Chapter 20

Prosody and Versification in the Odes

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In Walter Jackson Bate's 1945 monograph *The Stylistic Development of Keats*, still an essential companion to the poetry, Bate sees Keats's poetry as bound up with his responsiveness to 'the distinctive meaning and individuality of the particular'. This responsiveness is evidenced in the poet's delight 'in a sparrow or even a billiard ball'. It prompts phrases such as 'the *moist scent* of flowers' in *The Fall of Hyperion* (I. 404) or it finds expression in the stress-bunching revision of '*drooping* lamp' to '*chain-droop'd* lamp' in *The Eve of St. Agnes* (357).[1] In the light of the work of Bate and others, the present chapter offers some brief thoughts on Keats's prosody and versification (including the mingling of sense and sound[2]) in his odes.

As has often been noted, the great breakthrough of the odes is their dismantling and reconstruction of the sonnet. In 'If by dull rhymes our English must be chain'd' Keats writes an anti-sonnet sonnet; he protests against constraints of rhyme imposed by traditional schemes. He proposes and in the poem itself enacts 'Sandals more interwoven and complete / To fit the naked foot of Poesy' (5-6). The odes reap the benefit of this experimentation to find a 'Sandals' that will 'fit Poesy's naked foot', a comparison that wittily undercuts itself since the pun on 'foot' (implying metrical form as well as limb) complicates the metaphor of clothing. After the varied stanzas forms of 'Ode to Psyche' they settle into the fixed, magically mutable pattern of quatrain followed by sestet typical of the Spring odes ('To Autumn' plays a variation by adding a line). The result does much to make possible 'lyric debate'.[3] The quatrain often begins a train of thought that is new but associatively related to the previous stanza; the sestet spreads, pervades, ramifies, a six-line fantail of suggestions.

Dialogue, re-orchestration, cross-ply rehearsals and returns, unexpected spacious evolvings: all are enabled by this structural device, as is the balance between warring impulses which from Coleridge to I. A. Richards has been seen as a hallmark of poetic equilibrium. Not that Keats's balances are ever less than precarious, even as they are always more than mere balancing acts. A question, 'Who are these coming to the sacrifice?' ('Ode on a Grecian Urn', 31), tells us implicitly that the poet has shifted his attention from individual lovers to a collective group; the line's prosody is even in its emphases and searching in its secondary stresses on 'Who' and 'these', while 'sacrifice' gains in weight and resonance through its contrast with shorter words and its occupation of the rhyme-position. The stanza's close tells us that the true answer to that opening question is that there is no answer, since there is no witness:

> And, little town, thy streets for evermore
> Will silent be, and not a soul to tell
> Why thou art desolate, can e'er return. (38-40)

In the crucial first two feet of the lines the prosody is regular. The writing achieves pathos through successive strong pauses after the fourth syllable in those first two lines and after the sixth syllable in the third. Pathos also derives from the 'management of open & close vowels', which Benjamin Bailey recalled as 'one of Keats's favorite topics of discourse': 'Keats's theory was that the vowels should be so managed as not to clash with one another so as to mar the melody, -- and yet they should be interchanged, like differing notes in music, to prevent monotony'. [4] In the case of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', this variety avoids aesthetic 'monotony' by implying a curve of feeling and the tonelessness of aftermath. The 'interplay' of the vowels -- between, for example, the 'desolate' quality that attaches to the short *e* of

‘tell’ and ‘desolate’, and the yearning that surrounds the repeated sounds in ‘town’ and the personifying ‘thou’ -- track, in miniature, the passage of ‘unheard’ (11) melodies into an eternal lifeless silence.

Silence in line 2 of the poem promised discoverable mystery; here Keats discovers the silence of temporal desolation, the word ‘silent’ taking an appropriately prominent position in line 39. The poet’s speaking voice emerges audibly in the near-endearment ‘little town’, a town that precedes (35) and follows its possible location ‘by river or sea shore, / Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel’ (35-6). Its location may be uncertain; what is certain is that the town is ‘emptied of this folk, this pious morn’ (37). As the very sounds of ‘mountain’ and ‘morn’ chime with and against the ‘town’, they, along with the gesturing repetition of ‘this’, suggest the poet’s imagination as it breathes life into what may have inspired but has eluded the craftsman’s hand (the town is not to be seen on the urn’s surface). The fact that ‘not a soul can e’er return’ is doubly felt because of the impulse to return evident in the poem’s sounds, of which the rhyme involving ‘return’ is one, a word that holds within itself, in an ‘overlooked pun’, the ‘urn’ that cannot enable return.[5]

