

On the Eternity of Beauty Again-Reading John Keats's "ode on a Grecian Urn"

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Abstract

John Keats was one of the most important figures of the early nineteenth-century Romanticism. He pursued all his life the eternal beauty and truth and showed a certain indulgence in the appreciation of beauty. This essay analyses why Keats never belongs to the school of Aestheticism, interprets the use of the images in John Keats's "ode on a Grecian Urn" to demonstrate that the beauty in this poem is natural not philosophic.

Keywords: Keats and romanticism, Aestheticism, Ode, symbol, eternity of beauty

1. Introduction: Keats and romanticism

Romanticism, which Victor Hugo calls "Liberalism in Literature", is "a movement that espoused the sanctity of emotion and imagination, and privileged the beauty of the natural world" (Zhang, 2006). The most important quality of this new movement is to give honor and glory to instinct and emotion, to venerate nature, and to become enthusiastic over remaking the world. Scholar David Wright once said in his *English Romantic Verse* "There was in fact no such thing as a Romantic Revival. It was rather a birth of a new kind of sensibility which had to do the new kinds of environment that man was in the process of creating for himself" (David, 1986).

Romanticism is associated with vitality, powerful emotion, and dreamlike ideas. Many of the ideas and themes in Keats's poetry are quintessentially Romantic concerns: the beauty of nature, the relation between imagination and creativity, the response of the passion to beauty and suffering, and the transience of human life in time. He has the power of entering the feelings of others—human, animal, even static things e.g. a Grecian urn which will be analyzed as a symbol of eternal beauty later in this essay. He declared that when he saw a bird on the lawn, he entered imaginatively into the life of the bird. Keats's poetry is always sensuous, colorful and rich in images, which expresses the acuteness of his sense. Sight, sound, scent, taste, and feeling are all taken in to give an entire understanding of an experience. He takes delight in dwelling on beautiful words and phrases, which sound musical.

Keats stressed the sense of beauty and imagination. In one of his letters, he said to a publisher "...that with a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration..." Keats emphasized beauty, because to him, as shown by his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, beauty and truth were integrated and should not be separated. In his opinion, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever." Keats thought that imagination is the driving force of knowing and achieving beauty. So he used many images in his odes to symbolize and express eternal beauty. We must rely on the power of imagination to gain beauty sense from the inside of the heart. In the same letter mentioned above, he wrote "...imagination is true, beauty through imagination is also true because all our passion, just like the passion of love, in their lofty state can create beauty in essence..." Keats also pointed out that during the aesthetic process, the poet should be satisfied not only with his own passion but with the others passion to achieve rich and delightful imagination and to find vivid language to show his beauty more completely.

2. Why Keats Never Belongs to the School of Aestheticism

Aestheticism which in a sense is called "art for art's sake" puts art in the first place and above life. Aesthetes hold that life should imitate art, not art imitating life. According to them, all artistic works are absolutely subjective not objective. They believe that art should not be concerned with controversial issues, such as politics and morality and should only promote beauty in a fine style. Why do they aim at this? Just as Ralph Fox said: "'art for art's sake' is the hopeless answer of the artist to 'art for money's sake', hopeless because ivory never

was a good material for fortification.”

However, “Like love, poetry contains the possibility for evil as well as for good; what readers glean depends upon their faculties of judgment and perception rather than on the work itself” (Dai, 2003). Because Keats showed a certain indulgence in the appreciation of beauty, some people held the view that he had the inclination for “art for art’s sake” and blamed him as an escapist. Some critics even viewed him as the forerunner of the so called aestheticism, which represented by the English writer Oscar Wilde in the final decade of the 19th century.

John Keats never belonged to the school of “art for art’s sake”. Actually, Keats’s pursuit of immortal beauty is not like water without a source, a tree without roots, subjective and unreliable. Once he said: “...if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all...” Keats suffered from very severe illness and was also harshly attacked by his rivals. He resented the bourgeois-aristocratic society. Just as he wrote in the following poem:

“...*With her two brothers this fair lady dwelt.
Enriched from ancestral merchandize
And for them many a weary hand did swelt
In torched mines and noisy factories.
And many once proud-quiver’d loins did melt
In blood from stinging whip:----with hollow eyes
Many all day in dazzling river stood
To take the rich-ored driftings of the flood.*

*Why were they proud? Because their marble founts
Cush’d with more pride than do a wreth’s tears?
Why were they proud? Because fair orange-mounts*

