

Presentation (15.02.2023): John Keats's 'Endymion' and the 'Odes' of 1819

Anthony Johnson (Åbo Akademi University)

[§1]

[§2]

I have long thought that there is a peculiar kinship between the composer Franz Schubert and the poet John Keats. Born within the space of two years, both lived largely in poverty, blossomed in their teenage years, progressed miraculously to produce major artworks in their early twenties, and died tragically young (Keats at 25, Schubert at 31). Schubert's musical star was at one with the poetic lyrics of his contemporaries (as expressed in his *lieder*); Keats, for his part, felt that if he hadn't been a lyric poet he would have been a composer and that his ideas for the combinations of sound in poetry were closely allied to those in musical composition. Overwhelmed, too, by the colossal achievements of their longer-lived artistic mentors such as Beethoven for Schubert and Milton for Keats, it is perhaps no surprise that both experienced difficulties in producing works that could compete on the same scale. Hence, Schubert and Keats became master innovators of the smaller, more lyrical, chamber forms by which they are mainly remembered: the song cycle, the string quartet, the sonnet, the poetic Ode.

For both artists, too, the themes of transience and brevity were paramount. On the evening of February 14th, 1821 – just nine days before his own death from tuberculosis, the bedridden Keats asked his friend Joseph Severn to inscribe on his grave the words 'Here lies One Whose Name was Writ in Water'. (Severn did so: these famous words gracing the gravestone that he erected for Keats in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome exactly 200 years ago, in the spring of 1823.)

[§3]

The following year, in 1824, Schubert – realizing that he was in the grip of an illness from which he would not recover – worked on with a renewed vigour to compose his quartet 'Death and the Maiden' ('*Der Tod und das Mädchen*'). Remarkably, the younger Schubert and Keats did find time to successfully attempt more extensive works, such as Keats's long poem, *Endymion*, written between 1817 and 1818 (when he was in his early twenties), and dedicated to his hero – the poetic wonder-kid Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770) – who had died tragically young, at the age of seventeen.

[§4]

Luxuriant in the imagery of the natural world, shot through with moving deliberations on the nature of transience and loss, *Endymion* is ambitious in conception as well as length, and it is testimony to the passion and persistence of Timo Leinonen that, by 2022, he had translated all of its 4,000 lines of this poem – for the first time – into a more permanent form in Finnish. Now he has continued this work by translating Keats's *Odes* of 1820, and in what follows, I will briefly discuss the greatest of them, emphasizing, in particular, their links to *Endymion*.

* * *

[§5]

Endymion

Understandably enough, *Endymion* – Keats’s first full long work as an apprentice poet – is about poetic apprenticeship. ‘What is it to be a poet?’, it asks. ‘What does it give you that other professions do not?’ (These were all pertinent questions for Keats, who was, at that exact moment, giving up a career in the medical profession in order to become a full-time writer.) In this light, Book I of the poem may be seen as an introduction to the problem, as Endymion is a shepherd prince who finds that he is in love with poetic truth and beauty (not to mention the powers of the imagination), but does not realize that those powers are also in love with him. He has, in fact, been chosen as a lover by the moon Goddess, Cynthia – sister to Apollo (God of the sun, healing, poetry, medicine, and prophecy). Yet because Cynthia (ever secretive about her love-life) only meets him directly in sleep and dreams, Endymion, who admires her from afar, is unsure of where his feelings come from, or what they mean. Haunted by a sense of loss, he searches through the forests, fields, and mountains of his kingdom for the elusive source of his reciprocal love.

[§6]

Following the journey of Virgil’s Aeneas into the underworld (an adventure which the teenage Keats had read admiringly in Latin), Book II takes the apprentice poet into that region: a plane in which Cynthia (looking down from afar) can grant him visionary and prophetic experience that adds to his sense of beauty, teaching him too – through visions (including some highly charged with eroticism) – how to distinguish between the true and the false.

