

The burden of the mystery: Keats on melancholy

Talk for IPA webinar on 'Pain', February 2020

This paper presents Keats's 'Ode on Melancholy' in the light of the lonely problem of tolerating the mixed reactions to pain and beauty that stimulate our self-knowledge. The tension between these emotions was formulated in Bion's theory as LHK (Love, Hate and Knowledge).

Keats is famous for recommending that we look on the world as a Vale of Soulmaking rather than a Vale of Tears, and I would like to look in a little more detail at what he meant by this constructive use of the inevitable pains of life that are part of the human condition. He distinguished between 'imaginary' and 'real' difficulties: real ones 'nerve the spirit of a man'; imaginary ones 'nail him down for a sufferer', that is, a kind of self-indulgent masochism, that glamourises the pain in a narcissistic way rather than exploring its soul-making potential.

In the summer of 1818, the year before writing his great Odes, he embarked on a walking tour of Scotland which he envisaged as helping to 'ease the burden of the mystery'. As he wrote to a friend:

An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people – it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery: a thing I begin to understand a little ... The difference of high sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this – in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with all [the] horror of a bare -shouldered creature – in the former case, our shoulders are fledge, and we go through the same air and space without fear. (to Reynolds, May 1818)

Intense feelings, without understanding, become persecutory, and the personality is liable to fall out of the sky like an unfledged bird, into depths of depression. The way to 'fledge' the personality is through acquiring knowledge – above all of course, self-knowledge. Keats felt that his walking tour to explore the wonders of the mountainous northern landscape was at the same time an internal quest: a journey that would help him to digest and make sense of the pain and abandonment he was feeling after the departure of his brother George to America and the terminal sickness of his younger brother Tom who was dying from tuberculosis.

In the Keatsian view, 'the mystery' creates pain by its very nature: in particular owing to the unknown, uncontrollable qualities that evoke mixed emotions of wonder and loneliness attached to the object of contemplation or the relationship, meaning not just the external beautiful object but the internal one. (This internal dynamic is called by Donald Meltzer the 'aesthetic conflict', or by Bion, the linkage between Love, Hate

and Knowledge, LHK.) The failure to cope with this mystery could result in a type of madness, that Keats describes as losing one's mind on bleak mountains, and he prayed:

That man may never lose his mind on mountains bleak and bare;
That he may stray league after league some great birthplace to find,
And keep his vision clear from speck, his inward sight unblind.

On his Scottish tour Keats felt he was investigating the roots of poetry, the internal relationships that gave it birth, and the states of mind that hindered its birth. He wrote a poem on the top of Ben Nevis, the highest mountain, which was shrouded in mist so that nothing was visible, and he compared this physical state of blind sightseeing with the difficulty of inward vision:

Even so vague is man's sight of himself!

He plays on the words 'mist' and 'mystery'. This vagueness, mist, confusion, lies at the heart of mental pain. The difficulty lies in parting the clouds of confusion and keeping 'inward sight unblind'.

Some months later, after Tom's death and a period of severe depression in which Keats felt that if he was under water he would 'scarcely kick to come to the surface', he describes the awakening of his spirits. Where he had complained of 'writing in the dark', meaning he had no news from his brother in America, he now finds himself noticing 'particles of light' in the midst of darkness, like a small animal scurrying about its business with bright eyes and a sense of purpose. After getting a black eye during a game of cricket he makes an analogy with the 'buffets of the world' and with his internal state of inadequate knowledge: 'Do you not think I strive to know myself?' he writes in a letter to brother George, insisting that he now feels 'no agony but that of ignorance'. The most fundamental pain derives from lack of self-knowledge. Through letter-writing Keats transforms his external and distant brother, still silent, into an internal object who can hear him and inspire him to write poetry.

