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A STUDY OF KEATS’S ‘ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE’

By Janet Spens

It may appear superfluous and presumptuous to attempt an examination of Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ when we have among many others the critiques of the late Poet Laureate Dr. Bridges¹ and of Mr. Garrod when Professor of Poetry at Oxford.² But since both these authorities find fault with the close of the poem, I suggest that perhaps there is something further to be said, for the poet is more likely to understand his own work, not only than the ordinary reader, but even than the skilled critic. Dr. Bridges is, of course, in a different class, but he seems a little uneasy about his adverse prose judgement, and in his ‘Nightingales’ ‘with his singing robes about him’ he has implicitly met in part his own and Mr. Garrod’s criticisms.

Dr. Bridges esteemed ‘The Ode to a Nightingale’ much more highly than the ‘Ode to Autumn’ which is often held to be the greatest of all. The ‘Ode to Autumn’, he points out, ‘does not in any part of it reach the marvellous heights attained by several of the others in their best places, and even if judged as a whole, it is left far behind by the splendour of the “Nightingale”, in which the mood is more intense, and the poetry vies in richness and variety with its subject’. But later he tempers this high praise by the criticism that ‘the thought of the penultimate stanza [“Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird”] is fanciful and superficial—man being as immortal as the bird in every sense except that of sameness, which is assumed and does not satisfy’. A little later he complains that the poet ‘loses hold of his main idea in the words “plaintive anthem” which in expressing the dying away of the sound changes its character’.

Mr. Garrod echoes this judgement about the change in the interpretation of the song and goes further, calling ‘plaintive anthem’ ‘the only false note which the Ode discovers’. He says he does not feel Dr. Bridges’s difficulty about the penultimate stanza and gives his own interpretation of it, and he repudiates Dr. Bridges’s judgement that ‘no praise could be too high for those last six verses of the poem’. ‘That praise’, says Mr. Garrod, ‘is [too high] . . . the close [is] not wholly worthy of the rest’ [of the poem]. He thinks the main idea has been lost, and the poem suffers at the same time ‘a deterioration of rhythmical effect’.

¹ Robert Bridges, Collected Essays (London, 1929), iv. 128–34. I have normalized the spelling.
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We have, then, two main criticisms. First, a charge that there is a change from the ecstasy of the opening—assumed to be the main theme of the poem—to the melancholy at the close, and it is implied that this change is unmotivated, almost an oversight. This would involve that the poem lacks the unity of a work of art.

Bridges objects secondly to the idea of the penultimate stanza as ‘fanciful and superficial’. Garrod does not feel the objection, and rejects with emphasis Miss Amy Lowell’s explanation that Keats is referring to ‘the species nightingale’. Keats, he says, does mean ‘the particular nightingale singing at that instant. This “light-winged Dryad of the trees” is, like all other Dryads—and Naiads, and all nymphs and fays—like all the people of Faery, all the lesser divinities of the classical hierarchy—immortal. This nightingale and not the species merely to which it belongs, was “not born for death”. This nightingale, and not some other of its kind, was heard “in ancient days” by I know not what “emperor and clown”.’

I venture to think that of the three criticisms Miss Amy Lowell’s is the nearest and Professor Garrod’s the furthest from the truth. He appears to be relying chiefly on Coleridge’s doctrine of ‘poetic faith’ constituted by a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ (Biographia Literaria, chapter xiv). Coleridge invented—or discovered—this doctrine in support of his ‘Ancient Mariner’ in argument, one supposes with Wordsworth; but it seems to be overlooked sometimes that Coleridge does not imply that the poetic effect should depend on the supernatural element for which the ‘suspension of disbelief’ is needed. In the case of ‘The Ancient Mariner’, for instance, the reader may disbelieve the objective existence of the phantom ship without altering the poetic effect, so long as he accepts that the Mariner thought it was there.

But in Keats’s poem the writer himself is speaking throughout, and it is his experience we must share if we are to attain the poetic vision, and we do not believe that that particular nightingale is immortal. That Mr. Garrod’s explanation would have been rejected by Keats seems to be proved by passages in his letters. On 8 March 1819, writing to Haydon two months before the ‘Nightingale’ was composed, he says: ‘I have come to this resolution—never to write for the sake of writing or making a poem, but from running over with any little knowledge or experience which many years of reflection may perhaps give me.’ Mr. Garrod’s interpretation means that at the climax of his poem, Keats offered us a literary conventional stone for the bread of poetic and spiritual experience. For the theme of the poem is clearly the poet’s attempt to escape with the nightingale from ‘the weariness, the fever and the fret’ of his own world, to one of true

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1 Keats, pp. 114-17.
happiness, and that escape is supposed to be achieved for a moment in the penultimate stanza.

