

Contemplation on Beauty by Keats and Hopkins

Kunio Shimane

I

Hopkins was an admirer and a perceptive and understanding critic of Keats. He regarded Keats so highly that he hypothetically compared Keats with Shakespeare in a letter to a friend:

Keats' genius was so astonishing, unequalled at his age and scarcely surpassed at any, that one may surmise whether if he had lived he would not have rivaled Shakespeare.

(LII 6)

The fact that Hopkins' grand-father, a surgeon, was a fellow-student of Keats at the medical school they attended together (LI 51) does not account for Hopkins' admiration which derives from the fact that they are, by nature, kindred geniuses. Because of this Hopkins had been able to sense as well as perceive Keats' genius. One of his early poems, "A Vision of the Mermaids" naturally resembled Keats' poems in its sensuousness. Hence the words of Robert Bridges about his friend's poem: "This poem betrays the influence of Keats" (PI 213). Whether or not Hopkins strove to imitate Keats, just as Keats imitated Spencer, Shakespeare and Milton, is a matter of slight importance in view of the fact that Hopkins evolved into a greatly different poet. Basically what is common to both poets is that they were endowed with great sensitivity or sensuousness and imagination and also with a powerful intellect. In a sense, for Hopkins to praise Keats is comparable to praising himself. It is therefore noteworthy that Hopkins compared Keats to Shakespeare.

Kindred geniuses as they were, they grew into vastly different poets. In thought one has become profoundly religious; and in style, masculine, intense and kinetic; the other Romantic and unique in thought, in style natural, quiet and smooth. Their differences should be ascribed to their different backgrounds; especially to their education: a formal, higher and traditional education for Hopkins and a self-disciplined one for Keats. Hopkins had a deep understanding of the Romantic poet with his unfavourable attributes. He says in a letter to another friend: "His defects were due to youth—the self indulgence of his youth; its ill education" (LIII 386).

Reading Keats' letters is as much an experience as reading Hopkins' letters. They show eloquently Keats' naturally keen intellect, but sometimes they make us wish that he had an education comparable to Hopkins'. If he had had such an education, he would have found it easier to explain what he was thinking

of--such important and difficult matters as “negative capability”, imagination, sensation and beauty; conversely it would have been much easier for us to understand him correctly. He tried what he could to train himself and read such poetic giants as Spencer, Shakespeare and Milton. About his education compared with Shakespeare’s Hopkins sympathises with him:

He was at a great disadvantage in point of education compared with Shakespeare. . . . Shakespeare had the school of his age. It was the Renaissance: the ancient Classics were deeply and enthusiastically studied and influenced directly or indirectly all, and the new learning had entered into a fleeting but brilliant combination with the medieval tradition. ... But in Keats’ time, and the worst in England, there was no one school; but experiment, division, and uncertainty. He was one of the beginners of the Romantic movement, with the extravagance and ignorance of his youth (LIII 382).

Through these ill conditions, Hopkins, himself a deep thinker and a competent critic, perceived Keats’ keen intellect and intellectual aptitude and said: “He was, in my opinion, made to be a thinker, a critic as much as a singer or artist of words” (LIII 387). This has been proved correct not only by Keats’ poetry but also his letters published much later.

Beauty is undoubtedly Keats’ most important theme in which Hopkins is also deeply interested. In the beginning of *Endymion* Keats utters:

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
 Its loveliness increases; it will never
 Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
 A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
 Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

(I. 1-5)

This utterance has the quiet meditative tone which is soothing. Quietness is the tone when he contemplates on and talks of beauty. When he contemplates on the Grecian urn, he begins in a quiet tone appropriate to a contemplation implied by the title “Ode on a Grecian Urn”:

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
 Thou foster-child of silence and slow time.

One might think that this quiet tone is due to the quietness of the urn which has survived “unravished” in

its long history of slow maturation. The progress of history and the growth of the beauty of the urn is so slow and quiet that both imply “still-ness”. In this way the urn seems to symbolize immortal beauty of a work of art (though in ancient times ceramics were not pieces of art). There is a clear contrast in tone between this and Hopkins’ kinetic, energetic and exciting “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo”:

How to kéeep--is there ány any, is there none such, nowhere
 known some, bow or brooch or braid or brace, lace,
 latch or catch or key to keep
 Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, . . . from
 vanishing away?

These exciting and passionate lines could easily be attributed to Keats the Romantic poet, while the quiet meditative lines from the *Grecian Urn* could understandably be taken to be Hopkins’ who was an expert practitioner of Ignatian contemplation. This contrast is also seen symbolically between Keats’ “To Autumn” and Hopkins’ “Spring”. It is quite enough to quote the first two lines from each poem to examine this:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!
 Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun.

