

Aestheticism in John Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the aesthetic elements in Keats's creative ideas by close reading to his Ode on a Grecian Urn. It is suggested that there exists a correlation between Keats's and Wilde's aesthetic ideas. First, both of them emphasize the effect of imagination on art; second, they separate the world of art and that of reality, confirming the autonomy and utilitarian of art; last, they both regard art as a static aesthetic activity, holding that the artist's attitude toward everything in reality is a neutral one, and look upon the world with an artistic vision.*

Keywords: John Keats, Aestheticism, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*.

1. Introduction

John Keats (1795-1821), an English Romantic poet, had a short but brilliant career. His poetry and poetic views have borne immortal fruit and continue to be explored by later generations. Unlike other poets, Keats did not systematically expound his poetic creation concepts; his poetic views are scattered in personal letters. Although Aestheticism emerged and prevailed at the end of the 19th century, Keats's poetic concepts and creative thoughts are tinged with Aestheticism. Oscar Wilde, an Aesthete, highly praised Keats and expressed his admiration and reverence for him. In "The English Renaissance", Wilde affirmed Keats's artistic status, believing that "from Keats, we can find a new era in the history of art development." Therefore, this article will take Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" as an example to explore the Aestheticism in Keats's creative thoughts.

2. The Imaginative Creativity of Art

Keats believed that imagination is an indispensable part of the beauty of art. He placed imagination in a leading position, considering it the navigator of poetic creation. In a letter to Mr. Benjamin Bailey, he wrote, "I think creativity is the North Star of poetry, just as fantasy is the sail, and imagination is the rudder." This aligns with Wilde's Aesthetic thoughts. Wilde believed that the beauty of art is inseparable from imagination. In "The Decay of Lying", Wilde expressed this view: "Art, once it abandons its imaginative medium, also abandons everything." Both affirmed the decisive role of imagination in art. "Ode on a Grecian Urn" is the product of the poet's imagination. The Greek urn depicted by Keats does not exist in real life. The vivid pastoral scenes, flute music, quiet towns, and young men and women in the poem all come from the poet's imagination. Keats's classic aesthetic concept, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," actually affirms the authenticity of imagination. Although the scenes in the poem are imagined, the beauty they bring is real. Keats expressed the authenticity of imagination quite clearly, believing that "I have nothing to rely on except for the sanctity of emotional spirit and the authenticity of imagination." In "Ode on a Grecian Urn", Keats passionately sings the beauty brought by imagination:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone:

The audible music is the concrete movement conveyed by the object, which is beautiful, but Keats believes that "those unheard are sweeter". Here, the unheard music is sublimated through imagination, transforming the physical art into a feeling of beauty, an internal pleasure: "Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd, Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone." This is the highest realm of imagination, indicating that what Keats considers more beautiful and sweeter is for the soul. The "ditties of no tone" is for the internal invisible perceptual spirit, that is, the soul. It can only be transformed through the medium of imagination, turning "nothing" into "something", becoming a beauty that touches the soul. The beauty of the soul is also real beauty and a display of the authenticity of imagination. In Keats's eyes, imagination can turn the non-entity into an entity, making non-existent things exist. The Greek urn depicted by Keats did not exist, but through imagination, the poet not only turned it into a historian of the countryside, allowing it to narrate its own story, but also integrated himself with the urn, walking into the aesthetic pastoral world. At the beginning, the poet uses "thou" to refer to the urn, writing: "Sylvan historian, who canst thus express a flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme." At this time, the poet is standing outside the urn, facing the urn. However, as the story told by the urn unfolds, the poet unconsciously walks into the story, making the imagination more and more real:

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;

At this time, "thou" no longer refers to the urn, but has become the young man in the story told by the urn. It can be seen that the poet has been brought into the scene of the story by his own imagination, becoming a participant in the story of the urn, rather than the onlooker at the beginning of the urn. After that, the poet strolls in the story, seeing happy trees, crowds of sacrifices, young men and women in love, walking through the quiet streets in the morning. Finally, the poet is once again outside the urn, sighing: "Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought as doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!" This imagined beauty has become the real beauty experienced by the poet, and he expressed his understanding of beauty in the tone of the urn, that is, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," perfectly interpreting the creative energy of imagination that can turn all invisible beauty into reality.