Writing to Taylor his publisher, on 30 January 1818, Keats gives great importance to the insertion of a passage in *Endymion* (i. 777). He says: 'You must indulge me by putting this in . . . such a preface is necessary to the subject. . . . I assure you that when I wrote it it was a regular stepping of the Imagination towards a Truth. My having written that Argument will perhaps be of the greatest Service to me of any thing I ever did.' The inserted passage is as follows:

Wherein lies Happiness? In that which beck
Our ready Minds to fellowship divine,
A fellowship with essence; till we shine
Full alchemiz'd and free of space. Behold
The clear Religion of heaven.

In the poem he goes on to give examples of that which beckons our minds to this fellowship. They are like the 'luxuries' of 'I stood tiptoe'.

It is surely clear that in this penultimate stanza of the 'Nightingale', the poet did feel himself to have 'stept' for a moment 'into a sort of one-ness', to have become like 'a floating spirit' independent of space and time. And this interpretation is supported by the opening lines of the last stanza:

Forlorn! the very word is like a knell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self.

The oneness with the universe, with the divine Fellowship has been snapt, and he returns to earth, to imprisonment in his own individuality.

But if the argument by which the poet reaches his vision is fanciful and superficial, we, the readers, shall be unable to follow him; there is no vision for us. Unless we really believe the poet has captured that Eternal moment and to some extent share it, the poem has failed; willing suspension of disbelief is of no value at all, so far as the central poetic experience is concerned. We must, therefore, try to follow the steps by which Keats attained his vision, and I suggest that the principal clue to Keats's experience and the structure of the Ode is to be found in Hazlitt's *Lectures on the English Poets*. These lectures were given in the spring of 1818 and published in the same year. Keats missed the first by mistaking the hour and met Hazlitt and the audience, many of whom he knew, coming out. He dined in Hazlitt's company the following Sunday, and seems to have attended regularly all the rest of the course. During this period Keats's opinion of Hazlitt was very high; 'his depth of taste', he wrote to two different correspondents, was one of the great gifts of the age. He was, therefore, in a state of mind to accept suggestions from Hazlitt. There are two lectures

1 Keats, *Letters*, i. 98.  
2 Ibid. i. 94.  
3 Ibid. i. 85–86.
which seem to me important for the ‘Nightingale’: the second—the first which Keats heard—on Chaucer and Spenser, and the fifth, on Thomson and Cowper. I take the latter first, because it bears on the penultimate stanza—indeed gave it what may be called its structure.

In this lecture Hazlitt lays down that what distinguishes the interest in Nature from others is its ‘abstractedness. The interest we feel in human nature is exclusive, and confined to the individual, the interest we feel in external nature is common, and transferable from one object to all others of the same class.’ Further ‘there is generally speaking the same foundation for our love of Nature as for our habitual attachments, namely association of ideas’. But the peculiar quality of this attachment is the ‘transferable nature of our feelings with respect to physical objects’ so that ‘if we have once associated strong feelings of delight with the objects of natural scenery . . . we shall ever after feel the same delight in other objects of the same sort’. He goes on:

If we have once enjoyed the cool shade of a tree, and been lulled into a deep repose by the sound of a brook running at its foot, we are sure that wherever we can find a shady stream, we can enjoy the same pleasure again, so that when we imagine these objects, we can easily form a mystic personification of the friendly power that inhabits them, Dryad or Naiad, offering its cool fountain or its tempting shade. Hence the origin of Grecian mythology. All the objects of the same kind being the same, not only in their appearance, but in their practical uses, we habitually confound them together under the same general idea.

Thus, he goes on to explain, all the associations with all the individuals of a species known to us, come together to enrich each, and each becomes the symbol of a whole complex of emotions. After illustrating his thesis from his own and from Rousseau’s experience, Hazlitt ends his lecture with these words: ‘The cuckoo, “that wandering voice” that comes and goes with the spring, mocks our ears with one note from youth to age; and the lapwing, screaming round the traveller’s path, repeats for ever the same sad story of Tereus and Philomel!’

We have reached the nightingale and Hazlitt has used it to unite not merely the memories of one lifetime, but those of remote centuries, and to carry us finally into the world of Greek myth.

