

‘A Distant Idea of Proximity’ : How Keats saw nature

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Abstract

This paper brings together two questions that worried John Keats: first, can beautiful things (urns, mythologies, poems) suffer damage through mishandling or misinterpretation? Second, must the poet pursue his vocation in solitude? In his letters, Keats's thoughts on solitude and sociability continually intersect with his fears of damage to the beautiful. His preoccupation with thinking as touching, and touching as injury, led him to contemplate leaving the city for a hermetic solitude in which his poems would be 'not fingerable over by men.' On the other hand, Keats worried about being out of touch with those closest to him. He cherished the 'silent moulding and influencing power' of amicable proximity. Keats offered his correspondents what he calls 'a distant idea of proximity.' I show how this 'interassimilation' of his 'solitary re-perception of beauty' and textual sociability are legible in his manuscripts.

Keywords: Touch, letters, Keats, sociability, solitude, beauty, temperature, interassimilation.

Introduction

John Keats comes to see art as multidimensional things in life where in his poems and letters; where imagination, truth and psychological anxiousness are understood as the synthetic interpretation of all experiences which allocates a synthesis for wisdom and universal truth rather than the analytic description. John Locke initiated the "Age of Reason" by educating that all true knowledge must be empirically substantiated. In this way, one has to experience inwardly rather than breaking down into ephemeral facts by scientific method. The second generation poets of Romanticism era are very much fatalistic and melancholic according to the bad effect of French Revolution. Keats's feelings of personal inadequacies glorified in the work of his art or depicted art as a genuine picture of humanity. According to Keats, the essence of art is in its blending where everything contributes to each other. Art is something where knowledge is not to be given; truth is something which comes as a realization. What imagination sees the beauty, there lies the truth in it and this imagination according to Keats can be compared to Adam's dream. Keats spiritually asserts that the appeal of the art is profound that you don't have to question or argue the possibility of it. Also an intensified art form where medium and art cannot be separated. The epiphany moment is more important.

Keats must have felt, with regard to his critical and productive work, that it was his duty to bring to life a delightful vision of primal oneness which creates a moment of epiphany are required to see as empirical reality. It is for the same

reason that the innermost core of nature takes such profound influence in the artist and the work of art which elevates artistic symbolism. The work of art is such that the artist brings back his enlightened universality of abstraction to life and through this abstraction Keats will sermonize the wrongdoings of humanity.

As we know, emotion and imagination were regarded as fundamental components of an artist's work during Romanticism, the very innate and core idea of Romanticism was the free expression of the freedom of self. Keats equally had an access on the glimpse of universality from mundane life in order to reach the other realm where there is nothing but truth. Keats differs from Wordsworth and Coleridge because Keats approaches and propositions are nothing but escapism from reality. Nature was never an intrinsic aspect of reality for Keats, he never celebrated nature joyously like Wordsworth did. Keats subjected more on the part of celebrating his poems sensuously. What Keats meant by this was poetry doesn't give us informations but it gives us immense realization. Simply he means that a poem cannot be didactic in nature, poetry is all about truth. It should be represented, not told about. Odes are the most matured and fully developed poems in the sense of Keats's ideas.

The Odes were Keats's dedication to discuss the relationship between soul, nature, eternity, art and life. Initially, Keats and P.B.Shelley did not get a quick acceptance and was despised by the Tory critics intensely. Critics welcomed only Wordsworth and ignored the Cockney School of Poets like Keats, Leigh Hunt, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Lord Byron and so on. Keats abstractly defines the truth as beauty in his odes and with the help of deep-rooted analysis can one understand the presentation of human euphoria of consciousness in the world of literature and life, vice versa. The most absorbing awareness is the spontaneous demonstration of nature with the perspective of truthfulness and unraveling the symbolism of universal myth expressing this kind of awakening which is found in Keats's poems. By learning to love Keats's poems, he awakens the reader to the power of human love concealed in its words but genuinely impassioned form. The aim of this paper presentation is to make conversant with Keats's principles of truth in art and life and also to critically scrutinize within the bounds of Keats's inventiveness.

