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## Shiftiness in Keats's 'Ode on Indolence'

According to a familiar anecdote, one spring morning Keats slipped out into a Hampstead garden, settled himself beneath a plum tree where a nightingale had lately built her nest, and began to write. Upon returning indoors a few hours later he discreetly thrust several scraps of paper behind some books; it was only when his housemate Charles Brown enquiringly retrieved those scraps and, with Keats's help, rearranged them, that they took on the shape of what would become one of Keats's most famous works: the 'Ode to a Nightingale'.<sup>1</sup> Jack Stillinger claims that Brown's memory was playing him false, however, and that it was not the 'Ode to a Nightingale' which was composed in this way, but rather the 'Ode on Indolence'.

Whether true or not, Brown's story is suggestive on two counts. First, for what it tells us about the structural integrity of the odes – that one of them could come into being through the shuffling and reshuffling of scraps of paper is perhaps at odds with the idea of unity and formal achievement for which the odes are rightly celebrated.

Second, the furtive way in which Keats is said to have stolen in and secreted away his papers ascribes a kind of shiftiness to his compositional practice. That shiftiness, I wish to suggest, offers a useful way of characterising the 'Ode on Indolence', with its structural and chronological instability as well as its slipperiness of wordplay and ambiguity. Drawing attention to these qualities presents a more unsettling and artfully evasive, at times even devious, side of Negative Capability at work in Keats's odes.

One of the reasons Stillinger gives for claiming that Brown's recollections mix up the 'Ode to a Nightingale' with the 'Ode on Indolence' is that the business of rearranging the draft fragments might account for the latter poem's lack of fixed structure.<sup>2</sup> For the odd thing about the 'Ode on Indolence' is its peculiar textual

instability: it is unclear which order each of its stanzas should be placed in, and they have been variously shifted around by editors and critics over the course of the poem's bibliographical history.<sup>3</sup> With no authoritative text (Keats chose not to include 'Indolence' when he published the other odes and his holograph has been lost), the closest extant copy is a transcription made by Brown. But confusion arises from the fact that in transcribing the poem Brown seems to have muddled up its stanzas. He initially copied the poem, numbering each stanza as he went, only, at some point before completing the transcription he went back, scribbled out those numbers, and replaced them with an amended sequence that runs 1,2,4,6,3,5.<sup>4</sup> Richard Woodhouse followed Brown's revised order in the only other extant transcript (itself a copy of a copy, as the note 'from C.B.' attests).<sup>5</sup> When Richard Monckton Milnes first published the poem in 1848, he also set it out according to Brown's rearrangement.<sup>6</sup> However, in 1956 H. W. Garrod introduced a new order that moved the fifth stanza into second position (based on critical interpretation but without textual authority).<sup>7</sup> Garrod's version became standard until Stillinger's work on Keats's texts argued convincingly for a return to Brown's transcript.<sup>8</sup> Following this, modern editions of Keats's works, such as those by Stillinger, Miriam Allott, John Barnard, and Jeffrey Cox, have followed Brown's revised order (as do I in this essay).<sup>9</sup>

Arguments over the intricacies of the ode's correct stanzaic order sometimes seem to miss the significance of the argument itself. As Helen Vendler observes, 'only a poem peculiarly static could have offered the possibility of such a mistake'.<sup>10</sup> One might equally say that only a poem peculiarly lacking in fixedness or stasis could allow itself to be so shuffled about. Rather than motionlessness, then, the unstable formulation of the poem's stanzas allows for a constancy of motion without linear progress. As a commentary on the poem's own artistic productivity, the structure of

the ode is curiously germane to its subject matter, not so much because its looseness of structure is a symptom of languidness, but because it locates a dynamic somewhere between vain busyness and creative restlessness, between fruitless idleness and generative passiveness. Out of this dynamic the ode emerges, a product of the creative energy that Keats finds latent within a state of contemplative indolence.

