The Three Stages of John Keats’s Poetics

HU Xiao
Shanghai Institute of Technology, Shanghai, China

Apart from poetry, John Keats’s concise remarks on poetics scatter miscellaneously in his other writings, which have been less studied compared with that of Keats’s contemporary romantic poets. However, those terse remarks constitute his deep perception on romantic poetry, many of which are now still glistening with their unique value. Based upon close reading upon Keats’s poetical works and letters as well as later critics’ books on poetry, this paper intends to make a systematic study of Keats’s poetics. Aiming at illustrating Keats’ poetics, this paper falls into three parts—the first part being “Inspiration: Poetry as John Keats’s Life”, the second “Perspiration: Natural Genius Plus Exquisite Revision”, and the third “Perfection: the Aeolian Lyre”.

Keywords: romantic poetry, John Keats, poetics

Introduction

John Keats composed not only poems but also theories on poetics. However, those theories were not compiled in books but recorded in his letters. A systematic study of the collection of Keats’s letters will give clue to his theories on poetics, including the power of inspiration, the devoted process of revision, and the final stage of perfection.

Inspiration: Poetry as John Keats’s Life

Most romantic poets were themselves critics, many of whom had published works on poetics, such as William Wordsworth’s Preface to the Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads, Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s Biographia Literaria, Percy Bysshe Shelley’s A Defence of Poetry, etc. However, leaving the world at too young an age, John Keats never had the chance to sum up his exquisite thoughts and publish them in books. Fortunately, volumes of his letters were kept from which readers can gain access to his perception on poetics.

John Keats saw poetry as his life. Also, poetry inspired his life. It is not unconvincing to assert that among all the romantic poets, Keats is among the most devoted. Life without poetry is an unbearable torture to him. In this way, no sooner had he composed the poem On the Sea in 1817 than he wrote to J. H. Reynolds:

I find I cannot exist without Poetry—without eternal Poetry—half the day will not do - the whole of it—I began with a little, but habit has made me a Leviathan. I had become all in a Tremble from not having written any thing of late—the Sonnet overleaf did me good. I slept the better last night for it.¹

“1817” was a formidable time to Keats when he was afraid that inspiration might leave him and never return. It was a difficult time in Keats’s writing career. However, after this short and dark period, Keats’s inspiration finally found its distinctive voice. Keats emphasized the importance of inspiration and he

insisted upon waiting for it and capturing its quick flow instead of forcing himself to write lifeless mechanical lines.

Surrounded by poetry, Keats’s life was full of inspiration. His literary life and daily life were mingled into one harmonious union. Inspiration was seized and poetry composed. Keats’s axiom that poetry must come “as naturally as the leaves to a tree” was grounded on his own mode of composition which, as he described it to Woodhouse, waited upon the “happier moment” when, in the full play of all his faculties, he could write as one “almost inspired”.2 At the age of 21, not knowing the Greek language, Keats read Homer through Chapman’s translation. Immediately after one night’s reading, Keats composed the sonnet *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer*. Indeed, this short sonnet came as naturally as leaves growing out of a tree. The reason for its naturalness may well be explained as that inspiration favored Keats and that Keats was a wonderful instrument of composition. It is indeed a pity that Keats could not live another few years to establish his systematic theory on poetry. If all Keats’s inspiration were kept, romantic theories would be led into a more subtle and exquisite direction, but today, we readers can only refer to his manuscripts for the findings of his romantic theory on poetry.

Inspiration directed Keats to another world where beauty can be seized and captured into his poetry. This world nearly reached the frontier of madness. Hazlitt said of poetry: “it is the music of language, answering to the music of the mind… There is a near connection between music and deep-rooted passion. Mad people sing”.3 Keats sang with his soul and the songs expressed themselves in his poetry. Deep inside the veins of Keats’s subtle poetry flew an intense attachment to inspiration which always kept this poet in a state of madness. Keats’s madness led him to the ever-lasting pursuit of beauty and truth. In December, 1817, in his letter to George and Tom Keats, his zealous pursuit was expressed which goes as what follows—“the excellence of every Art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth”.4 Beauty and truth triggered John Keats’s passion so that it must find an outlet and no other form than poetry can best satisfy Keats’s intense urge to express his inspiration.

**Perspiration: Natural Genius Plus Exquisite Revision**

Keats’s poetics forged ahead day by day. Born to be a gifted poet, Keats never shunned any opportunity to improve his skills. During his composing process, Keats also reflected on techniques of poetry. Unlike Samuel Taylor Coleridge who wrote many critical works on his contemporaries but left rather few important poems himself, Keats dedicated to the composition of poetry as well as the accumulation of poetics. More important is the fact that Keats applied his theory gained from his own writing practice to writing itself, which distinguished him from his contemporaries.