Objective:

This paper seeks explore how Keats genius saw nature and beauty in unison.

Romanticism of Keats

The aesthetic theory of Romanticism diverges from Greek philosophy because art became more realistic and sensuous around the time of Romanticism era. Perhaps one can say the religious subjects got shattered gradually and reoriented more into the study of possible explanations of facts. Jean Jacques Rousseau encouraged poets to be inspired by nature which makes his poems very introspective and imagination's ability to reconstruct and purify one's experience. There is one more point to be made. There is a conscious reunion of Keats's inward reality within the outer reality in the Romanticism era which was the powerful functionality of symbolism. In such a young person, in order to have this capability of understanding the mysteries of macrocosmic nature and by bringing them into consciousness that gives him a vision of unexpected treasures of reality, a strong empirical reason why we should study Keats can be evaluated with strong assertion.

Artistically, Keats's Ode to Nightingale and Percy Bysshe Shelley's To a Skylark are both concentrated on nature in the form of birds where the use of poetic elements are identical but a difference can be pointed out in theme. Shelley was more into radical thought. Keats's Ode to Nightingale which was composed in the summer and autumn of 1819 is considered a passionate meditation which begins with a sense of ambiguity because the bird doesn't have a physical presence and gradually proceeds towards trance like experience caused by an ecstasy evoking mixture of pain and joy but this painful awareness of human reality can also be seen in Wordsworth's poems. What makes Keats's ode very unique is his concrete unification of sensations and emotions. Keats also believed that his poems had the power to transcend consciousness, in a way reality offers a form of escapism.

The last two lines of Ode on a Grecian Urn "Beauty is truth, truth beauty, that is all Ye know on earth and all ye need to know" shows how he acknowledged real truth in beauty and that truth is essentially subjective. Beauty is the central theme in Keats's poetry. T.S. Eliot calls these lines a small imperfection on a beautiful poem and the reason must be either i fail to understand this poem or this statement is completely false but Eliot praises his letters as the most beautiful personal letters in English Literature. There are also various remarks made by critics regarding paganism against Christianity displayed in Keats's poems. An important line to be noted here "Who are these coming to sacrifice? To what green altar, O mysterious priest".

The interpretation of paganism demands an increasing knowledge of Keats's responses to these themes which are fundamentally symbolic in nature. Shelley expressed the opinion that Keats was a representative of Greek thought and in this itself is Keats's distinctive style, an organic mythology of his own creation. This can be seen in the poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn", the poet expresses his imagination of the urn based on the picture that Keats had seen in British Museum in England.

Greek influence on Keats

The poet pictures how the lives of ancient Greek would look through contemplating the urn and that is the purpose of art. The classical Greek theology or the world of Greek paganism can be seen in the reading of "The Eve of St. Agnes" where the setting of the background is gothic and one can see the medieval influence in Keats. Keats was a poet of pure imagination "in faery lands forlorn" as quoted from his poem Ode to a Nightingale which means a lonely or faraway land. The man who had the vision to the doorway of his own reality of another reality like a peephole closer to truth. This is what Keats reveals gradually in his poems. In examining The Eve of St. Agnes where Keats gives us an awareness of his psychic maturity in a physical sense regarding his youthful phase of development where it becomes something more, a symbol of creative experimentalism.

Keats paradoxically leaves the opinion and orientation of art to us. In fact, whenever a human being truly starts to look everything within and tries to know himself, by following his unbiased nature such as imagination then sooner or later the self emerges. Perhaps this is the goal of philosophy as Socrates asserted "To know thyself". What makes Keats's poetry very spiritual is the power of art which transcends his reality. There is a mystery in art and is prophetic. The most important subject that can be seen were in the form of these letters where Keats refers his first letter to his

brothers George and Thomas on December 21, 1817 known as negative capability. The irony of studying negative capability in Keats's letters is that the purpose of poetry is not to transmit half-knowledge. As we've already discussed in this paper that Keats chose sensuousness over thoughts. In examining Keats's letters to Benjamin Bailey, he writes, "I am continually running away from the subject, sure this cannot be exactly the case with a complex mind, one that is imaginantative and at the same time careful of its fruits, who would exist partly on sensation partly on thought".

