Nature, Imagination, Reality and Two English Romantic Poets—Shelley and Keats

By A. Soe Than

The epithet ‘romantic’ has many meanings. That is why in the NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms a comment about the word ‘romanticism’ is thus made: “romanticism may be either the most meaningful or the most confusing word in any lexicon of literary terms. The English critic F. L. Lucas unearthed and counted 11,396 definitions of romanticism”. But here it is used as a mere chronological label to describe the imaginative literature of the early part of nineteenth century England.

A new conception of poetry came into being towards the end of the eighteenth century. It is generally termed as ‘Romanticism’ or ‘the Romantic Movement’. Precisely speaking, it is a literary movement and profound shift in sensibility which took place in Britain and throughout Europe roughly between 1770 and 1848. Politically, it was inspired by the revolutions in America and France and popular wars of independence in Poland, Spain, Greece and elsewhere. Intellectually, it marked a violent reaction to the Enlightenment. Emotionally, it expressed an extreme assertion of the self and the value of individual experience. The stylistic keynote of Romanticism is ‘intensity’ and its watchword is ‘imagination’.

A careful study of the works of the Romantic poets always results in the ‘back-to-nature’ philosophy. Because in the first place, the major poetry of this period was all written under the influence of the new secular, liberal conception of man and his destiny that had sprung from the French Revolution and the French eighteenth century thought that had preceded the movement. Secondly, the skepticism about existing society engendered by the revolutionary ferment impelled the more imaginative minds into a new communion with nature. When the world of man is harsh and repugnant, in need of violent reform, yet so often, it appears irreformable, the poet is apt to seek consolation in the world of nature which does not need reforming: at first natura naturata, the lovely texture of the visible world; then natura naturans, the informing principle within it:

A motion and a spirit that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things
whose dwelling is as much in the mind of man as in "all that we behold of this green earth". The proper study of mankind is still indeed man, as it was in the eighteenth century, but man seen less often in relation to his fellows or to a fixed religious scheme, and more often as a solitary man in relation to the natural universe of which he is a part.

In Britain, Romantic writers of the first generation included Wordsworth and Coleridge, Burns, Blake, Gray and Cowper. The second generation of British Romantics—Byron, Shelley and Keats—wrote swiftly, traveled widely (Greece, Switzerland, Italy) and died prematurely. Their life stories and letters became almost as important for Romanticism as their poetry. Through the dynamic nature of the Imagination, early Romantic poets dealt with remembered childhood, unrequited love, and the exiled hero as their constant themes. But the mature Romanticism expressed an unending revolt against classical form, conservative morality, authoritarian government, personal insincerity, and human moderation. The Romantics saw and felt things brilliantly afresh. They were strenuous walkers, hill-climbers, sea-bathers or river-lovers. They had a new intuition for the primal power of the wild landscape, the spiritual correspondence between Man and Nature, and the aesthetic principle of 'organic' form.

The poet William Wordsworth (1770–1850) is the harbinger of the Romantic Movement in English literature. He is a poet of Nature and he loves and worships Nature. His sonnet The World is Too Much With Us reflects his attitude towards Nature. Wordsworth condemns the growing materialism of the contemporary times. Due to our materialistic pursuits, we have become totally indifferent to the beauty of Nature. The poet complains:

The world is too much with us, late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

Here the poet points out that people are much taken up with the worldly activities. Our higher spiritual values are all lost in our quotidian business of earning and spending. Due to our mercenary nature we have become indifferent toward Nature. The poet is right. We, who are living the commonplace modern life, are cut off by cares of the world from the deeper sources of joy. Wordsworth clarifies that kind of joy in The Daffodils. When harassed by the woes and worries of this mundane world, the poet always travels to Nature and watches its beauty as it provides him with a kind of rejuvenating power.

I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought:
For oft, when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills.
Wordsworth says that in his calm and thoughtful mood the daffodils, the beauty of Nature that he has consumed, suddenly appear in his mind. This sort of mental peace is possible only at a lonely place. These lines also illustrate Wordsworth’s theory of poetry—“emotions recollected in tranquility”. In the Preface to the second edition of collection of poems named Lyrical Ballad (1800) by Wordsworth and Coleridge, Wordsworth described poetry as “the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling” and it became the manifesto of the English Romantics.

