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Role of Nature in the Poetry of John Keats

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ABSTRACT: Keats had a simple and sensuous attitude towards nature. He looked at nature with child-like delight and appreciated its beauty without trying to find deeper meanings. Unlike other Romantic poets who saw nature as having spiritual or moral significance, Keats loved nature for its own sake and described it as he saw it. His poetry provides exquisitely beautiful descriptions of the sights and sounds of nature, showing his ability to observe minute details and present vivid images through words.

KEYWORDS-John Keats, nature, poetry, images, beauty, sensuous

I. INTRODUCTION

This writing focuses itself on John Keats, who lived a short time between the 18th and the 19th century (he was born in 1795 and died in 1821), and his conception of Beauty and Nature. He is considered to have been of great importance at his time, since, by exalting Beauty, he grew as a source of inspiration to many English 19th-century poets, becoming the idol of such writers as Tennyson, Rossetti and the Pre-Raphaelites, as well as Oscar Wilde and the aesthetes, who saw in his cult of Beauty the exaltation of Art for Art's sake. Like most of the literature of the Romantic period, Keats's poetry mirrors the tension between actuality and ideal perfection, always trying to reach it.

After providing a short summary of Keats's thought, three of his Odes will be analyzed, both from the point of view of their content and of their structure, thus letting the reader find the aspects already discussed and helping him to have them clarified.

II. INTERPRETATION

2.1. Keats's thought

2.1.1. KEATS AND BEAUTY

Keats's life was imbued with family tragedies (both his father and his brother Tom died), financial problems, hopeless love affair (he was unable to marry Fanny Brawne because of his ill health) and professional setbacks. Moreover, he himself was killed by tuberculosis at the early age of twenty-five (in 1818 he accompanied his friend Charles Brown on a walking trip through Northern England and Scotland, but the physical fatigue, the rain and the strict diet provoked him a violent cold which resulted in tuberculosis).

His poetry was influenced by the events occurred to him and, in fact, most of his poems are imbued with a sense of melancholy, death and mortality. In these moments of need, Keats turned instinctively to poetry, which he conceived as something absolute, his only reason for life ("I cannot exist without poetry"), and through which he might achieve a kind of divinity. Poetry, he thought, should spring naturally from his inner soul and should reproduce what his Imagination suggested to him; and what struck his Imagination most was Beauty, not the "intellectual beauty" of Shelley, but the one which reveals itself to his senses. Beauty, in fact, became the central theme of all Keats's poems, since it was the only consolation he found in life. The memory of something beautiful brought him joy, as he wrote in the opening lines of *Endymion*: "A thing of beauty is a joy forever". Beauty could be either physical (women, nature, statues, paintings) or spiritual (friendship, love, poetry), though they were to be considered together, since physical beauty was simply the expression of spiritual beauty and, even if the former might be subject to time and decay, the latter was eternal and immortal. Imagination recognizes Beauty in existing things, but also it is the creative force of Beauty. In the letter to his friend Benjamin Bailey^[1] Keats wrote: "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination. What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not". The worship of beauty is the clue to everything in Keats and it is quite usual to find that Beauty and Truth often unite (see closing lines in "Ode on a Grecian Urn").



2.1.2. KEATS AND NATURE

Nature was one of the greatest sources of inspiration for Keats. Like Wordsworth he had a cult of nature, though, unlike him, he did not see an immanent God in it. He simply saw another form of Beauty, which he could transform into poetry without the aid of memory; he only enriched it with his Imagination. While Wordsworth thought that “sweet melodies are made sweeter by distance in time”, Keats believed that “heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter”, i.e.: beauty imagined is superior to beauty perceived, since the senses are more limited than the Imagination and its creative power. While Wordsworth’s love for nature is well explained by the fact that he grew up in the Lake District, thus being influenced by the suggestive landscape, it is harder to understand the connection between Keats and nature, since he was a city boy. For this reason, unlike Wordsworth, whose relationship with nature was spiritual, he looked at nature with the eye of the aesthete, recreating the physical world, including all living things.[1,2,3]

Nature was a major theme among the Romantics, but Keats turned natural objects into poetic images. When he already knew that he was going to die, he looked back at childhood and realized that concrete contact with natural objects at that time was responsible for the positive associations they continued to communicate in adulthood^[2].