Emerging transformed from the underworld of the imagination, Endymion finds himself at the beginning of Book III at the bottom of a vast sea, filled with the detritus of history and the records of mythical or historical beings whose lives and experiences are preserved there: awaiting the coming of someone who can access and understand them. Daring to take on the challenge, Endymion unlocks these histories, thereby strengthening his knowledge of the past and gaining a new understanding of the errors into which – under the influence of the witch Circe – so many human beings have managed to entangle themselves over time. Hence, in Book IV, he finally returns to reality regenerated. Empowered to find true beauty and love in a world full of illusion, deception, and despair, Endymion has passed through his apprenticeship: becoming a poet whose values are fully anchored in the ‘real’ world.

[§7]

Beginning in 2021 for the 200th commemoration of Keats’s death, Timo Leinonen’s lively Finnish translation of all four books is now, as we have mentioned, complete. Wisely avoiding the problems of verse translation (as Keats’s English rhythms and rhymes do not morph easily into Finnish), Leinonen’s prose version is ideally adapted to dramatic performance. This is a virtue that the Director, Maaret Perälä, has been quick to capitalize on: creating four mini-dramas – one for each book: which emphasize Endymion’s youth, humour, and energy in coming to terms with the demands of the poetic. Supported by music generated by the star signs of Keats’s birth and death, but overlain by contemporary songs (which would have triggered a smile from the poet’s lips), improvised by the younger actors, this is a play packed with verve and imagination: symbolized at its heart by the Venus-like Conch of Love which, when lifted to the ear, transforms the sound of the blood in your veins to the sound of the sea.

[§8]

‘Here’, Keats would have said (holding the conch to your ear): ‘take it. Listen ... listen ...!’.

[§9]

The Odes

Although *Endymion* was not received very well by the critics, it nevertheless proved to be of great importance for Keats's own development. For it was the testbed on which many of his ideas as well as technical experiments were carried out. Indeed, it provides the reader with an abundance (perhaps even an over-abundance) of wonderful natural and sensual images. And further, there may be some ground for suspecting that the work he put into *Endymion* (published in 1818), helped trigger the miraculous change which came over Keats's style in the following year.

Whatever the case, it is clear that, starting in the spring of 1819, Keats produced a sequence of five Odes (capped by a sixth, in September), which have come to be accepted as among the greatest poems in English.

* * *

[§10]

The 'Ode to Psyche'

Looking at the first of them, the 'Ode to Psyche' (produced in April 1819), we can see that its sphere of interest closely mirrors that of *Endymion*. For that poem (adapted from ancient myth), was about the Moon secretly taking an earthly being as her lover. And this Ode (inspired by the Latin of the late classical writer Apuleius [c. 124-170 A.D.]), concerns the God of Love himself (Cupid), who secretly takes Psyche – a stunningly beautiful mortal woman – as *his* lover.

The driving force behind Apuleius' story is Venus' jealousy of Psyche's beauty, and the fact that she'd ordered her son to punish Psyche by making the poor girl fall in love with a low-born man. However – while trying to obey his mother – Cupid accidentally falls in love with Psyche himself. As a result of which – having ordered Psyche never to look at him – he creates a wonderful palace for her and visits her every night.

Inevitably, within Apuleius' tale, everything is eventually ruined by Psyche's jealous sisters who persuade her to light a lamp and peep at her lover (who they claim is a monster): with the result that he (and the palace) vanish, leaving her to wake up, alone, in an open field. Like *Endymion*, then, Psyche is haunted by her longing for an absent lover. But all is not lost. For Venus's attempts to harm her are defeated by Psyche's own inviolable goodness (not to mention the support that she receives from divine beings as well as creatures in the natural world), Cupid is eventually allowed to marry her, and Jove immortalizes her as a Goddess.