It is surprising to learn that one major element of Romanticism—the beauty of Nature, man’s escape from the materialistic world to Nature—had already found its expressions in the works of the sixteenth century English writer William Shakespeare. One interesting element in Shakespeare’s sonnets is the nature imagery. He saw nature precisely and was always able to find the right words for her loveliness. Particularly, Shakespeare always wrote well on nature’s morning loveliness and her plenitude. For example:

Sonnet 7:

Lo, in the orient when the gracious light
Lifts up his burning head…

Sonnet 33:

Full many a glorious morning have I seen
Flatter the mountain tops with sovereign eye,
Kissing with golden face the meadows green,
Gliding pale streams with heavenly alchemy…

One cannot help being impressed with this seemingly effortless poetry of nature. In fact, Shakespeare had dealt with both natura naturata and natura naturans: he had explored the lovely texture of the visible world, moreover, expressed the idea of the informing principle within it, too. In As You Like It Shakespeare pronounced Nature as much harmless as beautiful; when in communion with Nature, apart from finding consolation in it, man can even learn from it. In the Forest of Arden, Duke Senior says:

Are not these woods
More free form the peril than the envious court?
And this our life, exempt form public haunt,
Find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

(As You Like It, Act II, Scene 1.)

From now on, as the topic of the paper suggests, I will concentrate on the use of Imagination by the two English Romantic poets, Shelley and Keats, in order to escape from the commotion and pains of this cruel world to the harmony and beauty of Nature. I will deal with one representative ode of each poet, namely, Ode to the West Wind by Shelley and Ode to a Nightingale by Keats.
It is my personal belief that a really good poet is the person, aided by imagination, appealing to the normal interests of mankind, not a peculiar being appealing to a specialized taste. The poet has to make use of the power of imagination because, to quote Wordsworth, the poet is "a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighted to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them". Of course, the power of imagination enables him to create "them" where he cannot find "them"

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792–1822), the son of an aristocrat, Sir Timothy Shelley, was born on August 4, 1792 at Field Place near Horsham, Sussex. He had his education at Eton and University College, Oxford. At Eton, he spent so much time reading books on science, friends called him 'Mad Shelley' and he became the jeered-at butt of the school. But his friend, Hogg writes:

No student ever read more assiduously.... I never beheld eyes that devoured the pages more voraciously than his.... It is no exaggeration to say that out of the twenty-four hours he frequently read sixteen.... Few were aware of the extent and fewer still of the profundity of his reading.

Shelley was a boy of much sensibility, quick imagination, generous heart and a refined type of beauty—blue-eyed and golden-haired. He is regarded as "a beautiful angel come to earth by mistake". His stay at University College, Oxford, was cut short by his expulsion on the publication of a pamphlet entitled The Necessity of Atheism.

Ode to the West Wind is one of the finest poems of Shelley. It was published in 1820. Shelley writes about it:

This poem was conceived and chiefly written in a wood that skirts the Arno, near Florence. The phenomenon adhered to at conclusion of the third stanza is well-known to naturalists. The vegetation at the bottom of the sea, of rivers and of lakes, sympathises with that of the land in the change of season, and is consequently influenced by the wind.

This poem is the greatest poetical composition of Shelley as it represents him fully. In fact, the poem embodies Shelley, the poet of nature, Shelley, the singer of endless sorrows, Shelley, the prophet of the millennium. The poem begins with its exciting opening:

O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing.

Here, Shelley compares the dead leaves with ghosts that run away from a magician out of fear. And the first stanza ends as Shelley addressing the West Wind as

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and Preserver; hear, Oh, hear!
The West Wind is the destroyer of leaves and preserver of seeds. The process in much of Shelley’s lyric poetry is to find in natural objects a symbol for his own emotional patterns. His best poetry is born when one of his major passions finds an adequate symbol—here ‘West Wind’ as a destroyer and preserver, sweeping away the old in storms, and gently fostering the new with zephyrs. It also reminds us of the Indian concept of Brahma, Vishnu, Mahesh—the trinity responsible for the origin, preservation and destruction of the world.

