English & Cultural Studies 1A03: Study Notes

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John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and “Ode to a Nightingale”

We took up both of these Odes but for the purposes of these Study Notes let me concentrate on “Ode to a Nightingale.” My object here is to model for you how to read the odes carefully. Once you’ve had a chance to consider my remarks here, turn to “Ode on a Grecian Urn” and test out an analogous reading strategy for yourself.

Every text has a context, many contexts, and that includes the already existing *form* that the poet inherits from the history of literature and then chooses to use. The choice of form matters hugely in literature because it isn’t a “box” into which a poet puts a certain meaning. Form is the way in which the poet gives meaning a shape; it is the primary means by which meaning is created and unfolded in a poem. Now, each inherited form makes its own demands on the poet, challenging the poet in unique ways. You can see an analogy in popular music. A musician must decide what form or hybrid of forms he or she will adopt: Jamaican dance hall, new country, hip-hop, lounge-music, K-pop , etc.. As I said in class, during his short and intensely compressed lifetime, Keats was possessed by a wildly experimental spirit, trying out many different forms of poetry, testing each form for their respective strengths, weaknesses and creative possibilities. During a short burst of creativity in 1819, Keats’s wrote a number of his most important *odes*, including the two odes we looked at in class. These odes became some of the most significant poems ever written in the English language, although of course Keats, who died penniless, far from home, could not have known anything about the splendid and still unfolding life that his poems would come to have.

But here's the odd thing about his decision to sink these creative energies into the form of an ode. By 1819, the ode was an almost completely exhausted or depleted form. In Keats's day, odes were written mostly as a form associated with mockery. They were heard and read as over-wrought, puffed up kinds of poems that a poet would only adopt to poke fun at people and poetry, perhaps a bit like Stephen Colbert did with *The Colbert Report*, which, as you know, adopted the form of a conservative political opinion show precisely to mock its depletion. So when Keats adopts the form of the ode, not to parody it but to put it to new kinds of serious-minded work, he has his work cut out for him. There is an admirable fearlessness about Keats that helped fuel his insatiable curiosity about life and about the role of the imagination and poetry *in* life. Indeed, if there is a common theme joining "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and "Ode to a Nightingale," it is an exploration of how poetry responds to life and how, in responding to life, both life and poetry undergo remarkable transformations. Your task as a reader is then to return to the poems and to test that hypothesis: how do the two poems *differently* embody this theme. In what ways does both life and poetry undergo a transformation *in* the poems and *because* of what happens in the poems? Working out answers to that question will go a long way towards consolidating your understanding of the poems for this course.

To be sure, the ode was a form of poetry that had in previous centuries, going all the way back to ancient Greece, been highly esteemed. Odes share certain common characteristics or conventions. They are:

--poems written in a highly stylized language, i.e., they are conspicuously formal, embellished, mannered and elaborate. The tone and language of the ode is *elevated.* "Overwrought" is the word that Keats might use (look back at the poems and suss out where, exactly, Keats uses that mouth-filling word and why he uses it precisely *there*). They are poems that display the poet's learnedness, and so brim with allusions or references to classical literature and myths.

--poems that are intricately and strictly organized. They are written in highly regular stanzas and are paced by analogously intricate rhyme schemes. (Take two stanzas from one of Keats's *Odes* and mark up the rhyme scheme the way that I did in the Study Notes for "The Wall.")

--poems written about and addressed *to* significant themes and big ideas. Before Keats's day, odes were reserved for addresses to only the most serious topics and the most powerful people.

--poems that are addresses, i.e., they are gestures of acknowledgement and often praise, a kind of dedication to something or someone of importance, or of importance at least to the poet. The addressee, the person or idea to whom the ode is addressed, stirs something profound in the poet's imagination.

As a form of poetry, the ode has a wonderful history. But things change. And with the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the wars in which Keats grew up, the ode felt stuffy, old-fashioned, and hollowed out. Such grand gestures now felt over-done. To write a serious ode in 1819 would be like putting on a top hat today. Once upon a time, top hats were ubiquitous, but if you wore one today in public you'd look like you were dressing up for a costume party. Most of the odes that were being published when Keats starting writing poetry were in fact *parodies* of odes, written in a mocking way, satirizing the subject

matter and mocking the form itself. The age was a depleted one. The war had exhausted the country's resources, its materials, peoples, and spirit. Even the inherited forms of literature felt emptied. And with the end of the wars came not radical transformation, as some had hoped would be the case, given the extraordinary costs of the wars, but quite the opposite. By 1819 it was obvious that Britain was facing a period of intense conservative reaction. For example, the army that had once fought in Europe now was tasked with firing on British citizens protesting food shortages in a crippled economy. And as always, it is young men and women who disproportionately bore the brunt of Britain's stagnation and exhaustion. Keats was one of those youth, trying to find his way in a run-down place.

