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Why John Keats was Denied Union with the Nightingale: A Vedantic and Scientific Perspective and Re-Contextualization

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John Keats was the last of the Romantic poet-first to die. Throughout his Odes, specifically in his "Ode to a Nightingale" in many perspective and shades, he was searching for the "ultimate building block", i.e. mystical existence of "SOUL" or "SELF" like the Seers of the Ultimate TRUTH. But at the climactic moment of union with "SELF" or "SOUL", (in the ode, the Nightingale), there started the fading and falling action. Was Keats denied? Or unworthy of union with the "SELF" or with the "Nightingale"? Like the "Probability Waves" of Quantum Physics, the possible answers are here.

At the Backdrop:

The Ode of John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale" is ethereal in nature and quality and ecstatic in absorption of feelings and had the stamp of eternity in the whole range of English poetry. Keats was not encircled with the "struggle for existence" or "survival of the fittest" and he is the fittest to feel for the heavenly songs of the Nightingale. His feelings arises from his meditative fountain of thoughts and workings in black and white. In his state of Meditation upon listening to the music of Nightingale he uplifted from mundane plane to the spiritually-aesthetic and unmundane plane and transported him to the world of "*nihil ultra*"

In 21st December 1817, Keats mused on and got the theorem of Negative Capability. In December, 1818 Keats brother Tom Keats died. Keats then moved to Hampstead Heath, where he lived in the house of Charles Brown and Keats' "Ode to the Nightingale" was composed in 1819. Charles Brown, a friend with whom Keats was living when he composed this poem, as wrote about its genesis and composition.

"In the spring of 1819, a Nightingale had built her nest near my house, Keats felt a tranquil and continual joy in her song and one morning he took his chair from the breakfast table to the grass plot under a plum tree, where he sat for two or three hours. When he came into the house, I perceived he had some scraps, four or five in number contained his poetic feeling on the song of our Nightingale."

Into the Ode:

The poet-speaker hails from a declaration of his peculiar heartache. So ecstatic is the song of the Nightingale in shadowy forest makes the speaker's heart ache with joy and

numbs his senses affected with a drug. The panacea-singing enlightens and kindles in him a desire for a draught of wine, greenery, country dances, the music of southern France and days spent in the sunshine and phosphorescence and all these are material objects give only a moment of pleasure. He longs to disappear and dissolve in the phosphorescent forest with the Nightingale, he would forget about the afflictions of the world- weariness, fever, worries, old age.

The poetic persona tells the Nightingale to fly away and says that he will follow, not through alcohol (Not charioted by Bacchus and his Pards), but through “poesy” which will give him “viewless wings.”

Surrounded by the elixir of the Nightingale’s song, the speaker thinks that the idea of death seems peaceful and richer than ever and he longs to ‘cease upon the midnight with no pain’. The ode is composed in “One Morning” but the atmosphere of the Ode mainly is of Night. By the end of the poem, the poet realizes that the Nightingale is immortal .The song of the Nightingale that he is listening to, was also heard in ancient times by emperors and peasants.

He comes back to a realization of his own state and consciousness. He realizes that he cannot escape even with the help of his imagination. At the end of the poem the speaker wonders whether he has had a true insight or experience or whether he has been day dreaming.

Here, I, am in my writing trying to probe into these perspectives in the aspects of Modern Physics and Vedanta.

Dive In:

Written on a spring day of exceptional warmth and beauty in 1819, the "Ode to a Nightingale" is a meditation on the eternal purity of the bird’s song. Its unrelenting poignancy reminds Keats, still haunted by the painful death of his brother, of the inevitable sadness of man’s mortality.

At the age of 25 years, in such a very young age, denying the asylum, Keats should propose other than death, but God disposes. Keats may have the presumption of his impending death when he wrote “Ode to a Nightingale” in 1819, two years before his untimely death on 23rd February, 1821. Keats, in fact, is so eager to denounce this world that he even welcomes death as he was also driven by the "fever, fret, weariness of this mundane world and he has often been half in love with easeful death. But why was he in half love? Is this the break of meditation or the pull of reality? But the reality too strong a power not to be quelled by imagination. Soon its song, his musing fades and meditative consciousness starts wavering and the mundane reality reasserted.

