marvellous example of the travelling imagination," showing what he thinks the influence of Claud's *The Enchanted Castle*. Keats's travelling imagination, with respect to the "self-same song" that "Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam/ Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn," perhaps goes back, as it meditates not just over the nightingale/s but the species of birds in general, to the fable of the ancient halcyon, a bird thought to have bred, as *Oxford English Dictionary* says, "about the time of the winter solstice in a nest floating on the sea, and charmed the wind and the waves so that the sea was specially calm." Further credibility to this idea may be given in light of the numerous appearances of halcyon in his poems such as "To Charles Cowden Clarke" (l. 57), "To The Ladies Who Saw Me Crowned" (l. 7) and *Endymion* (I. l. 453-5; III. l. 923). Throughout the *Nightingale Ode* Keats's imagination "reveals itself," according to Coleridge's definition of imagination in *Biographia Literaria*, "in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities."

Similarly, Keats's romantic longing for a transcendent home is balanced by the mythical Ruth's nostalgic craving for reunion with her loved ones. The sense of her ideal homely ties rooted in the common earth nicely contrasts with the remoteness of the "faery lands forlorn" and results in the combined effect of making the poet painfully aware of the increasing distance between him and the source of his inspiration, the nightingale. With such an awareness of the instant and the primordial, the upward flight of imagination cannot be sustained any longer. The meditative trance with which the poem begins and which reaches its peak in the fourth and fifth stanzas starts declining with the poet's death-wish in the sixth, which closes with the reflection that after death he would at best have his ears "in vain" and "become a sod" to the "high requiem" of the nightingale. The decline continues through the images of "hungry generations" and "the sad heart of Ruth...sick for home" in the seventh stanza and becomes complete with the transition between this penultimate stanza and the last as the word "forlorn" closes the former and opens the latter to toll the poet back to his "sole self." His slow withdrawal from the world of fancy and the bird's slow retreat

from the vicinity of the poet's physical location, widening the ever-existing gap between the two, are marked by the slow rhythm of the verses towards the close of the poem. The verses ("Past the near meadows...In the next valley-glades")--in which Fogle (p.383) thinks "objective description and subjective emotion are fused"--record the "process of withdrawal" in terms of physical locale and landscape. Similarly, the two closing lines,

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

do so in terms of the poet's own mind whose spark exhausts itself down the line of denouement like "a fading coal," to borrow Shelley's image.¹⁷ The element of ironical ambiguity and skepticism implicit throughout the poem and explicit at the end undercuts the success of Keats's momentary transcendence but completes his aesthetic experience at the level of human perception.

Return to reality with a mature understanding of it is also accompanied with a knowledge of the limitation of the power of imagination which, the poet discovers, can deceive him only for a brief moment. The imagination is identified with the nightingale and that identification is made complete when imagination departs the poet at the same time the nightingale does. Once he is back to his normal state of being, he questions the reality of the whole experience and finds himself in a state of doubt, self-division, half-knowledge. This state of tentative attitudes is actually a common real human state, "half-way between the *haggard* and *woe-begone* knight of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* and the fulfilled female figure playing her part in the natural process in *To Autumn*" (Hirst, 1981). Keats's experience--aesthetic escape into and return from the world of the nightingale--broadens his sane and sympathetic understanding of the realities of life, time, and space.¹⁸

¹⁷ In *A Defence of Poetry*, Shelley writes: "the mind in creation is as a fading coal which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness..." See *Norton*, 761.

¹⁸ Quite in contrast, Byron's understanding of the imperfections of the human lot seldom leads him in the direction of Keats's. It gives rise, instead, to the Byronic moods of cynicism, desperation, exasperation, and bitterness. In the words of Abrams, Byron stands single, among the English Romantics, in his "ironic counter-voice" and "a satirical perspective." However, at times he too comes very close to Keats in his aesthetically conceived transcendental dream of achieving "ideal beauty" (*CHP*, Canto III, l. 740) in the creations of the poet's mind:

'Tis to create, and in creating live
A being more intense, that we endow
With form our fancy, gaining as we give
The life we image..... (*CHP*, Canto III, ll.46-49)

The Beings of the Mind are not of clay:
Essentially immortal, they create
And multiply in us a brighter ray
And more beloved existence....(*CHP*, Canto IV, ll.37-40)

