

## EKPHRASIS AND GNOSIS: VISUAL ARTS AND MYTHO-POETIC AESTHETICS IN JOHN KEATS

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### ABSTRACT

*This essay, from a hermeneutic and phenomenological perspective, assesses the role which the material with regard to images played in John Keats's aesthetic, philosophical and spiritual experience. Using some selected seminal poems and letters which demonstrate depth psychology, it examines the intersection between Ekphrasis in Keats's myth consciousness in visual culture and its aesthetic and philosophical bearing on grounds of Gnosticism. Keats's aestheticism and idealism are strongly connected with the spiritual aspects of his life, argued on the grounds of gnosis, which implicates depth spiritual and divine awareness through individuation. The myth that Keats bequeaths to posterity is the myth of the search for an identity as a poet with a distinctive aesthetic voice and transcendental personality.*

**Keywords:** Ekphrasis, Gnosticism, Visual Arts, Myth, Idealism

### INTRODUCTION

Keats's sensuousness and materialism have always been celebrated, for many critics have seen him as one of, if not the greatest, materialist or mundane self-undoing poet in the Romantic period. Kucich (1995) contends that the increasingly urgent search for ways to evaluate Keatsian poetic formulations within materialist frames constitutes one of the strongest challenges for Keats's critics. Kucich is right because the materialist implications of Keats's poetry are more complex than one imagines. Keats's appeal for the physical often leads to a limited or dominantly one-dimensional apprehension of his philosophy of beauty, truth and the imagination to the secular, sensual and erotic. This essay assesses the role which the material with regard to images played in his aesthetic, philosophical and spiritual experience and conviction. It proposes to examine ekphrasis in Keats's myth consciousness in relation to the material (in this case, visual and imagined) arts as an igniting poetic force, that is, the relationship between visual culture and its aesthetic and philosophical impact on Romantic poetry represented in Keats's Gnosticism. I have previously critically examined visualising, contemplating and creating through poetic representation of natural phenomena as an undoubted strand of Keats's eco-psycho consciousness. Poems such as 'The Poet', 'Sleep and Poetry', 'Ode on a Nightingale', and 'Ode to Autumn' have ekphrastic undertones and were viewed on what I termed interiorised exteriorities and exteriorised interiorities. Interlacing ekphrasis and gnosis provides a refreshing reading of the texts in this study.

Keatsian aesthetics and idealism have variously been debunked by critics who claim that his idealism was escapist and futile, he was a religious sceptic with no spiritual conviction and suffered from the agony of ignorance, he was an unassertive agnostic or convinced atheist, he was a deconstructionist whose poetics was enshrined in aesthetic and semantic impasse, Swann (1986, 1995), (Wolfson, 1997), O'Rourke (1998), Kenning (1998), Priestman (1999), Everett (2000), Wood (2001) and Sharma et al (2015). Rehabilitating him within a reassessed

Romantic frame would do justice to his legacy in British literary culture. The material in relation to myth serves as a springboard to his most intense philosophical and spiritual speculations. For a poet who passed on at the age of 25 years, there is no doubt that Keats's erudition, intellectualism, artistic talent, philosophical and spiritual insight lend credence to merited distinction. Poetry is the art form which verbalises seeing, observing and perceiving, death and transcendence with a gnostic strain, and expressive of the existentialist issues which occupy Keats's mind. Keats does not only recreate myth, he creates his own myth; he 'mythises' his life in the indelibility of the written word.

Keats's access to Greek classical art was through the visual arts of the Hellenic era which were brought to England by Thomas Bruce, Earl of Elgin. The basic question of interest with regard to ekphrastic poetry is how does Greek visual culture affect Keats's groping sense of aesthetic grandeur, philosophical insight and transcendental conviction? In other words, what accounts for the choices he makes, and what effects have these on his aestheticism, aestheticism in this context conceived as transcending the formalist and structural quality of his poetry? Does the dialogic relationship that exists between an object or image and the poet-observer limit itself uniquely to mere description and aesthetic longings? What are the existentialist undertones in poetry inspired by visual art? How do the thematic concerns of his poetry concur with the philosophical substance of his letters?

The aesthetic phenomenon of ekphrasis as the intersectionality between the visual and the verbal or image and descriptive writing will serve as a critical paradigm in the present investigation. Ekphrasis, highly interdisciplinary in nature, is not a new term in critical circles in written forms of literature, let alone Romantic poetry and particularly Keats's<sup>1</sup>. The issue is not a detailed study of the complexity of the concept, but a semantic contextualisation in the specific dimension with which the present debate on Keats's poetic imaging and imagining is concerned. Keats's mythopoetic consciousness defines and appropriates his aestheticism and philosophy of life and the ekphrastic principle plays a fundamental role in this direction.

Ekphrasis relates to poetry as a speaking or articulating representation, and painting, sculpture, and scenery as a mute poetry or unseen poetry or the unwritten other. It can be defined as the verbal depiction of visual representation. Ekphrastic poetry is therefore poetry that takes its inspiration from visual or imagined art and in turn gives life and vitality to it. It is therefore uncontested to say that, much if not all of Romantic nature poetry was ekphrastic in character as the exteriority of physical nature had an immense impact on the interiority of the poet-observer. What is intriguing but interesting in this context is how contemplative and creative minds respond to other creative minds, or in certain cases, how a creative mind responds to its own creation. In this vein, the creative and regenerative potential of the imagination establishes a psycho-aesthetic relationship between the word and the object. The relationship between the poet or aesthetician and the observed phenomena shows the complexity of interaction with regard to space and time.

