

**FEMALE SINGER, MALE SPEAKER:
VENTRILLOQUISM AND THE CONSTRUCTION
OF POETIC GENDER IN KEATS'S
*LUSCINIA MEGARHYNCHOS***

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For over a century and a half, Romanticism has been constructed as a movement whose values were gender-neutral, culture-free, and universal. On both the popular and the scholarly levels, it has been considered a movement that defied the transcendence of the human imagination and needed no specific location in time or place for its reading and interpretation. For just as long, the canon of English Romanticism has been exclusively dominated by Blake, William Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Percy Shelley, and Keats, the all-male Big Six who acquired the title “the Romantic poets.” This title carried the implication that these six men were the only poets writing during the entire period that has come to be known as “the Romantic period” (1785-1830). This assertion therefore excludes the hundreds of women who were also writing during the period, women whose production was far from trivial or insignificant, and whose work was certainly widely read and widely sold. In fact, records of sales of the time indicate that their work was more widely read and sold than the work of all the Big Six put together. These explorations have revealed that far from being the monolithic movement it was once considered, the literature of this period encompasses several Romanticisms, including what Anne Mellor has termed a “masculine” Romanticism and a “feminine” one.¹ These explorations have thus demonstrated that

¹ As Anne Mellor aptly points out, “there are at least *two* Romanticisms, the men’s and the women’s” (“Why Women Didn’t Like Romanticism: The Views of Jane Austen and Mary Shelley,” in Gene Ruoff, ed. *The Romantics and Us: Essays on Literature and Culture* [New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990, p. 285]. She states, however, and aptly demonstrates through her reading of John Keats and Emily Brontë that “gender-biased Romantic ideologies are grounded not on biological sex but rather on socially constructed and therefore fluid systems of discourse.” (*Romanticism and Gender* [London: Routledge, 1993], pp. 3-4).

the movement frequently referred to as “the” Romantic movement is actually a masculine movement, and that the poems of this period purporting to be gender-neutral actually inscribe masculine values and identity.

Recent feminist re-evaluations of John Keats have cited him as something of an exception to the distinctly gendered Romantic imagination. Susan Wolfson, for instance, demonstrates how Keats complicates the feminist issue of gender in poetry.² Anne Mellor admits, likewise, that Keats “succeeds in ‘cross-dressing’ in occupying the subject position of the female, but he is not a ‘transsexual’: he cannot *become* the female.”³ This view is not unanimous among feminists: Margaret Homans, asserts instead that Keats, while appearing to be glorifying female power, is writing for “an exclusively male readership” and establishing poetry as a “male preserve.”⁴

Keats’s own analysis of the creative process indicate that he identified two distinctly different creative processes, a masculine one and a feminine one: in his theories of Negative Capability and of the “poetical character” he defined an alternative creative process, which he posited as a contrast to the more overtly masculine and aggressive Wordsworthian “egotistical sublime.”⁵ This view of creation was based not on the assertiveness of the male intellect, but on a disengagement of the ego that was associated with passivity, intuition, the feminine, and—most unexpectedly—with Jove, an artistry that was “passive and receptive” like the opening of a flower’s leaves rather than the active and masculine Mercury-like search of the bee for honey:

It has been an old Comparison for our urging on—the Bee hive—however it seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the Bee—for it is a false notion that more is gained by receiving than giving—no the receiver and the giver are equal in their benefits—The flower I doubt not receives a fair guerdon from the Bee—its leaves blush deeper in the next spring—and who shall say between Man and Woman which is the most delighted? Now it is more noble to sit like Jove that [sic, than?] to fly about like Mercury—let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey—

² Susan Wolfson, “Feminizing Keats,” in *Critical Essays on John Keats*, ed. Hermione de Almeida (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1990), pp. 317-56.

³ Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, p. 183.

⁴ Margaret Homans, “Keats Reading Women, Women Reading Keats.” *Studies in Romanticism* Vol. 29 (1990), p. 368.