By 1819, Keats had learned how to extend mythological materials and make them his own. Hence, as if he is continuing from *Endymion*, he begins his Ode by picking up the Conch of Love again, and putting its secrets to the ear of Psyche herself: whom he sees in a vision, lying in the grass with Cupid, entwined in a loving embrace. (As a surgeon who by now has seen something of the world, the twenty-four year-old Keats seems to accept the sexuality of the situation. And – in contrast to the tormented self-searchings experienced by *Endymion* when he faced with fleshly as well as spiritual love – Keats's speaker in the poem does not dwell on the details of his vision.) What he does do, however, is to realize the implications of Apuleius's

story. Namely that, Psyche – whose wonderful palace had been an illusion – was a Goddess with no temple of her own:

[§11]

Nor altar heap'd with flowers;
Nor virgin choir to make delicious moan
Upon the midnight hours;
No voice, *no* lute, *no* pipe, *no* incense sweet
From chain-swung censure teeming;
No shrine, *no* grove, *no* oracle, *no* heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming. [*Emphasis mine*]

Readers of Keats's earlier poetry may remember that Endymion's lover, the Moon Goddess Cynthia, had all these things: things that are present only as absences in this Ode. Furthermore, Keats's speaker realizes that Psyche was not worshiped in the ancient world because she had joined the Pantheon of the Gods too late. In order to make amends, he therefore decides to become her priest – as well as her voice, lute, pipe, incense sweet (and so on) – erecting a temple to her in his mind where (in a natural setting which resembles that of *Endymion*), her divinity can be celebrated. For, after all, Odes are poems of celebration and (like the hymn to Pan in *Endymion*), Keats's poem has a performative role: itself becoming part of the ritual that brings a cult – in this case the cult of Psyche – into being. At last, through these rites, and after all her sufferings, Psyche is free to enjoy her true right to the pleasures of

[§12]

all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in!

If we should wonder whether Keats is growing too raunchy at this stage, it may be worth remembering three things. First, that etymologically, 'Psyche' (often imaged as a butterfly), means 'soul' or 'breath'. Second, that the child created by the union of Cupid and Psyche was none other than Pleasure (*Voluptas*) herself. And third, that the poem was written 36 years before the birth of Freud (who saw sex in everything). Within the space of just 67 lines (in contrast to the 4,000 of *Endymion*), Keats has created a vision that has permanently reshaped and extended the range of Apuleius' fable.

* * *

[§13]

I have stayed with the 'Ode to Psyche' because it has so much in common with the other five great Odes produced by Keats in the following months of 1819. Namely, the 'Ode on Melancholy', the 'Ode on Indolence', the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', the 'Ode to a Nightingale', and 'To Autumn': each of them made out of 3-6 verses (each verse loosely rhyming like the last 10 or 11 lines of a sonnet). These details are important (though I will not go into the technicalities here) because, through this form Keats was able to create a flexible yet disciplined vehicle appropriate for a visionary subject matter that was more open ended than the traditional sonnet. Where, for instance, the rhyme and argument of sonnets tends to snap shut at the end,

the Keatsian Ode tends to end on a note of reflection and uncertainty. As in the close of the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, where the speaker asks: ‘Do I wake or sleep?’.

There is also an innovative quality of reverie about all of the Odes – as though the poet is daydreaming, or seeing hypnogogic images between the borders of wakefulness and sleep. And in this way, the Odes delve into a state of mind that was little explored (or, at least, written about) before the early nineteenth-century. There is also a quality of mental association by which the poems pass from thought to thought which is distinctive in all of them: giving them the feel of multifaceted but ultimately unified reflections on something difficult, painful, and paradoxical. The language, too, is staggeringly rich, sensual, and precise: so much so that a large number of authors over the last 200 years have stolen lines from the Odes as the titles for their own poems, plays, novels, films, and promotional materials. (We only need to think of titles taken from the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ – such as Scott Fitzgerald’s ‘Tender is the Night’ or Somerset Maugham’s ‘The Alien Corn’ – for the point to be made.)

Closely related to all of this is the depth of insight that is amassed in the Odes. By 1819, Keats had suffered the loss of his father (from a fall), as well as the death of his mother and brother from tuberculosis, and he was himself diagnosed with the same disease in that year. (As a doctor, he would, presumably, have recognized the symptoms.) So he knew well enough that life could be brief. He also, no doubt, intuited that his freshly blossoming love life with Fanny Brawne in 1819 would never be allowed to flower as he had hoped. But despite this, Keats had a great sense of fun and humour and was adept at writing joyful verses, even though many of them, understandably enough, have shadows in the distance. Correspondingly, everywhere in the Odes the sorrow is tempered by flashes of joy. For even while acknowledging the brevity of life, these are poems that celebrate existence.

