On the Understanding of Beauty by Keats

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Though the present-day new interest in Keats focuses on the poet’s relation to history, it is still an undoubted fact that Keats hungered for Beauty. While acknowledging Keats’ declaration that “I feel assured I should write from the mere yearning and fondness I have for the beautiful,”[1] historical critics want mainly to “restore the vivacious, even pugnacious, voice of Keats’ poetry, seeking in particular to trace those frequently unstraightforward ways in which his poems responded to and addressed matters of the moment.”[2] Since new historical criticism has not denied the existence of the beauty of Keats’ poetry and linked it to the historical circumstances how Keats understood Beauty is still, or evenly becomes more important a question needed to be answered.

I

The first question that we should investigate about Keats’ understanding of beauty is whether beauty has a capability to transcend history and time. Superficially,
Keats’ answers to this question were contradictory. In *Ode on Grecian Urn* he declared that Beauty went beyond history and time. The Urn is “quiet un ravished bride of quietness,” “foster-child of silence and slow time.” But in *Ode on Melancholy* Keats said that Beauty “must die.” This seeming contradiction even appeared in the same poem. We can take *Ode to Nightingale* for an example. On the one hand Keats indicated that the Nightingale, which is the embodiment of beauty in Keats’ mind, is an “immortal bird! / No hungry generations tread thee down.” On the other hand, Keats complained that “Beauty can not keep her Lustrous eyes.” The contradictions expressed in Keats’ utterances above result from the connotations of Keats’ different usage of the same term “Beauty.” There are two groups of antitheses in Keats’ usage of the word “Beauty.” One is the opposition between “individual” and “totality.” The other is that between “actual existence” and “imagined existence.” When Keats affirmed the mortality of Beauty what he meant by the word “beauty” is the concrete individual phenomenon of actual existence of Beauty, as in the sentence “Beauty can not keep her lustrous eyes.” On the contrary, when he affirmed the immortality of Beauty what Keats meant by the word “beauty” is either the totality of the Beauty or the individual phenomenon of imagined existence of Beauty. Some scholars indicated that Keats’ affirmation of immortality of “Nightingale” was not logical. That criticising would have been right and surely Keats’ utterance would have been not logical if in Keats’ mind the immortal Nightingale had been only that bird whose voice was heard by the poet. But this is to misunderstand Keats. Any one of the birds will die. We could not regard the Nightingale in Keats’ mind as “that one bird.” Keats could not think so. The immortal Nightingale in Keats’ mind must be the totality of the nightingale. And more exactly here the phrase “the immortal bird” means, as indicated by some scholars, the beautiful sound of the totality of birds.

**II**

The second question about Keats’ opinion of beauty is whether beauty exists in reality or in imagination.

On the one hand, Keats affirmed the reality of Beautiful things. In his opinion, there are boundless Beautiful things in the world, in actual life. In his eyes, nature is
beautiful and the life of common people is beautiful. On the other hand, Keats emphasized the role of imagination to produce Beauty. His famous metaphor “Adam’s dream” showed that what he cherished is the Beauty that originated from Imagination. “Byron ‘describes what he sees,’ Keats declared, ‘I describe what I imagine.’” Though he was fond of Beautiful things in nature, such as trees, flowers, rivers, birds, and insects, as well as Beautiful things in actual life of common people, Keats was used to looking for Beauty beyond the actual world. His most favorite is the world of Grecian arts and myths. The world of Grecian arts and myth is not true. They are created by artists.

In order to comprehend Keats’ attitudes described above, we are easily allured to have two alternatives, provided that reality is different from imagination. One is that beauty has not single essence and at least there are two kinds of beauties that are displayed separately in reality and in imagination. Another is that Keats did not insight the essence of beauty and his feelings are incongruous.

But we can have another way to get a more satisfying answer. We acknowledge that the world of reality is different from that of imagination. But their difference does not mean absolute antithesis. There might be congruity between the reality and the imagination. And we can say that in Keats’ opinion this congruity comes from sensation.

