Catalyst and Inhibitor: The Song of Keats's Nightingale

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In his poem “Ode to a Nightingale,” John Keats demonstrates a desire to leave the earthly world behind in hopes of unifying with the elusive bird in a fleeting, fantastical world. The poetical imagination acts as a conduit through which the poet can access the nightingale; yet he must grapple with the reality that, despite his desire, he is not, in fact, able to sustain contact with the “immortal” creature. The same empirical world which allows for the poet to access the nightingale (through its song) also draws him back from the celestial encounter. Though brief, the experience proves profound: the poet becomes more fully
aware of his shortcomings within the terrestrial world and thus scorns his inability to reunite with the songbird in the fantastical world it represents.

For Keats, even before connecting with the nightingale, the real world is painful and gloomy. He dedicates the third stanza of his ode to describing “[t]he weariness, the fever, and the fret” of the mortal realm (line 23); the poet yearns for escape from this dreary existence (even if by way of death). Because Keats does not view the mind as actively transformative (unlike other Romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Coleridge), the imagination alone cannot provide such an escape: “the fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam’d to do” (73-4). For Keats, the mind is transformed by the surrounding world. However, this does not at all suggest that the imagination plays an insignificant role for the poet. Helen Vendler, for one, implies that the poet’s imagination does assume creative faculties in the ode and insists that Keats attempts to demonstrate the “compulsive image-making of the entranced imagination” (86). But this “image-making” takes place only when the mind is “entranced” by an external facilitator such as the bird’s song.

Although the poem illustrates the mortal limitations of the brain, which “perplexes and retards” (34), it also provides the mind with a unique ability to connect – when stimulated – with the idealized realm of the nightingale. So while the poet’s sensory perceptions of his surroundings are certainly prevalent from stanza to stanza, it is the mind which must hear and interpret the nightingale’s melody
and other such externalities. In fact, to further stress the imagination’s significance, Keats routinely blends sensory experiences. Examples of this poetic device, called synaesthesia, can be found in the fifth stanza: as darkness closes in, the poet can no longer see that which lingers at his feet, “[n]or what soft incense hangs upon the boughs” (my italics) (42). Because the eyes fail to perceive, the imagination assumes this capacity. In this way, Keats asserts “the power of the imagination to see more than the sensory eye can see” (Perkins 107) – though this “power” is proved to be short-lived.

In the fourth stanza, the prominence of the imagination is reinforced as “[p]oesy” – or the poetical imagination – aids in bringing the poet to the nightingale (33). This poetical imagination does not shape or form the perceived world, but rather is informed by the guiding music of the bird’s song. From this view, as discussed previously, the imagination is crucial even though it is not actively projecting itself. Newell F. Ford notes that Keats must appeal to “[p]oesy” because only the imagination can “preserve and prolong the splendid ecstasy” generated by the song of the nightingale (209) – even if only for a brief moment.

While essential to contacting the realm of fantasy, the imagination relies upon stimuli from the empirical world. Indeed, “[t]he continuing vehicle of escape is the song of the nightingale” (Perkins 107) – a song which exists within the poet’s empirical realm. Especially considering Keats’ idea of the imagination as reactive, the mind can see differently (and,
at times, *more*) but not altogether separately from the senses which capture the physical world. The resulting perception becomes a hybrid of sorts: a combination of the world in which the poet exists and the one in which the poet attempts to enter.

As the poet moves closer to entering into the fantastical world, remnants of the empirical world fade. Darkness begins to surround the poet when terrestrial light can no longer penetrate the mystical world: “But here there is no light, / Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown” (38-9); “[In] Dark[ness] I listen” (51). As the onus shifts from an empirical perception to an imaginative one, even the physical surroundings grow fainter: “I cannot see what flowers are at my feet” (41). While this may imply the almost-literal “flight” of the poet toward the nightingale – and thus away from the flowers on the ground – it can also suggest a literal (though temporary) desertion of the optical world, i.e., the visual surroundings of the poet.

Yet, the poet cannot fully relinquish reality since the “flight” taking place within the poet’s imagination merely excludes the scenic periphery which remains, as the poet himself realizes, at his feet. Mentally (and spiritually), the poet can leave the empirical world, yet, physically, he cannot. Still hearing the very real song of the nightingale, the poet recognizes that the terrestrial world (i.e., the “real” world) is necessary to contact the ideal world. Because the song is his connection to the mystical world while he remains a part of the empirical realm, the poet can never actually attain the world symbolized in the nightingale.
Doing so would mean losing the one connection the poet has to it. David Perkins notes a similar paradox: “the same sympathetic grip that makes the experience vivid to the point one would wish to prolong it also forces the recognition that it must be short-lived” (103-4). Regardless of the cause, by the sixth stanza, “the human and nightingale worlds have been entirely sundered” (Perkins 110).