⁵ According to Homans, however, “Keats habitually makes the apparent femininity of his negative capability enhance masculine power and pleasure...” (p. 345).

bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at: but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive—⁶

In the now famous theory of Negative Capability—which is considered the cornerstone of Keatsian poetics—he articulated and defined the ideal of passivity. Regarding Shakespeare as the ultimate repository of this quality, Keats delineated it thus in a letter to his brothers George and Tom Keats:

...at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.⁷

Keats also characterized his own disposition as a repository of Negative Capability, an ability characterized by the self's amoral empathy with and anthropomorphic immersion or metamorphosis into the other. Naming this chameleon ability "the poetical Character," Keats, in a letter to his friend Richard Woodhouse, contrasted it with the Wordsworthian quality of "stand[ing] alone":

As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated—It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosoph[h]er, delights the chameleon [sic, chameleon] Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body.⁸

This alternate theory of creation is particularly interesting when seen in the context of the Romantic agenda as a whole. Although its purported goal was a union and oneness "with nature, this agenda conceals a masculine Romantic self that demonstrated the search for this union in domination and mastery over rather than passive self-absorption into the natural world. Distinctly gendered, this masculine

⁶ Citations from Keats's letters are from Hyder Rollins' two-volume edition, *The Letters of John Keats: 1814-1821* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), cited as *Letters*, followed by volume, page number, and date. *Letters*, 1:232, 19 February 1818.

⁷ *Letters*, 1:193, 21, 27 (?) December 1819.

⁸ *Letters*, 1:386-387, 27 October 1818.

Romantic Imagination is grounded in the effort of the poet to find within nature his own voice and his own identity. The struggle for oneness between the poetic voice and the natural world is a recurrent link among the major male Romantic poets, for whom the act of poetic creation frequently replicates sexual creation; it thus becomes a paradigm for the assertion of the male intellect over nature, establishing the power of the self to engender itself.

Many Romantic texts construct human identity through that of an animal, and masculine identity through the voice of a female. The "Ode to a Nightingale" imposes a human and distinctly masculine consciousness on a non-male non-human creature. In this case, rather than a speaking female, the text adopts a singing female bird whose song, since it is wordless, takes upon the ventriloquized signification projected upon it by the male speaker. This anthropomorphized and feminized bird is set in a debate against the speaker himself, a debate that asks a question whose answer is itself.

In the extant versions of the poem the nightingale's female gender is established in line 7 by her identification with a "light-winged Dryad," but, as Jack Stillinger points out in his edition of Keats's poetry, the lost holograph first began with the words "Small, winged Dryad." This beginning was later rejected.⁹ Although (with a few exceptions) this is the usual gender of the Anglo-American literary nightingale, the female singing nightingale would be an ornithological anomaly since it is only the male bird that sings.

Although several of his poems show the writer aspiring to possess female power, Keats was well aware of the disparagement of being considered an "effeminate" poet, as he frequently was by his detractors. Anne Mellor has pointed out how Keats's small stature and fine-boned appearance were often construed as "girlish," while his masculine reputation was further assaulted by Byron's public belittling of the "*p_ss a bed*" nature of his poetry, an adjective generally associated with a disparagement for supposed unmanliness and effeminacy. Likewise, the social derision of Keats's Cockney social status by Byron indicate that Byron scorned Keats for a certain "vulgarity" that was "shabby-genteel" without achieving the apparent masculinity of being "coarse."¹⁰

⁹ Jack Stillinger, *The Poems of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1978), pp. 652-653. All quotations from Keats's poetry are, unless otherwise stated, from this edition.

¹⁰ Anne Mellor, *Romanticism and Gender*, p. 238.

This ridicule rankled, and in spite of his attraction to feminine creation Keats repeatedly expressed his longing for a reputation as a great *masculine* English poet, one who “would not be dieted with praise./ A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce.” His entire career reveals, in fact, an alternating attraction to and rejection of the mode of creation he constructed as feminine. In the “Ode to a Nightingale,” it is in the voice of a female singing bird that the speaker seeks his own poetic voice, but instead of assertively appropriating the female’s voice for his own, Keats explores the possibility of feminine forms of creation that would merge the poetic Self with the Other through metamorphic empathy, without the act of masculine or poetic aggression.

