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The Craftsmanship in Keats' Odes: An Exploration

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Keats was beset by lots of financial and personal troubles after he parted ways with Hyperion. His health was deteriorating fast. By sheer will power, he managed a supreme effort of creative energy. There was a flurry of writing in verse, Spenserians, Shakespearian and Petrarchan sonnets, couplets, quatrains, and doggerel. Then, in the last week of April 1819, Keats's preoccupations with love, death, and poetry fused to produce the strange enigmatic power of 'La Belle Dame sans Merci'. The poem is in a sparse ballad-like stanza form, and concentrates a wide variety of literary influences – from medieval French poetry, through the Elizabethans (especially Spenser), and right up to Coleridge's and Wordsworth's experiments in ballad metre – in a haunted expression of Keats's responses to his brother's death, his tortured love for Fanny, and his sense of being dangerously in thrall to his poetic muse. 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' establishes a tone of brooding and anxious incertitude, as if pervaded by Keats's dread that his conviction of poetic vocation might be fatally mistaken. It thus bears comparison with those other achievements of English Romanticism, such as Wordsworth's 'Immortality Ode' and Coleridge's 'Dejection Ode', in which the fear of poetic failure or loss of vision is ironized by articulation within a successful poem.

Before the end of the month, Keats had written the 'Ode to Psyche'. Its themes, embracing the great paradoxes of art and life, permanence and mutability, beauty and death, are those of the major Odes that follow over the next few weeks. In formal terms the 'Ode to Psyche' grows out of Keats's now long practiced skill in the sonnet, as he begins the poem in an adaptation of sonnet rhymes to produce a complicated irregular form. The poem's preoccupation with the creative nurturing, gardener-like, of new growing varieties, is thus delicately shadowed in the Ode's own manifest formal genesis in a grafting of new stock on to old. The first fourteen lines do form a Petrarchan sonnet, except that Keats substitutes a trimeter line at line 12 – anticipating the use of this metrical variant in the stanzaic patterns of his more formal Odes – and he alters the last word of line 10 from the original draft reading, 'fan', to the unrhymed 'roof'. The last word of line 15, 'grass', is also unrhymed. The overall effect of this opening is of a poem that reaches for fresh formal possibility as the sonnet that had initially contained it breaks down in its final lines. No consistent stanzaic pattern subsequently emerges in the Ode, as it moves through a series of local variations on rhyme patterns of four, six, eight, and twelve lines, all derived from aspects of different sonnet types, and with a concomitantly unresolved metrical shape. The formal experimentation underlines the poem's feeling of striving for a breakthrough into new formal identity, and subtly endorses Keats's interest in exploring his own relation to the authority of an inherited literary culture.

The 'Ode to Psyche' is a profoundly reflexive poem, concerned with the processes of its own making. Its rhetoric is subtle and elusive. The goddess Psyche was born a mortal, but deified by Jupiter as a result of her love for Cupid. He was the son of Venus, who had killed Psyche for taking him away. The 'lateness' of her elevation to the gods meant that she was never worshipped amongst the Greek pantheon, and Keats develops this circumstance in making her the embodiment of the secular imagination, and identical with poetry itself, as the creative activity in which

mortal humans may yet, in a post-religious age, find immortality. The opening lines need thus to be understood as an address to the creative power that is both itself the source of the poem, and its addressee; the Ode is in this literal sense about itself, a celebration of the unfolding poem that takes as theme the special status and value of its own emergent shape:

O Goddess! Hear these tuneless numbers, wrung

By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,

And pardon that thy secrets should be sung

Even into thine own soft-conched ear. (ll. 1– 4).

