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JOHN KEATS AND THE THEOLOGY OF BEAUTY

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on Keats' vision of beauty and attempts to show how this feeling of beauty has its being in the moment of perception. For Keats, the magic of the beautiful is the magic of the moment – undistracted and undiluted. For Keats, all that is vouchsafed to man is the experience of the moment. Continued life is a succession of moments, each moment betokening both the beginning and the end of life. One of the main themes of Keats' body of work is the relation between the banalities of everyday life and the pleasure of the senses derived from art and beauty. Keatsian aesthetics instead of being a theory in abstract was a deeply felt conviction which was premised on a profound insight in life. Keats' select poems will be analysed in light of these ideas.

Keywords: Romanticism, art, beauty, moment.

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With Keats a miracle was born. In 1821 Keats the man to dust returned, but the miracle that Keats was, lives on. I do not know of a student of English poetry whose heart does not 'leap up' at the very mention of this High Priest of Beauty.

I want to make a single point in the present essay: the feeling of beauty - like all other aesthetic feelings - has its being in the moment of perception. Cosmic time rolls into that blessed moment impregnating it with a divine thrill, the very quintessence of an epiphanic experience. It is of course true that beauty lies in the eye of the experienter (the proverbial eye of the beholder) ; Its non-perception does not put its ontology in doubt, but only highlights perceptual opacity and experiential turbidity. The magic of the beautiful is the magic of the moment, undistracted and undiluted by an awareness of the past and the future. Intrusion of what was, and impingement by what will be, robs the moment of its honey. Everything Keats wrote bears out the veracity of what has been said above.

Even though he did not see the twenty-sixth spring, he is not one of the 'inheritors of unfulfilled renown.' On the other hand he illustrates at its best the Jonsonian dictum 'in short measures life can perfect be.' It is no small tribute to his artistic genius and poetic greatness that they inspire comparison with none other than the tallest of the tall, Shakespeare and Milton.

I shall start with what may look like a negative proof of the supremacy of the living moment.

'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.'

The 'now' of the first line is a single unexpansive point of time (note the use of the present simple in 'seems'), whereas the surrounding state is an expanse of time, reinforced by the use of the continuous form (while thou art *pouring* forth thy soul abroad). The message is clear: for good or worse, all that is vouchsafed to man is to experience the moment. It should surprise no one. In underlining the above truth Keats has reiterated the profoundest philosophical truth. Being (life) can be predicted only of the moment of iteration. Continued life is a succession of moments, each moment betokening both the beginning and the end - the totality - of life (being).

In one of his pronouncements Keats has emphasised the above truth through a metaphorically used phrase:

'I scarcely remember counting upon any happiness. I look not for it *if it not be in the present hour*. ('present hour' here is a metaphor for the living moment). The setting sun will always set me to rights, or if a sparrow comes before my window, I take part in its existence, and pick about the gravel.'

Even in his early poetry, which undoubtedly betrays the travails of growth and a certain unripeness, his love of beauty is really and truly an original passion. It may even be said that what distinguishes Keats from some of the fellow romantic poets is his disinterested and inclusive love of beauty - both inner and outer, or else he would not have emphasised the essential oneness of beauty and truth. His passionate plea is "Seek ye first" the ideal of beauty "and all other things shall be added unto you". His ideal of beauty was akin to that of the Greeks, a perfect blending of the inward and the outward:

'...or thy smiles

Seek as they were once sought, in Grecian isles,
By bards who died content on pleasant sward'

Coming back to my earlier theme that for Keats beauty inheres in the moment, I venture to further propose that Keatsian aesthetics was, far from being an aberration, a deeply felt conviction which was itself premised on a profound insight into life - very surprisingly so, considering his young age. The moment - life as a microcosm - is compounded of the twin elements of joy and sorrow, each owing its being to the other. The truth of the above analysis is best exemplified in *Ode to Melancholy*, the refrain of which is that fullness of joys is dependent on their sharpening into pains :

'She dwells with Beauty - Beauty that must die ;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips

Bidding adieu ; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to Poison while the bee-mouth sips :
Ay, in the very temple of delight

Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine,

Though seen of none save him whose strenuous tongue
Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine ;

His soul shall taste the sadness of her might,
And be among her cloudy trophies hung.'

