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KEATS' "ODE TO A NIGHTINGALE": A NOTE OF AN ESCAPIST?

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ABSTRACT

John Keats (1795-1821), one of the British Romantic poets, is primarily noted for being an escapist, who is found time and again to escape the world of actuality with a view to be in an ideal world, free from dull and depressive affairs of daily life. In many of his poems, he had been untiring in drawing a contrast between the real and the ideal. "Ode to a Nightingale" is often cited to prove Keats' escapism, as the poem is firmly founded on Keats' overwhelming passion for the imaginative world of the nightingale, where he seeks to escape and die a painless death. But if we go between the lines of the poem, it comes out that Keats's desire to escape the real world and to live in an imaginative world is but a process of his close inspection to reach the conclusion that the human quest for the so called ideal world is always a vain one because it is ever a will-o'-the-wisp. Hence, the physical world is still the best with its ever present note of the "weariness, the fever, and the fret". Then, my present explication on "Ode to a Nightingale" would concentrate on how and why Keats disengages himself from the ideal world where he initially escapes from the actual world and ultimately returns back to accept life what it is.

Key-words: Escapism, Imagination, Fancy, Hope, Despair, Real/Actual, Ideal/Unreal, Negative capability, self-knowledge, etc.

John Keats's (1795-1821) "Ode to a Nightingale" is a poetic journey—a journey from despair to hope, and from hope to despair again. The journey is but a process of his close inspection of the ideal world, contributing eventually to his self-awakening; it leaves a message for Keats as well as the readers that the hope of humans has ever been a hallucination because it is utterly impossible for us to achieve hope permanently. Moreover, the process of self-awakening helps him grow and realize that hope, though an antidote to despair, is a kind of placebo because its speculative nature; hence, he returns back to despair again where he sets out his journey from. But a significant point to be noted is that whereas he rejected the initial despair, he readily accepts the last. This is because

the despair at the beginning of his journey is different from the despair at the end of his journey; whereas the first one is bereft of self-knowledge the last is accompanied by it. Said differently, though Keats with his escapist nature rejected the world of actuality for its implacable mutability in quest for a Utopian world, the process of his journey involves the evolution of his intellectual self to prompt him to realize the vanity of that Utopia, leading ultimately to the acceptance of the world of actuality.

Cleanth Brooks makes an insightful observation so far as the theme of Keats' present poem is concerned; according to Brooks' observation, "the world of the imagination offers a release from the painful world of actuality, yet at

the same time it renders the world of actuality more painful by contrast" (31). Unmistakably, this is no less a persuasive statement of Brooks. It is not only for Keats but for all the romantic poets as well that the imaginative world provides a "release" from the pains of the real world; it is also obvious and true that Brooks' observation is based on the theory of comparison and contrast. But my opposition can be stated in a counter-argument that though the imaginative world with its ideality of things makes the real world more "painful by contrast", the humans come to realize that the world of imagination is nothing but a mere hallucination that ever remains unachievable.

The imaginative world of the nightingale does in fact provide no permanent substitute to the fever and fret of the actual world. Rather, the poet is found to evolve his intellectual self through a meaningful tug-of-war between the real and the ideal. This point has long before been noted by Richard Harter Fogle in 1953:

The principal stress of the poem ["Ode to a Nightingale"] is a struggle between ideal and actual: inclusive terms which, however, contain more particular antitheses of pleasure and pain, of imagination and common sense reason, of fullness and privation, of permanence and change, of nature and the human, of art and life, freedom and bondage, waking and dream. (211)

The conflict between the opposites as noted by Fogle is the essence of the poem. This is true. Another influential figure, Douglas Bush too thinks that "conflict is central in the "Nightingale" (335). But the statement which Fogle further has made in his paper is my object of dissent:

In the "Nightingale" Keats is both interesting as well as well-mannered as a man need be who is expressing his convictions. He is affirming the value of the ideal, and this is the primary fact. He is also paying due tribute to the power of the actual, and this is an important but secondary consideration. The stress of the poem lies in the conflict between value and power. (215)

It cannot be denied that Keats is found to assert the "value of the ideal". But this is, I consider in counter-assertion, not the "the primary fact" of the poem. The primary and of course "important" fact of the poem is what Fogle considers to be "secondary"—Keats's "paying due tribute to the power of the actual". In my opinion, if any value the ideal has is that it can provide a window for the time being to distract ourselves from the monotonous affairs of daily life.