And

Nothing is so beautiful as Spring—
 When weeds in wheels shoot long, lovely and lush.

The different tones in these poems are due to many elements besides the meaning, such as images and phonetic techniques. The use of *s* and *m* in Keats has realised a sense of serenity as well as the fullness and mellowness of the *season of fruitfulness*, while in Hopkins the *ws* and *ls* cannot but imply motion— i.e. the rapid growth of weeds in wheels, especially when they are used in alliterations; the assonances naturally contribute to this implication. Serenity and motion are dominant and contrasting features of the two poets.

Now in his quiet meditation on the Grecian urn Keats is not so much interested in its function as its form and beauty which has deepened through history. It is its beauty which invites the poet’s contemplation on it. He considers the urn as a symbol of the high craftsmanship of the age and place he regards as ideal. It is almost a miracle that this piece has not only survived ‘unravished’ but also has matured and increased in beauty through “slow time” of long history. He then begins asking simple

questions headed by as many as seven *whats* in the second stanza. Thus he lets it tell its 'sylvan' history:

What leaf-fringed legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?

The poet uses his two powerful senses, sight and hearing at the same time:

What men or gods are these? *What* maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? *What* struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? *What* wild ecstasy?

The *wild ecstasy* has entered the world of timelessness. Therefore either the maiden or the youth would not lose "what they are now, called fair", though their lips will never meet:

She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss.
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

The urn now represents immortality, just as the nightingale, *the immortal bird*, whose voice enchanted the poet, 'was heard'

In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when sick for home
She stood in tears amid the alien corn.

("Ode to a Nightingale", vii)

Apparently there is an idea of immortality in Keats' mind and this sense of immortality is included in his idea of beauty even though he says: melancholy "dwells with Beauty—Beauty that must die" ("Ode on Melancholy"). The beauty realized in the urn, on the contrary, is still, solid and suggestive of eternity. After his meditation on each scene on the urn, he reaches a conclusion. Now Keats is thinking of the meaning of the existence of the urn, as he has done in the beginning. He interprets the urn, which is eternal and has existed and shall exist as *a friend to man* through woes of history as well as felicities, to be beyond human thought. At the very end of his contemplation the poet hears it speak to him:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

There are a few different versions of these last two lines of how the quotation marks are applied. Most authoritative editions adopt the version with only *Beauty is truth, truth beauty* in quotation marks. In “the earliest known manuscript” (Gittings), for instance, no quotation mark is used; in Douglas Bush’s edition, the whole of the two lines are quoted (O’Rourke 47) to indicate these lines are spoken by the urn. I would like to think also that the whole of the last two lines should be quoted as the words of the urn, for this puts a correct relationship between the poet or man and the urn indicated by the two kinds of historical pronouns: *Ye* and *Thou*.

Since the aphoristic *Beauty is truth, truth beauty* has already charmed so many readers and invited so many comments and opinions, I have no intention of attempting another detailed interpretation, except adding two minor points.

This riddle in English poetry must have been made through Keats’ imagination which seems to be synonymous with intuition, as he pronounces in a famous letter:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of Imagination—What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth— . . . The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream—he awoke and found it truth. I am the most zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how any thing can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning- (Kli 184-5).

Clearly manifested here is his absolute faith in Imagination and deep distrust of “consequitive reasoning”. Although I cannot present proof, I am fairly certain that this conviction of his is solely due to his nature, his self (in Hopkins’ sense) which is characteristic of a genius. He was aware of the limitations of reason as well as the infinite ability of imagination. It is his imagination that has intuitively grasped that beauty is truth and vice versa. Had he Hopkins’ education, he would be able to explain it in reasonable language. Well-educated or ill educated, it must be difficult to explain what one’s intuition has caught or felt. He is a born poet. No wonder, he yearns, “O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!” (Kli 185).

Into what Keats has caught through his imagination, Hopkins’ knowledge may cast light. In one of his undergraduate essays he writes that the objects of art are “Truth and Beauty”, and that

the preponderance of one of our two great elements of Art in any marked degree to the setting aside of the other is destroying the balance and therefore the success of Art-- two elements namely of Truth and Beauty (J 76).

