

An Appraisal of Keats: Man and Poet in the *Ode to a Nightingale*

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Abstract

Taking into consideration his short life span, John Keats is still ranked among the great poets in English Literature." Had he lived ten years longer, he would have barred Shakespeare". This article aims to reveal the qualities of Keats as man and poet. These qualities I believe are manifested in his great Odes especially the "Ode to a Nightingale". Analysis of the ode showed Keats had "flint in him" as a man and as a poet he enjoyed a position much more reputable than many of his Romantic contemporaries and placed him high in the list of great English poets.

Key Words: consciousness, creativity, romanticism, art, eternity

Of all the great literary movements in England, ranging down from the time of Chaucer, fewer periods could have held a greater appeal for the more youthful students of English Literature than the Romantic Movement and fewer poets could have exercised a more mesmeric attraction than the Romantic Poets, especially the younger Romantics, Byron, Shelley and Keats. After all, more than any other movement, the very ingredients that made up the essence of Romanticism, that of revolt against the set canons of tradition, of the emphasis on imagination and the purely sensational and an impassioned attitude to life are to be found and expressed as ideals in youth anywhere in the world and throughout all ages. Even the medieval knights, the epitome of Romance, were all youthful rebels, restless, forever in the quest of dragons to slay, while love, honour and beauty were the ideals that hallowed their every action. In Romanticism, the poet himself is the hero, living in cities, but turning to nature in search of an expanded consciousness, the sense of identity with God and Nature which is the total human heritage, so far as the limited perspective of the human situation can grasp it (Frye 1968 p.37). It is in their biographies as much as in their poems and private correspondence that the younger Romantics emerge as passionate revolutionary young men of heroic stature, but martyrs to the fate that cheated their eager grasping at life by the intervention of early death.

But this very biographical knowledge is often detrimental for it leads to the temptation of psychoanalysing the motives underlying a piece rather than seeing it in its entirety as a product of a creative genius, but distinct from the creator. A poem may survive solely as a work of art, but it cannot escape standing testimony to the times and the poetic sensibility that engendered it. In the case of the Romantics, this testimony is more than mute for the Romantics saw their poetry as a subjective and self-revealing arena in which they stood, central to their experiences. These autobiographical elements heighten the power of imaginative representation of the truth in poetry, so a sharpened critical awareness cannot but accord such extra-textual information proper consideration. Indeed, otherwise, as (Watts 1985) observes, 'Ignorance that deprives one of both understanding and pleasure is not worth preserving.'

The point is, of course, whether one takes the stand that true art is disassociated from life or whether it is a pristine representation of that same life. If it is the former, then one is simply tempted to regard a poem as a whetstone for one's aesthetic sensibilities, shorn of any extra-textual relations to time and man. If it is the latter, a poem receives an added dimension and becomes a dynamic prism of ever-changing facets of the same truth. In this way, it is possible to place several interpretations, each adding to the richness of our reading of the poem. For such is the greatness of art. If a poem is incapable of yielding more than one interpretation, of meaning more than one thing to everybody, its popularity is short-lived. Art that endures transcends time barriers yet belongs to its age. One example of such art is John Keats's *Ode To A Nightingale*, a poem which has its undisputed inclusion in any anthology of the finest pieces of English poetry.

It is a poem which can be read and enjoyed independent of any consideration of its age or writer yet the wealth of biographical detail available to us on Keats makes it a challenging exercise to see how much of the essential Keats, both man and poet, it is possible to surprise out of a poem that has established him as one of the sweetest poets in the English language.

However, unless the investigation into the autobiographical elements in any poem is handled judiciously, there is always the danger of reading more into the text than may have been originally intended or indeed, would have been desirable. Nevertheless, after reading several critics on Keats, a voluminous biography and his letters, I feel that despite Keats's oft-quoted credo that 'A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence because he has no Identity-he is continually in for- and filling some other Body - The Sun, the Moon, the Sea"... etc, and his rejection of "the egotistical sublime" in his poetry, he has not been entirely successful in dissociating his personality from his art in *Ode To A Nightingale* but with fortunate consequences for the poem. Biographical data on Keats establishes *Ode To A Nightingale* as having been written in May 1891, the year that saw the production of his most outstanding poetical works and, as revealed in his letters of this period, the maturity of his genius, his personality and his poetic theory. It is not surprising, therefore, to see a reflection of this fruition of thought and feeling expressed in his 1891 poems and for this reason, these poems have been classified as his greatest because they embody the very essence of his genius at its peak of creativity.