The poet is not only an interpreter, but a creator out of what is being perceived and interpreted, since his work chains the line of interpreting. The line of interpreting here connects with the original creator of the art work, who must have had his/her own idea or contemplation behind its creation, different from the verbalising poet. This evokes a circle or chain of interpreting-creating, consisting of the original artist, the poet, and the reader of the poem vis-à-vis the art object and the poem. What Keats is inspired to textualise on Greek sculpture is not necessarily what the sculptor intended in his work. While he is interpreted from a revisionist axis as concerned with our passing away in time, the sculptor might have been preoccupied with immortalising humanity or something. Bloomian psycho-criticism of intertextuality intriguingly goes further to interdisciplinary levels, involving text and image

and the temporal and the spatial<sup>2</sup>. Romantic landscape and nature poetry demonstrate strains of ekphrasis, whereby poetic musing upon the visual aspects of nature leads to other realms of apprehension other than the initial description.

Most criticism on Keats's revisionist poetics has underscored the question of influence, anxiety and antithesis in the direction of seminal authors such as Dante, Spenser, Milton and Shakespeare<sup>3</sup>. Our concern with Keats, however, is ancient Greek art, represented by the sculptures and other related visual art objects that Lord Elgin brought to the British Museum. In addition we would examine the mythic vase of his imaginative creation through verbal energy.

As mentioned earlier, the introduction of ancient Greek art and literature to the British public had a great impact on Romantic thought and aesthetics. We will not go into any details here, given the very limited treatment of ekphrasis from a strict Keatsian perspective. The issue at stake is an in-depth study of but how Greek visual art inspired Keats to have written poetry and made statements that have continued to baffle, if not pose as an enigma to language, literary theory and criticism. A comparative or contrastive study of poems like 'To Haydon: On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,' 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles,' and 'Ode on a Grecian Urn,' shows the depth with which Keats's attachment to Greek culture enriched his aestheticism and philosophical apprehension of life. These are epkphrastic descriptions which demonstrate Keats's aesthetic growth as owing much to his intensely revisionist handling of extant Greek art. One can appropriately discern Keats's individuation, self-discovery through gnosis.

The first and second poems are spontaneous imaginative and highly philosophical responses to the influence that the marbles wield on the poet. The ruins remind him of the inevitability of man's passing away in time. The third poem must have been Keats's own imaginative creation, given that there is actually no representative urn of the poem's description among the art objects Keats saw, and that there is no agreed source of the poem's inspiration in terms of the particular vase that inspired it. But what is certain is that the description of the urn shows strong affinities with issues and scenes presented in *Endymion*. It is therefore an imagined visuality or visualised imagined. For instance the procession, the lovers, the anticipated ritual and sacrifice, can be said to have connections with the themes of the *Endymion*. The apprehension of the enriching nature of suffering and the apparently corroding effect of time cannot be said to be unconnected with the question of time and change in the Hyperion poems, and also interestingly with the philosophy of becoming which seems to be the core ideology behind the poem's contents. Yet, the basic question remains as to what purpose does sculpture and vases serve to an onlooker, and in which frame of mind did the Greek art objects put Keats that lead to his outlook of life not only from the material and mundane perspective, but also from the purely divine and existentialist imagination, or put alternatively, from a mystical and transcendental realm.

### **'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles': Speaking Silence and Inward Self-searching**

What exactly is the ekphrastic substance of this poem? Where does the poem place Keats's ambition for poetic gradation, artistic excellence and existentialist longings? What is the gnostic strain in the poem and others? How does Keats's epistolary self-consciousness intersect with the ideological perspectives in his poetry?<sup>4</sup> Writing to John Hamilton Reynolds on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1818, Keats put into prosaic form what he had hitherto captured in the poems, and which is a characteristic feature in subsequent ones, all connected with the debate on myth as aesthetics and philosophy. In fact, he seems to be working out a theory on aesthetics, with a move at conceptualising what it means and takes to attain not only artistic vision, but also the depths of existentialist knowledge. In this letter Keats stratifies the various stages of knowledge acquisition that strongly relate with his artistic creativity:

*I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me – The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think – We remain there a long while, and notwithstanding the doors of the second Chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle – within us – we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man – of convincing one's nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression – whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open – but all dark – all leading to dark passages – We see not the balance between good and evil. We are in a Mist – We are now in that state - We feel the 'burden of the Mystery.' (John Keats: Letters, 397)*

As already stated, this is a prosaic articulation of the ideas that are expressed in 'Sleep and Poetry' and to an extent 'I Stood Tip-toe.' The passages of life and different thought patterns to Keats presuppose poetic maturity as well, given that he apprehends aestheticism and speculations of life as inextricably interconnected. As the human goes through the successive phases of life, so too does the poet with a vision of struggling to attain poetic maturity. This growth is enhanced by the imaginative potential which in itself is a gradually changing an expansive faculty. Though Keats does not explicitly or implicitly refer to myth consciousness, it goes logically that what he states here aptly fits in the way he uses myth to portray the growth of the imaginative and artistic potential of the poet. The culminating effect of these processes, the burden of the mystery, shows the influence of a Wordsworthian philosophy, finely expressed in 'Tintern Abbey' and appropriately worked out in the Hyperion poems which are inextricably linked to Keats's aesthetic and philosophical development. One can convincingly say, therefore, that a better understanding of these processes is exemplified by Keats's myth-revitalising and myth-making, for it is through myth that he brilliantly maps a systematic structure of aesthetic and philosophical progression. In this vein, the letters on "Negative Capability" and the "Vale of Soul Making", all interrelate with the focal point of our discourse.

