Thou Immortal Bird: Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale*

Kunio SHIMANE

(*Department of English, Faculty of Education*)

1

Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* is not only one of his best but also one of the best odes written in English. It is a great wonder that such a young poet, after such a fast and extraordinary poetic growth, produced a series of fine odes in such a short time including the Nightingale Ode. To bring about this growth there must have been basic qualifications. These seem to be senses sharp enough to make him sensual, especially sight and hearing (the order does not matter) and a keen insight into the language, the sole medium for poetry, which is neither painting, sculpture nor music.

Probably no literary theory is more diverse than Romanticism. It is virtually impossible to try a comprehensive definition; this would take a dictionary of considerable volume.[1] For all this, already in 1940 the bare essentials of this movement were clearly and concisely put down by Ifor Evans (p. 66):

> "Romantic revival" is the label that has been attached to them [the poets] by the textbooks, though they themselves might not have understood what it meant and certainly did not apply it to themselves. The label is only an attempt to show how their work differed from that of their predecessors. They all had a deep interest in nature, not as a centre of beautiful scenes but as an informing and spiritual influence on life. It was as if frightened by the coming of industrialism and the nightmare towns of industry, they were turning to nature for protection. Or as if, with the declining strength of traditional religious beliefs, men were making a religion from the spirituality of their own experiences.

On this common basis each Romantic poet established his own poetic world quite different from each other. Wordsworth is so different from Keats, who, in turn, is also so different from Byron that we have to treat them separately. Each is an independent world.

Keats was not conscious of himself being a "new poet". He did not try to differ from the Neo-classical poets or those before them. He did not try to adopt the "simple" vocabulary of "low and rustic life"; rather, though short of formal education, he attempted to acquire a lofty vocabulary similar to that of Milton's for epics based on classical myths such as *Endymion*, *Hyperion* and *Lamia*. For his topics and themes he preferred classical ones rather than "incidents and situations from common life" of farmers. Even a bird, a nightingale, is an *immortal* bird. Keats' central thought is his unique philosophy of beauty. Yet each of his odes has its own characteristic which would yield only through minute analysis.

When we read *Ode to a Nightingale*, we are impressed with his craftsmanship. The stanza is regular with an elaborate rhyme scheme; the whole structure is well-wrought; and the phonetic effect—the fusion of sound and sense, as will be glimpse at below, well-calculated. All this is enough to convince us of his rigid self-training, despite his words: "I have for the most part dash'd off my lines in a hurry" (*Letters, ii*, p. 106). These words seem to state the usual manner of his poetic composition and to agree in significance to the testimony of his friend about the writing of this ode that the poet "in the spring of 1819...:

> felt a tranquil and continual joy in her [the nightingale's] 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 feelings on the song of our nightingale. The writing was not 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*, p. 65).

Robert Gitting, while admitting the "sole value" of this story "showing the mood of concentration and the setting in which the Ode was written" (p. 66), throws doubt on it following the scepticism of Dilke.

The reason for "dashing off his lines in a hurry" seems to be Keats's belief in "autonomous" writing:

> The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law & precept, but by sensation & watchfulness in itself— That which is creative must create itself (*Letters, i*, p. 374).

In spite of these words we should assume that there existed the hard discipline of *mimesis* behind Keats' composition. He may not have believed in the "law and precept" of writing but believed in diligence and hard work. Without these his talent, however rich, could not have had such fine fruits as the odes of 1819. In the summer of this most inspired year Keats confesses to his hardwork to Bailey: "Within these two months I have written 1500 lines, most of which besides many more of prior composition you will probably see by next winter. ... I am convinced more and more everyday that ... a fine writer is the most genuine Being in the World — Shakespeare and Paradise Lost everyday become greater wonder to me—I look upon fine Phrases like a lover ... (*Letters*, ii, p. 139). This remark implies the relationship among hard work, great poets and their style. Only ten days later he confesses to another friend, Reynolds, his conviction in the relationship between diligence and becoming a fine poet:

> I am convinced more and more day by day that fine writing is next to fine doing the top thing in the world; the Paradise Lost becomes a greater wonder—The more I know what my diligence may in time probably effect; the more does my heart distend with Pride and Obstinancy—I feel in my power to become a popular writer—... (*Ibid.*, p. 146)

"Thank God for my diligence!" (*Ibid.*, p. 137)—coming from a poet who probably had already written *Ode on Indolence* (or was writing) these words sound somewhat odd, though they tell the truth. His statement that he usually "dashes off his lines in a hurry", therefore, is a boast; it is at best a "rhetoric" to emphasize he has taken "moderate pains" to finish the *Ode to Psyche* (*Ibid*, p. 106). In his diligence and hard work Keats is not different from any poet of distinction of any age and in any "movement". Even the poetic genius in him was not able to create poems autonomously without discipline on the part of the poet.