‘Ode on Grecian Urn’, like ‘Ode on Melancholy’ and ‘To Autumn’, does not use shorter lines; ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and ‘Ode to Psyche’ do. ‘Ode to Psyche’ concludes by building towards a rebuilt extended sonnet, its final two stanzas consisting, respectively, of fourteen and eighteen lines. Keats’s management of these stanzas is strenuously playful. In the penultimate stanza, his rhymes almost mock the sonnet, in accord with his belated stance as one ‘Too, too late for the fond believing lyre’ (37). An alternately rhymed quatrain (Shakespearean) is followed by the envelope quatrain rhyme (*abba*) associated with the Petrarchan octave, before the poem allows two lines -- ‘So let me be thy choir, and make a moan / Upon the midnight hours’ (44-5) -- to be rhyme-free after a key line, ‘I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired’ (43), even if they virtually reword in antiphonal form lines in the

previous stanza (30-1). Then the stanza concludes with an alternately rhymed quatrain with two trimeters that have a jaunty feminine rhyme:

> Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
> From swinged incense teeming;
> Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
> Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming. (46-9)

Yet because of the extra stresses in 'pale-mouth'd prophet' the rhyme is not naively jaunty. Keats half-mocks yet wholly adopts the quasi-priestly role implied by 'teeming' and 'dreaming', as comes to the fore in the first line of the final stanza: 'Yes, I will be thy priest' (50), less a different note of music than a crashing chord.

In the final stanza, Keats makes fane-building, poem-construction, his topic; the poem builds its dome in air, or in 'some untrodden region of my mind' (51). The final stanza's first fourteen lines base themselves, as Bate notes, on the form of 'an exact Shakespearean sonnet, with the couplet removed from the end and placed after the octave to break the flow of the continual alternate-rhyming' (the stanza then appends a further quatrain).[6] The expressive effect of that couplet displacement is to place the gesture of achievement before rather than at the close of the poem. The lines in question, 'And in the midst of this wide quietness / A rosy sanctuary will I dress' (58-9) might almost have done for a conclusion. But Keats finishes less with an assertion of the creative will than with a testing of its hopes and aspirations; he brings in doubt along with affirmation. His 'fane' (50) will depend on what he can 'feign' (62), the words glancing a little suspiciously at one another by virtue of being in the rhyme position. Psyche will receive 'all soft delight / That shadowy thought can win' (64-5), where, in 'shadowy', the flicker of an extra syllable casts a shade over 'thought'. Finally, bravely,

Keats brings the poem round to its mythic catalyst, and invokes 'A bright torch, and a casement ope at night / To let the warm Love in!' (67-8). After the rallying stresses on 'bright' and 'torch', the last line turns like a key in a lock, freeing the poem from the cell of potential solipsism. What is allowed 'in' ('warm Love') can assist the attaining of all that 'shadowy thought can win'; the rhyme sings by its own ears inspired.

Bate draws attention to the cluster of technical devices that Keats uses in the odes to achieve greater richness and intensity of texture. They include a rejection of Latinate words in favour of words 'more native in origin', and a greater use of 'bilabials' and spondees (two consecutive strong stresses).[7] The spondaic point is one that I want to pause over in relation to an example he helpfully supplies: the close of the 'Ode on a Nightingale'. The opening of this last stanza is often quoted, accruing brilliant commentary, as in Geoffrey Hill's austerely empathetic remark about the echo of 'forlorn': 'The echo is not so much a recollection as a revocation; and what is revoked is an attitude towards art and within art.'[8] The moment makes us realise that this apparently unpremeditated ode has just eavesdropped on itself, listened to and replayed a semantically shifting rhyme word in 'faery lands forlorn' (70). But one hears less about these lines:

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

Marking the spondees in '*near mead*ows', 'still stream', 'hill-side' and '*next vall*ey (emphases added), Bate argues that the 'distinctive use of scattered spondees, together with initial inversion, lend an approximate phonetic suggestion of the peculiar spring and bounce

of the bird in its flight'.[9] Possibly so; but the lines also articulate an unwillingness fully to identify the bird-song with 'the fancy' (73) as a 'deceiving elf' (74). If body is given to the bird's winged departure, emphasis is also given to the poet's tracking of its departure and uncertain but half-yearning location of it in 'the next valley-glades'. Keats knows he has been in an enchanted place or state. He hopes by speaking of his experience and its catalyst as though they were a quotidian matter of meadow, hill and valley that they might be recapturable. The spondees help steady the poem; it regains its poise; the notion 'the fancy' did not 'cheat' (73) at all must surely be one allowable implication of the wandering final questions: 'Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: – Do I wake or sleep? (79-80).