Keats’ value of sensation can be affirmed with his famous claim “O for a life of sensations rather than of thought.” Sensation is an inward experience of human beings. Sperry indicated that “Keats’ absorption with the nature of sensation clearly engages” “the nature of our primary grasp over material reality, the way our sense impressions are channelled and combined in consciousness, and the way in which such states of perception assimilate with feeling and emotion.” Keats stressed the significance of poetic distilling and dissolving. His understanding of sensation was in agreement with his preoccupation with “distilling” and “dissolving.” Sensation occur both in the confrontation with reality and in imagination. Sensation contains as its element the impressions of the exterior world. But these “impressions of exterior world” can come from both the reality and the imagination and their different origins don’t mean their difference in essence. The difference between the reality and the imagination is not applicable to “the impressions of exterior world.”

It is certain that the life of sensation in Keats’ mind was the beautiful life. If so, may we say safely that in Keats’ opinion Beauty was sensation? At first we are sure
that we would not make mistake when we equate the negativity of Beauty with that of sensation. Both beauty and sensation are not sense, thought, and feeling, as well as pure exterior existence. Though of course we could not guarantee that all sensational experiences are beautiful we can assure that beauty is a kind of sensation.

One matter necessary to be indicated is that we must insist beauty is different from beautiful things. Things, such as trees, flowers, rivers, mountains, are objective. But beauty is subjective. Beautiful things are subjected objects.

Now let us back to our question at the beginning of this chapter. We conclude that in Keats' mind, beauty comes from the confrontation of human beings with the reality and the imagination. Reality must be subjected at first, and then is capable of producing beautiful things.

III

Since in Keats' mind not all sensations are beautiful we have to explore further what kind of sensations are beautiful. Though Keats did not give definition of Beauty, he depicted and analysed the attributes of many beautiful things, from which we can draw some conclusions.

In Ode to a Nightingale Keats depicted the beauty of the Bird is "singest of summer in full-throated ease," in contrast to "the weariness, the fever, and the fret" of human beings. In Ode on a Grecian Urn he praised "mad pursuit," "wild ecstasy," "for ever panting, and for ever young." When he described the process of history Keats affirmed that "first in beauty should be first in might."[10] Keats declared that "the excellence of every art is its intensity" capable of making "one feels mad to kiss" and one "face swelling into reality."[11]

From the utterances mentioned above and unmentioned, much of sameness we can conclude that in Keats' mind that the beautiful things are those that abound with vigour, energy, and force of life. Simply speaking, beauty is the vigour, energy, and force of life. Keats' pieces of depiction, such as "full-throated," "mad pursuit," "panting," "might," "intensity," all represent vigour of life. Of course here vigour, energy and force of life are subjective experiences. They are not objective existence because they are sensation. Though the vigour, energy, and force of life can not exist
without physical basis they are not physical existence, and unable to be interpreted with physiology. As a sensation they are spiritual. They abound with elements of mentality and culture.

Why in Keats' mind would the vigour, energy, and force of life become beauty? The answer of this question must be linked to the history both of Keats' personal life and of the time when Keats lived.

Keats' personal life tells that he suffered much with the destruction of life. "From his childhood, Keats had been in the midst of illness, suffering, and death." He exclaimed that "who could in such a case bear with death? The whole troubles of life, which are now fritted away in a series of years, would then be accumulated for the last days of a being who instead of hailing its approach would leave this world as Eve left paradise." He frankly confessed his fear to the destruction of life:

I was at home
    And should have been most happy, — but I saw
    Too far into the sea, where every maw
    The greater on the less feeds evermore
    But I saw too distinct into the core
    Of an eternal fierce destruction,
    And so from happiness I far was gone.

When Keats experienced vigour, energy, and force of life his fear of destruction was dispelled from his mind and he felt the beauty, brilliance of life.

The time when Keats lived was full of vigour, energy, and force of life. This vigour comes from many resources, such as bourgeois who struggle against feudalists for their economic interests, radicals who strove for a new political kingdom, and Romantics representing new aesthetical tastes. Keats was forged by his time. His life was excited by the forces of his society. He felt the vigour of the history and his feeling established his ideas of aesthetics.