Nature led Keats to the formulation of a concept he called “negative capability”, described as the ability to experience “uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason”, managing to negate personality and opening to the reality around. It is an intuitive activity of mind, a metaphysical process in which nature is a potential source of truth. That of the poet is a visionary activity, which uses natural objects as means to represent the poet’s ideas. Though a great number of images connected with nature in Keats’s poems are used only to represent experiences, thus becoming a symbol of the psyche.

2.2. Keats’s Odes

In some sonnets we find in Keats’s journal-letter to George and Georgiana in spring 1819, he already wrote about the theme chosen for the great odes and in the poem Letter to Charles Cowden Clarke in 1816 he had already an idea of how to structure an ode, since he described the “grandeur of the ode, / Growing, like Atlas, stronger from its load”. Prior to 1819 he had wrote some odes: “Ode to Apollo” (1815), “God of the golden bow” (1816) and “Mother of Hermes! And still youthful Maia” (1818), but 1819 was Keats’s “annus mirabilis”, when, in the spring, he composed almost all his greatest poems, published in 1820, except “To Autumn”, which was written in September. Most of these poems were impromptus, the result of a sudden inspiration, like an autumn afternoon, a nightingale’s song or a mood of dreamy relaxation after sleep.

2.2.1. ODE ON A GRECIAN URN

Already at the age of fifteen, Keats began to be attracted by books and particularly by classical antiquity. Five years later, his friends the poet Leigh Hunt and the painter Robert Haydon took him to see the famous Elgin Marbles, the sculptures brought to England by Lord Elgin from the Acropolis in Athens and kept in the British Museum. Greek plastic art enchanted him and deeply influenced his poetry. He could sit for hours in front of the Elgin Marbles, since ancient Greek and poetry ment to him Beauty. Thus he turned to the classical world for inspiration, but he interpreted it through the eyes of a Romantic. Keats is inspired by an ancient Greek vase, which he sees or imagines, to investigate the relationship of art and life. The urn is a symbol of ideal Beauty captured by art, above all classical art. It has remained unchanged through time, just as ideal Beauty never changes. The figures on it are immortal too, but only at the price of remaining frozen at a particular moment in time, without completing their lives. The poet, though, does not try to identify with them; he only contemplates a work of art, as the romantic tradition of the *ut pictura poesis* stated, deriving meditation from it.

Keats seems to be saying that art, because it can capture the ideal and the eternal, is, in a sense, superior to life, which must come to an end, and that man, who is naturally mortal, can only express his sense of the ideal and eternal through art. Nevertheless, precisely because art is not subject to the cycle of life and death, it remains curiously unsatisfying since it can never be made a concrete part of people everyday’s lives.

The trees, boughs, leaves (i.e.: natural elements) are functional; they suggest both permanence and absence of the variety and richness of seasonal change.



I

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
5 What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe of the deals of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
10 What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?

II

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:
15 Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal – yet, do not grieve:
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
20 For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

III

Ah, happy, happy boughs! That cannot shed
Your leaves, nor ever bid the Spring adieu;
And, happy melodist, unwearied,
For ever piping songs for ever new;



25 More happy love! More happy, happy love!

For ever warm and still to be enjoyed,

For ever panting, and for ever young;

All breathing human passion far above,

That leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,

30 A burning forehead, and a parching tongue.

IV

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?

To what green altar, O mysterious priest,

Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,

And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?

35 What little town by river or sea shore,

Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,

Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn?

