KEATS’ ODES: FOOTNOTED

1. Ode to a Nightingale; 2. Ode on a Grecian Urn; 3. To Autumn

Ode To A Nightingale

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
’Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness, –
That thou, light-wingèd Dryad of the trees
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath
Cool’d a long age in the deep-dveled earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth:
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim.

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1 drowsy – somnolent, soporific
2 numbness – temporary paralysis
3 aches... pains – the apparently paradoxical association of pleasure and pain is a theme common to the Spring odes.
4 hemlock – (Conium maculatum) the natural poison taken by Socrates
5 dull – (in this case) sleep-inducing
6 Lethe – the river of oblivion in Hades
7 ’tis – (archaic) it is
8 thy lot – your situation, your circumstances
9 the subject of ‘being’ is an absent ‘I’. This is a case of ‘anacoluthon’ (= beginning a sentence in one way and continuing or ending it in another).
10 the repetition in the wordplay parallels the repetition in the birdsong
11 polyptoton – the repetition of words derived from the same root
12 that – (in this case) because
13 Dryad – tree nymph
14 plot – (in this case) piece of land
15 beechen green – the green of beech trees (Fagus)
16 draught – (in this case) drink
17 hath – (archaic) has
18 deep-dveled – deeply dug
19 the Roman goddess of flowers and Spring (Greek ‘Chloris’)
20 Provençal song – suggesting the medieval troubadours
21 mirth – euphoria, joy
22 beaker – (in this case) big cup
23 Hippocrene – a fountain on Mount Helicon sacred to the Muses, and said to have been caused by Pegasus striking the spot with his hoof. The water was sacred to the muses and so a source of poetic inspiration. The implication is red wine as poetic inspiration; the idea of wine as ‘blushing water’ originates in the Biblical story of Christ turning water into wine (John, 2) but Keats may also be playing on the flushed cheeks caused by drinking.
24 to fade away – gradually disappear, vanish
25 dim – dark, obscure
Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known.
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies,
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes.
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy.
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And hapy the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light.
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

26 leaves – foliage
27 thou... hast – (archaic) you... have
28 weariness – exhaustion
29 fret – worry, preoccupation
30 palsy – involuntary tremors
31 an acknowledge biographical reference to Tom Keats
32 sorow – sadness
33 leaden-eyed despairs – hopelessness and despondency (‘leaden’ = made of the metal lead (Pb.))
34 what is beautiful is subject to change, except for the bird’s song, which is heard down the centuries
35 to pine at – long for, yearn for
36 for – (in this case) given that
37 Bacchus – the Roman god of wine
38 pards – leopards, cheetahs
39 viewless – invisible
40 poesy – (archaic) poetry
41 dull – (in this case) melancholic
42 used by Scott Fitzgerald as a novel title. Fitzgerald, who greatly admired Keats, also died on TB.
43 hapy – (in this case) perhaps, maybe
44 Queen-Moon – Cynthia or Digna
45 clustered around – surrounded
46 Fays – fairy attendants. In this ode Keats mixes Classical deities with English fairies, as Shakespeare does in A Midsummer Night’s Dream
47 save – (in this case) except for
48 verdurous – full of green vegetation
49 gloom – (poetic) dark place
50 winding – meandering
I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows.
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child.
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with eauful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath:
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

51 bough – branch
52 embalmed – shrouded (conveys the idea of death). The implication is of richly scented darkness, as with the aromatic drugs used to preserve a cadaver. This suggests the heavy perfume of the flowers and anticipates the reference to death in Stanza 6.
53 wherewith – with which
54 to endow – equip, provide
55 thicket – copse, dense group of trees
56 hawthorn – (Crataegus monogyna) a type of shrub
57 eglantine – sweetbrier, or honeysuckle
58 these lines are inspired by A Midsummer Night's Dream II. i. 248-67
59 musk-rose – (Rosa moschata) a type of rose
60 haunt – domain
61 eve – (poetic) evening
62 darkling – (archaic) in the dark
63 eauful – pain-free
64 rich to die – magnificent to die at such an intense moment of experience.
65 thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad – you are singing loudly
66 requiem – Keats imagines the bird’s song to be a hymn for his own soul
67 become a sod – because I would have turned into earth (being dead)
Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown.
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is fam’d to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now ’tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades.