In the spring of 1819 Keats writes some of his greatest poetry, including the series of Odes. The first is the 'Ode to Psyche' in which he describes how he sees the goddess of the soul 'with awakened eyes' and establishes a new relationship with this internal muse. The second-to-last is the 'Ode on Melancholy' in which he surveys the whole psychic journey of the past year and analyses the underlying quality of melancholy or depression. By contrast with Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia, in Keats they are intertwined, as are joy and pain, which he says are so intermixed that it is impossible to pick out one sole emotion from its overall human context.

Writing the poem on Melancholy, Keats begins by considering almost a caricature of the state of mind, in the form of a grotesque monster-goddess called 'the Melancholy', derived from a mixture of dragon and Medusa. In fact he omits this monster-picture from his final version, but the idea still hovers behind the next, more abstract stanza:

No, no, go not to Lethe, neither twist
Wolf's-bane, tight-rooted, for its poisonous wine;
Nor suffer thy pale forehead to be kiss'd

By nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine;
 Make not your rosary of yew-berries,
Nor let the beetle, nor the death-moth be
 Your mournful Psyche, nor the downy owl
A partner in your sorrow's mysteries;
 For shade to shade will come too drowsily,
 And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul .

The Melancholy is the depository of pain. It is a monstrous force even if not a monster, and its power is sensed behind the emphatic repeated negatives in: 'No, no, not, neither, nor, nor, nor'. What the poet is attempting to overcome, is the self-indulgent type of pain that is reflected in an over-pictorial type of poetic metaphor: the purple flowers, grapes, insects and birds that overpower 'sorrow's mysteries' and 'drown the wakeful anguish of the soul'. The extravagant use of poetic imagery and terminology serves not to express the inner pain but to disguise it, like the drug implied by shadows 'coming drowsily' (recalling the opium-Lethe of the 'Ode to a Nightingale').

When the soul is in pain it may either modulate it or deny it. When it is divorced from its opposite emotion, joy or love of life, it becomes grotesque and self-indulgent, sleepy, a blanket of pain rather than a clear, penetrating experience of 'wakeful anguish' that stirs full emotionality. Keats continues:

But when the melancholy fit shall fall
 Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud,
That fosters the droop-headed flowers all,
 And hides the green hill in an April shroud;
Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose,
 Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave, ...

Melancholy strikes suddenly, like a cloudburst, and the remedy is not to anaesthetise its impact but to intensify it: to make creative use of 'circumstances like clouds bursting', as he puts it in a letter at the same time. These circumstances are the unpredictable events that buffet us in life and that we need to learn to process into material for soul-making. That is, we need to symbolise and understand the emotional buffets that assault us from the heavens, whether painful or pleasurable, from psychic regions where we have no control.

For Keats, this creative metabolising of life's sudden sharp shocks is dependent on making contact with Beauty, rather than succumbing to the grotesque drug-inducing monster Melancholy. He concludes his ode, like all the odes, with a new revelation about the truth-beauty equivalent that absorbs both pain and pleasure in its mental reorganisation. Spiritual melancholy lies at the heart of the vision of beauty and the experience of joy:

She dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die;
 And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,

Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,
 Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine;
His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
 And be among her cloudy trophies hung.

This kind of pain is not extravagant and gaudy but 'veiled', half-hidden, to be intuited not displayed or flaunted, in its central position in the 'temple of Delight'.

Originally Keats began this stanza with 'She lives in Beauty', echoing a phrase of Byron's. He was persuaded by his publishers to change it, but the first phrase is more accurate and in keeping with the vision of the poem as a whole. Beauty and Delight are psychic spaces rather than personifications, in which Melancholy is the occupant lying at their core. The sadness is owing to the recognition of death – 'beauty that must die' is an inextricable feature of the 'apprehension of beauty' (as Meltzer calls it), the link between self and object on which creative and developmental response is founded. Without this complex emotionality, vision cannot pierce inwards to the heart of things, to understand their meaning.