The order of the first two stanzas, at least, seems to be clear enough. The ode begins with the appearance of three elusive figures who circle before us like shady forms inscribed upon a continually rotating marble urn, disappearing each time the urn is 'shifted round', only to reappear again, 'as when the urn once more / Is shifted round, the first seen shades return'.<sup>11</sup> There is something unsettling about this repeated shifting motion; the action suggests an anxiety to keep turning the imagined urn around to get a sense of the whole (even while doing so sees one side forever slipping out of view). It implies rather an 'irritable reaching' than a 'content[ment] with half knowledge', in Keats's account of Negative Capability, or the kind of serenity and poised state of mind one might associate with indolence.<sup>12</sup> So the poem progresses to become seemingly caught between irritability and half-contentment; after the shifting, grasping movement of the first stanza, the second ends with a richly self-undoing phrase which hovers in suspended knowledge, dissolves cohesion, and leaves it unclear where to go from here or which stanza ought properly to come third.

One morn before me were three figures seen,  
    With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced;  
And one behind the other stepp'd serene,  
    In placid sandals, and in white robes graced:  
They pass'd, like figures on a marble Urn,  
    When shifted round to see the other side;  
    They came again; as when the Urn once more  
Is shifted round, the first seen Shades return;  
    And they were strange to me, as may betide  
    With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore

How is it Shadows that I knew ye not?  
 How came ye muffled in so hush a masque  
 Was it a silent deep-disguised plot  
 To steal away, and leave without a task  
 My idle days? Ripe was the drowsy hour;  
 The blissful cloud of summer-indolence  
 Benumb'd my eyes; my pulse grew less and less;  
 Pain had no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower.  
 O, why did ye not melt, and leave my sense  
 Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness?

(1-20)

The first stanza turns on the rhyming of 'urn', 'urn', 'return'. The passive voice which describes how the figures 'were seen' or the urn 'is shifted' displaces Keats from the action impelling his own poem. The figures themselves appear hushed in conspiratorial fellowship: 'with bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced'. The last, unusual compound-adjective suggests the simultaneity of at once showing the side of the face, and facing the side. Perhaps it also carries the more disquieting suggestion of 'two-faced' or 'Janus-faced', and may owe something to the 'half-faced fellowship' of Shakespeare's Hotspur as he 'apprehends a world of figures here, / But not the form of what he should attend'.<sup>13</sup> In visual art, 'side-faced' refers to a profile portrait, a portrait whose subject is only ever half seen, half known. In a poem that at times seems equally unwilling to meet its readers fully in the face, Keats is concerned at the outset of the ode with how figures of selective disclosure might be realised in poetic form.

His syntax conspires in the 'deep-disguised plot' that the second stanza describes, drawing on the shifting meanings contained within a word so that, as the lines unfold, so too do their underlying complexities. The plot to 'steal away, and leave' implies a furtive attempt to depart, only, as the line runs onto the next, it becomes clear that the subject switches from the figures to Keats's 'idle days', so that

‘leave’ refers not so much to their taking leave but to his being left without, and ‘steal’ takes on the further sense of theft. There is an uneasy symmetry in the stanza between Keats’s initial resentment that the figures will leave and leave his idle days without a task, and resentment that they *will not* leave and leave his sense unencumbered.

One of the surprises of this stanza is Keats’s objection to the figures’ retreat on the grounds that it will deprive him of a task (rather than regarding their presence as a disruption of his indolence which he might then resume once they have left). This is ‘deeply puzzling’, Willard Spiegelman notes in his study, *Majestic Indolence*, ‘since we might expect Keats to object to just the opposite, that is, to the figures’ bringing *to* rather than removing *from* him an occupation that might spell the end to idleness’.<sup>14</sup> Keats suggests, however, that there is more at stake than merely a temporary state of distraction, since the figures’ presence at once empties out the productive, tasked aspect of his indolence, leaving him in a state of vacancy, and at the same time leaves him troubled by a lingering knowledge or feeling, so that he is left imploring them to ‘leave my sense / Unhaunted quite of all but—nothingness’.

These wonderfully baffling lines are paraphrased by Spiegelman:

Working with tropes of absence/presence and emptiness/fullness, Keats demands with his double negatives (‘Leave me *unhaunted* with everything except *nothing*’, he is saying) a release from temptations of the will which is simultaneously a repletion of ‘nothingness’, for which another word is, of course, indolence itself.<sup>15</sup>

This provides a lucid summary, but it risks leaving the lines unhaunted of some of their hovering ambiguities. Spiegelman singles out the familiar tropes and syntactical ploys that Keats goes in for ‘with his double negatives’ and his paradoxical formulations. But Spiegelman’s gloss, ‘he is saying’, implicitly reduces this to *all he is really saying*, and the final summative ‘of course’ makes too easy an equation of

Keats's complex negations by counting their haunting 'nothingness' as just another word for indolence.

