

How Much Did Keats Really Know? An extract from Matthew Scott's 2019 Keats Foundation Annual Lecture, delivered at Keats House Hampstead on 9 February 2019.

John Keats was in a famous confusion about Scotland, which Nicholas Roe ingeniously puts down in part to an association with 'orphaned misery' that derived from the memory of his grandparents' home at Scotland Green. On the one hand, he was quite capable, if Dilke is to be believed, of spending 'five hours abusing the Scotch'; on the other, he determined, in a letter to his brother Tom, to 'get rid of my prejudices, and tell you fairly about the Scotch'. The confusion is most marked, indeed somewhat comical, when Keats turns to Robert Burns, not least because (like so many pilgrimages) his visit to the birthplace, fraught with anticipation, turned out to be so disappointing. Finding not a shrine but a 'whiskey-shop', Keats tried: 'to drink Toddy without any Care – to write a merry Sonnet – it won't do – he talked with Bitches – he drank with Blackguards, he was miserable.' The ethereal feeling of intoxication, rendered as heightened aesthetic experience some ten months later in his 'Ode to a Nightingale' is, in that 'merry Sonnet', given as a form of proleptic parody:

My pulse is warm with thine old barley-bree,
My head is light with pledging a great soul,
My eyes are wandering, and I cannot see,
Fancy is dead and drunken at its goal.

Keats was too embarrassed by these lines to transcribe them in his letter of 11 July 1818 to John Hamilton Reynolds – a judgement in which he is, I think, unfair to himself, since the poem forms part of a sequence of admittedly more distinguished poems, which describe a narrative of aesthetic experience that confounds the reader's (and indeed the poet's own) expectations. I am thinking, of course, of 'Ode to a Nightingale' itself, whose insistent final questions, 'Was it a vision, or a waking dream?/ Fled is that music – do I wake or sleep?', remind us that the poem has not, as we might have expected it to, found salvation in the free-play of the imagination in contemplation of the 'thing' out there in the real – the song of the nightingale – as it seemed to promise all the way to the final line of the penultimate stanza. Rather, it has left Keats in the much more uncertain state in which, returned to himself by the sudden chance, but alliterative, presence amid 'faerylands' of the word 'forlorn', he is quite unsure whether there ever was truly known to him any object such as a nightingale generating its song in the external world beyond his consciousness.

The 'Ode to a Nightingale' is exemplary of a kind of poem at which Keats excels, in which he appears to intuit the obscure significance of an object external to him, while at the same time, in no firm way, claiming real knowledge, let alone mastery, of it. The Elgin Marbles sonnets are perhaps the best early examples of this kind of poem, which is a product of exuberant uncertainty and even confusion. But, here too, in Burns's room, there is a feeling of obscure significance that plays alongside the failure of the poet to grasp it properly as a moment of transit to poetic calling: 'Yet can I think of thee till thought is blind,' he notes in a tone of self-mockery, before seizing on the moment of bathos as an opportunity to do – what else? – but get drunk. The concluding couplet is an exhortation to raise a glass to a man whose fame is such that he has become a name, just such as Keats might himself become in rather fewer than the thousand days he gives himself at the poem's opening:

Yet can I gulp a bumper to thy name, –
O smile among the shades, for this is fame!

There is here a comical puncturing of a moment that should be sublime – the touching of the hem of the garment of a forebear 'in [his] misery dead' – but there is also, of course, pathos, because beneath the surface levity of the poem there hangs the thought of his own death and the fear that his implicit rejoinder to that imminent finality – the fame of poetic posterity – may, in fact, be nothing more than inebriated whimsy.

A good part of Keats's confusion about Burns emerges out of his feeling that the earlier poet was, in some sense, instinct with his circumstances and of his place, but also curiously at odds with it and hence different. No doubt, there is an element of projection in this muddle. Nicholas Roe notes that Keats felt that 'Burns's personality was "southern"', and this is to say distinctly unScottish, as the letter to Tom Keats makes clear. Of Scotland, he writes, 'the Clouds, the Sky, the Houses, all seem anti-Grecian and anti-Charlemagnish', thereby dividing it from the two areas of imaginative richness that moved him most at this moment – classical Hellenism (or the South) and gothic mediaevalism. But Burns was still the poet of his 'native skies', as Keats observes at the end of the rather weird earlier sonnet that marks his visit to the tomb. In that poem, Scotland is not without beauty but it is a beauty caught in curious, almost oxymoronic, negation. Eleven days after composing the sonnet, when writing to Reynolds, Keats described Burns's 'Ayrshire', the 'County of Air' (perhaps deliberately misspelt to imply an ethereality that is more Mediterranean than Scottish), as a 'Sight [...] rich as possible – I had no conception that the native place of Burns was so beautiful [...] I endeavour'd to drink in the Prospect, that I might spin it out to you as the silkworm makes silk from Mulberry leaves'.

The earlier sonnet marks a very different conception of the country from that letter, and it is one riven with contradiction. The stars of Scotland are, he decides, 'sapphire warm', enlightening a 'cold beauty' that contrasts with 'the real beauty' in lines at least as vexing as his later, more justly famous, crux on the nature of beauty in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn':

pain is never done
For who has mind to relish, Minos-wise,
The real of Beauty, free from that dead hue
Fickly imagination and sick pride
Cast wan upon it.