The price of knowing the meaning, is the awareness of death that is part of life. The alternative is the fake immortality of pleasant sensations evoked by the sleepy, drowsy feeling of being wrapped in melancholy like a blanket – Proserpine's drugged 'ruby grape', the closing eye, becomes in the last stanza, 'Joy's grape'. Keats does not split joy and sorrow but makes them a single experience – a kind of integration which can only be done directly in the face of the aesthetic object. Beauty opens the sharp perception of the inextricability of love and hate, death and life sensations, that have to be actively sought by the 'strenuous tongue' (the male principle) exploring the 'temple of Delight' (the female principle) in which 'veiled Melancholy' is the presiding goddess; she speaks to the poet who stood on the top of Ben Nevis shrouded in mist and mystery.

The shrine of human mysteries is guarded by the spirit of Melancholy in its musical, poetic sense. This melancholy at the heart of delight is a breast-like combined object, evoking love and hate, joy and despair at the inevitability of its disappearance: the ultimate triumph for the knowledge-seeker is to 'be among her cloudy trophies hung', that is, to be one of the countless devotees of the power of sadness to bring us closer to reality and thus to reinvigorate our experience of life. Pain just not need simply to be tolerated, but to be explored, but not in a masochistic sense. This is what Keats means by 'transforming an intelligence into a soul', as in his description of the Vale of Soul-making, which he wrote on completion of his series of odes.

Do you not see how necessary a World of pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways!

'Otherwise, he says, 'who could bear with Death?' The awareness of death is necessary to give meaningful structure to life in the world, to enable souls or psyches to be

made. For although everyone has this innate potential, not everyone can use it fully, and certainly it requires mental work to ‘acquire an identity’: for

There may be intelligences or sparks of the divine in millions – but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. (*Feb-May journal letter*)

As in Bion’s (and many other analysts’) conception of the purpose of psychoanalysis, the goal is for the individual to become himself. The goal is not to ‘pluck out the heart of the mystery’ as Hamlet objected, but to constructively face the mystery, with the turbulent emotions that are inevitably aroused. Aesthetic conflict gives melancholy its true developmental place – not just the pain of the absent object or of no longer believing in permanent possession of the object, but meaningful, soulmaking pain.

Response to Webinar questions

I shall try write a response that covers various of the original points raised. I think the poet has a special power of perception rather than projection; projection-introjection is the usual mechanism. The capacity to perceive external reality is founded on the degree to which we are in touch with internal reality. The poet’s pain derives from perception of the beauty of the world (including human and psychic beauty) and the attacks upon it, and he writes poetry basically because he has that particular talent and feels the need to use it to try to restore or repair the damaged beauty. He may well have personal life-pains, but these are absorbed in the general pain from heightened perception, which is both sharpened and relieved by the process of work (poetry). Shifting personae are like shifting vertices – they are ways of perception, from different angles, getting at the heart of the pain. But the poet does often feel his personal time is being used on behalf of humanity as a whole, and is of more benefit to others than to himself.

About the aesthetic dimension in psychoanalysis – this appears in later Bion, though it is Meltzer who elaborates on it, first in *The Psychoanalytic Process* when he notices an aesthetic feeling mutually in analyst and patient towards the end of an analysis; later in the idea of aesthetic conflict underlying all developmental crises. Meltzer and others think of psychoanalysis as an art-science, that is, a mixture not as alternatives: the method is artistic, owing to reliance on reverie and transference intuition, and the results gradually add up to a scientific quest for knowledge. But since both depend on the capacity for observation and perception there’s not much difference. The main problem is pseudo-scientific pretensions, which interferes perception.

The poet’s preverbal relation to the ‘mother’ (or muse) supports the musical qualities of poetic language. Symbol formation comes from this internalised relationship and is not imposed from outside by a paternal object demanding conformity. Symbols in poetry (as in dream) are by nature idiosyncratic, nonconformist. This use of the term ‘symbol’ is very different from the Freudian-Lacanian; it is in line with the Coleridge-Cassirer-Langer usage, that is, the philosophy of aesthetics.