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IMMORTAL BEAUTY FOUND IN KEATS

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1. 'Ode to Psyche'

D. Bush says as follows:

This is a completely happy poem, a picture of harmonious, single-souled creativity uncrossed by any shadow.¹

It was Keats' intention to seek for a new technique in writing a better sonnet stanza than before, according to Evert:

Since at least the beginning of the year, Keats had been concerned to develop a form in which one idea could be "amplified with greater ease and more delight and freedom than in the sonnet —"²

It is a sophisticated continuation of the simple blend of nature, myth, and poetry of youthful Keats. The theme of 'Psyche,' the celebration of the creative power of imagination, is not so bold as the 'Hymn to Pan.' However, we meet with phrases describing natural beauty and immortal beauty in the love of Psyche and Cupid. The poet, on the sudden, saw the following scene:

...two fair creatures, couched side by side
In deepest grass, beneath the whisp' ring roof
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
 A brooklet, scarce espied:
'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
 Blue, freckle-pink, and budded Tyrian,

They lay calm-breathing on the bedded grass; -11. 9-15
All the surroundings seem to the poet to be silent with tremblings and
whispers. This natural beauty seems to reflect the love of Psyche and
Cupid, and celebrate it.

The poet compares Psyche with other gods of Olympus and
concludes that she is loveliest far of 'all Olympus' faded hierarchy' (l.
25). Her beauty, which is physical, is praised as follows:

Fairer than Phoebus' sapphire-region'd star,
Or Vesper, amorous glow-worm of the sky; -11. 26-27
Now the poet grieves because Psyche has no temple,
Nor altar heap'd with flowers;
Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan
Upon the midnight hours;
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
From chain-swung censer teeming;
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming! -11. 28-35

The poet is longing for mythic beauty in these lines. And he declares
thus:

Yet even in these days so far retir'd
From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,
Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd. -11. 40-43

Now he begs Psyche to let him be her priest. Nostalgia gives place to
the positive affirmation, 'So, let me be thy choir' (l. 44), and to the
following repetitions of the ritualistic observances the poet can supply.

D. Bush mentions that the adjuration,

indeed the whole poem, is as typical of the quietly contemplative
side of Keats as the somewhat later prayer to the West Wind,

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'Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is,' was typical of the revolutionary Shelley. We may think too of *Kubla Khan*, in which an objective description of an imagined scene becomes a metaphor for poetic creation.³

The poet makes up his mind thus:

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane -1. 50

The following descriptions are typical of natural beauty which surrounds the mythic world. A 'fane/In some untrodden region of my mind' (l. 51), 'branched thoughts' (l. 52), 'dark-cluster'd trees' (l. 54), 'the wild-ridged mountains' (l. 55), 'zephyrs, streams, and birds and bees' (l. 56), the 'moss-lain Dryads' (l. 57), 'wide quietness' (l. 58), a 'rosy sanctuary' (l. 59), 'buds, and bells and stars' (l. 60). We can imagine that the poet intended to use these images as symbols of Love and Art, because the ode ends with a return to the myth and the union of Love and Art in 'shadowy thought' (l. 65). However, we cannot but feel that the whole conclusion falls short of its symbolic purpose. The bold and massive image which appears in ll. 54-55 as follows:

Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees

Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;

is quickly smothered as the poet relapses into the cozy world of Flora and old Pan, a private world of 'soft delight' (l. 64). To use Bush's conclusion,

Keats proclaims an imaginative exploration of 'untrodden' ways, of 'stars without a name,' of the new subjective poetry, yet Psyche and her temple are not products of the poet's realistic imagination; she does not become an adequate symbol of 'vision,' but remains a creation of sensuous and erotic fancy in a 'sanctuary' (l. 59).⁴

However, in spite of its failure in technique, we are impressed by Keats'

praise of Love and Art, or Immortal Beauty, hidden in Mortal Beauty in this ode.