Empathy—amoral and anthropomorphic—takes many shapes in Keats, and while it is often playfully expressed in his letters, it appears in the form of anguish in the odes. As Douglas Bush pointed out over half a century ago:

At first sight Keats’s theme ... in the Odes ... is the belief that whereas the momentary experience of Beauty is fleeting, the ideal embodiment of that moment in art, in song, or in marble, is an imperishable source of joy. If that were all, these Odes should be hymns of triumph, and they are not. It is the very acme of melancholy that the joy he celebrates is joy in beauty that must die.¹¹

Each ode is built upon this principle of an evolving dialectic that rises from a feminine central symbol and its apparent appeal for the masculine speaker, forcing him into an unresolvable debate. Through this debate the ode scrutinizes its central symbol by posing unanswerable questions about the enigmas of human existence and identity—be this symbol a female bird (as in the “Nightingale” ode), a virgin urn (as in the “Grecian Urn” ode), a female goddess, or a mood personified as a female goddess (as in the “Psyche” and “Melancholy” odes, respectively), or a season personified as a woman (as in the “Autumn” ode). Each ode then, with different degrees of intensity, moves from empathy with its feminine symbol, to a withdrawal from this attraction, and then to its conclusion: whether this conclusion be qualification (as in “Psyche,” “Melancholy,” and “Autumn”) or skepticism (as in “Grecian Urn” and “Nightingale”).

As a result each ode adopts different tropes for the possession of feminine power: the tropes of virginity and penetration, of personification, and of metamorphosis. In the Nightingale ode the trope of

¹¹ Douglas Bush, *Mythology and the Romantic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937), p. 107.

metamorphosis vies with that of sexual penetration, only to end, ironically, in an ultimate rejection of both.

Although the poem was apparently written in response to the real song of an actual bird, the details of the bird's actuality are withheld and it becomes a projection of the "I." In its dividedness, this "I" responds to the bird in a dialectical series of movements. Each cycle of this series embodies the speaker's empathic attempt to fuse with different aspects of the bird's identity. Although this desired fusion evades him, each wave leads to a higher stage of awareness and consciousness. The poem thus sets up and explores the duality between nature and consciousness, with nature constructed as feminine and consciousness as masculine. Through the bird it appears to be reaching for an ultimate transcendence of duality, an exploration that becomes an alternate route to the Romantic search for oneness.

Birds occupy a special place in the human imagination for a variety of reasons. As Leonard Lutwack points out, they are closer to humankind than other wild animals because so much of their life can be "readily observed and appreciated." The similarity between their behavioral patterns and those of human beings has led to their anthropomorphization, and they lend themselves to anthropomorphic imagery that combines both transcendence and familiarity. Because of the high quantity of sugar in their blood "few other creatures seem so alive in every fibre...so fully given to the action, whether in song, in motion or in display," which adds to the mystery that they produce.¹² Moreover, as Frank Doggett illustrates, "the tradition that links bird song with poetry reaches back into classical literature," and may be found as far back as Aristophanes and Callimachus.¹³

In addition, birds, more than other creatures, have had resonant associations with magical powers, omens, and human metamorphoses. "If you deem it an omen, you call it a bird," goes a verse of Aristophanes.¹⁴ Ernest Martin, among others, has drawn attention to the Roman association of sadness with birds, which arose from the prevalent widespread belief in metamorphosis, the Romans believing (not unlike the Greeks) that their favorite birds were not merely "birds

¹² Leonard Lutwack, *Birds in Literature* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1994).

¹³ Frank Doggett, "Romanticism's Singing Bird," *SEL*, 14 (1974), p. 547.

¹⁴ Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1912), p. 111.

per se, but rather... human beings who had been changed into the birds in question.”¹⁵

Of all birds, the nightingale has played the lead (albeit gender-shifting) role in the human fascination with metamorphosis. Envy, violence, revenge, lust, rape, and cannibalism variously surround the many mythic renditions of the metamorphosis of Philomela/Procne into female nightingales. (The earliest versions of the myth had Procne turn into the nightingale and Philomela into the swallow.)¹⁶ For medieval European poets, however, the nightingale was primarily a symbol of masculine sexual love, youth, and springtime, and the theme of metamorphosis all but disappeared. The nightingale’s song was a love song or the voice of sensual pleasure.¹⁷ It was even used, as in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, as a variety of sexual euphemisms: the bird for the male sexual organ and its song for the sexual act itself. In several medieval English debate poems, however (such as *The Thrush and the Nightingale*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, and *The Cuckoo and the Nightingale*), the nightingale becomes the defender of love over reason and therefore the champion of women.¹⁸