What is Keats's response to this unpromising and constricting environment? He insists on creating poems that embody what he calls "negative capability." In a letter written to his beloved brothers in 1818, Keats says that now more than ever he would like to be a man "*capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason*." (These are words well worth memorizing and being in a position to explain: they may come in handy again in this course.) Consider carefully what Keats is saying here: he affirms the capacity to dwell in the midst of uncertainty and thus to ward off the desire to know things fully, completely, quickly, or dogmatically. He calls for a certain patience with the world, and for a life that learns to thrive, to *be* (hence his phrase *being in*) in the midst of unknowns. He writes poetry in part to think openly and to practice thinking, demonstrating to others and to himself what can come from having the courage to dwell amid uncertainty. And not only to dwell amid uncertainty. Writing poetry is also about discovering and creating forms of *pleasure* in that uncertainty, i.e., to be a *joyful* thinker, taking pleasure in the powers of language at work with life. Facts and reasons remain important, to be sure. But Keats reminds us that there are fruitful things to be found in embracing all those things about life that remain deeply important but not, strictly speaking, "facts." Love, friendship, a sense of your own mortality, the fragile yet profoundly moving powers of beauty, sorrow, loss, longing, the unfathomable depths of the English language, the voluptuous pleasures of the natural world: these are some of the things Keats explores precisely because they aren't easily measured by "facts and reasons" and yet remain meaningful and stimulating. Keats's poems, including his *Odes*, are poems that capture the spirit of "negative capability." To be more precise, they capture what a mind looks, sounds, and feels like as it struggles between the need for uncertainty *and* the need for certainty.

Keats writes his odes, adopting all of conventions I've just described. But he does something new too. Although the form is quite rigid, Keats' creates speakers whose minds are actively in motion. He plays the voice and feelings of a dynamic, changeful speaker *against* the rigid form, thereby throwing the liveliness of the speaker's voice into sharper relief. Here's a useful analogy, and one that Keats would appreciate it, since he evokes it in both of the poems we consider: life needs death to be life. There can be no life without death, without the possibility of death. A life without the prospect of death would be no life at all. Death frames life, makes life, in all its complexities, all its joys and sorrows, *lively*. Without the frame, we do not have a clear sense of what is being framed. That's why the immortal life of the gods would be so terrifyingly boring. So Keats uses the static form of the ode to throw into the sharpest possible relief the liveliness of his speakers. The poems trace the speaker's subtle movements of thinking and feeling as they engage an enormous question or problem. The key to understanding the

poems and to writing about them well is to be able to trace those movements, pointing to where the speaker shifts from position to position, the moments when the speaker changes and why. And it isn't only the speaker who changes. The urn and the nightingale also change, depending on how the speaker thinks and feels about them. The urn changes the speaker and the speaker changes the urn. Same thing with the nightingale.

Take "Ode To a Nightingale." Here we have a poem in 8 highly regular stanzas. Each stanza accomplishes a certain amount of "work," as it were. Each marks a moment in the speaker's ongoing journey of exploration. Each stanza a kind of snap-shot of the speaker's shifting relationship with the nightingale and with the different thoughts and feelings that that invisible bird deeply evokes in him. So your task is to ask yourself, what frame of mind is the speaker in, say, the first stanza? And where is the speaker in the fourth stanza? What is happening, *what has the poem made happen*, so that the speaker has moved from one state of mind, one understanding and feeling in the presence of the nightingale's song, to another?

"Ode to a Nightingale" may be in 8 stanzas but if you are attending closely to the speaker's journey you will notice that it falls into three parts. In other words, the poem takes two significant *turns*.

1) First turn: In the third stanza, the word *fade*, used at the end of the second stanza, seems to resonate sadly in the speaker's mind. At first, the word describes how the nightingale disappears into the "forest dim." The bird "fade[s] away into the forest dim," he says. But the word, "fade," sticks in the speaker's mind. The fact that the bird fades away reminds him that he too is fading away, but in the worst possible way: not freely flying into the forest like the bird but fading in the sense of dying. And so the third stanza begins with the feeling of what it means for the speaker to fade away, what it means to live in a world of fading away, a world ""where men sit and hear each other groan," a world in which "youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies." (That's a reference to Keats's beloved brother, Tom, who died of tuberculosis, as Keats would only a few years later.) The speaker suddenly finds himself not affirming the beautiful, unearthly, spontaneous, and untroubled song of the bird but instead contrasting that bird's life to the world in which human beings live and die, a world where "but to think is to be full of sorrow," i.e., a world in which even the act of thinking brings deep, aching sadness. Such a world is very difficult to contemplate. And so the speaker stops the poem here and starts again, as if having touched a live wire and pulling his hand away suddenly from the shock. The opening lines of the next stanza, stanza four, is a double exclamation, "Away! Away!," as if through the sheer force of his exciting declaration, "Let's get the hell outa here," as it were, he could escape. Finding himself having fallen into the deepest depths triggers a corresponding wish to be with the nightingale. So the poem *turns* here: in the blank space between stanza 3 and stanza 4 we see the speaker pushing off from one world towards another . . or what feels like a pushing off. As the poet acknowledges at the end of the poem, poets can "cheat" themselves, i.e., use poetry to convince themselves of something that they know not to be true. Here in stanza 4, the journey towards the bird's world proves to be quite difficult and lasts only a moment. As the speaker declares emphatically, I'm going to get to that place "on the viewless wings of Poesy," i.e., I will use my imagination, whose workings are invisible, "viewless," to lift myself from the