* * *

[§14]

As examples of these features, we could do worse that to look at the ‘Ode on Melancholy’, where the speaker’s ‘mournful Psyche’ resists the desire to give in to ‘Lethe’ (the river of forgetfulness), or to drugs and poisons. Rather, the Ode suggests, anyone overtaken by melancholy needs to understand that it ‘dwells with beauty’; in other words, that the transience of beauty is the source of melancholy, and that melancholy’s shrine is actually located in the temple of Joy, Delight, and Pleasure (the daughter of Cupid and Psyche). Therefore (the speaker advises the reader in a language and imagery which has already been developed in *Endymion*), rather than submitting to melancholy, you should embrace its beauty and

[§15]

glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave,
Or on the wealth of globèd peonies,
Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows,
Emprison her soft hand, and let her rave,
And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes.

For ultimately, those wishing to overcome melancholy should embrace it, bursting ‘Joy’s grape’ against the roof of their mouth so that their soul ‘might taste the sadness of her might’.

* * *

[§16]

Likewise, though from another angle, the ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ leads the reader through a reverie in which the speaker – at that moment ready once again to pass into Lethe and drug themselves into the oblivion of ‘easeful death’ is saved by the bitter-sweet realization that the song of the nightingale, has remained a constant comfort to humanity enriching the lives of generation after generation across history. (Nor does time slow up in the poem: it grows dark while the speaker is listening, the visual world passes away, and Keats leads his readers through a lush sensual imagery of touch, taste, scent and music which triggers the imagination in new ways.)

[§17]

Keats plays in a similar way on different types of sensory imagery in the ‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’ (a poem which, like the ‘Ode on Indolence’, takes Greek ceramic figures as its starting point): in order, once again, to catch and cherish the paradoxical relation between time and timelessness.

[§18]

For here, he finds the visual depiction of temples, pipers, and lovers on an ancient Greek vase to be emotionally ambiguous: the music on the vase being sweet but ‘unheard’; and the lovers pictured there being blessed by always being in love, yet never able to consummate their longing. Knowing the tragedy of Keats’s own brief life – the fact that he had to give up his engagement with Love, Ambition, and even Poetry (the very figures on which he had mused in the ‘Ode on Indolence’) – it is easy to feel the real pity and passion of these thoughts. It is a pathos which extends far beyond the poet himself and applies to all of us. As individuals, thrown into a world in which death is our only certainty, Keats’s richly nuanced, empathic, and ambiguous insights – expressed in uniquely resonant language – have the power to open onto new levels in our understanding of the human condition.

* * *

[§19]

It would not, however, be fair to draw to a close on this small group of poems without recognizing that in this golden year of Keats’s poetic activity, and within the Odes themselves, there was a significant development in his achievement: even over the few months in which they were composed. As we may see by examining his last Ode.

On Sunday 19th September, 1819, as he informed his friend John Hamilton Reynolds, Keats went for a marvellous walk in the freshly harvested countryside which inspired him to write what many to consider his superlative achievement: ‘To Autumn’. As he also wrote in the same letter that ‘I always somehow associate Chatterton with autumn’, it is clear that there was plenty of room in the poem for the thematics of loss and death that we have been tracing from *Endymion* onwards. And as the poem is arranged in three simple sonnet-like verses of eleven lines, its close structural relation to the other Odes is plain enough.

In their own distinctive ways the other Odes are themselves miraculous crystallizations of poetic thought. But beyond all of them, in 'To Autumn', Keats has distilled his materials to create a new transparency. The poem is so clear, in fact, that on first glance it seems to be little more than a simple description of nature in England in September. Especially in the first verse, which magnificently images the autumnal scene surrounding the speaker as a 'Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness'; a cornucopia of ripeness and fertile production, filled with fruit and nuts and grain, the trees bent down with apples, the gourds swollen to the utmost, the beehives overflowing with honey.

