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FIVE FAMOUS POEMS OF THE AGE OF THE ROMANTIC REVIVAL

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ABSTRACT:

This article endeavours to explore the excellence found in the poems of the Romantic Revival. Ode to Psyche is the first of a group of odes by Keats, followed by Ode on Indolence and Ode to Melancholy. These odes have drawn high praise from critics, among whom T.S. Eliot is also included. The main focus here is on the sensuousness of Keats. Thought and imagery constitute the essence of the poems.

Keywords: *Romantic Revival; Sensuousness; Thought; Imagery*

1. INTRODUCTION

This article is about five famous odes of John Keats. Ode to Psyche is the first of a group of odes composed in April and May 1819. It is considered an introduction to the group of odes known as the great odes of John Keats. The poet himself commented on the genesis of this poem in the following words:

"The following Poem — the last that I have written — is the first and the only one with which I have taken even moderate pains. I have for the most part dashed off my lines in a hurry. This I have done leisurely — it reads the more richly for it and will, I hope, encourage me to write other things in even a more peaceable and healthy spirit. You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the time of Apuleius, the Platonist who lived after the Augustan age, and consequently the goddess was never worshipped or enshrined with any of the ancient fervour — and perhaps never thought of in the old religion — I am more orthodox than to let a heathen goddess be so neglected" (JKL, 2, 105–106).

This is how the first draft of Ode to Psyche was transcribed and prefaced with some explanation of its composition and origins.

2. ODE TO PSYCHE

Critics point out that Keats inserted some phrases from Lemprière's dictionary entry on Psyche. He also seems to have been inspired by the long narrative poem Psyche, or The Legend of Love by Mary Tighe. Classical mythology was an important element in Renaissance poetry from Spenser to Milton. It was during the Augustan age that it was weakened or blighted. With the Romantics, particularly Keats, it was revived and glamourized. He turned to the Greek story of Psyche from whatever source he could find. Greek mythology spanned not only his narrative poems but also his shorter compositions such as the odes. What Wordsworth slighted as a "pretty piece of paganism" became, in Endymion, an object of adoration. Keats would not let Psyche, the hidden goddess, languish in woeful neglect for ever.

T.S. Eliot considered Ode to Psyche sufficient for the reputation of Keats. Robert Bridges ranked it above Ode on a Grecian Urn. Douglas Bush finds it the least coherent and most uneven, while Middleton Murry and Herbert Read looked for the true voice of feeling in Ode to a Nightingale. It was Kenneth Allott who regarded Ode to Psyche as the most architectonic of the great odes.

Ode to Psyche — the Cinderella of the great odes — has a clear dramatic structure. The expository intent of Keats is discernible in the opening twenty-four lines of this ode. The speaker addresses Psyche, the heathen goddess, seeking through song her permission to unravel her "secrets." The poem then moves through a number of transitions:

Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see
The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?

In this first transition, the poet is caught on the horns of a dilemma. Did he see her with awakened eyes, or did he see her in a dream? His vacillation is soon resolved. He is in a forest where he is dazzled by a sight: two fair creatures lying side by side in deep grass, near a stream. They are Cupid and Psyche. Keats is employing the convention of the "sudden vision or waking dream." Furthermore, the vision of Psyche and the "winged boy" recall the descriptions of embowered lovers in Spenser and Milton.

The middle of the poem (lines 24–49) is historicized. The poet recounts how Psyche is "late born" and the loveliest of all the gods who inhabited Mount Olympus. Two things are emphatically mentioned: her beauty, and the fact that she was never made an object of worship in ancient times. Then follows an account of her deprivations. Psyche never received her due as a goddess. No temple, no altar, no choir of virgins, no tribute in the form of music, and no priest showed any fervour of worship or uttered prophecies on her behalf. Psyche attained the status of divinity when the age of mythical beliefs had already passed. The poet, however, is dedicated and firm, asserting that the worship of Psyche would not be curtailed or abbreviated.