The second stanza pictures the wind in its stormy and horrible aspect. The west wind is “dirge/ Of the dying year” and “from whose solid atmosphere/Black rain, and fire, and hail, will burst”.

The beginning of the third stanza shows the picture of flowers and fruits produced by the sweetness of the wind’s breath. Shelley also shows that the Mediterranean Sea is soothed to sleep by the soft sound of the streams falling into it. But the stanza concludes with a return of the spirit of terror—the same wind which ruffles the surface of the Mediterranean also cleaves the Atlantic into chasms and frightens the submerged vegetation of the ocean. Shelley’s poetic diction portrays the picture as follows:

Thou
For whose path the Atlantic’s level powers
Cleave themselves into chasms, while far below
The seablooms and the oozy woods which wear
The sapless foliage of the ocean, know
Thy voice, and suddenly grow gray with fear,
And tremble and despoil themselves: Oh, hear!

At this point we can see that it is only the genius of the poet that can build up these three stanzas on the antithesis between the two powers of the wind—its terrifying powers of destruction and its gentle fostering influence.

Shelley’s poetics are tinged with melancholy at the mutability of human affairs. The world is too much with the poet; he wants to run away from the ‘reality’, woes and worries and even the ruthless attacks of the critics of his time. Moreover, the poet thinks that the busy world is no place for him as it allows little room for poetry. By use of ‘imagination’, the poet creates a ‘vision’ where he feels that he is free from the pains of the real world, and where he can be most himself with poetry. But in Shelley’s philosophical system there is always a gap between the wretched actuality and the radiant and possible ideal. This gap must be bridged by imagination; imagination becomes the instrument of redemption.

Thus in the fourth stanza, his own sense of oppression and constraint is contrasted with the wind’s freedom and strength. He would like to be a dead leaf, a cloud or a wave to be swept along by the wind's power. The poet imagines that by accompanying the free and powerful wind, he could be away form the sufferings of the world.

If I were a dead leaf thou mightest bear;
If I were a swift cloud to fly with thee;
A wave to pant beneath thy power, and share
The impulse of thy strength, only less free
Than thou, O uncontrollable! If even
I were as in my boyhood, and could be
The comrade of thy wanderings over Heaven.

And again, the poet repeats the same wish in the following lines; repetition is for emphasis, of course. He asks the wind to lift him and also gives the reason for his asking:

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud!
I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed!

These lines remind us of what Emerson had said regarding poetry—“Poetry teaches the enormous force of a few words”. True, with the economy of words, the poet poignantly expresses the sufferings—“thorns of life” and how he suffers from them—“bleed!”

Shelley imagines that the wind’s power is his own; a similar power is naturally and by right his own: he too is tameless and swift, but has been crushed by the burden of the world.

A heavy weight of hours has chain’d and bow’d
One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

In the final stanza, we can see that Shelley and Keats have something in common: they decide to choose a certain ‘symbol’ only when they envy it. Each poet envies his own symbol and wants to possess its virtues. Keats in Ode to a Nightingale says of the bird:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down.

And here Shelley says of the West Wind:

Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My Spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

It is only natural that the old must give way to the new when the time comes for it. Destruction, the sweeping away of the old, is necessary before the new creation can take place. That is implied in the opening stanza, for the wind sweeps away leaves and seeds together. Again, in the last stanza, the poet asks the wind, both a power of destruction and a power of regeneration, to:

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither’d leaves to quicken a new birth!

Here the wind can also be interpreted as the ‘creative power’ for the poet. Sometimes the dead thoughts in a poet’s mind must be swept away by the wind of creative power as they block the flow of the new artistic creations. This great poem ends as it begins—with the cycle of the seasons:
O Wind,
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

Most critics agree that the poem ends with an optimistic message. They say it represents Shelley’s hope for political changes of his time. But personally, I shed some doubt upon this idea because political history is very largely the record of the crimes, follies, treacheries and deceptions of mankind. It is a story of tyranny and oppression. A careful reading of world history offers few consolations; if it instructs it is very largely through aberration. Though a better future can be envisaged, its arrival can by no means be guaranteed. Therefore, it is often possible that “Spring” can be “far behind”. It would be no exaggeration to say that there are some countries in the world where there are only winters and no spring at all.