3. The Autonomy and Non-utilitarian Nature of Art

Keats believed that the poet is “the most unpoetic creature created by God.” He also said in a letter to Woodhouse: “It is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—it has no personality.” In “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, the independent status of artistic beauty is perfectly reflected. Keats maintained a “distance” in creation, separating the poet from the poetry, and this separation of subject and object fully demonstrates the autonomy of beauty. At the beginning, the urn is an independent work of art separated from the poet. Later, when the poet depicts the beautiful scenes on the urn, he gives the right to speak to the urn. At this time, it is not the poet narrating the beauty of the urn to the reader, but the urn itself narrating its own beauty. The freedom that Keats gives to the urn to express beauty is a testament to the independent characteristics of art as an individual. Even when the poet enters the beauty of the urn with its narration, he still maintains a certain distance. Although the poet is on the scene, he is still an object separated from the subject of beauty. He is just a bystander of beauty and does not have any communication with the young men and women, and the crowds of sacrifices in the picture. That is to say, the poet is placed in the picture, but all the actions of living people and things in the picture are isolated from the poet. The poet just sees them, but does not truly integrate into them. This beauty is still distant to the poet. At the beginning and the end, the poet uses a series of rhetorical questions, which are all unanswered. Even if the poet enters the urn and is on the scene of artistic beauty, those beautiful pictures form a barrier between the poet and form an aesthetic dimension. It is this dimension that maintains an aesthetic distance and ensures the status of artistic beauty as an individual with its own independent life.

The natural flow of this kind of poetry, without any secular and utilitarian characteristics, is reflected in Keats’s creation of form and sensory impressions, using the feeling of beauty to express the work, which also has Aestheticism color.

4. The Emphasis on “Form”

“Ode on a Grecian Urn” is a perfect example of Keats’s emphasis on form. First, the language in the poem interweaves motion and stillness, rising and falling like musical notes, providing readers with a strong sensory experience. At the beginning, the poet presents a serene virgin, using words like “quietness”, “silence”, and “slow time” to convey the tranquil beauty of the urn. In the second part, the urn begins to tell its own story: “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter.” Here, the contrast between “heard” and “unheard,” between motion and stillness, light and darkness, creates a strong artistic effect, leading readers into a world of imagination. Leaves are usually quiet, but the poet describes them as “happy”, giving them life and emotional color, transforming them from stillness to motion, composing beautiful music together with the happy melodist. Then, the poem reaches a climax of music, where the poet feels passionate love, hears the “panting” of a courting boy, and sees a group of priests passing by. Like “panting”, the poet also uses the present continuous tense “coming” to dynamize the walking crowd in the urn, asking if they are going to some

quiet castle village. Then the poet sighs, “And, little town, thy streets for evermore will silent be; and not a soul to tell why thou art desolate, can e’er return.” Here, the scene changes to an empty and quiet street town, the passing crowd is gone, and motion turns back to stillness. At the end, the poet sighs again, “Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought” and the urn becomes a quiet work of art again. This interplay of motion and stillness is like a piece of music from the beginning to the climax and finally to the end, accompanied by the ups and downs of emotions, which is also the display of the beauty of artistic form.

Secondly, Keats’s emphasis on the role of form in sensory perception is also reflected in the continuous repetition in his language. This cycle not only shows the rhythm of the poem but also sublimates the senses in emphasis. In the first stanza of “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, the poet repeatedly uses seven questions, each starting with “what”, presenting the picture of the urn scene by scene. This repetitive questioning leaves a blank space that leads the reader into the realm of imagination. The second to fourth stanzas further transcend the limitations of time and space in the continuous repetition, moving towards eternity. The words “ever”, “never”, “for ever”, “more” appear repeatedly in the poem, and the word “happy,” which sets the emotional tone of the picture, also appears six times. In this continuous repetition and emphasis, the moment in the picture of the urn is beautified into eternity, lingering in the reader’s mind for a long time. This eternal beauty of art is also what Keats wants to express. The unheard flute sound is more beautiful, never stopping, not played for the “sensual ear”, but “more endear’d, Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone”. The sensory music is only a moment, and the spiritual is the eternal beauty, which is also the place where art transcends the secular. At the end of the poem, the poet reaffirms the eternity of art: “When old age shall this generation waste, Thou shalt remain.” The youth in reality will pass, but the beauty of art will always remain. This also reflects Keats’s poetic concept of placing art as an independent realm separate from reality, believing that the value of art transcends the morality and utility of reality.

5. Conclusion

Keats’s aesthetic concepts may seem to be at odds with the ideas of Romanticism, but this precisely reflects his unique insights and the progressive and forward-looking nature of his thoughts. His influence on the aesthetic creation concepts of later aestheticism, especially those of Oscar Wilde, is quite evident. It suggests that Wilde’s aesthetic thoughts are closely related to Romanticism, especially to Keats’s personal poetic concepts. From this, we also see the modernity of Keats’s poetic concepts.

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