

Keats and the Indian Ideal of Poetry

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It is an interesting study to compare the ideal of life and poetry that Keats held with that which we find in Indian tradition. We see on reading the letters of this young poet that he was led by his own experience and reflection to a very definite and original notion of the problem of evil and suffering and of the function of poetic imagination. These two notions may be better understood in the light of corresponding ones in Indian thought.

The Indian attitude towards life is basically pessimistic. Suffering is said to be the essence of life and the only way out is salvation through renunciation. The schools of philosophy, the Buddhist and the Jaina, the Sāmkhya, the Nyāya and the Vedanta, all trace our suffering to our attachment to worldly things or to our passionate nature, and enjoin us to overcome this weakness by the practice of detachment. When the Vedic sages declare that the world arises out of the blissful Brahman, then they speak of bliss not in the world and in life as they actually appear to us but in a realm behind them. All evil and pain is due to our error of seeing things; it is an illusion, the veil of māyā, caused by our own passionate and egotistic nature that must suffer in a world which is a sportive creation (*lilā*) of Brahman and is indifferent to man. The worldly happiness of man is not the purpose of creation. Man must seek not to improve the world but to alter his own nature so as to get real happiness. This happiness lies in the realization of one's

true self, which is one with Brahman itself and so is essentially blissful. The other philosophies of India mentioned above hold that the spirit in man is quiescent after death, with neither happiness nor suffering. But Vedanta, which has most influence over the Indian mind, speaks of a transcendental happiness to be attained in liberation from the bondage of birth and death or of phenomenal existence. This happiness (according to Vedanta) or this cessation of suffering (according to the other schools) may be experienced in this life if we control our ordinary mind and body sufficiently. One may have what the Vedanta calls a liberation while living (*Jivanmukti*), and one is then a 'living corpse', being dead to pleasure and pain of life and having no interest in anything. He sees everything as a shadow-show or dream which he appreciates for its inventive power and variety. According to the Vedanta, he identifies himself with the cosmic spirit that projects the dream world and enjoys it as a magical performance.

Now, Keats had no illusion about the world and human life which he knew to be full of evil and suffering. He sees the eternal fierce destruction that goes on on land and in the sea—the struggle for existence. 'In wild nature, the hawk would lose his breakfast of robins and the robin his of worms.... The great part of men sway their way with the same instinctiveness, the same unwandering eye from their purposes, the same animal

eagerness as the Hawk.’ ‘Man is originally “a poor forked creature” subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardships and disquietude of some kind or other.’ Keats read Robertson’s American history and Voltaire’s *Siècle de Louis XIV* and concluded that the civilized man is no less miserable than is the simple uncivilized one, and though he could imagine some happiness brought to man by ‘the persevering endeavours of a seldom appearing Socrates’, this must end in death, and ‘who could in such a case bear with death?’ Keats sees that the very elements of nature are against man. He knows this world where ‘youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies’, ‘Where but to think is to be full of sorrow and leaden-eyed despairs’, and where ‘hungry generations’ march on. Thus, Keats looked straight and clearly at the stark reality and saw the ‘giant agony of the world’. He did not like to put any gloss over this sorry state of affairs. He was a bold realist and an uncompromising pessimist.

But he knew how to settle with this evil and suffering. He entertained no vain idea about improving things; but certainly he found a trick to escape from it into another world which resembled this miserable one in all particulars but which is all beauty and soft delight. This trick is what he called ‘negative capability’. He meant by this a positive faculty of the mind, developed in some rare persons—such as Shakespeare, for instance—by virtue of which one, negatively, does not make up one’s mind about everything but enjoys being in ‘uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason’, and, positively, regards everything with a ‘sense of beauty’ that overcomes every other consideration. This sense of beauty

transforms an ordinary perception, which may be painful, into an enjoyable experience through the intensity of perception and feeling. We might say that here an isolation of the particular object from others, and thus an enhanced and concentrated attention to it, invests a new quality in it. It sheds a new light upon it so that what was disagreeable becomes fascinating. Thus, while this negative capability prevents one, by its negative function, from falsifying the reality of pain by some dogma, clever theory or rationalization and lets one face evil and pain and be sick—‘for knowledge is sorrow’ and ‘sorrow is wisdom’—it, through its positive function, makes the mind hold this very evil and pain with such intensity that they are transmuted into beauty. This vision of life is more valuable for Keats than is the ordinary one, and he regards it as true, thus defining truth in his way. ‘What imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth—whether it existed before or not.’ Keats thus faces evil and pain and yet sees nothing but beauty and joy. He declares to his beloved Fanny Brawne that he has ‘loved the principle of beauty in all things’, and that this is his only achievement.

But what is the source of this beauty and joy? It is surely the mind that is endowed with this negative capability by virtue of which it mercilessly subjects itself to life’s hard realities instead of being shielded by any intellectual half-truth or blind faith in some ideal perfection. Keats holds that by this process of intense undergoing of suffering through the activity of one’s heart one develops self-consciousness. The world is not so much a ‘vale of tears’ as it is a ‘vale of soulmaking’. One is unaware of any self-identity till one is schooled by the sufferings of the world. I think Keats was driving towards the view that one achieves self-consciousness as one

faces hard realities squarely, for they have a greater demand over his attention and imagination; and this discovery of the self together with the experience of its energy or power is what more than neutralizes the disagreeableness in the realities confronted. Thus, while one does not make evil less evil, in one sense one turns it into beauty, nevertheless.