Conversely, in trying to trace the personal component in *Ode To A Nightingale*, I shall begin with a discussion of that quality, supreme among others, that Pettet saw in Keats as being completely unromantic, namely, his constant striving to detach his personality from his poetry and to maintain a 'Negative Capability' comparable to Shakespeare's. Keats's view of the function of poetry was as distinct and individual as that of any of his contemporaries. Unlike them, he defined a poet as being plastic, of having the ability to merge perfectly with the spiritual elements that lie beyond the tangible and the commonplace so that this mystical consummation that he describes in his poetry is in fact, the full essence of that unseen but fully felt experience, undistorted by his own egotistical perception. Keats defines his own position more effectively. In his letter to Benjamin Baily, he says, 'Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect - but they have not any individuality, any determined Character.' Possibly his rejection of a life of thought for that of sensation can be adduced from this basic tenet of faith, if of course, by this we are clear in our definition of what Keats really meant by 'thought'.

On this point, Thrope (1977, pp 176-7) quotes from Plato, 'Not by wisdom do poets write but by a sort of genius and inspiration' and feels that if Plato meant by wisdom, knowledge through reasoning, then Keats would have been in complete agreement. Thrope says, 'For though he believed firmly in the wisdom that springs from close contact with a harsh world and flowers into gracious human sympathy, Keats had no faith in mere cold knowledge and reason.' Logical reasoning might have appeared as cold-blooded to one of Keats's passionate temperament but more than that, he might have seen in such a process of thinking, something essentially egotistical and, therefore, antithetical to what he had conceived of as the poet's basic duty as a consciously objective reporter of the mysterious and the mystical. Moreover, logical thinking refutes a good deal of abstractions that can be felt by a discerning sensibility, though not necessarily yielding to common-sense explanation. Thrope (1977, p.177) continues, 'Deep feelings makes possible thinking with our whole selves, soul and body. It emancipates the poet's mind from the incidental and temporary, leaving it free to probe the deeper mysteries of existence.'

The rational, thinking being is bound to the earth, precisely by the more limited truth that he can define and that is made tangible by his definition, while imagination frees the poet and bestows upon him the power to penetrate to the heart of an experience and to perceive spiritual truth, a perception that is denied to those who trust their minds above their hearts. Imagination, the creed of Romanticism, was defined by Coleridge as 'The union of deep feeling with profound thought, the fine balance of truth in observing, with the imaginative faculty in modifying the objects observed; and above all the original gift of spreading the tone, the atmosphere, and with it the depth and the height of the ideal world around forms, incidents, and situations, of which, for the common view, custom had bedimmed all the lustre' It found its perfect expression in the 1891 poems of Keats, of which *Ode To A Nightingale* is a prime example (Bowra 1968, p.7).

The absorption with the self, the self-worship that characterised a great deal of Romantic poetry and epitomised in the constantly intruding first person pronoun "I", as Pette noted, was largely absent from most of Keats's work even where he makes his famous pronouncement on Art, Beauty and Truth.

Nevertheless, there are deeply felt personal experiences behind the 1891 odes that seem to be in keeping with the generally held belief of the Romantics that some actual and factual experience should constitute the authority behind their reports (Barzun 1975, p. 62). But the significant fact, according to Pettet (1972), is that ‘this “I” is to a large extent a universalised one. This is the chief difference between Keats's odes and those of his contemporaries.’

This last statement may be of doubtful value when the reader is actually confronted with *Ode To A Nightingale*, which appears at first glance to be a totally subjective report on a personal experience. Certainly, the stanzas appear to be liberally sprinkled with references to “I”, the poet's personality intruding from the first to the last. Here at least, it would seem that the poet has momentarily lost his plasticity that enabled him to project himself into his subject that he had strived so hard for elsewhere, and even though he states his desire to merge with the bird, it appears to be more the outcome of a momentary desire for escapism. All of this does not accord with all that has been said of Keats so far.

