

Second generation Romantic poets: John Keats

Like Wordsworth he believed in the importance of SENSATION and its pleasures ("*Oh, for a life of sensations rather than of thoughts!*"), but for him sensations included taste, touch and smell as well as sight and hearing, so that in all his response to the physical world there is an impression of testing things by the palate and of feeling their texture. Sensation was for him, as for W., cognitive: it was a path to knowledge of reality and the task of the poet was to render it persuasively in words, even when it was associated with sex and self-indulgence. The first apprehension of BEAUTY, a central theme of all his poetry, proceeds from the senses, from the concreteness of physical sensations. Beauty is caught by the poet in almost tactile images, in the sensuous aspects of NATURE, in its colours, in the sweetness of its perfumes, in the curves of a flower (1). Or it might be the beauty of a woman's body, a painting, a statue, an object of art to kindle poetry. But beauty can also produce a much deeper experience than that of an intense sensual pleasure. When he wrote "A thing of beauty is a joy forever" he stressed a more spiritualized version of beauty; in *Grecian Urn* he assigned to beauty the function of revealing the innermost truth of life and things and to truth the inseparable quality of beauty (3).

The theme of beauty is strictly connected with the one of the transience of life. The appreciation of beauty linked to the idea of its transience has always been a commonplace in literature, but Keats felt it in the extreme, and this is peculiar of his biography and of his Romanticism. Besides the untimely death of his parents and relatives, the daily experience of sorrow, of disappointed love, of the decay of beauty and youth, led him to a constant quest for something permanent and unchanging to balance the transience of life. Consequently, a "life of sensations" was accompanied by a deep sense of melancholy and the solutions that he tried to find proved to be illusory. Even though Keats as a poet can delude himself into the idea of the permanence of art or of poetry, Keats as a man cannot avoid the consciousness of himself, of his mortality, of the laws of life. (-> The Odes). The Odes are the fruit of Keats' maturing mind, where he explores the relation between pleasure and pain, happiness and melancholy, IMAGINATION (4) and reality, art and life. In "Ode to a Nightingale" the bird's song is the symbol of the timeless, of the escape from the world of change and decay; art and death are both escapes from time and change and the relation between art, life and death is the true theme of the poem, as it is of "Ode on a Grecian Urn". In his most mature works we find the control of sensibility, an intense delight at the sheer existence of things outside himself and the loss of his own identity in the identification with the object he contemplates (this is what he called NEGATIVE CAPABILITY (5)). Keats' conception of the ideal poet is a poet who "has no identity", "no self", the "most unpoetical of creatures". He must be an empty vessel to be filled with some other poetical being or object. He is submissive to things as they are, without trying to change or even explain them. And when in one of his many letters (which contain his poetic principles) Keats stated that "*I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the heart's affections and of the truth of the imagination [...] what the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth; it is like Adam's dream: he woke up and found it truth,*" he not only was in line with the other Rom. poets, but he was even going farther than them, giving a definition of the source of poetry as non-moral and non-didactic.

As a final thought, it might be said that Keats' Romanticism lies in a characteristic presentation of all experience as a tangle of inseparable but not reconcilable opposites. He finds melancholy in delight, pleasure in pain: he inclined equally towards a life of indolence and sensation and towards a life of thought.

(1) Melancholy is seen by no one except by the one "whose strenuous tongue can burst Joy's grapes against his palate fine" ("Ode on Melancholy"). "*I cannot see what flowers are at my feet / nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs, / but, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet ...*" ("Ode to a Nightingale")

(3) It is only through beauty, which is revealed through an intense spiritual and aesthetic experience that we come to know the truth. --> *Beauty is truth ... / Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought as doth eternity*, "Ode on a Grecian Urn". This means to deny validity to any knowledge achieved through reason and logic.

(4) Imagination is superior to the senses because it creates a world of perfection; it represents the supremacy of the ineffable, the unsaid, the unrepresented, of what is expected and is not consummated and art gives consolation to man because it creates a world of imagination. -> "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

(5) He defined it as the ability, which "Shakespeare possessed so enormously", to be "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after (=search for) fact and reason".