Through the revival of classical literature in the Renaissance came a concomitant revival of the association of sorrow—especially the feminine sorrow of the violated Philomela—with the nightingale, and as Claude Finney points out, in English poetry from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, “the nightingale, or Philomela, is represented as a melancholy bird eternally lamenting her woes in sad but sweet melody.”¹⁹ In “Il Penseroso” Milton’s nightingale is “most musical, most melancholy,” but in *Paradise Lost* it appears in Eve’s dream as a masculine voice of seduction: sexual, destructive, and threatening. Milton’s nightingale is male, which gives it European, Arabic, and Asian avian brothers, but marks it as a poetic rarity in post-medieval Anglo-American tradition.

¹⁵ Ernest Whitney Martin, *The Birds of the Latin Poets* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1914), p. 2.

¹⁶ Wendy Pfeffer, *The Change of Philomel: The Nightingale in Medieval Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985), pp. 8-24 and Ernest Whitney Martin, *The Birds of the Latin Poets* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1914).

¹⁷ Linda Julian Bowie, “‘All’s Fowl in Love and War’: Birds in Medieval Literature,” *Furman Studies* 30 (1984) pp. 1-17, and Wendy Pfeffer, *The Change of Philomel*.

¹⁸ Linda Julian Bowie, “‘All’s Fowl in Love and War’: Birds in Medieval Literature,” *Furman Studies* 30 (1984), p. 9.

¹⁹ Claude Finney, *The Evolution of Keats’s Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1936) p. 621.

Joy—natural and spontaneous—rather than classical sorrow became the hallmark of the Romantic nightingale, and even when invoking the myth of Philomela, Philomela remains a mere name, a shell whose inner core of sorrow has been replaced by joy. This is in sharp contrast to Philomela's fate at the hands of the Victorians: Arnold's "Philomela" and Swinburne's "Itylus" are a far cry from joyful celebration indeed.

The magical power of the singing nightingale was, therefore, a new Romantic variation on an old tale. Several other Romantic poems, such as Shelley's "Ode to a Skylark" and Coleridge's "The Nightingale," likewise explore the nature/consciousness duality through the motif of the singing bird, and of the many varieties of literary birds, the solitary, nocturnal nightingale was especially attractive to the Romantics, for whom it became transformed through syncretic accretions into a symbol of the solitary Romantic self, its joyousness the attribute towards which this self aspired.

As a source of natural and organic feminine inspiration, it could replace the classical muse as a fount of spontaneous creativity. And as a symbol of joyful nature, sorrow was not part of its heritage. Coleridge's "The Nightingale," composed in April 1798, twenty or so years before Keats's ode (May 1819), jocularly rejects the tradition of grief from his nightingale: "A melancholy bird? Oh! idle thought/ In Nature there is nothing melancholy."²⁰ Rejecting sorrow as part of the nightingale's lore, but highlighting its magical hypnotic powers, the Romantics accordingly made the powers of hypnosis and inspiration a recurrent feature of the nightingale's many appearances. Coleridge, like Keats after him, dwells on the rapture of the human in the moonlit thralls of the invisible magical bird.

The nightingale is certainly the most celebrated of all Keats's birds, but was not his only avian symbol of intuitive creativity. In the unrhymed sonnet "What the Thrush Said," the thrush—the nightingale's more plebeian cousin—explicitly links song with the power of the intuition and the disengagement of the intellect:

O fret not after knowledge - I have none
And yet my song comes native with the warmth.

²⁰ Fred Randel, "Coleridge and the Contentiousness of Romantic Nightingales," *Studies in Romanticism*, 21 (1982), pp. 33-55, points out the Romantics' debt to Milton.

