

The interstitial company of literary remains in *Ode to a Nightingale*

Loveliness and loneliness - two words separated by a single vowel – sit like two tectonic plates beneath John Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale*, slipping and rubbing against each other. The ode is steeped in yearns for escapes, through repeating attempts of 'turning away', reaching toward escapes and half escapes.¹ The ode uses the beauty of the nightingale's song as conduit to escape present time; variously meditating on imagined and sublime escapes and half escapes. Some of these escapes and meditative 'turnings away' are invoked through the literary remains of poetic echoes: allusions to other poets, as well as and Keats's own literary fragments. Keats creates a sense of poetic company, both of his own poetic past, and the company of other poets, but continually turns from it.

Michael O'Neill comments on both the fascination, and fear, of a retreat from society for allusive Romantic poets. In the anguished words of Chaucer's Arcite in *A Knight's Tale*, to be finally "'Allone, withouten any compaignye' is always the potential fate and possible subliminal wish of the allusive poet"². The "awful Loveliness" that O'Neill recognises is the interstitial, paradoxical nature of such allusive company – that the company is simultaneously real and imagined - as well as the anguish and allure of this fact.³

On New Year's Day 1819 Keats wrote, all Jane Austen-full, to his brother and sister-in-law of the aching tedium of socialising and society and New Year's Eve:

"Where all the evenings amusement consists in saying your good health – *your* good health - and *YOUR* good health and o – (I beg your pardon) your's Miss"⁴.

Keats's humour in recounting the repetitive dullness of social interaction places him as an interstitial figure. He is in the room - playing his role by endlessly toasting the good health of his companions - while simultaneously watching himself and the other players, and perhaps considering how best to reanimate the experience later, to etch in a humour that is lacking, for a different audience. Keats is described by Grant F. Scott as sliding into "anti-social feelings... towards misanthropy" in these first months of 1819⁵.

While seeming to grow jaded of physical sociability, poetically, Keats continues to socialise. Christopher Ricks infers Keats's conception of his literary company by his letter

¹ "Half in love with easeful death" '*Ode to a Nightingale*', John Keats

² Michael O'Neill, *Shelleyan Reimaginings and Influence* (London, 2019) p4

³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, '*Hymn to Intellectual Beauty*' *Version B*. (Oxford, 2009) p117

⁴ John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats, 1814 – 1821*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA, 1958) p20

⁵ Grant F. Scott. *Keats in Context*, ed. Michael O'Neill (London, 2017) p122

referencing his likely impending death: “This is a mere matter of the moment – I think that I shall be among the English Poets after my death”. This confidence is free from arrogance, it calls out to Keats’s use of tradition, form, and allusion, as he “is among the English poets, since his poems had always been among theirs, enjoying their company and having them live again in the life of his allusive art”.⁶ Similarly, Donald Wesling notes that the Romantic poets made very few explicit statements about rhyme, “but they accept that rhyme is soaked with usage.”⁷ For Keats, then, company in form is everywhere.

If rhyme and form are pervasively soaked with influence and usage, this essay is concerned with new connections that are to be made by exploring the literary echo in the form and content of *Ode to a Nightingale*. It will trace new shoots and buds of Keats’s allusive company, both past literature and fragments of his past literary self, before exploring how the poem moves to close with a formic metaphor to slip into the extant nothingness that he seeks.

In the first stanza, the poet’s interstitial, half-presence is conferred through the various methods to turn away and toward an oblivion. The opening:

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:

The poet is firstly present in his pain and attempts to turn away into drowsiness. Hemlock and a ‘dull opiate’ are referenced as perhaps having either been consumed or emptied ‘to the drains’. ‘One minute past’, while indicating the movement of time, shares its line with ‘Lethe-wards had sunk:’ The combination of ‘past’ and ‘sunk’, combined by the caesura at the colon creates the sense that time is both slipping forward and moving backwards. The effect of the opening lines is disorientating in its form and content. The stanza is then split by the caesura and the entrance of the nightingale.