For the stanza ends on a note of inconclusiveness and lingering: 'all but—nothingness?'. The extended dash is crucial, a pause for thought that stops just short of calling for total thoughtlessness. The line declines to choose between all or nothing, opting instead to remain suspended between modes of awareness. Being 'unhaunted quite by all—but nothingness' is somehow not the same as being haunted by nothingness. The verse allows the shifting meanings in each word to maintain a hovering sense of all that is being negated: 'quite' means completely here, but also allows for the modifying (and oxymoronic) sense of being only 'quite' complete; while 'all—but' means here everything except, but also invokes the more colloquial meaning of 'all but' to mean 'very nearly'. The intimations of an only almost nothingness are suggested as well by the way that 'unhaunted' carries a ghostly trace of that which it negates (just as the 'unravished' state of the Grecian Urn brings with it a disturbing hint of its potential for ravishment). The lingering sense of something which is not fully felt draws upon the etymological root of indolence to describe a state of *non-pain*.

All this suggests that indolence is not a state of vacancy or insensibility; rather, that it is paradoxically alert to the presence of absence – 'the feel of not to feel it', as Keats puts it, 'the know of not to know it' in Susan Wolfson's formulation of Negative Capability.<sup>16</sup> Discussions of these lines are drawn into reiterating their paradoxical, circumlocutory logic in an attempt to gesture towards this slippage between modes of cognition: Deborah Forbes cites it as 'a kind of conscious unconsciousness', while Jacques Rancière writes, 'indolence is a doing that is also a not doing'.<sup>17</sup> Such formulations might sound gnomic, but they acknowledge the

poem's way of teasing out distinctions that are drawn finely but not firmly, of allowing oppositions to coexist, so that the ode might claim not to feel what its language makes felt, might at once reject an untasked idleness and embrace an unhaunted indolence.

These are the shifting states that Keats seeks to keep in play. But the lingering ambiguity creates a potential rupture in narrative progress or momentum at this point of the poem, leaving it at the mercy of the three circling figures to set the thing in motion again.

A third time pass'd they by, and, passing, turn'd  
Each one the face a moment whiles to me;  
Then faded, and to follow them I burn'd  
And ached for wings, because I knew the three:  
The first was a fair maid, and Love her name;  
The second was Ambition, pale of cheek,  
And ever watchful with fatigued eye;  
The last, whom I love more, the more of blame  
Is heap'd upon her, maiden most unmeek,—  
I knew to be my demon Poesy.

(21-30)

As speaker and figures exchange knowing glances, it seems they are engaged in playing out a pattern that has already been played many times before. In action almost choreographed, they pass, 'and, passing, turn'd', flashing a glance in Keats's direction as they go – yet only for a 'moment whiles', Keats notes, punning on 'wiles', perhaps, with a nod to their allure. In Michael O'Neill's words, it is as though 'having recognized them, he knows them only too well'.<sup>18</sup> A letter to his brother written in March 1818 reveals a previous encounter: cavalierly declaring himself to be 'in a sort of temper indolent and extremely careless', Keats continues, 'neither Poetry, nor Ambition, nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me: they seem rather like three figures on a greek vase—a Man and two women—whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguisement' (*LJK*, II. 78-9). The sense of



familiarity here corresponds to the ode's newly arrived at ability to recognize the figures, which might suggest a line of progress in the poem, a progress which is nonetheless undercut by the sense that Keats has all the while been indulging both himself and the three figures by willfully *allowing* himself to be beguiled.

