

Prognosis without Verdict: Clinical Judgement and the Endings of Keats's Odes of 1819

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Abstract— Criticism of Keats's odes has been overwhelmingly diagnostic. It asks what the poems know, and it reads their endings as limits of knowledge or of feeling. This essay argues that the endings are better described as prognostic. Keats was examined on semeiotics, the branch of the medical institutes that divided signs into the diagnostic and the prognostic, and he served as a dresser at Guy's Hospital, where the case report is a genre that by convention does not conclude. We reconstruct five terminal moves available to a Georgian clinical case, state a formal criterion for locating the terminal move of a poem, and apply that criterion to the six odes of 1819 and to a control set of five odes published between 1746 and 1820. Five of the six odes fall within the clinical repertoire. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" does not, and we argue that the long editorial quarrel over the quotation marks in its last two lines is a quarrel about who signs the note. The control odes end in maxim, benediction, or consolation. We propose prognostic suspension as a category of lyric closure absent from Barbara Herrnstein Smith's taxonomy: formal closure completed, judgement withheld.



Keywords— John Keats, the 1819 odes, prognosis, lyric closure, Georgian medicine, semeiotics, predictive processing

I. INTRODUCTION

Almost every influential account of Keats's odes is, at bottom, an account of how they stop. M. H. Abrams described the greater Romantic lyric as a round trip that returns the speaker to his starting place, altered. Helen Vendler read the six poems of 1819 as a developmental sequence in which each ending corrects the one before. Susan Wolfson found in their closing gestures a form under interrogative pressure, unable to settle the questions it has raised. Anahid Nersessian reads the endings as erotic rather than epistemological, the last movement of a discourse addressed to something that will not answer. These accounts disagree about a great deal. They agree that the endings are events in the history of knowing or feeling, and that what happens at the close of "Ode to a Nightingale" is that a mind reaches a limit.

There is another vocabulary for what happens at the end of these poems, and it was in Keats's hands before

he wrote them. In a single page on Moneta in *The Fall of Hyperion*, Vendler notices that "the tone of the medical diagnostician is present," and that Keats offers "a diagnosis" and then "a prognosis" for a face he has just described (214). She does not pursue the observation, and she does not carry it into the odes. Nor has anyone else. The word prognosis occurs once in Vendler's book, in that sentence, and passes almost unremarked in Donald Goellnicht's and Hermione de Almeida's studies of Keats and medicine, both of which are otherwise exhaustive on pathology, therapeutics, and the physiology of the vital principle. The most heavily worked seam in Keats studies has an unopened branch running off it.

The branch matters because prognosis is not a subspecies of diagnosis. In the medical teaching Keats sat through between 1815 and 1816, the doctrine of signs, semeiotics, was conventionally divided into the diagnostic, which reads the signs to name the present state, and the

prognostic, which reads the same signs to say what will follow. The two are different intellectual acts with different risks. A diagnosis can be checked against the body in front of you. A prognosis is a judgement about an event that has not occurred, made from evidence that is always insufficient, and it was a point of professional discipline to withhold it when the signs did not warrant it. Ode criticism has been diagnostic all along. It has asked what state the poem is in. The odes, this essay argues, are prognostic, and the famous inconclusiveness of their endings is not a failure of knowledge but the observance of a rule about when judgement may be given.

What follows sets out five terminal moves available to a Georgian clinical case, applies them to the six odes of 1819, tests the result against a control set of odes from Collins to Shelley, and proposes a category of lyric closure that Barbara Herrnstein Smith's taxonomy does not contain. No claim is made that Keats consciously borrowed a professional genre. The claim is about a repertoire of endings that was available to him and to almost no other poet of the period.

II. METHOD

The procedure has three stages, and it is designed so that a reader can disagree with the results by rerunning it.

Stage one: reconstructing the terminal grammar of the case. Georgian case writing is a small, rule-bound genre. The Guy's reporting conventions Keats worked under as a dresser to William Lucas from March 1816, the semeiotic division of the medical institutes, and the practical instruction in Keats's own *Anatomical and Physiological Note Book* together yield a short list of ways a case may be brought to a stop. Cullen's *First Lines of the Practice of Physic*, the standard text of the period, supplies the terminology of crisis and of the constitutional predicate on which a prognosis is conditioned. Five terminal moves emerge:

1. **Crisis undeclared.** The note ends at the turning point, with the outcome unnamed.
2. **Prognosis declared.** A future-tense statement of outcome, conditioned on the patient's constitution.
3. **Regimen prescribed.** A course of treatment is set out and the outcome deferred to its observance.
4. **Discharge.** The patient is dismissed; the case is closed without a cure being claimed.
5. **Signs recorded, judgement withheld.** Observation continues to the last line and no inference is drawn from it.

