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Thoughtfulness in Keats' Poetry: A Study of Contemplation, Reflection and Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

John Keats is generally studied for sensuousness and imagery in his poetry. No poem is complete without understanding the philosophy behind it. This paper attempts to study Keats' letters to understand the contemplative and reflective aspects of his poetry. To consider him only a sensuous poet is to underestimate his merits. Understanding philosophy behind his writings is imperative to understand his true genius. His rapid growth as a poet can be truly measured only after examining his letters thoroughly.

John Keats (31 October 1795 – 23 February 1821) is one of the most famous poets of the second generation of the Romantic poets. Shelley calls Keats, an inheritor of unfulfilled renown. Born in 1795, Keats died at an early age of 25. The amazing thing is that within this short period of life, despite his unpoetic origins he could write and leave for posterity some of the finest odes and songs which remain unparalleled to this day. He developed for himself a cult of "pure" poetry wherein only the beauty of life and art would find place. His admirers claim it to be nothing short of the miraculous, that his rise so rapidly to the height of perfection is something that critics find difficult to explain. The most acceptable explanation was that Keats combined within himself inborn genius and performed critical intelligence. He was a meticulously careful craftsman and a severe critic of himself.

Quiet early in his career he set his standards high and aimed at excellence. When he realized that he had only a few more years to live, he strove to achieve what others needed a whole life time to do well. The success was due not only to hard work but also to his critical intelligence as F.R. Leavis calls it. The letters established his intellectual range which proved once for all that Keats was not a wild genius or a simple soul inspired by the muses.

Keats was a prolific letter-writer. His letters throw special light on his thoughts and his art. Unfortunately they are not coherent enough nor sufficient enough to enable us to form an idea of his poetics.

In his first letter written to friend Benjamin Bailey in 1817, he speaks of something that happened to increase his humility. He avers that “men of genius are great as certain ethereal chemicals operating on the man of neutral character.” (qtd. in Sperry 4)

He makes haste to add that he is not qualified to speak on such matters. He only knows of “the holiness of the heart’s affection and the truth of imagination.” From his own experience, speaking with an air of finality, Keats asserts: “what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth.” (Webb 147)

Using poetic symbolism Keats says that imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream – he awoke and found it truth. Keats is sure that the truth can never be reached through a process of reasoning. The philosophers may have their own findings and their own conscious. But so far as he is concerned he will be perfectly satisfied with a life of sensations of all thought. This wish of his is spring on the readers how deeply Keats felt about this matter “O, for a life of sensations rather than thoughts!” (qtd in Sperry 38)

Thoughts and reason do not take us to the goal, namely, truth. “If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.” (Aske 60) The letter to his friend Bailey is important for his wish which expresses the essence of his philosophy and gives a clue to an understanding of the famous phrase „negative capability“.

His next letter, written in 1818 to John Reynolds, contains some of his axioms. Keats believes that poetry should surprise through a fine excess and not by singularity. It should express the reader’s thoughts but in fine diction. His second axiom is that there should be no halfway affair in dealing with beauty. It should be breathtaking. He says that like the sun, the expressions of beauty, quite naturally, rise, progress and set. The imagery used in a poem should shine brightly and set soberly yet magnificently, so that the reader is left in the luxury of the twilight. It is easier to say what poetry is than to write it. This leads to the third axiom that poetry should come as naturally as the leaves come to a tree. This should be compared with the idea that some modern poets give, of striving and struggling for the right expression.

The next letter, written in 1818 to his friend Reynolds, contains his important thought regarding expending knowledge. He says, “an extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people. it helps by wondering speculation to ease the burden of the mystery.” (Motion XXV). Before it, critics felt that Keats was a sensuous poet but he was much more than that. To exaggerate his sensuousness and conclude that he did not want a life of thoughts, is a gross critical error.

Keats poetry is replete with thoughtfulness and contemplation apart from his famed sensuousness. The following lines from his poem “Ode on a Grecian Urn” showcase this assertion:

**When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou
Say’st,
Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to**

Know” (Odes 134)

In another poem “Bright Star”, Keats writes:

“Bright Star, would I were steadfast as thou art –

Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night

And watching, with eternal lids apart...” (“Bright Star” 365)

The above lines exhibit Keats’ engagement with the themes other than sensuousness. They display thoughtfulness and introspective aspects of his poetry.

In this letter he states the difference between the high sensations with and without knowledge. He states that in the latter case we are continuously ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with all horror of a bare shouldered culture – in the former case, our shoulders are fledged and we go through the some space and without which we will fall into the abyss of misery and ignorance. Keats, here, has made his position very clear vis-a-vis knowledge and sensation.

Speaking of Wordsworth genius he says that axioms in philosophy are to be proved on our impulses i.e. personal experience and faith. Clarifying his position further, he compares human life to a large mansion of many apartments two of which Keats can describe, as the others are closed to him. The first is the infant thoughtless chamber where we remain as long as we are without thoughts. All the while the doors of the second chamber remain wide open and only after a long interval we go near it pushed by thoughts which awaken within us. This chamber can be called room of maiden thoughts, which we no sooner enter than become intoxicated by the light by which we see such wonderful things, that we are tempted to stay on there forever. However as one’s vision becomes sharpened one peeps into the heart and nature of man and realises that the world is full of miseries and pain which slowly darkens the chamber and sets open many doors around which are dark and mysterious and we see not the balance of good and evil. Wordsworth came to this, according to Keats, when he wrote „Tintern Abbey“. Genius has the power to explore these dark rooms and passages. Evidently Keats felt that the time had not come for him to go exploring the areas of human misery.

In the next letter, to Richard Woodhouse, written in Oct, 1818, Keats speaks of the poetical character. He uses a series of oxymorons and paradoxes to describe it being everything and also nothing. It delights in creating either Iago, a villain, or a chaste girl. He says that what shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the shameless poet. It relishes both the good and the evil. He believes that a poet has no identity, he fills others and plays many roles as such “he is the most unpoetical of all God’s creatures.” Keats adds that he is ambitious of doing the world some good :

If I should be spared that may be the work of matured years; in the interval I will assay to reach as high a summit in poetry as the nerve bestowed upon me will suffer. The faint conceptions I have of poems to come bring the blood frequently into my forehead. (<https://www.john-keats.com/briefe/271018.htm>)

Keats’ ambition was to write a great epic but after writing the first „Hyperion“, he stopped because it was becoming Miltonic in its grand style. As he wrote to his brother George:

I have but lately stood on my guard against Milton. Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written but in the vein of art; I wish to devote myself to another sensations. (Rollins 212)

It was in the Romantic period, the aesthete achieved so un-Byronic and so un-Shelleyan a note in the conteplation of human suffering – „an aesthete no longer an aesthete.“ This according to Leavis is an expression of rare maturity, attained by Keats when he was still young. It was not necessary for him to live for ten more years as he thought.

Keats composed his 'Ode to Autumn' after abandoning the second attempt at „Hyperion“, the epic. The ode shows the relation between Keats's sensuousness and seriousness and his capacity for rapid development.

So, it can be said that his letters bear a compelling testament to the varied nature of his poetic art which transcends mere sensuousness and explores keen thoughtfulness. His letters exhibit a profound intellectual and philosophical preoccupation with various subjects. He wrestles with complicated ideas pertaining to beauty, truth, art and human existance. They display a sensitive and contemplative mind, continually delving into the depths of human experience, aesthetics and philosophical inquiries. Therefore a thorough examination of the poet's letters is imperative to make a factual appraisal of his thoughts and potentials.

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