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MORTAL BEAUTY IN KEATS' ODES

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INTRODUCTION

Poetry, in spite of the fact that its definition is incomplete, has always fascinated the human heart by its mysterious power. And 'Beauty' makes up a relatively large part of its themes. 'Beauty' seems to be the eternal 'Ideal' for human beings to seek. Keats, well known for his poems, loved 'Beauty' in the immortal world of art, which is superior to the mortal beauty of nature. My aim in this essay is to study Keats' concept of 'Beauty.'

The question concerning 'Beauty' has a long history — in the Western world, from Plato down to the present. Plato identified 'Beauty' with 'virtue,' 'righteousness,' 'thought,' and 'love,' and believed that only 'soul' is immortal, through words of Socrates in *The Republic*¹ as follows:

And is not the love of learning the love of wisdom which is philosophy?

They are the same. . . . -II, 376, B

Then virtue is the health and beauty and well-being of the soul, and vice the disease and weakness and deformity of the same?

True. -IV, 444, D-E

Aristotle found 'Beauty' in tragedies, as shown by the following:

If, then, Tragedy is superior in these respects, and also, besides these, in its poetic effect (since the two forms of poetry should give us, not any or every pleasure, but the very special kind we have mentioned), it is clear that, as attaining the poetic effect better than the Epic, it will be the higher form of art.²

The theory of beauty finally appeared in the limelight in the ideas of Renaissance humanism, Sir Philip Sidney, in *The Defence of Poesie* (1583), stressed the necessity of 'Three Unities'³ in tragedies and the 'delightful teaching'⁴ in poetry, which is the traditional Renaissance doctrine of the poem. He also stressed that poetry describes ideal virtue and moves the human mind. Here, 'Beauty' in poetry meant virtue.

The Romantic Revival was the Golden Age of the Romanticism which had flourished in the twelfth century and appeared again in Shakespeare and Milton. It respected the supernatural beyond the limits of reason; exoticism, especially of the medieval romance; nature; and the revolutionary spirit. It made much of imagination rather than reason and form. Wordsworth found 'Beauty' in the pantheistic unity of the world including humanity; Coleridge, in imaginative creation full of supernaturalism and medievalism; Shelley, in the ideal of love and freedom from any oppression of the present world.

Unlike his contemporaries, Keats faced a life full of misery, disappointment and despair in this mortal world on the one hand, but on the other hand he also dwelt in the world of art, creation, imagination, which can be immortal. The conflict between the two worlds always ends in the victory of the latter. His description of nature is completely beautiful, but it is always faced with mortality and is evanescent. He becomes very excited, however, when he praises the immortal

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beauty of the arts. And I, too, completely become Keats and feel that I am praising it with him.

What makes me so excited? I know that it is 'Beauty' or the 'Ideal' which Keats created in his imaginative works. Then what kind of mortal beauty can I find in Keats? This is what I should like to analyze here.

For this purpose, I have limited the object of my study to the following six odes: "Ode to Psyche," "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode on Melancholy," "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode on Indolence," and "To Autumn." It is interesting that these great lyric poems in English were all born in the same year 1819, which is called 'The Great Year' by D. Bush.⁵ 'Within another nine days,' (of April), W. J. Bate says, in the following passages:

....he has finished the first of the great odes, the "Ode to Psyche," and then, in another day or two, the "Ode to a Nightingale." By the middle of May he has completed two other odes, the "Grecian Urn" and "Melancholy." The productivity of the three and a half weeks that begin on April 21 is difficult to parallel in the career of any modern writer. Yet to Keats it was not even a new beginning. It was rather a matter of becoming more alive in preparation for the next beginning.⁶

Moreover, these odes provide us with good materials in our search for Keats' concept of beauty. The "Ode to Psyche" leads us to a world where Love and Art can be united, although it did not succeed in its technique and theme. The "Ode to a Nightingale" reveals that escape from this world can not be achieved through the senses, but only through the poetic imagination. The theme of the "Ode on Melancholy" is transiency. The "Ode on a Grecian Urn" praises the preservation of beauty and love in enduring marble. The centre of the "Ode

on Indolence” is transience, with contrasts between youth and age, joy and suffering. “To Autumn” neither eludes nor challenges actuality but accepts it as it is. In these poems, Keats seems to have appreciated the eternity and supremacy of art and imagination over the mortal actual world. Therefore, I intend to analyze these poems and discover parts which touch on mortal ‘Beauty.’

