Romanticism and the Object

Edited by
Larry H. Peer

Nineteenth-Century Major Lives and Letters

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2. See The Examiner no. 758 (August 4, 1822), 289; Courier no. 9616 (August 5, 1822), 3, which calls Shelley “the writer of some infidel poetry”; Morning Chronicle no. 16.635 (August 12, 1822), which prints Leigh Hunt’s letter on the death of Shelley; Morning Chronicle no. 16.637 (August 14, 1822), 2, which censures The Courier, leading to an even stronger response in Courier no. 9.624 (August 14, 1822), 4; John Bull 2 (August 19, 1822), 701, which denounces the Morning Chronicle obituary of Shelley and reprints part of Queen Mab to expose Shelley’s atheism, declaring it offensive that Morning Chronicle “should descend to the insertion of such nauseating nonsense as this eulogium upon Mr Shelley’s friendship for the universe”; British Luminary and Weekly Intelligencer, no. 203 (August 18, 1822), 685, which ridicules the commentary of John Bull; The Republican 6 (August 23, 1822), 283, which characterizes Shelley as “unfortunately too well known for his infamous novels and poems”; Monthly Magazine 54 (September 1822), 178, which praises Shelley as a “man of highly cultivated genius”; and New European Magazine 1 (September 1822), 194, which praises Shelley’s talents but declares his poems to embody horrifying “fiend-like principles.”


Chapter 9

Keats and the Impersonal Craft of Writing

Magdalena M. Ostas

Keats’s Objects and the Visual Idiom

It has been characteristic of most commentary on Keats since Leigh Hunt described The Eve of St. Agnes in 1820 as a “picture” rather than a “story” to take recourse to some form of the language of the visual—painting, sculpture, particularly the genre of ekphrasis, and cinema (Matthews 172). While there are numerous studies investigating the lines of influence between Keats and the visual arts, the inclination to draw the parallel between Keats’s style and the various visual media is actually more fundamental and transpires almost inevitably and repeatedly in criticism. In addition to being filled with passing descriptions of and references to “tableaus” or “stills” in the poems, criticism on Keats often also makes recourse to the visual at the level of the thesis. Christopher Ricks, for instance, writes of Keats’s “scopophilia”; Marjorie Levinson of his writing in “word-pictures”; Charles Rzepka of the “statuesque” quality of his figures; Jerome McGann of the way “To Autumn,” for instance, aspires to “pictorial silence”; Geoffrey Hartman of “frames” in the ode; Michael O’Neill of Keats’s “poetic cinema”; Helen Vendler regularly of “friezes” in all of the Odes; and Grant Scott of the way in which the genre of ekphrasis eventually becomes indistinguishable from Keats’s style and poetic point of view itself (Ricks 89; Levinson, Allegory 143; Rzepka 231; McGann 59; Hartmann, “Poem and Ideology” 130; O’Neill 117;
Scott xiv). There are, furthermore, famous moments in Keats’s verse captured in contemporary criticism in specifically visual idioms: the long, slow “pan” that commences Hyperion; “cuits” that punctuate The Eve of St. Agnes; and “tableaus” that decorate the Grecian urn. In other words, speaking of pictures seems aptly to capture something about the way Keats writes in images. Words for Keats take on the form of visual objects.

My intention in the following analysis of the Odes of 1819 and Keats’s late lyrical style—what I term his “impersonal” craft of writing throughout—is to account for the draw toward the visual idiom in Keats’s criticism and attempt to bring its critical significance outside of the language of the visual. I show why Keats’s poetries draws what critics instinctively import as a “visual” idiom, one often left unaccounted for and made to do descriptive rather than critical work. I aim to show, then, that the intuitive recourse to the “visual” in Keats’s criticism stems from the unique grammar of enunciation and representation in Keats’s verse. One stands before—apprehends or comprehends—Keats’s text as one stands before a certain kind of picture: Keats recasts, in other words, a logic or a grammar of reading. Keats’s verse can read “visually” because it lacks the “depth” of a speaking or enunciating persona.

In the Odes of 1819, Keats consistently employs—uses—rather than “expressing in” signs. He uses them as always conscious material, manipulates them. Keats employs words as words rather than expressions. Keats’s grammar of enunciation is thus never tied to a first-person persona or self of utterance, is never “deep,” and I hope to bring out several aspects of the critical signification of this style of writing, the logic of subjectivity that it embodies, and the decidedly late moment in the Romantic tradition that it articulates.