The gnostic implications of Keats's philosophy of life's journey to death and after are worthy of consideration to apprehend his maturity. Gnosticism involves individuation, spiritual inner self searching and fullness of transcendental being<sup>5</sup>. Though the Gnostics do not talk much about or capitalise on death, there is much evidence in their philosophy that there is post-existence. The idea that man possesses the spark of divine essence does not mean he is enjoying the Realm of Fullness. It does not presuppose that he is already free from the impinging presence of the body/material world and all that characterise it. Yet, death is not really as important as the various processes of gnosis through which an individual is supposed to attain wisdom and spiritual plenitude. Filoramo (1990: 137 – 141) discusses the complexity of death contending that it is openly topical and seen as a welcome relief rather than a grief, and that it is synonymous with birth and rebirth in the sense of acquiring the plenitude of Pleroma. Keats's preoccupation with death is one of the distinctive marks in our understanding of his Gnosticism and philosophy of post-existence. The philosophy of death is common in most of his writings, and 1820 is the year in which he presented a deep insight into issue before dying on 26<sup>th</sup> February, 1821. It is not a mistake to believe that with the

1819 odes and the strong gnostic sentiments that characterise them, Keats seems to have foreseen the circumstances of his brief life by concentrating the following year on death, post-existence and posterity.

Gnosticism is considered as an esoteric mystical knowledge of ultimate reality. As a superior form of knowledge, esotericism leads to the hidden divinity of humanity, and is therefore connected with the self-deification of the individual rather than mere exoteric religiosity which obscures the spark of divinity within. In fact, Keats's Gnosticism is going to be seen to relate as well with Theosophy which has gnostic undertones and deals with wisdom and divinity. Keats directed bitter criticism against the Christian Church, which he considered to have lost the very essence of its preaching and doctrines, and so provided no assuring way to eternity or immortality.

Roberts' (1997) important research on Gnosticism, points out most of what other gnostic scholars expound. What is interesting in her case is that she uses it as an interpretative measure in literature, not from a Bloomian aesthetic perspective of antithetical thinking in the creative process, but from a purely aesthetic-spiritual dimension, where she intentionally draws no distinction between the two. As an ardent member of the Jung Circle, most of her research is devoted to depth psychology and its relevance and applicability to Gnosticism and other modes of spiritual expression like Alchemy and Platonism. With regard to literature, she devotes her investigations and applicability of Gnosticism to Romanticism (dominantly on the metaphysical and spiritual implications of the imaginative faculty), arguing that Platonism, Alchemy and myth strongly affiliate with Gnosticism and Romanticism. In all these systems, she stresses, there is a common feature of an initial unity which is divided, then re-collected as a higher unity through growth in consciousness. This high awareness constitutes the Romantic quest for wholeness as a gnostic inversion of the redemption myth. On Gnosticism, she accentuates that suffering and despair, whether circumstantial or through the pain of conscious growth, is not an "evil" consequence of "sin," but rather the amoral paradox of necessary evil, the cathartic potential of which transforms the individual through erasing the gnostic sin of ignorance as the unenlightened self.

We have so far tried to discuss some of the major characteristic features of Gnosticism. It should be noted that this is far from being an exhaustive attempt at the referential possibilities of the term, and equally that the thrust of the argument here is not whether Gnosticism is a better and superior form of spiritual salvation than Christianity or otherwise (unless in Keats's arguments and convictions). Only those aspects that seem relevant to the discussion of Keats's poetry and philosophy have been taken into consideration. The major questions therefore centre on the idea of psycho-spiritual processes of individuation as a key way to salvation.

We must stress that Gnosticism was not an overtly expressed spiritual attitude in nineteenth century England per se. In fact, the nonconformist and dissenting attitudes of the past two centuries fuelled Romantic insurgencies, especially the liberating spirit encapsulated in reflective curiosity and imaginative thinking. But with the Romantic revival of Platonism, Neo-Platonism, Pantheism and Theosophy, it was clear that anti-clerical positions were strongly favoured. The context in which we view Gnosticism is therefore logical, given that it has a relation to the philosophies stated above.

The advancement of Keats's distinctive sense of spirituality is expressed in a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, dated 19<sup>th</sup> February 1818. In it, Keats is formulating a concept on man's spiritual construction and wellbeing, which he later refers to and connects with what he calls the "spiritual yeast" of the self, the "vale of tears," and "the Burden of the Mystery,"

culminating with “the Vale of Soul-making.” Keats employs the powerful metaphor of the spider’s web to articulate this strong conviction:

*It appears to me that almost any Man may, like the Spider, spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel – the points of leaves and twigs on which the spider begins her work are few, and she fills the air with a beautiful circuiting. Man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine web of his soul, and weave a tapestry empyrean full of symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his wandering, of distinctness for his luxury.*

(John Keats: *Letters*. 378 – 379)