O fret not after knowledge - I have none
And yet the Evening listens...²¹ (9-12)

That knowledge is inimical to artistry is the thrush's pronouncement. Significantly, however, this bird speaks rather than sings, and thus ironically reproduces the dualism of Melos versus Logos (to use Eleanor Cook's comparison) by privileging the masculinity of logos over the femininity of melos.²²

It is a truism, then, that birds, like other animals, are used in some poems as a point of departure, to stress the difference between man and bird. In Hardy's "The Darkling Thrush" (a turn-of-the-century poem highly derivative of Keats) the gloom and despondency of the poem's speaker are underscored by the bird's ecstatic song. Other poems stress instead, the similarity between bird and man, but this similarity is by necessity borne out of difference, and Romantic texts frequently question without resolving the boundaries between the two. In Keats's ode it is initially difference that produces the powerful urge for metamorphosis into the bird. This longing for metamorphosis is not grounded on a monolithic quality that the nightingale possesses, but on multiple associations of alterity. As a dryad the nightingale is female, her femininity intuitive and, to the speaker, apparently passive. As a bird she is a creature of Nature but also a symbol of the artist, yet her art and nature are equally alien to the speaker: her art is beyond masculine self-consciousness and her nature is not bound by the knowledge of pain. The speaker's impulse to fuse with the other becomes part of various stages of a dialectic, in which he moves through waves towards dissolution and fusion, each movement producing a countermovement as the speaker's focus flows upwards and then downwards, from man to bird, from bird to man.

²¹ This sonnet frequently appears with the title "What the Thrush Said"; in Jack Stillinger's edition its title is its first line: "O thou whose face hath felt the winter's wind." The poem originally appeared without a title in the same letter to Reynolds that contains the observation on the passivity and receptivity of flowers (see note 6 above; *Letters*, 1.231-233, 19 February 1818). After describing Keats's views on the favored passivity of flowers, the letter continues:

...I was led into these thoughts, my dear Reynolds, by the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of Idleness—I have not read any Books—the Morning said I was right—I had no Idea but of the Morning and the Thrush said I was right—seeming to say—[the sonnet is transcribed below this].

²² Eleanor Cook, "Birds in Paradise: Uses of Allusion in Milton, Keats, Whitman, Stevens and Ammons," *Studies in Romanticism*, 26 (1987) pp. 433-434.

The opening stanza addresses the most explicit grounds of difference: a human speaker is filled with pain at hearing the song of a nightingale, which seems to be a being of perfect happiness. But this is not merely a simple opposition between the two principals (bird is happy, man is not), because the speaker's sorrow has its roots in the nightingale's happiness. The nightingale, for the speaker, embodies a pre-conscious union between nature and consciousness that the speaker hopes to share. Able though he is to enter the bird's being and participate in her song, the speaker is numbed by an intensity of feeling produced not from envy of the bird but from complete empathy with her:

'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness,—
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees...
Singing of summer in full-throated ease. (5-7, 10)

This expression of empathy dexterously emphasizes both sameness and difference simultaneously. Yet empathy with the bird does not add up to fusion with her, and the impulse stops short of culminating in the dissolution of being through metamorphosis. Ironically, empathy underwrites rather than dissolves the dualism it purports to transcend, and the speaker realizes that in order to possess the powers of the bird he needs external assistance. He invokes the wine of euphoria, "a beaker full of the warm south," which would numb his sense of pain and heighten his sensitivity to pleasure, thereby producing an immanent escape from his own intellectual reality. This reality is identified as both the world of transience and the world of thought, both of which are inimical to Beauty and Love. Presumably, these worlds idealize the divorce of human love and beauty from thought and process, a divorce that is disagreeable to the speaker and from which he desires to escape. But, it seems, the route of wine does not lead to the promised end, and to reach the bird the speaker must explore another route. This time it is the transcendent route of poetry, with its undeniable ties to the intellect:

Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy, (31-33)

The intellect both propels and inhibits this journey, but ultimately its inhibiting powers dominate, and it proves to be no more than the "dull brain" that "perplexes and retards," failing to make the final metamorphic leap. It is only through a supreme leap of the imagination that the

speaker can consummate the final act of fusion with the nightingale, where he can *become* her and *be* her song:

Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne, (35-36)

This act of fusion is sexual and yet attempts to transcend the sexual, leading the speaker out of his masculinity into a dark world in which sight—considered by some the most “intellectual” and “masculine” of the senses—has no place. But the loss of one sense produces the heightened intensification of each of the other senses. It is the bowing of sight to the other heightened senses that leads the speaker into the heart of darkness, back into the world of process, where death is the mother of beauty, where it is only in the “embalmed darkness” of mortality that the joys of transience can manifest themselves. Yet this winged flight seems to have taken the speaker no further from the burden of consciousness that the speaker has defined as the masculine intellect, exemplified in the grim world of the third stanza:

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 (23-27)

Perhaps the nightingale’s inarticulate song has merely provided an imaginative transformation of this discontinuous world, and its existence is no freer of pain than man’s existence. Her song has repeated the message of “What the Thrush Said,” placing the intuition and the senses above the intellect that created this impasse, but perhaps the intuition is no more successful at solving the problem of pain than the intellect is.