2. 'Ode to a Nightingale'

When I come to finding examples of Immortal Beauty in the 'Nightingale Ode,' I find myself at a loss as to what should I take up in this poem, for it is wholly filled with that beauty.

In the first stanza, the poet makes a straightforward confession that his heartache is not through 'envy' of the lot of the bird,

But being too happy in thine happiness, -1. 6

It is curious that he has to suffer from heartache, drowsy numbness and deathlike pain, while he was happy in listening to the song. This apparently contradictory confession of the poet seems to give us a key with which we can unlock this gleaming shrine of a poem. It is suggestive for the reader to observe the contrast between the poet and the bird. Lines 7-10 give us a hint which helps us to understand the poet's mind.

That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease. -11. 7-10.

Although the poet insisted that he was not envious of the bird, it seems that he cannot but adore the bird as a 'light-winged Dryad of the trees' (l. 7). Here, we come to wonder what the real mind of the poet is.

The second stanza shows us clearly what the poet wants. He wishes to drink 'a draught of vintage' (l. 11) so that he can escape from this world of suffering. The following passages are the key sentences:

That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim. -11. 19-20

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Although it is an old device to use the image of drinking for the purpose of expressing the image of escape, the poet is here successful in using that image with other images well centred.

... a draught of vintage! ...

Tasting of Flora and the country green,

Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!

-11. 11-14

The poet is consciously using the words 'summer' (l. 10), 'Cool'd' (l. 12), 'Flora' (l. 13), 'Dance' (l. 13), 'Provençal song' (l. 13), 'sunburnt mirth' (l. 13). Here it is the intention of the poet to make them function effectively in creating the image of 'happiness' in drinking, which is identified with happiness in listening to the song of the bird. Both are the same in the sense that they enable the poet to forget the suffering of the world. The poet remembers the ancient fountain of 'Hippocrene' and the tales connected with it. His imagination goes back to the age of Myth and convinces him that the imagination the old poets had got from being drunk with the water of that fountain was 'true' (l. 16). The poet seems to insist that what is true in this world is only imagination. It is not, however, so intensified in this stanza. We can only take it as a passage which is suggestive of subsequent development.

In contrast with the images of Immortality of imagination in the second stanza, the third stanza is full of the image of Mortality. The words 'weariness, the fever, and the fret' (l. 23), 'groan' (l. 24), 'palsy,' 'last gray hairs' (l. 25) represent the mortal world which is 'full of sorrow' (l. 27) and 'despairs' (l. 28). The poet knows that this is the actual world

Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,

Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow. -11. 29-30

The poet says that physical beauty cannot last. Even Love, which is generally regarded as immortal, is mortal for the poet.

Now his imagination flies to the nightingale 'on the viewless wings of Poesy' (l. 33). He is completely steeped in the bird's song. He is with the bird. This emotional tension is caused by nothing but his admiration for the bird's immortal song. He does not remember anything of the world of pain but is charmed with immortal beauty of the bird's song. He recognizes everything beautiful of the world, as the descriptions of 'the moon' (ll. 36-37), trees, grasses, and 'mossy ways' (l. 40) show us. These natural beauties set the immortality of the bird's song off to advantage.

In the fifth stanza, the poet turns the focus of his attention from the auditory sense to smell and imagination. All the flowers at his feet represent natural beauty, i.e. mortal beauty. He can guess each sweet 'in embalmed darkness' (l. 43) as follows:

The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

-ll. 45-50

We should be unfair to Keats if we missed the passage 'Fast fading violets' (l. 47) which is an epitome of all mortal beauties. He does not merely praise natural beauty but knows that it must 'fade' some day, as it is mortal.

