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THE HEALER AS A POET: JOHN KEATS AND THE USE OF POETRY AS A THERAPY

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ABSTRACT

John Keats (1795-1821), the nineteenth-century English Romantic poet was trained to be a physician but his passion for writing poetry prevailed over the profession of following a career in medicine. He taught the world how to treat the distressed and the dejected souls with poetry , as he believed that poetry could be a panacea for the sick mankind. For him a poet is not a 'lotus-eater' or a dreamer of dreams; he is not a fugitive, whiling his time in an ivory-tower; he is not a shallow idealist frittering away his life in abstract idle pursuits; rather the poet is a physician who uses his poetry as a therapy to heal the disease and sickness from within. His critics hounded him and did not accord him the distinction he so eminently deserved. As he had said in one of his poems that he wanted three things from life, verse, fame and beauty, and all the three things eluded him. In my paper I focus on this healing aspect of Keats's poetry to suggest that he is very much relevant to our troubled times.

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The poetic life of John Keats is just a period of six years (1814-1820) during which he produced marvelous odes and beautiful poems that rank him as one of the great English poets. Within a short period of twenty six years, his extraordinary poetic achievement took him to a great height, and today he is reckoned as one of the most powerful of the romantic poets. He is known for such beautiful odes like "Ode to a Nightingale", "Ode on a Grecian Urn", and "To Autumn", and poems like *The Fall of Hyperion*, *Hyperion*, *Endymion*.

The year 1814 marked the very beginning of Keats's poetic life. On May 5, 1816 he got his first poem published in *'The Examiner'*, edited by Leigh Hunt, which created a great interest in him to write poetry. On 1 December 1816 when his name was quoted in Leigh Hunt's article *'Young Poets'* as a rising poet, he made a confirmation about his interest in the field of literature by giving up medicine for a poetic career. During his short poetic term, Keats wrote many master-pieces which were criticized mostly by John Lockhart and John Wilson under the common pseudonym 'Z' in *'Blackwood's Edinburgh'* magazine. These two critics questioned Keats's poetic capacity and gave unpleasant remarks. They also mocked at and advised Keats to leave the field of poetry. In the fourth *'Cockney School'* essays, Z attacked Keats's poetic spirit and wrote:

It is a better and wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to the shop Mr. John, back to the' plasters, pills and ointment boxes'. But for Heaven's sake, young

Sangrado, be a little more sparing of extenuatives and soporifics in your practice than you have been in your poetry. (Roe, 161)

Such a virulent criticism made him suffer inwardly, still he continued to write poetry. He had great inner strength and that supported and inspired him to write. In a long letter to George Keatses in October 1818 he wrote: "Some think me middling, others silly, others foolish-everyone thinks he sees my weak side against my will; when in truth it is with my will- I am content to be thought all this *because I have in my own breast so great a resource.*"(Gittings,171. Emphasis mine) It clearly shows that he was drawing inspiration directly from his soul. He was totally unaffected by the poisonous words of the public. In the same letter he again wrote: "*The only thing that can ever affect me personally for more than one short passing day, is any doubt about my powers for poetry.*" (Gittings,170.Emphasis mine)

Keats was not physically weak at all, before consumption attacked him. At Enfield School he read the works of Leigh Hunt (1784-1859), the progressive English writer and reformer. Being impressed with the political and reformist ideas of Hunt, Keats dedicated his Poems to him. His sonnet "Written on the Day that Mr. Leigh Hunt Left Prison" in 1815 manifested his dedication towards Hunt and his interest to follow the path of civil and religious liberty. During an age of ferment he was writing and especially his dedication of Poems to Leigh Hunt clearly shows his mental potentials.

Throughout his life Keats's primal concern was on the realm of knowledge. He had distinguished memory and knowledge and was of the opinion that memory can't be called as knowledge. For him knowledge was everything and he himself believed in the continual drinking of knowledge, and through it, he believed that he would be doing the world some good. In other words, Keats always wanted to use his knowledge for the benefit of the people. As far as he was concerned, every single branch of knowledge is necessary and excellent which takes directly its way towards a great whole or cause. In a letter to J.H. Reynolds on 3 May 1818 he wrote: "An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people- it takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculations, to ease the Burden of the Mystery."(Gittings,92)

In the same letter of 3 May 1818, written to J.H. Reynolds, Keats discussed Byron's idea of knowledge and also gave his own. Byron once told that 'knowledge is sorrow' and Keats added to it further by saying 'sorrow is wisdom' and again 'wisdom is folly'.(Gittings,93)The categorization of the intellectual aspects from such a tender age shows Keats's maturity of understanding life. He was always having the idea of direct experience from the world and worldly objects. His most striking line, "axioms in Philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulse:"(Gittings,93), is nothing but his emphasis on the direct experience and experiment.

