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Keats' concept of negative capability

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Abstract

Negative capability enables the writer to identify himself with the thing he is writing about. It is an ability of the writer to subtract his own identity of the surroundings around him. Negative capability involves a fusion of oneness. In the heat of imagination, all the thoughts, feelings and emotions become one and all uncertainties, doubts and mysteries become elements of beauty. For Keats, the most important quality of poetry is the submission to things as they are, without trying to intellectualize them into something else.

Keywords: uncertainties, emotions become capability

Introductions

Keats believed, like the dramatic poets, that a lyric poet has no personality of his own. Just as a dramatic poet merges his personality into his characters, the lyric poet should also identify himself with what excites his emotions. The dramatic poet splits his personality into the manifold variety of human life: his imagination embodies itself only in the figures of his imagination. His creations are living because they share his life breath. In the same manner, according to Keats, the lyric poet should be open to every liberation of feeling or emotion that comes to him from the objects of nature. He should be like an Aeolian lyre, the strings of which are tuned in unison and sounded by the wind. He should subdue his ego or self in such a manner that he may possess the negative capability of participating in the life of nature. In one of his letters, Keats wrote that when he saw a swallow picking up the grass, he wanted to be a swallow to feel what it was like being one. In *The Ode to a Nightingale*, he actually transforms into the world of Nightingale and imagines himself on the same branch to experience what it experiences. And when he listens its song in the darkness of the night, he shares its joy and wants to die. He says,

Darkling I listen, and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath.

In *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, he is wonder-struck to see the forest scene of some festival or sacrifice carved on the Urn. The details of the scene arrest his attention. He shares with the leaves and the human beings the immortality that they enjoy. He finds the youngman singing a song which he will sing to eternity. He finds love and beauty captured in a moment of a ecstatic union and makes the moments eternal. He say:

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,
For ever will thou love, and she be fair!

This feeling of participation in the eternity of love and beauty as carved on the Grecian urn leads him to exclaim:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all,
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

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In *Ode to autumn*, Keats splits his personality into the personified visions of autumn, as it expresses itself in the various activities of Autumn and in the persons engaged in those activities. He finds autumn sitting like a happy farmer in the midst of his heap of corn. Sometimes the season is present in the form of a man fanning the corn to separate from the husk, its 'hair, soft-lifted by the winnowing wind'. Sometimes it is asleep on a half reaped furrow because

Sleep overcame it as if it was droused with the Poppies.
And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep,
Steady thy laden head across a brook;
Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,
Thou watchest the last ooziings hours by hours.

Even in *Ode to Melancholy*, in which the form of address is more consistently maintained, we find the poet responding and violating to the emotions aroused by his contemplation of the transitoriness of beauty and love. His melancholy finds its concrete realization in the images of Wolf's fame, night-shade, yew berries, downy owl and such other deadly or melancholy objects of nature and in a mood of reflection, the poet finds that,

She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu.

Keats was a worshipper of beauty, and it was his senses that revealed to him the beauty of things. The beauty of the Universe from the stars of the sky to the flowers of the earth - first struck his senses, and then from the beauty perceptible to the senses, his imagination seized the principle of beauty in all things. It was through his sense-impressions which kindled his imagination that he realized the truth that 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'.

It is this capacity for negative capability that enables the poet to experience at the same time the emotion of melancholy and joy, just as the Aeolian harp produces different tunes at the same time as the wind strikes its different strings. This is the peculiar quality of Keats' genius and the Ode enabled him to express his feelings in the most natural manners.

Keats' negative capability is precisely a rejection of set philosophies and preconceived systems of nature. According to Keats, the poet should be receptive rather than searching for fact or reason and should not seek absolute knowledge of every truth, mystery or doubt.

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