Keats's despair is occasioned by the sad mutability of the human world; it is no less caused by his own life. And here it may not be wrong if I allow a little bit of digression in reflecting on Keats's biographical details which may serve my purpose to concentrate on Keats' despair. Towards the end of his life in 1818—he died in 1821 at the age of 25—Keats set out on a walking tour in Northern England and Scotland. He returned and devoted himself to caring for Tom, his brother who suffered from TB and died on December 1, 1818. To his utter dismay, Keats himself was diagnosed with TB in the autumn of 1819. The present poem was composed in the spring of 1819 in one day when Keats was living in a semi-rural town Hampstead with his friend Charles Armitage Brown. It was the time when Keats also had fallen in love with Fanny Brawne. No doubt, while Keats was composing the poem he was steeped in despair, caused by the death of his brother Tom and his own physical illness that made him too conscious of the inevitable mortality of human life. But he was filled with hope while he was encountering the sweet song of the nightingale, "his prime symbol for the imaginative power that will take him on his journey" (Wentersdorf 70).

The song of the nightingale induces in Keats a mood of seventh heaven so much so that he is able to merge his sole self with that of the nightingale. In other words, the poem is but a flight into the state of 'negative capability', a state that Keats has defined in a letter he wrote from Hampstead to his brothers George and Thomas Keats on December 22, 1817: "The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth" (277). Douglas Bush "might accept" it as "an informal and

incomplete" aesthetic theory but affirmed that the statement is "incontrovertible" (331). To be sure, it is indisputable that the intensity of Keats' contemplation on the song of the nightingale makes him capable to at least temporarily forget 'all disagreeables'. Further, Keats continues the letter: "I mean *Negative Capability*, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason"¹ (277). In "Ode to a Nightingale", Keats certainly attains the state of what he himself terms "Negative Capability" and for the time being identifies himself with the self of the nightingale in a mood of intoxication. This intoxication is not certainly to be identified with the literal intoxication, but with a state of the mind being in poetic frenzy.

The poet in the opening stanza of the poem is found in an almost intoxicated frame of mind; he is drowsy and numb, as if he had drunk hemlock or opiates or been immersed in the mythical water of Lethe, the river of forgetfulness:

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. (1-4)

This state of inebriation continues in the second stanza:

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved 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. (11-20)

Here Keats is found to celebrate the power of wine to temporarily release him from the shocking actualities life. Probably, the poet desires for the magical powers of wine with graphically described

colours to completely identify himself with the attributes of the nightingale. Moreover, his minute contemplation on colours of wine is but an evidence of his frantic attempt to forget the world of blacks and whites where he had bitter experience of Tom's death of tuberculosis which he inscribed in the third stanza of the poem:

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. (21-24)

The most significant point in this stanza is that though the poet is ready to undertake a journey in the magical realm of the nightingale with which he has identified himself, he cannot become completely forgetful of the ills of the mundane world; rather, he realizes that the nightingale, like Shelley's skylark and unlike that of Wordsworth's, is quite unaware of the vinegary disappointments of day to day reality. Thus, the song of the bird has no trace of 'The weariness, the fever, and the fret' of the world—

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. (25-30)

Nevertheless, the poet in the stanzas 4 and 5 looks untiring in his journey to the region of the imaginative world. Hence, he rejects the power of wine and relies on the value of "the viewless wings of Poesy" (33) to find himself in nightingale's world where "the Queen-Moon is on her throne,/ Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays" (36-37) and where he finds many unseen flowers he recognizes with their "soft incense" (42). Subsequently, the poet is utterly overwhelmed by the nightingale's song and appears to become victorious in his journey with no return. But his sole self does not allow him to be in unmixed pleasures that the nightingale offers. Contrarily, it

makes him aware of the inevitable mortality of himself and wishes the nightingale to continue it song even when he himself is no more:

Darkling I listen; and for many a time

I have been half in love with easeful 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. (51-60)