And, little town, thy streets for evermore

Will silent be; and not a soul to tell

40 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

V

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! With brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought

45 As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

“Beauty is truth, truth beauty, - that is all



50 Ye know on earth, and all ye need yo know.”

II. DISCUSSION

Keats is one of the greatest lovers and admirers of nature. In his poetry, we come across exquisitely beautiful descriptions of the wonder sights and senses of nature. He looks with child-like delight at the objects of nature and his whole being is thrilled by what he sees and hears. Everything in nature for him is full of wonder and mystery - the rising sun, the moving cloud, the growing bud and the swimming fish. But Keats is not only the poet of nature. Infact, all the romantics love and appreciate nature with an equal ardour. The difference is that Keats's love for nature is purely sensuous and he loves the beautiful sights and scenes of nature for their own sake, while other romantics see in nature a deep meaning-ethical, moral or spiritual. For example, Wordsworth claims that nature is a moral guide and universal mentor. Coleridge adds stangeness to the beauty by giving it supernatural touch. Shelley, on the other hand, intellectualizes nature. [4,5,6]Byron is interested in the vigorous aspects of nature and he uses nature for the purpose of satire. So, the attitude of all other romantics towards nature is complex, but Keats' attitude is simple. He does not try to find any hidden meaning in nature and he describes it as he sees it. He loves nature for its own sake and not for the sake of anything else. As pains and sufferings are the part and parcel of man's life, therefore, to forget his personal sorrows. He indulges in the world of natural beauty. As in the "ode to Nightingale", Nightingale and he becomes one, his soul sings in the bird which is the symbol of joy. The song of the bird transfers him into the world of imagination and he forgets his personal sorrows in the happy world of the nightingale: Fade for away, dissolve, and quite forget What thou among the leaves hast never known, The weariness the fever, and the fret Similarly, in "Ode to Autumn" he loses himself in the loveliness of autumn. He lives wholly in the present and does not look back to the past or look forward into the future. In that state of mind, he asks: Where are the song of spring? Ay where are they? Think not of them, thou hast thy music too Keats' description of nature is very beautiful and he, infact, paints the pictures with words. He is greatly impressed by Spenser and specially his "Fairie Queen.

III. RESULTS

I've been reading the opening section of 'I stood tip-toe on a little hill'. I smile to myself every time I come across these lines, it is like listening to the first few bars of a favourite live recording. The tumbling phrases have a spontaneity that the young Keats was after. How was it that I was breathless when I was not reading aloud, other than my current general chestiness and ineptitude? By some mistaken instinct my breath had co-ordinated with the irregular phrase lengths. Here was Keats congesting my lungs with long and short breaths, so enacting his exhilaration. I rehearsed again what I'd been instructed. Blowing out the stale air, I drew in new towards my diaphragm like a diver touching the bottom of a pool. It was nothing that couldn't be coped with. I read again. Slower and more focused this time, after all, it is only Keats's eyes are running around the plant-filled landscape immediately about him.

I stood tip-toe upon a little hill,
The air was cooling, and so very still,
That the sweet buds which with a modest pride
Pull droopingly, in slanting curve aside,
Their scanty leaved, and finely tapering stems,
Had not yet lost those starry diadems
Caught from the early sobbing of the morn.
The clouds were pure and white as flocks new shorn,
And fresh from the clear brook; sweetly they slept
On the blue fields of heaven, and then there crept
A little noiseless noise among the leaves,
Born of the very sigh that silence heaves:
For not the faintest motion could be seen

Of all the shades that slanted o'er the green.