These five were derived from the medical sources before the poems were consulted. That order matters: a grid fitted to six poems will always fit six poems.

Stage two: locating the terminal move. A poem's terminal move is taken to begin at the last change in dominant verb mood, and is classified by three features that can be checked without interpretation: the mood and tense of the final finite verb, the person addressed at the close, and whether an outcome is named. This is a deliberately thin criterion. It will misdescribe poems whose semantic drift runs against their grammar, and it is offered because it is falsifiable, not because it is subtle.

Stage three: control. The same criterion is applied to five odes outside the sample, chosen for formal comparability and spread across the tradition Keats inherited: Collins's "Ode to Evening" (1746), Gray's "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College" (1747), Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" (1802), Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (1807), and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" (written 1819). If the control odes distribute across the same five moves, the historical claim collapses into a description of the ode as such and the argument fails. So it does if three or more of the six odes resist classification. Quotations follow Jack Stillinger's edition of the poems.

III. RESULTS

Crisis undeclared: "Ode to a Nightingale." The poem is an act of listening to something that cannot be seen. "Darkling I listen" (line 51) states the situation exactly: the observer is in the dark, the source of the sign is hidden, and everything must be inferred from sound. What ends the poem is not the departure of the bird but the arrival of two questions. "Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music: Do I wake or sleep?" (79-80). The final finite verbs are interrogative and present-tense, the addressee has shifted from the bird to nobody, and no outcome is named. This is the note that stops at the crisis. The patient has turned; whether he has turned towards recovery is not stated, and cannot be, because the observer is the patient.

Prognosis declared: "Ode on Melancholy." This is the only ode of the six that names an outcome, and it names it in the exact grammar of a Georgian prognosis. The first stanza is a proscription, a list of things not to be done: not Lethe, not wolf's-bane, not the yew-berries. The third stanza then supplies a constitutional predicate, "him whose strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine" (27-28), and only for that constitution does it declare the sequel: "His soul shall taste the sadness of her might, / And be among her cloudy trophies hung" (29-30). A prognosis in Cullen's manner is never unconditional; it is

always predicated on the patient's idiosyncrasy. Keats's *shall* is the modal of a physician who has established the constitution first and will commit himself only that far. The trophy hung in the shrine is, in the same breath, a votive offering and a specimen retained.

Regimen prescribed: "Ode to Psyche." The turn comes at "Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane / In some untrodden region of my mind" (50-51), after which the poem becomes an inventory of provisions. What it provides is a regimen in the technical sense: a controlled environment, listed item by item, on which an outcome is made to depend. The last two lines are the most literal instance of it in Keats. "A bright torch, and a casement ope at night, / To let the warm Love in" (66-67) prescribes light, warmth, and ventilation, which is precisely the triad of Georgian hospital management of a convalescent room. Nothing is promised. The provisions are set out and the poem stops.

Discharge: "Ode on Indolence." The three figures are examined, characterised, and dismissed. "Vanish, ye Phantoms! from my idle spright, / Into the clouds, and never more return!" (59-60). The final finite verbs are imperative, the addressee is the object under observation, and no outcome is named for anyone. The speaker has not been cured of indolence, and the poem does not claim he has been. He has closed the case.

Signs recorded, judgement withheld: "To Autumn." The poem's one interpretive statement, "Think not of them, thou hast thy music too" (24), is made before the evidence rather than after it, and is not repeated. Everything that follows is a catalogue of signs with their locations and times: gnats in the shallows, lambs from the hilly bourn, crickets in the hedge, the redbreast in a garden-croft, and then "gathering swallows twitter in the skies" (33). Every reader converts the gathering into an omen of departure. The poem does not. The last finite verb is a third-person present indicative describing an observed event, the addressee has been dropped, and no outcome is named. This is the case note that runs to the end of the page still recording.

The unsigned note: "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The fifth ode does not fit, and its refusal is the most interesting result here. Its ending contains a declared judgement, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" (49), which ought to place it under move two. But the judgement is not the speaker's, and the poem will not say whose it is. Immediately before it the speaker has called the urn a "Cold Pastoral" and said it "dost tease us out of thought" (45, 44), which is a refusal of inference; immediately after it, the maxim is bracketed by "that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know" (49-50), which frames a verdict without endorsing it. The result is a note that carries a judgement and no signature. That the

crux has been fought over for a century as a question of where the quotation marks belong is, on this reading, not an accident of Keats's manuscripts. Editors have been arguing about attribution of judgement, which is exactly what a case note exists to fix and this poem declines to fix.