Though shortly after the beginning of the poem the poet aspires to identify himself with the nightingale and once he seems to completely merge his self with that of the nightingale, the “gradual disengagement”, to use Walter Jackson Bate’s term, of the poet from the bird begins here (349). Subsequently, we see the gradual awakening of Keats’ sole self that helps him have a realization that unlike himself the nightingale is immortal. The immortality of the bird contrasted with the inevitable mortality of the humans prompts him to subsequently lose his state of ‘negative capability’ with the bird and move effortlessly through the passage of time and space with an allusion to the biblical Ruth and distant lands:

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. (61-
70)

Immediately the poet returns to his sole self; he will no more body forth the imaginative realm of the nightingale, nor will he remain confined into it. Rather, the word “forlorn” sounds like a bell “To toll me back from thee to my sole self” (72); it makes him aware of the bleak landscape of human existence: “Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf” (73-74). Commenting on the “Ode”, Douglas Bush writes:

The power of the imagination... offer[s] no adequate recompense for either the fleeting joys or the inescapable pains of mortality. Keats's early desire to burst our mortal bars, to transcend the limitations of human understanding, becomes in the “Nightingale” the desire for death, the highest sensation, or an anguished awareness of the gulf between life and death. In the end the imagination cannot escape from oppressive actuality; far from attaining a vision of ultimate truth, it achieves only a momentary illusion. (335; emphasis added)

Truly, the poet finds “no adequate recompense” for the inevitability of human life in “the power of the imagination”. Hence, though he concludes the poem with an unsettled question, “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?” (79-80), it does not only record Keats’ retreat from the ideal realm of the nightingale that he created by means of the time machine of poetry but helps him voluntarily to embrace reality with its ever present note of despair. At the end, he gains knowledge from the trip that the imaginative faculty can never be a permanent substitute for the depressing realities of life; now he knows the truth that man’s hope is eternal but irrational at the same time; human beings, how imaginative they be, must accept the bleak actualities of life, though always despairing and heart-rending, and reconcile himself to their inevitable end, death.

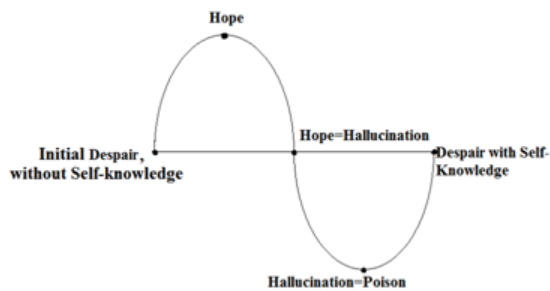


Figure 1

Thus, in "Ode to a Nightingale" Keats's aesthetic journey can best be understood with the help of the above figure². The initial despair of the poet as shown in the figure is occasioned by the premature death of his brother Tom, his own ailment of TB and his failure in love with Fanny Brawne. This despair is devoid of self-knowledge. Hence, the poet rises from despair to hope; this is the poet's hope for the ideal which he finds in the song of the nightingale. But he discovers gradually that hope is only hallucinatory and is never found. His deeper contemplation further helps him realize that hallucination is but a poison. So, he rises to embrace despair again and this time his despair is accompanied by self-knowledge. In other words, Keats comes to the realization through his pleasure trip, which no longer remains a pleasure trip till the end, that neither is it feasible nor enviable to rise above the world of actuality as the gap between the aspiration and achievement of human beings is eternal. That is why in my explication of "Ode to a Nightingale" I have made a modest attempt to show that Keats's flight in the imaginative realm of the nightingale is not to be interpreted from the traditional perspective of his escapism but from the perspective of a kind of journey that involves the evolution of his self leading ultimately himself to accept life what it is.

End Notes:

1. Scudder, Horace E. (Ed.). *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats: Cambridge Edition*. Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1899. Web. World eBook Library, in inlibnet.ac.in.
2. For this figure I am heavily indebted to Jason Mauro who has used this sign-wave in his interpretation of Keats' "Ode on a

Grecian Urn" (p.292). The terms by which I have labelled the five spotted points are altered. Mauro's paper is entitled "The Shape of Despair: Structure and Vision in Keats' Ode on a Grecian Urn", published in *Nineteenth Century Literature*, Vol.52, No.3 (Dec. 1997), 289-301. An informed reader may access the paper in www.Jstor.org/stable/2933996.

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