It is apparent that in Hopkins’ thought of art beauty and truth are intimately related. For artistic

excellence these two objects or elements should co-exist and be balanced; it is therefore impossible to separate them, much less dismiss one. Unlike Keats' contemporaries such as Hazlitt, who says "to the genuine artist, truth, nature, beauty, are almost different names for the same thing" (O'Rourke 53), Hopkins does not regard beauty as truth but holds that they are equally essential objects of art. It seems natural that Keats' imagination has seized them as equal, though his education has not provided him with enough knowledge nor vocabulary to explain his thought clearly to his readers .

So much for deciphering the riddle. In any case, to my ears in the mysterious words of the ancient Greek urn there curiously echoes another enigmatic chanting of the witches in *Macbeth*:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

(*Macbeth*. I.i.)

That Keats read *Macbeth* is evident and his echoing the witches has created another mystery to English poetry. While the witches' riddle implies the reversal of values as well as the destiny of mediaeval kings, the urn's pronouncement claims the equality of values between beauty and truth and it also suggests the interchangeability between them.

Now if we compare the two expressions, particularly –*Beauty is truth, truth beauty and Fair is foul and foul is fair*, we find a striking similarity between them. It is a similarity produced mainly through the equally symmetrical syntax, the same number of syllables and the same rhythmic pattern. Although the metres are different, stressing of these expressions are the same with the same number of stresses. There is yet another identical pattern between them: the arrangements of the open and closed syllables. Both *beauty* and *fair* are open syllables and *truth* and *foul* are closed syllables and they are alternated in the same pattern. Thus while the witches' words imply that the contrasting values in the play—especially good and evil—alternate and so do the destinies of kings in the revolution, in its etymological sense, of history, the conclusion of Keats' contemplation assumes a tremendous emphasis on the sameness of the two values of beauty and truth. This is his conviction. Unlike the ancient Greeks who used ceramic vases only for their function for holding water, oil, spirits or human bones, Keats the Romantic poet regards the urn with aesthetic interest and respect as a piece of art and looks to what it essentially is.

II

Just like Keats Hopkins is also deeply concerned with beauty. There are surprisingly many lines and expressions about beauty in Hopkins' poems. This shows that beauty is one of his main themes. It would be idle here to cite them all and would suffice to concentrate on a few poems such as: "Pied Beauty" , "The

kingfishers catch fire”, “To What Serves Mortal Beauty” and “The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo”.

In a sense “Pied Beauty” is reminiscent of Keats’ “To Autumn” in vivid imagery but is different in that this “curtal sonnet” has been composed with a definite idea of beauty. Hopkins is interested in irregularity, contrast and opposition in things as a principle of beauty, as he is equally interested in regularity, identity and similarity. In one of his undergraduate essays entitled “On the Origin of Beauty: A Platonic Dialogue” the Professor of “the newly founded chair of Aesthetics” asks John Hunbury, his student, in their discussion if he likes “the whole sky to be uniform rich red? To this answers Hunbury, “Certainly not” (J 88). Then the Professor asks:

Or the red and blue to end sharply with a straight line, without anything as a go-between? (J 88)

His student answers that he likes “the gradation” (J 89). Both the professor and the student agree that “beauty is a mixture of regularity and irregularity”; it is in other words *complex beauty* (“On the Origin of Beauty” J90). It is a matter of course that after this in Hopkins’ mind vivid imagery consisting of various contrasts would be formed:

Glory be to God for dappled things--
 For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
 For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
 Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
 Landscape plotted and pieced--fold, fallow, and plough;
 And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things created by God in this world are *counter, original, spare, strange*. After all, theoretically, *pied beauty* lies in the contrast between the *swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim*. *Pied beauty* is what God *fathers-forth* which is *past change*. This thought is endorsed by his experiences of observing nature as well as his sacramental view of the world. On his way home from Lord Clifford’s on a summer evening in 1874 he looked up at the sky when “the stars came out thick”. He enters in his journal:

I leant back to look at them and my heart opening more than usual praised our Lord to and in whom all that beauty comes home (J 254)

Pied beauty is a contrast between the *inscapes* which each object constituting *pied beauty* possesses. *Inscap*e is not only the essential individuality for existence, or “the distinctive controlling energy that makes the being itself” (Ong 17), but also the very essence of individual beauty. Without *inscape* neither

the object or being nor its beauty can exist. Indeed, Hopkins holds that *beauty is* “the virtue of inscape”. Speaking about the difference between poetry and verse, he asserts:

But if it [verse] has a meaning and is meant to be heard for its own sake it will be poetry if you take poetry to be a kind of composition and not the virtue or success or excellence of that kind, as eloquence is the virtue of oratory and not oratory only and *beauty the virtue of inscape* and not inscape only (289; Italics mine).