No sooner have the figures arrived than they are gone again, and their evasions take on the more negative associations of shiftiness as a form of deceitfulness:

They faded, and, forsooth! I wanted wings:  
O folly! What is Love? and where is it?  
And for that poor Ambition—it springs  
From a man's little heart's short fever-fit;  
For Poesy!—no,—she has not a joy,—  
At least for me,—

(31-6)

As he invokes each figure again, Keats views them now with a worldly-wise disillusionment: 'What is love', he scoffs, 'and where is it?'. Once they have faded, he seeks to convince himself that he never really cared for them anyway. 'Forsooth!' and 'O folly!', he postures, in affronted expostulations that upset the ode's more lyrical aspects and seem to parody its prior seduction by the urn-like figures. As Ambition, 'ever watchful with fatigued eye', is worn out by her own watchfulness, Keats's vigilance against ambition becomes its own paradoxical ambitiousness. And as for that 'poor Ambition', he now tells us, 'It springs / From a man's little heart's short fever-fit'. The line proceeds in fits and starts, the language clipped and monosyllabic, its short vowels spat out between fricatives and glottal stops. The renunciation of the allurements and illusions of Love, Ambition and Poesy sounds a note of petulance and meanness at this point as the poem seems to fall out of love with its own lyricism.

Turning on Poesy herself, the poem assumes an uneasy self-reflexiveness, its syntax breaking down into dashes, reneging on itself in stultified clauses: 'For Poesy!—no,—she has not a joy,— / At least for me,—'. The lineation that would initially deny Poesy any joy whatsoever does so by effectively grinding the poem to a halt, as though Keats needs to interrupt and extract himself from the verse in order to renounce its effect.

And so around we go again:

A third time came they by;—alas! wherefore?  
My sleep had been embroider'd with dim dreams;  
My soul had been a lawn besprinkled o'er  
With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams:  
The morn was clouded, but no shower fell,  
Though in her lids hung the sweet tears of May;  
The open casement press'd a new-leaved vine,  
Let in the budding warmth and throstle's lay;  
O shadows! 'twas a time to bid farewell!  
Upon your skirts had fallen no tears of mine.

(41-50)

From the recollected poise of early summer comes the knowledge that it is in those precious moments when the active straining after thought is suspended that the mind is at its most richly productive, its thoughts coming unbidden and arriving with the pleasant surprise of budding warmth or birdsong drifting in at an open casement. Yet, this apparently smooth narrative progression belies a more unsettled pattern. Time slips out of sync as the figures pass by for the third time – again. The fifth stanza's 'a third time came they by' repeats the formulation in the third stanza, 'a third time passed they by'. How many third times have there been? Trapped in a Beckettian waiting game, like the character in *Stirrings Still* who asks only that the shadowy others 'leave him or not alone again waiting for nothing again', here the figures' comings and goings play out a drama in which nothing happens, thrice.<sup>19</sup> It is never

made clear whether the repeated third time is the same time seen from two different perspectives, or whether it represents ‘a return and counter-shift’, as Stillinger suggests.<sup>20</sup> When Richard Monckton Milnes first published the poem, he silently amended the opening of stanza five from ‘A third time’ to ‘And once more’ in order to avoid the ambiguity of a second third time.<sup>21</sup> But that ambiguity seems right here, since it conveys something of the structural shiftiness intrinsic to the ode’s indeterminacy, an indeterminacy that is testified to by the very fact that its stanzas could be so confused.

The final line of the ode ends, ‘never more return!’, which in fact returns us to the very beginning: both the first and last stanzas include the end rhymes ‘return’, ‘urn’ and ‘once more’.

So, ye three ghosts, adieu! Ye cannot raise  
My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass;  
For I would not be dieted with praise,  
A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!  
Fade softly from my eyes, and be once more  
In masque-like figures on the dreamy urn;  
Farewell! I yet have visions for the night,  
And for the day faint visions there is store;  
Vanish, ye phantoms, from my idle spright,  
Into the clouds, and never more return!

(51-60)

The ode seems to have come full circle, repeating the circlings and recirclings of the figures themselves, as though Keats would go back on his rejection even as he bids them depart. Keats’s confidence in the knowledge, ‘I yet have visions for the night / And for the day faint visions there is store’, allows for the possibility that the figures have been an enabling source of creative energy, and that, at the same time, the rejection of them provides the necessary self-possession and commitment to indolence that produces this store of visions.