Once again, Wordsworth's sonnet "I heard (alas! 'twas only in a dream)," also called "I saw (alas! in a dream)," published in 1819, provides a strong analogy to the whole process of dreaming and waking with regard to a natural source of inspiration in a living bird. In the sonnet Wordsworth dreams about "A most melodious requiem, a supreme/ And perfect harmony of notes, achieved/ By a fair Swan," which is unmistakably similar to the "high requiem" of Keats's nightingale. Just as Keats's "dull brain perplexes and retards," Wordsworth's "dull earth partakes not, nor desires." When Keats says, "Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!," Wordsworth says, "Mount, tuneful Bird, and join the immortal quires!" As the nightingale flies away over the hills and meadows with the poet only listening "in vain" and waking to reality, the swan "soared" and the poet "awoke, struggling in vain to follow." In this way many other words and phrases from the sonnet such as "dream," "waking ears" and "drowsy" are relived in the Ode as if it could scarcely have had its being without Wordsworth.

According to Yeats (*The Symbolism of Poetry*), Blake's pictures and Keats's Odes are symbolic in the sense that in them colors, sounds, and forms combine to evoke "an infinite emotion" and "a perfected emotion." The finely wrought imagery of the *Nightingale* Ode is appealing to the senses of hearing, smell, and sight, and usually to more than one sense at a time. This synaesthetic image-making has the effect of producing a greater intensity of the imaginative experience recorded in the poem. Keats is always careful to enhance the sense impressions, reinforced by melodious assonance and alliteration. The simultaneous repetition of vowel and consonant sounds, of compound words and epithets, along with superb inversions, is intended to contribute to the desired poetic effect. Yeats also distinguishes between Blake and Keats by saying that while Blake celebrates the energy of "eternal delight" and makes his poetry out of his passionate identification with everything he sees, Keats gives us a poignant sense of separation from what he presents in the form of romantic longing for "otherness." Keats's is an aesthetic experience born of the tensions between identification and detachment or, in Burkean terms, self-preservation and self-propagation, the beautiful and the sublime.

It is interesting to note that the Keatsian conflicts between idealism and skepticism are similar to the Yeatsian ones in "Sailing to Byzantium" and "The Wild Swans at Coole." Yeats also wishes to escape from the actualities of the biological world of process—birth, decay, and death—into the permanent world of art where he would assume the shape of a golden bird. But it is obvious that he would then become a mere cold artifact free from the pulsating, throbbing process, though still looking from a distance and singing of the flux of the world of the living. After Keats and before Yeats, the famous Danish writer of fairy tales, Hans Christian Andersen, showed the difference between the beauty of the natural and the precision of cold science in his short story "The Nightingale." Like Keats's nightingale, the fullness of life of Yeats's "wild swans" makes him aware of his growing old age and with it possible poetic decline. The symbolization of the faculty of imagination by the abundance of life embodied in the swans implies that their disappearance from the sight of the poet is going to signal a loss of his creative powers just like the nightingale's fading away signals the break of Keats's spell of imagination.

Keats's nightingale is the "objective correlative" for his emotions and feelings. As Eliot defines the term, the object of nature acts as a medium through which the poet attempts to objectify his subjective impressions about the process of life fraught with tragic consequences. Of the "three voices of poetry," identified by Eliot in the essay by the same title as the meditative, the dramatic, and the didactic, Keats's poem combines the first two with the total exclusion of the last. The meditative content, however, gives in to the dramatic in the form of a symbolic debate as the poem progresses through a process of "advance and withdrawal," giving an impression of a living speech and a need for discourse. There is a sense of rhetorical urgency and intimacy in the form of lyric "I-You" address.¹⁹ The "I" of the poem is a poetic persona, a poetic mask, not the poet's own self, which is thus not directly involved in the debate between the listener and the object of his listening. As de Man (p. xxiv) says:

One never gains an intimate sense of Keats's own selfhood remotely comparable to that conveyed by other romantic poets. The "I" of the nightingale ode, for instance, is always seen in the movement that takes it away from its own center. The emotions that accompany the discovery of the authentic self, feelings of guilt and dread as well as sudden moments of transparent clarity, are lacking in Keats... He moves away from the burden of self-knowledge into a world created by the combined powers of the sympathetic imagination, poetry and history, a world that is ethically impeccable but from which the self is excluded. (my emphasis)