It is evident that beauty is a major attribute of *inscape* such as “effect” or “merit”. It would not be, therefore, far from the truth that *inscape* is the origin of beauty in Hopkins’ aesthetics. That is to say, God *fathers-forth* the *inscape* of each thing and being in the world, “to and in whom all the inscape comes home”. All of Hopkins’ nature poems are his praise of God who manifests himself through the *inscape* and beauty and grandeur in the world.

A small child Margaret is *grieving over Goldengrove unleaving*. She does not know why but is sad to see the beauty of autumn fading with golden leaves falling. Soon she, as a keen-witted girl, will learn there is no way in this world to *keep back beauty from vanishing away: No there’s none, there’s none, O no there’s none*. Then she realises a dreadful truth about herself:

Nor can you long be, what you now are, called fair,
Do what you may do, what, do what you may.

Thus her intelligence tells her this sad truth and she despairs already in her young girlhood. What a monstrous contrast with those Greek maidens on the Grecian urn!

Not only the beauty of nature manifested by their own inscape but also the beauty, both physical and spiritual, of people never stopped attracting Hopkins. In a letter to Robert Bridges he admits this and mentions physical beauty first: “I think then no one can admire beauty of the body more than I do” (LI 95). His innate and keen eye for beauty would never fail in finding and admiring the physical beauty of people. He admires it in “Harry Ploughman”, thereby the amazing description, “a direct picture of a ploughman, without after thought” (LI 262). Although “this kind of beauty—i.e. *mortal beauty which does set dancing blood –is dangerous*, it nevertheless can serve the good of the world: *it keeps warm/Men’s wit to the things that are*. The beauty of the young male slaves from the land of Angles hinted to the later Pope Gregory to dispatch St. Augustine and his company for the conversion of the nation. Thus using physical beauty, which is mortal and can be dangerous, *God to a nation dealt that day’s dear chance*.

Greater than beauty of the body in Hopkins’ thought is the “beauty of the mind, such as genius” which is not dangerous. More beautiful than the beauty of the mind is the beauty of character, the handsome heart

(LI 95): thus he is much impressed with a little boy's *handsome heart*—i.e. a *Heart mannerly*—which is *more than handsome face*. Likewise, the poet is moved by the simple character of the *big-boned and hardy-handsome* Felix Randal whose *tears touched* Father Hopkins' heart at the end who now calls him *child, poor Felix Randal*.

Hopkins further develops his aesthetic theory: "The soul is the form of the body" (LI 95). Although "soul" in Hopkins' philosophy may not be an exact synonym to his idea of *self*, as *self* may not be exactly identical to *inscape*, there is at least a definitely close relationship among these three and especially between the latter two: *self* and *inscape*. According to Walter Ong, "often the self is related to the superindividuation of "inscape" or "instress" (Ong 7). In some usages, especially in Hopkins' poetry, they seem to be identical in meaning as in the following examples.

The first from "To What Serves Mortal Beauty":

World's loveliest--men's *selves*. *Self* flashes off frame and face.

It is interesting that on a simpler level John Donne seems to share a similar view of man's mind and body when he says:

To wicked spirits are horried shapes assign'd

This beautiful forme assures a pitious minde.

(Divine Poems. XIII)

What is more, in the Kingfisher sonnet, *men's selves* are connected to the *self* of Christ and its typical case is that of *the just man* who justifies:

Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is— Christ.

This thought develops in the most dramatic expression in "That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection":

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,

I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and

This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,

Is immortal diamond.

Now noteworthy is the fact that the word *self* is also applied to things--i.e. other than human beings. This the poet articulates most definitely:

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
 Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
 Selves--goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
 Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*
 ("As kingfishers catch fire")

In the first quatrain of this sonnet mortal things such as "kingfishers", "dragonflies", "stones", "tucked strings" and "hung bells" manifest their individuality or *self* through their characteristic actions. To denote their distinct actions the poet uses the verb form of self: *selves*. Also in "Binsey Poplars" a variant of the same usage is seen:

Ten or twelve, only ten or twelve
 Strokes of havoc *unselve*
 The sweet especial scene,
 Rural scene, a rural scene,
 Sweet especial rural scene.

The unusual word *unselve* apparently denotes the destruction either of the *self* of this landscape made up with aspens or the *self* of each aspen. Here *self* should be synonymous with *inscape*. He laments the destruction of nature since he cannot bear to see its *inscape or self* destroyed. His sorrow was profound to find:

The ashtree growing in the corner of the garden was felled. It was lopped first: I heard the sound and looking out and seeing it maimed there came at that moment a great pang and I wished to die and not see the inscapes of the world destroyed any more(J239).

