



Discovering The Composite Self : An Essay On John Keats

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Abstract : Keats was a romantic with staunch belief in the ethical value of beauty and imagination. Keats was among the first to discover the possibility of a human meaning in old myths. Shelley also expressed his ardent admiration for Keats's talent. Throughout his life of Twenty-five years Keats struck a balance between the positive and the negative, the world of imagination and the world of circumstances. He was keenly aware of the responsibilities of an elder brother to brothers and sisters orphaned at an early age. His letters shows his composite self, his love for his friends, his dedication to intellectual and professional pursuits, his commitment to poetry. His relationship with Fanny Brawne became an agonized struggle for self realization. It culminated in an equation of love and death. He longed to possess both at the same moment. Life was for him a 'Vale of Soul making', the poet a self negating personality. He was inspired by the gifts of civilization, by the way man visualizes life not only in words but through visions in stone. The paper attempts to show Keats's empathy with the sensibility of artists working in different media, to point out the riches created by human mind.

"I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death", John Keats confidently asserted in a letter of October 14 or 15, 1818. Bicentenary thoughts on Keats inevitably includes regret at his missed opportunities. A poetic career that spanned just four brief years; a personality that was still in the throes of self development. An intellect that had the makings of a great critic: "praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic of his own works", he said of himself. He had the objectivity not only to obliterate himself in a creative empathy with his surroundings, (the Negative Capability he so praised in Shakespeare), but also to judge for himself the quality of his own work. This is evident in the preface to ENDYMION, a work that engaged him for a great part of his brief creative life and was so cruelly and unjustly referred to as "drivelling idiocy" by 'z' in BLACKWOOD'S EDINBURGH MAGAZINE, Vol III no XVII, August 1818. As it later transpired the anonymous critic was John Gibson Lockhart, Keats wrote in the preface to ENDYMION:

"The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life in between in which the soul is in a ferment the character undecided, the way of life uncertainthence proceeds mawkishness ..."

Keats was a romantic with a staunch belief in the ethical value of Beauty and Imagination; "I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the heart's affections and the truth of imagination" In spite of its acknowledged immaturity, Keats valued ENDYMION because of what he had learned in the process of writing it, the experience gained and the critical faculty awakened. Its pulpy texture in which idea became diluted in over-sensuous prettiness does not cancel its contribution to English poetry, Aileen ward refers to the fact that Jeffrey in the Edinburgh Review rightly pointed out that Keats was among the first to discover the possibility of a human meaning in old myths². Shelley expressed his ardent admiration for Keats's talent although in spite of sincere efforts he could not go through the whole of ENDYMION.

HYPERION, that unfinished magnum opus that has been described as a poem on progress, Kenneth Muir thinks that Keats's desire for an England in which the progress that was interrupted by the Tory reaction



after the French Revolution would be resumed and accelerated in reflected is the poem.³ Though Keats was not uninterested in politics and had even nurtured journalistic programmes, he seldom let politics enter his poetry. In HYPERION he devises a mythology of his own and invests it with an idea the weight of which punctures the fable and reveals its weak structure. He abandoned it perhaps because he felt himself yet unprepared to accept its challenge. The progress extolled by Keats, in keeping with eternal law - "That first in beauty should be first in might." - The poem contains memorable romantic lines: "Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty's self;" this awareness of the beauty in sorrow connects with Keats's apprehension of tragic reality and tragic beauty; it crystallizes in his famous appreciation of Shakespearean tragedy, especially KING LEAR.

Throughout his life of twenty-five years Keats struck a balance between the positive and the negative, the world of imagination and the world of circumstances. He was keenly aware of the responsibilities of an elder brother to brothers and sister orphaned at an early age; he even instructed his fiancée to keep in touch with his sister Fanny during his absence. His letters show his love for his friends, his dedication to intellectual and professional pursuits, his commitment to poetry. His relationship with Fanny Brawne became an agonized struggle for self-realization. It culminated in an equation of love and death: he longed to possess both at the same moment. Life was for him a "vale of soul-making", the poet, a self-negating personality.

