

## KEAT'S POETRY OF BECOMING

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Para Keats el tiempo es un vector con una existencia objetiva, distinta e independiente del hombre, y una síntesis de todos los momentos del tiempo que resultan de la lucha del hombre para trascender lo temporal. Así, el tiempo presenta una contradicción doble: antagónica / no-antagónica. El tiempo como vector es un elemento de realidad objetiva que el hombre no puede cambiar, y el tiempo como síntesis es una construcción subjetiva en la que los elementos contradictorios coexisten. La resolución para el arte de esta contradicción del tiempo es característica tanto de la ontología como de la poesía romántica. Sin embargo, mientras a sus contemporáneos a quienes no satisfacía esta solución y quienes volvieron a los conceptos platónicos de la poesía como manifestación de lo inmutable, para Keats el arte pertenece sobre todo, no al terreno de lo inmutable, sino al terreno de lo temporal.

**Key words:** Keats poetry time becoming romanticism

For Keats time is at once a vector with an objective existence apart from and independent of man, and a synthesis of all moments in time resulting from man's striving to transcend the temporal. Time presents a contradiction, but a contradiction that is both antagonistic and non-antagonistic: time as vector is an element of objective reality that man cannot change, and time as synthesis is a subjective construct where contradictory elements co-exist. The resolution in art of the contradiction of time is characteristic of Romantic ontology, as it is of Romantic poetry. But whereas his contemporaries remained profoundly dissatisfied with this solution and turned to Platonic notions of poetry as a manifestation of the immutable, for Keats art belongs first of all not to the realm of the immutable but to the temporal world.

Time, for Keats, is both quantitative and qualitative. As such, it is a contradictory concept, for it is at once a vector with an objective existence apart from and independent of man, and a synthesis of all moments in time resulting from man's striving to transcend the temporal. Though this contradiction is antagonistic<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of antagonistic and non-antagonistic contradictions, see Lucien Sève's *Structuralisme et dialectique*.

and thus ultimately unresolvable: time as a vector belongs to an objective reality that man cannot change, it is also non-antagonistic: the elements of the contradiction —time as vector and time as synthesis— do not negate each other, but exist simultaneously in art. In fact, the resolution in art of the contradictions arising from this dual conception of time is characteristic, not only of Keats' aesthetics, but of all Romantic poetry, as it is of Romantic ontology. Or, more accurately, it is a consciousness of the inadequacy of this resolution (hence of this ontology) which dominates Romantic poetry. All the English Romantics were to some degree aware of this inadequacy; most attempted to solve the problem by affirming, as does Coleridge, the primacy of Being over Becoming: ideas exist before discrete, concrete events.<sup>2</sup> Refusing to accept this view, however, Keats maintained a dialectical conception of art; where his contemporaries tended to return to a notion of poetry as manifestations of the immutable, Keats understood that poetry is the product of the poet's attempts to resolve the otherwise irresolvable contradictions between Being and Becoming<sup>3</sup>. Further, for Keats art belongs first of all not to the realm of the immutable but to the world: if art manifests a striving-for, a going-beyond, it nevertheless belongs to the world of Becoming here below, and its resolutions of contradictions (such as that between time as vector and time as synthesis) must be therefore resolutions in this world.

Keats would not believe, as had poets and philosophers continuing the Platonic tradition, that art is simply a manifestation or evocation of the eternal and immutable in the mutable world; but, like most of his contemporaries, neither could he accept that the temporal world in which man lives his daily life is all. Art is, for Keats, a means (and perhaps the only one available to him) through which man strives to transcend the mutable world. With art man tries to overcome time, to hold it in his hand while existing in and as part of the process of time. The work of art, in particular the poem, is an attempt to create a synthesis of the mutable and the eternal —of all that was and might have been, all that is, and all that might be. The poem is an attempt to collapse the real and the possible into a single experience; it dissolves into itself subject and object, and it embodies in itself the objective world: matter and time, and the subject and imagination. And

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Sharon Smulders of the University of Lethbridge for pointing out that «Kubla Khan» seems to affirm the primacy of Becoming. The question of whether it accurately reflects Coleridge's ontology at the time of writing or whether the poem is, as he claimed, unfinished, is unanswerable. This exception does not change the fact that in his other work primacy is given to Being.