2

Keats' nightingale, the symbol of nature, is an *immortal bird*. *Immortal* is an epithet most proper to the nightingale in English poety. The cuckoo may deserve it, whose *magic cuckoocall* has the power to *cap, clear, and clinch all* (Hopkins, "The May Magnificat") in nature and to bring *a tale of visionary hours* and *that golden time* again (Wordsworth, "To the Cuckoo").

Being *immortal* the nightingale has been witnessing human history with its diverse aspects like different cultures and religions of different peoples in different places and ages. It is different from the artificial bird made by the *Grecian gold-smiths*

> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come. (Yeats, "Sailing to Byzantium")

Keats' nightingale is free to fly anywhere it pleases

> Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
> Up the hill-side; ...

of ancient Arcadia, of the ancient middle east, of medieval Byzantium, of the Shakespearean and the nineteenth century England, while the *golden bird*, eternal as it is, as an artifice like the Grecian Urn, is deprived of the freedom of mobility, being *set on a golden bough*.

Keats' nightingale has seen the religions of different peoples in different places and ages. As a deist Keats does not confine his attention to one particular religion. For his *The Eve of St. Agnes* and *The Eve of St. Mark*, he only uses Christian superstition and atmosphere. No reader takes them for religious poems. Possibly his *Ode to Psyche* is more religious than these; only it is not Christian but pagan. His intention is serious when he says, "I am more pagan that [*sic* i. e. than] to let a he[a]then Goddes be so neglected" (*Ibid*., p. 106). Apart from the ancient pagan religion, he looks upon his love for Fanny Brawne as comparable to faith. He tells her, "I have been astonished that Men could die Martyrs for religion—I have shudder'd at it— ... I could be martyr'd for my Religion —Love is my religion—I could die for that —I could die for you." (*Ibid*., pp. 223-4). Even though coming from the mouth of a youth madly in love, for him Christianity—I think in this case —could not vie with his love for the girl. His fondness for women in general, however, could barely rival his love for his brothers:

> My Love for my Brothers from the early loss of our parents and even for earlier Misfortunes has grown into a [*sic*.] affection "passing the Love of Women"—I have been ill temper'd with them, I have vex'd them—but the thought of them has always stifled the impression that any other women might otherwise make upon me— ... (*Letters, i*, p. 293).

At least these words suggest Keats' humanity which probably is his true "religion". This is where he differs from Wordsworth or even Coleridge. The former especially has a religious view far more traditionally Chiristian than Keats—*i. e.* his view clearly and repeatedly manifested especially in his *Prelude*. Even Coleridge's idea of repentance and forgiveness expressed in his *Ancient Mariner* is Christian enough. A "Romantic" poet, Keats did not follow them in this matter. This is an interesting contrast.

What made them different in their religious attitudes can be a point of dispute but at least it should be true that the prevailing spirit of the "Age of Reason" influenced them. It was rationalism. Keats was affected greatly by it, whereas Wordsworth, mildly. In this sense the former may be more "Romantic" and more faithful to the spirit of their age than the latter.

A rationalist believes in the power of his reason unconditionally. Reason is the foundation of religion but its unrestricted use would lead not only to rationalism but also to atheism. J. H. Newman, perceiving this danger, says:

> Rationalism is a certain abuse of reason; that is, use of it for purposes for which it never was intended, and is unfitted. To rationalize in matters of Revelation is to make our reason the standard and measure of the doctrines revealed; ... thus a rationalistic spirit is the antagonist of faith, for faith is, in its very nature, the acceptance of what our reason cannot reach, ... (*Lilly*, pp. 112-3)

He goes on to define the rationalist:

> ... the rationalist makes himself his own centre, not his Maker; he does not go to God, but he implies that God must come to him. And this, it is feared, is the spirit in which multitudes of us act at the present day [i. e. nineteenth century] (*Ibid.*, p. 114).