In the sixth stanza, the poet's heart throbs with excitement. The poet confesses that it seems to be 'rich' to die. His mind escalates from merely being 'in love with easeful Death' (l. 52) to an ardent wish

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To cease upon the midnight with no pain,

While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad

In such an ecstasy! -11. 56-58

The poet cannot believe the bird's song to be mortal. The bird seems to him to have some kind of soul from which that beautiful song flows. Then the poet contrasts mortality and immortality in the following passage:

Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain —

To thy high requiem become a sod. -11. 59-60

The poet is convinced that the bird's song will last forever, whereas he has to die some day. He is not, however, so disappointed in life as to stop writing the next lines. On the contrary, he overcomes the conflict between mortality and immortality in his mind by praising the bird's song in the final two stanzas.

The poet declares that Bird is 'immortal' (l. 61). His imagination again goes back to the 'ancient days' and proves that the bird has been singing and comforting human hearts since olden times. The images of 'emperor and clown' (l. 64), 'Ruth' (l. 66), 'the alien corn' (l. 67), 'magic casements' (l. 69), 'perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn' (l. 70) are quite effective in leading our imagination into the wider range of the world of time and space.

In the eighth stanza, the poet comes to his senses when he is faced with the word 'forlorn' (l. 70) in his imagination because the poet himself is 'forlorn.' He identifies himself with people who heard the bird's song in ancient days, because both are mortal in contrast to the 'immortal Bird' (l. 61). He unwillingly suffers from the reality that he is 'forlorn' as a result of his own imagination. As the bird flies and goes out of his sight, the poet is surrounded by silence. Although his heart has been filled with happiness in listening to the bird's song, 'the

fancy cannot cheat so well' (l. 71) any more, since he once returns to reality, where he deeply feels that contrast between the bird and himself; the contrast between immortality and mortality. As he has been so much charmed by the bird's song, he still has an indistinct consciousness and wonders as follows:

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?

Fled is that music: — Do I wake or sleep? —11. 79-80

In this ode, the poet once succeeds in escaping from this world of pain at the moment when he was with the bird which creates immortality in its music. Even at that moment, however, the poet is sure to remember the inevitable conflict between his own mortality and the immortality of the bird's song which is regarded as representative of the arts. He is almost happy when he is with Art, but he then always remembers the actual world of pain, sickness, misery and heartbreak. This conflict between mortality and immortality starts from the beginning of this ode. First, the conflict appears between the poet's heartache, his 'drowsy numbness' (l. 1) and the acute intensity of his happiness in the bird's song. Second, the poet contrasts the world of suffering, age and death with the bird which has never known it. The poet belongs to the former mortal world, and the bird to the latter immortal. Third, the poet admits transiency or mortality in the 'fading' of life when he is with the immortal bird. Fourth, the conflict is represented by the loss of his hearing (l. 59) and the bird's song, which seems to be a 'high requiem' (l. 60) for him. Fifth, the word 'forlorn' (l. 71) refers to the conflict between the fancy of the song and the actual world.

All these conflicts are well organized by effective imagery: 'hemlock' (l. 2), 'opiate' (l. 3), 'Lethe' (l. 4) for the poet's heartaches; 'light-winged Dryad' (l. 7) for the nightingale; 'vintage' (l. 11), 'Flora' (l. 13), 'Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth' (l. 14), 'South' (l.

15), 'Hippocrene' (l. 16) for immortal art of the bird's song; 'groan' (l. 24), 'palsy,' 'last gray hairs' (l. 25), 'pale, 'spectre-thin', 'dies' (l. 26), 'leaden-eyed' (l. 28), for the world of misery, pain and sorrow; 'the viewless wings of Poesy' (l. 33) for his imagination; 'the Queen-Moon' (l. 36), 'starry Fays' (l. 37), 'the breezes' (l. 39), 'verdurous glooms,' 'mossy ways' (l. 40) and flowers in the fifth stanza for natural beauty, first as immortal but finally as mortal; 'Death' (l. 52) as a means to reach immortality; 'emperor and clown' (l. 69), 'faery lands forlorn' (l. 70) for the immortal world of imagination. Although Death is generally thought as to be accompanied by pain, the poet uses that image as a means to reach Real Life of Immortality. The poet seeks for Reality or Truth only in the world of Imagination. He is sure that he cannot be immortal. This severe reality causes him to escape to the world of imagination where he can be with immortality. The poet is not content with natural or physical beauty which is mortal, but eagerly seeks for Truth 'on the wings of Poesy' in the world of imagination, which is filled with Immortal Beauty like the song of a nightingale.