The vigour, energy, and force of life are against the destruction of life not only in their intensity but also in their endurance or everlasting. Keats had a yeaning passion for the everlasting of life, as well as for the intensity of life. So, quite a number of Keats' poems explored as their themes eternity, immortality, and the tensions between history and timeless world.
The fact that in Keats' mind, Beauty was the vigour capable of conquering destruction of life means that Beauty was produced in the process to confront the destruction. Beauty acknowledged the terror and cruelty of destruction. Beauty contained the destruction of life. Simply speaking, Beauty contained destruction. To contain destruction doesn't mean to be equivalent to destruction. On the contrary, it means transcending destruction. The fact that Beauty both contains and transcends destruction is an intrinsic contradiction of Beauty itself. But it is a great contradiction. Because of containing death, Beauty is full of the meaning of tragedy. And because of transcending death, Beauty represents the triumph of the human spirit. Beauty is the aim of Keats' poetry and of his whole life. So the characteristic of Keats' Beauty controls and enters all of Keats' poetics. His feelings and thoughts all show the intrinsic contradiction of Beauty.

One typical theory of Keats' poetics that contains the contradiction of Keats' Beauty is the famous utterance: Negative Capability. Negative capability contains two elements. One is negativity that means "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts." [15] In Keats' mind the negativity is a basic attribute of the poetic world, and an essence of actual life. The other is capacity, or "capable of being" in Keats' words. Bate pointed out that "we should also stress 'capable.'" [16] Capability is the force to confront the negativity and conquer the negativity. It is clear that the two elements of Negative Capability are just the two elements of Keats' Beauty. The difference is only the terms. The negativity of actual life is the destruction of life. And the force capable of conquering destruction is exactly subject's capacity capable of being in negativity.

We take it for granted that Keats included in his famous theory the thought of "non-identity" as Bate indicated, [17] though Keats didn’t mention "non-identity" when he elucidated the contention of the theory "Negative Capability." It is well known that "Non-identity" is a very important thought in Keats. And it is the most favourite one of his theories. "Non-identity" is an important element of Negative Capability. And "non-identity" itself contains two elements of the Negative Capability, or two elements of Beauty. Firstly, "non-identity" means the subject’s acceptance of the mysteries, uncertainties of the world. It is because of the
uncertainties of the reality that the subjects lose their identity. And this acceptance is compulsive. The subject is passive. And the passivity or “non-identity” becomes unbearable, even terrible eventually for subjects in most cases. The unbearable comes from the fact that in most cases one’s identity is the basis of his life. For most people losing identity equates to ruin their life. Secondly, “non-identity” means a capability of being in mysteries, certainties. It is that capability that assures the existence of the life of the subject. Though that capability is different from the identity of the subject it is yet the displaying of the life of the subject. When a subject has this capability and experiences the performance of the capability he feels that he is alive, he has not fallen into annihilation. That is why Keats was plunged into the contradiction—on the one hand he complained of a lack of poetic meaning in his poetic writing because of the absence of identity, on the other hand he attached himself to poetry closely. \[181\] It is happiness for someone to experience the diversity of the world on the basis of the existence of his life though his identity is lost.