It is a wonder that Keats became a deist as well as a rationalist, because he firmly believed the power of imagination and sensation and distrusted "cold philosophy" which

> will clip an Angel's wings,
> Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,
> Empty the haunted air and gnomèd mine—
> Unweave a rainbow,. ... (*Lamia*. II, 234-7)

The irresistible influence of Hunt and his *Examiner* is understandable, but this is a great contradiction in his life. Mild though it is, his antagonism against Christianity or at least against its convention is clearly seen in a sonnet ("Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition").

Now it is strange that the same poet should use the story of Ruth for one of his best poems to express its central thought, even if it is not Christian but Jewish. There must be an inevitability. In the biblical story there is no mention of Ruth's hearing the nightingale. A good reason, as has been mentioned, is to imply the immortality and mobility of the nightingale that enable it to witness human history, transcending time and space.

The allusion of the story of Ruth is significant yet in a few more ways. The nightingale and Ruth share sadness of heart. The nightingale has the sad origin of the tragedy of Philomela, while Ruth *stood in tears amid the alien corn.* Keats has most certainly wanted to make use of the association of the nightingale with Philomela; at least the two were automatically connected in his mind. The association was probably strengthened by his reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* which he read and underlined most, together with *The Tempest*, among Shakespeare's works that he read (Spurgeon, p. 5). He underlined the song in the second scene of the second act:

> You spotted snakes, with double *tongue*,
> Thorny hedge-hog, be not seen; ...

Philomel, with melody,
Sing in our sweet lullaby; ... (Italics mine)

As will be seen, Keats also underlined Oberon's lines with the flower images (II, ii) which he was to "echo" in his Nightingale Ode.

Also, Keats' fascination with the classical myths and mythology would not have let him forget the association of the nightingale with Philomela. This is important because Philomela and Ruth share another thing: sexual harassment. One was actually raped and had her tongue cut off; the other was in danger of being molested. In the authorised version of the Bible Ruth's case is suggested by the word to *touch* in Boaz's words:

> Hearest thou not, my daughter? Go not to glean in another field, neither go from hence, and abide here fast by my maidens:
>
> Let thine eyes be on the field that they do reap, and go thou after them: have I not charged the young men that they shall not *touch* thee? (2 : 8-9)

Thus, Boaz tries to protect Ruth, first, by forbidding her to go and glean on somebody else's field; then, by telling her to stay *fast* with his *women* servants; and finally, by ordering his men servants not to *touch* her. Boaz's consideration for her is later appreciated by her mother-in-law who says:

> It is good, my daughter, that thou go out with his maidens, that they meet thee not in any other field. (2 : 22)

No doubt, Naomi sees the same danger that is likely to happen to Ruth and acknowledges Boaz's precaution.[2] Ruth's sadness grows deeper still. Although the destiny of both women takes a dramatic contrast in the end, it would have been unnatural for Keats not to have seen the common sadness between them. The greater significance is that by alluding to the legend of Philomela, the nightingale has added to the ode even greater mobility and immortality with a touch of nobility. The epithet *immortal* becomes most fitting for it. Little wonder, the nightingale is untouchable and *no hungry generations tread* it *down*.

3

That Keats has ultra-keen senses is common knowledge. All his five senses are sharp. It is an advantageous qualification for becoming a fine poet to have sharp senses. But it is quite rare that all his five senses are equally sharp. Usually seeing and hearing are the ones most developed in the poet. It is curious that in many great poets these two co-exist and there may be a special relationship between them. There are of course exceptions. John Donne, for instance, seems to be a poet who hardly uses his naked eye for poetic imagery. Instead, he sees through the essence and characteristics of things with his mind's eye and makes astonishing comparisons, though he has a wonderful auditory faculty and is passionate and even sensual by nature.

My face in thine eye, thine in mine appeares
And true plaine heart doe in the faces rest,
Where can we finde two better hemispheares
Without sharp North, without declining West?

What ever dyes, was not mixt equally;
If our two loves be one, or, thou and I
Love so alike, that none do slacken, none can die. ("The Good-Morrow")

This is the kind of poetry that Keats could never write — the poet who says, "O for a Life of Sensations rather than that of Thoughts!" (*Letters*, i, p. 185). One is tempted to attribute the reason to his lack of formal education. Had he had university education for Classics and Philosophy, he still would not have been able to write this way. Conversely Donne would never have been able to compose lines like:

Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!
Oh, for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stainèd mouth,
That I might drink, . . .

