Ode on Indolence

On 19 March 1819, 'having slumbered till nearly eleven' in the morning, John Keats experienced a reverie in which Love, Ambition, and Poetry all seemed to pass him by 'rather like three figures on a greek vase'[i]. Sometime later — we aren't certain when — he composed 'Ode on Indolence', apparently drawing upon his memory of this vision. The ten-line pentameter stanzas of the poem, with their opening quatrains rhyming abab and concluding sestets, make it structurally consistent with the odes to a nightingale, Grecian urn, and on melancholy. Unlike those odes, however, it was neither included in Keats's 1820 collection of poems, nor published anywhere else until 1848.

'Ode on Indolence' takes as its subject a quality of mental and physical laziness, passivity, and withdrawal, which however could also signal an openness to inspiration and creativity. In its poetical lineage, Keats's 'indolence' drew on such forebears as James Thomson's The Castle of Indolence and Wordsworth's 'wise passiveness'. He also knew that, medically speaking, 'indolence' was a positive quality, for it signified a lack of pain — and it may not have been coincidental that Keats had taken laudanum to ease a black eye he had acquired while playing cricket on the night before he experienced his vision. In the poem, the figures of Love, Ambition, and Poesy come upon the poet during a time when 'The blissful cloud of summer-indolence / Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less; / Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower' (ll. 16–18).

Writing to John Hamilton Reynolds on 24 August 1819, Keats noted that his physical infirmity, which forced him 'continually to check' himself from 'extreme thought and sensation' and 'strive to be nothing', was 'the only state for the best sort of Poetry'. 'Ode on Indolence' dramatizes this conflict between the exalted reach of the imagination and the bodily 'check' on it, for the poet is not left undisturbed by the visit: '...why did ye not melt, and leave my sense / Unhaunted quite of all but — nothingness?' (ll.19–20). The 'three ghosts' (ll.51) wake in the poet a momentary desire to follow them: '…I burn'd / And ached for wings…' (ll. 23–24). However, this desire passes swiftly, as the awareness takes hold that even the poet's 'demon Poesy' (ll. 30) has not 'a joy, — / ….so sweet as drowsy noons, / And evenings steep'd in honied indolence' (ll. 35 –37).

Despite their inability to rouse the poet, the visit of these three figures is not in vain. In their presence, and under the influence of 'honied indolence', the poet is moved to let in impressions that he was earlier impervious to, of the beauty of the physical world around him:

> The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,
> Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;
> The open casement press'd a new-leaved vine,
> Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay;
> (ll. 45–48)

Keatsian indolence, thus, goes hand in hand with Keats's ideal of 'Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason'[ii]. By being content to receive impressions as they came without questioning or acting upon them, the poet arrived at an appreciation of the world as it is, his head still 'cool-bedded in the flowery grass' (ll. 52) and yet having '…visions for the night, / And for the day faint visions there is store' (ll. 57–58).

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[i] Letter to George and Georgiana Keats 19 April 1819. Letters ii, 78-9
[ii] Letter to George and Thomas Keats 27(?) December 1817. Letters i, 193