

JOHN
KEATS

Complete
Poems

edited by

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Ode on a Grecian Urn

1

Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
 Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
 A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
 5 What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
 Of deities or mortals, or of both,
 In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
 What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
 What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
 10 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

2

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
 Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
 Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
 Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:
 15 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst 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,
 20 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

3

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu;
 And, happy melodist, unwearied,
 For ever piping songs for ever new;
 25 More happy love! more happy, happy love!
 For ever warm and still to be enjoy'd,
 For ever panting, and for ever young;
 All breathing human passion far above,
 That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd,
 30 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

4

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,

And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
 35 What little town by river or sea shore,
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?
 And, little town, thy streets for evermore
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
 40 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

5

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
 Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
 With forest branches and the trodden weed;
 Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought
 45 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
 When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
 "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all
 50 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Ode on Melancholy

1

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
 Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
 Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd
 By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
 5 Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
 Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
 Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
 A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
 For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
 10 And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul.

2

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
 Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
 That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
 And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
 15 Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
 Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,

with us to day—they will enjoy the country after Westminster,” and then exclaims:

O there is nothing like fine weather, and health, and Books, and a fine country, and a contented Mind, and Diligent-habit of reading and thinking, and an amulet against the ennui—and, please heaven, a little claret-wine cool out of a cellar a mile deep—with a few or a good many ratafia cakes—a rocky basin to bathe in, a strawberry bed to say your prayers to Flora in, a pad nag to go you ten miles or so; two or three sensible people to chat with; two or th[r]ee spiteful folkes to spar with; two or three odd fishes to laugh at and two or three numskuls to argue with—instead of using dumb bells on a rainy day.

At this point he breaks into verse, writing the present poem (*Letters*, II, 56).

20 Mrs. —: “Mrs. Abbeyes,” a reference to the wife of Richard Abbey, who was guardian of the Keats children and a trustee of their grandmother’s estate. Fanny was living with the Abbeyes at this time. Keats adds “mum!” in the margin beside this line in his letter.

Ode to a Nightingale

Written in May 1819; first published in *Annals of the Fine Arts*, July 1819. Brown recalls the circumstances of composition in his “Life” of Keats, written seventeen years after the event, as follows:

In the spring of 1819 a nightingale had built her nest near my house. Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast-table to the grass-plot under a plum-tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On inquiry, I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on the song of our nightingale. The writing was not well legible; and it was difficult to arrange the stanzas on so many scraps. With his assistance I succeeded, and this was his *Ode to a Nightingale*, a poem which has been the delight of every one. (*KC*, II, 65)

Brown is probably exaggerating his role in the history of the poem, and his description of the draft MS is almost surely mistaken (the extant draft, in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, consists of two half-sheets, neither of them a “scrap”), but some of the other details may have been remembered accurately. Oddly, Keats himself says virtually nothing in his letters or any recorded comment about this and the next two odes, and he did not copy them, as he did so many other poems, for his brother and sister-in-law.

As to interpretation, the speaker’s problem has always seemed fairly clear—dissatisfaction with the real world of mortality and mutability, movingly described in 23–30, and desire to escape that world by imaginatively joining an in-

visible bird in “the forest dim”—but the attempts at solution, and even more so the attitudes that the poem takes toward them, continue to be a matter of dispute. In some readings the poem is seen to depict, after the initial statement of the problem, an almost systematic cutting off, one after another, of all the escapes the speaker can think of: alcohol is the first to be rejected (32); then the nightingale’s forest is found to have “no light” and the speaker “cannot see” the beauties of the transient natural world he has left behind (38–50); the romantic attractiveness of death is undermined by the speaker’s awareness that he would “become a sod” (51–60); and a further imaginative journey, this time into the past, leads ultimately to “faery lands forlorn” (61–70). In the final stanza the speaker is back in the real world where he started, and the nightingale is divested of its symbolism as it flies off and the speaker locates it not in another ideal forest but in the familiar landscape of “the near meadows . . . the still stream . . . the hill-side . . . the next valley-glades.” But the ending, just as in a number of other major poems in this volume, is full of ambiguity; the speaker himself doesn’t even know whether he is awake or dreaming.

On the great odes as a group see the note above to *Ode to Psyche*. On *Nightingale* in particular most of the best critical work has been done in the full-length general studies (especially those by Earl Wasserman, David Perkins, Walter Evert, and Morris Dickstein), but see, among separate pieces, Allen Tate, *American Scholar*, 15 (1945–46), 55–63, 189–197 (the essay is reprinted in Tate’s *On the Limits of Poetry*, New York, 1948, pp. 165–184); R. H. Fogle, *PMLA*, 68 (1953), 211–222 (essay reprinted in Fogle’s *The Permanent Pleasure*, Athens, Ga., 1974, pp. 100–115); Andrew J. Kappel, *ELH*, 45 (1978), 270–279, 282–284; and Allan Chavkin, *Research Studies* (Washington State University), 47 (1979), 108–115.

Ode on a Grecian Urn

Written in 1819; first published in *Annals of the Fine Arts*, January 1820. In this ode, whose structure parallels that of *Nightingale* (but without the additional complexity resulting in stanza 6 from the wish to die), the hypothetical ideal is the realm of art. The seesaw opposition of earthly and urnly values gets under way immediately with the implications of unnaturalness in “unravish’d bride” and “foster-child,” and it continues with increasing intensity through the first three stanzas. In the fourth stanza the speaker takes a fresh look at the urn, worries more onesidedly about the perpetual immobility of the sacrificial procession and the permanent emptiness of the unseen town whence the people have come, and with “desolate” in 40 (cf. “forlorn” in *Nightingale*) arrives at a final acceptance of the real world of time and mortality. The closing lines present a special problem in interpretation, but it seems clear that, while the urn is not entirely rejected at the end, its value lies in its character as a work of art and not in its being a desirable alternative to life in the real world.

