Intrinsic Criticism and the "Ode to a Nightingale"

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JAMES O’ROURKE

WHEN the phrase “intrinsic criticism” is used to describe the practice of those who work from the premises of the American New Criticism, the term is commonly associated with a critical focus on the autonomy of an individual text rather than on its place in literary history and with a belief that literary texts are fundamentally ambiguous and therefore resistant to paraphrasable summary. So it should seem something of an anomaly that Cynthia Chase should find, in a recent essay, that a critical consensus has emerged among readers of the “Ode to a Nightingale” based on an assumption about the place of Romanticism in literary history, that Romanticism “inaugurat[es] the demystifying gesture of modernism,” and a corollary belief that Keats’s value lies in his ability to “anticipate the undeceived modernist vision.”

Chase’s intertextual reading of the Ode demands that we take seriously the epistemological challenge that is emphasized, rather than transcended, in the poem’s final question. Although, as Chase notes, Keats is regularly congratulated for his supposed “renouncement of the visionary imagination and renewed concern for real life” as expressed in the lines “Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf,” this is not where the poem concludes, and neither should


its interpretation. Chase perceptively characterizes the poem’s central issue as the potential for discontinuity between “perception and cognition,” and sees its final question to be “whether perception is not hallucination.” Where Chase seems to me to fall short, though, in capturing the specificity of the text of the “Ode” is in her overly programmatic application of the method announced in her title: “Intertextual Interpretation of Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale.’” Although she acknowledges that “Keats’s poem is full of phrases and figures from Milton and Shakespeare,” Chase quickly installs Milton, by now the official precursor of the Romantic poets, as the “poetic father” of this text, and the one to whom Keats listened “more than any other.”

The strength and the shortcomings of Chase’s method can be seen in her treatment of the echoing of the word “forlorn.” As has been noted before, the internal echo of this word also echoes Adam’s lament in Paradise Lost:

How can I live without thee, how forgo
Thy sweet Converse and Love so dearly join’d
To live again in these wild Woods forlorn? (ix.908–910)

Chase’s comment on Keats’s adoption of Milton’s word is that “In applying ‘forlorn’ first to a place (‘faery lands’) and then to himself, Keats reenacts the effects of Milton’s syntax, where the ‘forlorn’ applied by Adam to himself makes the wild woods of paradise forlorn too, fallen with him even as he speaks.” The result, says Chase, is that although “‘Keats’ is tolled back to the sole self . . . he cannot say ‘I’ without also saying Adam’s ‘I,’ the first I and all Is.”

But in the image of a “bell / T[hat] toll[s] me back from thee to my sole self” (lines 71–72), Chase ignores a far more obtrusive echo than that to Milton. Keats is obviously reversing the very theme of the impossibility of a “sole self” as he tropes on Donne’s famous image of the “bell [that] calls us all” when it “tolls,” and tells us that “No man is an island.”

The fluid accommodation of the echoes of Milton’s and Donne’s images, and the easy reversal of their

ideas where it suits his own poetic situation, testifies to the independence of Keats’s Ode from the Bloomian burden of influence ascribed to it by Chase.

There is another important sonic feature of the word “forlorn” that Chase, and the “intrinsic” interpreters before her, have either dismissed or overlooked. In this stanza which most fully absorbs its speaker in poetic flight, the culminating word is entirely phonically constituted; to finish the line, the word needs to rhyme with “corn,” and its consonants—f, r, l, n—come directly, and in order, from “faery lands.” The density of its phonetic constitution is the reason that this word strikes its speaker “like a bell.” Although Chase argues for a moving away from “the familiar proposal of a negative capability, or a poetry of sensations rather than of thoughts,” such a poetics seems to me to be precisely the approach that can best capitalize on a discontinuity between perception and knowledge; the “sense of Beauty” of the “fine isolated verisimilitude” is said by Keats to flourish in a context of “half knowledge.” This has not been the thematics of the demystified “Keats” of previous “intrinsic” criticism; when the word “forlorn” has been discussed by “intrinsic” critics in the past, it has been suspected that the manner of its appearance indicates that the poem is structured by mere “accidents of style” such as “rhythm and words,” and that “forlorn” was simply a “word evoked by chance,” or a “word [that] slipped in without much consideration as an easy, sound-pleasing, alliterative rhyme.” It has also been defended as “objectifying the theme” of Keats’s preference for a real world over this purely imaginative and textual construct.