The third part of the poem marks the accession of his creative strength. The poet extends the action and himself becomes both poet and priest. As a Romantic poet, he attempts a bold flight of imagination, aiming to build a fane (temple) for Psyche in the invisible realm. His temple is to be located in some untrodden region of his own mind. To Keats, Poesy vanishes at the mere touch of cold philosophy, but for Psyche it would not. That is why, in the untrodden region of the poet's mind, "fresh thoughts" are concretized as branches of pine trees and the mind itself becomes a forest full of varied beauty drawn from myth and nature. The poet describes the situation in the following lines:

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,

The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep.

Keats elaborates further in these lines:

And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign…

The poet would create a rosy sanctuary — a shrine for Psyche — and worship her with the loveliest buds and bells, metaphors for his verses. By means of the Gardener's Fancy, that is, creative imagination, he would provide all the soft pleasures his brain can devise.

Keats is primarily a sensuous poet. Arnold rightly remarked that "poetry, according to Milton's saying, should be simple, sensuous, impassioned." No one can question the eminence of Keats's poetry in terms of the quality of sensuousness. This sensuousness is noticeable in a number of word-pictures in Ode to Psyche. The first is the lovely picture of Cupid and Psyche lying in embrace in deep grass, beneath a roof of leaves and blossoms beside a brooklet:

Couch'd side by side
In deepest grass, beneath the whispering roof
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
A brooklet, scarce espied…

Another exquisite picture follows when flowers of varied colours are described:

'mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed,
Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian.

Keats evokes the lovers with the delicate phrase "with their lips that touched not." Another picture shows Psyche superior to Venus and Vesper in beauty. In concrete and sensuous imagery, the poet describes even the paraphernalia of the lucent fane for Psyche in "some untrodden region" of his mind:

A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath'd trellis of a working brain,
With buds and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
Who, breeding flowers, will never breed the same.

Keats is highly adroit in the use of what critics call synaesthetic imagery in his odes. Fogle notes:

"The easy naturalness and functional quality characteristic of the synaesthetic imagery of Keats is especially notable in his later poetry, more particularly in the six great odes. In the odes, divergent sensations and notions are fused into complex and indivisible wholes by the intense concentration of his mature technique. The Ode to Psyche presents a remarkable instance of fusion and transference of multiple sensations, so quietly managed that the variety and diversity of the materials is likely to be overlooked: 'Mid hush'd, cool-rooted flowers, fragrant-eyed, / Blue, silver-white, and budded Tyrian…' Auditory, tactile, olfactory, and visual suggestions join together in one line in perfect amity."

As to the language of Ode to Psyche, it may be stated that it captures the myth and magic of the ancient world through references to zephyrs, dryads, and temples. The stanza design of the ode is based on the sonnet. There is more irregularity in Ode to Psyche than in the later odes. Keats continues with iambic pentameter, though hexameter lines also appear. The four-line quatrain is a part of the structure, with the conclusion of each usually marking the end of one thought and the beginning of another.

Critics have responded variously to Ode to Psyche as a work of art. L.M. Jones underlines the role of imagination in the re-creation of Greek mythological divinities, saying: "Psyche was an excellent symbol of imagination as an instrument to bridge the gap between the mortal and immortal, because she mediated between both; she had been mortal, and she became a goddess." David Perkins notes the subjectivity of the visionary poet in the sense that Psyche's worship, in an unbelieving world, must be private. It can exist only in some untrodden region of the mind, since the poet cannot contemplate the visionary and the quotidian worlds co-existing. He therefore consecrates his mind as a shrine to Psyche. Sidney Colvin eulogizes Keats for having followed the enriched stanza form employed in Spenser's nuptial odes.

