

Ode to a Nightingale

Charles Brown, Keats's friend and housemate in Hampstead, tells us that 'in the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house. 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'. Those scraps of paper contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale'. But Brown's account is somewhat misleading: 'Ode to a Nightingale' is one of Keats's darkest poems, far removed from any poetic feelings of tranquil joy. The poem first appeared in the Annals of the Fine Arts 4 (1819), and it was included in Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and Other Poems (1820), where it appeared as the first of the 'other poems' immediately after 'The Eve of St Agnes'. Like 'The Eve of St Agnes', the 'Ode to a Nightingale' stages a vision of escape in a series of stanzas, but while the lovers in 'The Eve of St Agnes' manage to flee from the castle, the speaker of the 'Ode to a Nightingale' ends up in limbo, between wakefulness and sleep. All he knows for sure is that the music is 'fled'.

'Ode to a Nightingale' consists of eight carefully structured stanzas of ten lines each. Each stanza reads like a shortened sonnet, in which a Shakespearean quatrain (with abab rhyme scheme) is followed by a Petrarchan sestet (with cde cde rhyme scheme). This hybrid stanza reflects a golden ratio of 2:3 (four lines: six lines), and it suits the often contradictory but interdependent contents of the poem well. Any luxuriant indulgence in a wished-for escape (alcohol, medication, poetry) is undercut by a series of reality checks (numbness, suffering, decay, death).

The first four lines of each stanza state the actual position or the desired state of the speaker. He feels numb and drugged (stanza 1); he wishes for 'a draught of vintage' (stanza 2); he would like to escape the miseries of human existence (stanza 3); he wants to join the nightingale through the force of poetry (stanza 4); he guesses the smells of plants in the darkness (stanza 5); he confesses he is 'half in love with easeful Death' (stanza 6); he addresses the immortal nature of the nightingale's voice (stanza 7); he finally admits that the fancy cannot provide an escape from the self (stanza 8).

In the following six lines of each stanza we get an elaboration or explanation of these initial statements. The speaker's dark, depressed state contrasts sharply with the 'happiness' of the nightingale (stanza 1); the cool wine is associated with carefree enjoyment, but the whole purpose of drinking is oblivion (stanza 2); the miseries of life, both physical and mental, afflict both the old and the young (stanza 3); the speaker claims to have joined the nightingale ('Already with thee!') through the force of poetry, but notes the absence of light (stanza 4); he celebrates the smells of plants and flowers, but realizes that these are a sign of decay (stanza 5); he luxuriates in a fantasy of the nightingale's ecstatic song as the soundtrack to his death, but knows that he himself would not be there to hear it (stanza 6); the immortal song of the nightingale is not subject to the boundaries of time and reality, unlike human life (stanza 7); the song of the nightingale gradually vanishes, and the speaker wonders about the whole experience: was it a vision or a dream, is he awake or asleep? (stanza 8).

The beauty of 'Ode to a Nightingale' lies in the sharp contrast between the sensory intensity of the escapist visions and the unflinching portrayal of the realities which underpin them. It acknowledges the reality of suffering and death through the flamboyant portrayal of sensory life. While the 'draught of vintage' tastes of 'Flora and the country green, / Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth', it also leaves a 'purple-stained mouth'. The 'seasonable month' endows the 'grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild; / White hawthorn, and the

'pastoral eglantine' with sweet smells, but the flowers and trees also become the 'murmurous haunts of flies'. The nightingale's song is one of 'ecstasy', but the dead speaker would only be a 'sod' to its 'high requiem'. The imaginative flight associated with the immortal song of the nightingale cannot really alleviate the 'weariness, the fever, and the fret' of human suffering. The night may be tender, but the light is absent all the same. The upward, imaginative flight in every stanza inevitably descends into a realistic retort.

Keats was well acquainted with human suffering by the spring of 1819, and he had no illusions about 'easeful Death'. His experiences as a medical student, the illnesses and deaths of both his mother and his brother Tom ('pale, and spectre-thin'), and his own unsettled health prompted him to celebrate the 'immortal Bird' as an unachievable ideal amidst transient life itself.

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ⁱ Charles Brown 'Life of John Keats' 19 March 1841. In Hyder Edward Rollins *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers 1816-1878*. Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press (1948) ii, 65.