The forecasting of the discovery of the divine spark through gnosis is highly indicative in this excerpt. Spirituality, as Keats presents it, has the characteristic feature of the individual’s conscious awareness and construction of themselves. The notion of “beautiful circuiting” points to spiritual growth and maturity, resulting in the constant attempts of the self to transcend life’s polarities. The spiral nature of the web can be interpreted from a gnostic standpoint as the process of becoming, of attempting to discover the spiritual potential from within, and therefore seeking the authentic inner self. This brings in the notion of the spiritual seed which is common in most religious traditions, but greatly differs in terms of interpretation. In Christianity, the seed is conceived as the word and body of the growing faith of the church in Christ. In Gnosticism, the seed is the divine essence of God that man possesses and has to discover through gnosis. It is the self-same substance of God or Realm of Fullness. It is therefore part of the cosmic creation myth, indicating the infinitesimal thing from which all else springs.

Keats continues his line of gnostic thinking in three other letters before boldly presenting his spiritual vision. These are the letters addressed to John Taylor, 24<sup>th</sup> April 1818, John Hamilton Reynolds, 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1818, and Richard Woodhouse, 27<sup>th</sup> October 1818. They all point to his conviction in engaging his speculative thought on knowledge, wisdom and spiritual assurance. Self-reliance is seen as a distinctive mark in the process of knowledge acquisition and spiritual discovery. In fact, it is appropriate to see Keats’s notion of knowledge as that which opens up the self to its spiritual essence and potential. In the first letter Keats conjectures that:

*I know nothing I have read nothing and I mean to follow Solomon’s directions of “get Wisdom – get understanding” – I find cavalier days are gone by. I find that I have no enjoyment in the World but continually drinking of Knowledge – I find there is no worthy pursuit but the idea of doing some good to the world ... there is one way for me – the road lies through application study and thought (**knowledge through gnosis: my emphasis**). ... I have been hovering for some time between an exquisite sense of the luxurious and love for Philosophy (**spiritual philosophy: my emphasis**) – were I calculated for the former I should be glad – but as I am not I shall turn my soul to the latter. (John Keats: *Letters*. 391 – 392)*

Wisdom and understanding are a persistent pursuit related to idealistic quest. This idea reverberates with the previously stated idea that rational knowledge (consecutive reason) limits the human capacity to explore ingrained transcendental and immaterial qualities. Though Keats sounds vague here, the parenthetical emphases are inserted in connection with the conviction that there is a systematic trend of thought which later lends credence to the contention that his philosophy adheres to certain pertinent strands of Gnosticism. When he talks of “cavalier days are gone by,” it takes us back to ‘Sleep and Poetry’ in which he

outlines his journey to aesthetic maturity and identity (*Letters*. 101 – 124). He must advance from the realms of Flora and Pan to a more nobler life characterised by strife and agony, that is, a more philosophical and contemplative level of consciousness. We have previously noted that Keats's gnostic attitude is not exclusive of the pleasure and bliss of mundane life. The rejection of the quest of "an exquisite sense of the luxurious" is a re-affirmation of his choices. This comment is very pertinent as a point for substantiation, for it seconds the issue of cavalier days. Here, the poet is obviously not referring to a life of suffering or agony.

The sense of sensuousness and sensuality, either in nature or human relations cannot bring true knowledge in his understanding. In the second letter Keats states on similar lines as above that:

*An extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people – it takes away the heat and fever; it helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery: a thing I began to understand a little, and which weighed upon you in the most gloomy and true sentence in your Letter. The difference of high Sensations with and without knowledge appears to me this – in the latter case we are falling continually ten thousand fathoms deep and being blown up again without wings and with all [the] horror of a bare shouldered creature – in the former case, our shoulders are fledged, and we go through the same air and space without fear. (John Keats: Letters. 395)*

We are presented here with the question of high sensations without knowledge, which introduces us to the gnostic concept of ignorance and the material illusion which imprisons the self's potential for transcendence. In the state depicted here, it becomes difficult to wipe away or annihilate ignorance because no process of gnosis has occurred; no authentic imaginative experience has been arrived at to sanction divine vision.

It should be recalled that this is the same letter which discusses the issue on the Mansion of many Apartments. We can again connect this with our argument above with regard to the letter to Reynolds. The successive chambers to unburden the mystery begin with the Chamber of Maiden thought, which pertains to luxurious and mundane blissfulness. But any authentic aesthetic-spiritual quest must necessitate more complex chambers. This process could also serve as an interpretative measure in understanding Keats's spiritual speculations, given that his aestheticism, far from serving as art for art, culminates with the transcendentalism of his gnostic vision.

Keats manifests the Romantic trait of anti-self-consciousness in articulating his concerns with the axioms of poetry, and though the letter articulates the aesthetic qualities of the poet, it subtly manifests certain gnostic characteristics:

*As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of thing which, if I am any thing, I am a member' that sort distinguished from the Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself – it has no self – is everything and nothing – It has no character – it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or rich, rich or poor, mean or elevated - It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the camelion poet. ... A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no Identity ... the Sun, the Moon and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute – the poet has none; no identity – he is certainly the most unpoetical of God's creatures ... (John Keats: Letters. 418 – 419)*

This excerpt does not only point to an aesthetic quality but suggests a clue to understand Keats's later gnostic intentions. Though it sounds paradoxical and self-contradictory, conveying the idea of no identity and his ironic aversion of the egotistical sublime, it once more depicts and re-affirms Keats's resistance to the fixity of the self which is the very centre of his spiritual longings. This relates with the concept of negative capability which gives a dynamic and widened space for speculation and possibility. Keats goes further to pose a series of rhetorical questions and re-affirms his intentions and ambitions that he will write the greatest poetry, not only concerned with human affairs but connected with his acuteness of vision. It should be noted that this is one of Keats's central passage which the poetics of Deconstruction has interpreted in line with its concept of unreadability, undecidability, aporia and irony. In this vein, it is considered as an expression of the impossibility to construe meaning or formulate concepts. Yet from a hermeneutic perspective, Keats is attempting to formulate and articulate an idea that is open to constructive aesthetic and philosophical broodings.

