



FROM EPHEMERAL TO PERMANENCE: IDENTIFYING THE EPIPHANY IN THE ODES OF JOHN KEATS

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Abstract:

John Keats (1795 – 1821), the English Romantic poet is one of the finest in world poetry. His Odes, apart from his other lyrical poems, stand apart for their astute content. Keats explores the dilemma between the ephemeral quality of life and his intention to find a somewhat permanent solution to this. Composed within a very short span Keats's Odes stand strong in their effort to find an alternate reality to temporal aspect of life. As his mood in the Odes change from sorrow to hopelessness to despair, it can be said that in the last poem of this series of Odes Keats has an epiphany. His wistfulness turns into a kind of happy realisation that brevity of life is accompanied by its own charm and fulfilment. The paper here traces the development of this idea in the six Odes by John Keats. The paper also identifies the sensuousness that is intricately connected to the themes of transience and permanence.

Keywords: ode, sensuous, ephemeral, imagery, art, negative capability

The greatest thing in Keats' poetry has been the recreation of sensuous beauty, first as a source of delight for its own sake and then as a symbol of life, of the mind and emotions. Speculative and philosophical interests always formed a major part of Shelley's experience and the young Wordsworth for a time was hag-ridden by them -there is almost no trace of this in Keats. He not only cared little for, but positively resented intellectual truths which make demands upon the mind without mixing being verifiable in immediate experience., "Axioms in philosophy are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses. We read fine things but never feel them to the full till we have gone the same steps as the author". Keats almost hates a writer who tries to force the world

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and the readers to his own conclusions.

For Keats, the necessary precondition of poetry is submission to things as they are without trying to intellectualize them into something else, submission to people as they are without trying to indoctrinate them or improve them. Keats found this quality at its fullest in Shakespeare, “It struck me what quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature, - I mean Negative capability, that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” To Keats poetry is a natural process, the flow of thoughts getting translated into words and thereby creating a rhythm of its own is absolutely in harmony with the world. He said, “if poetry does not come naturally as leaves to a tree, it had better not come at all”. Nothing artificial is involved in this and poetry should surprise the readers with its “richness” or “luxury” and not by anything subtle or fantastic.

The total impression of the moment, the fusion of his own subjective emotion with sensations from the outside world is the ultimate reality for him. Such a nature is at its height in moments of impassioned contemplation, when the life of the spirit is closely bound up with the objects of immediate sensuous experience. It was in such mood that the *Ode on Indolence* was written. Keats’ letter makes it clear that on March 19, 1819, he was not only in the exact mood of *On Indolence* but could almost paraphrase the poem in prose, “this morning I am in assort of temper- indolent and supremely careless. I long after a stanza or two of Thompson’s Castle of indolence. My passions are all asleep from my having slumbered till nearly eleven ...neither poetry, nor ambition nor love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by me; they seem like three figures on a Greek vase-‘Not Love, nor Ambition, nor Poetry makes it worthwhile to give up the luxurious enjoyment of the moment; none of them is ...so sweet as drowsy noons/ and evenings steep’d in honied indolence”.

Ode on Indolence records a moment when sensuous happiness is complete and sufficient in its own justification. The trouble with such experiences, as the poem implicitly recognizes, is that they are only momentary. To Keats, with his appetite for immediate experience they are the most real and important things in life. “We become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere” of such moments: but among the effects they give rise to what is that “of convincing one’s nerves that the world is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and Oppression.”

The mood in *Ode to Psyche* is much like the mood of *On Indolence*-

Surely I dreamt today, or did I see
The wing’d Psyche with awakened eyes?
I wandered in a forest thoughtlessly
And on the sudden, fainting with surprise
Saw two fair creatures...

Though it would be simpler to take this poem as a piece of lovely decorative mythology, it is probably something more. Psyche is the soul, not recognized as a goddess in classic Greek

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mythology. But neither is she the soul in the Christian sense. The absence of any specifically Christian feeling, of any kind of orientation to Christianity is remarkable in Keats. His main religious feeling is a longing, perfectly expressed in the fourth stanza, for the natural piety of antiquity –

When holy were the haunted forest boughs
Holy the air, the water and the fire

Thus the poem, concluding with its promise to “...be thy priest, and build a fane / In some untrodden region of my mind” is not merely a piece of fanciful devotion to an obsolete myth, but a recognition by Keats that his own exploration is to be of the interior landscape, that his ultimate devotion is to be neither of the objective world, nor to any power outside himself.

The *Ode on Melancholy* recognizes that sadness is the inevitable complement of the moments of intense sensuous pleasure and happiness –

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

Bidding adieu;

It is therefore a vain attempt to escape from this inevitable pain. Melancholy springs from a transience of joy and this transience is a part of nature.

The *Ode to a Nightingale* does not forget the implicit idea of *Ode on Indolence*. It is a rendering of the same principle that happiness is momentary and transient, the only thing certain is “the weariness, the fever and the fret / Here where men sit and hear each other groan.” Hence, the poet’s desire to participate in the world of the nightingale is only a momentary struggle to escape from the drab, mundane reality. The nightingale too is immortal in the sense that down the ages there has been the song of this bird, and this song has had in it the power to captivate the hearts of men. History has experienced the same power of enchantment and Keats finds this bonding of humanity through the song of nightingale fascinating. But the charm is just a momentary flux as the word “Forlorn” drags the poet back into the real world where suffering predominates and where sorrow finds no respite. Unlike Shelley who could write “If winter comes can Spring be far behind?” in *Ode to the West Wind*, Keats comes to terms with the fact that this world is a space “Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes, / Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.”

