

## A Keatsian Echo in Cormac McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper*

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Cormac McCarthy's first novel, *The Orchard Keeper* (1965) both celebrates and mourns the disappearing customs of the fictive community of Red Mountain, Tennessee. The novel's conclusion recalls John Keats's poem "The Eve of St. Agnes," gaining resonance from the poem's elegiac lament for its departed lovers' community. The concluding stanza of Keat's poem begins with these lines about the departure of Madeline and her lover Porphyro from her ancestral home: "And they are gone: ay, ages long ago / These lovers fled away into the storm" (lines 370-71). The stanza and the poem end in death, with the passing of Madeline's nurse Angela and the death of the beadsman who "slept among his ashes cold" (line 378). McCarthy almost directly quotes the first half of line 370 and the crucial verb "fled" from line 371 of "The Eve of St. Agnes" in his final paragraph: "They are gone now. Fled, banished in death or exile, lost, undone" (246). Keats's poem employs bejeweled, archaic language and a mythic setting on the Eve of St. Agnes, the night when female virgins are supposed to receive an image of their future husbands if they follow a time-honored ritual. Porphyro cheats by appearing in person to Madeline and essentially rapes her, and the poem gives voice to her great despair at having lost her most prized possession. But the poem's conclusion mourns not so much Madeline's loss but the effect of her departure: The death of the characters Angela and the Beadsman in the final stanza symbolize the end of the community, signified by "ashes cold."

At the conclusion of McCarthy's novel, John Wesley Rattner has just visited the cemetery where his mother Mildred is buried and leaves, heading "out to the western road" (246), which is ablaze with light, "pennoned in flame." Just as Keats's lovers head to the warm south to escape the cold clime of the castle and its grounds, McCarthy's Rattner heads west, also figured as a place of warmth, over against the figurative coldness of a dying culture. The cemetery where Rattner's mother is buried is already in disuse: The grass is "tall" and the "spiked iron fence" is in "ruins" (245). After Rattner leaves, the narrator mourns not just Rattner but all the local inhabitants by employing McCarthy's reference to Keats's poem. Tellingly, McCarthy leaves out Keats's paratactical "And," which would have suggested undue continuity, and adds "now," flatly rendering the rupture of a communal way of life: "They are gone now." While some, like Rattner, have "Fled," others are "banished in death or exile, lost, undone" and "On the lips of the strange race that now dwells there their names are myth, legend, dust" (246). Just as Keats's poem ends in "ashes cold," with the death of Madeline's community, passed as it were into myth, recorded only in the imagination of the poet, McCarthy's novel ends in "dust," with Rattner fled and Uncle Ather banished to the asylum, their communal way of life preserved solely by McCarthy's fiction.

## Works Cited

- Keats, John. "The Eve of St. Agnes." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: The Major Authors*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Gen. ed. M. H. Abrams. New York: Norton, 2001. 1804-14.
- McCarthy, Cormac. 1993. *The Orchard Keeper*. New York: Vintage, 1965.