



## THE USE OF IMAGERY IN THE ODES OF KEATS

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### ABSTRACT

*In the nineteenth century, poetry began to be regarded as non-propositional, an expressive mainly of feeling and independent of truth as known scientifically, and thus having an intrinsic value in itself. There are, however, several links between Keats and the present day, which enable one to study his imagery very closely indeed. In the first place, Keats' poetry is more concrete. sensuous and less transitory than that of the other Romantics. There are, however, several links between Keats and the present day, which enable one to study his imagery very closely indeed. Keats' odes are not of this fashion as they are exceedingly sensuous, their images are concrete, which makes his odes have many layers of images, each reflecting the other until the internal organic quality of one of the odes is like that of a room of mirrors. His poetry probes beyond the mere verbal level of language and there can be no exaggeration to say that very few poems of the other Romantics have the power of synaesthesia which the odes of Keats possess.*

**Key Words:** *Images, Sensuous, Romanticism, Nature.*

### INTRODUCTION

During the last two or three decades the amount of research and comment on Romantic poetry in general, and the poetry of Keats in particular, has been immense. Despite the enormity of this work, however, there are several gaps to be filled up. Keats' genius and life which has stimulated biographers to account for the extraordinary powers of poetic creativity, developed in such a short time. A certain amount of this biographical approach seems to have found its way into the criticism of the written material with an adverse effect. Secondly, there is the much more complex problem of the nature of Romantic poetry in general and Keats' poetry in particular in relation to modern critical approaches. As this paper attempts to deal with Keats' imagery in the odes, there are two main approaches with reference to Romantic poetry specifically the imagery in the last two or three decades worth mentioning. Firstly,



Romantic poetry has been viewed by Earl Wasserman as "imprecise, essentially visionary and impressionistic: critics have either ignored it as a possible field for the study of imagery or wallowed in it as if in a perfumed bath" (Wasserman 224). There has been little consideration of how the images in Keats' poetry have been organised or how their impact has come about. Wasserman has criticised the approach of the critic who adopts the impressionistic method of viewing the poetry of Keats.

The second main approach which has been made in the last three to four decades is rather more complex. An important aspect of modern criticism which has been pointed out by Bayley and Kermode is to what extent this criticism is indebted to the Romantic tradition of poetry and criticism despite its frequently proclaimed antipathy to Romantic attitudes. In the nineteenth century, poetry began to be regarded as non-propositional, an expressive mainly of feeling and independent of truth as known scientifically, and thus having an intrinsic value in itself. There are, however, several links between Keats and the present day, which enable one to study his imagery very closely indeed. In the first place, Keats' poetry is more concrete, sensuous and less transitory than that of the other Romantics. This sense of concreteness comes out most clearly in the odes; yet it has been dismissed in many cases as merely a facet of Romanticism and in this context, the viewpoint of Powell becomes relevant. Powell comments:

*The Romantic poet is afraid to use the various forms of real things, lest they suggest the objects of the real world. He seeks to rarify form, to create shadowy images, swaying at atmospheric, composed of faint, intangible suggestions, not moulded into clear outline. (Powell 16)*

Keats' odes are not of this fashion as they are exceedingly sensuous, their images are concrete, which makes his odes have many layers of images, each reflecting the other until the internal organic quality of one of the odes is like that of a room of mirrors. The danger has been, therefore, to see Keats too much as one of the Romantic school, to assume that his poetry works from the same basis as that of the other Romantic poets and will yield similar results through the use of a common poetic method. As Robert Spiller has remarked with reference to Romantic poetry and the criticism:

*So firmly fixed in the public mind is the portrait of the typically Romantic poet singing immortal words as he sinks prematurely into the twin despairs of love and death, that once a poet is identified with the romantic image, his own personality and artistry are difficult for criticism to recapture. (Spiller 62)*



Keats' poetry unfolds the richness of experience in a different way from the other Romantics as his poetry probes beyond the mere verbal level of language to a level where the connotations of words become highly significant resulting in the synaesthetic quality of the imagery in the odes. Very few poems of the rest of the Romantics have the power of synaesthesia which the odes possess. This is one point where Keats is more modern than the rest of the Romantics; his poetry fulfils the modern critics' requirements in that his odes are dense, complex and not ironic, in such a way as modern poetry is ironic.