The sensory and random features of the appearance of the word “forlorn” can, however, be a great help to an intrinsic understanding of the “Ode to a Nightingale.” In order for the unity of each of the single-voiced

utterances of Keats’s Odes to be recognized, the central interpretive issue must become the identification of the most comprehensive and unified phrasing of the text in the voice of its persona. Rather than indicating “low-grade mental activity,”10 the abrogation of direction and control apparent in the emergence of this unbidden word represents an intensification of mental activity and its displacement into unusual terms under the influence of a heightened aesthetic perception. The texture of speech that results in the Ode should be heard as a stylized stream of consciousness rather than as a planned declaration of a securely undeceived, and undeceivable, vision.

This approach to the Ode in no way minimizes the degree of epistemological risk that Chase has identified as central to the poem. While the speaker of the Ode is unable to reconcile his perception at the end of the eighth stanza with his feeling of transcendence of time and place in the seventh, when we are dealing with a poet who once wrote in a letter to his brother that “there is no such thing as time and space, which by the way came forcibly upon me on seeing for the first hour the Lake and Mountains of Winander” (Letters, 1, 298), it cannot be assumed that Keats himself would remain detached from the imaginative departure from the “sole self” of the poem’s persona. Common sense assumptions about the capacity, or the necessity, of premeditation of such associations as that effected by the echo of “forlorn” in this poem are far from assured at any level. “Keats” cannot be used as a metaphysical touchstone, and he should not be relied upon to provide, in the midst of aesthetic experience, a stability based on continuity of identity that he himself never espoused.

The poem’s final epistemological agnosticism represents the furthest extension of its consistent blurring of the border between physical and mental phenomena. The poem begins in this sort of confusion, as the speaker first describes his condition in terms of physical sensation; his “heart aches and a drowsy numbness pains” his “sense” (lines 1–2). He then reveals, however, that the cause of these physical sensations is not itself physical in nature but is an imaginative impression produced on him by the nightingale, which has made him “too happy in [its] happiness” (line 6). The language of the stanza has much to do to maintain

10. Fogle “Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’,” MLA, 68 (1953), 221.
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the credibility of this description against its potential anomalies. In the first line, “drowsy numbness,” which should signify a lack of sensation (as “shade to shade . . . com[ing] too drowsily” does in the “Ode to Melancholy,” line 9), actually “pains,” and the incongruity is heightened when the cause of the speaker’s “aches” and “pains” is said to be a surfeit of happiness. Furthermore, as the happiness originates not in the speaker but in the nightingale, the whole line of causality in the stanza claims that the emotion of happiness passes from the nightingale to the speaker, but is then transformed into a contrary state of physical pain. A precise physical locus for the speaker’s pains is illusorily but effectively conveyed in these opening lines. “My heart” is a thoroughly deceptive specification of the locale of feelings of physical distress brought on by emotions, and, as a medical student and a poet, Keats would be especially sensitive to the gap between the literal and allegorical uses of the word. “My sense” is entirely imprecise, but the possessive suggests that it must have a location somewhere, and in the wake of the misleading physical specificity of “My heart,” the term contributes more than it can literally support in providing the speaker’s feeling with the sense of a physical grounding.

The major rhetorical burden of justifying the creation of physical sensation from an imaginative idea is carried out in the simile of the second through fourth lines:

as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.

This is not actually a simile of the state of drowsy numbness but of its cause, which is as yet unspecified. Thus by the time the identification with the nightingale’s happiness enters the poem as the reason for the speaker’s condition, its ability to produce physical sensation has been established by this analogy to physical stimulants. The identification of the speaker with the nightingale is asserted in the iterative closure of “happy in thine happiness,” where the invariance of word choice encloses a bond of complete identity. James Chandler has pointed out that the poem’s syntax leads one to believe that the seventh line will begin “That I,” rather than “That thou,” and that some further description of the
speaker’s condition would follow. The shift from the speaker to the nightingale, from “I” to “thou,” follows upon the assertion of the identity of the two, and carries out the effacement of the border between the speaker and the nightingale as the nightingale replaces the speaker as the central subject of the stanza. This first union of the two figures in the poem lasts, however, only for the duration of the first image of the nightingale’s singing. Although the “drowsy numbness” of the first stanza is said to be predicated out of the identification between the speaker and the nightingale that leaves the speaker “too happy in [its] happiness,” at the outset of the second stanza the speaker is trying to reestablish that link, which seems to have fallen away somewhere in the ellipsis between stanzas. He envisions the vehicle for rejoining the nightingale to be a “draught of vintage” (line 111), thus adopting the simile of drinking from the first stanza and turning it into a literal reality. The pattern of causality of the second stanza reverses that of the first; whereas in the first stanza an imaginative impression was said to generate physical sensation, in the second stanza physical stimulants are looked to to produce a change in consciousness whereby the speaker would “forget” (line 21) his own condition.