[§20]

This, once more, is a poetry of celebration, a pastoral golden age not unlike that commemorated in Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics* (especially *Eclogue IV*, which has been traditionally taken as a covert praise of the world as it was during the lifetime of Christ).

[§21]

In these ancient hymns to nature, as Virgil's commentators have pointed out, it is possible to divine 'powerful allegorical meanings'. And the same is true of Keats's Ode: most notably in the middle verse, where Autumn is personified as woman 'sitting careless on the granary floor', her 'hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind; Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep, / Drowsed with the fume of poppies,' while her 'hook / Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers'.

[§22]

Long ago the critic Helen Vendler, having remembered that Autumn was usually personified as a man, pointed out that the female image here was probably a reference to Ceres the goddess of the harvest, as Keats would have known from his reading of Milton and the classics. And although I agree with this, I cannot help adding that – from his reading of Apuleius for the 'Ode to Psyche' – he would have also come across two scenes where Psyche herself deals with the same materials. First, in the temple of Ceres, where Psyche helpfully sorts out the hooks and reaping instruments along with the grains of the harvest, puts them into a new order, cries – like Ruth in Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' – amid the alien corn, and sweeps the temple floor with her hair (Apuleius VI, 1-4). And second, in the scene where Venus has set her the impossible task of separating out all the grain of the harvest before sundown, and she is saved by an army of ants which comes to her aid and sorts out the grain for her. Because, too, the images of reaping and winnowing the corn in 'To Autumn' are traditionally associated with Death (who is a reaper of souls), the middle verse of the poem subtly blends a darker set of colours into the joy that has been set up at the beginning.

[§23]

The trick here is not to go too far. And although, in the final verse, the description of a beautiful day moving into night opens up these associations with a fuller allegorical resonance, Keats brilliantly tones down the negative potential of the allegory, keeping the realistic descriptions and the feeling of celebration in the foreground of the poem. Thus, where the verse begins with the traditional cry – 'Where are the Songs of the Spring?' – which in the ancient world would be used to summon up feelings of nostalgia and regret – Keats's speaker promotes the opposite mood by saying 'Think not of them'. For Autumn, after, all has its 'music too'.

Nevertheless, in the same way that the honeycombs of the first verse had overflowed with honey, so, in the third verse, the bitter-sweetness of completion – of endings – eventually seeps out of everything and settles. The day is ‘soft-dying’. The redness of sunset strikes the fields where the corn has been cut. Gnats ‘mourn’ amid the willows (traditionally associated with grief). The lambs are now ‘full-grown’. The ‘robin red breast’ (an emblem of winter), whistles in the garden. And ‘gathering swallows twitter in the skies’. They are gathering, because they are leaving. As Chatterton had. As Keats’s parents and brother had. And as Keats himself knew he soon must.

* * *

[§24]

Looking back over these strangely joyful, yet bitter-sweet Odes, a common realization starts to emerge. Namely that Keats – having celebrated the joy of existence in some of the most exquisite English poetry ever written – is saying goodbye to the world: commending it to God through a French word which simultaneously estranges him from his beloved language. ‘Adieu’, says Joy in the ‘Ode on Melancholy’, whose ‘hand is ever at his lips’. ‘Adieu, adieu’, fades the plaintive anthem of the nightingale as it dissolves into the darkness. ‘Adieu’, whispers Keats’s narrator to Love, Ambition, and Poesy – the three ‘Ghosts’ that he hallucinates in the ‘Ode on Indolence’. The only figures who stay are the lovers and happy boughs on the Grecian Urn that can never shed their leaves, ‘Nor ever bid the Spring adieu’, because – as ceramics – they are frozen in time. And, of course Cupid and Psyche, in one another’s arms who, Keats tells us, had no need to bid each other ‘adieu’, as Psyche was no longer mortal.

[§25]

Here, then, is Timo Leinonen’s translation of these marvellous *Odes*. ‘Take it.’, as Keats would have said. Read. Dream. And ‘Listen ... listen ...!’.