"I lay awake last night listening to the Rain with a sense of being drowned and rotted like a grain of wheat."⁴ - Like Shakespeare he sought to become what he created, merging himself with creatures and effects of his creation. In spite of what critics say about the perfection of the six great odes, PSYCHE, MELANCHOLY, NIGHTINGALE, GRECIAN URN, INDOLENCE and AUTUMN, lyric poetry, mere subjectivism, was not the conscious aim of his poetic activities, for Keats himself regarded them as incidental work, as E.C. Pettet has observed.⁵

Keats's career was a journey towards a goal. Arrival was prevented not by death alone, but also by an inherent urge for continuous self evolution, self-fulfilment; horizons were ever receding, ever-expanding. It was better so. Wordsworth's "Genius" explored those dark "passages" of "life's Mansion", mysterious, intricate; "now if we live and go on thinking we too shall explore them," Keats asserted. It is interesting to speculate at this time, where the exploration could have led.

In the Induction to THE FALL OF HYPERION Keats affirms his faith in poetry as the mode of his own spiritual development. The revised HYPERION is the revolutionary claim that the poet creates in order to self-create. And in ODE TO INDOLENCE he says, A rosy sanctuary will I dress With the wreathed trellis of a working brain.

Although Keats believed that Poetry should come "naturally as leaves to a tree," he never underrated the value of intellect and knowledge in the making of a poet. In a letter to his brothers, George and Tom he writes, "Nothing is finer for the purposes of great production than a very gradual ripening of the intellectual powers. (Jan. 23, 1818).

Keats was conscious of the replenishing power of all knowledge. In May 1818 he realized he could take up his medical studies again without any disruption in poetic pursuits; "Every department of Knowledge we see excellent and calculated towards a great whole - I am so convinced of this that I am glad at not having given' away my medical Books, which I shall again look over to keep alive the little I know thitherwards," Deprived of a literary education, he did his best to enrich his mind by the converse of teachers, friends and mentors like Charles Cowden Clarke, Leigh Hunt, Benjamin Robert Haydon, Charles Armitage Brown, Charles Wentworth Dilke, Benjamin Hamilton Reynolds, Benjamin Bailey, Hazlitt, Wordsworth, Lamb, Shelley.

His desire to visit Italy never was fulfilled, except when he went to live in Rome" a posthumous life" and found burial in the Protestant Cemetery there near the Pyramid of Cestius. Yet he strove to learn Italian and

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Latin in order to become better acquainted with the work of Ariosto, Dante, Artino, Sannazaro and Machiavelli. Among English poets he fed on Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton. His own poetic style shows a steady development.

John Keats declared himself a votary of the life of 'Sensation' as opposed to 'Thought' yet was supremely wary of mere sensation, shallow and frothy:

An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people - . . . The difference of high sensations with or without knowledge appears to me thus: in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again, without wings and with all the horror of a bare-shouldered creature - in the former case, our shoulders are fledged, and we go through the same air and space without fear.

To Keats knowledge became a sensation and sensation an idea. He applied himself to life and 'experience with a 'gusto' (a recurrent word in his letters). His walks on Hampstead Heath, the game of cricket he enjoyed playing on it, the glass of claret, his meeting with Coleridge, his affair with the mysterious and sophisticated Mrs Isabella Jones who had the words 'Je reviendrai' inscribed on her seal and all the varied fare his short life offered.

What is most important, his acquaintance with painting and sculpture seems to have become one of the means towards the development of a composite creative personality. It was as though he was creating himself anew, sympathising with the sensations felt by artists working in other media with an assured Romantic belief in the transcendent value of poetry it appears to this writer that Keats sought to embody in his poetry the values not only of painting and sculpture but Gothic architecture also. Consequently his work assumes plastic qualities rare in his contemporaries.

Keats's response to the plastic arts may be termed 'kinesthetic'. He recreates in poetry an intense emotional-intellectual tryst with medieval interiors and sculptural forms. Even human drama is framed in sculpturesque relief and the reader is impelled along aisles and interiors of medieval and Corinthian palaces, whispering crypts of Gothic chapels, the mellow curvature of Greek sculpture. An extremely cultivated approach to the fine arts and one that indicates the poet's movement towards becoming what we have called a composite artistic personality, a step forward in his mission of progressive evolution.