These lines mark a return to the use of a mid-line pause (caesura), employed a few times earlier in this poem of endlessly self-adjusting movements. The mid-line caesura reinforces the exultant ambiguity of 'Already with thee! tender is the night' (35) or the seductive allure of the song that 'Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam / Of perilous seas' (69-70). Thanks to a well-judged revision -- the draft read 'Was it a vision real or waking dream?' (*P* 370n) – the final lines of the ode puzzle the reader into seeking to resolve and reformulate the difference between a 'vision' and 'waking dream'. The result is an enriching quandary, complicated further by the final line's repetition of stress on the syllable 'wake'.

One thing that is sure, and accepted with elegiac nobility, is the fact that 'Fled is that music': the nightingale's and the poem's. The line's precursor passage in 'Sleep and Poetry' invites comparison:

> The visions all are fled – the car is fled
> Into the light of heaven, and in their stead

A sense of real things comes doubly strong,
And, like a muddy stream, would bear along
My soul to nothingness (155-9).

The phrase 'doubly strong' strikes the passage's key note, here, as the steady, even steadfast iambics enact a bracing recognition, 'A sense of real things'. The pause after 'nothingness' is momentary but marked, glimpsing how the poet's 'soul' might be borne along to 'nothingness'. The ode, returning to these lines, crystallises and compacts them; it takes from 'fled' the burden of supplying a rhyme word, positioning it at the start of the line, where it sheds a valedictory music, marked by a reversed stress. Using a medial caesura, this last line pivots and tilts halfway through, causing itself and the poem to spin on the question, 'Do I wake or sleep'.

Spondee in the odes is a metrical vehicle of absorbed discovery, and among the discoveries made in 'Ode to a Nightingale' is the importance for poetry of the maligned 'sole self' (72). The phrase takes a spondaic pause at the close of the opening lines of the final stanza: 'Forlorn! the very word is like a bell / To toll me back from thee to my sole self!' (71-2). Keats's decision to bring out the soleness, the singular uniqueness, of the self shows in his revision from the draft's 'from thee unto myself' (see *P* 371n): 'sole self' intensifies 'myself', and suggests the significance of the self without whose presence and tensions there would be no flights of imagination. Through its versification, the last stanza lays bare the conditions that enable poetic activity, and in it the spondaic is Keats's marker of his own 'inscape' as Gerard Manley Hopkins, one of his major inheritors, will call it, and by extension that of any individual.[10]

The Keatsian prosodic signature involves wheelings and returns: 'Ay, in the very temple of Delight / Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine' ('Ode on Melancholy', 25-6);

‘Where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they? / Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.—’ (‘To Autumn’, 23-4). In these two exemplary odic turns, the rhythms move, in Middleton Murry’s sure-footed phrase, ‘towards a complete acceptance of a peculiar kind’. [11] The writing accommodates oppositions, latent and manifest; it offers and is attuned to an equable if sorrowing music. Prosodically, the iambic holds its own even as it is beaten into a sword of finer temper through initial stresses (apparent in all four lines) and regroupings (the reinforcing ‘ay’ and ‘thou’). These rhythms suits a poetry that 'marks the before unapprehended relations of things, and perpetuates their apprehension’, as Shelley has it in *A Defence of Poetry*.[12]

The lines quoted above from ‘Ode on Melancholy’ attain a note that might, in one Keat’s own coinages, be termed ‘high-sorrowful’ (‘Ode on a Grecian Urn’, 29). They do so because the poem’s third and final stanza in which they occur forsakes the commands and adjurations of the first two stanzas in favour of statement. The poem that intrigued and delighted with imperatives now offers the difficult balm of near-paradoxical declaration. The poem opens with a flurry of urgent monosyllabic negatives: ‘No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist / Wolf’s bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine’ (1-2). The lines win a complex melody from what feels like contending, even mutually-obstructing impulses: both the rejection of oblivion and drug, and the attraction of these things, are marked in the clustering stresses of, say, ‘Wolf’s-bane, tight-rooted’. Stanza two depicts ‘the melancholy fit’ (11) as a force of nature, falling ‘Sudden’, as a reversed foot at the start of the line has it, ‘from heaven like a weeping cloud’ (12). The fit is also a humorously sardonic version of traditional Christian ideas of grace as it falls from ‘heaven’. And yet the recollection is more than sardonic: if the ‘weeping cloud’ of the simile suggests lamentation, it quickly becomes an agent of restoration ‘That fosters the droop-headed flowers all’ (13).