Complete devotion means, complete absorption and unification with ONE .Swami Vivekananda in a discourse, replied “I have a message to the West as Buddha had a message to the East ...” And thus, here John Keats has a message to the Seers of the

truth rugged on the vicissitudinous reality to unite with "beauty" and "truth" as he is a messenger of "beauty" and "truth" part of Omnipotent God's prowess.

In Srimad Bhagavad Gita (Ch-2/Verse: 16) we find:

ÎFFôFçFFW PÛFççFW ÚFFÛFFW ÎFFÛFFÛFFW PÛFççFW ôFççF:

(*nasato vidyate bhavo nabhavo vidyate satah*).

("The unreal has no existence and the real never ceases to be ;the truth of both these , has been perceived by the seers of truth".)

This mundane world is full of "weariness, fever, fret", inconstancy and incertitude. Keats was musing over the Nightingale and its elixir of music and was in the plane of imagination. As Keats did not understand wholly the existence of unknown flowers at his feet. But there was something sensible to him. Here we can connect his sense-perception with that of the "probability waves" of "quantum physics" through its interconnectedness.

Consciously (knowingly) or sub-consciously, Keats fell in love with death. Keats cannot erase the empty space between his *inner-self* (world of Nightingale) and *outer-self* (world of the Poet Himself). Neither can he enjoy the bliss of solitude nor the bliss of creation (i.e. the bliss of Union). In this state of pangs, coated with romantic feelings and sensibility partly he had a kind of *spiritual consciousness*. But he was denied by his own "self" to the "eternal spiritual bliss".

Keats here feels the ecstatic wonder in his poetic-self in a climactic moment of Oneness with the Nightingale but to a utter rejection by his spiritual-self. Hason Raja, a Bengali poet, mystic philosopher, and folk song writer and composer- in one of his folk writes- "Jalailo ei priter agun mamono nete...." (Thou hath lit the fire of love in my "self"). Keats also burnt himself in the burning fire of love for Nightingale for even he could not fall half in love with death.

As *Sri Chaitanya Deva Mahaprobhu* felt repeatedly the bliss of love for *Radha-Krishna Duet* and also felt the burning of love for them. Actually pain and numbness produces a particular and peculiar feelings and sensations and all these as if the pangs of dejection and separation in the way of union with "One", the "Supreme Personality", and the "Supernatural Eros". Here in the poem and to the Poet, Nightingale is the 'Supernatural Eros' beyond the bending sickle compass of time, fever, fret and weariness. It is the "soul" as we find in Srimad Bhagavad Gita (Ch-2/Verse 20):

ÎF;FFÛFçFW PÛFççFW ÛFF=+¼FççF: (Na jayate mriyate va kadaci) /

(For the soul there neither birth, nor death, nor does it come into existence after having been born. *It is unborn, eternal, constant and primeval* .It is not killed, even when the body is slain.

Bengal's Vaishnava Mysticism and Keats' Nightingale:

Keats only felt for "half love" for the Nightingale and it is everything to do away with senses and totally earthly love and our earthly love is but a pale, counterfeit reflection of that .That is why Keats was "already with thee" but unable to unite with Nightingale but do not have "*Bhakti*" (complete devotion), "*Prema*" is the ultimate goal and "*bhakti*" is the means to attain that goal.

Lord Gouranga of the holy city of Navadwip (West Bengal) was the embodiment of the quintessence of "Love" or "Prema" Radha and Krishna blended into One.

As in John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale"- the bird "Nightingale" and its "Voice" are totally inseparable and blended into One."

"One" without One part as other part is non-existent. He was Krishna assuming the nature and qualities of Radha to taste and enjoy his own infinite sweetness as in the Ode Keats enjoyed the ethereal sweetness of the ecstatic music of the Nightingale which has the stamp of eternity in it.