V

Why is “non-identity” unbearable for others but bearable for Keats? To answer this question we have to discuss two dimensions of it. One is the different connotations of the two terms, identity and capability. The other is the personality of Keats that is uniquely his. From the point of view of psychology identity is a system of self-consciousness. It contains the ideas of cognition, morality, politics, and religion, etc. Of course everyone has his identity. In ordinary life human being can not exist without his identity. Capability is the system of one’s intelligence that transcends ideas of morality, cognition, politics, and religion. Identity is self-recognised, self-conscious. Identity shows one’s own particular “self.” Capability is subconscious, without the self-recognised. When somebody experiences his own identity he can feel the existence of his particular “self,” and vice versa. Most western people equate their identity with their life. But the fact is that one’s identity is not necessarily equivalent to one’s life. When people, who lose their identity, experience their capability they probably experience the existence of their life though they could not feel the existence of their particular “self.” Keats’ personality was just unique. What he wanted was Beauty, which was exactly the
vigour or everlasting of existence of life, not the identity based on the ideas of morality, politics, and religion. In Keats’ mind Beauty was an experience transcending self and ideas. When he entered the experiences of the non-identity he obtained the happiness of Beauty though he lost his identity. Why can “non-identity,” or negative capability, produce Beauty in Keats’ mind? It was because the performance of negative capability was an acting of sensation. And the performance of negative capability assured the existence of Keats’ life though it affirmed the losing of his identity. Paradoxically, it was just because of the loss of identity that the existence of Keats’ life was robust, brimming with vigour, like a “beaker full of the warm south,” as he described in his Ode to a Nightingale-- “with beaded bubbles winking at the brim”--it entered a world of diversity. It showed itself in many objects. It possessed a vast world. It can be proved reasonable that Keats both wanted to flee from and wanted to enter into the actual world. Because the destruction of the actual world depresses his self he wanted to escape from it. After he obliterated his self in his imagination or his sensation he got rid of the depression of the actual world and he obtained power to enjoy actual life. So he entered the exuberance of his life. This vigorous exuberant existence of life or performance of life transcended any destruction that Keats was eager to conquer. To live in the experiences of “non-identity” was for Keats to live in the triumph over the destruction of life, to live in the beauty. Beauty, “in close relationship with” which “the excellence of every art is in its intensity, capable of making all disagreeable evaporate from their being,”[19] was the salvation of life in Keats’ mind. The view that Beauty is the vigour and the salvation of life was Keats’ understanding of Beauty, or more exactly speaking, Keats’ “proposal” of Beauty.

Keats’ “proposal” of Beauty maybe has special importance for us living in the contemporary world.

Notes:
[1] Sidney Colvin, Letters of John Keats, ed. (Macmillan, 1928), p.185.
[2] Nicholas Roe, John Keats and the Culture of Dissent (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998), ‘preface and acknowledgements’, p.ix.
[3] Miriam Allott, Some of arguments displayed in the documents mentioned in The Poems of John Keats, ed. (Longman, 1970), p.524.
[4] Miriam Allott, The Poems of John Keats, ed. (Longman, 1970), p.529, footnote 61.
[5] Sidney Colvin, Letters of John Keats, ed. (Macmillan, 1928), p.80.
[6] Sidney Colvin, Letters of John Keats, ed. (Macmillan, 1928), p.41.
[7] Clarence D. Thorpe, The Mind of John Keats (New York, 1926), p.120.
[8] Sidney Colvin, Letters of John Keats, ed. (Macmillan, 1928), p.42.
[9] Stuart M. Sperry’s Keats, the Poet (Princeton University Pr. 1994), p.9.
[10] Miriam Allott, Hyperion II, 229, The Poems of John Keats, ed. (Longman, 1970), p.428.
[11] Sidney Colvin, Letters of John Keats, ed. (Macmillan, 1928), p.47.
[12] Clarence D. Thorpe, The Mind of John Keats (New York, 1926), p.76.
[13] Sidney Colvin, Letters of John Keats, ed. (Macmillan, 1928), p.255.
[14] The epistle to Reynolds.
[15] Sidney Colvin, Letters of John Keats, ed. (Macmillan, 1928), p.48.
[16] Wilter Jackson Bate, John Keats (Cambridge, 1964), p.249.
[17] Ibid., 242.
[18] Sidney Colvin, See Letters of John Keats, ed. (Macmillan, 1928), p.184 and Clarence D.
Thorpe, The Mind of John Keats (New York, 1926), p.17: “in his most fevered days, he could still cry, ‘poetry is all I care for, all I live for.’”

[19] Sidney Colvin, Letters of John Keats, ed. (Macmillan, 1928), p.47.

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