In terms of films these lines are compared to a colour film, while Donne's lines to a monochrome. They are poets of essentially different nature.

If Keats is colourful and vivid, Hopkins is more so in his imagery:

the azurous hung hill are his world-wielding shoulder
Majestic — as a stallion stalwart, very-violet-sweet! — ("Hurrahing in Harvest")

The imagery of Hopkins is based on his actual precise and minute observations; he uses it in his poetry in ever-accurate and original expression. The poet similar to Hopkins in this respect is probably Wordsworth whose nature imagery is undoubtedly based on his actual experiences and observations of nature "recollected in tranquility":

all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils,
Beside the lake, beneath the trees
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

In contrast, Keats does not seem to have been interested in observation of things in nature. Occasionally, however, he produces amazing metaphors presumably based on his own actual observations. One such example, it seems to me, is found in "To Autumn":

sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep
Steady thy laden head across a brook.

Contrary to widely accepted interpretations, I would venture to interpret that the basis of this metaphor is cornstalks, of either barley or rye, left unreaped, standing by a brook. But much of his nature imagery seems to consist of "stock images". As Mariam Allot implies (p. 528) the flower images in the following lines from the Nightingale Ode were possibly taken from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

White hawthorn, and the pastoral *eglantine*;
Fast-fading *violets* covered up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming *musk-rose*, full of dewy wine.

True, Keats had underlined the lines containing these flower images in Shakespeare's work (Spurgeon, p. 93)

> I know a bank whereupon the wild thyme blows,
> Where ox-lips and the nodding *violet* grows;
> Quite over-canopied with lush woodbine,
> With sweet *musk-roses*, and with *eglantine*. (II, i)

It is rather difficult to think that this is a mere coincidence. Then, are such other images in "To Autumn" as the *apples*, the *cottage trees*, the *gourd*, the *bees*, the *poppies*, the *cyder-press*, and even the *swallows* imagined in his mind? It is indeed easy to imagine these single images without minute observations, as long as one's memories are valid. Keats' *violet*, for instance, has a trite adjectival phrase which one can think of without looking at actual violets, while even Shakespeare's simple *nodding* has a touch of reality derived from actual observation; so does *fluttering and dancing* of Wordsworth's daffodils. Hopkins' *azurous hung* — especially *hung* — for *hills* is nothing but the outcome of his trained observations to perceive their inscape. Again, the colour imagery in these lines from *Lamia* could be produced purely by imagination:

> She was a gordian shape of *dazzling hue*,
> *Vermilion-spotted*, *golden*, *green* and *blue*;
> *Striped* like a zebra, *freckled* like a pard,
> Eyed like a peacock, and all *crimson barred*;
> And full of *silver* moons, ... (II, 47-51)

Then, was the scene depicted in these lines from "To Autumn" fashioned in the poet's mind without observation?

> barred clouds bloom the soft dying day,
> And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue.

If so, what is the significance of his trip to Winchester when he actually looked at *stubble plains* saying, "I never lik'd stubble fields so much as now — Aye better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm — ..."? (*Letters*, *ii*, p. 167). If this scene had been created purely in his imagination, the few unreaped corn stalks with *laden heads across a brook* compared to Autumn may have been invented in his mind.

All this shows the difficulty of deciding how Keats creates his imagery. It would be safe to say that he uses both his naked eye as well as his mind's eye, his optical sense as well as his imagination. What he has seen he re-creates as "truth" in his imagination for his poetry. If so, this is what all poets do. The important thing is that he believes in the supreme power of imagination. For "What the imagination seazes as Beauty must be truth" (*Letters*, *i*, p. 184). To George, his brother he says:

> You speak of Lord Byron and me — There is this great difference between us. He describes what he sees — I describe what I imagine — Mine is the hardest task (*Letters*, *ii*, p. 200).

The truth is that Keats has unusually keen imagination supported not only by sight but also by all the other senses.

4

Equally wonderful to sight is Keats' hearing. It is so sensitive that the singing of the nightingale is able to exercise the magic power of drugs, the "tranquil and continual joy":

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though a hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.