There seems to be a general critical consensus that the Ode begins in full daylight and makes a single movement into darkness; the point is made in such varied commentaries as those of Bush, who says that “The poem had begun in an hour of sunlight. . . . when the poet’s imagination has carried him to join the bird in the forest, it is midnight, in a secluded fairy world of sense that is almost cut off from moon and starlight”; Wasserman, whose observation is complicated by a metaphysical apparatus which distinguishes between good and bad darkness and good and bad light in the poem, but who essentially agrees with Bush that “The opening and close of the poem . . . take place in the material world, the soul’s daytime”; and Vendler, who senses some logistical difficulty in the movement from daylight to darkness, saying that “The Ode shows signs of improvisation, notably in its passage from a sunlit day to a midnight scene (with no apparent allowance for the passage of time).”

This point commonly anchors a belief that the Ode is cyclical in structure, in general conformity to M. H. Abrams' description of the "Greater Romantic Lyric." Abrams does, in fact, say that "Of Keats's odes, that to a Nightingale is the one which approximates the pattern most closely." 13 The cyclical reading implies that when the speaker returns "back from" the nightingale to his "sole self" at the poem's conclusion, he returns to the state in which he began the poem.

While such a reading is structurally satisfying, it is inconsistent with the speaker's own description of his initial identification with the nightingale. In the poem's first stanza, he says that he does not "envy" (line 5) the nightingale, which would separate him from it, but that he identifies with it; he is "happy in [its] happiness" (line 6). I would argue that the poem is actually more dialectical than cyclical in its structure, and that there are many more fluctuations and partial shadings of identification between the speaker and the nightingale than can be accounted for in a description of the poem as a single cycle of departure from and return to ordinary experience. The more literal question of time of day in the Ode is complicated by the liberal use in the poem of pathetic fallacy, which blurs interior and exterior landscapes; but perhaps the best reason for doubting that the opening of the poem is meant to convey a sunlit scene is that this is an ode to a nightingale, which is, in the poetic tradition, a bird of the night. The standard poetic association of the nightingale with night includes such well-known material as the daybreak exchange between Romeo and Juliet, where the song of the nightingale functions as the natural sign of the presence of the night.

Wasserman makes both a negative and a positive case for the daylight opening hypothesis, saying that "in stanzas one to three . . . there is no suggestion of darkness," and "In the opening stanza the poet seems able to see the green of the beech trees." But a "plot / Of beechen green and shadows numberless" (lines 8-9) can slide too easily into "verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways" (line 40), which is an explicit description of darkness despite the visual potential of "verdurous," "winding,"

and “mossy,” to guarantee that “green” is an actual visual presence and not a poetic locution. The imagery of the poem is at least as dependent on the mood of the speaker as it is on any implied landscape, and descriptive cues can be taken too literally. Wasserman makes the point that the “here” of line 38 (of “here there is no light”), “like the ‘Here’ of line 24, [“Here, where men sit and hear each other groan”] designates the physical world.”14 While I would say that Wasserman is often overly schematically Platonic, in this case there does seem to be a consistency in the voice of the speaker in which “here” is referred to as a place of spiritual and literal darkness, standing in distinct contrast to an ideal. The contrast is developed in the tableau created of the Queen-Moon and her attendants in the fourth stanza:

    tender is the night,
     And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
    Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays;
    But here there is no light. (lines 35–38)

“Night,” in this image, is a realm of light above the dome of the sky, inhabited by a stellar court, and “here” is the terrestrial world from which one can only surmise what goes on above. The most explicit placement of the speaker in a terrestrial darkness is also an allusion to the Miltonic image of the nightingale and is carried in the word “darkling,”

    the wakeful Bird
       Sings darkling, and, in shadiest Covert hid,
       Tunes her nocturnal Note. (PL, iii. 38–40)

This image anchors the naturalistic placement of the speaker in the night and at the same time invokes the image of the blind bard, deprived of sensory sight but privileged in insight; the passage from Milton occurs in the invocation to light at the beginning of Book Three, where it introduces the poet’s lament over his own blindness.

