Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale”

1. My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
   My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
   Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
   One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:
   'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
   But being too happy in thine happiness,
   That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
   In some melodious plot
   Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
   Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

This poem follows a pattern
Jack Stillinger sees in
many Romantic poems:
1. Poet has a problem.
2. Poet reflects on problem in
   a kind of imaginative,
   transcendent reverie.
3. Poet returns from it but
   somehow changed.
In short, there is a kind of
mental departure and a
return, suggesting some
insight has been gained.

Here the poet begins in pain
and envious of the bird,
not unlike Shelley in “Ode
to a Skylark.”

Note: unlike Wordsworth, the
later Romantics liked to
include classical allusions.
O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been
Cool’d a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country green,
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm South,
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,
    With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
    And purple-stained mouth;
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

The poem has suicidal and ideas and “deathy” imagery throughout.

Those parts are underlined.

Beethoven thought of suicide and said,
“only art held me back.”

Being burried is a reoccurring image. Being underground is in stark contrast with the bird that rises above.

“Fading” is a key repeated word in the poem.

The poem shows Romantic interest in altered states of consciousness; in stanza 1, a “dull opiate” is mentioned; here wine is referred to with classical allusions.
Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

This is a powerful stanza, sad and moving in its description of the pain the speaker wishes to leave behind.

“Keats’s brother Tom, wasted by tuberculosis, had died the preceding winter.”
Away! away! for I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:
Already with thee! tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

We’ve seen reference to Bacchus (the Roman name for the Greek god Dionysus) in “Kubla Khan” and “Ode to the West Wind.”

Here, we see a shift—away from alcohol-inspired vision and instead to pure poetic vision itself.

Keats already feels with the bird, as he imagines himself rising into the dark sky.

Tender Is the Night was used as a title for a novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald.
5.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonable month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves;
And mid-May’s eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Keats is known for being one of the most sensual of poets, meaning he writes with a lot of sensory descriptions: everyone includes imagery, but Keats includes a lot of the sense of touch, taste, smell, and sound—especially here.

Remember, the underlined parts signal the “deathy” images and phrases that appear throughout the poem, even when death is not explicitly being discussed (it’s like the mindset of the speaker being hinted at through his descriptions).
6.

Darkling I listen; and, for many a time
   I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call’d him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
   To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
   To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
   In such an ecstasy!
Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain—
   To thy high requiem become a sod.

Here’s where the speaker appears most suicidal, but at the end of the stanza he begins to arrive at a realization, one like Shelley’s in “Ode to a Skylark”:

Even if the bird seems to transcend the problems of the world (just as the speaker is looking for such an escape), the bird is nothing like him and could care less if he died.

A “sod” is a British term for an idiot (among other things). He would be an idiot to die. A “sod” is also a piece of turf, again hinting at the “deathy” underground imagery of the poem.
Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft-times hath
Charm’d magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

The speaker begins to see a wider picture here, and he no longer appears so alone.

He thinks of other people over time, lonely people, who must have felt like him hearing the bird’s song: ancient emperors and clowns, Ruth (from the Bible), and sailors upon rough seas.

At times, everyone feels sad with longing, and recognizing this common thread in humanity marks a shift away from the seduction of death.
Wordsworth can only hold onto glimpses of immortality and Coleridge is only allowed a little taste of paradise; here, too, the poetic vision is fleeting. The poet’s own words like a bell wake him from his reverie, and he suggests his imagination (linked to his suicidal thoughts) can no longer cheat or deceive him.

There is a reversal in the main pattern of imagery, too. The bird’s song, which prompted the speaker’s suicidal thoughts, is now distant from the speaker—the song is faded, buried deep in the next valley.

Adieu!—it is as if the speaker says farewell to death, farewell to thoughts of fading away and being buried.