A reconsideration of the first stanza reveals the poet in a state of “*drowsy numbness*”, but the fourth and fifth lines clearly show that this stupor is not the result of self-absorption, a retreat from the world into the self, since the poet expresses that he is “*too happy*” in the felicity of the birdsong:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
 My senses, 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, and shadows numberless,
 Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

This stupor, while self-induced, appears to be a state of preparation, a dullness of the corporeal senses so that imagination can come into its own and help the poet transcend the temporal moment, to penetrate beyond to the ultimate truth in immortal Beauty in Art that he has glorified time and again in his most memorable works. Keats's biographer (Gittings 1968, p. 162) has noted that ‘The necessity of actual experience in arriving at truth or in creating becomes a prime creed with Keats. It is the beginning of the need he felt to experience everything “on the pulses”’. In another context, Gittings (1968, p. 212) observed, ‘To live and feel human experience on the pulses was now to be a necessary part of his whole conception of poetry. It is a poetic watershed, a great divide that marks off everything he wrote after *Isabella* both from that poem and what had gone before.’ For Keats to feel the intangible “on the pulses”, it is necessary to seek physical and mental oblivion and so he opens his report on the nightingale's song by wilfully inducing a mood of stupor to pave the way for the experience of a mystical ecstasy. The melody of the nightingale ceases to be mere birdsong. Instead, it becomes the vehicle that transports the poet into regions where eternity reigns supreme and beauty never dies.

The next stanza reveals Keats, the poet of the senses and sensation. The suppression of rational thinking gives way to an awareness of the sensations and here Keats unreservedly gives full rein to what Trilling calls his ‘appetitive image’:

O for a draught of vintage! That hath been
 Cool'd a long age in a deep-delved earth,
 Tasting of Flora and the country green,
 Dance and Provencal 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 away into the forest dim.

Although the English language distinguishes between the sensory, the sensuous and the sensual, Trilling's observation that in Keats they were all one, is borne out by stanzas II and V. His is a highly keen sense-perception and while in Wordsworth sensory details are purified through the mental processes, in Keats they are distilled in the intense passion of his nature to produce imagery that borders on the sensual. For him, it is not enough to merely long for a draught of cold wine but it must bring on associative images of song and the full, passionate enjoyment of life with it.

As a poet, Keats was preoccupied completely with sensations instead of thought, with gorgeous imagery instead of abstract conceptions. Poetry for him was like a drug which made him forget the weariness, the fever and the fret of human life. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to overwhelm himself completely with poetry. It exhilarated him and plunged him in rapture. As Tahir (1989, p. 123) has affirmed, 'Keats was a poet first and always. That was the chief passion of his heart, and he devoted all his powers and energies to that end.' But his greatness does not depend upon his unusual 'sensual receptivity', the creation of charming images, the powerfully realistic description of nature, and the felicity of expression. Like other great poets, he reveals that 'inner vision with the help of which a genius enters into the life of things, and grasps the permanently deep meaning of the universe' (Tahir, 1989, p. 123).

Stanza III contains the closest that Keats ever came to autobiographical revelation. Generally accepted belief ascribes these lines to the memory of the prolonged illness and death of his brother Tom at age 19. Inglis (1969) scoffs such a journalistic reading into this stanza, where trained by daily newspapers, we pack more biographical details than might have been the poet's intent. Nevertheless, with his brother's death barely six months earlier, it is both impossible and illogical to imagine that Keats was in any way unaffected, while engaged in the preoccupation with the mutability of human experience unless immortalized in art, that formed such an intrinsic part of the odes. But this stanza serves as more than mere retrospective brooding.

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 here each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

It reveals one aspect of Keats's theory that (Fogle 1977, p. 436) summarises as 'The intensity of experience when it is felt in its fullness. They (the odes) express an exquisite awareness of the existence of joy and melancholy, pleasure and pain, and art and life. They express a feeling that they are inseparable although not identical, and they express an acceptance of this inseparability of the elements of human experience.' Keats himself has expressed this idea more poetically in his *Ode On Melancholy*:

'Veiled Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
Though seen by none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine'.

The ecstasy in the song of the nightingale is immeasurably heightened by the contrast with the 'Laden-eyed' sorrow that Keats had suffered in his personal life and which lead to his maturity of poetic vision and only through juxtaposition can he emphasise the intensity of both. Owen suggests that at the time of composing the *Ode To A Nightigale*, Keats already had a premonition of his coming doom which endowed him with 'that remarkably quickened sympathy with all natural life which is so often to be seen in those who are doomed to die.' (1971, p. 39) It was, therefore, not poetic escapism but a real sadness that prompted the longing to fade away with the nightingale in the dim forest.

Away! Away! For I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Baccus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:

Literature has always provided an avenue of escape, both for the reader and for the writer as the creator of imaginative worlds, and Keats's preoccupation of literature as a refuge surfaces in instances like this one, where the means of escape is not through drink but through poetry. Gardner (1982) defends this not as a sign of weakness in Keats or a refusal to face life but rather as a sign of the resilience of his spirit which was able to break out of the prison of self and refuse to be bound by its own present wretchedness. She feels that Keats drew from his reading - and if I may add, his writing - 'a renewed sense of life as full of possibilities and as infinitely worth living, however dark the present might be' (1982, pp. 36-7).