The “here” of the material world exerts a constant pull on the speaker throughout the opening stanzas, and his own position vis-a-vis this material world and the ethereal world symbolized by the song of the nightingale continually varies. In the absence of reliable visual clues a literal

landscape cannot be securely identified at the outset of the poem, and whatever coloration is present in the opening must be taken from the speaker’s condition of drowsiness and dullness. The blurring of interior and exterior in pathetic fallacy is succinctly captured in the description of the “dull opiate” (line 3) when it is actually the speaker who is feeling dull without the agency of a narcotic. In the poem’s second stanza, the speaker’s wish, “That I might drink... And with thee fade away” (lines 19–20), expresses the hope of reestablishing the link with the nightingale that had existed in the first stanza. The dissolution of that original bond is not explicitly mentioned, but this omission should not be surprising. In view of the fact that the speaker desires an identification with the nightingale, his hopes might well be expected to lend some hyperbolic color to descriptions of bonds forged with the bird, as in the exclamation “Already with thee!“ (line 35), while the disintegrations of those bonds, as they are brought about by forces other than the speaker’s desires and operate regardless of his conscious mental activity, exist in the poem only as faits accomplis to which he must respond. Thus the poem’s third stanza begins with an expression of the desire to “forget” the pains of the material world but, in the speaker’s inability to accomplish that forgetting, the stanza is primarily taken up by an extended description of the inescapable sorrows of this world.

While the second stanza proposed that the physical stimulus of wine would be the agent of forgetfulness, the grim physicality of the catalogue of horrors in the third stanza would seem to have much to do with the subsequent shift to the more ethereal alternative of the “viewless wings of Poesy” (line 33) as the means of transcending corporeality. The word “viewless” would be particularly resonant for the audience of the Annals of the Fine Arts in this regard as it emphasizes the insubstantiality of poetic representation over against the fixed correspondence between image and represented object in the visual arts. Set in direct opposition to the etherealizing power of poetry is “the dull brain” (line 34), as several of the poem’s initial motifs are subtly reconfigured. The word “dull” was first applied to “opiate” in a pathetic fallacy; it now recurs as a pejorative description of the speaker’s own organic constitution, as it is precisely his own physical nature which is now posited as the bar to transcendence. The shift from the possessive “My heart” and “My sense” to the imper-
sonal “the dull brain” registers the speaker’s attempt to distance himself from all connections with the material world, even his own physical being.

While the images of the poem’s first two stanzas had shown imaginative ideas producing physical sensations and had imagined physical stimulants producing changes in consciousness, in the fourth stanza the imaginative medium of poetry is envisioned as carrying the speaker beyond the organic données of “the dull brain” and into the transcendent world of the nightingale. The image that results of “the Queen-Moon” and “her starry Fays” is really quite dazzling, and is consistent with the sort of distinctions characteristically drawn in the Romantic period between poetic and pictorial representation. Although this is a “visual” image, it would not lend itself to being drawn; the “Queen” and the “Moon” could not comfortably cohabit a single pictorial image. The development of the image in poetic terms is astute, however, as the “light” from this stellar court (which, in its full visualization as a Queen and her attendants must exist on the far side of the dome of the night sky), is given enough density to be carried on “breezes” (line 39) from that realm to the garden inhabited by the poem’s speaker.

A distinct change in the poem’s tone sets in here at its midpoint. The simple opening of the fifth stanza, “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet” (line 41), seems especially hushed after the broad and often sudden oscillations of the previous stanzas, and its quietness can be measured in contrast to the stridency of the other stanza openings—“My heart aches,” “O, for a draught of vintage,” “Fade far away,” and “Away! Away!” The desire for transcendence of corporeality which inspired the hyperbolic tone of the first four stanzas has no influence in the fifth stanza; in direct contrast to its treatment in the third, the material world is here described as a luxurious source of sensation. There is a superficial structural similarity between these stanzas, as each begins with an image of the speaker’s

separation from the material world, but then issues into a catalog of some dimension of materiality which arises without, or, in the case of the third stanza, against, the speaker’s volition. The thematic difference, however, is great. In the third stanza, the catalog of worldly ills overcomes the speaker’s desire to forget his mortal condition. The opening of the fifth stanza should be seen as Keats’s own naturalistic invocation of the *topos* of the blind poet; this is confirmed by the subsequent allusion to Milton’s invocation to light in *Paradise Lost.* The loss of sight effaces what Wordsworth called the “tyranny of the bodily eye,” the power of the visual sense to fix a gap of intransitivity between the perceiver and the object of perception. The image of light acquiring the density to be carried on breezes gives way to an image of the speaker standing amidst a myriad of smells, which are truly material enough to be borne on the breeze. In the absence of light, the speaker is diverted from his schematic opposition between the transcendent and the immediate as the smells of the spring foliage both reward and challenge him with perceptions that are sensorily richer, more subtle, and less easily defined. His attention is entirely absorbed in the attempt to make the precise discriminations, and to savor the precise odors, of the surrounding garden.