world of the dying to the intense life that the bird lives. Indeed, he says, he's already made it, "Already with thee!," he exclaims. But is he? As I've said before in this course, *trust the tale, not the teller.* The teller, the speaker, *says* he's escaped but his own words, *the tale*, offers up a different story. For the world he describes feels weird: "And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne, / Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays." The world he's found himself in feels fake, artificial, over-wrought, a world of fantastical or mythical creatures, an imaginary palace in which sits a mythical figure surrounded by her loyal fairies. *Really*? Keats's writes a kind of poetry here that his audiences would instantly recognize as fake, antique, and unconvincing. That world is described in a deliberately dreamy way. This moment is a bit like one you would see in a dream-sequence in a movie; you know it's a dream because suddenly the camera-angles are strange, people look odd and do unexpected things; something's off. The bird's world is one in which he sings spontaneously, "in full-throated ease," but this world is anything but spontaneous; it looks and feels like a scene out of a Pixar animated movie not the dark forests that are the bird's natural home: it's lovely, but finally not enough, not given the stakes. And we know just how unconvincing it is because at the instant Keats imagines it, it drops away. "<u>But here</u> there is no light," he says. One moment before we were watching the mythical queen and in the next moment we are down on the ground, "here," in the darkness of the poet's beautiful garden. The speaker has tested his creative powers but, for the moment, found them unconvincing. So, there's more work for him to do. The poem isn't over, not nearly. He begins again, this time in the simple English garden where Keats's wrote the Ode. So stanza five is entirely taken up with a fine-grained description of the sounds and scents of that garden, which, paradoxically, the speaker can't actually see because of the falling dark or what he calls the "embalmed darkness." Because he can't see the things he describes so vividly, he is compelled to *imagine* them for us, thereby demonstrating the new powers of creativity that are now stirring in him. Stanza 5 is remarkable in the poem for the simplicity of its description. Now, rather than characterizing *this* world as a place only of the dead and dying, the speaker acknowledges that that same world also brims with beauty. Keats is here writing a new kind of poetry. After the great American poet, Wallace Stevens, let us call this poetry "the poetry of earth," meaning a poetry that unapologetically affirms the immense gift of this world rather than imagining an escape to another world. For a moment, for just a few verses, the speaker is happy imagining each of the plants and creatures populating that world; it is enough briefly and plainly to describe them, and to take an inventory of them and to take pleasure in taking that inventory: "the grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild," the "murmerous" sounds of insects flying about "on summer eves." But of course, this world of beauty is also a world of death. No life without death. Keats wrote other poems that linked those two things very closely together: what makes something beautiful is precisely the fact that it is transitory, that it doesn't last forever. Death haunts this English garden, as it does every garden. That's why Keats uses that strange metaphor for the time of day, "embalmed darkness," using this metaphor of embalming to suggest that he is almost buried in or interred in the world he describes so lovingly and plainly. And we know death creeps back into his thoughts and into his poem because it is the subject of the opening lines of the very next stanza, stanza 6.

