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NIGHTINGALE HYDRAULICS

I kissed in a place where garbage came down like rain
I kissed where I vomited all night long
Every time I sang vomit flew in

Maybe you know this song. It's "The Road to Kimp'o Landfill" by Kim Hyesoon, translated by Don Mee Choi. It tells how Art arrives, how it goes, and what it goes like—like trash, rain, vomit, song. Every substance of Art acts like a fluid, including sound. On arrival, it floods the poet's body—"The sound of Mother's sewing machine / filled the holes in my body, one by one." *Orifice* derives, etymologically, from *ora* + *facere*, to make a mouth, so every hole in the body becomes an orifice for imbibing and emitting Art. Drinking mouths and vomiting mouths. Miscarrying mouths and singing mouths. Art rises up the nose, turns the stomach. It can be huffed like baby powder or expelled like babies. Why does it make you vomit? Because it is toxic.

Art's toxicology is also the business of the pharmacist Keats's Nightingale Ode, in which to hear the exquisite (yet widely available) Nightingale's song is to take Art in through every sense-hole like poison and to undergo poison's symptomatic attack. Sing it with me, or just hum along to yourself:

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

It's fun, because the derangement of the senses is brought on by drinking, by a surfeiting experienced as hydraulics. To drowse, drink, drain. The sinking and draining are immediately contrasted with the upwards-motion of the epithet, "light-wingèd Dryad of the trees." Starting and ending in

“d,” the “Dryad” is a mirror image of itself, a sonic and visual imprint of Art’s chiasmic possibility, a folded dollar bill. This “light-wingèd Dryad” is the twittering vessel from which the song-poison pours into Keats’s ear; it’s from this syrupy surplus of “d”s that the drowsing/drinking/draining dribbles, perhaps along the diacritical of the *accent grave* in “wingèd,” or else down the winestem of the “y” in “drowsy”— a dowser or divining rod that indicates where water is, when it points so alertly *down*.

Let’s pause by these seductively murky waters to contemplate the ichorousness of Keats’s verse—the characteristic/catechetical way his descriptions are suffused by the gorge-rising muchness of adjectives (*ad + jacere*, to throw toward, to hurl). The scholar Nikki Hessell has shown that Keats’s reliance on adjectives ending in “y” was particularly singled out for derision by critics, as exemplified by this passage from the infamous *Edinburgh Review* hit-piece:

“Leafy luxury,” “jaunty streams,” “lawny slope,” “the moon-beamy air,” “a sun-beamy tale”: these, if not namby-pamby, are, at least, the “holiday and lady terms” of those affected creatures who write verses “in spite of nature and their stars.” [qtd in Hessell, 91]

Even for this nay-sayer, Keats’s treacly “y” sound is sticky, gumming up the critic’s own prose in the phrases “namby-pamby” and “holiday and lady terms” (the former phrase originated as an epithet with which Pope and his contemporaries disparaged pastoralist Ambrose Philip; the latter directly quotes Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* describing the weedling language of an unmanly courtier, “perfumèd like a milliner,” “a popinjay.”) In the language of this Scotch reviewer, the hyperbole of scorn rises like the hyperbole of which Keats is accused, a sugary meniscus to attract the reader’s beak. As Hessell goes on to illustrate in her article “John Keats, the Botanist’s Companion,”

Keats’s descriptive and adjectival habits reflect the textbooks, methods, and jargon of his medico-botanical training. In particular, adjectives ending in “y” do specific, meaningful scientific work that would help a trainee doctor distinguish one plant from another with great precision. The “-y” suffix does not dilute the noun to which it attached, but rather suffuses it, making the quality described integral to how one might view a plant.” [100]

As Hessel also shows, such advances in descriptive precision were urgent during the period of Keats's training; there had been several recent cases of fatal poisonings resulting from the misidentification of plants by doctors prescribing botanical cures. Far from a "namby-pamby" weakening of descriptive powers, Keats's adjectival habit entails an intensification as well as a reiteration of the fatal closeness of plants and poisons. It also entails, perhaps, a kind of perverse autohomeopathy—infusing nouns with their own qualities, an oversaturation that emits the dubious elixir of Poesie.

Hessel's article allows us to realize that Keats's adjectives "suffuse" the noun, a parasitical arrangement: the adjective preys on the noun, infusing it with its qualities, like a virus that injects its DNA into a host. This mode of suffusal with a toxic dose of Art is also the method of each Ode, intoxicated by its subject. In the case of the Nightingale, the Ode opens with Keats already aching and going numb from the effects of toxin apparently encountered "one minute past," from essential, undiluted contact with Art via the Nightingale's song.