Yet the shifty mind games or self-deceptions involved in justifying his indolence to himself make at times for an uneasy self-defensiveness. Keats seems anxious to avoid what Thomas Carlyle in a later, suggestive usage of ‘shiftiness’ defines as ‘a kind of thing that fancies itself [...] to be talent’.<sup>22</sup> By declining to bother with the vain strivings of over-ambitiousness, indolence might offer the salutary advantage of avoiding conceit. Thus Keats rejects the allurements of Love and Ambition that go along with Poesy: ‘For I would not be dieted with praise, / A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!’. With this petulant insistence, the poem shifts tone to become self-ironising. But perhaps there is a sense of relief in being able to ridicule himself in this way, since only from a position of relative confidence could he afford to satirize an image which he no longer acknowledged to be an accurate reflection of himself. Keats had used the image of the pet-lamb to describe a former version of himself in a letter to Sarah Jeffery: ‘I have been very idle lately, very averse to writing’, he confesses, and, attributing this partly to an ‘abatement of my love of fame’, reflects, ‘I hope I am a little more of a Philosopher than I was, consequently a little less of a versifying Pet-lamb’ (*LJK*, II. 116). The letter’s provisional ‘I hope I am’, in comparison with the poem’s affronted ‘I would not be’, sounds more assured through being less insistent. Behind the ironic flippancy in the ode, then, is a wish to distinguish a poetic self aligned with a philosophical form of indolence from an artistic posturing that would be lead on by the vain enticements of praise. But the protest seems to be its own performance, the bluff of a poet secretly hoping that if he can only appear not to want it too much, praise might come of its own accord.<sup>23</sup>

The attitude of disinterestedness is more successfully achieved when he rejects the figures by settling into a firmer, more composed resolve: ‘ye cannot raise / My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass’, he asserts. Though burying one’s head might

be seen as merely an evasion, here the act suggests how poetic absorption might be a matter of actively resisting distraction and concentrating one's efforts into a willed passivity. The embedding of sound in 'head cool-bedded', suggests bedding down to rest with the rootedness of a flower bedded in the ground. The image locates in this rootedness a sense of perfect repose, a moment when Keats is no longer aching and burning for wings (and the visionary transcendence they imply), but takes perspective from the ground up. 'A nap upon clover engenders ethereal finger-pointings', Keats wrote to his brother, pointings which were delicately feeling their way towards a 'certain ripeness in intellect', he had come to appreciate, as he embraced the pleasure and productiveness of idle contemplation: 'what delicious diligent Indolence!' (*LJK*, I. 231).

'Does it take more energy to write an "Ode on Activity" than to write an "Ode to Indolence"?'', Karl Kroeber quips, identifying the irony of writing a poem about not writing, or doing, anything at all.<sup>24</sup> Yet this is the productive tension animating Keats's ode. As he turns to poetry to understand and overcome his state of indolence, he is caught within a circling back on the self: it is only by making sense of his experience that he will be able to write, and it is only through writing that he will be able to make sense of his experience. This gives rise to the shifty structure and verbal mobility or wordplay of the 'Ode on Indolence', as the poem traces out the circumlocutory, at times erratic, at times contradictory, movement of thought.

To end by returning to the beginning, the final section of this essay considers the ode's various manifestations of shiftiness in relation to the work ethic riddlingly alluded to in its epigraph. Taking a cue from the alternative sense of 'shift' meaning to make a living or support oneself financially ('to shift for oneself'), I suggest that the poem distinguishes indolence from the labour of writing in line with contrasting

notions of the passively inspired genius of organic composition verses the toiling figure of the professional writer that had emerged in the period. The epigraph, 'they toil not, neither do they spin' introduces the poem with an image of passivity, which, in the context of the biblical allusion, advocates the virtue of doing nothing: 'Consider the lilies, how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin' (Matthew 6:28). By omitting the first clause, Keats leaves the justification of organic growth and productivity as only ever implicit behind the bare statement of negated labour; it also allows for the possibility that 'they' refers to the three figures in the poem. Matthew Chapter Six draws out a way of thinking about indolence within the context of moral disinterestedness whereby one is neither drawn on by the thought of praise or gain, nor preoccupied with worldly concerns, but finds in the lilies a model of passive contentment:

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: And yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? (Matthew, 6:28-30)

Keats considers how the lilies grow as a model for artistic productivity, finding a kind of faith in the value of a passive aesthetic. The image of the lilies brings together natural beauty and adornment with the contented sense that it is enough for such artistry to exist in the 'is' of today without giving thought to what will be tomorrow.