The current of his love flowed in two directions, *one towards "Krishna", the Infinite, and the other towards "Beings", both Animate and Inanimate*. The poor and the depressed, the sinner and the afflicted, and the lepers- both physical and moral- became easy recipients of his infinite love and grace. He threw upon the gates of the highest heavens to those against whom they had been shut from time immemorial and brought the message of love to the doors of such people. Here in the Ode, John Keats is the recipient of the message of love of the Nightingale in the name of ethereal music as it helps people to forget about the afflictions of the world-weariness, fever, worries, old age. As the Song of the Nightingale that he is listening to was also heard in ancient times by all people. The Nightingale never shut the door to anyone.

Religion of MAN:

Bengal Vaishnavism is essentially the Religion of man .The Eternal is the Supreme Image of the Deity.

Sri Chaitanya Charitamrita Says:

"Of all Krishna's sports of love,

The most excellent are His Love - Sports as Man,

The Human body is the Supreme Form of the Deity".

It adds that there are numerous emanations and hypostases of Sri Krishna, the Eternal Man. Narayana, who represent His power and splendor, and the great divinities to whom is relegated the charge of Creation, Preservation and Destruction - all owe their life and being to the Eternal Man. He does not directly participate in these activities.

The body of the Nightingale is the Form (sakara) and the Music of it is its Formless (*soul- nirakara*). Aesthetically speaking, Keats was craving Union with the material object i.e. the Nightingale not with his Soul, i.e. its music, which always have the stamp of eternity.

That's why in vain effort; he was betrayed by *Sakara body* losing its *Nirakara 'soul'*.

Keats lost in devotion to the Nightingale but diverted his mind in meditation in many other directions and got lost in frustration, psychic-fever, and fret on the way of Union. It is a matter of logic but logic can never probe everything in aesthetic world. But John Keats was searching for and also hankers after "*Physical individuality*" of the Nightingale. But '*Soul Searching*' is not at all the part of "*physical individuality*" and is a part of "*Universal One*".

Modern Physics and Vedanta vs. Keats and Nightingale:

Modern Particle Physics shows the folly of trying to search for a 'single object', a sub-automatic particle or an electron as a separate independent reality. Such a thing does not exist. The very experience of the independent existence of one thing is unreal. Vedantin terms it *mithya*. The right vision is to perceive the whole in the so called isolated entity. This is what the Vedantist means by the statement: "*Brahman alone is Real*". The adherents of Logical Positivism and Scientific Materialism in the West, who tried to cling obstinately to a material universe, were dismayed at the withering of a material universe.

Here is how Bertrand Russell describes his own experience:

"As regards metaphysics --- I experienced the delight of believing that the sensible world is real. Bit by bit, chiefly under the influence of physics, this faith has faded... I find myself in a vast mist of solitude both emotional and metaphysical from which I can find no issue".

Vedantic Epistemology and Ontology transcend this *sense bound universe* millenniums ago. Physically, aesthetically, and spiritually "*Reality is WHOLE*". Each atom says Swami Vivekananda, reflects the whole universe. The biggest is reflected in the smallest- says the Katha Upanishad:

"*एतद्ब्रह्म सवितायै नमः । एतद्ब्रह्म सवितायै नमः ।*"

"Anoraniyan Mahato Mahiyan."

At the parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, Swami Vivekananda expressed an idea and related it with Monistic Vedanta:

"Science has proved to me that physical individuality is a delusion, that really my body is one little continuously changing body in an unbroken ocean of matter, and Advaita (unity) is the necessary conclusion with my other counterpart, soul."

Thousands of years ago the Upanishads realized this fundamental 'truth' the entire universe is One, interconnected and interpenetrated by the ultimate Reality which they termed Brahman. The reality Gargi, has interpenetrated the whole universe, says the Sage Yajnavalkya. And the ultimate nature of Brahman is eternal (and therefore, all pervading) existence, eternal (and therefore all penetrating) knowledge, eternal (and therefore interpenetrating the entire universe including the mind of man and his consciousness) bliss.