<sup>3</sup> As this was not a question for Keats, we are leaving aside the question of whether or not a realm of Being does exist.

yet also it remains necessarily a discrete entity in the world: it moves though and changes with time. Time is a continuum reaching from the murky past through the present to the possible. It is not, for Keats, simply the rationalist's vector, but rather it might be described as shaped like an hourglass with its ends forever opening yet returning upon each other. The present is the neck through which the drops of experience pass. But, because man has the ability and the inclination to desire and to imagine, the present opens to limitless possibility in both the past and the future, into eternity. The poem makes this possibility to which man reaches into a sensual and cognitive experience.

In his sonnet, «On First Looking into Chapman's Homer,» Keats shows that the poem is a synthetic moment—a moment into which world and time collapse, and he expresses his experience of such a moment. His poem reaches from the islands of mythic Greece to a «peak in Darien»<sup>4</sup> overlooking the vast and unknown, perhaps unknowable, Pacific; it tries to encompass in itself all that is man's experience. It places into a medium which exists in the temporal world: language, at once the present experience of the poet and the span of humankind's experience, both in the past and the possible future. Homer's «many goodly states and kingdoms» exist not only in the past; but, because in his and in Chapman's art they transcend the immediate temporal worlds in which they were formed, like the Pacific, the kingdoms and the poems belong also to the possible. Keats' sonnet expresses the wonder he knew upon discovering Chapman's Homer, and it expresses how his experience of that work opens the world for him.<sup>5</sup> It makes him perceive the imaginable as immediate, and by doing so it makes him sense the infinite reach of the imagination. It is for him the discovery of a new world; and it is the discovery of a world which enfolds within itself the world he already knew; thus it is not a separate world but the same one, now perceived as boundless. Chapman's translation and Hamer's epic function in the same way as Keats' sonnet. The sonnet embodies in itself the past and the possible, and acts as a lens which focuses the world and time into itself where they can be perceived as a whole; and yet the poem moves through that which it contains. Though it embodies the world in itself, Keats' sonnet is, nevertheless, a distinct part of the world. Similarly, Homer's epic focuses in itself the demi-mythical Aegean; it comes out of that world and it is that world. Chapman's translation is analogous to the original epic, holding Homer's work in itself without limiting it, hence becoming, like it,

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<sup>4</sup> «Chapman's Homer,» ed. Richard Harter Fogle, *John Keats: Selected Poetry and Letters* (New York: Holt, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> The synthetic view of experience in Keats' work means that the fact that an experience is second hand in no way diminishes its quality. Rather, the opposite is true; see also «On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again.»

limitless. These poems are manifestations of the objective world that do not limit the world or maintain a radical separation of subject and object because, in Keats' view, they allow the imagination to move beyond what they present. They draw time into a moment that reaches through time yet exists within it. For they, like man, necessarily exist in time. But, because they do not draw limits around the world which they manifest—they cannot for they contain all the world, because they draw Keats' imagination into themselves, into the infinite world they contain, Chapman's translation and Homer's epic draw Keats from the immediate experience of art towards the unknown. The transformation of the text to the realm of the senses draws Keats beyond the poems and himself to look, like Cortez, upon unlimited and unattainable possibility.

This reaching beyond the present implies for Keats a movement towards the spiritual and eternal. In his romance, «The Eve of St. Agnes,» he confronts more specifically than in «On First Looking into Chapman's Homer» the question of the poem as synthetic moment. In particular, he faces the problem of the poem embracing in itself the eternal as well as the temporal and material. His treatment of this problem involves the form of art towards the unknown. The transformation of this poem as well as its content. The Spenserian stanza which Keats employs in «On the Eve of St. Agnes» does not in itself collapse time and eternity into one, but it does work with the content of the poem to collapse time into the poem, hence facilitating the perception of a union of time and eternity. Keats begins and ends his poem in the past tense:

St. Agnes' Eve— Ah, bitter chill it was!  
 The owl, for all its feathers, was a-cold;  
 .....  
 The Beadsman, after a thousand aves told,  
 For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold. (1-378)

Framed in the present looking into the past, the poem is alternately in the past or the present tense; thus it brings the present into the past and the past into the present. This past with which the present is intertwined is not only a historic past but, like in Chapman's Homer, a mythic one. Hence, Keats' poem invokes, as well as the quantitative time in which we have lived since the Enlightenment, time that includes myth and imagination. In particular, through its title, the poem invokes the traditional belief that on St. Agnes' Eve a maid may see her future husband. This tradition draws into the poem, and our experience of it, the dimension of desire to reach beyond the material and immediate.

