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The Descent into Self: An Erasure Poem of Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale"

Creating an erasure poem expanded—literally—my understanding of space in poetry.

Upon deciding to produce erasure poetry, I sought a poem that could act as a mighty canvas: one dense with imagery, one where I could confront and alter the speaker's tone, and one with a firm addressee I could keep in mind. I soon realized, however, that many poems fulfill these requirements. In the end it was my *annoyance* with the ambiguity of such qualities in John Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" that prompted me to dissect it.

Keats' "Ode to a Nightingale" artfully explores how a fear of mortality can prompt the need to disassociate, particularly through excessive focus on another being. The first stanza encompasses the whole of the poem rather well; the speaker declares that "My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense" (1-2), but "'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot, / But being too happy in thine happiness" (5-6). The sibilance induces a drowsy, drunken atmosphere, but the hard "k" sound of "aches" punctuates the softness. This immediate paradox of simultaneous heartache and numbness points to some emotional dissonance within the speaker. Still, Keats connects the two senses through the conjunction "and" to suggest that the speaker's sharp internal pain prompts him into a state of analgesia as a coping mechanism. Interestingly, Keats then specifies that the speaker's disorientation is not the fault of the bird but rather his own. Instead of being jealous of what the bird has, he blames his condition on his own "being too

happy in” another being’s happiness. Envy “of” another indicates distance between oneself and the other, but being happy “in” another’s emotions ties the two identities together. The speaker thus harbors a tone of resentment toward himself for his act of “being” too involved in the nightingale.

The rest of the poem conveys how it is the speaker’s fear of human frailty that prompts him to nearly adopt the identity of the bird as a way to escape his own mind and body. Keats shifts the focus from the speaker to the nightingale over and over to portray the speaker’s fluctuating sense of self until the bird ultimately flies away. The poem ceases with a series of questions: “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?” (79-80). The intricate imagery and allusions throughout the poem make it natural to forget the speaker’s blurred state of consciousness. It is unclear whether he is awake or not, and ambiguity intensifies because the speaker does not trust his own mind. Furthermore, with the nightingale’s song gone and nothing left to distract his fear of mortality, the final question becomes metonymic: the speaker does not know whether he should wake or sleep—live or die.

I find the speaker’s state of disorientation both fascinating and frustrating. Due to the speaker’s fear of recognizing himself and thus the mortality that comes with being human, there is little actual description of the speaker. Instead, the poem possesses a constant up-and-down movement that reflects how the speaker’s mind wanders to the nightingale, returns to his own body briefly, then goes back to the nightingale almost immediately. There is no time and space for the speaker to consider his psyche. I want to linger on what the speaker does—or more accurately, could—not: his ache. I see an erasure poem as a way to strip away the nightingale, the object that he turns to to escape himself, and force upon the speaker a recognition of himself. I see it as a way to reflect my bare interpretation of the speaker’s fears onto the poem.

More than anything, I want a conclusive ending to the poem while still capturing the disorder within the speaker's mind. After sitting in my frustration over the poem's ambiguous final lines, I printed out physical copies to begin crossing words out in pencil. I quickly realized that I had to do so without thinking excessively; there was so much text that attempting to ponder each word hindered any progress. I swiftly moved across the page, striking through lines until I came across words like "heart," "envy," and "song": nouns that seem to embody the poem. However, the sheet of paper soon became visually overwhelming. I could see random letters behind my harsh swipes of lead, and it felt as though I was adding to the speaker's confusion rather than narrowing down his train of thought. It helped to circle certain words because the white space within the ellipses drew attention to the black letters, but this whole process really only left me with a string of words that sounded poetic yet failed to tell a narrative.

I decided to do with myself what I desired the speaker to do: sit with his thoughts and consolidate and narrow them down. I questioned how each stanza made me *feel* and sought to capture that feeling in one or two words. What stood out to me in the beginning of the poem was the overwhelming sensation of sinking. The slow diction of "drowsy," "drunk," "drains," "sunk," portrays a descent in the speaker's mind. I saw it as sinking into the depths of one's consciousness, going down toward a darkness that contains unspoken secrets, fears, desires, etc. That darkness feels quiet and lonely, and I realized that isolating letters rather than words better evokes that sense of solitude. I wanted the experience of reading the poem to reflect what was occurring in the speaker's mind, and that led me to consider the horizontal and vertical positioning of the letters.

