"Ode to a Nightingale" - Keats

Keats is in a state of uncomfortable drowsiness. Envy of the imagined happiness of the nightingale is not responsible for his condition; rather, it is a reaction to the happiness he has experienced through sharing in the happiness of the nightingale. The bird's happiness is conveyed in its singing. KEATS LONGS FOR A DRAUGHT OF WINE WHICH WOULD TAKE HIM OUT OF HIMSELF AND ALLOW HIM TO JOIN HIS EXISTENCE WITH THAT OF THE BIRD. THE WINE WOULD PUT HIM IN A STATE IN WHICH HE WOULD NO LONGER BE HIMSELF, AWARE THAT LIFE IS FULL OF PAIN, THAT THE YOUNG DIE, THE OLD SUFFER, AND THAT JUST TO THINK ABOUT LIFE BRINGS SORROW AND DESPAIR. BUT WINE IS NOT NEEDED TO ENABLE HIM TO ESCAPE. HIS IMAGINATION WILL SERVE JUST AS WELL. AS SOON AS HE REALIZES THIS, HE IS, IN SPIRIT, LIFTED UP ABOVE THE TREES AND CAN SEE THE MOON AND THE STARS EVEN THOUGH WHERE HE IS PHYSICALLY THERE IS ONLY A GLIMMERING OF LIGHT. HE CANNOT SEE WHAT FLOWERS ARE GROWING AROUND HIM, BUT FROM THEIR ODOR AND FROM HIS KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT FLOWERS SHOULD BE IN BLOOM AT THE TIME HE CAN GUESS.

In the darkness he listens to the nightingale. Now, he feels, it would be a rich experience to die, "to cease upon the midnight with no pain" while the bird would continue to sing ecstatically. Many a time, he confesses, he has been "half in love with easeful Death." The nightingale is free from the human fate of having to die. The song of the nightingale that he is listening to was heard in ancient times by emperor and peasant. Perhaps even Ruth (whose story is told in the Old Testament) heard it.

Forlorn," the last word of the preceding stanza, brings Keats in the concluding stanza back to consciousness of what he is and where he is. He cannot escape even with the help of the imagination. The singing of the bird grows fainter and dies away. The experience he has had seems so strange and confusing that he is not sure whether it was a vision or a daydream. He is even uncertain whether he is asleep or awake.

Analysis

The "Ode to a Nightingale" is a regular ode. All eight stanzas have ten pentameter lines and a uniform rhyme scheme. Although the poem is regular in form, it leaves the impression of being a kind of rhapsody; Keats is allowing his thoughts and emotions free expression. One thought suggests another and, in this way, the poem proceeds to a somewhat arbitrary conclusion. The poem impresses the reader as being the result of free inspiration uncontrolled by a preconceived plan. The poem is Keats in the act of sharing with the reader an experience he is having rather than recalling an experience. The experience is not entirely coherent. It is what happens in his mind while he is listening to the song of a nightingale.

Three main thoughts stand out in the ode. One is Keats' evaluation of life; life is a vale of tears and frustration. The happiness which Keats hears in the song of the nightingale has made him happy momentarily but has been succeeded by a feeling of torpor which in turn is succeeded by the conviction that life is not only painful but also intolerable. His taste of happiness in hearing the nightingale has made him all the more aware of the unhappiness of life. Keats wants to escape from life, not by means of wine, but by a much more powerful agent, the imagination.

The second main thought and the main theme of the poem is Keats' wish that he might die and be rid of life altogether, providing he could die as easily and painlessly as he could fall asleep. The preoccupation with death does not seem to have been caused by any turn for the worse in Keats' fortunes at the time he wrote the ode (May 1819). In many respects Keats' life had been unsatisfactory for some time before he wrote the poem. His family life was shattered by the departure of one brother to America and the death from tuberculosis of the other. His second volume of poetry had been harshly reviewed. He had no gainful occupation and no prospects, since he had abandoned his medical studies. His financial condition was insecure. He had not been well in the fall and winter of 1818-19 and possibly he was already suffering from tuberculosis. He could not marry Fanny Brawne because he was not in a position to support her.

Thus the death-wish in the ode may be a reaction to a multitude of troubles and frustrations, all of which were still with him. The heavy weight of life pressing down on him forced "Ode to a Nightingale" out of him. Keats more than once expressed a desire for "easeful Death," yet when he was in the final stages of tuberculosis he fought against death by going to Italy where he hoped the climate would cure him. The death-wish in the ode is a passing but recurrent attitude toward a life that was unsatisfactory in so many ways.

The third main thought in the ode is the power of imagination or fancy. (Keats does not make any clear-cut distinction between the two.) In the ode Keats rejects wine for poetry, the product of imagination, as a means of identifying his existence with that of the happy nightingale. But poetry does not work the way it is supposed to. He soon finds himself back with his everyday, trouble-filled self. That "fancy cannot cheat so well / As she is fam'd to do," he admits in the concluding stanza. The imagination is not the all-powerful function Keats, at times, thought it was. It cannot give more than a temporary escape from the cares of life.

- Keats' assignment of immortality to the nightingale in stanza VII has caused readers much trouble. Keats perhaps was thinking of a literal nightingale; more likely, however, he was thinking of the nightingale as a symbol of poetry, which has a permanence.
- Keats' evocative power is shown especially in stanza II where he associates a beaker of wine "with beaded bubbles winking at the brim," with sunny France and the "sunburnt mirth" of the harvesters, and in his picture in stanza VII of Ruth suffering from homesickness "amid the alien corn." The whole ode is a triumph of tonal richness of that adagio verbal music that is Keats' special contribution to the many voices of poetry.

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