Upon publication, many of Keats’s poetry were criticized bitterly by his contemporary literati. Apart from the fact that the literati did not evaluate Keats’s poetry properly, another less important truth is that the summit of Keats’s poetics was yet to come. Keats was severely disappointed but still maintained his belief that improvement can be made. In his letter to James Augustus Hessey in October, 1918, Keats stated, “I may write

---

independently, and with judgment, hereafter" and at the conclusion of the letter he again insisted, “I was never afraid of failure; for I should sooner fail than not be among the greatest”. Keats clearly expressed his positive attitude towards the severe criticism. His aim was to be one of the greatest and he realized that his natural gift needs further polish.

John Keats adored Hazlitt’s talent and attended his lectures on Shakespearean drama. Later, Keats “followed Hazlitt as his guide in literary speculation, emphasized more than any of his contemporaries the image-and-intense aspect of the Longinian heritage. ‘I look upon fine Phrases like a Lover’, he said, referring to Shakespeare’s dramas and Milton’s Paradise Lost”. As a lover of poetry, John Keats’s sensation throbbed with the beauty of his predecessor’s works during which period his craftsmanship was improved and his taste for beauty polished.

Keats’s poetry, not only attached importance to inspiration, but also stressed the necessity of revision. Keats’s heavily corrected and inter-written manuscripts, like those of Shelley and other contemporaries, demonstrated that poetic vision by no means obviated revision. Revision and inspiration do not conflict with each other. On the contrary, inspiration made the tone smooth and revision made the poetry exquisite, each of which benefited from the other and the consequence of this union was that Keats’s poetry became classic.

Later poet T. S. Eliot remarked in his well-known book On Poetry and Poets that “some minds maturing earlier than others, and we observe that those which mature very early do not always develop very far”. However, Keats is an exception. At his twenties, not only did John Keats’s poetry develop very far but also his theories on poetics reached high. Keats’s poetics grew day by day. He practiced his theory so that his theory became practical and his writing principle properly guided. The combination of Keats’s accumulated theory on poetics and restless revision of his drafts is like one crafty gardener so that when artistically shaped, the garden becomes a wonderful view. At a young age, Keats’s poetics matured into excellent works, if not, arguably, masterpieces.

Perfection: the Aeolian Lyre

The previous experience of composition and reflection on poetics directed Keats to the maturing stage. In the time to follow, Keats’s genius and dedication yielded into enduring poetry and his theory on poetics was also expressed with deep perception although within few words. In February 27, 1818, John Keats clearly stated his three axioms of poetry in the letter to John Taylor.

The first principle is that “poetry should surprise by a free excess and not by singularity—It should strike the reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts and appear almost a remembrance”. One proper example to illustrate this axiom is the famous ode—To Autumn. The apples, the bees, the winnowing wind, the gnats, the hedge-crickets, the redbreast, and the gathering swallows are all familiar objects made by “a free excess” to readers so that the mere reading of this short poem would bring the memory of autumn back whatever season it is now.

The second axiom is that “its touches of beauty should never be halfway thereby making the reader 
breathless instead of content: the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the sun come natural to 
him – shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence, leaving him in the luxury of twilight”. 11 Ode 
on a Grecian Urn is representative of this principle which begins naturally by the sight of the Grecian Urn, then 
progresses naturally to the pictures engraved on the urn, and then the poet’s as well as readers’ imagination are 
stirred, and finally it concludes in magnificence, leaving the answer as well as the question—“Beauty is truth, 
truth beauty”—to readers.

The third, also the most well-known axiom about poetry, is that “if poetry comes not as naturally as the 
leaves to a tree it had better not come at all”. 12 All Keats’s poetry may well demonstrate this natural element. 
Here, Keats directed his attachment again to inspiration so as to show his stance that lines forced onto the paper 
are not poetry. Inspiration is still the soul of Keats’s poetry. Revision is needed but what is forced onto the 
paper does not deserve this process which should be thrown away and that poets ought to wait and search for 
inspiration. Poetry does not avoid restless revision, but the motivation for composing it must be inspiration 
rather than any other purpose.

In the following years, especially in 1819, with the guidance of these axioms and the improvement of his 
poetics, when inspiration lingered in Keats’s mind, he, like the Aeolian Lyre, naturally composed his famous 
odes. The year 1819 marked his poetical peak when the combination of Keats’s poetry and theory made its 
distinctive voice which would establish the poet whose “name was writ in water” as one “among the greatest” 
in English literature.

Conclusion

During 1814-1820, John Keats created most of his poems. Although six years of composition was a short 
time in one’s life, Keats forged it into a golden stage of writing. It was during those last few years in his life 
that Keats’s poems and poetics matured into classics. A romantic poet’s life ended in the year 1821, but the 
poems and theories on poetics illuminated later poets and critics.

References