Very generally, the inclination to draw the parallel between Keats’s poetry and the visual arts stems instinctually from three characteristic marks of Keats’s poetic style that are indeed—descriptively, that is—“pictorial.” First, the inclination to speak of Keats’s scenes as being painted, rendered, or often recorded rather than “written” comes from his tendency to slow down and even explicitly stall narrative movement in favor of what is sometimes called “slow time” (“Ode on a Grecian Urn”)—the poet’s persisting, “lingering” (“I stood tip-toe upon a link hill”), and “loitering” (“La Belle Dame Sans Merci”)—within images and scenes. As Andrew Bennett has put the point, Keats’s poems are frequently “overwhelmed by the absence of generative narrative energies” (Bennett 65). To call to mind the effect of

the utter slowness of narrative time in some of Keats’s verse, we might recollect Hyperion’s slow-moving, deliberate opening pan:

Deep in the shady sadness of a vale
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon, and eve’s one star,
Sat gray-hair’d Saturn, quiet as a stone,
Still as the silence round about his hair;
Forest on forest hung about his head
Like cloud on cloud. No stir of air was there,
Not so much life as on a summer’s day
Robs not one light seed from the feather’d grass,
But where the dead leaf fell, there did it rest.
A stream went voiceless by, still deadened more
By reason of his fallen divinity
Spreading a shade: the Naiad ’mid her reeds
Press’d her cold finger closer to her lips. (1-14)

or reflect on one of the immovable images on the Grecian urn, which refuses to yield to what hovers as the imminent resumption of temporal advance:

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou cast not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
Put ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! (15-20)

The sensuousness of Keats’s imagery coupled with this still, slowed-down, or even retreating form of narrative progression often leads to the impression that the poetic persona has “halted” in some sense and surrendered entirely to the scene before it—the chameleon poet relinquishing identity to immerse unreservedly into an image or scene. Keats’s is a form of immersion or identification that forward motion actually appears to threaten. Thus the frequent resulting impression is of a precariously stilled “scene.” Keats, in this way, resists narrative progression.

Second, Keats’s images often suggest the visual idiom because they are always grounded in the material, external, and outward characteristics of their forms. Alan Richardson calls this an “objective exactness” in Keatsian imagery and points out in a revealing example that Keats is one of the first, for instance, to use the word “brain” to signify “mind” or “thought” and that, in this way, Keats’s images
signify consciousness by the sensible and tangible body (Richardson, "Romantic Science" 233–35). Likewise, feelings and emotions in the Keatsian image, as if literally indistinguishable from the body itself, always appear as symptoms, things "seen" and discernible only from an external gaze. Here we might think of Keats’s abundant images of flushes, colors, trembles, and glances—always instead of the language of states, feelings, or emotions. The "breathing human passion," "burning forehead," and "arching tongue" of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn" exemplify this tendency to couch states of consciousness in the sensuous, external, sometimes clinical imagery of affect and symptom. They are beheld from the outside—not internal dis-quiet but a burning forehead. Keats’s imagery in this way is not only "sensuous" but also unfolds as if the poetic sensibility were only coming into contact with external, worldly surfaces and forms. Things in Keats’s poems are things seen (or heard, or tasted, or touched). They show their insides.

Finally, critics often invoke cinema and the genre of ekphrasis in parallel with Keats’s style because Keats’s poetic persona constitutively maintains his diegetic invisibility—even, as we will see, in the lyrics. Keats maintains the sensuality and intensity of his imagery always at a hovering distance from it. That sensuality is never "his" but always as if "out there." The Keatsian poetic persona, when apprehending an image, does not come forward to confront or meet that image. Syntactically or formally, this means that Keats’s surrender to the image, the entering of the chameleon poet into the object before it, rarely transpires in the mode of the first person. Like a camera or ekphrastic eye, then, Keats’s "I" or even narratorial persona are not personalized agencies in viewing, seeing, and apprehending. The sense often, then, is that the poetic voice or persona apprehends something but rather that something is being seen from an unembodied, impersonal locality. We can recollect here, for instance, Keats’s construction of the tableaus on the Grecian urn, the ode whose very theme is the final impenetrability or over-there-ness of the poet’s own images and his distance from them. The poetic persona marks the images’ inaccessibility at both the beginning and conclusion of the ode by underlining their silence ("foster-child of silence," "silent form") for him. They do not let him in. His initial questioning and curiosity are unable to carry him into these images—and in the end the urn is "cold." They are for him thus perceptible but finally qua images impenetrable—marble. The structure of the ode can be grasped precisely as the I’s alienated struggle with the inaccessibility of its own representations. Keats’s "self"—or what in lyricism reads

as the self or "I"—cannot come forward. The loss or dissolution of subjectivity and the diegetic invisibility of the poetic persona, the loss of the particularity from which something is viewed or apprehended, is thus constitutively inseparable of the Keatsian image. The resulting effect is that Keats’s poetic eye hovers about his scenes, maintaining a proximate, almost-there distance to its material.

What critics call the visual quality of Keats’s poetry, however, is not just a function of the characteristic Keatsian constructions of narrative time, narrative perspective, and image—all instinctual associations with the structure or ontologies of the visual media. Rather, Keats’s "visualness" is a function of the form of Keats’s text more broadly conceived. For to say as Leigh Hunt did that The Eve of St. Agnes is a picture or not a story is not to say that it includes within it vivid or sensuous images or that its narrative progression is measured but rather to say that the poem is like a picture, that reading it is like apprehending a (certain kind of) picture. In short, that quality of Keats’s text that so instinctively calls up the visual idiom must be understood in terms that extend beyond the instinctive characterizations of Keats’s verse as slow-moving and sensuous. How does one write, for instance, in tableaus and stills? How is a poem like a picture?