Keats's enormous love for poetry, no doubt, drew the ire of his critics who didn't like him, though they were struck by his poetic genius. Keats believed that poetry should be great and unobtrusive. It is something which makes its way into one's soul and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with the subject. He, once in a letter to John Taylor on 27 February 1818 discussed his poetic principles and wrote:

In poetry I have a few Axioms, and you will see how far I am from their centre. 1st I think Poetry should surprise by a fine excess and not by singularity- it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance- 2nd Its touches of Beauty should never be halfway thereby making the reader breathless instead of content (Gittings,69-70)

Like Wordsworth Keats too believed in the spontaneity of poetic feelings. Keats, in the same letter wrote the often quoted line: "That if Poetry comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all."(Gittings,70) This is nothing but the statement of an intellectually matured person.

Abandoning the medical career for the sake of poetry shows Keats's state of mind clearly. After getting a degree and being fully capable in medical practice, Keats left the profession. He could have earned a handsome amount in that profession. But he gave priority to his thoughts and feelings and did what his heart wanted him to do. It was not because he was a failure but because he wanted mental solace and this he found only through poetry. Another reason behind his leaving the medical career, perhaps, was that he wanted to

serve the people through his writings, for he knew that the mental injuries cause lots of harm than that of the physical. His thoughts and ideas are better revealed in his work "The Fall of Hyperion" (1819), where he has defined the role of a poet and pointed out the qualities of the poet:

'Sure not all
Those melodies sung into the world's ear
Are useless: Sure a poet is a Sage;
A humanist, Physician to all men.'
(*"The Fall of Hyperion I"*, lines 187-90)

Keats's comparison of the poet with a sage, humanist and physician is not at all baseless. To make it more lucid, a poet gives consolation to a distressed soul and mind where as a physician deals with the external states. Keats termed the poet as a 'chameleon' (Gittings,157) because he speaks through different voices. He can't be pinned or tagged in anything. Like a chameleon changes its colour, so does the poet. He changes his role into different personalities. Sometimes he becomes a sage and philosophises life, sometimes he turns out to be a humanist and serves the distressed and depressed mankind and sometimes he plays the role of a physician in order to heal the mental wounds of the people. And also in this regard Keats wrote to Richard Woodhouse on 27 October, 1818 discussing the role and identity of a poet: "A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity- he is continually in for- and filling some other Body-" (Gittings,157)

Keats always placed poetry in the highest degree. According to him poetry is creative and no law or precept can mature it or alter it. What affects it is sensation and watchfulness. He could not live without poetry and feeling himself dull and inactive. No doubt he was deeply indulged in writing poetry but he had not least interest of making it a source of livelihood. It was his passion and he treated poetry more than his soul. Earning name and fame through poetry was just a sort of crime to him. He converted his thoughts and imaginations into words to serve the mankind mentally. He was interested to write poetry that would express the agonies, the strife of human hearts and would simultaneously heal them.

Keats believed that the power of imagination is a rare thing which includes the idea of the holiness of the heart's affection and the truth of imagination. As far as Keats was concerned, imagination takes someone to a level where he/she forgets his/her stature completely. And thus he made use of the phrase 'Wings of Imagination' in a letter to Benjamin Bailey on 22 November 1817 while discussing about the essence of imagination. In his marvelous master-piece "Ode to a Nightingale" (1819) he writes:

"Away! away ! for I will fly thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless Wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards."
(*"Ode to a Nightingale"*, lines 31-34)

In a letter to George and Tom Keats on 22 December 1817, Keats mentioned his most popular and often quoted term '*Negative Capability*' and also discussed the intensity of art and knowledge. "The excellence of every Art", he wrote in this letter, "is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeable evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth." (Gittings,42) The term '*Negative Capability*', as he stated, is something when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. In other words, it is just like taking part in the existence of others. On 22 November 1817, in a letter to Benjamin Bailey, Keats wrote: " if a sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel." (Gittings,38) It clearly shows Keats's deep and extreme involvement in poetry.

Keats gave priority to 'Beauty' and 'Truth' and also advocated for a better understanding of these two words. He had not one single idea of Truth or Beauty. He never treated these concepts from a logical point of view. In other words, he did not believe in the idea of 'Arts for Art's sake'. In his letter to Benjamin Bailey on 22 November 1817, he wrote: "What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth- whether it existed before or

not.” (Gittings,37) Not only this letter but also in his famous poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” he sang for Truth and Beauty:

“Beauty is truth, truth Beauty’- that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

(“Ode on a Grecian Urn”, lines 49-50)

Keats had an idea that only Truth and Beauty are immortal and the rest are illusion. He often associated the idea of immortality with the concept of death. According to him death is the great leveler which is inevitable. In a beautiful sonnet written in the letter to George and Georgiana Keats in between 14 February to 3 May 1819, Keats wrote about the intensity of death:

“Verse, fame and Beauty are intense indeed,
But Death intenser- Deaths is Life’s high mead.”