The obvious conclusion to draw here, as John Barnard observes, is that beauty is somehow unavailable to those caught perpetually under dark skies, and Keats was clearly depressed by the weather and stuck in a strange mood, as he himself affirmed. But this is to gloss over lines that are actually rather interesting and confused – or at least double-minded. Syntactically and grammatically, there are serious problems that surely belie an uncertainty, even at this time, about the idea of beauty, and the ways in which it becomes known to us (if at all). A lot of what is at stake comes from the juxtaposition of the word 'done' with that following it: 'for'. If 'pain is never done' is a discrete statement, gloomy and alone at the heart of the poem, then the word 'for' raises an incipient question that is half-heard though never quite asked – rather like the ostensibly interrogative opening 'who canst thus express' in line three of 'Grecian Urn'. If, however, we are meant to read the lines in enjambment – as I suspect we must – then a lot hangs on the word 'done', since it clearly contains two rivals: the idea that no pain is done to those who apprehend beauty, and also the contrary statement that beauty (as in the 'Ode on Melancholy') is always excessively present as pain to those who get it, because it must come with an awareness of its temporality. Beauty, then, catches us in a double-bind; but, either way, our awareness of it makes clear the state of 'Fickly imagination and sick pride' – a slightly pompous way of saying 'self-interest', which is the condition we spend most of our time in simply by being human.

Keats, I am sure, meant to catch both senses and hold them – first, that beauty is a state that is almost completely undiscoverable and hence so rare and fleeting as to be a chimera, and then also that, if caught, it serves only to reveal the bane of a normative state that is unable to transcend more than momentarily the dull vagaries of imminent experience. It is no surprise to find him in this rather gloomy existential state as he contemplates the poetic afterlife, but to reduce such profound thinking to a matter of biographical vicissitudes seems to me to miss the point of the poem's depth. If we borrow from 'Grecian Urn' the idea that when Keats speaks of beauty he has 'truth' in mind, then we can perhaps begin to see how this poem opens an avenue to thinking more clearly about how he conceived of the relationship between certainty and knowledge, and indeed how that vexed relationship informs upon what it meant for Keats to think of certain kinds of knowledge as workable truth.

The rather unsatisfactory nature of the account of the visit to Burns's tomb struck Keats himself, as it has later readers, and he reworked some of its ideas in a slightly later poem, composed a week after the letter to Reynolds, that he transcribed in a letter to Benjamin Bailey on 18 July 1818. 'Lines Written in the Highlands after a Visit to Burns's Country', little remarked on by critics, is a fine, if rather unknown, poem in which Keats makes a self-conscious attempt to yoke his own incipient Hellenism with Burns's very different environment by adopting the couplet-rhyming iambic fourteeners of Chapman's Homer that he had admired in somewhat callow form in his sonnet of 1816. Amy Lowell – one of the few to have noticed this poem – was dismissive of it but unfairly so, seeing it as little more than an attempt to echo in the lines the plod of his feet across 'heroic and rather forbidding scenery'. This reading rather deafly misses the immense poignancy of the poem's closing lines:

Scanty the hour and few the steps beyond the bourn of care,
Beyond the sweet and bitter world – beyond it unaware;
Scanty the hour and few the steps, because a longer stay
Would bar return, and make a man forget his mortal way.
O horrible! to lose the sight of well-remember'd face,
Of brother's eyes, of sister's brow, constant to every place,
Filling the air, as on we move, with portraiture intense,
More warm than those heroic tints that fill a painter's sense,
When shapes of old come striding by, and visages of old,
Locks shining black, hair scanty grey, and passions manifold.
No, no, that horror cannot be, for at the cable's length
Man feels the gentle anchor pull and gladdens in its strength –
One hour, half-idiot, he stands by mossy waterfall,
But in the very next he reads his soul's memorial.
He reads it on the mountain's height, where chance he may sit down
Upon rough marble diadem, that hill's eternal crown.
Yet be the anchor e'er so fast, room is there for prayer.
That man may never lose his mind on mountains bleak and bare;
That he may stray league after league some great birth-place to find,
And keep his vision clear from speck, his inward sight unblind.

The expansiveness of the lines here, all regularly iambic save one, contrasts bitterly with the contraction of life that they announce – a life that needs to journey on if it is to continue. To stop momentarily is to risk, somehow, the inability to return to the tissue of memories (of persons and things alive only now in the mind) that makes up the texture of imagined consciousness as it grows out of lived experience. As the poem goes on, Keats appears to see himself as Burns in relation to the objects that formed that poetic consciousness – the waterfall (pregnant with connotations of poetic inspiration), the sublime mountains, the rough marble that surely also recalls Elgin's broken fragments, caught in his earlier sonnets. And then, in the final lines, Keats changes direction and yearns for a state in which nothing will inhibit or interfere with the purity of his poetic vision, as though to free himself from association with any external object that governs thought. It is a moment of yearning for a clear poetic consciousness – 'vision clear from speck [...] inward sight unblind' – and one in which the subject does not range himself against an external object of sight but rather exists without knowledge of anything that is not simply internally created. That final line, I want to suggest, is the purest distillation of that aspect of the Keatsian consciousness that is hardest to understand and hardest to pin down, where poetic creation is dependent upon a knowledge of nothing external to itself and is, instead, residing purely in the externalisation of an inner vision that is coherent purely on its own terms.