The specific tradition that Keats invokes by referring to St. Agnes' Eve gives a mythic and immediate sensuality to the abstract problem of transcending the world. It helps to create a humanly intelligible metaphor

for transcendence. In a similar way, the Spenserian stanza of the poem helps to place the abstract questions of the poem in a tactile context. Because of this form, the mythic world into which Keats' poem draws us does not exist in a vacuum. It is somewhere in a medieval wilderness; but further, this wilderness, into which Porphyro and Madeline flee, echoes, again through the form of the poem, the wilderness through which Spenser's Red Cross Knight rides. The point is not that Keats makes a commentary on *The Faerie Queene*, or that his poem should be read specifically in the context of this Renaissance work, but that, as in «On First Looking into Chapman's Homer,» in «The Eve of St. Agnes» Keats uses other poems to develop in his own poem a sense that it enfolds time and imagination within itself. The poems Keats draws upon embody worlds; hence, when they become part of his poems, the worlds which they embody are embodied in his poems. With them Keats collapses the world —present, past and possible— into his poems.

The transcendence of time, that is, the synthesis in which the temporal and the eternal become one, is a process that involves the melding of the person with the world, the effacement of the separation between subject and object. Because, for Keats, man is material as well as spiritual, this process implies the dissolution of the distinctions between the senses, not a liberation from them. Before Madeline and Porphyro are united, Keats creates in the poem a moment in which the senses become fused into one multi-faceted sense:

...he from the closet brought a heap  
Of candied apple, quince, and plum, and gourd;  
With jellies soother than the creamy curd,  
And lucent syrups, tinct with cinnamon;  
Manna and dates, in argosy transferr'd  
From Fez; and spiced dainties, every one,  
From silken Samarcand to cedar's Lebanon. (264-70)

This synaesthesia is a necessary step in the synthesis of subject and object which is inseparable from the sought-after synthesis of the mutable and the eternal. But it is also a model describing, by analogy, the effect of that final synthesis; though the senses lose their individual characteristics, hence identities, rather than being dulled, our synaesthetic perception of the world is a heightened perception. Each different sense, though inextricable from the others —in fact no longer discrete, is more intense than it was before the fusion, hence also maintaining its discrete identity. If one could achieve such a synthesis between the material and spiritual worlds, and between time and eternity, one would experience the world as similarly more intense and beautiful, though one would be, paradoxically,

the world. It is important to note, however, that in «The Eve of St. Agnes» this synthesis of the sense and the accompanying intensification of the world is described *before* Porphyro and Madeline are united —while they reach into the unknown, while, like Cortez, they desire and reach into the imagination and the possible.

Where in «The Eve of St. Agnes» and «On First Looking into Chapman's Homer» he shows the poem enfolding into itself time and space, in «Ode to a Nightingale» and «Ode on a Grecian Urn» Keats describes more clearly than in the other two poems this quality as an ongoing process, and the relationship of the individual and the work of art in and to this process. In «Ode on a Grecian Urn» he develops more fully the problem of the work of art, while in «Ode to a Nightingale» he develops that of the individual, in particular that of the artist, in this process. In «Ode to a Nightingale» Keats shows how art, the nightingale's song leads him from the temporal and material towards the eternal, and how his sense of self ultimately must deny him the synthesis of self and world, and hence of the synthesis of time and eternity to which he strives. Listening to the bird's song, Keats is drawn towards a melding of time and space. The bird, because it has no sense of self, no conception of itself as distinct from the objective world, when it sings, draws all the world into its song. Following its song, Keats is drawn towards a moment when the distinctions between times and places dissolve into the immediate; the nightingale's unselfconscious song causes the categories with which Keats organizes his world to begin to break down:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
In ancient days by emperor and clown:  
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,  
She stood in tears amid the alien corn;  
The same that oft-times hath  
Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn. (63-70)

