


The Nightingale of Keats

 Those who have frequented the lyric poetry of England will not forget the "Ode to a Nightingale" that John Keats, consumptive, poor, and perhaps unfortunate in love, composed in a Hampstead garden one April night in 1819 when he was twenty-three. In the garden Keats heard the eternal nightingale of Ovid and Shakespeare and felt his own mortality, contrasting it with the delicate imperishable voice of the invisible bird. Keats had written that the poet must give poetry naturally, as the tree gives leaves; two or three hours were all he needed to produce that page of inexhaustible and insatiable beauty, which he scarcely had to touch afterward. As far as I know, its virtue has never been questioned, but its interpretation has. The crux of the problem is found in the penultimate stanza. The circumstantial and mortal man addresses the bird, "No hungry generations tread thee down," whose voice, now, is the same heard by Ruth the Moabite on the fields of Israel one ancient afternoon.

In his monograph on Keats, published in 1887, Sidney Colvin (a correspondent and friend of Stevenson) perceived or invented a difficulty in the stanza I am speaking of. He made a curious statement that with an error of logic (which in his opinion was also a poetic fault) Keats opposed to the fugacity of human life, by which he meant the life of the individual, the permanence of the bird's life, by which

he meant the life of the species. In 1895 Bridges repeated the accusation; F. R. Leavis approved it in 1936 and added that the fallacy included in the concept naturally proved the intensity of the feeling that engendered it. In the first stanza of his poem Keats had called the nightingale a Dryad; another critic, Garrod, quoted that epithet in all seriousness to express the opinion that the bird was immortal because it was a dryad, a divinity of the forests. Amy Lowell wrote more accurately that the reader who had a spark of imaginative or poetic sense would perceive at once that Keats did not refer to the nightingale singing at that moment, but to the species.

Those are five opinions from five critics of the past and the present; of them all I find the dictum of the North American writer Amy Lowell the least vain; but I deny the opposition she postulated between the ephemeral nightingale of that night and the generic nightingale. I suspect that the key, the exact key to the stanza, is to be found in a metaphysical paragraph by Schopenhauer, who never read the poem.

The "Ode to a Nightingale" was written in 1819; the second volume of *The World as Will and Idea* appeared in 1844. In Chapter 41 we read:

Let us ask ourselves sincerely whether the swallow of this summer is a different one than the swallow of the first summer, and whether the miracle of bringing something forth from nothingness has really occurred millions of times between the two, to be mocked an equal number of times by absolute annihilation. Whoever hears me say that this cat playing here now is the same one that frolicked and romped in this place three hundred years ago may think of me what he will, but it is a stranger madness to imagine that he is fundamentally different.

In other words, the individual is somehow the species, and the nightingale of Keats is also the nightingale of Ruth.

Keats, who could write without exaggerated injustice that he knew nothing, that he had read nothing, divined the Greek spirit from the pages of a schoolboy's dictionary; a very subtle proof of that divination or re-creation is his intuitive recognition of the Platonic nightingale in the dark nightingale of a spring evening. Keats, who was perhaps incapable of defining the word *archetype*, anticipated one of Schopenhauer's theses by a quarter of a century.

Now that one difficulty has been clarified, there is still another one, of a very different nature. Why did Garrod and Leavis and the others not find this obvious interpretation?¹ Leavis was a professor at one of the colleges of Cambridge, the city that in the seventeenth century was the meeting place of the Cambridge Platonists and gave them their name; Bridges wrote a Platonic poem entitled "The Fourth Dimension"; the mere enumeration of those facts seems to aggravate the enigma. If I am not mistaken, the reason derives from something essential in the British mind.

Coleridge observes that all men are born Aristotelians or Platonists. The latter feel that classes, orders, and genres are realities; the former, that they are generalizations. For the latter, language is nothing but an approximative set of symbols; for the former, it is the map of the universe. The Platonist knows that the universe is somehow a cosmos, an order; that order, for the Aristotelian, can be an error or a fiction of our partial knowledge. Across the latitudes and the epochs, the two immortal antagonists change their name and language: one is Parmenides, Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Francis Bradley; the other, Heraclitus, Aristotle, Locke, Hume, William James. In the arduous schools of the Middle Ages they all invoke Aristotle, the master of human reason (*Convivio*, IV, 2), but the nominalists are Aristotle; the realists, Plato. The English nominalism of the fourteenth century reappears in the scrupulous English idealism of the eighteenth century; the economy of Occam's formula, *entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*, permits or prefigures the no less precise *esse est percipi*. Men, said Coleridge, are born Aristotelians or Platonists; one can state of the English mind that it was born Aristotelian. For that mind, not abstract concepts but individual ones are real; not the generic nightingale, but concrete nightingales. It is natural, it is perhaps inevitable, that in England the "Ode to a Nightingale" is not understood correctly.

Please do not read reprobation or disdain into the foregoing words. The Englishman rejects the generic because he feels that the indi-

¹ To these must be added the poet of genius, William Butler Yeats, who in the first stanza of "Sailing to Byzantium" speaks of "Those dying generations" of birds, with a deliberate or involuntary allusion to the "Ode." See T. R. Henn, *The Lonely Tower* (1950), p. 211.

vidual is irreducible, unassimilable, and unique. An ethical scruple, not a speculative incapacity, prevents him from trafficking in abstractions like the German. He does not understand the "Ode to a Nightingale"; that estimable incomprehension permits him to be Locke, to be Berkeley, to be Hume, and to write (around seventy years ago) the unheeded and prophetic admonitions about the individual against the State.

In all the languages of the world the nightingale enjoys a melodious name (*ruiseñor*, *nachtigall*, *usignolo*, for example), as if men instinctively wished the name to be not unworthy of the song that filled them with wonder. Poets have exalted it to such an extent that it has come to be a little unreal, less akin to the lark than to the angel. From the Saxon enigmas of *The Exeter Book*, where it is called the ancient singer of the evening that brings joy to the noblemen, to Swinburne's tragic *Atalanta*, the infinite nightingale has sung in English literature. Chaucer and Shakespeare extol it, and Milton and Matthew Arnold, but we inevitably attach its image to John Keats, as we attach the tiger's to Blake.