3. 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'

It is worthy of note that the fifty lines, especially the last two lines, of this ode have caused enormous disputes among literary critics. Although it is now admitted that the last two lines should be interpreted not as the words of the poet but as the words of the urn, it would be appropriate to touch on the core of the disputes concerning this ode. Since the disputes are centred around two problems, one concerning the first stanza and the other concerning the final stanza, they should be discussed according to the order of the stanzas. At first, however, it will be necessary to indicate the characteristics of both 'Nightingale' and 'Grecian Urn' odes with comparisons.

Both odes succeed in creating an imaginative world by using a nightingale and a Grecian urn as their mediators. They involve the contrast between the mortal world and the immortal world, between life and art. W. J. Bate compares them and says as follows:

In contrast to the rapid shifts of pace in the "Nightingale," the "Grecian Urn" . . . reflects the leisurely and "peaceable" spirit. . . .⁵

Although there were several interpretations concerning the first stanza, C. R. B. Combellack⁶ gave us the solution to this problem. The word 'unravish'd' means 'not broken by a vulgar discoverer,' so that the urn can still tell us the story which is expressed upon its sides. The poet intends to associate the image of 'bride,' which is full of happiness and joy, with the urn, because the urn itself has 'connotation of urn burial or Hydriotaphia,' death, and the ashes of corpses. 'Silence' and 'slow time' are, Combellack says, foster parents of the urn; and 'quietness' is its bridegroom. All metaphors for the urn mean immortality of Art in this stanza; 'quietness' (l. 1), 'silence and slow time' (l. 2), 'historian' (l. 3), 'legend' (l. 5), 'deities' (l. 6), 'Arcady' (l. 7). The following lines show us that the urn expresses love, happiness, joy, and ecstasy.

The second stanza and the first seven lines of the third stanza express the perfect praise of love in the immortal world, as found in the following word: 'sweeter,' 'soft pipes' (l. 11), 'Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone' (l. 14), 'Fair youth' (l. 15), and in the following passage:

For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair! -l. 20

and in the repetitious use of 'happy' and 'for ever' in the third stanza. The passage 'She cannot fade' (l. 19) means that the poet grieves for the mortality of physical beauty. However, the poet is satisfied even if he cannot get the bliss of love, because love lives in its process.

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The fourth stanza, with the images of pain in the actual world in the last three lines of the third stanza, reveals the sacrifice and sufferings of this world. The poet's interest is now focused on the little empty town sculptured on the urn. He accepts Life as it is; not as merely full of sweetness, love, happiness, joy, bliss, but as full of both bliss and 'sacrifice' (l. 31), 'desolation' (l. 40). As background, it is well known that Keats had reconciled himself to the necessity of suffering a month earlier, in April 1819, while elaborating his philosophy of the world as 'the vale of Soul-making.'⁷ In this stanza, the poet is severely realistic. As Bate says, the poet knows that no one remains from the past, except as figures on an urn or in other works of art, so that no one can return to the empty town.⁸

The poet never despairs of the actual world. The first line of the final stanza leads us to a firm belief that he accepts every feature of life, whether bliss and suffering, praising the urn as follows:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! -l. 41

The urn is identified with 'eternity' (l. 45), because both tease the poet 'out of thought' (l. 44). The poet knows that this urn, which is a symbol of immortal works of Art, will say to man as follows:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"— that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. -ll. 49-50

These two lines have caused several disputes as mentioned above. Take for instance, J. M. Murry and Robert Bridges take the affirmative side and defend the lines. However, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, I. A. Richards, and T. S. Eliot stand on the negative side.