*Were of more soft ascent than lazar stairs?
Why were they proud? Because red-lined accounts?
Were richer than the Songs of Grecian years?
Why were they proud? Again we ask aloud
Why in the name of Glory were they proud?...”*

Keats described the sufferings of the miners and workers and told people that the pride of bourgeoisie was built upon the blood and sweat of the common people. He was truly concerned with the interest of the mass. Based on this, don’t you think he will sing the praises of real and eternal beauty and truth? He, full of love and ambition, did make great efforts to perfect his writing skills, to pursue the real, eternal truth and beauty, rather than the abstract, meaningless ones especially by writing the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

3. Interpretation of the USE of the IMAGES in John Keats’s “*Ode on a Grecian Urn*”

Keats always blends human feelings with nature perfectly in his poems and makes people feel as if they were right on the scene (Li, 2017). “*Ode on a Grecian Urn*” is no exception. Dexu Zhang, after analyzing the recurring images of life and death in Keats’ poems, comments that the images in the poems in fact originate from the primitive memory of beauty and truth (Zhang, 2015). Zhang insists that Keats intuitively captures the dynamic relations between life and death, truth and beauty with his unique sensitivity and imagination (Zhang, 2015).

There are five stanzas all together in John Keats’s “*ode on a Grecian Urn*”.

In the first stanza, the speaker stands before the Grecian urn and as if speaking to it. He compares the urn to “still unravished bride of quietness”, “foster-child of silence and slow”, and a “Sylvan historian”. He also describes the exciting “mad pursuit” scene to readers and wonders about the figures on the side of the urn: who they are, what legend they depict, and from where they come.

In the second stanza, the speaker looks at another picture on it: a young man playing a pipe, lying with his lover beneath an open area of trees. The speaker says that the piper’s “unheard” melodies are sweeter than mortal

melodies because they are unaffected by time. He tells the youth that, though he can never kiss his lover because he is frozen in time, he should not grieve, for her beauty will never fade. In the next stanza, he looks at the trees surrounding the lovers and feels happy that they will never shed their leaves. He is happy for the piper because his song will be “for ever new”, and happy that the love between the lovers will last forever, unlike the mortal love which lapses into “breathing human passion” and eventually vanishes, leaving behind only a “burning forehead, and a parching tongue.”

In the fourth stanza, there is another picture facing the speaker: A group of villagers lead a heifer to be sacrificed. He wonders where they are going and from where they have come. He imagines their little town, empty of all its citizens, tells to the urn that its streets will “for evermore” be silent, for those who have left it, frozen on the urn, and will never return. In the final stanza, the speaker again talks to the urn that it, like Eternity, “doth tease us out of thought.” He thinks that when one generation is dead, the urn will remain, telling the future generation its enigmatic lesson: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.”

Here Keats doesn't force people to appreciate beauty but to lead readers to sense, to indulge in the content beauty. He insisted that poetry should be great and unobtrusive, “a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with subject. –How beautiful are the retired flowers! How would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway crying out, ‘admire me I am a violet! Dote upon me I am a primrose!’” (Abrams, 1986).

Keats, in this ode, using the Grecian urn as the carrier and woven by the beautiful, musical words and phrases, especially the magic symbols to arouse readers' imagination in each stanza, depicts an eternal and immortal attractive panorama.

Some people say the first symbol should be the urn itself. They have their reasons to say so, but the following given here emphasizes the understanding of the symbol. The urn, as the carrier of beauty, according to the dictionary, is “a vessel or vase with foot and usually with rounded body, which is especially used for storing ashes of the dead” (The new Oxford Illustrated Dictionary). Thus, the urn must be connected with death. As for death, Keats even longs for being dead in his another ode: *Ode to a Nightingale*

*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! ...*

Keats believes that to die is to be close to the eternity of beauty, because death is the end of everything, and it surpasses the limit of time and space. Having finished singing the praise of the immortal but free-flying nightingale, he, of course, pursued the perfect, immortal beauty, carried by the urn.

Then from the first stanza, two symbols are found out: the still unravished bride of quietness, sylvan historian. Bride, a newly-married lady, is the most beautiful one on her day. She wears the exaggerated but classical, pleasant-looking white dress. She is sweet and charming with the especially well-decorated haircut. What's more, she is “unravished”, perfect and pure. As the “foster-child of silence and slow time”, she is to be married to the quietness, who is calm, unchangeable, of course eternal at last. She inherits calmness and eternity and will pass on them to the next generation. Actually she melts the beauty into the immortality. As regards the Sylvan historian, sylvan means rustic and pastoral, representing a woodland scene. It is natural, harmonious beauty. Historian can tell us stories of history, which symbolizes age-old and eternal. This sylvan historian “canst thus express A flowery tale” and “leaf-fringed legend”. Don't you think this is the eternity of beauty?