### Late Keats and the Question of Tone

There is a strong connection between what critics call the "cinematic" imagery in Keats’s poetry and the details of Stanley Cavell’s meditations on the ontology of cinema in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. For one of the questions that lingers about the obviously anachronistic characterization of Keats’s imagery as "cinematic" is what cinematic can mean outside or without the context of cinema: what is the structure of apprehension that the parallel wants to conjure? The *absent or displaced yet maintained perspective* of the one watching or recording is here at issue—its impersonality, in other words. Descriptions of Cavell’s such as the following, for instance, of the relationship specific to cinema between artwork and spectator and the economy of apprehension that the medium’s ontology therefore calls for can read as descriptions of many moments so characteristic of Keats’s poetic eye:

To say that we wish to view the world itself is to say that we are wishing for the condition of viewing as such. That is our way of establishing our connection with the world: through viewing it, or having views of
it. Our condition has become one in which our natural mode of perception is to view, feeling unseen. We do not so much look at the world as look **out at it**, from behind the self. (Cavell 102)

Or:

[In cinema I am not present at something happening, which I must confirm, but at something that has happened, which I absorb. (Cavell 26)]

To follow the analogy, then: like the cinematic camera, Keats's poetic perspective looks at its subjects not through or with the self, but as if from behind it. The structure of apprehension that the parallel between Keats's style and cinema wishes to conjure stems from Keats's desire for what Cavell here calls "the condition of viewing as such," a condition unanchored to something like a "subjective" perspective and in which the **subjective particularly** of the viewing position precisely dissolves. In this way, Keats's grammar of enunciation, like a cinematic image, is dislodged from a structure originating or emanating from a first person, but is one that nonetheless retains an absent "perspective"—not a persona but a moving, emphatically de-personalized site from which language and image spring. The perspective does not entail confrontation with or confirmation of what comes before it but rather unfolds as a kind of fixed absorption.

While we should take the parallel between Keats's characteristic poetic perspective and cinema neither literally nor too fixedly, some of Cavell's further insights into the ontology of apprehension in film are worth evoking if only because they can help distinguish the specific character of Keats's characteristic distanced poetic eye from something like a hovering "omniscience." Cavell argues, for example, that the economy of watching in the cinema requires that the actors "be present" to the spectator while the spectator cannot be present to the actors (Cavell 25). The film must call for the spectator's absorption and dramatize that it unfolds without that spectator. Keats's poetic images similarly, rather than issuing "from" him, often are actually present to him or before him; they appear to be something happening to the poet, in other words.

The question is both of control and origination. It is as if his images continually exceed or outrun whatever can be construed as the poetic persona and thus unfold outside of him. The image in Keats's verse appears always to be able to disappear or dissolve at any moment (thus "cuts")—this threat or sense of liminality is part of its effect—since the poetic persona appears rhetorically and psychologically uncertain of its role in ensuring its maintenance. The imagination is as if independent of the persona. The persona therefore often feels himself instead to be the image's subject. Exceedingly vivid and sensuous as they are, Keats's images stand without subjective investment. Their sensuousness might be read as the literary effort to keep them there. They unfold and unravel with their own momentum and in their own world, a world the persona often appears to be "watching."

Keats's 1819 odes are filled with "cuts" such as the following from the "Ode to a Nightingale," which in its use of tense typifies ("Away! Away!...Already with thee!") and in its reference to the agent of flight as the "wings of Poesy" also in fact thematizes the way in which Keats's poetic persona can become subject to or of rather than being author of his own image and poem:

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!... (31-35)

The jarring "Already" here marks the first person's literal moving with the poem, as if that poem's progression and its language were independent of him; he literally arrives to the nightingale with the inscription of the word. The poem, diegetically, is the agent of flight. We might think here also of the mirroring between stanzaic and thematic rhythm in the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Each consecutive tableau brings the poetic persona to an increasingly frenzied state only for the urn to turn with each stanza to a subsequent scene.

Here, the poet's affective entry into each scene might be said to outrun the poem's regular meter and stanza form. The poetic persona is not "done" at each tenth line, and his very turn to a new scene and new stanza must be read diegetically within the psychology of the ode to come out of either agitation or the search for relief. Internally, each stanza grows progressively more desperate, so that the poem qua structure can be said to save, relieve, or coerce the poet as each new stanza commences. Stanzaic, poetic form does not quite capture or hold affect in this poem, and the persona thus watches himself in the poem grow more frenzied. What the parallel between Keatsian imagery and cinema reveals here is that the image's disavowal of or disengagement from the poetic persona, its dramatization of its independence, is not always or not only in Keats's verse a matter of general pathos—as it is, most clearly, at the conclusion of the nightingale ode—but also a matter of the structure of poetic progression and enunciation. In this way, the sense is as if Keats often watches his own poetry unfold, as if it moves outside or without him. His images
are often—thematically and rhetorically—present to him while “he” is, strangely, not present to them. The imagination is severed almost entirely from subjectivity in Keats’s verse.