Anyway, Shelley’s poetry is a happy blend of literature, philosophy and science, emanating from emotion and imagination. A few critics like Matthew Arnold may find him an ineffective angel beating his luminous wings in vain but his poetry can never be allowed to wither. He has a message of enlightenment and beauty that would spread in the world of tyranny, cruelty and corruption. In fact, he is a true blue poet who is always ready to serve for the interests of poetry. Shelley had written *Defence of Poetry* in which he insisted that it was only the poet who could “lift the veil from the hidden beauties of the world and make familiar objects be as if they were not familiar”. “Poets”, he concluded, “are the unacknowledged legislators of the world”.

After defending poetry itself, Shelley came to the defence of a particular poet—John Keats. Keats had died in Rome of consumption, but Shelley believed that Keats and his genius had been killed by the malicious reviews of the critics. In Shelley’s last major poem *Adonais: An Elegy on the Death of John Keats*—in verse 42—we can feel the presence of Keats, another great English Romantic poet.

He is made one with Nature: there is heard
His voice in all her music, from the moan
Of thunder, to the song of night’s sweet bird;

He is a presence to be felt and known
In darkness and in light, from herb and stone,
Spreading itself wher’er that Power may move
Which has withdrawn his being to its own;
Which wields the world with never wearied love,
Sustains it from beneath, and kindles it above.

John Keats (1795–1821), the eldest of four children of Thomas Keats, a West Country head ostler in a livery stable, was born in 1795 in Morristhills, London. He had his early education at Enfield where he learned some Latin, history, and French, but no Greek. However, he acquired an interest in the mythologies of Greece and Rome (in his *Ode to a Nightingale*, there are some references to Greek mythology). He was then apprenticed to a surgeon in Edmonton. At the hospital his fellow medical students called him ‘proud Keats’ because he exhibited himself as a poet. In 1812 he happened to get a copy of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* from the son of his tutor. This made him feel that he too was a poet and inspired him to lead the life of a poet.
Keats was ‘un homme pour qui la monde visible existe’. And the visible world for Keats meant chiefly the world of nature; not nature with all the mystical and moral overtones that Wordsworth found in it, but simply the unanalysed delightfulness in the beauty of living and growing things. In deed, he is a poet who loves ‘beauty’ and worships ‘beauty’. The poet announces it in Endymion Book I:

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness;

Again, in his famous Ode on a Grecian Urn he talked about beauty in its unforgettable ending:

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—this is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

About Endymion, the lengthy poem that earned the poet bitter criticism, Keats once wrote to a friend that it would be his test. It would be “a trial of my powers of imaginations and chiefly of my invention—by which I must make 4000 lines of one bare circumstance and fill them with poetry. I have heard Hunt ask, ‘Why endeavour after a long poem?’ To which I should answer, ‘Do not the lovers of poetry like to have a little region to wander in where they may pick and choose, and in which the images are so numerous that many are forgotten and found new in a second reading?’”

The young ambitious poet experienced his own time as literarily deficient (probably because the critics refused to recognize his genius). Even the criticism of Byron and Wordsworth failed to deliver the message of hope that Keats would like to hear. Some of his dissatisfaction with the present is reflected in Keats’s image of his own situation as a beginning poet on the contemporary literary scene: the greatness of the major predecessors—Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton—measures his own inadequacy and dwarfs the present:

Is there so small a range
In the present strength of manhood, that the high
Imagination cannot freely fly
As she was wont of old?

(Sleep and Beauty).