In the second and third stanzas, Keats described a “fair youth” piping and chasing his “fair” lover beneath the trees without shedding leaves. Their “happy love” is the very symbol of the immortality of beauty. Firstly, they are pretty and happy: Keats used the word “fair” to characterize the two youths. It is fair (just), for being fair is being pretty. To be young is to be attractive. Then what are they doing? They are piping sweet melodies, “unheard” but “sweeter”. They are dating with each other. Though the “fair youth” can't kiss the girl for being fixed on the urn, he should not be grieve, for she will be fair forever. The piping and the dating make them happy.

Their happiness makes them more beautiful. Happiness is the forever thing people pursue, just like being depicted in the poem:

*O happiness! our being's end and aim!
Good, pleasure, ease, content! whate'er thy name:
That something still which prompts the eternal sigh,
For which we bear to live, or dare to die.* (Alexander Pope, 1688-1744)

Beauty, caused by happiness here, will company the happiness into their enduring love. Secondly, their “happy love” will be “for ever warm and still to be enjoyed, for ever panting, and for ever young”. In the two stanzas, in order to stress their undying love, Keats used “for ever” and “happy”, both for six times. It is very obvious for us to understand love to be the symbol of immortal beauty in human’s life. Nobody says that he doesn’t know the monumental love between Romeo and Juliet. Everybody will remember the sorrowful but with the romantic ending love between Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai in China. Love, like forever green trees and forever happy melodist, is the very evidence of the eternity of beauty.

In the last two stanzas, the scene for “the sacrifice”, the “green alter”, even the “Cold Pastoral” are all the symbols of immortal beauty. Sacrifice has long history with its divine ceremony. It’s said that all people in the holy celebration must be clean and tidy. They should wear colorful dress and show their beauty to God. Sometimes beautiful ladies even are cruelly offered as sacrifices to him. People believe in God just because they can be safe and happy under the aegis of him. They can survive generation after generation, becoming the immortal master of the universe. In the ode it is the heifer, “all her silken flanks with garlands drest”, that will be sacrificed to achieve the same goal: to be eternal! As to “green alter”, alter, the place where people put their sacrifices on, is in the relationship with holy eternity. To be green, on one side, is to be pretty and young; on the other side, is to be long and forever. Cold pastoral, as the symbol of eternity of beauty, is easy to be understood. Coldness is the state of being frozen. Pastoral, just as having been talked on the above, symbolizes beauty. Cold pastoral, being frozen beauty, expresses the exact meaning of eternal beauty.

In fact, Keats employed very exquisite and musical wordings to pay a tributes to the immortal nature. He is not abstract aesthete. When he described the “season of mists and mellow fruitness” in his *to autumn*, he used concrete words and symbols that readers can see and touch, so that people can sense the happiness and satisfaction from their harvest. In this ode, trees, leaves, boughs, river, sea shore, mountain, forest, grass, even the peaceful citadel (these symbols, as parts of nature) leave readers deep impressions on the eternity of beauty. Greece, the ancient nation and still civilized one, permanently stands for beauty and long-history in the hearts of artists and readers.

Keats employed very exquisite and musical wordings to describe the silent but permanent beauty. This kind of beauty is dynamic and vibrant, full of lives in it. The heroes and heroines played the pipe, chased the lover, dated with each other, and sacrificed etc, as if they are living in our lives, romantic and happy. This kind of beauty is also static and eternal. Although the young wanted to kiss his lover, he can’t in fact. He was frozen in time on the urn. Although the group of villagers leading a heifer to be sacrificed walked along the street noisily, they can’t go to the destination. They left but were frozen in time on the urn. The beauty Keats depicting the ancient urn associates readers with Laozi's silent aesthetics. Laozi, the ancient Chinese philosopher, proposed this kind of beauty: seeing the substantial through the abstract; seeing the being through the not being; seeing the dynamic through the static; and also seeing the truth through the facts. Laozi's silent aesthetics suggesting readers saying less(or not saying at all)but watching and imagining, expresses a kind of magnificent beauty, being active and energetic and also being silent and eternal.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said: “Nature is a revelation of God Art a revelation of man.” Keats, the poet and artist, using his perfect writing skills, sings high praise of the Grecian urn, which becomes eternity itself and leads readers to the deep thought he is conveying: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty”, that is what people know and should know in the world.

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