"The burden of self-knowledge" that de Man refers to is actually at the center of Keats's aesthetic experience. He is troubled by his knowledge of human mortality and that of his immediate family members, including his own, as we see when we take his biography into account. It is this knowledge from which he wishes to distance and dissolve himself in the "otherness" of aesthetic sensuousness as he proceeds from the center to the circumference. When the process is reversed, that is, when he is back to the center at the end of the poem with a maturer understanding of it, he questions the idealist and aestheticist tendencies of his desire. Yet (and this is precisely the point I wish to make) his aestheticist impulse is more gratified than not in his descent from the ideal to the real. That is why he seems contented with the unresolvable ambiguity of his experience. Since the green nature in which he finds the joyful sensation that he seeks is also real, it can be said that (the idea is implicit in Vendler's analysis) Keats is aestheticizing the real as well, not just the ideal. This is as much an escape--an unintended irony perhaps--as his desire for reaching the state of the bird's song or that of the figures on the Grecian urn.²⁰

¹⁹ For an interpretation of the "I-You" form in lyric poetry, see W.R. Johnson (1982, pp. 1-23). Watson (p. 364) discusses the function and mechanism of "thou" in Keats's Ode.

²⁰ It should be mentioned here that the pattern of Keats's aestheticism that I present here changes in his last poems. There is in the *Hyperion* poems a clear indication that he knows that he ought to be writing another kind of poetry, a poetry that will not be a mere fevering of himself but will begin with a knowledge of the pain and suffering of human hearts and will be a consolation to readers. And to prepare for that, as he says in his letters, he needs knowledge and philosophy--a step away from mere aestheticism.

Keats's nightingale is an aesthetically perceived object in much the same way as Robert Frost's tuft of flowers in the poem by the same title. Unlike Keats, Frost, however, never leaves the earth, always letting his practical sense of reality prevail over the romantic tendency to give in to fancy. Although Frost is a romantic in his characteristic ways, he does not yield to the temptation of the music of the thrush (as in "Come In") nor does he linger to contemplate the sensuously inviting landscape nearby (as in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening"), preferring to attend to the distant obligations and responsibilities. While Keats discovers the limitations of his imaginative quest after having plunged into imaginative contemplation and ultimately becomes better equipped to confront both the real and the ideal with a far-reaching vision, Frost seems to be armed with a foreknowledge of the dangers of imaginative dallying and therefore is refrained from full participation in the romantic flight. The result is a characteristic Frostian earthy didacticism whose literary quality lies in its irony, ambiguity, and paradox--something that Frost shares with Keats.

Keats's aesthetic and sensuous passion for the beauty of nature precludes any moralism and didacticism. After having pointed out his passion for what he (Keats) described as "the mighty *abstract idea* of Beauty in all things," Matthew Arnold rightly observes that "in one of the two great modes by which poetry interprets, in the faculty of naturalistic interpretation, in what we call natural magic, [Keats] ranks with Shakespeare."²¹ Despite his indebtedness to the literary tradition of the past, Keats establishes an Emersonian "original relation" with nature, independent of his knowledge of history and human society, just as he creates his own stanza-form out of the tradition of two sonnet forms.²² As Emerson (ed. 1968, 357) says, "Nature will not be Buddhist; she resents generalizing, and insults the philosopher in every moment with a million of fresh particulars." Keats experiences many emotions in contact with "fresh particulars" of nature in the form of its sights and sounds. He belongs to that school of Idealist Aestheticians who hold that spiritual element is introduced to the phenomena of nature not by God but by man's own consciousness. Beauty, in their view, is merely a particular condition of the human mind. And Keats as a poet shows a remarkable acumen for such conditions in which he captures the beauty and variety of natural sights and sounds with a sense of the immediate as well as the primitive in aesthetically satisfying form and style.

²¹ *Essays in Criticism*, Second Series, ed. S.R. Littlewood (Macmillan, 1960) p. 71. Arnold continues to say that for the faculty of "moral interpretation," in which Shakespeare equally excels, "Keats was not ripe." Arnold, however, is quick to say that in short literary works such as Keats's poems, in which "he is perfect," "the matured power of moral interpretation and the high architectonics...are not required" (p. 72).

²² Gittings (p. 454) thinks that it is a Shakespearean quatrain followed by a Miltonic sestet. Watson (p. 362) who gives a detailed picture of Keats's adaptation of the form thinks that it is a variation of the Shakespearean and the Petrarchan patterns combined.

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