The theme of the status or sustainability of the image or of the imagination more generally plays itself out in Keats’s work of course not only rhetorically but also thematically and allegorically. Keats’s central figures famously abandon the poet, “cheat” him (“Ode to a Nightingale”), “tease” him (“Ode on a Grecian Urn”), or “cut” without his will. Many of Keats’s poems stage precisely moments or trances of absorption or enthrallment by an “image” and end almost always in questioning, abandonment, or deliberate suspension. The imagination’s independence from subjectivity, in other words, is precisely a central theme for Keats. That both Keats’s nightingale and urn very much “happen to” the poetic persona is the very topic, for example, of both odes. Their status as images of an imaginative meeting cannot be sustained, and the encounter leads the poetic persona to the disillusioned Keatsian thematization of the status of imagination (“Was it a vision, or a waking dream?”). Likewise, the circular temporality and the indeterminability of events in “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” allegorizes the poet’s own ailing and woe about imaginative visions. Like the poetic persona at the conclusion of the “Ode to a Nightingale,” who stands stranded like Ruth in a field of alien corn, the knight at the ballad’s conclusion too abruptly has been abandoned by his own image and left ailing. The later Keats takes up precisely the theme of the status and origin of imaginative imagery as his almost singular topic. The Keatsian image is thus dislodged from the classic first person almost entirely—in rhetoric, poetic structure, and allegorically in theme.

One of the consequences that Cavell draws out of this sense of feeling unseen and watching in the theater—to draw out one final analogy—with images “happening to” or happening outside oneself in this way, is that subjectivity comes to be thoroughly synonymous with spectatorship, a position that for Cavell is endemic to modernity generally. In such a position of spectatorship, self-consciousness consequently becomes synonymous with embarrassment (Cavell 93). To feel seen watching in this way—fixedly, unreservedly gazing without subjective affective response or investment—is to be embarrassed, for this kind of indiscrete absorbed gaze betrays a lack of basic orientation in one’s position. Rather than acting or responding as one should, one just “looks”—scopophilia. Christopher Ricks analogously draws the connection between the absorbed “nonversion of the eyes” in

Keats’s verse and the characteristic early Keatsian “adolescent” gaze with a position of easy embarrassability—what he terms an overtly “blushing” poetic vantage point (Ricks 9, 102–3). Both Cavell and Ricks trace the source of embarrassment in such a position to a lack of certainty about or the inability to orient oneself in one’s social present—adolescent awkwardness, in other words. Blushing, then, is an acknowledgment of sociality without the assurance or authority of a proper, decorous, or fixed social orientation. And Keats’s poetic perspective as it watches itself unfold frequently “blushes” at its own conscious poetic indiscretions, allowances, and even blunders. It is a mode of writing that at every step thereby marks its own knowledge of the proper bounds of aesthetic and literary form, and thus also at times holds up rather than simply executing its own literary achievements. Keats thus of course famously puts his own years of blush-filled apprenticeship sometimes painfully openly on display. This unsentimentally self-conscious style, though almost unanimously associated only with the early Keats, as we will see continues forcefully into the later works. The presentation or “grammar” of subjectivity is therefore different in Keats’s poetry from that of any other Romantic’s—whether a Wordsworthian spontaneous first-person lyricism or a Byronic irony. His is a unique Romanticism, at once unironic yet almost entirely unhinged from the emunctive first person of lyric.

Whether Keats’s relationship to the linguistic sign should be characterized as fetishistic, indulgent, inventive, self-conscious, or simply senseless, words for Keats in any case are like objects. They lack depth. They exceed “him” or come to him from the outside. Keats does not own a language; he manipulates it. In the same way, then, that the ontology of the cinematic image entails the spectator’s absorbed displacement from within the image, the formal workings of Keats’s language necessitate a mode of reading or apprehension that is at once absorbed and distanced—absorbed by the sign or image, yet distanced from its employment as spontaneously attached to an expressive subjectivity or as “naturally” literary. Keats’s verse forces meaning out of the linguistic sign in order to fix the locus of meaning instead on the employment of the sign as a sign. It uses it as material. Like a certain kind of image, it is thus perceptible, visible but in a style as estranged, of a double-consciousness, alienated, inauthentic, or performative. What is needed instead is an analysis of its specific formal structures and workings as well as their implications for late Romanticism’s taking up in the form of poetry questions of subjectivity, form, history, and aesthetics.
That Keats’s characteristic literary forms in this sense serve as an instructive contrast to Wordsworth’s explicitly spontaneous program for poetry is important for conceptualizing the shift in the relationship between literary form and affect from the early to the later Romantic period. As Thomas Pfau has put the point, “The Keatsian text disestablishes the claims of an earlier romantic paradigm of literature as originality in a timeless, inalienable and socially beneficial type of affective experience” (Pfau 365). If the rhetorical success of Wordsworth’s poetry had pivoted on the phenomenologization of the voice in the text as a human voice; on the strong, inalienable identification of the lyrical “I” with the poetic persona; on Wordsworth as a man speaking in the verbal language of the everyday to other men; Keats’s literary forms later hinge, as Pfau here underlines, precisely on the undoing of this paradigm—on its questioning, disillusion, and historical unfeasibility. Language for Keats never functions—not even in the high lyrical form of the ode—as a repository of affect. Like the world, allegorically, for his poetic persona, language is never a “habitat” for Keats.