The most important letter in which articulates Keats's gnostic convictions is among a series of letters which he wrote to his brother and sister-in-law George and Georgiana Keats, dated 14<sup>th</sup> February to 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1819. This letter, written specifically on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1819, has undergone diverse interpretations, but its connection with the ontological self and spiritual engagement is beyond doubt. It offers a hermeneutic and phenomenological clue into the depths of Keats's unchristian spiritual self. From a gnostic perspective, the spiritual philosophy that Keats advances is a mature statement on what he has hitherto been articulating both aesthetically and spiritually in the previous letters.

The circumstances that inspire Keats's speculation here are dominantly related to the life of tragedy, suffering and despair. These are very general experiences and are related to all art, philosophy, and theology. What is distinctive here is the perspective with which Keats handles them in his spiritual vision. These are necessary components of the process of gnosis, because they probe the imagination to speculative thinking that evokes the meta-rational and spiritual. It is in the face of torments and tribulations that man must strive to go beyond the mere realities of his corporeal self. Keats asserts that:

*There is an electric fire in human creatures [,] there is continually some birth of a new heroism. The pity is that we must wonder at it: as we should at finding a pearl in rubbish. I have no doubt that thousands of people never heard of have had hearts completely disinterested: I can remember but two – Socrates and Jesus – their Histories evince it. What I heard a little time ago, ... with respect to Socrates may be said of Jesus – That he was so great a man that though he transmitted no writing of his own to posterity, we have his Mind and his sayings and his greatness handed to us by others. It is lamented that the history of the latter was written and revised by Men interested in the pious frauds of Religion. Yet through all this I see his splendour. Even here though I myself am pursuing the same instinctive course as the veriest human animal – I am however young writing at random – straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness – without knowing the bearing of any one opinion. Yet may I not in this be free from sin? – Do you not think I strive – to know myself? (John Keats: Letters. 464 – 465)*

The gnostic undertones of this excerpt are very glaring. Gnostics see man as embodying spiritual essence which has to be discovered through an intense process of self-seeking. When Keats talks about the electric fire that humans possess and are supposed to search for as a pearl in rubbish, he is obviously referring to the gnostic conception of the sparks of divinity which he later elaborates. We have pointed out Gnostics' conception of Jesus as a convinced



Gnostic, but whose life and sayings are considered to have been altered and distorted to suit the purposes of organised and dogmatic theology; an issue Keats terms the pious frauds of Religion, and poetically articulates in 'Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition' (1816), showing his disenchantment with the de-spiritualising nature of the Christian Church.

Instead of lamenting his agony ("we are destined to hardship and disquietude"), man has to open up to and embrace this reality as a breakthrough to a redemptive realm rather than an irreparable breakdown. This reflects the duality which Gnosticism takes into consideration, asserting that the material world must be superseded if the Realm of Fullness has to be attained. The vale of tears is therefore spiritual yeast which leads to the consciousness of overcoming or annihilating the illusion of materialism. It is in line with this that Keats calls the world "the Vale of Soul-making":

I say "Soul making" Soul as distinguished from Intelligence – There may be Intelligences or Sparks of the divinity in Millions – but they are not souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. Intelligences are atoms of perception – they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God – How then are souls to be made? How then are these Sparks which are God to have identity given them – So as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one's individual existence? How, but by the medium of a world like this? This point I wish to consider because I think it a grander System of Salvation than Christian religion – or rather it is a system of Spirit-creation – This is effected by three grand materials acting the one upon the other for a series of years. These three Materials are the Intelligence – the human heart (as distinguished from intelligence or Mind) and the World or Elemental space suited for the proper action of Mind and Heart on each other for the purpose of forming the Soul or Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity.(John Keats: *Letters*. 473)

There is clear evidence in Keats's articulation of a redemptive vision which he claims to be convincing and superior to the Christian religion. With regard to the dynamics of becoming, soul-making is a constructive process whose end goal is the attainment of the realm of Pleroma. The discovery of spiritual knowledge is not seen in terms of the Christian myth of salvation. Rather, it corresponds with what the Gnostics elaborate in connection with Jung's depth-psychology, in which gnosis gives not only psychological but also spiritual allowance pertaining to ontological issues at odds with mainstream orthodox theologies. This excerpt also points to the question of Eastern mystical traditions which see man's spiritual and divine engagement as a basically individualistic potential. Meditation and divine reflection are therefore important components of Gnostics, given their strong individualistic character.