The penultimate stanza of the Nightingale ode, which holds the key of its mystery, is built on this coda of Hazlitt’s lecture. Keats is trying to reach the Poetic Paradise—Happiness as he defines it in Endymion. To be happy is to be ‘rapt into a sort of oneness, into a fellowship of essence and free of space’, to be freed, that is, from the individual experience and to be swept into the vast and infinitely various flood of emotion in the

universe. The voice of the nightingale singing in his own poignant moment, unites him with the different dialect of pain in the ancient world of 'Em-
peror and Clown'. But with the next step Keats forsakes Hazlitt’s guidance. Hazlitt had ended with the world of Greek tragic myth; Keats turns to the world of the Old Testament.¹

Why does Keats bring in Ruth instead of Philomel? Dr. Johnson, I suggest, gives indirectly the answer to this question. He is criticizing in his Life of Cowley the poet’s choice of a subject for his epic poem Davideis. ‘The whole system of life’, he writes, ‘while the Theocracy was yet visible, has an appearance so different from all other scenes of human action, that the reader of the Sacred Volume habitually considers it as the peculiar mode of existence of a distinct species of mankind, that lived and acted with manners uncommunicable.’ Johnson had the gift of putting his finger on the intimate, barely conscious feelings of the ordinary man of his own day; and this was certainly the feeling about the world of the Old Testament not only of his own contemporaries, but of the great mass of Christian men and women, for more than a hundred years later. Keats is using this conceptional difficulty, the sort of historical incongruity to suggest a state of being between that of ancient history and the world of pure poetry where he would be. The Nightingale’s song is heard through the ages and out of time by Ruth: the next step is into ‘Faery lands forlorn’.

I leave this stanza for the moment and go back to the beginning of the poem. Dr. Bridges has suggested that the first stanza has been deflected from the natural syntax by a reminiscence of a passage in Browne’s Britannia’s Pastorals (I. iii. 163).

Sweet Philomela (then he heard her sing)
I do not envy thy sweet carolling
But do admire thee that each even and morrow
Canst carelessly thus sing away thy sorrow....

This would explain how Keats came to write

'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot
But being too happy in thy happiness
That thou, light winged Dryad of the trees
... Singest of summer....

Dr. Bridges describes Browne’s lines as ‘the remote cause of the hitch’ in the syntax of Keats’s first stanza, but the connexion is closer and more

¹ There is no possible doubt of this. Dr. Garrod’s suggestion that Ruth is so named ‘by some obscure process of association’ from Wordsworth’s ‘Solitary Reaper’ (Keats, p. 115) is not possible, though memories of that poem may have suggested the word ‘plaintive’. This Ruth is an exile ‘sick for home... amid the alien corn’ and Wordsworth’s Reaper is in her native land.
suggestive than he indicates, and I believe that the Ode started definitely
from the pastoral convention, that this explains some of the passages to
which objection has been taken as ‘artificial’, and that the delicate gradations
of mood are best understood from this point of view. Browne’s hero
the love-lorn and wounded Doridon listening to the bird’s song compares
his case with that of Philomel, who can sing away her sorrow, while his own
grief cannot be assuaged. Similarly Keats compares his more real grief with
the ecstasy of the nightingale’s song. The references to the ‘Pastoral
eglantine’, to the ‘Queen Moon’, ‘cluster’d around by all her starry Fays’,
and even perhaps to the ‘Dryad of the trees’ breathe the atmosphere of
Browne’s pastoral world. In the first instance, however, the Dryad was
probably suggested by Hazlitt’s ‘Dryad or Naiad’, the ‘mystic personifica-
tion of the friendly power that inhabits’ ‘cool fountain’ or ‘tempting shade’,
and the identification of the Dryad with the bird was, I think, due to the
influence of Wordsworth’s poem ‘The Green Linnet’. As will appear later
there are grounds for thinking that Keats associated his nightingale with a
green linnet.

Wordsworth put his delightful poem among those founded on Fancy,
not with those founded on the higher faculty of Imagination. There are
two reasons, I suggest, for this classification. The poem expresses a mood
of the largely physical exhilaration of ‘spring’s unclouded weather’, and
there is a quality of playful make-believe all through emphasized in the
final stanza. Keats in the early part of his poem is thinking of the night-
ingale in something the same way: the linnet’s ‘exulting strain’ is the
essence of spring; the nightingale

In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless
sings of summer. The physical enjoyment of both poets is intense, but
neither quite believes in a supernatural presence—at that stage: it might be
about to enter. The linnet is the ‘Presiding spirit’, ‘A Life, a Presence like
the air’, and it is important to notice that ‘Presiding’ and ‘presence’ were
to Wordsworth ‘polarized’ words: he uses them in one of the great passages
of the Prelude, of the shepherd seen alone high up in the mountains:

I felt his presence in his own domain
As of . . . a power
Or genius, under Nature, under God
Presiding.