His auditory sense, then, takes the initial and the principal role in *Ode to a Nightingale.*

The poet's hearing should best be disciplined and strengthened by either the knowlege of language (and preferably of phonetics) or experience or by both. By experience I mean that of "public speaking" like that of a stage actor or that of a poet reciting poetry to the audience. Shakespeare had ample experience of the stage both as an actor and mainly as a playwright who would hear and see his own works rehearsed and enacted. These experiences, I believe, are the very secret of his remarkably rapid growth as a poet and a playwright. Milton, Grey and Hopkins were linguists and phoneticians of great merit. These great poets were undoubtedly gifted with no ordinary hearing, which was trained and enhanced by their experience and knowledge.

It is discernible that Keats tried his best to train himself by imitating his great predecessors. Imitating Milton means to learn not only his poetic forms like blank verse but also and *automatically* his linguistic characteristics. In his "classical epics" such as *Endymion* and *Lamia* this is perceptible; it is perceptible especially in the diction which includes many polysyllables consisting of a considerable number of tetrasyllables and a great number of trisyllables. An example indicating this characteristic of diction is:

O magic sleep! O *comfortable* bird,
That broodest o'er the troubled sea of the mind
Till it is hushed and smooth! O *unconfined*
Restraint! *Imprisoned liberty*! Great key
To golden *palaces*, strange *minstrelsy*,
Fountains grotesque, . . . (*Endymion*, I, 453-8)

Whether he has been as successful as his master is another matter, but his efforts to produce an elevated style are clear.

It is in his linguistic efforts that Keats has made a contribution to his mother tongue: the very first use of the rare word *volcanian* in *Lamia*[3]:

A deep *volcanian* yellow took the place
Of all her milder moonèd body's grace. (I, 155-6)

The poet may have lacked competent linguistic knowledge but his auditory sense, which was undoubtedly whetted by poetic compostion, has made up for it. Auditory sense and articulatory sense are inseparable; they usually enhance (or conversely damage) each other. This is part of the working of the brain mechanism. Keats naturally practised oral composition. Whether he used his own actual voice (*concrete voice*), or the voice in his mind or arditory image (*abstract voice*) does not matter. What is important is that he composed poetry by means not of letters (writing) but of voice. Of course, he did write as his MSS actually exist. The truth is that to him as well as all other poets of distinction at least, of any age, writing is only auxiliary: It is no more than the (a) means of preserving their works. Keats composed his *Endymion*, *Hyperion*, *St. Agnes*, the *Odes*, *Lamia* and all others as he listened to his voice either with his actual ears or his mind's ear. This gave him the best training for his hearing. He *might* not have been able to distinguish between the vowel *i* and the semi-vowel *j* of *ear* and *year*, as he actually confuses these two in a MS of the Nightingale Ode where he first wrote:

> Still would thou sing and I have *years* in vain. (Gittings, p. 40)

This is not merely a matter of misspelling, though he often makes spelling mistakes. This may be taken for a piece of evidence showing his inability to distinguish the subtle difference between the two sounds or suggesting his idiosyncrasy of pronunciation. Still, this would not negate the fact that his hearing is excellent. For there are plenty of examples to prove it.

Good poets, as I have found, have many examples of what should be termed "articulatory agreement". The traditional devices like alliteration and rhyme are typical ones which realize two agreements at once: the articulatory and the acoustic; that is why they are easy to perceive and appreciate. Usually "articulatory agreement" has just one agreement—that of articulation. Keats uses this for the very beginning of an ode: "*B*ards of *p*assion and of *m*irth". It is excellent enough to fascinate the reader who loves reading poetry aloud. He feels his lips meet at equal timing; the poet has arranged these words with initial bilabial consonants by placing stress on them (and another one). This is one of the joys of reading aloud. This is the same joy that the Shakespearian actor would feel, as there are innumerable such instances in his plays since the great poet and playwright used his hearing when writing his plays. This is the joy that a reader who uses only his eyes when reading poetry could not have. Probably he could not understand the ingenuity of the famous expression in:

> Thou *w*ast not *b*orn for death, *immortal bird* !