2) Second turn: In the sixth stanza, the speaker is momentarily overcome with a wish to die: "Now more than ever seems it rich to die, / To cease upon the midnight with no pain." Keats frankly acknowledges that there are moments in which a young man might be so depleted, so exhausted by loss and sadness, that absenting himself from the world starts to feel not only possible but desirable. But note how even as the speaker contemplates that death, as if experimenting with the idea of it, seeing what it feels like, he qualifies himself. He is scrupulously thorough in taking a kind of inventory of his own feelings—and so invites us, as readers, to be just as attentive. Here he acknowledges that he is "half in love with easeful Death"—the *other* half of him is turned towards a quite different direction. But the speaker imagines what it would be like to die while the nightingale sang its gorgeous song, "pouring forth thy soul abroad / In such an ecstasy!" He takes a breath, and then faces a very different thought, but one that could only have come from the thoughts and feelings leading up to this moment; "Still wouldst though sing, and I have ears in vain-- / To thy high requiem become a sod." In other words, the nightingale would continue to sing if the speaker were dead; dead, he would be insensate, lacking the ears to hear that music, the heart to feel it, the mind to contemplate it. He would be nothing more than *that*-- a "sod," a lump of clay on the ground. Yikes. The word happens suddenly, plunked down there at the end of the stanza, rough and plain. Its appearance is the place where the poem pivots for the second time. We know that because when you look at the next stanza, stanza 7, we hear a new voice from the speaker. Now he doesn't long to be with the nightingale. He isn't pained by the comparison between the nightingale's life and his life. He doesn't disavow that pain or those comparisons. They too, after all, remain a central part of the poem and indeed form the means or path by which he gets to this point late in the poem. Instead, he is in frame of mind that lets him fondly observe the nightingale, right away remarking that it possesses a kind of immortal existence, seemingly untouched by time, while he remains in a world of "hungry generations," whose weight he feels. The speaker is now more generous both to the nightingale and more importantly towards himself in the presence of the creature's beautiful and evocative song. The speaker imagines all the different places the bird has graced with its music: in classical myth, in the bible . . . and in totally imaginary places, places that the speaker himself is responsible for inventing using the power of his imagination, those worlds "opening on the foam / Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn." It's a lovely thought, and a sign of a certain calm. But again, a single word shakes the poet to the core, and this time that word is *forlorn*. It means "distant" in stanza 7. But it triggers other associations; *forlorn* can also mean "empty." There is something "empty" about those invented lands into which the speaker has just travelled, listening for the nightingale's song. He wakes up at the sound of it: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!" His own language rouses the speaker and it is this rousing that marks the second important pivot or turn in the poem. He is now himself again, but a new self, so different from how he was at other points in the poem. How do we know that? We know that because, among several other things, the eighth and last stanza is a *benediction*, a gesture of well-wishing and farewell. At the start of the poem, the speaker was immersed, and understandably so, in his "aching" sorrow. But now he turns his eyes and ears outwards,

towards others. He bids the nightingale goodbye ("Adieu!"), letting it fade into the meadows and streams and hills and onto the next "valley-glades," but now, notice, not hungering after it. And it is in that more generous state of mind that the poet brings about the poem's closure. The poem ends with several questions. Your task as reader is to consider why those questions and why end the poem with those questions. The poem *earns* the right to ask these questions and to ask them in a particular way, i.e., as genuinely querying, open to possibilities, rather than questions of the sort with which "Ode on a Grecian Urn" begins, where the speaker grasps after the urn's meaning precisely because the urn refuses to speak or yield up its meaning. The poem addresses the nightingale but that address has changed the poet. How so?

Okay, now that you've had a chance to consider Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," turn to "Ode on a Grecian Urn." Some questions to consider:

1. In what ways does this ode call upon the conventions of the form of the ode and reproduce those conventions?
2. In what ways does Keats play the dynamic voice of the speaker *against* the regularity of the form of the ode?
3. In what ways does this poem embody "negative capability"?
4. Where are the turns in the poem? Why there? In other words, what has happened in the poem for the turn to take place at that particular moment? How are the turns marked in the poem? The poems are paced by being divided into separate stanzas. But they are also paced by separate movements, i.e., *groups* of stances that mark the places where the poems shift gears, try new directions, earn new thoughts or escape old ones.
5. In what ways is the speaker different between the start and the end of the poem?
6. How does the urn change as the poem unfolds and as the speaker changes?
7. How does the poem end?
8. In what ways is the urn different from the poem, "Ode on a Grecian Urn"?
9. Where do you see Keats's drawing on the resources of the English language, working with the power and depth of words?
10. Compare and contrast the urn and the nightingale. Compare and contrast the two poems addressed to the urn and the nightingale, respectively.

One way to read the two Odes and to understand what makes them tick, so to speak, is briefly to recall the differences in their subjects of their respective addresses, one addressing the nightingale, the other the Grecian Urn.

a) The urn remains until the end of the poem silent and restrained, qualities that activate the poet's imagination. But the nightingale is mesmerizing and attractive because it is heard "pouring forth," unrestrained and far from silent.
b) Both nightingale and urn remain mostly indifferent to the poet who is, contrastingly, deeply invested in them and complexly attached to them.

c) The urn is a human creation, a work of art made with human hands. The nightingale is a creature of the natural world, alive rather than inanimate, like the urn.
d) The urn is examined for its fine-grained details; indeed, at a certain moment the poet almost appears to enter into those details, travelling to locales “on the urn” but “in” his own imagination. But the nightingale is invisible, heard, not seen.
e) The nightingale Ode concludes with the bird flying away, leaving the poet to ask questions about what has just happened. The urn, on the other hand, “will remain,” as it has for millennia. That poem ends with an oracular assertion by the urn that *sounds* like wisdom that explains the world but in fact is only what the world looks like from the point of view of the urn. The poem, however, is what the world looks like from the point of view of the poet. Those two perspectives are very different. How so?