It is not so that there is a Christian didacticism at work beneath Keats's account of indolence; rather, that this particular passage in Matthew resonates with the ode's preoccupations with artistry and passivity. Grant F. Scott argues that 'the whole tenor of the biblical passage, in fact, is perfectly in keeping with the tone of Keats's poem', while Charles Patterson comments on the epigraph, somewhat mystically, 'the motto provides a clue to the essential point in the poem, for Keats

tries to convey that he has achieved something of a kindred state of pure being'.<sup>25</sup> The contentment and purity of being that Patterson intuitively finds in the poem relies upon a careful balance of self-forgetfulness and self-absorption, upon the irony that not focusing too much on one's individual concerns is perhaps the best means of ensuring a commitment to one's own spiritual integrity; or, in Kierkegaard's gloss on the biblical passage, 'if the troubled one really pays attention to the lilies [...] while in this absorption with them, he subtly learns through himself something about himself'.<sup>26</sup> Like the closing images of Keats's ode in which the soul becomes assimilated with the flowery lawn, the biblical allusion suggests that focusing upon something beyond the self paradoxically allows for a concentration on the self that is at once spiritually enriching and personally productive.

William Hazlitt had previously drawn upon the lilies of the field in a discussion of *Paradise Lost* in his lecture on 'Shakespeare and Milton'. In this instance Hazlitt's allusion relates to the perfectly contented idleness enjoyed by Adam and Eve before the fall:

What need was there of action, where the heart was full of bliss and innocence without it! They had nothing to do but feel their own happiness, and 'know to know no more'. 'They toiled not, neither did they spin; yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these'.<sup>27</sup>

The allusion is invoked here within the context of a prelapsarian innocence. But indolence in Keats's ode is not the same as innocence; instead it constitutes a state of awareness within suspended knowing, a kind of negative capability achieved by those who, in Milton's words, 'know to know no more'.<sup>28</sup> Keats's indolence involves a conscious attempt to achieve a state of equanimity and integrity within his art by first acknowledging, and then resisting, the temptations of Love, Ambition and Poesy.

In the ode, Keats is able to reject these figures in favour of the idyllic contentment of simply lying back in the grass. The envisioning of his soul as a flowery lawn seems to have been adapted (or unconsciously absorbed) by Keats from the image of the lilies of the field. As the lilies ‘clothe the grass of the field’ without the need for toiling or spinning, so Keats recalls how his soul ‘had been a lawn besprinkled o’er / With flowers’, his sleep ‘embroider’d with dim dreams’. Passive receptivity allows him to be spiritually clothed in the beauty of a natural aesthetic. But there seems to be something more complex involved in the allusion: Keats fabricates a pun out of the biblical passage’s conceit of clothing and weaving with the word ‘lawn’, which also means linen or fine fabric used for clothing. Moreover, the further implications of ‘embroider’d’, are not altogether happy: the pursuit is commonly seen as a fruitless one, a specifically feminine task that occupies with mechanical tedium periods of what would otherwise be mere idleness. The allusion threatens to make writing poetry just another idle pastime, and poetry itself merely the rhetorical frippery of embroidered speech.

Read in this light, the epigraph points to an underlying tension about artistic production. Scott relates the biblical allusion to a disempowered form of creativity that links the urn’s spinning to weaving and thus to ‘women’s work’. The figures’ active circling in the ode is itself a kind of spinning, as is the rotating movement of the urn. In Scott’s words,

what is curious here is that the ode’s central image, the urn, itself *spins*, and its motion constitutes one of the most important sources of imaginative energy in the whole poem. Though Keats may remain unaware of it, the urn’s activity puns on the epigraph and undermines Keats’s independence.<sup>29</sup>

The notion that the pun unwittingly undermines Keats’s independence is telling in other ways, too, for there is the suggestion here of the shiftiness of language somehow



getting away from Keats in his own poem. Yet Keats, surely, is not one to miss a pun. In fact, I think there is a deliberately coy play on words intended by Keats's choice of epigraph, which has to do with thinking about poetry as toil in its most prosaic sense: as a task performed to make money.