To explain the workings of his proposed system of spirituality and redemptive vision, Keats is aware of the fact that discursive and rational language may not be appropriate to elaborate his convictions, but advances a comparative analysis:

*I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive – and yet I think I perceive it. - I will call the world a school instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read – I will call the human heart the horn Book used in that school – and I will call the Child able to read, the Soul made from that School and its hornbook. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a Soul? ... Not merely is the Heart a Hornbook, It is the Mind's Bible, it is the Mind's experience, it is the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity. As various as the Lives of Men are – so various become their Souls, and*

*thus does God make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the Sparks of his own essence – This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity – I am convinced that many difficulties which Christians labour under will vanish before it – (John Keats: Letters. 475)*

From this excerpt, we need not re-emphasise some of the basic characteristic features of Gnosticism. But what is so interesting is that Keats should have expressed such a depth of spiritual thought. Christianity accepts that man is made from God's image, but the question of the divine spark or God's essence in man is an encroaching Otherness or Alienness to its ideals, it is a typical Eastern mode of spiritual enlightenment rather than a Christian concept, though Keats asserts that it would work well in a Christian redemptive framework. He expresses his belief and conviction that the gnostic system of Soul-making is parent of the original Christian myth of redemption. Soul-making, Keats accentuates, is a more palpable and personal scheme, and his reference to the Hindus is an indication of a relation to or knowledge about Eastern mystical and spiritual systems to which he is inclined.

Self-reliance therefore distinctively stands as the basic key to gnosis. It leads to self-knowledge, self-discovery and a deep spiritual self-awareness. Intelligence in gnostic terms will be the realm of Fullness and not the Demiurge. So the divine spark should be corresponded with the true God and not the self-deceptive and deceiving one. When one carefully examines this letter and the poems that Keats wrote in this same year, there is a consistency of thought. 1819 was the most productive and maturing year for Keats in his search for an aesthetic identity and an alternative quest for spiritual wellbeing and assurance. There is a systematic connection between the gnostic elements in his letters and poems dating from 1817 to 1819, and his philosophy of death with its spiritual implications dominantly preoccupied most of his 1820 engagements.

Keats permanently lived with the consciousness of death, and it is evident that he saw it as one of the measures necessary for the overcoming or annihilating of the agonies and strife of earthly existence. And as we have already said, the question of death as a common topical or thematic concern in poetry need not be overemphasised. We cannot reductively view suffering alongside death as all that is to be said about his Gnosticism. But what holds one's interest is how it can be treated as pointing to a gnostic attitude, how Keats blends his premonition of death with his certainly unchristian philosophy of becoming and post-existence.

One of the first intense broodings of Keats's philosophical attitude towards death can be traced in 'On Seeing the Elgin Marbles' (1817):

My spirit is too weak – mortality  
Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep,  
And each imagin'd pinnacle and steep  
Of godlike hardship, tells me I must die  
Like a sick Eagle looking at the sky.  
Yet 'tis a gentle luxury to weep,  
That I have not the cloudy winds to keep,  
Fresh for the opening of the morning's eye.  
Such dim-conceived glories of the brain  
Bring round the heart an indescribable feud;  
So do these wonders a most dizzy pain,  
That mingles Grecian grandeur with the rude  
Wasting of old Time – with a billowy main –  
A sun – a shadow of a magnitude.

The speechless but diversely articulate and communicative marbles elicit verbal response in poetic rendition and generate existentialist speculations and interrogations. The word-image dialectic in this instance has deep undercurrents of meaning. The hermeneutic instance wrestles with seeing beyond the physicality of the marbles. Seeing transcends the materiality of the ruins to the realms of the poet's apprehensions of subtler experiences of bliss and beyond-ness of human infliction, trauma, pain and physical death. Contrary to what some critics have understood to be the basic message of this poem, contending that it is an expression of poetic impasse, pessimism and death generated by the Grecian ruins, the poem has a positive philosophical attitude towards the reality of death.

The tone does not show the poet as being afraid of or wanting to escape from the presence of such Grecian grandeur which brings to consciousness one's mutability in unchanging nature of time. The lines "My spirit is too weak – mortality/ Weighs heavily on me like unwilling sleep" express the overwhelming power that the sight of the marbles wield on him. Yet this state of mind neither connotes self-defeatism nor the desire to escape the reality and inevitability of death. "Such dim-conceived glories of the brain/Bring round the heart an indescribable feud;/So do these wonders a most dizzy pain," suggests what one can call the spiritual ferment in Gnosticism. Relating the marbles to wonder, feud and dizzy pain shows an awakened consciousness in the self of transience and transcendence. These apparently negative states of mind attest to the process of individuation and self-discovery. The question of the sun and a shadow of the magnitude is not very clear, but could suggest an aspired transcendental and textually elliptical signifier. If we examine the development of Keats's thought from this year onwards, there is substantial evidence that he modified his view on the question of spirit, integrating death more than usual into the fabric of his gnostic attitude.

#### **'Ode on a Grecian Urn': Existentialist Interrogation Mode in Imagining and Imaging**

This is one of Keats's most enigmatic poems regarding the ramifications of ekphrasis and his existentialist broodings. Till date, there is actually no existing evidence that such an urn really existed. Keats obviously imagined the urn and wrote as he perceived it in his imaginative eyes. The poem showcases Keats's affiliation to classical Greek heritage. What is important are those instances that oscillate between the material and ideal and how Keats understands them. The transience-transcendence, impermanence-permanence, mortal-immortal, and mundane-soulful dichotomies in this poem evoke a number of gnostic related issues. The most pressing one is that the one becomes possible because of the understanding of the other. The metaphysical or transcendental is lived only temporarily, but there is a strong sense of spiritual discovery which indicates that the infinite is attainable and therefore justify the prefiguring spiritual power of the imagination.