Much of Keats's poetry exemplifies the principles of three-dimensional works of art which is achieved through evocation of simultaneous movement of mind and the senses. Thus the poet's-response and reader's response become one, lending to the verse a dimension that goes beyond the limits of verbal appeal; the poetry becomes sculpture, it assumes architectural implications. We shall try to illustrate these remarks as far as possible within the limits of this article.

In sculpture tangibility of form becomes clear; our eyes tell us what our hands would like to know, it gives a visual feel of roundness, smoothness, ruggedness, etc. Keats's partiality towards tactile imagery is well-known. In the famous line "or on the wealth of global peonies", the cupped hands formulate the roundness that seems to transcend transience because the epithet 'globed' makes the blossoms assume a sculpturesque solidity.

In HYPERION Bk. II the overthrown 'ancient gods, moved by anger, fear, anxiety, are viewed as huge impressionistic sculpture, taking on different dimensions and forms viewed from different angles and mood: "Above a sombre cliff/Their heads appeared, and up their stature grew/Till on the level height their steps found ease:/ Then Thea spread abroad her trembling arms/ upon the precincts of this nest of pain". The lines are hauntingly otherworldly, like the Egyptian sculpture in the British Museum that Keats saw. More important is the visual movement the reader experiences, a sense of kinetic force building up and coming to rest as Thea spreads her arms. One remembers an early line, "Tis might half slumb' ring on its own right arm." Keats shows



an understanding of the centre of energy that constitutes the focal point in sculpture. The fossilized energy in equestrian statues, the stored energy in a marble discus about to be hurled. Keats achieves a remarkable artistic transformation. Poetry acquires the values of sculpture.

Deep in shady sadness of a vale
Far sunken from the healthy breath of morn,
Far from the fiery noon, and eves one star,
Sat grey-haired Saturn, quiet as a stone,
Still as the silence round about his lair;
Forest on forest hung about his head
Like cloud on cloud.

HYPERION Bk I. - Saturn here has the primitive grandeur of open air sculpture, almost a Druid simplicity - a memory of Stonehenge minus the forest? - we watch with baited breath. The thick piling of cloud and trees lends the form a vivid physical presence and environmental integrity. Sculpture, unlike painting, depends on light from external sources. Here the lightless environs make everything more sombre. Again Thea and Saturn are so still and "postured motionless" that they appear 'like natural sculpture in cathedral cavern'- the niche sculpture in medieval cathedrals that harmonizes so well with the architecture. There is moreover a deep awareness of the sublime grandeur of the natural setting. The reader is asked to activate both knowledge and imagination for a proper appreciation. In *HYPERION* Keats indicates the *raison d'être* of sculptured and architectural shape. As Ruskin among others was to point out later created form follows the forms of nature. The monumentality of the images of *HYPERION* is achieved by this imaginative linking together of nature's forms with those created by the artist.

Keats was able to convey the essence of the plastic arts. He could not only 'intensify' his consciousness, but 'extensify' it, that is, enter into the consciousness of others, even inanimate objects. Richard Woodhouse reported how he could conceive a billiard ball to be soothed by a sense of its own smoothness - the rapidity of its motion. This kinesthetic perception enters his poetry to give it a depth of concreteness, an innuendo of the life that vibrates in the artist's creation of form.

His fascination with stillness and movement, so potent in *ODE ON A CRECIAN URN* and the *BRIGHT STAR* sonnet could be the outcome of his thoughts on 'energy' not only that displayed in a street fight but the more metaphysical energy coursing through nature and crystallising in the artist's creativity. A frequent gazer on the Elgin Marbles, he must have noticed the fascinating disposition of the drapery which animates the forms, revealing, rather than concealing, the body that lay underneath, and giving to form a kinetic energy lacking in the sedateness of the earlier archaic period in Greek sculpture. The Elgin Marbles belong to the High Classical period (c. 450-400 B.C.) The Parthenon frieze in spite of its thin surface makes one perceive the life beneath the skin. The contour lines do not act as borders but seem to have grown organically from the inside. Keats's imagery pulsates with a force not merely the result of magical words. It is a holistic engagement of the self with the expressive artistic form.