The dramatization of the poem as teetering off a shallow temporal delay, "one minute past" the hearing of the birdsong, parallels the experience the reader might have, reading the title, gleaning the subject, then leaping over the visual synaptic gap between title and the first line, before tumbling headlong into the full blush of the sensuously and adjectivally suffused Ode. This anesthetic pause, this syncope, might represent the unrepresentable arrival of the song, which must be represented by its toxic and intoxicating after-effects. Or it might represent what happens in the brain's mysterious bower while perceiving Art's arrival, a bower Keats builds and subjunctively anticipates inhabiting in poem after poem right up to the eve of his death, when he is reported to have said to Severn,

I shall soon be laid in the quiet grave—thank God for the quiet grave—O! I can feel the cold earth upon me—the daisies growing over me—O for this quiet—it will be my first.

I like it when a saint looks on paradise. 19th century Irish mystic and feminist Frances Cobbe Powers employs a Keatsian phrase to describe the glimpses of the afterlife described by the soon-to-die; she called such deathbed testimony a "Peak in Darien" experience. Typically for Keats, his view from the Peak in Darien is *viewless*: inverted, underground, and tactile.

To return to our Bird, the Dryad is a version of the poet himself, a species of mobile chiasmus, reversing and improving his most deplored conditions—rising where the poet sinks, trending elsewhere when the poet remains so definitively “Here.” The axes of likeness and unlikeness intersect in phrases that seem to reflect both parties, like the adjective “full-throated,” describing at once the bird’s throat sufflated with song and the poet’s with (poison) drink. Any intoxicated person peering a little too long at a club mirror will have had the uncanny experience of glimpsing an object smeared with a version of herself; just so, the singing Dryad seems to bear the poet’s drinking throat. Later in the poem, the poet will be doubled again by his drinking cup which bears, in advance of his drinking from it, his own purple-stained mouth. The quality of ambient drunkenness (and maybe ambient doubleness) is like the song itself, and like Art: a font of likeness. It fills and flows from the dim glade and makes more of itself.

As the Ode grows longer, it becomes a channel, a rivulet down along which the song/wine may flow until the speaker wakes, as a drunk might, in a stupor. Admittedly, the poet’s drunkenness is not literal but by turns figurative, subjunctive, metaphorical and optative, “as though” and “that I might” and “I will” and “It seems.” But since we are fully immersed in the groves of Poesie, the fact that his drunkenness is figurative only renders him all the more drunk, the effects all the more keen. Figuration is the ultimate draught, both hippocrene and hemlock. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that the speaker-poet wants to be more like the bird, who in fact is already like him, or more like his cup, which is assigned his own purple lip.

To drink from Art’s vessel is to participate in a deranged, Rimbaudean hydraulics of synesthesia, wherein green is “melodious” and the draught the speaker longs for “Taste[s] of Flora and the country green.” This draught has been “cooled a long while in the deep delvèd earth,” like wine, of course, but also like the dead. In this black-green grove of longing, Keats longs to drink the synesthetic, pharmaceutical-grade melodious green, then wants to hold up a vessel that looks like him, also a vessel, with a “purple-stained mouth” and drink (to) death. Such complicated machinery requires complicated English syntax, complicated equipment like subjunctive tenses and tags, requires an arm bent back, a strain, an *accent grave*, to be so devoutly stained and strained “[t]hat [one] might drink, and leave the world unseen / And with thee fade away into the

forest dim—.” Death’s triple d: drink, fade, dim. The consonants of “fade” open up to produce the “forest dim” which will be the speaker’s Elysian preserve.

Sight must be sacrificed to the other senses to bring about such transport, and the painful dedication to the *accent grave* must be repaid.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs
But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet [...]

Here the *accent grave*, in making “embalmed” one syllable longer than it usually is, does the work of making the darkness slower, embalming it, making a preserve of it, so that it may become a viscous habitation for Keats to cross into. Thus embalmèd, the stanza achieves the bower of fragrant Shakespearean fullness Keats craves, an apprehension of posthumosity, a feeling not of extinguishment but of extension.

This 1819 Ode develops as in a dark room the 1817 sonnet “After dark vapours have oppressed our plains.” Unlike the Ode, the sonnet is untitled. As typically presented in volumes of Keats’s work, the title is the first line, and the first line stands for the entire sonnet. Meanwhile, the poem itself entails another hydraulic mechanism, first converting the dark vapours of the opening line to a series of light and flowing images, then pressurizing this light tide of associations until we arrive, again, in the deep-delvèd earth, the quiet grave which theoretically shuts up both poet and poem. How precisely is this mechanism constructed? For the first eight lines we are smoothly and rationally guided along by the long clauses and commas of orderly English syntax. However, a fitfulness disrupts this smoothness in the ninth line. In place of conventional sentence structure, similitude takes over the poem, channeling likeness through a series of synaptic dashes:

The calmest thoughts come round us—as of leaves
 Budding—fruit ripening in stillness—autumn suns
Smiling at eve upon the quiet sheaves—
Sweet Sappho’s cheek— a sleeping infant’s breath—
The gradual sand that through an hour-glass runs —
A woodland rivulet— a Poet’s death.