Keats praises Bailey by stating that his way of thinking is very identical to this mind. The self-exploration of Keats's consciousness to encounter divinity as a collective identity is symbolic representation of the whole psyche. Keats was associated with Arts for Arts sake because he regarded art as a moral value. According to Keats, the role of the artist was not only to celebrate his joy but also the joy of life in itself where all senses are perceived with beauty of things. Wordsworth dwelled more into transforming memory into awakening "spots of time" in our existence because for him nature is benevolent form to understand knowledge and so did William Blake said the same thing about spots of time. The Tory critic John Gibson Lockhart was harshly criticizing Keats in Blackwoods Edinburgh's Magazine advising Keats that "It is wiser to be a hungry apothecary than a hungry poet". A major reason for the great appeal of Keats's poetry is that his sentiments were sincere and spiritually rooted.

In the meantime it is noticeable that there are also many differences between Keats and Lord Byron as Byron saw nature more associated with humanity and also is more concerned with human civilization in most of his poems whereas Keats is more involved with dream-world, more imaginantative and allowing the self to emerge. Rather, it is a realm of the ideal where one can notice in the opening lines of the "Fall of the Hyperion". Another critic named Matthew Arnold will have a Keats who is a poet of "thoughts" rather than of "sensations" and Christopher Ricks, who offer vital reinterpretations of the importance of "sensuousness" to Keats's work. Therefore, the conclusion of this paper in regard to the very core of Keats's poetry advocates us to find the deep truth in real life which is the core of ultimate beauty and that is the art of truth.

But Keats has his limitations as a Greek. He does not write Greek things in a Greek manner. Something indeed in Hyperion — at least in its first two books—he caught from Paradise Lost of the high restraint and calm which was common to the Greeks and Milton. But his palace of Hyperion, with its vague, far-dazzling pomps and phantom-terrors of coming doom, shows how far he is in workmanship from the Greek purity and precision of outline, and firm definition of individual images. Similarly one of the most characteristic images of Nature from this poem shows not the simplicity of the Greek, but the complexity of the modern sentiment of Nature, with its concourse of metaphors and epithets. Keats produces here every effect which a forest-scene by starlight can have upon the mind: the pre-eminence of the oaks among the other trees, their aspect of human venerable-ness, their verdure unseen in the darkness, the sense of their stillness and suspended life, etc.

The rooted artistic instincts of the Greeks were absent from Keats's nature and temperament. He did not have the Greek instinct of selection and simplification, or of a rejection of all beauties except the vital and the essential. He did not have the capacity to deal with his material in such a way that the main masses might stand out unconfused, in just

proportions and with outlines perfectly clear. And like his aims and his gifts, he was in his workmanship essentially romantic, Gothic, English. At the time when he wrote *Endymion*, he believed that poetry should surprise by a fine excess, and the manner in which Keats deals with the Greek story of *Endymion*, is as far from being a Greek or classical manner as possible.

But though Keats sees the Greek world from a far, he sees it truly. The Greek touch is not his, but in his own rich and decorated English way he writes with a sure insight into the vital meaning of Greek ideas. For the story of the war of Titans and Olympians he had nothing to guide him except the information that he got from classical dictionaries. But as to the essential meaning of that warfare and its result, it could not possibly be understood more truly, or illustrated with more beauty and force, than by Keats in the speech of Oceanus in the Second Book. In the dethronement of an older and ruder worship by one more advanced and humane, in which idea of ethics and of arts held a larger place beside ideas of Nature and her brute powers—this idea has fully been brought out. Again in conceiving and animating the colossal shapes of early gods, Keats shows a masterly instinct.