Here and elsewhere in the ode, prosodic art is at the service of a concentrated array of suggestions, the droopiness of the flowers, for instance, granted full presence by the fifth syllable's additional beat. The stanza retains an element of play through its compilation of melancholy instances and how best to respond to them, concluding with the high-spirited aestheticism of feeding 'deep, deep upon' the 'mistress's 'peerless eyes' (20). Yet as Keats imagines that strangely non-reciprocal gaze he senses, in an electrifying transition that recalls effects in Donne (the third stanza of the 'The Sun Rising' is a case in point), that 'She' (both mistress and melancholy) 'dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die' (21). The entire poem and the near-series of which it is part come to a rest and a focus in this line. It is central to Keats's prosody and versification that he can shape objective correlatives for this awareness. But the line itself seems far more than doctrine painfully proved on the pulses; it has the character of memorable dramatic utterance, as Keats seems to reach down to deep levels of the iambic tradition. His voice delays on 'dwell' and the repeated 'Beauty', giving both words their moment in the spotlight, before the conclusive force of 'must die', a spondaic hammer-blow. But by realising the entwinement of beauty and dying, Keats is able to advance to the embittered, dignified vision of the end. There, , he or his surrogate is rewarded and defeated in virtually the same poetic breath, as a stoically resolved iambic rhythm and echoic sound-patterning recognise: 'His soul shall taste the sadness of her might, / And be among her cloudy trophies hung' (29-30).

In 'To Autumn', as Keats come to terms with what it is to be alive after Waterloo and indeed Peterloo, he writes a poetry that has foresuffered all and makes newly fortified and fortifying discoveries, as is shown by the remainder of that final stanza:

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn

Among the river sallows, borne aloft

Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;
And gathering swallows twitter in the skies. (27-33)

Reversed feet cluster in the opening two stanzas with their intent movements of near-bodily involvement: 'Seasons of mists' (1), 'Close bosom-friend' (2), 'Drows'd with the fume of poppies' (17), 'Steady thy laden head' (20). By the time of the third stanza, there is a change; such stresses diminish. If they reappear, they do so in an elegiac minor key, as in 'Then in a wailful choir' or 'Hedge-crickets sing', to quote two phrases that go in different directions: the first the nearest thing to a tragic note in the stanza, or mock-tragic: it is 'the small gnats' who 'mourn'; the second the disciplined marker of a gathering up, a composing. Or they migrate, beautifully, to the middle of the line, as in the stress on 'bloom' a transitive verb that helps put a soft colour into the cheeks of dying.[13]

Helen Vendler argues finely that the poem's close, its 'glance that rises to the skies' 'is purged of self-referential pathos and nostalgia for the past. The Ode has floated free of its occasion, and ends poised in the sound of song, sufficient unto itself.'[14] That self-sufficiency, however, flowers out of a poem's search for what will suffice, a search embodied in the poem's versification, as Paul D. Sheats notes in relation to the line that haunts the poem through its double act of miming and exposing poetic and human hopes: 'Until they think warm days will never cease' (10):

> The line that exposes the ironic effect of summer's generosity (10) is made to conspire in this generosity, by forming a couplet that prolongs the stanza's closing

cadence (cdecDDe). Here, in Keats's one readjustment of the May stanza, meter functions as a formal, nonsemantic analogue to the passage of time.[15]

In the ode metre functions, not only as 'a formal, nonsemantic analogue', but as part of the poetry's achieved meanings. In 'To Autumn', as in the odes as a whole, prosody and versification shape and guide the relationship between poet and reader. Our sole selves blend, as a result of Keats's technical and expressive skill, with that of the poet, with whom we participate in the knowledge of 'other woe / Than ours', hoping to make of art a 'friend' ('Ode on a Grecian Urn', 47-8, 48).

Notes

[1] See Walter Jackson Bates, *The Stylistic Development of John Keats* (1945; Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), pp. 7, 6, 4, 2; italics in quotations are Bates's.

[3] Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (1963; London: Hogarth, 1992), p. 500.

[4] *KC* 2, 277.

[5] James L. O'Rourke, *Keats's Odes and Contemporary Criticism* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1998), p. 81.

[6] Bate, *Stylistic Development*, p. 130. The Shakespearean sonnet form is present also in lines 1-14 and elsewhere in the poem (see Bate, *Stylistic Development*, p. 129).

[7] Bate, *Stylistic Development*, pp. 135-9 (135).

[8] Geoffrey Hill, 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', in *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (London: Deutsch, 1984), p. 4

[9] Bate, *Stylistic Development*, p. 139.

[10] For Hopkins on 'inscape', see his letter to Robert Bridges, 15 February 1979, in Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Major Works*, ed. Catherine Phillips (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 235.

[11] John Middleton Murry, *Keats and Shakespeare: A Study of Keats' Poetic Life from 1816 to 1820* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), p. 129.

[12] *Percy Bysshe Shelley: The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 676.

[13] See Jon Silkin, *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, ed. with intro Jon Silkin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), pp. 66-7.

[14] Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 261.

[15] 'Keats and the Ode', in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 98.