But in his famous Ode to a Nightingale the poet, aided by the power of imagination, could freely fly on the wings of Poesy. Ode to a Nightingale is one of the most famous poems of Keats. It was published in 1820. There is a story behind the composition of this poem. It is said that Keats got the inspiration at Hampstead from a nightingale that had built its nest in a garden. Charles Brown, one of Keats’s friends writes:
Keats felt a tranquil, continual joy in her song; and one morning he took his chair from breakfast table to a grass plot under a plum where he sat for two or three hours. When he came to the house, I perceived he had some scraps of paper in his hand, and these he was quietly thrusting behind the books. On enquiry I found those scraps, four or five in number, contained his poetic feeling on a song of the nightingale.

Sidney Colvin, one of the critics of Keats, writes about this poem:

The same crossing and intermingling of opposing currents of feelings finds expression together with unequall'd touches of the poet's feeling for nature and romance in the *Ode to a Nightingale*.

In fact, in this poem, Keats, by using the bird as a symbol, contrasts the temporary nature of human life with the permanence of art as he did in his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. The poem begins with these lines:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains

The poet is naming his suffering: heartache, numbness, dullness (even 'hemlock'—the poison given to Socrates to kill him); in other words, he is giving the reasons why he wants to flee from this world where all he can find is only suffering. Then the poet hears a nightingale "lightwinged Dryad of the trees" that is singing "in full-throated ease". As a drowning man trying to catch even a straw, the poet finds solace in the melody of the bird—something that would not count much for a modern man. By the intoxication of imagination, like that of 'vintage', the poet wishes to follow the bird into the forest where he would be in the dark listening to the dulcet melody of the nightingale.

That I might drink and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim.

There are several discouraging drawbacks of human life that the poet wants to forget; and the poet envies the nightingale its freedom from them. The poet wants to:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.
By this long list, Keats refers to man’s life which is full of pain, misery and care. He shows the bird free from such pains and worries. The line “Where youth grows pale, and spectre thin, and dies” can be an autobiographical reference. Keats here probably refers to the death of his younger brother Tom in 1818. It was only a few months after the death of his brother Tom from a painful and distressing illness that Keats wrote this poem.

After the mention of the real world congested with pains and worries, the poet describes his imagined world to which he was taken by the bird on the “viewless wings of Poesy”. Here we can see the contrast between the two worlds the poet dwells in.

Already with thee! Tender is the night,
And haply the Queen Moon is on her throne,
Cluster’d around by all her starry Fays;
But here there is no light.

Here we can observe that both the Urn and the Nightingale are general, impersonal entities, endowed with significance by an act of the poet’s imagination. They are what they signify for Keats in relation to humanity in general. The world to which they give access is a world of happiness and beauty, and it is by the suggestive evocation of this world that beauty enters the poem. This, in turn, allows for the dramatic contrast with the world of actual experience, caught in the destructive power of mutability and described throughout, in the *Ode on a Grecian Urn* as well as in *Ode to a Nightingale*, in terms that appeal directly to our moral sympathy like—“Here, where men sit and hear each other groan”.

In the next stanza, the poet, lost in the “embalmed darkness” of the bird’s song, describes a phase of delighted communion with the nature with all the external and obvious beauties of the world.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet
Wherewith the seasonal month endows
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit tree wild;
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;
Fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves.

The richness of these lines can only come into being because Keats’s self is in fact dissociated from the suffering mankind with which he sympathizes.

Then in the next stanza, the poet declares his death wish:

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death.
Yes, death with a capital D; and the poet thinks that while listening to the bird's song it even seems "rich to die". It will make one wonder if it can be the dualism of human nature—the death wish along with the affirmation of life. But here the poet shows a deep understanding of the burden of mortality. One misunderstands it altogether if one interprets it merely as a flight from human suffering; to the contrary, it is a sign of the poet's profound understanding of the human predicament.

In the beginning lines of the next stanza, Keats seems to be praising the memorable works of the artists throughout the centuries all over the world. The poet shows his admiration for the bird by these lines:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;
The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown.

Keats shows the bird as immortal, because she is the embodiment of beautiful song. The idea that Keats's nightingale is immortal has been seen by many as a paradox, because the bird nightingale, so far from being immortal, has a considerably shorter life than man. But it is only its song that is immortal in the sense that through history there have been nightingales' songs and that they have always had the same power and tone of entertainment. In fact, immortality can be dedicated of poets too: a poet's name never dies and his individual song or poem endures so timelessly that we still study and appreciate Keats's poems until today and they will definitely be studied in the future as well. Therefore, we are left with the knowledge that human life is transient while art is permanent.