The immense despair that is created in Keats from this understanding that life is transitory, and suffering overrules happiness makes him search for an alternate reality where the transitoriness of life will get replaced by a permanent existence. His numerous visits to the British Museum in London and his fascination with ancient artefacts from Greece suggested the idea that art has in it the quality of permanence. Just as the bird in ode to a Nightingale is not just a temporal aspect but a creature that covers space and time, similarly in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* Keats is absolutely in love

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with the paintings on the urn. These paintings depict real life scenes transfixed in time and make the moments depicted on the urn eternal. The Grecian urn has passed the test of time and stands testimony to the idea that art is immortal. Keats's confusion with the fluidity of life finds, at last, some solution in art. The leaves will be forever green, the boy and the girl will never suffer the "weariness, the fever and fret" that curse physical existence. On the contrary, the lovers on the urn "...cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, / Forever wilt thou love and she be young". The intense pain the poet had to go through due to his disease of tuberculosis made him lose his beloved Fanny Brawne. His muse for poems like *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Bright Star* resulted in nothingness as they had no future together and Keats died only at the age of twenty-five in 1821. Hence, his determination to find a route that will ascribe permanence to things referred to as transitory could only find an answer in art. The Grecian Urn stands as an embodiment of victory that has survived the "ravages" of time and the figures on its body are all permanent. The leaves on the branches will be forever green, the flute will always be played and the lover need not worry as "She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss, / Forever wilt thou love and she be fair!"

The famous lines that come at the end of the poem "Beauty is truth, Truth beauty" suggests that beauty is truer than love, pleasure and other forms of value because they pass away while beauty can be embodied in a quasi-permanent form.

Keats' *To Autumn* is, in a sense, a return to the mood of *Ode on Indolence* -making the moment sufficient in itself. His Odes, beginning with a celebration of a mood of indolence reaches climax in *To Autumn*. In this last poem it is most difficult to penetrate below the surface. The emotion has become completely fused with the object and expresses itself completely through it. There are no questions and no conflicts in the poem; the season of ripeness and fulfilment is seen as though it is quite final. Autumn as a poetical symbol is commonly the prelude the winter. Keats looks at autumn as a pause in time when everything has reached fruition and ripeness is all. The old question still lingers –

Where are the songs of spring? Ay where are they?
Think not of them, thou hast thy music too...

But it is immediately stilled. The poem ends with a quiet relapse of consciousness into the soft natural loveliness that surrounds it.

If Keats's Odes are a combination of various themes like beauty, art, transience they are also most definitely a treasure chest of myriad images. His poetry is not only rich in line, colour, light and shade and sound but it is also rich in images of the intimate physical sensations of taste, touch, smell and in images of organic sensations such as hunger and thirst. Thus, his imagery is both sensuous and comprehensive. Keats is earthly and arboreal while Shelley is aerial and ethereal; the former fixes his gaze on the objects in all their varieties and the latter either penetrates the heart of the things or tries to grasp their substances like light, air, fire, fog and airy things.

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W. J Bates has extensively concentrated on the secret of the rounded perfection of Keatsian phraseology, namely the growing use of particular phrases as epithets to indicate the momentary arrest and suspension of energy and movement at a single point, “beaded bubbles winking at the brim”, “purple stained mouth” (Ode to a Nightingale). Apart from this, the single epithets and compound words are equally rich and condensed – “drowsy numbness”, “unravish’d bride”, “clammy cells”. This condensation in imagery is the result of an increasing concentration on tactile effects, “a beaker full of warm South”, “leaden eyed despair”, “The self-same song that found a path/Through the sad heart of Ruth”.

An ode is traditionally a lyric that is exalted or enthusiastic in tone and, whether regular or not, elaborately designed. There are two main classic sources of this form – Pindar and Horace. It is Cowley and Dryden who created the English irregular ode. The stanza form of Keats’s Odes except the irregular *Ode to Psyche* are his own invention. The *Ode to a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode to Melancholy* and *Ode on Indolence* are written in ten-line stanza, consisting of the quatrain of a Shakespearean sonnet followed by the sestet of a Petrarchan sonnet. In *To Autumn* we get an eleven line stanza, the Petrarchan sonnet becoming a septet with a couplet, catching on to an earlier rhyme word just before the last line.

These odes written by Keats within a brief span of seven months from March to September 1819 stand testimony to a perfect specimen of the combination of various ages, the Greek, the medieval and the biblical. His odes are a unique amalgam, a coming together of diverse themes, picturesque images and perfection of form containing beautiful phraseology. For a life whose thread was cut short, where the avenues of creativity could not get explored due to premature death Keats stands tall, the best perhaps in the gallery of literary artists. Readers readily accept Northrop Frye’s singular praise, “He is with Shakespeare”.

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