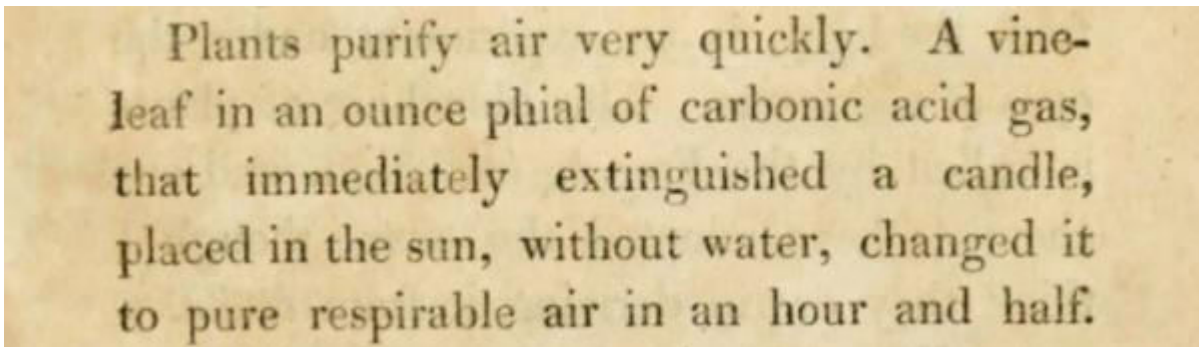
There was wide wand'ring for the greediest eye,

To peer about upon variety ...

Breath is the primitive structure of poetry. It lies under the words in a quiet pattern of respiration. When on the Isle of Wight, Keats wrote to his brother and sister-in-law. 'I shall read a passage of Shakespeare every Sunday at ten o'clock – you read one at the same time and we shall be as near each other as blind bodies can be in the same room'. Was he attempting not only synchronising their thoughts but also their respiration in an intimate way? This may have occurred during the mass recreation of this event organised by the KSMA during the long Covid-19 lockdown. A time when we had become more aware of breath: ours, others, the nature of it and the maintenance of it.[7,8,9]

Keats had an acute awareness of the quality of air, or the lack of it. It is the nature of human respiration that we take oxygen from the air with each breath such that unless there is general circulation and replenishment we would not thrive. The pleasure of 'cool breezes' is a health-sustaining sensation.

In Britain, Joseph Priestley first isolated what became known as oxygen, then went on to discover respiration in plants (Observation on different kinds of air. Joseph Priestley, 1772). Over the length of a day, and unlike humans, plants enrich the atmosphere with oxygen. 'The feeling of it in my lungs' Priestley wrote, 'was not sensibly different from that of common air, but I fancied that my breast felt peculiarly light and easy for some time afterwards'. Sounds almost like being in love. As the convalescent Keats writes to Fanny Brawne, in June 1820, 'the air I breathe in a room empty of you is unhealthy'. If this is a fundamentally floral image then it refers to the functioning of both plants and humans.



The discovery of plant respiration fed into a contemporary debate on the nature of plant existence. Newly discovered parallels with animal life helped erode an ancient distinction between the realms. Aristotle's concept of the 'vegetative soul' was of one merely aspiring to growth and reproduction. Keats would have found in his copy of Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (first published 1689) a description of the continuity between the realms; 'the animal and vegetable kingdoms are so nearly joined that if you will take the lowest of one and the highest of the other there will scarcely be perceived any great difference between them'. Potentially upsetting an accepted order, the discussion continued into the late 18th and early 19th century. One question that had to be addressed as a consequence was, if there was no absolute distinction between the two realms, did plants have the ability to feel? (Whatever 'feel' means).

The question was to later wither away in the mainstream scientific world, and today sounds esoteric. However, here is one of the coolest minds of the times, Jeremy Bentham, differentiating the animal from plant worlds by the presence of sensation or feeling. Though he made sure to leave room for doubt: "Under Botany, those which have vegetable life, i.e. birth and growth, as well as death, but, as far as appears, without feeling" (*Chrestomathia*, 1816).

The possibility of a degree of feeling fed into the early Romantic imagination. Wordsworth's rhapsody, *Lines Written in Early Spring*, was written for the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

Through primrose tufts, in that green bower,

The periwinkle trailed its wreaths;

And 'tis my faith that every flower

Enjoys the air it breathes.