The demands thus made on the speaker’s concentration imbue the opening of the next stanza, “Darkling I listen” (line 51), with a powerful dramatic tension. The use of the intransitive “listen” hovering over the semicolon pause suggests that, in the drama of the poem, the nightingale is now silent, and the speaker is poised in waiting for its song to resume. The Hamlet-like meditation on death as a quietus in this stanza, suggested by such images as death being “easeful” (line 52) and occurring with “no pain” (line 56) as “breath” simply turns a shade more ethereal and becomes “air” (line 54), gets its most concrete grounding in the recollection of Hamlet’s “to die, to sleep” in “to die, / To cease” (lines 55–56). But then the nightingale resumes its song, and the “dull brain,” once censured for serving as the point of contact with the material world, suddenly becomes indispensable. In the poem’s extended meditation on consciousness as a phenomenon which straddles the mental and physical worlds, there is a gradual thematic displacement effected by the chain of imagery running from “My heart” and “My sense” through “the dull brain,” “thy soul” (line 57), “I have ears” (line 59), and “become a sod” (line
60). The initial images of “My heart” and “My sense” introduce some vagueness on the matter of the location and nature of “sense.” When the speaker distances himself from the image of “the dull brain,” he clearly wishes to see his own consciousness as immaterial, and hence potentially immortal. This desire pervades the “soft” images of the sixth stanza, but the sensory experience of the previous stanza has already subverted his premise that incorporeality is to be preferred, and there is a clear reversal from the disowning of “the dull brain” to the confessed dependence on “ears.” Rather than finding his physical existence to constitute an undesirable link with the material world, the speaker now feels this to be his only means of existence. Only the nightingale, and not the speaker, is assumed to have a “soul,” as the possessive is transferred from “My sense” to “the dull brain” to “thy soul.” In the inability to affirm the possession of a personal immortal soul, the speaker sees his only existence without the sensory avenues of consciousness to be an inert body—“a sod.” Death, once viewed as the means of transcending the material obstacle of “the dull brain” if “breath” could simply become “air,” is now seen as producing only a complete reduction to corporeality.

The seventh stanza begins by setting an antithesis between death and the “voice” (line 63) and “song” (line 65) of the nightingale. The movement by which breath becomes the more ethereal air is thus reversed by the materializing of breath into “voice” and “song.” The structure of such an incremental transformation of the ethereal into the material is foreshadowed at the juncture of the fourth and fifth stanzas, where light acquires the density to be carried on “breezes” (line 39), which are then employed to carry the truly material odors of the flowers. In each case, a desire for immateriality is relinquished and the sensory world comes to exert a greater hold on the poem’s speaker. In the seventh stanza, after the dissolving of breath into air is abandoned as an illusory escape from the reductive power of death, the sensory presence of the nightingale’s song is posited as a truer opposition to that absence. In its role as the antithesis to death, the voice of the nightingale is construed as immortal through the identity of its occurrence in “ancient days” (line 64) and in the presence of the poetic auditor. The transcendence of mutability is emphasized in the image of this song as the “self-same song” (line 65) heard by Ruth in a Biblical tableau. In the culmination of the stanza, the poem itself most fully develops its own sonic character in the constitution
by rhyme and alliteration of “forlorn,” but as it does so the theme of
tрансendence of temporality, which has been carried on a linear medium
of duration, is betrayed in that dependence as the redeployment of sounds
forms the word “forlorn” and subverts the ideality of the imagined
“ancient days.”

The opening of the eighth stanza is, among other things, an admission
that the speaker truly has, for a time, “forgotten” the here and now of
his own condition. This has occurred, as he had wished, through the
power of poetry, but if the seventh stanza represents the deepest level of
poetic absorption and the tableau of Ruth “in tears amid the alien corn”
(line 66) is truly its most compelling image (at least in its ability to
transport the poem’s persona), poetry cannot, without some qualifica-
tion, be called “viewless.” In the images of the seventh stanza, poetry is
not transcendent and allegorical, in the manner of the image of the Queen-
Moon and her starry Fays, but it nevertheless overpowers the confining
limits of the “dull brain” as a processor of sensory information. The
literalness of the vision of the seventh stanza to the poem’s speaker is
indicated in the recurrence of the “alien corn” and “perilous seas” (line
70) as the “near meadows” and “still stream” (line 76) of the speaker’s
ordinary perception at the poem’s close.