3. ODE ON INDOLENCE

The genesis of Ode on Indolence is usually traced through a letter Keats wrote to a friend in March 1819. The letter reads as follows:

"This morning I am in a sort of temper — indolent and supremely careless. I long after a stanza or two of Thomson's Castle of Indolence. My passions are all asleep from having slumbered till nearly eleven, and weakened the animal fibre all over to a delightful sensation about three degrees this side of faintness — if I had teeth of pearl and breath of lilies, I should call it languor — but as I am, I must call it Laziness. In this state of effeminacy, the fibres of the brain are relaxed in common with the rest of the body, and to such a happy degree that pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown. Neither Poetry nor Ambition nor Love have any alertness of countenance as they pass me by: they seem rather like three figures on a Greek vase — a man and two women whom no one but myself could distinguish in their disguisement. This is the only happiness."

In the above extract, Keats makes his position clear on the importance of indolence in his life. According to him, the real source of happiness is indolence. So he affirms that neither Love nor Ambition nor Poesy can detract him from a mood of exquisite somnolence.

Ode on Indolence is a lyric structured like a narrative poem; in other words, it reads like a story. The chief event in this story is a moving vision of three figures passing before the poet as if they were drawings on a spinning urn:

Three figures seen
With bowed necks, and joined hands, side-faced;
And one behind the other stepp'd serene,
In placid sandals, and in white robes graced;
They pass'd, like figures on a marble urn.

These figures appear and disappear, deepening the mystery about them. Keats employs dramatic suspense and repetition as the two modes through which the identification of the three figures is enacted. But their identification gives rise to a conflict. The poet senses a "silent deep plot" against him: the trio seems to tempt him from a mood of exquisite somnolence while he is enjoying "the drowsy hour and the blissful cloud of summer indolence." If the three figures mean to tempt him back into everyday life, he vows they will fail. For Love is fleeting and insubstantial; Ambition is the result of short-lived excitement. He does not want to write poetry merely to be petted by the public and flattered by reviewers, which would degrade him to the position of an insignificant poet. The phrases "pet lamb" and "sentimental farce" are quite indicative.

The core of Ode on Indolence is the poet's indolent mood, which mingles sleep and waking together. It is not lethargy; it is a creative, visionary state that combines both pleasure and pain and transmutes them:

Pain has no sting, and pleasure's wreath no flower.

Indolence is a positive state, bringing a calm, pervasive happiness and emboldening the poet to say "So, ye three ghosts, adieu!" and repudiate Love, Ambition, and Poetry.

What makes Keats a celebrated sensuous poet is his imagery. There are at least four concrete word-pictures in this poem. The first is the picture of the three figures "in placid sandals, and in white robes." Each figure is individualized: Love is a fair maid, Ambition is "pale of cheek," while Poesy is a "maiden most unmeek." These figures function as allegorized presences. Sleep is embroidered with "dim dreams," while "my soul is a lawn besprinkled o'er with flowers and stirring shades." A picture of a cloudy morning and another of an open casement with a new-leaved vine exemplify Keats's gift of impressive concrete imagery.

The structure of Ode on Indolence resembles that of Keats's other odes, using a ten-line stanza. It also borrows from the sonnet structures of Shakespeare and Milton. Keats uses assonance to create rhythm through repeating vowel sounds, as seen in the line "O why did ye not melt, and leave my sense?"

4. ODE ON MELANCHOLY

Unlike in Ode to a Nightingale and Ode on Indolence, in Ode on Melancholy the poet urges action rather than passive contemplation. He rejects both the passionate, embracing drowsiness of Indolence and the rapturous drowsiness of the Nightingale.

If the first stanza of the poem is marked by a series of strong negations, the second stanza is one of clear affirmation. The sufferer of Melancholy is urged toward a course of action when suddenly afflicted with it. He is called to immerse himself in natural beauty — gazing at the morning rose, at the rainbow of the salt sand-wave, or at the spherical peonies. Although these things are beautiful, they do not last forever. Their extreme brevity makes the observer sad and enables him to understand the reality of true Melancholy.