Some passages in Keats's poetry has the same appeal as relief sculpture, which depends for its effect on subtle gradations of light and shade depending on the direction of light and the angle of vision. It appears therefore more rigid than sculpture in the round. Many of Poussin's paintings have this relief-like quality with prominent delineation of form and strong disposition of light; only the surface is illuminated. Critics like Ian Jack and Sidney Colvin before him have found the possible visual sources of Keats's poetry. Ian Jack in *Keats and the Mirror of Art* traces much of Keats's poetry to Poussin's paintings, which the poet must have seen in print. The aim of this article is not to pinpoint such similarities but, to suggest how aware Keats was of the



affective qualities of the visual arts. Deeply moved by what he saw in the British Museum, in Leigh Hunt's collection of prints, in Stansted Chapel, in the Gothic cathedrals at Winchester and Chichester, the medievalism of Oxford, and by what he learned through discussions he had with Hunt, Severn, Haydon, Hazlitt and perhaps in the company of the painters' William Hilton and Peter de Wint, Keats was inspired to employ poetic techniques that make readers constantly shift ground:

from readers of poetry they often become viewers of sculpture and painting and are -sometimes made to walk down deep naves and arcades of lavish interiors. What is more significant is his appreciation of sculpture and architecture as part of the wonder of the created universe.

The poet's alignment with such forms is also a measure of his 'negative capability', his deep empathy with what the imagination seizes as beauty, his romantic idealization of art. Had he lived longer he would doubtless have become not only a maturer poet, but one with a highly developed aesthetic-cultural creed.

Most commentators make much of the visual, sensory, sensuous, sensual and synaesthetic aspects of Keats's imagery. But no one to our knowledge has discoursed at length on his sense of space. In relief sculpture the eye roams from point to point over space and the whole surface can also be taken in at once: the focus is uniform. An urn is turned round so that only a few points are visible at a time: "They passed, like figures on a marble urn, when shifted round to see the other side: They came again: as when the urn once more/ is shifted round, the first seen shades return.

" In some of the statuesque forms of *HYPERION* and other poems, the viewer is stationery, so are the forms: grave and dignified; the surrounding space lends the required dynamism.

But in poems describing interiors, as' in the brilliant *THE EVE OF ST AGNES* and the fragment *THE EVE OF ST MARK* the reader spectator walks through "each arched porch, and entry low," and "along the chapel aisle by slow degrees;" "beside the portal doors, Buttress'd from moonlight stands . . ." With *Hyperion* we move "From stately nave to nave, from vault to vault/Through bowers of fragrant and enwreathed light". And diamond-paved lustrous long arcades," until the "great main cupola is reached." Miltonic evocation of space is performed through kinesthetic means.

In *ST AGNES* Keats uses light even as Gothic sculpture architects would. Chiaroscuro becomes a powerful expressive feature aiming at a mysterious obscurity with forms broken by shadow emerging from a dark back-ground.

In *ODE ON A GRECIAN URN* and *CDE TO AUTUMN* the subtle coolness of touch, the placidity of movement, remind one of the serenity of some relief sculpture where the eye moves on a plane broken by subtly modulated elevation.

The painterly qualities of Keats's poetry are too obvious and too complex to be adequately treated in so short a span. We therefore refrain from discussing this aspect of his art.

To conclude it should be pointed out that the emotive response of John Keats to life, art and culture would be fully appreciated if the reader is prepared to accept the frequent transformations of effect that Keats achieves. Poetry becomes sculpture, architecture, and painting.

It requires an alert and sophisticated sensibility to appreciate such experimentation possible only to a poet belonging to the 'Cockney School of Poetry' that pejorative term applied to Hunt and Keats by *BLACK WOOD'S EDINBURGH MAGAZINE*.

John Keats was inspired by the gifts of civilization, by the way man visualizes life not only in words but through visions in stone.

Against the allegation that Keats was too absorbed in the senses, physicality, mere externality, and failed to reach the 'purer mind as did Wordsworth, one may assert that Keats made an unique attempt to be in



empathy with the sensibility of artists working in different media, to point out the riches- created by human mind deified . . . for, that is what artists really are.

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