In the final stanza, the poem leaves off images of identity, such as the
“self-same song,” for analogies and, finally, disjunctions. The word “for-
lorn” is said to toll “like a bell” (line 71), in the poem’s first use of simile
since the first stanza (“as though of hemlock,” line 2). The sound of “sole
self” (line 72) reawakens the alliterative memory of the “self-same song”
and intensifies the thematic opposition through sonic compression. The
ensuing statements that the act of imagination is a deception, and even
a “cheat” (line 73), are colored with the speaker’s disappointment. He
clearly backtracks from this position when he asks “Was it a vision?”
(line 79), where “it” is the imaginative trance brought on by the nightin-
gale’s song. He finds the memory of the perception of “Ruth . . . amid
the alien corn” and the “foam of perilous seas” irreconcilable with his
present perception of the “near meadows” and “still stream” and he
attempts to regain a sense of reality by constructing a hierarchy between
the two perceptions; either the effect of imagination was a perception of
a higher quality, a “vision,” or it was a mere daydream.

The attempt to construct this hierarchy fails, and the speaker is plunged
into even greater uncertainty at the conclusion of the poem. At one level, “Do I wake or sleep?” (line 80) reverses the terms of the previous question and reapplies the question of metaphysical valorization to ordinary experience. In each case, the potentially disparaging term is drawn from the same metaphorical pool of “dream” and “sleep,” but this final question goes deeper, and to leave it unanswered does more than to subvert a hierarchy. To ask whether this world of the imagination is a vision or a dream assumes its immateriality, but to ask whether the perception of ordinary reality is a “sleep” puts the autonomous physicality of the objects of sensory perception into doubt.

The image interposed between these questions, “Fled is that music” (line 80), deepens the problematic even further. As the imaginative “vision” of the seventh stanza was inspired by the song of the nightingale, it was only by means of that sensory stimulus, a point of contact with the material world, that the speaker encountered perceptions beyond those usually available in the brain’s commerce with reality. If such is a dream, then by the same standard the visual field before him at the poem’s conclusion may be only the gateway to a different dream, with a different imaginative color. After the speaker reenters his “sole self,” he finds himself bereft of the usual certainty that the reality he perceives is a true reading of an autonomous physical universe and not merely a matrix of images constructed by his mind. Moments earlier, before he came “back to” his “sole self,” he faced a reality other than the one he now views, and he did so in a full perceptual confidence of its existence. That confidence was motivated by the sense that the world he perceived was self-determined and shaped by its own contingencies and not by his mental activity; the speaker’s position as the auditor, and not the architect, of the deferred resonance of “forlorn” is crucial to his sense of the autonomy of that world.

While this absolute epistemological agnosticism can be dismissed by readers who are certain of Keats’s preference for a real world over one of the imagination, a resistance to the notion of the autonomy of the esthetic, and to a poetry of sensations, can insulate even the reader willing to enter into epistemological risk from being submerged, as is the speaker of the Ode, by a phonic wave which breaks on the description of an imagined world as “forlorn.” And intrinsic criticism should not resist
intertextual echoes when they are crucial to the esthetics of a poem; when the Shakespearean images of “to die, to sleep” that structured the poem’s meditation on the nature of consciousness recur in the imagery of the poem’s conclusion, they give us some sense of the experience of Keats reading Shakespeare, and hearing language with an extraordinary density of implication. In presenting the exceptionally fluid yet unstructured language of this Ode, Keats offers the best access a reader is likely to get to artistic perception, a largely involuntary act, and one that is obscured by an interpretive vocabulary that attempts to describe what Keats intends to say in the poem. The Ode’s own sonic character is its point of contact with the material world, and the means of access to what Brooks called its “world of the imagination.” Just as the “self-same song” of the nightingale forges the link between Ruth in biblical times and the persona of the “Ode to a Nightingale,” it is only through the “music” of the Ode, its “rhythm and words,” that the identity of reading and writing is joined in their nature as acts of negative capability, rewarded by moments of imaginative transport, and arriving only at greater uncertainties.