There is no doubt that Keats' poetry is extremely strong in sense images, and the range of his imagery is so all-embracing that it prompted Finney to say:

*The imagery of Keats' poetry has two notable characteristics. In the first place, it is comprehensive, having images of all the sensations of sight, hearing, touch, temperature, of the intimately physical sensations of touch, taste, smell and the internal sensations. (Finney 48)*

But even this description does not do justice to the images in Keats' work, and it is extremely hard to reach a full appreciation of the imagery unless one is aware not only of the many types of sensation to be found in the poems but also of the intensity and depth of his imagery. The importance of the sensuous quality in Keats' imagery can be highlighted if one views it with reference to his thought. As Caldwell indicates, "We find Keats continuing to express an impulse to aesthetic escape as in *To a Nightingale* and in *Lamia*" (Caldwell 6)

*Ode to Psyche* is one of the finest poems of Keats because it is also a prelude to the greater odes which were to follow, clearing the ground for more luxuriant growths. It is the first of Keats' succession of odes, having been written about the same time as *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*. The theme of the poem is related to the myth of Eros and Psyche. In the myth, Aphrodite, the goddess of love is jealous of the beautiful mortal, Psyche and commands Eros to make her fall in love with a base creature but ironically Eros falls in love with Psyche himself. Since he is a God, he must visit her at night and remain unidentified. Psyche searches desperately for him and the amiable curiosity which lost her Eros almost causes her to be dragged down into the underworld when he opens a magic and forbidden box and ultimately Eros saves her and persuades Zeus to immortalize her. The first two stanzas of the ode celebrate the goddess. Keats finds the two lovers on the Grecian urn, they are neither apart nor together but rather in an embrace which has no beginning and no end. He recognizes Eros immediately, but Psyche is revealed to him in a moment of astonished apprehension. Regarding the stanzas, Harold Bloom comments, "The two stanzas are parallel in structure, and are deliberately contrary to each other in emphasis and meaning" (Bloom 390).

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*Ode on Melancholy* primarily presents the joy/melancholy conflict which appears throughout Keats' later poetry but the ode also demonstrates the development of Keats' style, especially the imagery. Of this development of style, Walter Jackson Bate states:

*Considering his short life, there is no parallel to the diversity of styles with which he experimented. Yet it was never experimentation for its own sake. The experimentation moves consistently towards great honesty - greater openness concrete life and the claims of experience, towards greater fullness and richness of expression, and at the same time a growing strength of control and sensitivity to the formal claims of poetic art. (Bate 217)*

In this ode, the development of Keats' poetic art is seen by Mayhead's the point in Keats' career where the poem must be regarded as an organic structure in which parallels and contrasts within the whole are as much a part of the meaning as the statement that 'she dwells with beauty'. The controlling images render the poem's meaning and effect and not simply a statement concerning beauty. In the first stanza, Mayhead sees as remarkably alive and muscular especially with reference to the handling of the sound quality of the language which reinforces the synaesthetic quality of the imagery. The second stanza presents an upsurging of life, and melancholy and vitality are closely juxtaposed. Here Keats employs imagery which suggests freshness and renewal and the stanza three follows this extremely sensuous stanza with a first line of immediate expository force:

*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;  
Aye, in a very temple of delight. (Ode on Melancholy 21-25)*

*Ode on a Grecian Urn* serenely explores the eternity intrinsic to art. The urn as a work of art helps Keats to confront the facts of death and change by showing him the continuity of human behaviour and its value. The urn shows him this value through asserting that the main business of all art is precisely this union of time and place. According to G. Wilson Knight, "In using the spatial as rough material for vital, and therefore temporal significance as in architecture and sculpture or in building a time sequence of words and sounds into an architectural unity" (Knight 259). In this ode, Keats' notion is that art is not a mirror held up to life but something higher in itself but a high unsubstantial ideal. The first stanza of the ode is probably as good a poetic exemplification as any of the opinion Keats has expressed that poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul.



*What leaf-fringed legend haunts about the shape  
Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
In temples or the dales of Arcady?  
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?  
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?  
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (Ode on a Grecian Urn 5-10)*

The figures on the urn may be men or gods but they are swept up in a wild sexual orgy. The opening lines of the second stanza continue the musical reference contained in the last line of the first stanza, and thus by implication also continue the theme of silence. In the first stanza, the verse is packed and there is a quality in it which one does not find in the rest of the poem. About the density of structure and the architectural quality, William Walsh states:

*There is another quality in this magnificent stanza...and that is the marvellous use of language of such a kind that the system of apprehension assumed by the reader in response to the poet's words is a kind of model or metaphor of the physical structure of the vase, from its still centre to its turbulent surface. The language traces in the responsive mind the shape of the vessel. (Walsh 235)*