As Homer's and Chapman's works attempt to span the breadth of human experience, from myth to the possible, and embrace it in the present experience, so does the bird's song. The heightened awareness of the world which Keats experiences when listening to the nightingale brings with it for him, because he is a man, a renewed awareness of the self. When self, world and time seem about to collapse into the one experience of the nightingale's song, Keats recognizes himself as a discrete part of the process. This recognition of the self shatters the process:

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
    To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
    As she is fam'd to do, deceiving elf. (71-4)

Art is ultimately unable to realize its aspirations of synthesis, for though it embraces the world—real and imagined—it requires the creating subject and exists as a distinct part of the world; and because unlike the nightingale he is conscious, man must perceive through it that he is also a distinct part of the world. Synthesis is made impossible by man's consciousness of himself, without which, however, art would be impossible because beauty implies desire<sup>6</sup>.

In «Ode on a Grecian Urn,» Keats offers a resolution to this paradox that man must be conscious for art to exist, but that the fact that he is conscious precludes art's achieving its end: a moment into which subject and object, and hence time and world, are fused. Art does not attempt to transcend the mutable world in the sense that it abandons it. Rather, art attempts to capture in itself this world and the possibilities to which this world opens. In «The Eve of St. Agnes» the moment of greatest awareness is that moment in which Madeline and Porphyro are united. But a work of art, though it strives to such a union, exists, necessarily, in the material, mutable world. Existing in the mutable world, the work of art can embody, as does the synaesthetic moment in «The Eve of St. Agnes,» as well as world and time, the purely human element of desire. Hence it can never achieve a complete synthesis of the material and ideal as Madeline and Porphyro do, but can only approximate this synthesis, for desire requires awareness of the discrete self. Because striving for the beyond is necessary to man, art can only reach towards a complete synthesis through the senses and the imagination, but can never achieve it. The scene on the Grecian urn is such an approximation, comparable to the synaesthetic description of the delicacies in «The Eve of St. Agnes.» It captures not the moment of the realization of our desires, for that is impossible, but the moment just prior to their

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<sup>6</sup> See Keats' letter of 22 Nov. 1817 to Benjamin Bailey: «Men of Genius ... have not any individuality, any determined Character ...» (Keats 304); the fact the subject's intention gives an intellectual activity its reality (letter of 13 March 1818) does not deny the negation of the subject in the creative process. As a philosophical position, Keats' solution in art shows a penetrating insight into the limits of subjective idealist dialectics. The problem of the affirmation and negation of the subject is central not only to Romanticism, but also to Hegel's idealist legacy. See, for example, Lukács' *Destruction of Reason* for a thorough—if sometimes dogmatic—account of this legacy up to the middle of the twentieth century.

realization in which, our senses combined and heightened, we are most acutely aware of the world. This is the moment which the poet and the artist attempt to hold through and in their art. It is the moment when, to recall Keats' metaphor of the rose, the flower has bloomed completely yet is still, somehow, opening.

Keats celebrates this moment in «Ode on a Grecian Urn»: the youth, his love, the trees, all on the urn are immortal, not because they transcend time, but because they have stopped time yet move in it, towards never to be attained completions, «Forever panting, and forever young;» As «On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer» this poem spans time and imagination. The scene the urn evokes for Keats is a village in Ancient Greece; it collapses time so that Keats perceives the village as it once was: vital and joyful, and as it is now: desolate. However, instead of ending by opening to the unknown realms as does the sonnet, this poem turns back into itself with the nostalgic recollection that even the urn, though it transcends time is also subject to time.

Keats begins the ode by creating a sense of immanent decay:

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,  
Thou foster child of silence and slow time,

At its close he returns to this theme of decay, reminding himself and us that all, even the urn which captures and enfolds time within itself, transcending mutable existence, is, ultimately, mutable —existing in and subject to time. For Keats, beauty is impossible without a sense of the unattainable. Beauty might be an eternal, immutable quality, but man's perception of it needs desire, hence mutability. Thus Keats does not attempt to deny the mutable world and create an eternal artifact; he tries to create in his poetry a synthesis of the material and the ideal worlds, a synthesis of what is immediate and what may be, and he necessarily fails. Because man lives in time, though a poem may embrace all the world and time, it still must exist in them. This continual process of the poem as paradoxically both embodying the world and existing as a discrete part of it is essential to beauty; because man cannot resign himself to this process but strives to fix it in time, there is art.



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