The ingenuity of this expression lies in the hidden "articulatory agreement" between bilabials. Significantly *immortal* has the stress on the second syllable so that the bilabial *m* is fully and strongly articulated to "agree" to the other bilabial in *bird* which is also stressed. Here we should never overlook the fact that these bilabials further "agree" to the other two in the same line, to another *b* in *born* (naturally) and the *w*, another bilabial, in *wast*. All these words are stressed.

Speaking of bilabials, another example testifies to their mastery by the poet:

> Dance, and *P*rovencal song, and sun*b*urnt *m*irth!
> Oh, for a *b*eaker full of the *w*arm South,
> Full of the true, the *b*lushful Hi*pp*ocrene,
> *W*ith *b*eaded *b*ubbles *w*inking at the *b*rim,
> And the *p*urple-stainèd *m*outh,
> That I *m*ight drink, . . .

We should suspect that, used in this way, the bilabials are not just for forming an "ariticulatory agreement". Could not we feel something rich and plentiful through them, especially the expressions, *beaded bubbles winking at the brim/And the purple-stainèd mouth*? Mother Nature's abundant gift to man in the forms of full and ripe grapes and their wine is probably what the poet aimed to reproduce by his imagination. In addition to the bilabial consonants, the twice repeated adjective *full* (and also the suffix of *blushful*) effectively reinforces the feeling of abundance.

For Keats who is all ears for the nightingale's song in his *numbness*, his auditory impression has come foremost. This probably explains why he uses the seemingly uninteresting epithet *fast-fading* for *violets*. This is auditory rather than visual since there is a definite agreement between these two fricatives *f* and *v*. They have the same articulation and their qualities share much in common. In acoustic quality they are much closer to each other than, let's say, p and m. This implies that the poet has been qualified to experiment on the effect of the Shakespearian word *adieu*:

> 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 famed to do, deceiving elf.
> *Adieu*! adieu! . . .

Whether or not Keats borrowed this French word from Shakespeare is of no great importance. The important thing is that wittingly or unwittingly Keats echoes Shakespeare; the more important thing is that he uses this word most effectively in his poem.

It is natural to assume that, as an ardent pupil of Shakespeare, Keats directly borrowed the word from *Hamlet* which he read and "underlined a great deal" (Spurgeon, p. 5). Even if he did not underline the part of the ghost's speech[4], it does not mean definitely that he did not borrow the word:

> Fare thee well at once,
> The glow-worm shows the matin to be near,
> And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire.
> *Adieu, adieu, adieu,* remember me. (I, v)

This word, together, with *remember* echoes in Hamlet's ear.

Now the poet echoes the same word to the nightingale. Here we have to notice that all the words phonetically ideal for echoing in the poem are uttered not by the bird but by the poet himself, beginning with *Fade far away* in the third stanza to the final *adieu* in the final stanza, when the nightingale's *plaintive anthem* fades away. Thus, *fled is that music* with the bird. All this strongly implies that the poet echoes the nightingale's song through these words. He has wanted to fly to the nightingale *on the viewless wing of Poesy*, for he wants to *quite forget* his miseries on earth; then he identifies himself with the bird saying, *Already with thee* (the phonemic structure of this expression is also ideal for echoing!). The nightingale's song is his own now and *vice versa*.

Although this ode is perfect as a poem, from the point of view of sheer logic, however, there seems to be a riddle that one cannot solve. It is the introduction of the word *Forlorn* at the beginning of the final stanza. Logically, it is quite irrelevant to the context of the poem. Yet this has a very important role to *toll the poet back from* the *bird to his sole self* (this is the moment he parts with the *immortal bird*); without this he could not return to the dismal reality of this world. The only probable explanation is that the same word is echoed from the very end of the previous stanza. It would be better to include these words in the echo of the nightingale's (and therefore the poet's) song.

The sound of the word *Forlorn* is compared to the sound of the bell. This is a correct phonetic comparison[5], since especially the final nasal consonant is almost ideal for echoing. It is one of the so-called "soft consonants" that much resemble the vowel. In this respect, the opensyllabic *adieu* is even better, for opensyllables,—i. e. words ending in a vowel, are ideal for producing the effect of echoes. It is precisely because of the nature of the vowel which has a large amplitude (loudness), and regular and gradual fading.