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep?

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68 thou wast – (archaic) you were
69 hungry generations – children ‘consume’ their parents and replace them
70 clown – (in this case) peasant; simple uneducated person
71 biblical Ruth was driven into exile by famine and worked in the fields near Bethlehem
72 alien – foreign
73 oft-times hath – (archaic) has often
74 casement – window
75 perilous – dangerous
76 forlorn – utterly lost, desolate, hopeless, wretched, forsaken, abandoned, neglected
77 an ominous allusion to John Donne’s “Never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.”
78 the fancy cannot cheat so well – the imagination cannot keep up the illusion (of the nightingale’s immortality)
79 deceiving elf – imagination personified as a mischievous sprite
80 thy plaintive anthem – your hymn of sadness
81 to fade – gradually disappear
82 meadow – field of grass and flowers (typically near a river)
83 glade – open space in a forest
84 waking – lucid
Ode on a Grecian Urn

Thou still unravish’d488 bride of quietness,487
Thou foster-child488 of silence and slow time,486
Sylvan historian482, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring’d490 legend haunts492 about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe484 or the dales484 of Arcady485?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth490?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels490? What wild ecstasy?

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter: therefore, ye488 soft pipes, play on100;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear’d,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone101;
Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave102
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare103;
Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal105 — yet, do not grieve106;
She cannot fade107, though thou hast not thy bliss108.
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair109!

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever pipping songs for ever new;

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85 still — (wordplay) a. motionless (like a bride at the altar); b. virginal, intact (the urn is unbroken); c. sterile because her marriage will never be consummated
86 unravish’d — (in this case) virginal
87 quietness — tranquility
88 foster-child — the urn’s maker, its parent, is dead, it has been cared for by time and silence
89 it has been suggested that silence and slow time are foster parents to ensure that there is no intercourse — no regeneration in the entire poem
90 sylvan historian — the urn is apostrophized as a woodland storyteller, who narrates through images
91 leaf-fringed — referring to the decorative foliage on the urn
92 to haunt — be manifest, appear, exist
93 Tempe — a valley in Thessaly, celebrated for its beautiful, cool woodlands
94 dale — valley
95 Arcady — Arcadia, a district in Greece associated with pastoral happiness, home of Pan
96 loth — (in this case) unwilling to yield, reluctant
97 timbrels — tambourines or small drums
98 ye — (archaic) you
99 soft — (in this case) harmonious, melodious
100 to play on — continue playing
101 ditties of no tone — songs inaudible to the human ear
102 thou canst not leave — (archaic) you cannot interrupt
103 bare — (in this case) without foliage
104 bold — audacious, valiant
105 goal — objective
106 to grieve — lament, be sad
107 to fade — (in this case) become less beautiful
108 thou hast not thy bliss — you haven’t achieved your ecstasy
109 wilt thou — (archaic) will you
110 fair — (in this case) beautiful
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,
For ever panting, and for ever young;       assonance

All breathing human passion far above,
That leaves a heart high-sorrowful¹¹¹ and cloy’d¹¹²,
A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead’st thou¹¹³ that heifer¹¹⁴ lowing¹¹⁵ at the skies,
And all her silken flanks¹¹⁶ with garlands drest¹¹⁷?

What little town by river or sea shore,
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of this folk¹¹⁸, this pious morn¹¹⁹?
And, little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be; and not a soul to tell¹²⁰
Why thou art¹²¹ desolate, can e’er¹²² return.

O Attic¹²³ shape! Fair attitude! with brede¹²⁴ internal rhyme
Of marble men and maidens overwrought¹²⁵,
With forest branches and the trodden weed:
Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought¹²⁶ pararhyme
As doth eternity.¹²⁷ Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste¹²⁸,
Thou shalt¹²⁹ remain, in midst of other woe¹³⁰
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say’st,
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty”, – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.       alliteration