Keats’s late lyricism, then, is characterized by an insistent materiality and indulgence in imagery and language—the attentiveness and adherence of a perspective—and the absence of what might be called the responsiveness or engagement of the poetic voice to that material—a depersonalization of the site from which language and image originate. Keats’s use of language always exceeds, undermines, or mismatches whatever can be construed diegetically as the emergence of a poetic persona. Language runs into subjecivity in the verse; the poetry’s progression is often the drama of the always failed attempt to take on voice. Keats’s poems, in other words, lack tone; put differently, one might say that their structure is a composite of tones, that is, tones cited as tones and signs issued as signs and never properly, convincingly inflected. Most recently, Thomas Pfau has termed this quality of Keats’s mode of writing “serialized,” and Marjorie Levinson speaks of Keats’s unnatural relationship to language as “willfully alienated articulation.” She thus terms Keats’s an “aggressively literary” style while Pfau terms it an “anti-literary” one (Pfau 312, 315; Levinson, Allegory 105–6).

These contemporary revaluations of Keats force us to bear in mind that the reality of self-consciousness so characteristic of the early, awkward, overtly “blushing” Keats well continues into the later works but in more formally complex and less self-professed ways. This is rarely thought to be the case. These reassessments undermine, in other words, the oft-told narrative of Keats’s short life as one of a

young, awkward poet in the end growing into a proper, full Romantic lyrical voice in the late works of 1819. That the early Keats is a series of strangely self-assigned trials in poetic vocation, ill-at-case simulations, movements through genres and forms as if through garments tried on, is well established in the critical literature. Keats’s displaced relationship to the literary tradition and to the construction of the aesthetic, however, is consistent throughout his poetic career.

The Odes of 1819, however, are most often read precisely with the assumption—explicit or not—that Keats there finally does find something like an authentic poetic “voice” and persona. I hope to show that Keats’s achievement in these late poems lies in the construction of a uniquely “impersonal” lyricism. The form of the ode, too, will prove especially important in my analysis, for if the mark of the Keatsian mode of enunciation is indeed a hovering distance from its linguistic material and a renunciation of the first person of utterance, the pressing question will be of course how Keats writes or manages an ode, a genre whose very organization depends on the coherence and conviction of the first-person lyrical voice.

HIGH LYRICISM WITHOUT VOICE: ODES AND ABSENT SPEAKERS

If we are to take consequentially the thesis that Keats’s mode of writing entails the renunciation of utterance as “deep” or as expressive, we have to begin by throwing out most commonplaces about the Odes of 1819 as well as the commonplace that an ode’s constitution is determined by the valences of the first-person lyrical voice. Rather than conceiving of them as accomplished odes, we must conceptualize Keats’s Odes of 1819 as Keats’s attempts at odes, that is, his thematicization through the ode form of the possibilities and constraints of odal and lyric structure—his attempt to arrive at rather than simply to write what is to be an ode. Rather than with lyrical pathos, they must read as Keats’s meditations and commentaries on lyricism. Keats’s odes, then, are no less uncompromised than his epics, the only difference being that formally the lyrics are complete, and they do end. Still, in the same way that Endymion and both Hyperion poems are about what Martin Aske calls the necessary failure of epic in the modern, and in the same way that the very form of these poems is determined by uncertainty about what epic is to look like—the lack of grounding in theme, form, and progression—the odes are structured, first, by the need to arrive at or constitute the traditional object of the ode and, second, by a reflection on a poetics grounded in the
voice as its structuring and defining principle. Keats takes for granted neither the object nor the subjective centering of an ode. As in the epics, then, in the odes Keats “is confronted with bare circumstance which he must fill with poetry,” in this case not event, narrative, and movement but voice (“voice”) and object (Askle 88).

Keats thus fills the odes with “voice”—with medium. Language, rather than having the function of expression, subsumes the “I” of utterance in Keats’s odes. Rather than unfolding in verse, therefore, the “I” and the presumed consciousness or utterance instead watches itself unravel in these lyric poems, watches over and worries about its own constitution through its medium. Keats’s “I” is the subject of or the subject within his lyrics; language carries the “I” of utterance along in these texts. Vacillations of consciousness watch Keats’s odes unfold rather than being dramatized by the odes themselves as in traditional lyric. The speaker of these odes arrives at no medium that he expresses as “his”; the odes are not lyrical. Qua odes, then, Keats’s Odes of 1819 are attempts to arrive at and achieve oral form and pathos. The trajectory of the odes is an effort to take on voice—to rouse from “silence” (“Ode on a Grecian Urn”) or “drowsy numbness” (“Ode to a Nightingale”). The “taking on of voice” necessary for the traditional movement of an ode, wherein an object is invoked, addressed, and celebrated, is instead in these texts a brief and frenzied achievement. Each of the Odes of 1819 can be read as the attempt of the poet to find rather than to expound in the vocative. And each breaks under this pressure at the very moment of achievement. Read as cadences of a vocal center, the odes thus unfold as psychological fret and intense self-estrangement rather than celebration and its gradual amplification. Keats’s odes structurally and rhetorically cannot sustain the “self-present” intensity of a lyrical first person.