In contrast to the first stanza, the second stanza begins quietly on the subject of heard and unheard melodies, preferring the latter:

*Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard  
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;  
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,  
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone. (Ode on a Grecian Urn 11-14)*

This musical image follows from the 'pipes and timbrels' yet in essence it remains no more than an idea. Instead, appealing to the spirit rather than to the physical ear, this music is thought of as superior to that which can be heard in the ordinary way. So when Keats contrasts the 'sensual ear' with 'spirit', he contrasts sensory perception not with the soul or intellect, but with imagination. In the same way, the images of the lovers in the third stanza are important as they are seen by Keats in the warm vitality of life.

*Ode to a Nightingale* is one in which Keats' yearning dreams of release from the sufferings of the human condition are the most generalized and closest to the dominant impulse in his



writings. The ode is marked for its rich and suggestive imagery, and it is not simply because it is the longest of the odes, but because the treatment of the subject involves a totality of experience on the part of the poet, which he wants to express with the maximum impact. There is a dramatic development in the poem, the gradual transformation of the living nightingale into a symbol of visionary art. Though this theme receives its fullest expression in the ode, yet this is not the first time when Keats has dealt with the topic. There are references throughout the work which are connected with other poems of Keats. In the first stanza, the words 'aches', 'drowsy numbness', 'pain', and 'dull opiate' have a peculiar quality, created in part of their sound quality, and by the images they help to construct and the movement of the verse. The same powerful images can be seen in the opening lines of stanza two:

*O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been  
Cooled for a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
Tasting of flora and the country green,  
Dance and Provincial song, and sunburnt mirth!  
O for a beaker full of the warm South  
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
And purple-stained mouth; ... (Ode to a Nightingale, 11-18)*

This description of the 'draught of vintage' magnificently condenses a metaphor recurrent through Keats' career. Before going into an account of the synthesis of the imagery, one can see how the use of wine as an image by Keats has always been of great significance. In the third stanza, Keats sets out all the things he wishes to forget, all the sufferings and misfortunes that are pressing him hard and as a result, the poet wants to join the immortal word of the nightingale, which is every minute fading further into the forest where Keats is tempted to go. The ode is marked for its rich imagery and the imagery conveys sharper sense impressions of the objects that could ever be felt in actuality. This is one of the most densely packed poems of Keats and in it, the quality of experience receives great expression from the density of imagery.

In *To Autumn*, the last of the great odes, Keats comes closest to realise that 'negative capability' which he believed was the hallmark of the greatest poetry. As compare to other odes, *To Autumn* is objective, oblique and impersonal. The poet himself is completely absent, as there is no 'I' in the work, for the poem is entirely concrete and self-sufficient. The ode is essentially a distillation of all that Keats felt about the fullness of life, and there is no clear statement concerning the transitoriness of the human experience. The first stanza presents a picture of autumn in all its ripeness-the season that comes between summer and winter. In this stanza, we get a personifications of autumn, where the season is presented as a 'close

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bosom-friend' of the 'maturing sun'. Here the word 'maturing' is ambiguous because it represents what the Sun is actually doing, ripening the fruit of the land, but it also suggests that the Sun itself is maturing, in the sense that it is growing old, preparing to fade into winter. The imagery of the ode moves from a lush, rich and ripe sensation of autumn from the first stanza to the last stanza. The last ode moves to a different kind of conclusion from that reached in the *Ode on Melancholy* and it arises more organically from the verse. The transition is gentle and enforced to the question 'where are the songs of spring?' The personified figure of the autumn is replaced by the concrete images of life and these images are entirely different from those used in the first stanza.

Conclusively, there is no doubt that Nature is treated in a different used by other Romantic poets. Nature furnishes a large part of Keats' imagery in the odes inspiration from Shelley and Wordsworth experienced, and Keats wrote few poems which consisted primarily of natural description. The odes of Keats are of impersonal kind and one cannot read them as fragments of continual spiritual biography like the lyrics of Byron and Shelley. A close reading of his odes shows that they are exceedingly sensuous, their images are concrete and language is rich and suggestive which make his odes more reflecting. His poetry probes beyond the mere verbal level of language and there can be no exaggeration to say that very few poems of the other Romantics have the power of synaesthesia which the odes of Keats possess. His poetry fulfils the requirements of modern critics according to which his odes are dense, complex and although not ironic and they generally stand up pretty well to the criteria of "good poetry".

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