The Mundaka Upanishad begins with the question of a student to his guru: "What is it?" "O adorable sir, which having been known, all this becomes known? After a lengthy discourse the teacher concludes; "Know that *One Atman* which has interpenetrated the earth the subtler world of thought, the cosmic heavens, the mind and the vital energies of all living beings. Give up all other vain talks. That is the way to Immortality. The interrogation of *Kasmin* (by what) is answered by the emphatic assertion of *yasmin* (by what) which is Brahman. Keats thought upon the independent experience of the Nightingale as against the doctrine of Vedanta. But the Nightingale and its Voice are completely inseparable from each-as it is a WHOLE.

Glennis Byron said-

"He enters some twilight region of the mind while he can see nothing; the other senses feed his imagination. This prompts him to contemplate leaving the world altogether. He realizes, however, that the ultimate form of forgetfulness, of escape from the troubles of life, would be death. Death at such a moment, listening to the Nightingale pouring forth its soul in ecstasy, would be the supreme ending. And yet death is rejected. As the poet realizes, the bird would sing on, and he would be unable to hear it. While all humans must die, the Nightingale is in some sense, "immortal." With the word 'forlorn', the spell of the poet is broken: the poet returns to the self, to the present.

Fancy, he claims, has failed him once more. He again becomes aware of the landscape around him and the bird's song begins to fade, leaving him wondering whether his experience was a vision or walking dream. But Keats falls prey to the walking dreams. "Forlorn" reminds the poet- that he is not in the right direction in meditating upon Nightingale-his Soul. The Nightingale in every way maintained the ultimate serenity and sanctity, complete absorption and devotion to his/her work and drowned to his ethereal workings.

Probability waves of Quantum Physics and Uncertainly Principle vs. Keats' Uncertainty of "already with Thee":

Uncertainty or indeterminacy was found to be the very foundation of Quantum Physics or Physics of sub-atomic particles. We cannot pulverize Religion from Literature, Mysticism from Logical Certitude, Aestheticism from Iconoclasm and Skepticism.

To the August Assembly of Westerners gathered at the Parliament of Religions of Chicago held in 1893, *Swami Vivekananda* declared “Science is nothing but the finding of unity. As science would reach perfect unity, it would stop from further progress because it would reach the goal. Thus, Chemistry could not progress further when it be able to full fill its services in discovering one energy of which all the others are but manifestations. And the “*Science of Religion*” would become perfect when it would discover “Him”, who is “One Life” in a Universe of Death, Him, who is the constant basis of an ever-changing world, one who is the only “Soul” of which all souls are but delusive manifestations. Thus it is through multiplicity and duality, that the “Ultimate Unity” is reached. Religion can go no further. This is the Goal of all Science.

Probability of Quantum Physics and Interconnectedness Vs Keats and Nightingale-"Union" a Probability and Interconnectedness:

Werner Heisenberg developed the “uncertainty Principle” which tells us that we (the observer) can never exactly know both the position and momentum of a particle. As every observation requires an energy exchange (photon) to create the observed “data” , some energy (wave) state of the observed position and momentum of the particle can never be exactly known ,theorist were left trying to determine the probability of where, for example, the “particle ” would be observed. But what is this “particle”? It is the Ultimate object of “Nirvana” to the Scientist, as Union with the Nightingale is the achievement of “Nirvana” to John Keats.

Max Born (1928) was the first to discover (by chance and with no theoretical foundation) that the “square” of the Quantum Wave equations could be used to predict the probability of where the particle would be found. Since it was impossible for both the waves and the particles to be real entities, it became customary to regard the waves as “unreal” probability waves and to maintain the belief in the “real particle. Unfortunately (profoundly) this maintained the belief in the Particle/Wave duality, in a new form where the “quantum” scalar standing waves had become “probability waves” for the “real” particle.