Using a thick black marker, I colored over letters until I reached an "s" to depict the word "sunk." It would make sense if each letter was on a different line, illustrating the downward

motion that the word denotes. However, I involved both horizontal and vertical motions to create a sense of disorientation: the speaker's thoughts appear linear for a moment but then drop out of his control. I added a second "sunk" because this poem was an opportunity to make a few notions potent and extremely present. It was fascinating to play with how the letters from the two "sunk"s fit together, and how the eye goes to lengths to make sense of what it sees. I kept this idea of letters conjoining in multiple ways in mind as I moved down the poem.

At that point I thought about color. I wondered: since the setting of this poem is in the darkness of the mind, should the background be black and certain letters be white? I moved onto Google Docs to test this, but I decided against it because it made the letters too harsh and too bright. The brain is used to reading black text on white paper. If I switched this, there would be an inversion in perception and thus processing when I wanted the poem to embody the natural progression of thought. The path downward should be natural, consuming, and inevitable, just like how our consciousness often turns to places without our control.

From stanzas 2 and 3 I spelled the speaker's fear and understanding of death. The word "Down" literally stretches down the page until it reaches "dim." I placed the "n" and "d" near each other to also sound out the word "down'd," as if the speaker has downed alcohol to reach this state of numbness. Similarly, the subsequent letters overlap with one another to produce the sentence "I'm man and die." The alliteration of the letter "d" draws an audial connection between the various words, amplifying how one thought quickly leads to another. The comma indicates a slight pause; in this erasure poem the speaker is able to acknowledge what he is and what will happen to him, and that is its stark difference from Keats' poem. The isolated letter "d" on the same line as "e" both offers the beginning phoneme of another "die" and the conclusion of the former "die" as "died." I am intrigued by how the original poem blurs the line between the

asleep and awake mind, and I see that same indefiniteness when it comes to death via losing the self with depersonalization. The interchangeability of tenses between future and past epitomize the unclear definition of death in an emotional sense.

By the fourth stanza, I veered away from how each stanza made me feel and instead identified the consequences that come with the speaker's recognition of his impending death. Still, I drew out ideas already present in Keats' poem. The overwhelming repetition of the letter "i" reflects the daunting act of self-recognition. The act of calling oneself "I" without any other words beside it forces one to consider who they are in isolation. The letters "d" and "e" are additionally scattered nearby to project the pervasive awareness of death. Indeed, I navigate with the parallel notions of living while dying and dying while living with the phrase "I fade and feed." Keats repeats "fade" throughout his poem to describe the speaker's desire to "fade away" from his consciousness as well as how the nightingale's song fades. There is a sense of loss, but at the same time both beings appear alive and must feed their bodies that are fading. Again, these letters are in close proximity, so one sees other words such as "need," "deed," and lastly, "death."

I spell out death from the "d" of "feed" and "e" of "fade" from right to left while moving down the page because the speaker must contemplate death in every direction. There is a moment of pause in the white space and then the irresistible sibilance brings the poem to a close. After the turmoil of recognizing one's mortality, death softens in comparison to the brutality of the human body. I take Keats' last line and choose a conclusion for the speaker: he decides to sleep. The final word is solid and whole, compressing all the scattered thoughts above into this single act of sleep.

The process of creating an erasure poem was far more difficult and far more exciting than I anticipated. I discovered additional dimensions to poetry: I considered how letters are

connected and disconnected, what it means to have certain words in proximity on the page, and how to harness the incredible power of the human eye. Erasing words forced me to recognize that choosing one letter means taking away nearly all the others, so I had to consider carefully what deserved the space. I thought about our Creating Memory seminar and how certain memories take on a larger space in our minds. In the same way, language composes the way we think, so the letters and words most present in our minds dictate the essence of how we think and feel. Whether time moves laterally or whether death appears in a linear or circular timeline depends largely on the movements in which we approach language. Erasure poems press meaning onto each and every letter, forcing attention upon how every space and every letter builds the speaker's thoughts.