Even with the warning bells tolling in the appearance of death's wingman, "breath," and the comparatively long-wending mention of the hour-glass, the final phrase is a shocking arrival. The capitalized "P" is toppled, inverted to the "d" which, as we learn from the Ode, is song's signature, as well as death's. The short "e," which seems to flow from "rivulet" to "Poet" to "death" along the stabby dashes, is an acoustic postalette from the *accent grave*. Death by song, by assonance.

The more famous Ode ends with our Keats trying out posthumicity in his favorite subjunctive location, the fragrant bower, then converted to a new species of bird, not a starling but a "Darkling," perched on the sill of the stanza, a large D on his chest to show whose bird he is. The big D of Darkling is shortly answered by the big D of Death, and we know Keats's confession is true because he calls Death by soft names all marked with the shibboleth *accent grave*—"in many musèd rhymes." Death may be easeful but our "Darkling" is busy; Keats and the nightingale form a chiasmic pump where one source is drained as the other "pours forth":

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
To thy high requiem become a sod.

The word "drain" does not appear in this elaborately cantilevered subjunctive bit of ode-ing, but its full rhymes "pain" and "vain" do, and the final image of the stanza shows Keats not just drained of hearing but of fluid, the fluid of song, a dry sod.

The penultimate stanza opens with a gust of hoary odic pronouncement, the sod is reinflated to a Bird, the stanza glides over a huge temporal vista on vaguely unpleasant proto-Yeatsian wings. Happily by the last few lines mid-line commas begin disturbing the flow of rhetoric; by the time we are delivered to Keats's favorite sticky images, "magic casements," the faery bower of this stanza proves to be, like Keats himself, and like the leaky vessel that would carry him away to his death, all at sea.

This antic disturbance continues into the final stanza, the punctuation, syntax, and phrasing showing Keats to be well-charged-up with Art, even as he depicts it as fled. Sonically speaking, fled is like “dead” when it flows, a riv-u-let. Here even the silence is marked with exclamation points, hyphens, dashes, colons, question marks, a variety of variously sumptuous and flashy dramatic effects that erratically deepen and shorten the depth of perspective until the speaker-Keats himself suddenly shoots bolt upright in the bed of the line, asking “Do I wake or sleep?” as if he were the question mark, the tone that rises on the slim gorge of the English throat.

In his most persuasive Ode, Keats seems to dramatize the irresistible, inundating force of Art’s arrival. Art, it seems, is bioidentical with Death, sharing Death’s ecstatic properties. Art’s ever ramifying effects are always out of synch with themselves—if “one minute past” then also set in elaborate futuristic and optative subjunctive tenses; if present, then also posthumous. In fact we might need to coin a new tense, the “posthumous tense” to describe the way in which poets imagine themselves as denizens of Art’s presence. This posthumous tense is also the one in which Kim Hyesoon’s speaker (in Don Mee Choi’s handling) sings from her forest-grave, as song elapses not from her throat, but from her chest

From the forest, mosquitoes swarmed
and dug on into my scrawny, caved-in chest
Born in the 20th century, I was on my way
to die in the 21st century.

The woodland rivulet is shown to be an uncanny artesian well, a site of not (only) dread but of inventive posthumous extension, where one can be (de-) composing in the shallow grave, and also exuberantly “on my way.” The poet has died and yet dwells in Art as in the grave, and the reader may join there, in Narcissistine close reading, so close you drown in it, or drink it up, and vomit song. Such is Art’s wellspring, the infernal source of Art. For the death-less Bird: Immortality. For the Death-bound human: posthumicity.

WORKS REFERENCED:

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“The Road to Kimp’o Landfill” initiates *Mommy Must be a Fountain of Feathers* by Kim Hyesoon translated by Don Mee Choi, Action Books, 2008, which itself is the first full-length English publication of Kim Hyesoon’s work.

Hessell, Nikki, “John Keats, the Botanist’s Companion” may be found in *John Keats and the Medical Imagination*, Nicholas Roe, editor. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Severn’s account of Keats’s final days are widely reported, and may also be reviewed in the informative and upsetting *Mapping Keats’s Progress: a Critical Chronology*. <https://johnkeats.uvic.ca/1821-02-23.html>

You may make study of Frances Cobbe Power’s “The Peak in Darien: The Riddle of Death (1882)” at The Public DomainReview, <https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/frances-power-cobbe-the-peak-in-darien-1882>.