Others also fervently wished the idea to be true, but could not prove it. One was Dr (later Sir) James Edward Smith (1759-1828) of whom the accolade ‘Arch-Linnaean’ was meant as a compliment. Smith was one of the leading botanists of the day. In 1784 he purchased the entire collections of the late Carl Linnaeus and transferred them to England.

Carl Linnaeus, botanist, zoologist, and physician, 1707-1778

Four years later Smith founded the Linnean Society of London, and became its first president. Smith’s botany primer was one of the most popular of his many notable publications (an illustration to one of the editions is the head image for this post).[10,11,12]

Going through an exceptionally long print run of 1,500 copies in ten editions, it was in the select list of recommended books for medical students. Following an elegantly worded preface (which has attracted the attention of Keats scholars), the first chapter of this otherwise practical book was for ‘those with a philosophical eye’. In what to us seems an unnecessary preamble on the distinction between plants and animals, Smith finds ‘a want of sensation is certainly not proved with regard to Vegetables’. He goes further:

Spontaneously directing their organs to what is natural and beneficial to them, and flourishing according to their success in satisfying their wants, may not the exercise of their vital functions be attended with some degree of sensation however low, and some consequent share of happiness.

An Introduction to Physiological and Systematical Botany, JE Smith, 2nd ed, 1809.

Two decades before Keats’s attendance there, Smith was in post as botany lecturer at Guy’s Hospital. A favoured pupil of his, James Perchard Tupper, penned a paper on ‘the probability of sensation in vegetables’, which went further than Smith in hypothesising on the various signs of sentient life in the plant world. The paper was not published until 1811, with Smith’s support, by which time Tupper was a member of the Royal College of Surgeons and a Fellow of the Linnean Society. I am not going to suggest that Keats definitely read Tupper, but I will use some of Tupper’s themes as a guide to what was being discussed at the time in the public sphere. Speculation about the sentient life of plants was the 19th-century equivalent of discussions on extra-terrestrial life in ours. You could ignore it if you wished. If not, you could deduce that it was possible or probable, while speculating on what exactly counted as ‘signs of life’. Tupper’s first three basic signs of vitality were sensation, irritability and instinct. Let’s take them in turn, focusing particularly on the last.

‘Sensation’ is a hard-working word in the English language. Considering his writings as a whole, it has been found that Keats’s many uses of the word range widely, from physical touch to an emotion. Much has been written on its implications for Keats but I will focus on one nature-referencing aspect that is less than immediately obvious. The period after his decision to follow his poetic instincts and uproot himself from his successful medical training is marked by the significant declaration; ‘O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!’. The meaning has poetical ambiguity across a happy spectrum of possibilities. Stuart Sperry in *Keats the Poet* (1973) argues that the word in this context signifies a complex accumulation of both experience and his increasing self-awareness over time. Here sensation refers not to a single event, such as ‘the prick of a pin or the odour of a rose’, but a perceived process of organic development in the poet’s imaginative powers and ‘such growth is spontaneous and natural’. An unforced development of an individual’s poetic instinct. An idea that surfaces in some of the most well-known passages from Keats’s letters. Later in his career, after the continued criticism of *Endymion* (1818), Keats describes explicitly this conscious process to his publisher.

The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself — that which is creative must create itself.

In a letter to his ailing friend James Rice (February 1820), ‘simple’, or single, flowers are contrasted with so-called ‘fancy’ flowers of horticulture, of which double flowers are one example:

It is because [wildflowers] are connected with the most thoughtless and the happiest moments of our lives. I have seen foreign flowers in hothouses, of the most beautiful nature, but I do not care a straw for them. The simple flowers of our Spring are what I want to see again.[13,14,15]



The judgement is not completely aesthetic: the hothouse was designed not only protect plants but to force them. The artificial heat of the forcing house brought on accelerated development, however, as a result the growth could be delicate and weak compared to that obtained naturally, unprotected in the open air.