Keats' auditory sense has enabled him to realize this great effect by echoing Shakespeare. We have to realize that he has not isolated the word to attain the effect; if he had, the effect would not have been great. He has prepared it early in the ode. As has been pointed out, already in the beginning of the third stanza he has put down *Fade far away* with two open syllables side by side, to begin the main echoing (I say main echoing as there are other echoes whose analysis I shall attempt elsewhere) continuing to *adieu*. In between come two more *away*s in the beginning of the next stanza. This further continues through twice repeated (again) *forlorn*, as we have seen, at the end of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth stanzas. All this is nothing but the poet's conscious creation. This implies the free mobility of the nightingale whose voice finally fades away

> Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
> Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
> In the next valley-glades.

It is Keats' no ordinary phonetic insight that combined these words (*away*, *forlorn*, and *adieu*) all of which have long vowels. (Phonetically what is termed a "diphthong" can be classified as a long vowel).

Keats' nightingale is comparable to Wordsworth's cuckoo in that both share mysterious characteristics. Either of them is a *wandering Voice passing from hill to hill at once once far off and near*. To imply the effect of the *wandering Voice*, Wordsworth, in a different way from Keats, has contrived an ingenious rhyme scheme:

> While I am lying on the grass
> Thy twofold shouts I *hear*;
> From hill to hill it seems to pass,
> at once far off and *near*.
>
> Though babbling only to the *Vale*
> Of sunshine and of flowers,
> Thou bringest unto me a *tale*
> Of visionary hours.
>
> Thrice welcome, darling of the *Spring*!
> Even yet thou art to *me*
> No bird, but an invisible *thing*,

A voice, a *mystery*.

The italicised words in the first stanza above are not purely opensyllabic in Wordsworth's Northern Accent which still retains the final r today. But unless it has friction like the traditional Scottish final *r*, it would be permissible to treat it as a "frictionless continuant" which is much similar to the vowel. The final nasal *ng* of *Spring* and *thing* is also an ideal consonant for echoing.

Then passing through three more stanzas all with echoing rhymes the poem ends in:

O blessèd Bird! the earth we pace
Again appears to *be*
An unsubstantial, fairy place,
That is fit home for *Thee*!

Significantly, this poem ends in an opensyllabic. Because of the very nature and effect of the vowel, it gives a feeling of continuation. The voice of the cuckoo will continue to *wander* as that of the nightingale.

* * *

Extremely short lived though he was, Keats was quickly transfigured to an *immortal bird* in English Literature mainly through his epics and 1819 odes. Together with a few others *Ode to a Nightingale* has a special place among them. It is a "delight of everyone". For it is a creation of the sensation and imagination of a genius in whom

the nightingale doth sing
Not a senseless, trancèd thing,
But divine melodious truth,
Philosophic numbers smooth,
Tale and golden histories
Of heaven and its mysteries.

NOTES

1 For example: *Encyclopedia of Romanticism*, ed. L. Dabundo, London: Routledge, 1992.

2 In other versions this becomes much clearer —*e. g.* the Jerusalem Bible, Good News Bible. The former has: "It *is* better for you, my daughter, to go with his servants than to go to some other field where you might be *molested*"; the latter has: "Yes, daughter, it will be better for you to work with the women in Boaz's field. You might be *molested* if you went to someone else's field." Thus, the implication is clearly sexual. Moreover, it is significant that Ruth is in danger of sexual assault in either Boaz's or someone else's field.

3 Probably this is his coinage; *The Oxford English Dictionary* records this as the first example of usage.

4 Spurgeon has not reproduced any annotated page from "Keats' Hamlet" in her *Descriptive Study*.

5 See Chapter 8 of my *The Poetry of G. M. Hopkins: The Fusing Point of Sound and Sense* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press, 1983).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Allot, M. ed., *The Poems of John Keats*, London: Longman, 1970.

Evans, I., *A Short History of English Literature*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970.

Gittings, R., *The Odes of Keats and their Earliest Known Manuscripts in Facsimile*, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 1970.

Lilly, W. S. ed., *A Newman Anthology*, London: Dennis Dobson Ltd., 1949.

Rollins, H. E. ed., *The Keats Circle*, 2 vols., Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1969.

——— (ed.), *The Letters of John Keats*, 2 vols.,Cambridge, Masachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1972.

Spurgeon, C. F. E., *Keats's Shakespeare*: *A Descriptive Study*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968.

(Manuscript received : September 30,1992)
(Published : December 28,1992)