For Keats beauty, like Thea in *Hyperion*, is made 'more beautiful than beauty's self' by sorrow.

'But oh! how unlike marble was that face :
How beautiful, if sorrow had not made
Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty's self.'

Thus the religion of beauty become inseparable from the religion of sorrow. How much a single extended eye-ful moment can contain is best seen in the immortal stanza from *The Eve of St. Agnes*

'Full on this casement shone the wintry moon, And
threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast, As
down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest, And
on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint:
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest, Save
wings, for heaven: Porphyro grew faint:
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.'

It is possible to piece together Keats' several pronouncements where he dashes off theories about the poetic faculty in which central importance is given to the claims of beauty. We often quote the following lines from one of his letters:

'I think poetry should surprise by a fine excess, and not by a singularity. It should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a remembrance.'

However, it is generally overlooked that they are preceded by the following significant observation

'With a great poet the sense of Beauty
overcomes every other consideration,
or rather obliterates all
consideration.'

In *Endymion* too Keats sings a panegyric to beauty:

'A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases: it will never
Pass into nothingness, but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health and quiet breathing.'

At this point I should like to state that the passion and the wisdom of a great poet often compel him to telescope eternity into an animated moment. Thus telescoped, the moment puts on the hues of a divine celebration.

Browning's lover in his *The Last Ride Together* fancies one such moment :

'What if we will ride on, we two, With life
forever old yet new, Changed not in kind
but in degree, The instant made eternity, -
And heaven just prove that I and she Ride,
ride together, forever ride?'

A moment pregnant with eternity is veritably a blissful experience, as Wordsworth puts it in his own inimitable manner:

'- that serene and blessed mood,
 In which the affections gently lead us on, -
 Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
 And even the motion of our human blood
 Almost suspended, we are laid asleep

In body, and become a living soul:

While with an eye made quiet by the power
 Of harmony, and the deep power of joy, We
 see into the life of things.'

And seeing into the life of things implies timelessness. The moment of seeing assumes cosmic proportions, not unlike what Keats experiences in the seventh stanza of the *Ode to Nightingale*:

'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'

That which is not subject to death is everlasting, encompassing all - the past, the present and the future.

The refrain of my argument has been the importance Keats gave to the principle of beauty and the philosophical method of his perception of beauty in the moment. That he treated beauty as sacred as God is evident from the following statement:

'I have not the slightest feeling of
 humility towards the public or to
 anything in existence but the
 Eternal Being, the Principle of
 Beauty, and the Memory of Great
 men.'

The three odes, *On a Grecian Urn*, *To a Nightingale* and that on *Melancholy*, together with one or two of his sonnets and a few passages in his letters give us an intimate glimpse of Keats' worship of beauty. Unlike Shelley, who celebrated intellectual beauty involving a transcendental refinement of love, Keats always regarded beauty concrete, not necessarily external though, and living in images of the soul at work. It is in this sense that Beauty is the same as Truth. It explains the conviction behind his famous lines

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty; - that is all Ye
 know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

I can pay no better tribute to what I have called Keats' theology of beauty than to quote a stanza from his own *Ode on a Grecian Urn* which marks the greatest height of his triumphant attempt at capturing eternity in a moment :

'Heard melodies are sweet, but those
 unheard Are sweeter: therefore, ye soft
 pipes, play on; Not to the sensual ear, but,
 more endear'd, Pipe to the spirit ditties of no
 tone;
 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not
 leave Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;

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,
Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair'

(The urn is 'impressed' by beautiful images which shall for ever satiate the onlooker's hunger for beauty through his identification with the moment of his perception of the blissful scene.)

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