For instance suppose a rose to have sensation it blooms on a beautiful morning it enjoys itself but then comes a cold wind a hot sun it cannot escape it cannot destroy its annoyances they are as native to the world as itself no more can man be happy in spite the worldly elements will prey upon his nature.

To George and Georgina Keats, Feb 24th 1819

In his medical notes, Keats took down a textbook definition of sensation that was suitable only for organisms with a nervous system. Although Tupper thought it probable that plants required a nervous system to behave as they do, he was not able to find anything that might function as one. At its most rudimentary, sensation signifies the ability to detect a stimulus. But how do you know it is there? 'Irritability', as Keats would know from his medical training, is a reaction located at the exact place where the sensation was felt. Many plants exhibited some of this quality: JE Smith had written up his experiments on the stamens of a barberry at the Apothecaries Garden (now the Chelsea Physic Garden), in *Some Observations on the Irritability of Vegetables* (1788).

The dramatic show of irritability by the central American sensitive plant (*Mimosa pudica*) made it the right plant for the right cultural moment.

In *The Sensitive Plant* (1820), composed following the death of Percy and Mary Shelley's young son, Shelley performs an adroit separation of scientific speculations and spiritual perceptions. Not committing to either nonetheless he invokes them both.

Whether the Sensitive Plant, or that

Which within its boughs like a Spirit sat,

Ere its outward form had known decay,

Now felt this change, I cannot say.

In George Romney's painting *Sensibility* (1789), Emma Hart (later Emma Hamilton) 'interreacts' with a potted mimosa in a contrived scenario – in fact the figure of Emma Hart was finished before the potted plant was thought of.

'Sensibility' by George Romney, The Jean Kislak Collection

As the accompanying verse relates, each triggers an instinctive reaction in the other. Without some human volition on her part this would have had the potential to continue for some time. In 'I stood tip-toe' the poet, too, is startled by the natural behaviour of a plant. Following an overheated vision Keats, rather like Shakespeare's Bottom, wishes to doze off. In a semi-comical set-up he is startled repeatedly by 'the leap | Of buds into ripe flowers'. Unlike Emma Hamilton, and whether he knew it or not, he is only the observer of the interaction as the flowers of evening primrose (*Oenothera biennis*) pop open to coordinate with pollinating moths found loitering in the following lines.

Locomotion, or self-propulsion, seemed to many to be a particularly obvious distinction between animals and plants. Aristotle's theory that plants did not move due to their lack of sexual relations had been undone by the work of Linnaeus. Smith dismisses the criterion as not watertight by citing some examples of sea flora. However, in his ironic and animated image, Keats conjures up mobile wildflowers whom not only breathe but cry out. Unlike Lewis Carroll's static Tiger-lily, who will only speak to someone worth talking to, they are not discriminating. However, it is not so much the fact that they speak that makes them outlandish but that they can move.

Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject. – How beautiful are the retired flowers! How would they lose their beauty were they to throng into the highway crying out, 'admire me I am a violet! Dote upon me I am a primrose!



To J. H. Reynolds, 3 February 1818

Associated with this idea of movement is instinct, a phenomenon that is defined by Tupper as ‘a particular disposition or tendency in a living being to embrace without deliberation or reflection’. We are well aware of animal instinct, but what can be said of plant, or vegetable, instinct? Without the possibility of escaping from its roots, we could say that a plant just wants to be itself. Sensing gravity, a plant has no choice but to sink its taproot into the ground and raise its leaves to the sky. Also, at its simplest, it is true to its species; a rose cannot be anything but a rose; a violet, a violet. You can see the attraction to Keats, whose instinct was to leave medicine to be a poet, as befits someone possessing ‘abilities greater than most Men’.