Keats puns on the notion of word 'spinning' that would make writing a form of mechanical employment or mere hackwork. The *Oxford English Dictionary* does not list this sense specifically (though one might relate it to the figurative sense of spinning a yarn), but it was current at the time Keats was writing. In Canto I of *Don Juan* Byron glibly claims of his poem's beginning that it 'cost me half an hour in spinning'.<sup>30</sup> The mercenary associations of word spinning are also evident in Keats's correspondence: the subject provokes in him a degree of cynicism and world-weariness. Writing to Dilke about his need to act to make a living from his writing, 'I should *do* something for my immediate welfare', he declares, 'I am determined to spin—home spun any thing for sale. Yea, I will trafic. Any thing but Mortgage my Brain to Blackwood' (*LJK*, II.178-9). While in a satirical sketch of a literary set involving Hazlitt, Hunt and Charles Ollier, Hunt is made to boast of a current literary venture: 'O we are sp[i]nning on a little, we shall floridize soon I hope—Such a thing was very much wanting—people think of nothing but money-getting' (*LJK*, II.14). How much this unkindness has to do with Keats's turning away from his former literary mentor is open to question, especially considering that it was partly owing to his association with Hunt that Keats had recently been on the receiving end of similar criticism in the *Quarterly*'s review of *Endymion*: after disparaging Keats for mimicking Hunt's floridness of style, the reviewer had mocked, 'he cannot indeed write a sentence, but perhaps he may be able to spin a line'.<sup>31</sup>

The epigraph of Keats's ode, then, makes indolence an alternative to the kind of writing that would be merely spinning a line, versifying for money or praise. Yet at the time of the ode's composition, Keats's letters reveal that he was growing more and more desperate for funds, calling in loans, foregoing social calls, considering alternative careers. Faced with the choice of being a poet or a ship's physician, he committed himself to the former vocation with a new determination to 'conquer my indolence', and to 'henceforth shake off my indolent fits' (*LJK*, II.113, 122). The irony implicitly registered in the epigraphic pun makes the concerted effort to neither toil nor spin seem the best way of conquering his indolence; or, in other words, he doesn't toil in order to work well, and he doesn't spin in order to write well.

The most productive kind of indolence required a sophisticated means of negotiating these spells of discontent, guilt and self-recrimination, and the vacillations between listlessness and restlessness – the kind of shifting, perhaps, that would allow Keats, having just completed his ode, to confide, 'I have been very idle lately, very averse to writing', and in the same letter to declare, 'the thing I have most enjoyed this year has been writing an ode to Indolence' (*LJK*, ii.116). And perhaps it is in the nature of indolence to be so circumlocutory – as spells of idleness give way to spells of industry give way again to spells of idleness in an endless cycle of creativity haunted by the shadow of returning frustration. As Keats's letter continues, he entertains the prospect of retiring to the country for a while, envisioning a kind of writing retreat: 'this is just the thing at present', he reassures himself, for 'the morrow will take care of itself' (*LJK*, ii.115). The remark reveals him thinking again about indolence in relation to Matthew 6, which concludes with the perfectly poised chiasmus, 'take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself' (Matthew 6:34). On the one hand this sounds like a

wonderfully reassuring excuse to do nothing, a religious sanctioning of procrastination and apathy; on the other, it comes close to an elevated maxim of Negative Capability. Within the context of the biblical passage, and within the context of Keats's ode, the capacity to 'take no thought for the morrow', to neither toil nor spin, would usher in one of the most industrious periods of any poetic career.

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<sup>1</sup> The anecdote was first published in Richard Monckton Milnes, *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats*, 2 vols (London, 1848), I. 244-5.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Stillinger, 'The Text of Keats's "Ode on Indolence"', *Studies in Bibliography*, 22 (1969), 255-8, (p. 257).

<sup>3</sup> For detailed accounts, see Stillinger, 'The Text of Keats's "Ode on Indolence"', pp. 255-8, and Toshihiko Sato, 'A Reevaluation of Keats's "Ode on Indolence" with Special Attention to Its Stanzaic Order', *Philological Quarterly*, 68:2 (1989), 195-213.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats, The Charles Brown Poetry Transcripts at Harvard: Facsimiles Including the Fair Copy of Otho the Great*, ed. by Jack Stillinger, vol 7 (New York, 1988), pp. 19-21.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Stillinger (ed.), *John Keats. Poems, Transcripts, Letters, &c.: Facsimiles of Richard Woodhouse's Scrapbook Materials in the Pierpont Morgan Library*, ed. by Jack Stillinger, vol 4 (New York, 1985), pp. 284-6.