It is at this point that the speaker’s stance turns, and he realizes that the final escape out of the world of flux can only be Death, with which the bird becomes identified. With this identification of a masculine Death with the feminine bird, the speaker seems to have reached the total annihilation of the boundaries of gender, time, and existence that separated his identity from that of the bird’s.

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; (51-54)

Yet it is in this very solution of beings that the speaker's identity slips away from that of the bird to reveal two separate beings, the one masculine, in erotic supplication, the other now androgynous, in supreme, inscrutable indifference. Like the earlier flight through wine, this flight too, the speaker discovers, is cyclical—death brings only oblivion and not the desired fusion with the female other. Metamorphosis has proven to be mere ventriloquism. The spell has been broken.

In this bestowal of immortality upon the bird, the speaker reaches another impasse and has no option but to divorce the bird from himself and mortality, finally placing her in “faery lands forlorn,” an entirely non-human world of fairies with which the mortal has no traffic. In gaining her immortal status, the bird has transcended the world of death and generation that she magically created for the speaker in her lesson of “embalmed darkness,” reintroducing the notion of separateness from the human that the speaker had earlier sought to dissolve. Androgynous fusion has failed, and the imagery of sexual penetration returns once more. In a startling reversal of roles, the instrument of penetration is now the bird's song rather than the speaker's intellect, as it propels itself through the centuries, perforating the animate and the inanimate, human and nature, finding “a path through the sad heart” of a tearful Ruth and charming “magic casements” into “opening on the foam / Of perilous seas.”

If the song of the bird were to continue its penetrative act, fusion would still not be impossible, the reversal of roles notwithstanding. But once more the spell is broken, this time irreversibly, with the mention of the word “forlorn.” The bird's happy song now seems to the speaker a funeral dirge, a “plaintive anthem” that is “buried deep / In the next valley-glades.” And with this second act of separation of identity, the spell is lost to the speaker. The mention of “faery lands forlorn” abruptly brings him back to the ground and to his “sole self.” The supreme imagination has become no more than a teasing coquette; the “high requiem” is now a “plaintive anthem” fading into the distance. The bird's physical presence is now merely an absence, and the ode ends on a note of tragic awareness and skepticism rather than on one of visionary affirmation:

Was it a vision, or a waking-dream?
Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep? (79-80)

Which, the speaker wonders, was closer to Truth: the vision of the speaker, rooted in a world where “to think is to be full of sorrow,” or the “vision” of the nightingale, whose ecstatic song could

simultaneously celebrate the glories of summer and the “embalmed darkness” of the tomb? Which is closer to vision: the power of the masculine intellect or the passivity of the feminine intuition? And the question really is, what was the music that is now fled? What did the nightingale “say” to the speaker?

The questions, of course, remain unanswered, and the speaker can no longer distinguish the boundaries between the bird’s “voice” and his own ventriloquism. In spite of the attempt at closure, the structural principle of the text (the unresolved debate) engenders the skepticism of its ending, permitting it to acknowledge simultaneously the superiority of the masculine intellect as well as the masculine failure to reach feminine power. By dodging anything remotely resembling a resolution, the poem permits the speaker to circumscribe without rejecting the role attributed to the nightingale. This structural principle—the unresolved debate that ends in a question—enables the poem to uphold, concurrently, its own wishful act of metamorphosis with its acknowledgement of ventriloquism. The poem ends where it began, with the speaker’s “sole [male] self,” but the dialectic has evolved rather than come full circle, and the power of feminine song is thus simultaneously rejected and ratified.

APPENDIX I

John Keats: **Ode to a Nightingale**

(composed May 1819; first published
Annals of the Fine Arts IV. 13. 1819)

I

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-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

II

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:

III

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.

IV

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 haply 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.

V

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.

VI

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.

VII

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.

VIII

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 near 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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