The nightingale in the ode, in its easeful song, is often cited as representative of the salve of poetry to human suffering throughout the ages. It is introduced:

That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,

⁶ Christopher Ricks, *Allusion to the Poets*, (London, 2002) p177-178

⁷ Donald Wesling, *The Chances of Rhyme*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980) p50

This is frequently recognised as an (arguably tautological) reference to a tree nymph. The word ‘Dryad’ was de-capitalised in some print editions of *Ode to a Nightingale*, notably, in James Jermyn’s infamous, and deeply academically influential, *Book of English Epithets, Literal and Figurative: With Elementary Remarks*, printed in 1849. Returning to Keats’s manuscript of *Nightingale*, he uses the capital ‘D’, giving ‘Dryad’, rather than ‘dryad’. I suggest, as the ear and eye move through the line with its capitalised Dryad, they go to (John) Dryden. When Donald Wesling commented on Romantic poets’ acute awareness that rhyme is heavy with past usage, he notes specifically that “they reinvent existing forms with a fine sense of how the device is limited and enabled by previous work: Keats goes to Dryden to get the sort of couplet he wants in *Lamia*”⁸. Keats goes to Dryden again in *Ode to a Nightingale*, in his allusive half-pun, with bird, rather than rhyme, as conduit.

Dryden’s odes were convivial: “social and often ceremonial, written not for the self but for the nation”⁹. His odes were distinctly musical, often in their form, performance, subject, and content. *Song for St. Cecilia’s Day* for example, was written to be performed to music, for a feast that celebrated music, mediating on the goddess of music. In *Ode to A Nightingale*, open vowels fill the final line of the stanza when we hear the nightingale’s song, as form and content mirror each other in Keats’s ode. Through a half pun, both visual and aural, (Dryad/Dryden) the stanza is allusively haunted by sound of the easeful performance as well as the sociability of Dryden’s odes.

Further, the poet in the ode is markedly distinct and separate from the nightingale and its easy sociability. The nightingale is part of ‘some melodious plot’. This synaesthetic conspiracy is necessarily exclusive of the poet, emphasised by ‘some’, conferring his awareness but distance. The poet only knows of the existence of ‘some melodious plot’. The ease with which the nightingale is singing its unheard melody, and the poet’s reverential distance from it, is marked. The poet in the ode is akin to the figure Keats casts in his anecdote of New Year’s Eve 1819: recounting the story but not part of the plot.

The ode shifts to a series of contemplated escapes from the anguish and dread of the first half of the first stanza. Keats turns the inevitable pain of human experience “and its counter urge in his desire to escape... into an outdoor world of health and happiness”¹⁰.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ *The Norton Anthology of English Literature - Vol C: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century*, Ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York, 2012) p.2083

¹⁰ Nicholas Roe, *John Keats A New Life* (New Haven and London, 2013) p.324

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:

In his wish to bridge the gap between the ephemeral nightingale and his material anguish ('leave the world unseen, And with thee'), the poet turns to escape through a warming drowsiness and wine-stained lips. Keats, moving from the sunburnt scene of pastoral escapism, turns instead to the possibility of disappearing or dissolving, ('leave the world unseen' and 'fade away') at the close of the stanza.

The third stanza opens with an echo from the close of the second. The colon at the close of the second stanza indicates a continuation. It draws attention to the gap on the page, the space between the stanzas:

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

The first line of the third stanza almost enjambes with the end of the previous stanza, it is as though the second stanza has faded into nothingness, into silence, to start up again by coming back into sound and vision. Keats's intertwines form and content to evoke the actuality of the poet's longing to fade away 'into the forest dim', by fading out and fading in again. The poet wishes to fade away, dissolve and forget, wishing to dissolve and de-exist himself, rather than dissolve the escapes he has found. The poet's wish to de-exist contrasts starkly with the present, as echoed by the uses of 'Here' / 'Where' / 'Where' / 'Where' / 'Where', of physical pain, the inevitable journey of aging and young death.