At the beginning of the next stanza, the poet, now separated from the nightingale’s domain, hears the bird’s “voice” (63), thus reinforcing the existence of the song within the poet’s mortal world. At once, his brief encounter with the world of inspired perception becomes both consolation and tragedy – consoling because the poet loosens the constraints of his own depressing surroundings and tragic because such constraints are impossible to elude completely.

The ending of the poem seems to act as its crux: “Was it a vision, or a waking dream?” (79). Does the poet actually contact the mystical world of the nightingale or merely daydream the encounter? Ford suggests the poet must admit “that the ineffable beauty seized by his imagination was not truth” and “that fancy had cheated for a moment” (133). While left unanswered in the poem, the question is not as crucial to the ode as it may first seem. The issue is not that the poet’s imagination deceived him; instead, the issue becomes the inability of the poet to sustain contact with the nightingale.

Toward the end of the poem, as Perkins suggests, “the nightingale stands revealed for what it is, or rather what the poet, using it as a symbol, has made it. No longer
a part of the natural world, it is an ‘immortal Bird’ living in a visionary realm” (105). It is this very characteristic which prevents the “mortal” poet from maintaining contact. The poet, in fact, curses “fancy” (i.e., the imagination) as a “deceiving elf” *because* of the mind’s inability to sustain a merger with the nightingale (73, 74). The poet’s resulting hostility is a product of his desperate desire to exist indefinitely within the world of the nightingale and not necessarily a degradation of the imagination itself, which, after all, provided a means whereby the poet had become “happy in thine [i.e., the bird’s] happiness” (6).

Real or not, the songbird’s domain is indeed “experienced” by the poet. Even if only a dream, the fantastical world which the bird symbolizes becomes more desirable than what is “real.” In this way, it matters less what something is (or if it exists at all) than what it is *perceived* to be. This same sentiment is echoed in another famous ode by Keats: “‘Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (“Urn” 49-50). Emphasis is placed upon subjectivity and personal perspective. Thus, the objective reality of the poet’s union (or non-union) with the nightingale becomes secondary to the poet’s perception of the “experience.” In other words, the poet can touch the world of the nightingale, even if only through his imagination.

When the poet questions the authenticity of his encounter at the end of the poem – “Do I wake or sleep?” (80) – he does so because of the *implications*, not the inadequacies, of an “imagined” encounter. The poet
recognizes that an experience which relies primarily upon the imagination is fleeting and often impossible to revisit. He wishes the realm of the nightingale would exist – and thus remain accessible – within his own world. However, the poet knows that this is not the case. (This realization may also help to explain the poet’s apparent bitterness towards fancy in the final stanza.) Alas, the ideal world which the nightingale represents becomes as remote as the bird’s song by the end of the poem:

\[
\text{Adieu! Adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades}
\]
\[
\text{Past the near meadows, over the still stream,}
\]
\[
\text{Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep}
\]
\[
\text{In the next valley-glades. (75-8)}
\]

The poet, now alone, can merely recollect the world of the nightingale without any ability to exist within it.

Regardless, the poet is changed due to his “encounter” with the bird. He recognizes the immortal quality which the bird has come to symbolize: “Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!” (61). Describing himself as a lowly “sod” (60), the poet understands his position, both literally and figuratively, in relation to the bird. This new-found insight further bolsters the argument that the relevance of the experience lies not within its “truth-value” (i.e., whether or not it actually took place) but within its “perceived-value” (i.e., the poet’s understanding and interpretation of the experience). Although the poet, reminiscent of homesick Ruth (66), longs to exist with the nightingale, his shortcomings of mind and mortality prevent such a reunion.
After the poet has connected, however briefly, with the nightingale, he views his surroundings with even more disdain. Before his union with the bird, the poet was “half in love with easeful death” (52); having returned to his misery after contacting the nightingale, the poet laments, “Now more than ever seems it rich to die” (55). If nothing else, this alteration in the poet suggests the profound impact of the experience. Jack Stillinger’s eloquent explanation of the structure of many Keatsian odes applies:

[T]he speaker in a Romantic lyric begins in the real world, takes off in mental flight to visit the ideal, and then—...being a native of the real world, he discovers that he does not or cannot belong permanently in the ideal—returns home to the real. But he has not simply arrived back where he began, for he has acquired something…from the experience of the flight, and he is never again quite the same person who spoke at the beginning of the poem. (3)

The poem contends that mortals can contact the ideal world while remaining tied to reality, even if only for a moment. Thus, Allen Tate’s view of the ode seems extreme when he says, “The poem is an emblem of one limit of our experience: the impossibility of synthesizing…the antimony of the ideal and the real” (177, my italics). The limit of our experience is not that such synthesizing cannot take place at all but, instead, that it cannot be sustained for any satisfactory length of time. Because of this dilemma,
the poet is forced to exist – with a heightened perspective – within a lowly reality. Desire for perpetual union with the nightingale can carry the poet only so close to the realm of fancy while an inspired mind can endure only for so long within that realm.
Works Cited