As the poet evokes the immortality of the nightingale's song through a profusion of images he suddenly finds that the spell is broken by a single word—"forlorn".

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Aideu! the fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.
Aideu aideu! thy plaintive anthem fades.

Of course, his imaginative participation in an untroubled natural life cannot last long. The symbolic bird-nightingale and its song are only poetic imagination. The imaginative vision and the imagined escape cannot be sustained long, and finally the poet has to return to the reality of the world. The experiences which the poet feels in the natural world are created by his own mind—rather than received from the nature. On returning to his "sole self" the poet, by using the synonym which had become for the Romantics pejorative, blames his imagination: "fancy cannot cheat so well" and calls it "deceiving elf".
The poet says that the bird’s song “fades”. The use of the word ‘fade’ is quite common in Keats’s poetry and it reveals the theme of transience, despite the poet’s strenuous efforts to render the imaginative other world palpable. In the Ode to Psyche he writes of “Olympus’s faded hierarchy!”, in the Ode to Indolence he writes how the visions he saw “Then faded”, again “They faded”, “Faded softly from my eyes”—a triple repetition that receives further emphasis from the fact that each phrase appears at the beginning of a line. In the Ode on a Grecian Urn the lover depicted on the vase is consoled with the reflection that, although he will never kiss his beloved, “She cannot fade”. Here in this Ode to a Nightingale the repetitions of the word ‘fade’ come thick and fast: Keats longs to “fade away into the forest dim”, to “Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget”; he writes of the “Fast fading violets cover’d up in leaves” and in the final stanza he addresses the nightingale by saying “Adieu! adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades”. Therefore, to Keats, to fade is at once the desire to escape from the quotidian into a world of ease, oblivion and voluptuousness, and the loss of that dream itself from the clutching fingers of consciousness. Just like in Shelley’s Ode to the West Wind, Keats ends the poem with questions and the end is the climax of the poem.

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music: do I wake or sleep?

Of course, after being asleep a while on the soothing bed of nature, the poet usually comes back to the waking moments of reality. In fact, these questions largely arose from the problem that had been haunting Keats throughout his short life—the attempt to reconcile the loveliness of the world with its transience, its pleasures with its pains, the longing to enjoy the beautiful with the suspicion that it cannot be long enjoyed or the beauty cannot last long. But it seems that Keats was never to find a solution to these conflicts in his very short life and poetic career.

It is said that Keats was so devastated by the brutal reviews that he even considered abandoning writing and going back to the medical practice. In Adonais Shelley implied that the reviewers had inflicted a mortal blow on Keats, and Byron also wrote:

Who killed John Keats?
“I”, said the Quarterly,
So savage and tartarly,
“Twas one of my feats.”

During the period of his last two years, a period of feverish intensity, Keats wrote his wonderful six odes, the eerie ballad La Belle Dame Sans Merci and such a heart-rendering sonnet (as if some instinct warned him that he had very little time left to live) as:

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
Before high-piled books, in charactery,
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;
When I behold, upon the night’s starred face,
Huge cloudy symbols of a high romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Their shadows with the magic hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair creature of an hour,
That I shall never look upon thee more,
Never have relish in the faery power
Of unreflecting love;—then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.

The poet himself sank to nothingness only a few months after his twenty-fifth birthday. At his request there was no name on his tomb. He had chosen his own epitaph:

“Here lies one whose name was writ in water”.

But we strongly believe that his poems were not “writ in water”; to the contrary, the works he had left behind are the permanent concrete pillars of the Romanticism. Though the singing poet ‘dwell in the dark’ we can feel his warm presence, and see his image clearly because as Katherine Mansfield once commented: “There is a light upon the poets, especially upon the Elizabethans and Keats, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley. These are the people with whom I want to live, these are the men I feel are our brothers”.

Bibliography


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