The ten existentialist questions that Keats poses in stanzas I and IV of this poem are a clear indication of gnosis, of a process of individuation and knowledge-seeking which culminates with self-discovery and continuous spiritual yearning:

#### I

What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape  
Of deities or mortals, or of both,  
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady? (1)  
What men or gods are these? (2) What maidens loth? (3)  
What mad pursuit? (4) What strange escape? (5)  
What pipes and timbrels? (6) What wild ecstasy? (7)

.....

#### IV

Who are those coming to the sacrifice? (8)  
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,  
Lead'st thou that heifer lowering at the skies,  
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest? (9)  
What little town by river or sea shore,  
Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,  
Is emptied of this folk, this pious morn? (10)

These questions and what he philosophises in his meditative observation and reflection, show his synaesthetic and empathic character which relates with the qualities that consist in his capacity of negative capability. The questions can be seen as more directed to the speaking self, as an act of inner self-inquiring and questioning rather than the supposed silent and inarticulate object that has inspired the reflective attitude to life and the desire for transcendence. The questions therefore resist the deconstructionist view that they are unanswerable, and justify nothing but aesthetic and spiritual impasse.

Using Desmond's ontological category of the equivocal sense of being which appeals to the non-discursive and metaphysical, Stambovsky (1997) contends that gnosis leads to an intuited knowledge of the absolute. So in its timeless existence or trans-temporality, the urn is a symbolic representation of eternity. This gnosis can further be understood by applying the dialectic category. Stambovsky rightly sees the urn in this perspective as a reflective medium, stressing that the encounter with the urn is an encounter which is a self-mediating drama that gets played out entirely in the beholder's consciousness. He interprets the Keatsian persona as remaining at once dialectically other to the urn while he self-transcendentally speaks as the urn.

Stambovsky refers to Desmond's conviction (Desmond, 134) on the dialectic sphere to discuss the last stanza of the poem:

*[The dialectic] is concerned with the articulation in intelligible saying of that interplay [among self and other], with respect to both mind and being. Moreover, it is intimately linked with the sameness of univocity and and the difference of equivocality, and most especially the oscillation between them.*

We can conclude with similar lines on his conviction that dialectically conceived the ode fulfils the promise of an encounter between two antipodal poles of truth: the earthly and the ideal. With regard to the antithetical thinking in the poem, Maureen Roberts rightly contends that the urn epitomises the function of all symbols of the absolute principle of knowledge and being in that it represents the irrepresentable. In this vein, it symbolises what the ode itself delineates, the lived paradox of the inherent polarities of life. This, she stresses, are action through non-action, fullness through emptiness or void, knowledge through ignorance, being through non-being, and the immanence of the eternal within the temporal. From strict gnostic terms, emptiness, void, ignorance, non-being and the temporal only serve as an igniting force for gnosis, but do not reconcile with it. This brings to mind the metaxological strand of senses of being which, as indicated above, resists reconciliation of opposites. We can also refer to the poem 'Song of Opposites' which conveys a similar theme. All these point to an intense process of exploration into the ontological self in the bid to come to terms with and transcend the material limitations of life.

"Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought/As doth eternity" has often been misconstrued as Keats's rejection or renunciation of imaginative and visionary experience. But from a hermeneutic and phenomenological viewpoint, this statement clearly posits the conviction that Keats is aware of the limitations of rational knowledge, which must be

superseded into non-rational and non-discursive spheres. Teasing out of thought presupposes another level of reflection that goes beyond the rational. Keats strongly believes that it is eternity that teases us out of thought. So seeing the urn as representing that eternity, or more precisely as providing visionary space is related to the gnostic search for the true essence of spirituality.

The concluding lines of the ode's last stanza attract a careful hermeneutic and phenomenological interpretation within the frame-work of the present argument:

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,' – that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

There is a clear change of emphasis here, that is, from the speaking presence to the articulating voice attributed to the urn. The urn, though silent, paradoxically has a voice to transmit what we can call an elliptical transcendental message to humanity, which the poet universalises as the most important thing to humanity. This gives room for a dialogic perspective or what one can call an inter-mediation in the complex act of self-investigation; the urn being an imaginative Other with a self-reflective attitude, and the poet who contemplates the urn. The urn can therefore be said to articulate through the act of the poet's delicate process of consciousness as self-mediation or inner-self-dialogue. This message, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,' is an enigmatic proposition that has been subject to a multiplicity of interpretations. Our concern here is its applicability to the discussion on Gnosticism. As a transcendent voice, the urn (the poet's self-transcendent self) will speak for eternity to humanity, who in successive generations will be subject to woe and agony, but with its message, can change its state from woe to transcendence, immanence and spirituality.

The content of the message necessitates a hermeneutic reading. The question of Beauty and Truth can be seen from a dual perspective as evident in a contextual definition. Beauty is considered as a highly inclusive category, and here will apply to the aesthetic faculty in relation to its (that is, Beauty) outer qualities; phenomenal, sensuous and sensual beauty, and its inner qualities; spiritual and transcendental. Truth is seen, among others, from a pragmatist and correspondent dimension, and from its intuitionist and metaphysical ramifications. We can respectively interpret the phenomenal and pragmatist views of Beauty and Truth with regard to Keats's negative capability as an empathic embodiment of all experience. From this perspective, Beauty can be seen as that which must die, 'Ode on Melancholy' (Stanza III, L. 21), and therefore not an ultimate or lasting Beauty, "eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty".