For guidance through the first 125 years of criticism on this poem see Harvey T. Lyon, *Keats’ Well-Read Urn* (New York, 1958). The most useful of the earlier essays are those by Kenneth Burke, *Accent*, 4 (1943), 30–42 (reprinted in Burke’s *A Grammar of Motives*, New York, 1945, pp. 447–463); Cleanth Brooks, *Seawane Review*, 52 (1944), 89–101 (reprinted in Brooks’s *The Well Wrought Urn*, New

York, 1947, pp. 139–152); Charles I. Patterson, *ELH*, 21 (1954), 208–220; and Jacob D. Wigod, *PMLA*, 72 (1957), 113–121. Among more recent studies see Bruce E. Miller, *K-SJ*, 20 (1971), 62–70; Jean-Claude Sallé, *SIR*, 11 (1972), 79–93; James Shokoff, *K-SJ*, 24 (1975), 102–107; and Pratap Biswas, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 47 (1977–78), 95–111. For interesting discussion, with illustrations, of the kinds of urn and other art works that might have influenced Keats while he was writing the poem, see Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art*, pp. 214–224, and James Dickie, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 52 (1969), 96–114.

49–50: In Brown's transcript the penultimate line reads "Beauty is Truth,— Truth Beauty,—that is all" and the *Annals* text has "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty.—That is all" (neither contains the quotation marks around "Beauty . . . beauty" that are unique to the third of the authoritative texts, that of 1820, followed in this volume). With or without the quotes there is considerable uncertainty about who speaks the last thirteen words of the poem, and to whom. The four most frequently mentioned possibilities are (1) poet to reader, (2) poet to urn, (3) poet to figures on the urn, and (4) urn to reader—but serious objections have been raised in each case (see Appendix III in *The Hoodwinking of Madeline*, pp. 167–173). "Beauty" and "truth" were commonplace as aesthetic values in the literary and especially the art criticism of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the union or equation of the two was often emphasized (e.g., in Mark Akenside's *The Pleasures of Imagination* 1.374–375, "Truth and Good are one, / And Beauty dwells in them, and they in her"); the terms appear together frequently in Haydon's comments on the Elgin Marbles (see James A. Notopoulos, *Modern Language Review*, 61 [1966], 180–182), and three times in Keats's own letters (*Letters*, I, 184, 192, II, 19). Critics sometimes relate "beauty" to poetry and "truth" to philosophy, but it is probably best not to attempt this sort of translation.

Ode on Melancholy

Written in 1819; first published in 1820. At one time (but not, as is usually reported, in the earliest version) the poem had an additional stanza at the beginning, to introduce the other three, but this was canceled before it got into print:

Though you should build a bark of dead men's bones,
And rear a phantom gibbet for a mast,
Stitch creeds together for a sail, with groans
To fill it out, bloodstained and aghast;
Although your rudder be a Dragon's tail,
Long sever'd, yet still hard with agony,
Your cordage large uprootings from the skull
Of bald Medusa; certes you would fail
To find the Melancholy, whether she
Dreameth in any isle of Lethe dull.

Melancholy is the most logically constructed of the major odes: the first stanza tells what not to do "when the melancholy fit shall fall," the second stanza advises

what to do instead, and the third presents a rationale for these injunctions (and the clearest statement in all Keats's poetry concerning the interconnectedness of pleasure and pain in human life). This does not, however, mean that there are no complications. "Wakeful anguish" is presented as a state to be valued (10); the "weeping cloud" of melancholy is associated with both nourishment and death (12–14); the deep enjoyment of the mistress' "peerless eyes" seems to depend on her "rich anger" (18–20); the heroic figure capable of bursting "Joy's grape" ends up a cloudy trophy (27–30). For recent critical discussion see Barbara H. Smith, *SEL*, 6 (1966), 679–691, and Horace G. Posey, Jr., *Concerning Poetry*, 8 (Fall 1975), 61–69.

Ode on Indolence

Written in the spring of 1819, probably after 19 March, when Keats described "a sort of temper indolent" in his journal letter to his brother and sister-in-law (see just below), and certainly before 9 June, when he told Miss Jeffrey (or Jeffery) that "the thing I have most enjoyed this year has been writing an ode to Indolence" (*Letters*, II, 116); first published in 1848. The passage in the earlier letter is as follows:

This morning I am in a sort of temper indolent and supremely careless: I long after a stanza or two of Thompson's Castle of indolence—My passions are all asleep from my having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fibre all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees on this side of faintness—if I had teeth of pearl and the breath of lillies I should call it langour—but as I am I must call it Laziness—In this state of effeminacy the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body, and to such a happy degree that pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown. Neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me: they seem rather like three figures on a greek vase—a Man and two women—whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguise. This is the only happiness; and is a rare instance of advantage in the body overpowering the Mind. (II, 78–79)

There are several details of image and wording here that also appear in the poem, but the chronological relationship of poem and letter is unsettled.

Indolence is occasionally classed with *Psyche* and the others as a sixth "great ode," but it lacks the dramatic tension and sharpness of imagery characteristic of the more famous examples. The speaker refuses to engage in serious conflict with Love, Ambition, and Poesy, and the poem genuinely reflects the indolence that is its subject. For critical comment see Margaret Y. Robertson, *Style*, 4 (1970), 133–143; Howard H. Hinkel, *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 20 (1975), 26–36; and William F. Zak, *K-SJ*, 25 (1976), 55–64 (the first two of these, however, interpret a text that has the stanzas in the wrong order). The epigraph is from Matthew 6:28.

10 **Phidian:** After Phidias (fifth century B.C.), the sculptor thought to have been responsible for the designs of the Elgin Marbles.