This discussion of plant vitality did not change anybody’s behaviour to any noticeable degree: grass still got cut and trees pruned. Yet, at the very least, the conjectures must have raised awareness of the individuality of plants. You could be in the company of a plant both as a species and as an individual. Keats may not have had conversations with flowers but that did not stop him being very attentive to them. He may use few words in his floral imagery but they are good ones that convey life as only that species can experience it. As with the marigold, which opens its petals instinctively as the sun rises.

Open afresh your round of starry folds,

Ye ardent marigolds!

Dry up the moisture from your golden lids,

For great Apollo bids

This Keats is a poet laureate of the lockdown, a time when so many reported a new appreciation of their immediate natural environment such as growing from seed, the opening of garden flowers, the pleasure of untended roadsides, and, of course, the birdsong. These expressive comments are selected from a hashtag search for nature and lockdown taken together:

As we can see, many people responded to the animated instinct of plants, especially when growing in unfavourable circumstances, a quality that is especially visible to us through the growth of garden climbers, such as sweet pea, honeysuckle, clematis and rambling rose.

The Ode to Psyche contains a multi-layered image of climbing plants, which were originally grown by ‘effect of chance’, and then cultivated on suburban walls, ‘adapted to receive trained foliage’

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,

This can be seen as a carefully constructed image of the organic process of poetic creation. The ‘branched thoughts’ represented by the climber’s growing shoots need a supportive structure to be complete; clambering through rigid poetic formality – syllables verses structure, sounds verses sense.[16,17,18]

We can help to attune ourselves into the unique nature of plant growth by considering a single term and its dual meaning. ‘Vegetate’, as I write, is a key feature of the lockdown. We are either enjoying it, avoiding it, or are compelled to be reduced to it. In this sense it represents the proverbial static nature of plants, confined as they are to their own plot. Alternatively, in a usage which is closest to the word’s derivation, vegetate has quite a different meaning. Here it represents growth, animation and development. Seeds are without ‘sensitive life’ until they vegetate, or sprout into growth once committed to soil (Erasmus Darwin, *Economy of Vegetables*, 1806). Likewise, the buds of trees can vegetate – sometimes too early.

The short intervals of mild weather which happen in the beginning of the spring excite them to vegetate too early and the next cold blast destroys the young buds



The twin senses of the word reflect the unique nature of a plant: both unavoidably stationary but always intuitively growing. The pairing mirrors the carefully chosen dichotomies used by Keats to depict the organic operation of imagination: 'passive capacity', 'diligent indolence' and even the much discussed 'negative capability'. Keats favoured visual portrayals of abstract ideas and in plant growth he found an ideal of creative engagement: 'Let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive – budding patiently under the eye of Apollo'.

'I get it' is a cliché used by high and low these days. But 'getting' plant growth can be difficult, such is the enormity of it. Should we have the opportunity to stop to look we find that it is part of the teeming natural phenomena that runs parallel to our everyday lives. It can be argued that there are not many organisms that change their form quite so dramatically within plain sight. Keats 'got it' as seen in the terms he used to describe his poetical development – that which is creative must create itself. Or, as Tupper put it.

How great the contrast between the diminutive acorn and the stately forest-oak! The seed is seemingly nothing more than a mere homogeneous substance; but, when placed within the influence and operation of particular causes, its latent vital principle is called forth into action, a variety of organs are unfolded, and by successive evolutions the plants arrives at that state which constitutes the perfection of its nature.

JE Smith ends his 'philosophical speculation' on the distinction of animals and plants by quoting what he sees as the best criterion available to him. It is 'the office of vegetation life alone to transform dead matter into organised living bodies'. That is, the ability to sustain its life and growth from what appears to be almost nothing – 'mere earth, salts' and oxygen. Keats's flowers have roots, and these roots are functional. 'The flower must drink the nature of the soil | Before it can put forth its blossoming'. As part of the cycle of life, Keats again makes a physical analogy between this account of natural growth and his creativity, the height of which could follow a period of melancholy inaction.