Robert Bridges is very critical of this ode, because although it is beautiful, it is 'unprogressive, monotonous, and scattered.' However, he says that 'the concluding lines are very fine, and make a sort of recovery with their forcible directions.'⁹

On the contrary, Quiller-Couch says that the final lines are 'an uneducated conclusion, albeit pardonable in one so young...' and 'a vague observation.'¹⁰

I. A. Richards chooses precisely these two lines as a perfect example of what he calls 'pseudo-statement.'¹¹

T. S. Eliot, although agreeing with the poet at first, after re-reading the whole poem, says of the last line as follows:

...this line strikes me as a serious blemish on a beautiful poem; and the reason must be either that I fail to understand it, or that it is a statement which is untrue....The statement of Keats seems to me meaningless: or perhaps the fact that it is grammatically meaningless conceals another meaning from me.¹²

J. M. Murry admits that 'the lines disturb the subtle harmony of the poem,' because in spite of the indirectness of the ode as a whole, the lines are very 'direct.' Murry argues that Dr. Bridges misjudged the poem by interpreting the last stanza as an assertion of the supremacy of Art over Nature. Murry says that it is not the poet but the vase which

whispers, and will whisper, to minds aching with the thought of human misery, 'Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty'; and to the poet this whisper brings the comfort of a great finality.¹³

It is very clear who whispers, because the poem has the following passage:

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st -11. 47-48

The poet convinces himself that the urn, or any work of art, will be 'a friend' to man, his most closely related existence in the world of suffering. As T. S. Eliot indicated above, the statement 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' is grammatically meaningless, because all things

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beautiful are true but truth is not always beautiful. Here the background of the time when Keats wrote this ode should be considered:

... a time of grinding misery. Everything was being taken from him, a brother dead, a brother exiled — and their love was ‘passing the love of women’ — his life in question.¹⁴

Keats personally shared the human woe and the miseries of the world at that time, and this seems to have made him compromise with the world and accept the world as it is. He knows that everything in this world must end some day; youth cannot keep its beauty, because it is physical, and mortal; trees must become bare in winter and die in the end, because their natural beauty which is mortal; love must become old and cold some day, because it belongs to the mortal human world. All the praise of the beauty of the world in the first, second, and third stanzas reveals that it is a paradox; the poet knows that it does not exist in the actual world, but only in the world of Art. The actual world is rather full of sacrifice, decay, misery, death. The poet does not merely dream sweet ideals in his imagination without any relationship to the actual world, but he praises the Immortal Beauty of Arts, based on the recognition of Reality. The poet, after experiencing human misery and woe in his life, finds a shelter in creating a work of Art which whispers to him and comforts his mind in the following words:

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” — that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know. -11. 49-50

Murry, in the same book mentioned above finally supports Keats’ concept of Beauty-Truth identity as follows:

When we love a Fact, it becomes Truth.... All Fact is beautiful; it is we who have to regain our innocence to see its beauty....¹⁵

Although various degrees of Beauty (from the lowest, mortal beauty,

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in nature and youth, to the highest, immortal beauty in art) fundamentally exist, this ode is successful in connecting Beauty with Truth, a fact which seems to owe a great deal to the poet's own experience in life.

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NOTES

1. Douglas Bush, *John Keats*, Collier Books, New York, 1967, p. 133, ll. 31-32.
2. *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, ed. by Hyder E. Rollins, Harvard University Press, 1958, II, p. 115-116.
3. Bush, *op. cit.*, p. 129, ll. 33-39.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 131, ll. 28-34.
5. Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963, p. 510.
6. C. R. B. Combellack, "Keats's Grecian Urn as Unravished Bride," *KSJ*, XI, pp. 14-15.
7. Albert Gérard, "Romance and Reality: Continuity and Growth in Keats's View of Art," *KSJ*, XI, p. 26.
8. Bate, *op. cit.*, p. 515.
9. J. M. Murry, *Studies in Keats*, Haskell House, 1956, p. 71.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
12. Murry, *op. cit.*, pp. 71-72.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 81.