But how the “real” particle became “probability waves”? Aesthetics or Metaphysics or Iconoclasm cannot answer it but Mystics can solve the puzzle.

There can be no heaven on earth; consequently, the homeward flight of an earth-bound mortal must necessarily leave him in a gulf between the two worlds, One dead, the other powerless to be born. Happiness and Eternal Bliss can be experienced only by the annihilation of self. That is why Fakir Lalon in one of his most celebrated folk songs- wonders:

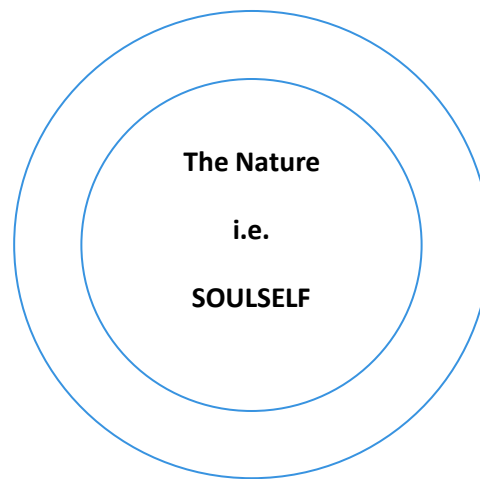
"Khanchar vitor Achin Paki, Kemne Ase Jay".

[Oh God! How the Eternal and unknown Bird (i.e. soul) can enter and exit in the cage. (i.e. Body)].

Yet, being mortal, he is still, confined to the earthly, and because the Spirit cannot wholly leave behind the sensory substance in which it is encased.

The Nightingale

The Poet



In every angle, in the Ode, The Nightingale as a part of Nature, mingled with and dissolved in the womb of Nature, but Keats remained in the same stasis from the first to the last. What Nightingale did, Keats could not-resulting in dis-union of Keats with Nightingale though he has every probability of union like the "particle" of the Quantum Mechanics. Without contradiction there can be no creation and as the love being sad has a charm of its own. The poem enriched and impregnated with antinomies of ideas which are contemplative and meditative in musings on "SELF".

As per Earl R. Wasserman-

“In the first stanza, there are *conflicts of ideas* that One we have been examining that fractures of the poet’s “happiness” into pain and numbness; and the antithesis of the two empathies, the Poet’s and Nightingale’s an antithesis of the “happiness” that determines the structure of the stanza. The poet’s heart aches, we are told, not because he envies the happiness of the Nightingale-envy being the reverse of empathy, but because he has himself entered too deeply into the emphatic happiness of the Nightingale-is: “*Too happy in thine happiness .*” For such selfless participation in

essence is not designed for mortal man. He has ascended the “*pleasure thermometer*” as high as merely human powers permit, but there is nothing to fix his intensity there, nothing to remove its temporality, no heaven bourn into which to empty it. The consequence is a drowsy ache like that of Porphyro in *Endymion*. “*Forlorn*” reminds the Poet-that he is not in the right direction. In “*already with thee*” the Poet reached there with the wings of imagination (*nirakar/Formless*) and in the plane of “poesy” (*sakar/with Form*).