Stanza three is one of revelation. Here Melancholy is personified as a woman — as are her companions, Joy and Pleasure. Keats lays stress on the fact that true melancholy is consequent upon the contemplation of beautiful things and the experience of joy and pleasure. As one gazes at beautiful things, a question arises: will these things last forever? The feeling of their transitoriness makes one sad. Even a feeling of intense pleasure is of short duration and is therefore followed by a feeling of utter sadness. Melancholy and joy are not far apart. The poet asserts:

> *Ay, in the very temple of Delight*
> *Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine…*

Melancholy is enshrined as a divinity, with her altar in the very temple of Delight. She could be glimpsed and experienced only by one who could fully enjoy the raptures of delight.

Evidence of Keats's sensuous temperament is seen in his exquisite imagery: rain falling on flowers, sunlight falling on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave, and a picture of a man squeezing the hand of a woman. Further, the personifications of Beauty, Joy, Pleasure, and Melancholy help crystallize the theme of the poem. Melancholy is elevated to the status of a pantheon figure, shown co-existing with Delight.

Harold Bloom comments: "The magnificence of Ode on Melancholy's final stanza is in its exactness of diction as it defines the harmony of continued apprehension of its unresolved contraries." The word 'sorrow' is used repeatedly to emphasize the central theme. Synonymy is also amply used: are not the words 'mournful', 'anguish', 'aching', and 'sadness' employed to the same effect? The use of archaic diction — 'ay', 'sovran' — evokes the period of the poem's composition. Words such as 'rosary', 'heaven', 'shrine', and 'temple' carry religious overtones.

5. THE EVE OF ST. AGNES

Keats recreates a medieval atmosphere of romance and chivalry in The Eve of St. Agnes, yet he concentrates on human passions rather than on thrilling or violent action. In the bitter cold of a January night, while merry music plays in the castle hall, Porphyro — with his "heart on fire" — has come across the moors to catch a glimpse of his beloved Madeline and is hiding in her

chamber. Were his presence discovered, a hundred swords would storm his heart. But nothing so violent occurs.

The hero, whom Jack Stillinger provocatively calls "a villainous seducer," does not fight his enemies. On the contrary, he demonstrates his resourcefulness through a timely escape with his beloved. As a sensuous poet, Keats delights his readers with evocations of exquisite imagery and felicitous phrasing, mostly visual, as the following stanza illustrates:

Full on this casement shone the wintry moon,
And threw warm gules on Madeline's fair breast,
As down she knelt for heaven's grace and boon;
Rose-bloom fell on her hands, together prest,
And on her silver cross soft amethyst,
And on her hair a glory, like a saint;
She seem'd a splendid angel, newly drest,
Save wings, for heaven: — Porphyro grew faint:
She knelt, so pure a thing, so free from mortal taint.

6. HYPERION: A FRAGMENT

Keats did not know Greek and had nothing of Greek culture in his heritage. Yet he was irresistibly drawn to many things Greek, of which Greek mythology was foremost. It was this love that led him to take up an epic theme for Hyperion. Initially he wanted to treat Hyperion as a romance, but the project evolved into an ambitious attempt to re-imagine the Titanic struggle for cosmic supremacy in the manner of Milton. The poem remained a fragment, partly because Keats felt the Miltonic influence was too strong and the poem was not yet his own.

Hyperion engages with the central Romantic preoccupation with suffering, loss, and the passage of power from one order to another. The fallen Titans, overwhelmed and desolate, grapple with a defeat they cannot understand. Saturn, stripped of his sovereignty, is presented with majesty and pathos. The narrative movement from Titanic stasis to the dynamism of the new Olympians parallels the philosophical movement from passive endurance to active acceptance that characterizes Keats's thought.

The verse of Hyperion is grandly Miltonic in its weight and amplitude. The imagery, however, is distinctly Keatsian: rich, sensuous, and rooted in the physical world even when describing cosmic events. The poem stands as a remarkable achievement and an indication of the heights Keats might have reached had his life not been cut short.

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