Since the focus of Keats’ aim in art was nothing but ‘Beauty,’ it will be vain to say anything on Keats without touching on it. In other words, it is a short cut for us to approach Keats directly through the study of ‘Beauty’ in his poems. W. J. Bate says of Keats’ magic power as follows:

The development of his technical craftsmanship as a poet proceeds simultaneously, a growth that interests us all the more because it is not something separate but, as it were, partly a by-product — at least an organically related accompaniment — of his larger, for over a century, Keats has continued to strike so many reader — and writers — as the most Shakespearean in character of all poets since Shakespeare himself.⁷

D. Bush also informs us of Keats’ charm as follows:

Keats’ Shakespearean or humanitarian ambitions, his critical and self-critical insights, his acute awareness of the conditions enveloping the modern poet, his struggles toward a vision that would comprehend all experience, joy and suffering, the natural and the ideal, the transient and the eternal — all this made him capable of greater poetry than he actually wrote, and makes him, more than his fellow romantics, our contemporary. . . . Though his poetry in general was in some measure limited and even weakened by the romantic preoccupation with ‘beauty,’ his finest writing is not merely beautiful, because he had seen ‘the bore-

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dom, and the horror' as well as 'the glory.'⁸

It was natural that in 1872, the *Quarterly Review*, which in 1818 had been Keats' great enemy, had to admit that his writings had "done more to determine the subsequent course of English poetry than these of any other poet."⁹

MORTAL BEAUTY FOUND IN KEATS

There seem to be mainly two kinds of Beauty in Keats' Great Odes. One is Mortal Beauty which is found in the actual world. Mortal Beauty consists of Physical and Natural Beauty. Keats found Physical Beauty in youth, especially in beautiful ladies. He also described Beauty in Nature. Take for instance, John Hamilton Reynolds defended Keats in *The Alfred, West of England Journal and General Advertiser* by the following words:

The moon, and the mountainous foliage of the woods, and the azure sky, and the ruined and magic temple; the rock, the desert, and the sea; the leaf of the forest, and the embossed foam of the most living ocean, are the spirits of his poetry. . . .¹⁰

Since this article was published in 1818, it may not be suitable to cite it as an example of the odes of 1819. However, I would like to follow the demonstration made by Professor W.H.Evert which stresses the continuity of Keats' early spirit as follows:

Keats began to formulate his aesthetic in terms of an Apollo-myth. . . both the mythological references and the natural images in his early poetry supported this central central concept. . . .¹¹

The other kind is Immortal Beauty, which appears in the praises of Art, Love, and Imagination. These two kinds of Beauty, Mortal and Immortal, appear together in each poem in many cases. This co-existence of Mortal and Immortal Beauty helps Keats to make the contrast between them clear and to show the superiority of the latter. When we study the theme or the subject of each poem, however, both Mortal and Immortal Beauty are expressed by separate and distinctive materials.

Here, the six odes which I have decided on my materials, belong

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to two main kinds of Beauty. The 'Ode to Psyche,' which is a world where Love and Art can be united, belongs to the group of Immortal Beauty. The 'Ode to a Nightingale' and the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' also belong to the same group, for the former praises the power of imagination, and the latter, art. The other poems, the 'Ode on Melancholy,' the 'Ode on Indolence,' and 'To Autumn' belong to Mortal Beauty, because their theme is transience.