Perhaps with the exception of the “Ode to Psyche,” Keats’s odes also cannot sustain or cannot achieve the invocation of the object that usually marks the form of the ode. Neither the urn nor the nightingale—neither art nor nature—allows the poet entry enough to sustain a chorus of vocal address or meeting. Each object is shut off, and as readers we are as shut out from it as our poetic persona is. Keats’s objects trouble and haunt rather than abide in his odes. The objects even appear to reprimand the poet’s curiosity (“Ode on a Grecian Urn”) or his desire for identification and celebration (“Ode to a Nightingale”). Thematically, therefore, each ode fails to become a proper ode and each dwells with and experiences this failure. Thematically, then, every ode, particularly the “Ode to a Nightingale” and the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” dwells on the impossibility of a full or actual meeting with or evocation of its object. Rather than by excess, Keats’s odes are characterized by impossibility. His odes fail at evocation, celebration, and even at address. The ode fails to constitute or to arrive at or to its object, and each is thus structured in theme and in rhetoric as the experience of a failure. The nightingale leaves the poet forlorn, and the urn in the end is marble and cold.

The “Ode to a Nightingale” commences in what would appear to be a simple or naive first person: “My heart aches...” (1). The line would seem to situate our poetic persona as speaking with an unproblematic first-person lyrical voice. Indeed, Helen Vendler terms Keats’s mode of enunciation here confessional and contends that Keats’s assertion is simply a statement of personal feeling—a declaration of personal heartache (Vendler, Odes 97). Yet as Susan Wolfson elegantly has shown, Keats’s beginning strangely has the effect of precisely removing the personal sense of immediacy. Because it makes reference to what is a transpersonal, representative, generically lyrical emotion, the line, she notes, does not actualize its potential personal reference and tap “unspecified depths in a self behind the ‘I’” but instead signifies a representative state of emotion and desire (Wolfson, Questioning Presence 203). “My heart aches” might in this sense be understood to signify lyrical pathos as lyrical pathos. It is where lyricism can and usually does begin—my heart aching. The line, however, manages to drain the sense that our poetic persona has meant it—it has been drained not of meaning but of personal meaning—because it announces and publicizes that sense of feeling so loudly, openly, and declaratively. Rather than as confession, it reads as a citation of the declaration of lyrical feeling. Neither the metrical nor the semantic weight falls on the “My” but rather on the general and nearly generic state of “heart ache.” The “Ode to a Nightingale” thus begins forcefully as “lyricism.” Keats begins with a bold citation of lyricism as such and thus a boldly impersonal “My.” There is an attempt here to constitute or interject lyrical pathos, which reads as decidedly crafted or “literary” and not actualized. Keats here is orchestrating lyric.

The conclusion of the first stanza and whole of the second stanza of the poem, furthermore, make clear that the cause of the poet’s general heartache is his distillation from the object before him, the object of our ode—the nightingale. The ode aches as unconsummated ode; it aches because it senses the distance between itself and its object. The emotional and empathetic arc of the poem is tied solely to this measure of distance between the two figures. The nightingale has the ability to sing in what the poet calls “full-throated
case” (10) or a “pouring forth” (57), contrasted with his own self-estranged voice. Both stanzas thus unfold in theme as an exposition of the distance between the “I” and the “thou”—the immortal “too happy...happiness” (6) of the bird and the poet’s world of “wearingness,” “fever,” and “fret” (23). A true identification between the two figures, however, would entail an overcoming of the poet’s own self-estranged voice, a “fading away” (20) and “dissolv[ing]” (21) of self-consciousness. Rather than in sound or tone, the dissolution of subjectivity and merging of “I” and “thou” in the poem is staged entirely in terms of the senses of sight and touch. The poet stands, at the moment that he manages a coming to and identification with the nightingale, in a synaesthetic “embalmed darkness” (43), amidst “soft incense” (42), grass, fruit-tress, violet, hawkthorn, and “the coming musk-rose” (49). “I” and “thou” cannot be merged in tone. Even at the moment of identity and the blurring between “I” and “thou,” the poet still perceives difference between himself and the nightingale. The bird can sing (“pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!” [57–81]) in a way he cannot and which continues to inspire envy. The poet measures the self-division of his own voice against the nightingale’s ability to pour forth in full-throated ease.