This opening section then offers a vision of Psyche and Cupid, imaging the possibility of union between human and immortal in a setting that merges imaginative dreaming with the sensual detail of a real natural world existing in time and space – in short, a complex image of the poem's own conditions of existence. The Ode develops this reflexive rhetoric by the elaboration of a language of worship. The goddess Psyche is the presiding spirit of the poem, which shapes itself as an expression of quasi-religious homage to that spirit. The Ode becomes a temple to the poetic creativity it embodies, with the poet Keats as priest of the temple, and this conceit builds to an extraordinary closing stanza:

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane

In some untrodden region of my mind,

Where branche `d thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,

Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:

Far, far around shall those dark-clustered trees

Fledge the wild-ridge `d mountains steep by steep;

And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,

The moss-lain Dryads shall be lulled to sleep;

And in the midst of this wide quietness

A rosy sanctuary will I dress

With the wreathed trellis of a working brain,

With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,

With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,

Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:

And there shall be for thee all soft delight

That shadowy thought can win,

A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,

To let the warm Love in! (ll. 50– 67)

The fane that Keats builds is, of course, essentially a mental construction, and is envisioned as set within an interior landscape that widens and complicates the workings of the metaphor. The poem is a product of intelligent artifice, set amid a forested mountainous scenery that evokes the vastly wider realm of consciousness as a whole. The growing point of this consciousness is the poem, conceived as shaped into new existence by a deliberated pruning, 'branche `d thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain'. The idea of this interior mental landscape as the setting in which the poem itself has been cultivated gains a further dimension by the glancing allusions in Keats's formulation to contemporary medical images of the brain stem as it is revealed in dissection. But Keats's deployment of the landscape as an image for consciousness offers no easy reading. The 'dark-clustered trees' and 'wild-ridged mountains' suggest remote and inaccessible reaches of mind, lying far outside the self-bounded and controlled arena where the poem has taken shape. In this setting Keats dramatizes his achievement in creating the *Ode* as a winning of order and beauty out of a surrounding wildness.

This complex metaphor of landscape-as-consciousness recalls other major Romantic efforts to use the relations within an observed landscape to stand for the relations between landscape and the perceiving consciousness, and is no less powerful in evoking the difficult paradoxes of the self-conscious mind than, for example, Wordsworth in 'Tintern Abbey', or Shelley in 'Mont Blanc'. The apparently effortless fluency with which the closing image is developed, with the poetic imagination glimpsed as 'the gardener Fancy', creating new varieties by graft and hybrid variation, ironically belies the tremendous effort that the 'Ode to Psyche' in fact cost Keats (L. ii. 105– 6). The poem's last lines, where the poem is figured as a window left open and lighted on a summer night, to attract the butterfly Psyche in, beautifully catch the strengthening sense that Keats has found his way to a poetic form that can articulate his great central themes: the interdependence of art and reality, the immutable and the temporal, and the perpetual co-presence of transcendent abstract archetypes with specific historical circumstance, and the fleeting individual life.

Over the next few days after completing the 'Ode to Psyche' in late April 1819, Keats further explored the possibilities of the sonnet, expressing his frustration with its limits in 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chained'. Then, at the beginning of May, the themes of the 'Ode to Psyche', and the formal experimentation of the preceding weeks, were brought to a poised focus in the 'Ode to a Nightingale'. In Brown's later account, a nightingale had nested near Wentworth Place, and Keats

felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast-table to the grass-plot under a plum-tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps . . . contained his poetical feeling on the song of our nightingale.

But Brown's famous narrative of the writing of the 'Ode to a Nightingale' is profoundly misleading. It suggests an unpremeditated burst of writing, thrown off in passing and all but discarded on completion; but everything about Keats's poem suggests otherwise. It inaugurates the central group of three Odes, 'Nightingale', 'Grecian Urn', and 'Melancholy', all composed in quick succession in May 1819, and which all share defining features of versification, diction, and theme. They build on the achievement of the 'Ode to Psyche' by moving through a series of very carefully organized variations on the formal patterns created in the breakthrough in that poem from sonnet rhyme sequences. This fully emerged Keatsian Ode takes on the formal stanzaic arrangement of something like a short, intense, and tightly organized series of abbreviated hybrid sonnets. The 'Nightingale' stanza, like that of both 'Grecian Urn' and 'Melancholy', is precisely regular in repeating its ten lines. Each of these three odes uses the quatrain of a Shakespearian sonnet for its first four lines, and Keats then works subtle variations on the six-line sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet. Thus the rhyme scheme in 'Nightingale' is *ababcdecde* , perfectly regular through its

eight stanzas. It proves a poetic vehicle very exactly suited to Keats's purpose in establishing a verse idiom that combines the sense of purposeful forward movement, with a feel of statuesquely arrested poise.