From now on, in this chapter, I intend to discover passages which touch on Mortal Beauty found in the 'Ode on Melancholy,' the 'Ode on Indolence,' and 'To Autumn'; in chapter III, to take up Immortal Beauty found in the 'Ode to Psyche,' the 'Ode to a Nightingale,' and the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' then find some unified characteristics in the kinds of Beauty found in these six odes, and make a brief conclusion to each chapter. As for the method of analysis, I should like to follow the degrees of Beauty which were, according to M. L. D'Avanzo, categorized by Keats himself as follows:

....the different intensities of sensation and emotion according to a "pleasure thermometer" where natural beauty is placed at the lowest point, and love at the highest.¹²

1. 'Ode on Melancholy'

The theme of this poem is very clear, because the poet mentions in the last stanza, ll. 21-30, as follows:

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.

The poet says that there is Melancholy in Beauty that must die (l. 21), in Joy (l. 22), in Pleasure (l. 23), and in Delight (l. 25). He says that Beauty, which is mortal, e.g. 'a morning rose' (l. 15), 'the rainbow of the salt sand-wave' (l. 16), 'the wealth of globed peonies' (l. 17), and 'mistress' (l. 18), must die some day. He can easily find many physical and natural beauties in the actual world. But he can not help but feel melancholy, because he knows that those mortal beauty must die, they cannot last forever. He also finds himself melancholy even when he is joyful. Joy pleases him well, but its 'hand is ever at his lips/Bidding adieu' (ll. 22-23). The poet is again melancholy, because he suddenly remembers that Joy can not last and it will fade away soon even while he is filled with it. He knows that Joy has to bid him adieu and leave him in this world after all. Even if he is enjoying Pleasure, he falls into the sad feeling of melancholy. Pleasure is at first very helpful in releasing him from the pain of this world, but later, it comes to pain his mind. Pleasure turns to 'Poison' while the poet sips it. The poet finds Pleasure melancholy, for it lives only in uncertainty. Pleasure can not last, and that fact makes him melancholy. Even at the height of Delight, melancholy's face appears. Delight loses its might in the end, and melancholy gains the victory. All the mortal beauty of Joy, Pleasure, Delight, which are considered as the sensible or emotional, is mortal and can not last for ever. They are all mutable. The impossibility of attaining permanence causes melancholy in his mind, and he admits it is good for our sad mind.

The character of our sad mind is described in the first stanza. It

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leads us to Lethe which is full of 'poisonous wine,' makes us suffer from being kissed by 'nightshade, ruby grape of Proserpine.' It leads us near to Death, namely Mortality, which is expressed in such images as 'yew-berries,' 'the beetle,' 'the death moth,' 'the downly owl.' The contrast between these ominous images and lovely Psyche seems to be effective in creating the melancholy mood. The poet is afraid that our sad mind would lead him to destruction. Therefore, he advises us not to follow that kind of sadness but to follow melancholy which 'shade to shade will come too drowsily,/And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul' (ll. 9-10).

In stanza II, the poet advises us to drown in melancholy 'when the melancholy fit shall fall,' to 'glut' our 'sorrow' on natural beauty. Although the poet knows that melancholy is transient, he convinces himself that his 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' (ll. 27-30). He is addicted to melancholy and does not dare leave it. We can sympathize with the emotion which he constantly feels. This ode seems to show the fundamental conviction of Keats that all emotions in this world, represented by Beauty, Joy, Pleasure, and Delight, are mortal and have to come to ruin in the end. Keats seems to be seeking for something immortal instead of them, although he does not show it in this poem. Henceforth, this is what we have to seek in his other poems. However, this poem proved the degrees of Beauty that 'natural beauty is placed at the lowest point,' and even the sensational feeling brought by that kind of beauty.

2. 'Ode on Indolence'

The poet says that it is folly to long for wings for Love, Ambition, Poesy when he is indolent, because it is so sweet to be indolent that

he does not want to 'toil' nor 'spin.' Although the three personifications of the urn seem to steal away and leave his idle days without a task by 'a silent deep-disguised plot' (l. 13), the poet is not moved but bids them farewell with 'no tears. . . .' (l. 30). When they turned each one of the face to him, he 'burn'd' to follow them and 'ached for wings' (ll. 33-34). But he is not interested in Love, Ambition, nor Poesy, because they awaken him from his sweet dreams. In his position as a poet he 'would not be dieted with praise,/A pet-lamb in a sentimental farce!' (ll. 53-54). He really wants in this poem to escape from this world. He begs the three figures to leave his sense 'Unhaunted quite of all but — nothingness' (l. 20). He wishes to live in 'an age so shelter'd from annoy,/That I may never know how change the moons,/Or hear the voice of busy common-sense' (ll. 48-50). There is a conflict between his wish to be in 'honied indolence' and his fervent hope of following the three figures now recognized, as Love, Ambition, and daemon Poesy. His Letter to Sarah Jeffrey, who is a Teighn-mouth friend of George Keats, on June 9 confesses his recent feelings as follows:

I dare say my discipline is to come, and plenty of it too. I have been very idle lately, very averse to writing; both from the overpowering idea of our dead poets and from abatement of my love of fame. I hope I am a little more of a Philosopher than I was, consequently a little less of a versifying Pet-lamb.¹³

Douglas Bush concludes as follows:

. . . .we have a renewed sense of his growth in artistic power and insight.¹⁴

And he remarks in an earlier publication thus:

Most of Keats's major poems have to do with the nature and experience of the poet, and might therefore seem foreordained to

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be precious; but Keats is in a way the natural man raised to the *n*th degree, and his meditations are so central that he speaks, with "the true voice of feeling," for no small part of humanity.¹⁵

The poet is conscious that Indolence is unproductive. It does not help him to create any imaginative product, but makes him steeped in 'dim dreams' full of natural beauty, e.g., 'a lawn besprinkled o'er/With flowers, and stirring shades, and baffled beams'(11. 23-24). His head is now 'cool-bedded in the flowery grass' (1. 52), that is to say, he is very near to nature, so that such things as 'praise' which belong to this world has no power to move his mind to follow it any more. This statement sounds as if he were of two minds; he actually wants to gain Love, realize his Ambition, and serve his 'daemon Poesy' with fine poems, but he denies them because that means to 'be dieted with praise,/A pet-lamb.' In this poem, the poet is eager to dream indolently of natural beauty which is mortal and uncertain in this world.

3. 'To Autumn'

The realistic acceptance of the world as it is appears directly in this poem, while Keats wrote on April 21, 1819, as follows:

The point at which Man may arrive is as far as the paralel state in inanimate nature and no further — For instance suppose a rose to have sensation, it blooms on a beautiful morning it enjoys itself — but there comes a cold wind, a hot sun — it can not escape it, it cannot destroy its annoyances — they are as native to the world as itself: no more can man be happy in spite, the world[l]y elements will prey upon his nature.¹⁶

The poet accepts the four seasons and praises their beauty, not merely indulging in melancholy or indolence. The praise of Autumn, natural beauty, is found in every line of this poem. It is 'the season of mists

and mellow fruitfulness' (l. 1), 'Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun' (l. 2), full of 'the vines that round the thatch-eaves run' (l. 4). We can find Autumn in 'the moss'd cottagetrus' (l. 5) bending with apples, in 'all fruit with ripeness to the core' (l. 6). It swells 'the gourd, and plump the hazel shells/With a sweet kernel' (ll. 7-8), sets 'later flowers' budding more 'for the bees' (l. 9). It is seen amid stores, sitting 'on a granary floor' (l. 14), or 'on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep' (l. 16), in the midst of gleaning, or in the oozings of 'a cyder-press' (l. 21). These descriptions of Autumn found in the first two stanzas are referred to by D. Bush as Follows:

....a wholly happy picture of summery warmth and bursting ripeness in everything, of vines and trees and fruits and nuts and bees fulfilling their creative destiny.¹⁷

Even in these stanzas we find his consciousness of the impermanence of the world; for instance, the bees 'think warm days will never cease' (l. 10), or the 'last oozings' (l. 22) of a cider-press. The implications of the exuberant ripeness lead us to feel the melancholy which comes from the uncertainty of seasons, the actual world. The poet cheers up Autumn, after remembering the songs of Spring, by saying thus:

Think not of them, thou hast thy music, too — -1. 24

The music of Autumn, the natural beauty of this season, which is described in the last stanza, sounds to us rather elegiac than before. The 'soft-dying day' bloomed by clouds (l. 25), 'the stubble-plains' touched with 'rosy hue' (l. 26), 'a wailful choir' (l. 27) of the small gnats, 'the light wind lives or dies' (l. 29), the 'bleat' of full-grown lambs (l. 30), the song of hedge-crickets, the whistles of the 'red-breast' (l. 32) with 'treble soft' (l. 29), and the twitterings of the 'swallows' (l. 32), all these are no longer full of open ripeness but make us imagine the end of the season. The day is dying; all lives, gnats, lambs, crickets and birds, seem to be

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aware of the approaching darkness of the season as well as of the day. But the dominant mood of this poem is the 'open ripeness' which celebrates the fullness of this season.

The poet seems to find some solution for the problem which has been troubling his mind, that is, how to make a compromise between the mortal and immortal worlds. Of this poem, Bush says thus:

....he does not evade or challenge actuality; he achieves, by implication, 'the top of sovereignty,' the will to neither strive nor cry, the power to see and accept life as it is, a perpetual process of ripening, decay, and death.¹⁸

Walter Evert also praises this poem as follows:

This is, I think, the only perfect poem that Keats ever wrote — and if this should seem to take from him some measure of credit for his extraordinary enrichment of the English poetic tradition, I would quickly add that I am thinking of absolute perfection in whole poems, in which every part is wholly relevant to and consistent in effect with every other part.¹⁹

He touches on the perfection of this poem from the point of view of the technique. The images of the season, Autumn, are quite suitable and effective. In the first stanza, the natural beauty of Autumn is praised with the description of a scene which is full of ripeness. The second stanza uses movements which accompany harvest. The poet seems to be openly praising Autumn in these stanzas. But a little attention paid to lines 10 and 22 cited above leads us to find that there is some shadow over these praises of the season. The reason is clear: he knows the mutability of the world. As the seasons always move within a cycle, this world is uncertain. Nothing remains unchanged in this world. Even the beauty of nature must fade away, as nature changes her appearances. He does not mention a single word about Art which can

be immortal in this world. We can understand, however, that Keats is no longer merely melancholy or indolent. He seems to have found a way for reaching a higher stage than that of the straight conflict between the mortal and immortal world. This seems to me the acceptance of the world as it is. He is now free from choosing to be in either the mortal or immortal world. He is confident in this poem that he will not be annoyed by the troubles as before. But we find a sort of resignation, especially in the final stanza. That may be the fruit of his long period of affliction. This poem ends with peaceful singing of birds, as though they are also praising the ripeness of the season with the poet.

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NOTES

1. Plato, *The Republic*, With an Introduction by Charles M. Bakewell, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928.
2. Ingram Bywater, *Aristotle on the Art of Poetry*, Oxford, 1909, Chap. 26, ll. 56-61.
3. Philip Sidney, *The Defence of Poesie*, Kenkyusha, 1968, p. 101, ll. 1-4.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 24, l. 4
5. Douglas Bush, *John Keats*, Collier Books, New York, 1967, p. 120.
6. Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 484.
7. Bate, *op. cit.*, vii, ll. 12-19.
8. Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 212, ll. 11-23.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 211, note 3.
10. The Quarterly Review — Mr. Keats, published in *The Alfred, West of England Journal and General Advertiser*, for Tuesday, the 6th of October, 1818.
11. W. H. Evert, *Aesthetic and Myth in the Poetry of Keats*, Princeton University Press, 1965, on the front flap written by Mrs. William Hanle.
12. Mario L. D'Avanzo, *Keats's metaphors for the poetic imagination*, Duke University Press, 1967, p. 10.
13. *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, Harvard University Press, 1958, II, p. 115-116.
14. Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 149, ll. 21-22.
15. D. Bush, *John Keats: Selected Poems and Letters*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1959, p. xvii.
16. Rollins, *op. cit.*, II, p. 101.
17. Bush, *John Keats, op. cit.*, p. 177, ll. 6-9.
18. Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 178, ll. 16-20.
19. Evert, *op. cit.*, p. 298, ll. 27-33.