## CONCLUSION

Keats's myth-consciousness through ekprasis and gnosis sheds light on his myth-revitalising and myth-making potentials. The basic argument has been concerned with the aesthetics of regeneration, creativity, philosophic/spiritual insight and becoming. At no moment did Keats show signs of having attained his poetic vision or metaphysical vision. But his interweaving of myth into his poetic and philosophical consciousness appropriates a steady development that he was going through before his death, forming the substance of his own self-made myth despite the deterministic constraints of his life. This aestheticism is strongly connected with the spiritual aspects of his life, which have been argued on the grounds of gnosis, which implicates depth spiritual and divine awareness through individuation. The myth that Keats bequeaths to posterity is not actually Greek myth, whether verbal, visual or written. It is the myth of the search for an identity as a poet with a distinctive personality and voice. It is the

myth of his aestheticised life, or to put in differently, the myth of the poet in the quest of becoming an aesthetic and philosophical hero. The myth lives on and will certainly be subject to further considerations and conceptualisations.

## ENDNOTES

1. There has been an increasing interest in the study of the relationship between the visual and the written word. Ekphrasis, that has come to represent the concept, shows the subtleties of the various responses that the written word has engendered from visual culture, and points to the enriching and mutually shared relationship between the two. An impressive number of works are available for further reading on the subject. We have, A. Kebidi Vagra, "Criteria for Describing Word and Image Relations" (1989), Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1990), Peter Cannon-Brookes, *The Painted Word: British History Painting* (1991), Murray Krieger, "Appendix: 'Ekphrasis and the Still Movement of Poetry; or Laokoon Revisted'" (1992), W. J. T Mitchell, "Ekphrasis and the Other" (1994), Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760 – 1830* (2001), and Wolfgang Funk, "The Poem as Mirror: Reflections on the Relation of Poetry and the Visual Arts in John Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' and W. H. Auden's *The Shield of Achilles*" (2002). We have already discussed certain historical, social and anthropological positions on Keats in relation to his ekphrastic poetry.
2. Important works of Bloomian psychoanalytical approach, which are related to his theories of influence and anxiety are *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975) and *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (1976). They discuss Bloom's cognitive approach, encapsulated in the psychological impact of earlier writers on younger ones and how the younger ones struggle through the process of individuation to seek a distinctive and recognised voice from the precursor. Keats's ekphrasis expresses his swerving away from art objects that inspire his creativity.
3. A number of readings have situated Keats's work in the domain of influence and anxiety. These have always led to the question as to who the precursor(s) of a particular poem was. We have the examples of Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (1963), Cynthia Chase, "'Viewless Wings,': Intertextual Interpretation of Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'" (1985), Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* (1986), Greg Kucich, *Keats, Shelley, and Romantic Spenserianism* (1991), Ralph Pite, *The Circle of Our Vision: Dante's Presence in English Romantic Poetry* (1994), Rudolf Sühnel, "Keats's On First Looking on Chapman's Homer" (1998), and Michael Hanke, "Keats Reading Spenser" (1998). Chase, for instance, carries forward Bloom's assertion that Milton is the principal source and haunting spirit behind the ode's composition. She adds the aspects of syntactic and sonic motivations in the poem, justifying Keats's revisionist stance in the end of her argument. Her point of reference is *Paradise Lost*. Bate takes the issue of intertextuality to more complex and intriguing terms. He recognises the multiplicity of sources in the poem, but strongly contends that Shakespeare is the pivotal force behind the poem's creativity. His reference points are *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, though he demonstrates that Keats comes out of the influence with an integrity and distinctive poetic and aesthetic voice of his own. The other readings also substantiate Keats's revisionist tendencies in face of previous poets who wield an influence on him.
4. The different editions of Keats's letters have different editorial preferences. While some give the full contents of the letters, some of which carried poems, others select only those portions they think have an important bearing on Keats's poetic and philosophical ideas. Elizabeth Cooke's edition does not include poems, or certain prose sections. For instance

the portion of Keats's narrative to his younger sister, but it at least shows proof that Keats mentions the poem. Grant's recent edition, which has been used in this essay, carries the poems and considerable portions of the letters.

5. Etymologically, Gnosticism stems from the term "gnosis," which in Greek means knowledge. It is therefore a state of consciousness, and Gnosticism denotes the Gnostic system. Gnostic consciousness combines both epistemology and ontology. So its conception of the acquisition of knowledge and the contemplation on the mystical and spiritual ramifications of life are inextricably linked, for the one works towards attaining the goal of the other. Many scholars have tried to assemble authoritative material and expound the different referential possibilities of Gnosticism rather than tried to give a concise definition to the term. They include Hans Jonas, Carl Gustav Jung, Joseph Campbell, Harold Bloom, Clark Emery, Robert Grant, Richard Smith, Emile Gillibert, Anne Marie McGuire, Giovanni Filoramo, Mark Jeffery Olson, Peter Sorensen, Bentley Layton, Maureen Roberts, Gilles Quispel, Herbert Christian Merillat, Douglas Groothuis, and Stephan Hoeller.

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