<sup>6</sup> Milnes, *Life Letters and Literary Remains*, II. 276-8.

<sup>7</sup> H. W. Garrod, *Poetical Works of John Keats* (London, 1956), pp. 54-6; Toshihiko Sato's argument that Garrod's order is the best interpretation relies upon the attempt to impose a consistent narrative upon the poem.

<sup>8</sup> The concluding sentence of Stillinger's article reads: 'For a proper text we must go back to Brown's transcript'. Stillinger, 'The Text of Keats's "Ode on Indolence"', p. 258.

<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, these editions tend to regularize line indentations, capital letters and syncopations in ways which at times tell on the poem's meaning; for this reason I have used Brown's transcript.

<sup>10</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), p. 20.

<sup>11</sup> 'Ode on Indolence', *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London, 1978), II. 6, 7-8. (All references will be taken from this edition.)

<sup>12</sup> John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Hyder Edward Rollins (2 vols, Cambridge, MA, 1958), i. 193,4. (Hereafter *LJK*)

<sup>13</sup> *JHenry4*, I.iii. 208-10.

<sup>14</sup> Willard Spiegelman, *Majestic Indolence: English Romantic Poetry and the Work of Art* (Oxford, 1995), 93. See also Robert Adelman, *Idleness and the Aesthetic* (Cambridge, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Spiegelman, 94.

<sup>16</sup> 'In drear nighted December'; Susan J. Wolfson, 'The Know of Not to Know It: My Returns to Reading and Teaching Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn"', in "'Ode on a Grecian Urn": Hypercanonicity and Pedagogy', *Romantic Circles Praxis Series* [website], ed. by James O'Rourke. <<http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/grecianurn/contributorsessays/grecianurnwolfson.html>> (last accessed: 28.05.2015).

<sup>17</sup> Deborah Forbes, *Sincerity's Shadow: Self-Consciousness in British Romantic and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), p. 169; Jacques Rancière, 'The Politics of the Spider', trans by Emily Rohrbach and Emily Sun, *Studies in Romanticism*, 50:2 (2011), 239-250 (243).

<sup>18</sup> Michael O'Neill, *Romanticism and the Self-Conscious Poem* (Oxford, 1997), 203.

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- <sup>19</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Stirrings Still, As the Story Was Told: Uncollected and Late Prose* (London, 1990), 114.
- <sup>20</sup> Stillinger, 'The Text of Keats's "Ode on Indolence"', *Studies in Bibliography*, 22 (1969), 255-258 (257-8).
- <sup>21</sup> Richard Monckton Milnes, *Life, Letters and Literary Remains of John Keats* (2 vols, London, 1848), ii, 278.
- <sup>22</sup> *OED*, s.v. 'shiftiness'
- <sup>23</sup> Compare Keats's sonnet 'To Fame', which advises poets to scorn Fame in the secret hope that by doing so you might win her affections: 'Make your best bow to her and bid adieu, / Then, if she likes it, she will follow you'.
- <sup>24</sup> Karl Kroeber, *The Artifice of Reality: Poetic Style in Wordsworth, Foscolo, Keats, and Leopardi* (Madison, 1964), p. 82.
- <sup>25</sup> Grant F. Scott, *The Sculpted Word: Keats, Ekphrasis and the Visual Arts* (Hanover, NH, 1994), 112; Charles Patterson, *The Daemonic in the Poetry of John Keats* (Urbana, 1970), 159.
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted by Howard Hinkel, 'Growth Without Toil: Generative Indolence in Keats', *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 20 (1975), 26-36, (32).
- <sup>27</sup> *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt*, ed. P. P. (21 vols, London, 1930-34), v.152.
- <sup>28</sup> Hazlitt cites Milton's description of the sleeping Adam and Eve: 'Sleep on / <sup>SEP</sup>Blest pair; and O yet happiest if ye seek<sup>SEP</sup> / No happier state, and know to know no more'. *Paradise Lost*, IV.773-5.
- <sup>29</sup> Scott, p. 114.
- <sup>30</sup> George Gordon, Lord Byron, *Don Juan, The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. Jerome McGann (7 vols Oxford, 1980-93), v, I.54.
- <sup>31</sup> G. M. Matthews, *John Keats: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1971), p. 44.