Both climactic moments in the “Ode to a Nightingale” are staged not in theme or in terms of the relationship between object and speaker but in the texture of the language itself. They are literal “happenings” at the surface of the poetry. Precisely in its most consequential movements, the poem has the highest, almost surreally conscious and memory of itself and its own language. Both moments in which the poet persona is moved transpire when he apprehends and retrospectively identifies with his own written word, when he hears and apprehends his own poem, in other words, within the poem. The words of the poem itself diegetically take on a determining agency within the movement of the text, that is, within the struggle to reach the nightingale. First, the poem literally carries our persona to the bird, the moment of identification and inward flight marked with the words “Already with thee!”:

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. (31–5)

Bate calls this a feat of “poetic supernaturalism,” as the language of the text literally brings the poetic persona to the bird (Bate 499).

No other thematic, structural, or rhetorical agency is involved in the achievement of the great moment of identification than these words. Simply, with their inscription, the poet already is there. His identification with that “Already” determines it to be the case within the poem. The dramatic effect of the exclamation is made stronger by the preceding three stanzas that enumerate and expound the poet’s sense of distance and estrangement from the bird. They read as a catalog (“as though” marks the beginning of the imaginative sequence in the poem’s second line) of the ways in which the distance between the two, “I” and “thou,” can be measured and of the ways that distance is registered in the poetic consciousness. Thematically or structurally, there is no indication in the text that the distance has been bridged or has begun to be bridged. In fact, the poetic persona verbally gestures to the bird to physically fly further: “Away! Away!” (31). Simply, then, “Already with thee!” It is written before it happens. The inscription of the feeling diegetically precedes its actualization in the poem. The poem is allowed to take on an agency of its own in relation to the poetic “I.” The poetic persona brings himself to the nightingale “on the viewless wings of Poesy” (33) through a retrospective identification with his own exclamatory utterance.

Similarly, the poetic persona’s own utterance causes him to fall out of identification with the bird and halts his transelestial state:

Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

8

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!

(69–72)

Here, the poem both cites and hears itself within itself. The word “forlorn” momentarily is drained of meaning and emerges as a deus ex machina (“Forlorn!”) as sheer sonorous and literary material; “like a bell.” The poetic persona here splits in relation to his own utterance; his own word tolls him back from the bird to himself. It is not the semantic heaviness of the word—to be “forlorn”—that brings the poet back to despair (his “sole self” [72]) and confusion (“Was it a vision, or a waking dream?” [79]). Rather, his language in that moment stands exposed as mere “word” (71) next to what had been hailed as the bird’s self-same (65) (transpersonal, transhistorical, extralinguistic) “voice” (63) or, later, “music” (80). To the extent that the bird itself had been identified solely with the sense of sound, so that the poet only “listen[s]” (51) to it and does not see it, the bird’s
control over his literary materials is lost and the effect is that the
verse reads symptomatically, as if literally registering a pressure that
it cannot contain—frantic, frenetic, speech-like writing. At exactly
the moment that the poetic persona identifies itself most deeply with
his object and threatens to move into odal or lyrical pathos, the dense
characteristic Keatsian literariness with which the text begins undoes
itself and the language registers instead a psychological and rhetorical
stress—the pressure of or toward “expression” that results in stuttering
or near babble:

Ah, happy, happy bought! that cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever hid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;
More happy love! more happy, happy love!
For ever panting and for ever young; (21–27)

At the moment when the ode feels most pressure, structurally, to
“break” into the vocative, it breaks instead into literary struggle or
delirium—a wrestling with its medium. Keats cannot write in the
“Ode on a Grecian Urn” in the vocative except to address the urn
as either “silent” or “cold.” Keats can only write “anterior” to odal
pathos and structure, can only find voice to address the urn prior
to the moment of celebration and identification. The fact that the
third stanza of the poem, famously characterized by rampant repeti-
tiveness and such un-Keatsian, unstylized, babble-like lines as “More
happy love! more happy, happy love!” (25), has been either passed
over by formalist critics or has been seen as a mistake in an otherwise
properly wrought poem testifies to the way in which the registers
of Keats’s “literariness” can work to register modes of consciousness.
That poetic control is lost in this stanza is undisputed. Consciousness
in Keats’s text thus always appears as the symptom of the poetic
persona’s relationship to his poetic medium and art. In the vocal
and vocative register in the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” our poetic persona
is precisely most fretful and self-estranged.

CONCLUSION: LATE KEATS AND POETIC FORM

Keats does not finally “grow” into a properly full poetic voice in the
Odes of 1819—a working truism of Keats criticism that both casts the
early works as self-conscious experiments in form and the late works
as mature poetry. That quality of the early verse that critics often cast

own voice might be seen as allegorical in the text of odal potentiality.
The nightingale is lyrical, the poet has words: “thou singest of sum-
mer” with ease (10), he writes. (Keats will only sing of Autumn with
ease.) Its song is an “anthem” (75) or “high requiem” (60); the bird
precisely composes in lyric forms. Unlike the poet, the nightingale
sings in the vocative. Voice is identified with the bird; language with
the poet. In these ways, Keats’s poetic persona avowedly—in theme
and in rhetoric, in this text—does not inhabit his language. In the
“Ode to a Nightingale,” particularly Keats’s first person and his voca-
tive exclamations do not sustain a transparently lyrical “I” identified
with the first person of utterance and with the poetic persona.