As Hazlitt has said about poetry that 'It is not a mere frivolous accomplishment (as some persons have been led to imagine), the trifling amusement of a few idle readers or leisure hours - it has been the study and delight of mankind in all ages' (in Foakes 1977, p.109). This delight, ever present in Keats, is intermingled in this poem with Keats's wish to fly to the nightingale and then later, to ultimately cease in the climax of rapture. Stanza IV reflects this delight that Keats felt even in the midst of sorrowful musings on the transience of life.

Following the patterns of light alternating with dark, characteristic of this ode, in stanza VI the note of death intrudes once again. However, there is a marked difference, since death is not viewed as it was in stanza III as the sleep that comes after life's fitful fever, but as a climax. As Fogle (1977) notes, '... if we choose to view this poem as an imaginative reflection of the complexity and intensity of human experience, Death may quite reasonably be viewed as its culmination'. This is no escape but seen as a fitting climax to an experience for which anything else that follows on earth would be anti-climatic.

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;
More than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon midnight with no pain,

The movement of ideas takes us logically to the next point where death is followed by eternity and immortality. In stanza VII, Keats achieves the poetical momentum of transporting the experience from the temporal moment to all eternity.

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
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

It is not poetic fancy that makes him call the nightingale '*immortal Bird*', as we might feel from his earlier use of the word '*Dryad*', but his realization at this moment of all that he had hoped to find in imaginative experience. Suspended above time and space, he can look through eternity to the accompanying cadence of the nightingale's song. As Holloway (1972) puts it, 'the voice of the nightingale is made immune first to history and then to geography: it can establish a rapport with dead generations or with faery lands'. This stanza, one of the most poetically powerful passages in Keats, is his lyrical celebration of the moment of achieving infinity.

It is valuable to note here how complete, despite the subjectivity elsewhere, is the effacement of the poet's personality, a 'fellowship with essence' leaving him completely 'alchemized and free of space'. To MacFarland (1981), a more fitting climax would have been hard to find although one cannot agree with him that the final stanza, following immediately as an anticlimax, mars what might otherwise have been poetic perfection. If Keats had indeed terminated this poem on the penultimate stanza, one might have read a different meaning altogether into this ode and taken it to imply that for Keats, having left himself literally in the air in the fairy realms of imagination, it meant that poetry like any other form of art, offers the best, permanent and only refuge from worldly pain and sorrow.

It is a measure of his maturity which according to Stillinger, also reflects the recurrent theme in his Odes that 'an individual ought not to lose touch with reality'. His acceptance and affirmation of reality makes him a 'saner if in some ways, less Romantic poet than his contemporaries'.

Though Keats was not a poet to moralize, a moral, if any can be extracted from his odes, might read as 'The proposed remedy of escape from grief through the beguilement of art is available to all, but in the end, even it is insufficient' (Jackson, 1980, p. 97). Young as he was, Keats's precocity gave him the acumen to perceive the limitations of art as a substitute for life.

This insight came partly from his intelligence and partly from a 'disposition of character' which according to Walsh, brought an added strength to Keats as a poet, and an unusual degree of self-awareness. He says, 'He does indeed offer many proofs in his letters of an ability for self analysis, but it is of a detached and clinical sort, uncoloured by prejudice, touchiness or self-love. The general characteristics of Keats's self-awareness are both humorous sanity and humility, a combination which, nevertheless, permitted him a sturdy independence of merely fashionable influences or ill-disposed critics'.

This independence of fashionable influences enabled him to create his best poems so that they transcend his own time and qualify for the label of modernity that Fraser (1971) bestows on them. He elaborates, 'The basic theme of the odes, the tension between our painful sense of transience and our intuitions of the eternal, the relationship in a more abstract sense, between the pain of life and the delight of poetry, the relationship, in a more abstract sense still, between life, art and death is a central theme of modern poetry. The odes are also modern in that they are symbolic poems; they show rather than say. They are modern in finding 'objective correlatives' artistically distanced from intimate and painful states of personal feelings'.

There is little more to add here. For me the quintessence of all that Keats was, as man and poet, is clearly manifest in the Odes. In them, he finally attained the immortality, the quest of which had haunted him and eluded him in his own transient life.

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