(Gittings, 231)

To put it in just one line, what Keats intended to say was that the highest and finest achievement of life is death. Towards the last part of his life, in a letter to Charles Brown written on 30 September 1820 he questioned the concept of life and birth. He wrote: “Is there another Life? Shall I awake and find all this a dream?” (Gittings,394) From this it is quite clear that he was deeply frustrated from the world in which he was living.

Keats with his theories of poetry and life, wrote poems which developed into a new form and was termed as ‘ode’. Perhaps for this reason these odes are called as ‘romantic meditative odes’. These odes were having a note of melancholy and escapism in them. To some extent, we can call Keats an escapist who treated life in a melancholic way. He was unhappy with the real world for many reasons and always tried to escape into an ideal world, like that of an ‘Utopia’. But he was again coming to the real world being disappointed with his mental flight. Keats often associated both love and pain in his practical as well as poetic life. Almost all of his odes are the embodiment of the perfect blending of the contradictory aspects as life and death, love and pain etc.. In “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819) he distinguishes between the real life and the ideal one and wonders at it:

“Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music:- Do I wake or sleep?”

(“Ode to a Nightingale”, lines 79-80)

Keats by introducing the phrase ‘*pleasure thermometer*’ (Gittings,59) didn’t mean only to make a gradation of happiness rather he wanted to show the permanence and change, which he was aware of. This idea is more evident from his observations regarding ‘*soul-making*’ (Gittings,249-51) and the ‘*chambers of Life*’(Gittings,95-6). His treatment of human life as a large mansion having many apartments and categorization of the infant stage as the ‘*thoughtless chamber*’ and the matured one as the ‘*chamber of maiden thought*’ shows his complex understanding about his idea of continuity and change.

Keats’s theory of poetic genius rested highly upon his dealing of the sensuous aspect of life. His poems appeal directly to the senses. He had a peculiar tendency of mixing the physical with the passionate. His works are praised for their seriousness and thoughtfulness, along with the passionate quest for truth. Keats believed that only through experience, truth can be achieved. On 22 November 1817, in a letter to Benjamin Bailey he wrote: “O for a Life of Sensations rather than of thoughts! It is ‘a vision in the form of Youth’ a shadow of reality to come- .”(Gittings,37)

Keats made a wide use of the sensuous imagery in his works, especially in the odes. His imagery cover all the physical sensations like sight, taste, hearing, touch, smell etc.. He combined different kind of senses in one image which is called ‘*synaesthesia*’. The examples of synaesthetic images can be drawn from the poems like “Ode to a Nightingale”, “Eve of St. Agnes”, “Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil” etc. . His odes deal with the experiments based on an intense awareness of both joy and pain, the happiness and sorrow of human life. This can be treated from a personal point of view. Every writer has a tendency to mingle the private life with the poetic life or in other words, every writer mingles his passion with his profession and Keats was never an

exception to it. The particular kind of awareness which Keats possessed made him brood over the condition of humanity with the conclusion that they must satisfy their desire for happiness in a world where joy and pain are inevitably and inseparably blended together. The union of joy and pain was the fundamental fact of human experience which Keats had observed and accepted as true and created a new world away from the harsh, real world where beauty was treated as the authentic truth.

Throughout his entire life Keats suffered the acerbic barbs of his critics. Still he never left writing and fervently believed in the healing touch of poetry. He was not at all well-treated by the world. It was only due to his strong determination and spirit he struggled tirelessly. In a letter to C.W. Dilke on 22 September 1819 he wrote: "I am fit for nothing but literature." (Gittings, 302) It was quite an accurate statement. The writer of excellent letters and the introducer of the ode form was really born to create an era of his own in English literature. Many contend that Keats's writings were meant for the female class. But in reality, his healing words are meant for each and every individual who is an admirer of beauty. Nobody understood the real worth of Keats's writings when he was alive. Still he had a hope for a place in the pages of history. Once, in a letter to George Keatses in between 14 and 31 October 1818, he wrote: "I think I shall be among English poets after my death." (Gittings, 161) In merely 26 years of age his prophetic statement came to be true and now he is not only ranked among the English poets but also considered to be after only Shakespeare and Milton.

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