Like the “Ode to a Nightingale,” the “Ode on a Grecian Urn”
commences in a place Tilottama Rajan has termed “anterior to begin-
ing” (Rajan 335): “Thou still unravish’d bride of quietness” (1).
The opening line of the ode might be read as a poetic synopsis of the
traditional workings of odal movement and structure itself: a “thou,”
implicitly an “I,” and the desire for a movement toward figured here
as giving voice and as violation are all here already thematized. The
giving of voice to the object traditionally undertaken in an ode—
here marked with the urn’s initial “quietness,” in the second line by
her “silence”—is figured as ravishing, a verb that already suggests
the action’s utter difficulty for the poet, so much so as to have to
elicit violence. It also suggests the impenetrability or unyielding
of the object before him. Nothing here has been “begun” but the con-
fession of the desire to write. The ode begins by thematizing the very
force and the structure of desire that marks it as an ode.

Consciousness in the “Ode on a Grecian Urn” is not figured in the
medium of a “voice” of utterance—the ode, in fact, is written with-
out use of the first person—but appears instead at the level of a strug-
gle between the hovering poetic persona and his linguistic medium.
Keats is at all times writing and crafting and never uttering, as we
have seen, in all of the odes; they do not “break” into lyric. Rather,
they break under the pressure of lyricism. Even in the first person,
as we have noted, the odes’ register is never confessional. Instead, both
the “Ode to a Nightingale” (stanza 8) and the “Ode on a Grecian
Ur” (stanza 3) contain moments in which Keats’s dense, literary,
wrought style breaks into a common, more vocal one characterized
by an eased sense of cadence and particularly by repetition and exag-
gerated exclamation. In the “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” as momentum
mounts and the persona begins to identify with the figures on the
urn and think himself into the scene, his language feels the pressure
of enunciation and cannot bear it. The sense of the poetic persona’s
as derivative or citational—trying genres and forms “on,” it is said—manifests itself in these late works in more formally complex ways. Keats, as we have seen, attempts rather than achieving odal form and pathos—the movement of attempt gives his odes their structure—just as he more obviously attempts epic and romance. Keats’s late works, like his early, are unable to sustain a transparent narratorial or lyrical “I.” Their structure might be read as the symptom of this struggle. To the extent that Keats’s maturity is identified with a form of enunciation affectively “his,” the late works are precisely not mature but instead frenzied. Keats’s lyrical modes of utterance in these late works do not issue according to a grammar of “subjectivity.” Instead, they unfold at the surface, pulled along and given form by the weight of the materiality of their language and the always impersonal avowed desire to write.

NOTES


2. On the relationship between Keatsian imagery and physicality, see also particularly Christopher Ricks, Keats and Embarrassment (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), who writes, for instance, “His body seemed to think, and, on the other hand, he sometimes appears hardly to have known whether he possessed ought, but a body” (198).

3. While there are numerous ways to conceptualize or reason what “loss of self” means here, I find Charles Rzepka’s formulation of the point particularly useful in this context. Because Rzepka’s understanding of Keatsian dissolution centers on the temporality of the presentation of self in the text, it proves an especially suggestive contrast to, e.g., a Wordsworthian construction of selfhood. Charles Rzepka writes of Keats: “There are for the mind no ‘last’ nor ‘next,’ past nor future moments of consciousness in which the awareness of the present moment can inhere and be recognized as a part of the ‘self’ that is aware. That ‘self’ has already faded from its own view, until all that exists is the pure percept, outside of time, unlocalized” (The Self as Mind: Vision and Identity in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986], 175).

4. Compare, e.g., the sentiment Cavell calls here the wish “for the condition of viewing as such” (The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film [New York: Viking Press, 1971], 102) with Charles Rzepka’s comment that Keats’s is “the effort of the imagination to capture the world as it is when no one is there to disturb it” (The Self as Mind, 171).

5. On this point, see also Marjorie Levinson, who argues that “to ‘ overhear’ Keats is to hear nothing but intonation, to feel nothing but style and its meaningfulness” (Keats’s Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style [Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1988], 36); Richard Macksey, who writes of Keats’s “eagerness to be other than the voice of a distinctive personality” and dissolve into other poets in the same way that the poetry yearns thematically for dissolution into another (“‘To Autumn’ and the Music of Mortality,” Romanticism and Language, ed. Arden Reed [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984], 276); and Charles Rzepka, who writes of Keats’s “most enthusiastically and originally derivative” style (The Self as Mind, 185).

6. See, e.g., John Barnard’s representative comment that while Keats is centrally concerned with audience in the narrative poetry, the Odes of 1819 are “written with no immediate sense of an audience” (John Barnard, John Keats [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987], 98).

7. For an analysis of the density of the phonic constitution of “forlorn” in relation to the whole of the “Ode to a Nightingale,” see especially James O’Rourke, Keats’s Odes and Contemporary Criticism (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1998), 7.