From the above mentioned discussion we can say that Keats had great influence on Greek but he took the references and examples for some reason which is clear to us like a broad day light. At last we can mention in the voice of Sidney Colvin, “This is clear from his choice of comparisons, drawn from the vast inarticulate sounds of Nature, by which he seeks to make us realise their voices.”

unique to Keats as a Romantic poet is that he did not believe his poetry needed or even should have a message to convey. Rather, poetry’s sole purpose was to convey a sense of beauty. The poet, then, must search for beauty and render it as best he can through words. As Keats notes, “With a great poet, the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all considerations.” The question then is what is beauty for Keats? For him, beauty was truth itself, a concept intertwined with negative capability. During the transcendence of the poet, he attempts to feel like a nightingale (*Ode to a Nightingale*), or even a bee (*Ode to Indolence*). This process requires the poet to use imagination and accept his visions and feelings as truth: “I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart’s affections and the truth of imagination. What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth.” His poem, *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, is a prime example. It is about a Greek vase decorated with paintings of a Dionysian festival. In this poem, the poet transcends logic and imagines the lives of each of these characters, including a bull heading to a sacrifice.

Keats vision of nature and beauty

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,

And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

From the very beginning of the poem, the poet is struck by the eternal beauty:

THOU still unravish'd bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of Silence and slow Time,

Furthermore, through the course of the poem, the poet also experiences woe, for the characters painted on the vase are frozen in time, for eternity. Never to return home:

What little town by river or sea-shore,
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?
 And, little town, thy streets for evermore
 Will silent be; and not a soul, to tell
 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

Another example is the male lover, who although so close, will never get to kiss the fair maiden. Yet, she will forever remain beautiful and young:

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
 Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
 She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

On the other side of the token, the characters will be forever celebrating, they will never more know the chill of winter:

Ah, happy, happy boughs! that cannot shed
 Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;

Regardless of the possible woes, the beauty (art) is the only eternal truth, for all else will decay:

When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

Art was not the only beautiful thing for Keats, so was nature. Nature's glory and power amazed the poet and lifted his spirit, as we have seen in Ode to a Nightingale. Many poets and writers of the Romantic era saw nature as a source of health and the counterpart, the urban milieu, as a source of disease. De facto, even in Ode to a Grecian Urn, the poet speaks of the natural setting, showing its importance for Keats. On the same token, nature is constantly re-nourishing itself, and in that sense, nature is also eternal. Ode to a Grecian Urn is not the only poem which embodies Keats's philosophy on beauty and truth. Bright Star (see page 6-7) also speaks of an unchangeable star, in other words, eternal beauty. The beginning lines of the poem Endymion, also showcases the importance of beauty and its eternal nature:

A THING of beauty is a joy forever:

Conclusion

Overall, John Keats is a poet of the ages. That had life not been taken from him so early on, he might have seen his work cherished and even rivalling the ever so glorified sonnets of William Shakespeare (as it is now). Even with his turbulent life: with a family disintegrating, and a love affair like an extinguishing candle, Keats managed to escape his sorrows through negative capability. Inevitably, his capacity for imagination and sensitivity to beauty, combined with his despairing life, fueled his internal emotions. He was able to turn these emotions into everlasting art. Through his major poetic themes of beauty and imagination, he gave life to his writing and enchants his readers to adopt the dynamic attitude that is negative capability. In turn, healing us by cleansing us from the chains of reason and into seeing the beauty around us. Had it not been for tuberculosis which took him, would we now not be elevating the name John Keats instead of William Shakespeare as being the greatest man to have wield the English language? Would not his self-doubt have been muffled and dissipated if he had he only seen a few more years of life. He would had him time to see his poetic mind grow and expand to unmatched parallels. Keats's life alone is emblematic of the mutuality between beauty and truth, as his truth led to such literary beauty that touches the mind and penetrates, resonates and also heals the soul. Keats was indeed a man who lived his philosophy, who lived his poetry. His philosophy is not like any other. It is trailblazing. He truly was a pioneer, unshackling himself (and his readers) from the chains of reason. Showing that "Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses."

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