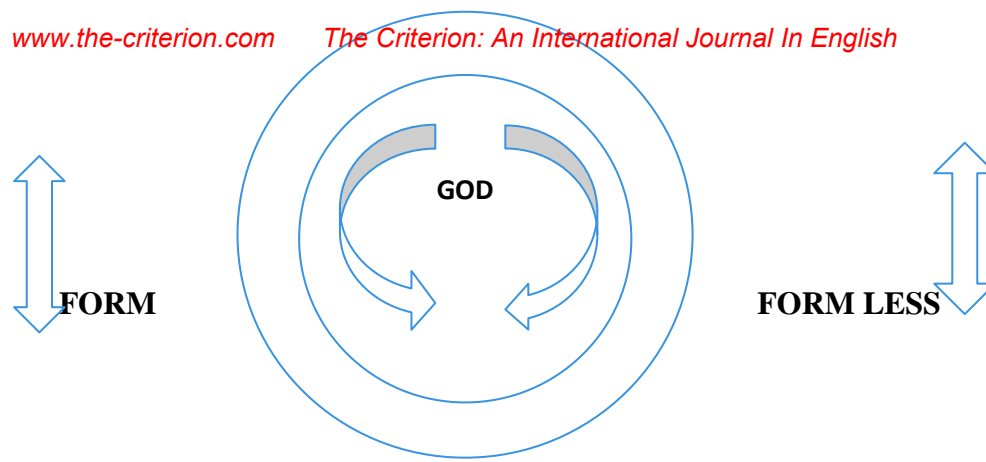
The poet is neither in the path of “Sakar” nor in the path of “Nirakar” and above all he was of none, with none, and by none. That is why he stumbled on the mystical path of union with “SELF”, and without any renunciation, but full of eternal bliss of life and love. The Nightingale is in his vicissitudinal mind, swelling his imagination, not of his own but a self. *As per F.R Leavis*: “The Ode tends to suffer an unfair simplification in memory; the thought of its being “rich to die” and the desire: “To cease upon the midnight with no pain” tend to stand for more of it than they should. Actually, when we re-read it we find that it moves outwards and upward towards life as strongly as it moves downwards toward extinction; the Ode is, In fact, an extremely subtle and varied interplay of motions; directed now positively, now negatively.

Movements in the Ode Vs Fluctuations in the Poet’s Mind:

In the fifth and sixth lines, with the reiterated “happy” the direction changes, and in the next line comes the key word, “light winged”. The stanza now moves buoyantly towards life, the fresh air, and the sunlight (shadows numberless)-the thought of happy, self-sufficient vitality provides the impulse. The common medium, so to speak, in which the shift of direction takes place with such unobtrusive affectiveness the pervasive sense of luxury, is given explicitly in the closing phrase of the stanza, “full throated ease” *The second stanza* reverses the movement of the first; until the last two lines it moves towards life and the stirring human world: “*Dance an Provencal son and sun burnt mirth*” *The Third Stanza* is the only one in the poem to be completely disintoxicated and disenchanted. *The fourth stanza* takes up the “away” again – but not the “fade’

“Away! Away! For I will fly to thee,”

The thoughts of Keats were fanciful. And the poem is basically structured around the contrast between *the poet* who is earthbound, and *the bird*, which is free. To hug the free, we need renunciation; Keats is devoid of many of the advantages of life but artificial way-bound cannot reach us to the *soul or self*. Thus, the repetition of “forlorn” has a peculiar and appropriate force is obvious, or would be if Keats had not here suffered the injury- incidental to becoming “hackneyed”.



Keats' Renunciation vs. Flying Away of the Nightingale:

The scriptures of Hinduism *Lesha-Avidya* is a Sanskrit term and here in it some souls who are extremely compassionate towards mankind can retain a trace of their compassionate thought even in Samadhi. This thought is called "*Lesha-Avidya*". It is "*Lasha- Avidya*" that drags their mind back to the awareness of the World. Retaining this trace of compassion is possible due to the "*Parabdha Karma*" of the Yogis.

Through "Dance and Provencal song", "I will fly to thee", "I cannot see what flower are at my feet", "darkling I listen", The voice I hear, "Do I wake" or sleep? Are the examples of "Lesha Avidya" in Keats'-proves that he is compassionate towards mankind but before reaching to his "*aesthetic samadhi*", he suddenly gained his moral senses-full of weariness, fever and fret. He was so much absorbed in the Nightingale and its music in a immortally-consciously renunciation, but is more absorbed in the matter of the material-conscious- world of renunciation. According to the *Doctrine of Karma*, every action produces an effect, either Good or Bad. The word "Karma" means action. In this particular context it means the effect of action.