He saw the shepherd as the incarnation of the essential being of these
lonely places. Similarly in ‘The Green Linnet’ the bird is the visible
embodiment of Spring in the orchard, although Wordsworth’s poetic in-
tegrity causes him here to stress the momentary and illusory quality of this
personification. In Keats's poem Hazlitt's rationalized Dryad has become a living thing by contact in Keats's mind with Wordsworth's bird. Keats, I suggest, started from Browne's pastoral convention, but having indicated that note, he bathes the description in the dew of his own and Wordsworth's poetry, helped by Hazlitt's interpretation of a poem in the dream tradition.¹

Hazlitt in his lecture on Chaucer and Spenser takes as his example of Chaucer's natural description the beginning of *The Flower and the Leaf* which he, like Keats, and I suppose most of their contemporaries, believed to be by Chaucer. Keats, in the year before the lectures were delivered, had written a sonnet on the same poem, and it had been published in the *Examiner* on 6 March 1817. Probably Keats's sonnet had directed Hazlitt's attention to the poem, and Keats, in his turn, I think, has been reimpregnated by what Hazlitt had said. Let us look at the sonnet.

This pleasant tale is like a little copse;
The honied lines so freshly interlace,
To keep the reader in so sweet a place,
So that he here and there full-hearted stops;
And oftentimes he feels the dewy drops
Come cool and suddenly against his face,
And, by the wandering melody, may trace
Which way the tender legged linnet hops.
Oh! what a power has white simplicity!
What mighty power has this gentle story!
I, that do ever feel athirst for glory,
Could at this moment be content to lie
Meekly upon the grass, as those whose sobbings
Were heard of none beside the mournful robins.

The last lines are generally taken as referring to the Babes in the Wood, so that they are probably equivalent to saying that he could be content to die. Two other comments may be permitted. The reader (that is, the poet), is 'full-hearted' with joy, as the nightingale sings in 'full-throated ease'—the emotion is the same. Linnet is equivalent to goldfinch, which bird is that first seen at the beginning of *The Flower and the Leaf*. Keats's sonnet omits mention of the Nightingale; Hazlitt's prose paraphrase omits mention of the linnet or goldfinch. Keats's preoccupation with the linnet suggests the influence of Wordsworth's 'Green Linnet'.

Hazlitt says that Chaucer's natural descriptions 'have a local truth and

¹ That Keats was conscious of the way in which other writers played in and out of his thought is suggested by a letter to Reynolds of 3 May 1818: 'This crossing a letter is not without its association—for chequer-work leads us naturally to a Milkmaid, a Milkmaid to Hogarth, Hogarth to Shakespeare, Shakespeare to Hazlitt—Hazlitt to Shakespeare—and thus by merely pulling an apron-string we set a pretty peal of Chimes at work. Let them chime on while, with your patience, I will return to Wordsworth. . . .' (Letters, i. 155).
freshness, which gives the very feeling of the air, the coolness or moisture of the ground'. He goes on to cite the beginning of *The Flower and the Leaf* as an example of this, and speaks of 'the young beauty, shrowded in her bower, and listening in the morning of the year, to the singing of the nightingale; while her joy rises with the rising song and gushes out afresh at every pause . . . and still increases and repeats and prolongs itself and knows no ebb'. The author of *The Flower and the Leaf* had come out three hours after midnight to hear the nightingale, but could not do so at first, and whilst listening for it

Thught sodainly I felt so sweet an air  
Of the eglantere, that certainly,  
There is no hert I deme, in such despair,  
Ne with thoughtes froward and contrair  
So overlaid, but it shuld soone have bote,  
If it had ones felt this savour sote.

And then she sees a goldfinch (linnet) 'leaping prettily' and 'Whan he had eten what he ete wold' he began to sing, and was at last answered by the Nightingale 'with so merry a note . . . that all the wode rong' and the listener was so ravished with the song 'that, til late and long / Ne wist I in what place I was, ne where'. She discovers the nightingale in a 'fresh green laurer-tree':

That gave so passing a delicious smel  
According to the eglantere ful wel.

This suggests

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

Hazlitt's quotation goes on:

Wherof I had so inly greet plesyr  
That, as me thought, I surely ravished was  
Into Paradyse, where my desyr  
Was for to be. . . .

It is at this point in Keats's poem that the change from ecstasy to the thought of death is introduced:

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time  
I have been half in love with easeful Death.