This in turn serves the larger intellectual question that underlies Keats's whole extraordinary achievement in writing the Odes; how are we to negotiate the paradoxes and ironies of the fleeting direct personal knowledge of experiences and ideas that exist in timescales immeasurably greater than that of the individual human life? We seem to apprehend as fixed and permanent the informing values of a life that is caught up, inescapably, in the flow and movement of time, just as the verse of the Odes is always, simultaneously, offered as a static and completed object for contemplation, and a temporally unfolding verse movement. This is a problem about the personal relation to the great and permanent archetypes of existence, but the problem is partly comprised in the uncertain nature of those archetypes. Are pleasure and pain, love and the other dominating emotions, beauty and truth, a set of absolutes of which we are allowed, at best, only a transient experience? Or are these apparent absolutes in fact dependent for their experiential reality on the actual experience of individual people? And might they perhaps not after all be absolutes at all, but historically and culturally relative? In one aspect, this is, centrally, also a problem about history, and the individual's relation to historical process. Understood in this way, the *Odes*, for all their ostensible yearning for escape from the ordinary conditions of human existence into the timeless and pain-free realm of art, are themselves concerned, fundamentally, with history. The form taken in the Odes by this deep concern with history embodies a decision to refuse history as the dominant ground for meaning. It is important to insist on the manifestly meditated character of this decision in the Odes. If we attempt to 'historicize' Keats – which is to say, seek an explanation of his poetry by looking to place it in its contemporary historical context – then that will involve a search for direct or indirect historical reference of various kinds, in an effort to weave the poetry back into its original complex relations with the wider culture and society that informs and produced it in the first place. This effort, however, is effectively a kind of patronizing of Keats, which misses the sophisticated and deliberated judgements on this way of interpreting human experience that make up the formal substance of the poems. That formal substance is developed as an attempt, ironically self-limited and self-aware as it is, to escape the conditions of temporality, to exist out of time.

The entire corpus of Keats's *Odes* is astonishingly programmatic. The diction is remarkably consistent, the formal experimentation with variations on sonnet-derived elements is, as we have seen, systematically progressive, and the themes revolve round and connect up with each other in a carefully calibrated way. Even the titles participate in this effect of homogeneity: Psyche, Nightingale, Grecian Urn, Melancholy, Autumn. These titles name a range of entities that form a set in being known to individual people, and known through the successive generations of people, but that are things neither existing in the same way as people, nor themselves dependent for existence on any one particular agency of their being. Nightingales as a species, for example, demonstrate all the qualities of behaviour and song that Keats notes in his Ode; those qualities do not depend on any one actual nightingale. Psyche as a myth exists in her narrative as immortal, and those narratives do not depend on particular acts of narration for their continued existence and transmission through time. Autumn as a season exists quite apart from the vagaries of a particular autumn; and so on.

The fact that such things exist quite differently from individual people, and yet form part of the existence of individuals, constitutes a recurring dimension in experience of connectedness with orders of being that are out of human time. Keats is himself very well aware that poems themselves exist like this, as indeed do literary works in general. As we read something read before by countless others, in diverse places and times, we find that its relatively general reference is implicitly endorsed by the diverse conditions of the time and place to which it has spoken. This is a complicated part of one's reading experience of major works that have lasted, and all of the *Odes* conduct an implicit commentary on their own mode of existence in broaching the issue. In 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' the theme is fully explicit, in a beautifully concise and almost definitive formulation.

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