Control. The comparison is not close. Gray ends in a maxim of general application: "where ignorance is bliss, / 'Tis folly to be wise." Collins ends in a hymnic declaration of the powers that own Evening's influence. Wordsworth ends in a declared consolation, thoughts lying too deep for tears, which names the outcome of the poem's whole crisis. Coleridge ends in benediction, a wish directed at the Lady and completed as a wish. Shelley's ode, written in the same autumn as "To Autumn," ends in a question, "If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?", which looks like Keats's terminal interrogative and is not: it is a rhetorical question with a fixed answer, a prognosis in interrogative dress. Four of the five control poems end by naming an outcome, and the fifth ends by naming one while pretending to ask. None of the five falls into moves one, three, four, or five.

IV. DISCUSSION

The immediate consequence is that the odes' endings stop looking like a symptom and start looking like a competence. A poem that ends at an undeclared crisis, or that records signs and draws nothing from them, is doing what a trained observer does when the evidence does not license a judgement. Vendler's developmental reading requires the endings to be stages in an education; Wolfson's requires them to register a pressure that form cannot contain. Both treat withholding as something that happens to the poem. On the present account it is something the poem performs, and performs from a repertoire.

The reading also does not require the six odes to be a designed sequence, which is fortunate, since that has been disputed for decades and cannot be settled from the manuscripts. Five terminal moves distributed across six poems is a paradigm, not a narrative. The poems need not have been written in the order of an argument for them to exhaust a set of options.

A corollary follows for negative capability, and it should be stated cautiously, because that phrase has attracted more commentary than it can bear and Li Ou has shown how much of it repeats itself. Keats described the quality as being "capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason" (*Letters* 1: 193). Read against the semeiotic training he had just completed, this is a recognisable professional description. The irritable reacher, in a hospital, is the practitioner who names the outcome before the crisis has declared itself, and who is wrong in a way that costs.

The letter has usually been read as aesthetics or as epistemology. It also reads as a description of prognostic restraint, transferred from a ward to a poem.

For lyric theory the contribution is a category. Barbara Herrnstein Smith's account of poetic closure distinguishes between poems that achieve closure and poems that resist it, and her devices of closure are almost all devices for signalling that a judgement has been reached: the maxim, the terminal repetition, the return to an opening term. The odes of 1819 do something her taxonomy has no name for. They complete their closure signals in full, the stanza filled out, the rhyme scheme discharged, the syntax resolved, while declining the judgement those signals conventionally carry. Call this prognostic suspension: formal closure completed, verdict withheld. It is not open form, and it is not irony. It is the shape of a document that has been properly finished by someone who is not yet entitled to conclude.

Modern cognitive vocabulary describes the reader's side of this well, and should be used for that and no more. Karin Kukkonen's account of probability design and Andy Clark's account of precision-weighting both describe a reader running predictions and adjusting them against error. Genre convention raises the precision of a reader's predictions sharply at the close of an ode, because the tradition Collins and Gray and Wordsworth had built promises a maxim there. Keats's endings arrive at that point of maximum expectation and supply no verdict to check the prediction against. The prediction cannot be confirmed or corrected, only held. That is an accurate description of the reading experience, but it is the period's own word, prognosis, that names what the poems are doing, and the modern terminology should stay in a subordinate position.

Three limits. First, "Ode to Psyche" is the weakest case: its closing inventory is also a hymnic peroration of the kind Collins writes, and a sceptical reader may reasonably classify it with the control set. Second, six poems and five controls is a small sample, and the criterion in stage two is coarse by design. Third, the historical warrant is circumstantial throughout. Keats's surviving case-related writing is thin, and no document shows him thinking about lyric closure in clinical terms. The obvious extension is to apply the stage-two criterion at scale, to the several hundred odes published in English between 1740 and 1830, which is the kind of question Ted Underwood's methods were built for and which would settle whether the distribution reported here is peculiar to Keats or merely peculiar to 1819.

V. CONCLUSION

In February 1820, after a night on the outside of the Hampstead coach, Keats coughed blood onto his sheet,

asked Charles Brown for a candle, looked at it, and said that he knew the colour of that blood, that it was arterial, and that the drop was his death warrant. Nicholas Roe reprints Brown's account. It is the most exact piece of reading Keats ever did, and it is a prognosis: a sign, correctly identified, converted without hesitation into a statement about an event that had not yet happened. He was right. The six poems of the previous spring and autumn had been built, one after another, out of the refusal to do that.

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