Keats's ode "turns away" again, to "push deeper through 'verdurous gloom' and winding mossy ways"¹¹. Fade and fading echoes through the ode again, returning to the poet who "cannot see what flowers" are at foot, but navigates them through their scent:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet...

¹¹ Nicholas Roe, *John Keats A New Life* (New Haven and London, 2013) p.325

..Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;

Keats's self-echo can be found again in the move from the seventh to the eighth stanza ("Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn"). He opens the eighth and final stanza with the echo ('Forlorn!'), the instant repeat of the same word is unexpectedly jarring to the reader, despite the building use of self-echo in the poem. The use of self-echo at this point draws attention to its repetition through the proximity of the mirrored words. The only distance between the repeat is the page space between the stanzas. O'Neill suggests that the second 'Forlorn!' is the moment at which the poem becomes self-conscious. There is certainly a shift as forlorn is repeated and drawn attention to as a word (like a bell). The poem, of course, is composed entirely of words, and draws attention to this by repeating 'forlorn', from a faery land then bridged across the stanza 'forlorn' being self-consciously referred to as a "word", which, like a bell, rouses the poet back to the reality of the construct of the poem. The poem, composed entirely of words, is being self-consciously dismantled as each word peals the poet back to his soul self, his loneliness.

Forlorn! The word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my soul self

It has been increasingly recognised that the final lines of *Ode to a Nightingale* are echoes from *Sleep and Poetry*¹²:

The visions are fled – the car is fled,
Into the light of heaven, and in their stead
A sense of real things...
... would bear along
My soul to nothingness

Walter Jackson Bate and Michael O'Neill comment that the pause after 'nothingness' is momentary but marked and offers a glimpse of how the poet's soul might be borne away to such nothingness.¹³

In *Ode to a Nightingale*, we have:

¹² Michael O'Neill, 'Prosody and Versification in the Odes', *Keats in Context*, ed. Michael O'Neill (London, 2017) p202

¹³ Ibid

Was it a vision or a waking dream?

Fled is that music: – do I wake or sleep?

The lines from *Sleep and Poetry*, unlike the closing lines in *Ode to a Nightingale*, confer the sense of a series of consecutive moments. The rhymes of fled, fled, and stead, give a syncopated, continuous movement forward. The corresponding lines in the ode, as a literary echo, arrests time. The sense of consecutive order is jumbled, and the moments become abrupt. ‘Fled’ is brought out from the end of the line to the start. At the medial caesura, where the final line in splits, we are left with the nothingness of silence.

The echo of the lines from *Sleep and Poetry* result in nothingness being rendered through form in *Ode to a Nightingale*. *Sleep and Poetry* alludes to nothingness through ellipses, naming “nothingness” and then evoking a sense of nothingness in the poetic pause that follows the word. Rather than providing a momentary pause at the close of the poem, the literary echo of the lines from *Sleep and Poetry* invokes nothingness at the ode’s close. Form and content merge to confer nothingness and present a final ‘turning away’ of the poem, to ‘bear his soul away’.

In conclusion, poetic language, steeped in the usage, echoes, and allusions of its literary tradition, represents a form of company, and company in form. Keats’s *Ode to a Nightingale* shifts between various escapes and experiences, focussing on one only to turn to the next. The ode turns to look at the anguish and sorrow, to turn away again. Turns to the “mirth” of red-wine-stained lips on hot summer’s days, to turn again away. Keats is contemplative of how a song (or an ode) has been the company of others in their own human anguish over the centuries.

Keats closes *Ode to a Nightingale* with a form of interstitial company, half-echoing lines that he devised for *Sleep and Poetry*. The echo at the close of *Ode to a Nightingale* holds the fragments of his previous lines and traps them in amber. The alluded lines are cut short by the caesura, so they remain half said and yet to be said, with *Ode to a Nightingale* finally dissolving, form and content in harmony, into nothingness.

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