This way of dealing with evil and pain is not spoken of in Indian philosophy where, as we stated before, one is to deaden one's sensibilities. Keats does come near speaking of this kind of happiness in one letter where he describes how 'pleasure has no show of enticement and pain no unbearable frown' for him. 'Neither poetry, nor ambition, nor love have any alertness of countenance as they pass by.' But this is a passing mood induced by his bodily disorder. He did not think of cultivating this attitude of indifference. He speaks in the same letter of taking a detached view of things such that one may see and appreciate the energies displayed in animal and human activities rather than the ugly struggle for existence. 'Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energy displayed in them is fine.' He calls this attitude poetic and considers it inferior to a philosophical attitude that makes for truth. 'This the very thing in which consists poetry, and, if so, it is not so fine a thing as philosophy—for the same reason that an eagle is not as fine as truth.'

But how could Keats hold a view that poetry does not give truth when he believes poetic imagination to yield beauty and truth? He speaks of his *Endymion* that, when he wrote it, 'it was a regular stepping of Imagination toward Truth.' And we know his statement, 'Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream—he awoke and found it truth.' It seems, therefore, that

Keats did not mean by 'poetry' in that passage real poetry which never gives untruth or false abstraction and so is not inferior to philosophy. He has in mind a kind of poetry that simplifies its task by ignoring the moral and intellectual elements in things contemplated, whereas real poetry takes care of them and yet goes beyond them by its 'intensity' or 'fine excess' that is creative of beauty and of a higher truth than intellectual philosophy can offer us. True poetry, for Keats, is the expression of the poet's successful confrontation with evil and pain, which are turned into beauty and joy by his intensity of feeling and his self-awareness that is involved in this activity.

If this is so, the answer to evil which Keats gives is different from the traditional Indian answer in this: while he thinks that one's imaginative activity, and the self-awareness which accompanies it, are the solvents of evil, the Indian philosophers consider one's self-surrender to the cosmic spirit to be the required solvent; this surrender or dissolution of the ego implies withdrawal of all ordinary sense and sensibilities and, as the Vedanta adds, identification of oneself with, and appreciation of, the cosmic creativity. While Keats concentrates on the individual consciousness and its intense absorption in objects that evaporates all disagreeableness in them, the Vedanta philosopher rests on the universal creative consciousness and our absorption in it.

But Keats is nearer the view of Indian aestheticians who define aesthetic delight (*rasa*) as arising out of one's intense absorption in some object, which activity is necessarily accompanied by, first, an impersonal aesthetic attitude to the object which is contemplated for its own sake; second, realization of one's own consciousness; and, third, intense delight of

an extraordinary kind. The Indian aesthetician makes it clear that the mind of the poet in its imaginative mood is not ordinary in so far as it is not affected naturalistically by the objects he contemplates; it is deindividualized or socialized and yet in so far as it is intensely absorbed in some object and variegated by emotions instead of being indifferent to them, it is not like the state of mind of a yogi. The objects and the associated emotions are contemplated in such a manner that the mind is self-conscious and collected and enjoys both the unity and serenity of the self and the variety and movements of its sensuous and emotional modes. I think Keats would have admitted much of this account of the poetic mind. He would find in it his own requirements of 'intensity' of perception and feeling and the realization of self-identity of the experiencing subject. Keats does not explicitly speak of one characteristic of the poetic mind brought out in Indian poetics, viz., the state of sympathy with other minds by virtue of which the poet can readily take an objective view of things instead of a narrowly subjective or idiosyncratic one. This makes for communicability of poetry. I think Keats would readily admit this, for he could not but believe in the universal appeal of his poetry which he considered to be the expression of truth. The poetic imagination is no less common a faculty in man than is the perceptual or the reasoning one. Keats held that 'poetry should surprise us by fine excess and not by singularity—it should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts and appear almost a

remembrance.' So he would appreciate the Indian conception of the poetic imagination which adds to his own characterization another aspect: the socialization or normalization of imagination. This means that, along with the feeling of self-identity, the poet also feels some essential kinship with other minds. As he experiences evil and suffering and turns them into beauty and delight by his imagination, he becomes aware not only of his particular experiencing and imaginative self but also of his affinity with other selves in this poetic nature. For a poet does not create for his own enjoyment solely, he does it in order to communicate with others. Keats would have admitted this and, perhaps, would have reached such a view himself had he been spared by ill-health and death to pursue his thoughts on the subject further. Though he did not write poetry for public fame, he would certainly not write and publish for his own pleasure. Describing a fine northern scene in a letter, he goes on to say that he would learn poetry there and would add to the 'mass of beauty he harvested from those grand materials' and 'put into ethereal existence for the relish of one's fellows.'

We may conclude this study by observing that Keats admitted evil and pain, like the Indian philosopher, as a brute fact, but he did not find a solution of it in terms of identification of oneself with the Absolute and enjoyment of the world as a magical show; he found an aesthetic answer to it, and in this he was allied to the Indian aestheticians whose idea of artistic imagination and enjoyment was not very far from Keats's own. ■

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