"*Prabdha Karma*" means the effect of action which has become available to the doer. Keats is the "Doer" in this Ode in many and every way. He wanted to be "already with thee" i.e. to be "One" with the Nightingale but was denied the union with it in the climax-started the falling action. The effect of action is bitter and this is the "Parabdha Karma" of John Keats'

John Keats wanted to know the source of the Nightingale's eternal happiness and ethereal voice "with full throated ease"-by contemplating on it, whereas, he is encircled by "weariness, fever and fret." But the fluctuating graph of his mind was diverted from the object of worship, i.e. from the *SELF*. Knowers of true-Self (*i.e Brahman*) are not conscious of their bodies, senses and worldings.

The first two stages on that route-entrance into the essence of nature and art, or the exertion of the intensities of the senses and of imagination-are here symbolized by wine (*falsely*) and by the poetry (*ineffectually*). And if Keatsis once again moulding a poem into the pattern of his spiritual epistemology, as we have seen him do repeatedly, he should then seek mystical union with essence through love as the Bengal Vaishnavites do find and in the tryst of Radha- Krishna. The poet addresses

death in terms of Love: he has been half in love with death and in tenderly poetry, addressing him by “soft names, he has like a lover, begged him to take up the poet’s spirit with him.”

But it is possible to see even more clearly why Keats now conceives of death instead of love as the last and highest stage of the “*pleasure thermometer*”. The poet in the Ode faces earthward instead of heavenward, such a view of earth reveals, not absorption of Self into the immortal spirit of life, but only a physical decay. The axis on which Keats’ universe rotate has been bent wary, and his entire scheme of things is being shaken apart.

As per Earl R Wasserman:

“In the world of decay the Nightingale creates this vision by leaving its heaven on earth, and thereby gives man a glimpse of the promise that the future holds out. The Nightingale, like Pan, is a “firmament reflected in a sea” a heaven on earth; and therefore, like Pan, it is the “*opener of the mysterious doors/ Leading to universal knowledge.*”

Was Keats denied Union or the Nightingale Deceived Keats? :

In Many stages of the drama of life in “Ode to a Nightingale” the poet was striving to move to the Nightingale, but that it is the Nightingale who eventually moves-prove the futility of the aspiration. The ecstasy-requiem of the Bird’s song, now that it is being heard by only sensory ears, is merely the sad musings and mediation, wanted to release from earthly fever and fret culminating in “*Nirvana*”- and hoped to fade far away from the mutable world into “*shadows numberless*” in order to avoid the inherent fadingness of mortal man; but in the physical, spatial inversion of the vision it is the bird’s song, the poet finds, that “fades”. To the poet the night was “passing”, but now the Bird, who seemed fixed in darkness, invisible, passes. There is in the Ode many topsy-turvy movements of vision and mind which left Keats in the poll of confusion. The darkness in the Ode is not ruthless to the Nightingale as the Bird is not.

Earl R. Wasserman, in his *The Finer Tones* says:“The bird is not tormented by darkness as the poet is, for here is the light of the ideal, the visionary power of presentation into the mystery. And for this reason the Bird is encouraged to pass from the “*shadows numberless*” of the plot to the richer darkness of the “*forest dim*”, the deeper heart of the mystery.

There are, then two kinds of “darkness” and two kinds of “light” in the poem, just as there are two kinds of “death,” two kinds of “fading”: the poet is in the darkness of ignorance and bewilderment ,the Nightingale in the darkness of mystery; light to the poet is only a return from the mystery, a withdrawal into the physical world to which his faculties are adequate, but to the Nightingale light is the illumination of the mystery.”

To Sum Up:

Realized the bewilderment of the world and creation, *LALON FAKIR of BENGAL* wondered:

"*Ee baro ajab kudrati...*" (This is the great puzzle of creation).

And *HASON RAJA of BENGAL* (now BANGLADESH) exclaimed:

" *Baula ke Banailo Re - Hason Raja re Baula ke Banailo Re..*" (Oh God! who made Hason Raja, the Baul..?)

Thus, knowingly or unknowingly, the essence of the Psyche of *the Baul* has congregated and intermingled in the "*Ode to a Nightingale*".

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