¹¹¹ high-sorrowful – very sad
¹¹² to cloy – make weary through excess
¹¹³ lead’st thou...? (archaic) are you leading
¹¹⁴ heifer – young female cow
¹¹⁵ to low – moo
¹¹⁶ flank – side
¹¹⁷ drest – dressed, adorned
¹¹⁸ is emptied of this folk – has been vacated by these people
¹¹⁹ morn – (poetic) morning
¹²⁰ not a soul to tell – nobody who can explain
¹²¹ thou art – (archaic) you are
¹²² e’er – ever
¹²³ Attic – from Attica or Athens
¹²⁴ brede – embroidery, decoration
¹²⁵ overwrought – painted or carved on the surface
¹²⁶ dost tease us out of thought – frustrate our attempts to think reasonably
¹²⁷ i.e. both the beauty of the urn and the notion of eternity should be felt, not speculated upon. Art stops time, and so is a form of eternity.
¹²⁸ to waste – (in this case) eliminate
¹²⁹ thou shalt – (archaic) you will
¹³⁰ woe – sadness, suffering
To Autumn (September, 1819)

EARLY AUTUMN – ripening – tactile imagery – description of landscape.
The plenitude of the land.

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
To bend with apples the mossed cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel;
to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For Summer has o’erbrimmed their clammy cells.

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131 mist – low cloud that reduces visibility
132 mellow – subtle; ripe, mature; good-humoured
133 close bosom-friend – intimate friend
134 maturing – a. getting older as the year passes; b. bringing crops to ripeness
135 to conspire – (in this case) plan, cooperate
136 to load – weigh down (with grapes)
137 vine – climbing plant on which grapes grow
138 thatch-eves – (in this case) homes of the rural poor
139 to bend with – be weighed down by
140 mossed – mossy, covered in moss (= Bryophyta, a spongy soft green plant)
141 cottage-tree – tree owned by a humble rural person
142 ripeness /'raipnas/ – (of fruit) maturity, sweetness
143 to the core – to the centre, (in this case) completely
144 to swell sth. – dilate sth., expand sth.
145 gourd /go:d/ – marrow/squash, courgette/zucchini or pumpkin
146 to plump sth. – fatten sth., make sth. bigger
147 hazel /'heizəl/ shell – the hard outer cover of hazelnuts
148 kernel – (in this case) hazelnut
149 to set budding (set-set-set) – cause flowers to bloom (= blossom)
150 later – (in this case) late-blossoming, late-flowering
151 o’erbrimmed – overbrimmed, overfull, filled to overflowing
152 clammy – moist and sticky (because they are full of honey)
153 cells – (in this case) the hexagonal compartments in a beehive
Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store? Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find Thee sitting careless on a granary floor, Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind; Or on a half-reaped furrow sound asleep, Drowsed with the fume of poppies, while thy hook Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers; And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep Steady thy laden head across a brook; Or by a cider-press, with patient look, Thou watchest the last oozings, hours by hours.
LATE AUTUMN – barrenness – auditory imagery – description of the sky and the air. Birds and insects sing an elegy to Autumn.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they? Think not of them, thou hast thy music too. – While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue; Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn Among the river sallows, borne aloft Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies; And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn; Hedge-cricket[s] sing, and now with treble soft The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft; And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

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185 thou hast – (archaic) you have
186 thy – (archaic) your
187 barred /bard/ clouds – cirro-cumulus clouds
188 to bloom – (in this case) shed a warm, hazy light
189 stubble-plains – fields of stubble (= cut crops) left after the harvest
190 rosy – pinkish-red
191 hue – colour, shade
192 gnat – (Dipterid) very small insect that flies in swarms (= big groups)
193 wailful choir... mourn – the faint sound made by the insects’ wings has a mournful effect, but Keats may also be suggesting that they are lamenting the dying of the year
194 sallow – (Salix cinerea) type of willow tree
195 to be borne aloft – be carried high
196 to sink (sink-sank-sunk) – descend
197 full-grown lamb /læm/ – young sheep that was born in Spring (thus marking the passing of time)
198 bleat – cry of a lamb
199 bourn – boundary, (in Keats) domain, (in this case) the hills bounding the horizon
200 cricket [C] – (associated with winter)
201 treble – high-frequency, soprano
202 redbreast – robins are associated with winter (see photo)
203 to whistle – (in this case) sing
204 garden-croft – walled garden
205 to gather – congregate
206 swallow – (Hirundinidae) small fast bird like a swift or a house martin
207 to twitter – sing