Now I have tasted her sweet soul to the core

All other depths are shallow: essences,

Once spiritual, are like muddy lees,

Meant but to fertilize my earthly root

And make my branches lift a golden fruit

Into the bloom of heaven:

Fruition is seen as the instinctual goal of the natural world and the creative Keats aspired to emulate it and the abundance it yields.

The apparent continuum between animal and vegetable realms, the latter's instincts and even happiness, were plausible subjects in the context of contemporary understanding of plant physiology. At that time, these conjectures helped people make sense of a plant's observed and revealed behaviour.

It has been an old comparison for our urging on – the Beehive; however, it seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the Bee – for it is a false notion that more is gained by receiving than giving – no, the receiver and the giver are equal in their benefits. The flower, I doubt not, receives a fair guerdon from the Bee – its leaves blush deeper in the next spring – and who shall say between man and woman which is the most delighted?

John Keats to Reynolds, February 19th, 1818

Even without the explicit sexualisation of flowers the processes of vegetation were in themselves a deep store of sensual, instinctual metaphors for Keats. Although these literary fig leaves are hardly doing their job.

'Love! Thou art leading me from wintry cold,

Lady! Thou leadest me to summer clime,

And I must taste the blossoms that unfold

In its ripe warmth this gracious morning time.'

So said, his erewhile timid lips grew bold,



Great bliss was with them, and great happiness

Grew, like a lusty flower in June's caress.

'Isabella, or the Pot of Basil', 1818.

Keats integrated concepts from the contemporary discourses on the nature of plant vitality into his poetry. There are also parables he tells both himself and others in an effort to understand the nature of life, and his own in particular. As with other formal studies and reading, Keats extracted these ideas for his own uses. Originating in a seemingly humble subject, he uses this compelling imagery to interpret so much of human existence through natural growth; its nature and cycles. His floral imagery appears a shade more heavily influenced by the knowledge that they could be to some degree sensitive and instinctive entities. Not autonomous beings (unless he is trying to amuse) and not just scenic objects but somewhere in the space between. A hypothetical zone which is perhaps a little alien to us today, and may have been for some then.

Much will be written about the nature of Keats's last days approaching the bicentenary of his death, including the real and bitter ironies of Keats's final weeks in Rome. He was denied the palliative medication he knew well, whose benign effects had provided potent imagery in his poetry. Keats's companion in Rome, Joseph Severn, recorded the impact of the disintegration of the organic structure – the organised matter – of his friend's lungs in grim detail. Starved of oxygen, he was too weak to walk, becoming a living image of the vegetal inability to physically escape.

Keats is sinking daily of a confirmed consumption, with continual coughing of fawn-coloured phlegm, sometimes streaked with blood, night sweats, chattering teeth and great uneasiness in his chest.

15th January 1821 Letter from Severn to William Haslam

Keats on his deathbed, by Joseph Severn.

Sweating profusely, the feel of Severn's breath chilled him; 'don't breathe on me – it comes like ice'.

A few weeks before his death Keats was agitated by Severn's report of first signs of spring returning.

The spring was always enchantment [sic] to me – I would get away from suffering – in watching the growth of a little flower, it was a real delight to me – it was part of my very soul – perhaps the only happiness I have had in the world has been the silent growth of Flowers.

More than a desperate response, or an exile's 'home thoughts from abroad', it is the invocation of a natural symbol of joyous self-fulfilment at its most overtly energetic and instinctive. The growth may be silent, but through Keats's knowledge and imagination it is marvellously expressive.

IV. CONCLUSION

As always, Keats proves to be a rewarding person to spend time with – both through his poetry, and through his correspondence which is thoughtful, thought-provoking, engaging and original. If creating poetry 'as natural as the leaves on trees' is not perhaps as easy as it sounds, neither was pursuing a self-defined and self-fulfilling life. Keats just wanted to be Keats – poet, brother, friend and lover – and went to enormous lengths to pursue these all these goals. Regrettably, life rarely is as easy.[19]

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