There are two matters to be considered. First, why Keats was led into what appears on the surface something of an irrelevance, so that the ecstasy of the opening stanza becomes the 'plaintive anthem' of the last. And secondly, whether the change can be justified by what may be called poetic
logic. As for the first, I think Hazlitt’s lecture explains something. After dealing with Chaucer, he turns to Spenser. He referred, of course, to many of Chaucer’s authentic poems, and introduces the Pardoner’s Tale of the three revellers and the old man whom Hazlitt interprets as Death himself. From Spenser he cites long passages and ends with a reference to the great Despair episode, but without quoting it. It was probably much too well known to his audience. His comment is: ‘The cave of Despair is described with equal gloominess and power of fancy; and the fine moral declamation of the owner of it, on the evils of life, almost makes one in love with death.’ This surely suggested ‘I have been half in love with easeful Death’. Hazlitt finishes his lecture with the words: ‘Spenser was the poet of our waking dreams . . . from which we have no wish ever to be recalled.’

I assume, of course, that the suggestions worked more or less subconsciously on the poet. These pictures had been presented to him in that order without much relation. Had he woven them into a poetic structure, and does that structure explain and justify the change from ecstasy to ‘plaintive anthem’? I think we can find such a structure or design.

The Ode is an attempt to find a poetic Paradise, that is to say a state of mind in which ‘the weariness, the fever and the fret’ will be forgotten and only the ecstasy of the poetic perception will exist. He has seen something of it in the pastoral poetry of The Flower and the Leaf which he has developed and made more lovely in four of the first five stanzas (one stanza bewails the evils from which he seeks release). But there is something lacking in that Paradise; it is unreal and takes no account of the sorrow and sordid care which in fact are pressing on him. The Despair passage, which Hazlitt’s lecture had brought together with the ‘Pastoral’ poem, is an invitation to another peace, ‘the deep delight that is in death’; it recognizes all the evils with which he is surrounded and creates its magic by their very means ‘As he were charmed with enchaunted rimes’.

Is not short payne well borne, that brings long ease
And layes the soul to sleep in quiet grave?
Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas
Ease after warre, death after life, does greatly please.

But, I think, there is a definite turning away from the temptation at the end of the stanza. Death would make him deaf and blind to the beauty of the world concentrated in the bird’s song, and he cries out that it is of immortal life not death that the nightingale sings: its song ‘beck’ him to the ‘fellowship divine’: he has stept into the oneness of the world of pure emotion. But that emotion is of infinite sadness—Ruth ‘sick for home’;

1 But the associations were shared by the group of friends who attended Hazlitt’s lectures, the first readers of his great ode—‘the little clan’ to whom this ‘great verse’ was left.
‘the perilous seas of Faery lands forlorn’. Keats had written to Baily in November 1817: ‘I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive [logical?] reasoning.’1 For reasoning here he gives us a graduated sequence of emotional experience. The rapturous beauty of the bird song carries him into the ancient world, in which context the marvellous is more credible; thence he is borne on a deeper understanding of the song to share the intensity of Ruth’s yearning, and from there to ‘Faery lands forlorn’.2 I think the reader who lives through the stages does for a moment capture the vision. At stanzas three and six, and as an undercurrent always, there is the theme of sorrow and yearning; in this penultimate stanza it appears as the necessary element of the vision of happiness as Keats defined it. Bridges’s poem ‘The Nightingales’ seems to support Keats’s experience and interpretation of the song’s essence.

Beautiful must be the mountains whence ye come
And bright in the fruitful valleys, the streams, wherefrom
Ye learn your song.

Where are those starry woods? O might I wander there
Among the flowers, which in that heavenly air
Bloom the year long!

Nay barren are those mountains and spent the streams
Our song is the voice of desire, that haunts our dreams,
A throe of the heart,
Whose pining visions dim, forbidden hopes profound,
No dying cadence nor long sigh can sound
For all our art.

The last stanza of Keats’s poem, as I noted above, was regarded by Mr. Garrod as definitely unworthy of the rest of the poem. Dr. Bridges thought no praise too high for the last six lines, but found the introduction of the stanza ‘artificial’. There is no doubt that the music both of sound and meaning drops suddenly, but I suggest that the poem required it. The Eternal moment had been reached, reached by the intensity of yearning uniting the poet with the exiles of all ages. The link had snapped, and the poet is back imprisoned in his ‘sole self’. The revulsion is needed to cut off and make convincing the Immortal experience. The poet returns to earth by way of the Fancy of the opening experience, now found empty. The bird remains real, but withdraws beyond his knowing. ‘Do I wake or sleep?’ Was that Reality or this?

1 Letters, i. 73.
2 ‘Perilous seas’ was at first ‘keelless seas’. I have always suspected that Romeo’s words to Juliet have some connexion with this famous couplet: ‘Wert thou as far as that vast shore washed with the furthest seas’, and again with Keats’s own ‘shore of the wide world’ in the sonnet beginning ‘When I have fears that I may cease to be’.