What is noteworthy here is that Hopkins uses *inscapes* instead of *selves*, when the situation is exactly the same as the destruction of the aspens in "Binsey Poplars". Then these words should be identical in meaning. At least in the poems the reader should read *self* as *inscape*. Otherwise the meaning of *unselve* and *selves* in these poems cannot be duly interpreted. It is curious that much has been said about *inscape* but this word is not used in his poetry. It is used in his journals and other writings. It seems that Hopkins has not defined it clearly. Is *inscape self, self inscape*? Keats says boldly *beauty is truth, truth beauty*,

while Hopkins does not say clearly *inscape* is *self*. For all this, as far as his poetry is concerned it is *self* which matters.

In the world above it is otherwise but here below beauty, which is *heaven's sweet gift* and is manifested through *inscape or self*, must die. This is the source of disappointment and despair to man who instinctively longs beauty to be immortal. Keats' cry to the nightingale *O immortal bird* implies this instinctive desire. What he catches in the Grecian urn is a glimpse of immortality of art and its beauty, while Margaret is on the verge of despair and crying. But wait! There is the most ingenious magic to turn mortal beauty to immortal beauty in the echo between the *Leaden Echo* and the *Golden Echo*:

Be beginning to despair, to despair,
Despair, despair, despair, *despair*.

Spare!

There is one, yes I have one (Hush there!)
Only not within seeing of the sun,
(“The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo”)

where,

The flower of beauty, fleece of beauty, . . .
Never fleets more, fastened with the tenderest truth
To its own best being and its loveliness of youth.

What do then? how meet beauty which never fleets more? It is not enough to *merely meet it and own Home at heart, heaven's sweet gift; then leave, let that alone* (“To What Serves Mortal Beauty”). It demands of Margaret much more than this. It demands a most painful sacrifice of resigning her mortal beauty:

Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God,

who is *beauty's self and beauty's giver*. Then she has to strive to go to heaven where her beauty is kept with *fonder a care*.

III

It is curious that these two poets of genius died young or, at least, prematurely--Keats in his mid twenties and Hopkins in his mid-forties. What they left tells us that it is their poetry that counts. At the very old age of ninety an average poet could never compose the mature, serene and content "To Autumn" reflected in heavenly light. Yet it is very hard, on the other hand, to believe that this ode has been composed by a youth of twenty-five. Genius is a true bliss.

The deficiency of education and lack of higher education had not hampered Keat's self-training which developed his natural intellect and talent. His letters are the records of his training and soul-making as a poet. His growth is amazing indeed. His style is fashioned to be most suitable to his thoughts. Most of the odes of 1819 show an ideal blend of his style and thought.

Hopkins was also endowed with rich talent which enabled him to grow to be a rare and great poet who combines the most profound thought and the most unique style, neither of which seems unprecedented. His nature is probably intuitive like Keats and is as sensuous as Keats. It is his training which educated his mind as well as his senses. The enthusiasm of his age about linguistic inquiries from etymology to prosody enhanced his linguistic knowledge which contributed greatly to developing his style featuring especially the power of English consonants. His knowledge of English and stylistics is so competent that he cannot tolerate Keat's "unlawful rhyme" as "very offensive to trained taste" (J 286). At the same time contemporary fashion of observation of nature (Ong 11) helped his artistic eye to see things accurately. All these different kinds of education and his Christian training undoubtedly served to form his theory of *inscape* and *self*. They have their origin in God and are immortal.

Both Hopkins and Keats are great examples of poets who have "tasked the highest power of man's mind" (J 85).

References

- Hopkins, G. M. *The Poetical Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins* W. H. Gardner, ed. Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1967(PI)
 — *The Journals and Papers of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. H. House and G. Storey, eds. London: Oxford U.P., 1959(J).
 — *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. C. Devlin, ed. London: Oxford U. P., 1959 (S).
 — *The Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins to Robert Bridges*. C. C. Abbott, ed. London: Oxford U. P., 1955(LI).
 — *The Correspondence of Gerard Manley Hopkins and Richard Watson Dixon*. C. C. Abbott, ed. London: Oxford U. P., 1955 (LII).
 — *Further Letters of Gerard Manley Hopkins* C. C. Abbott, ed. London: Oxford U. P., 1956 (LIII).
 Keats, J. *Letters of John Keats*, 1. ed H. E. Rollins. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard U. P., 1970 (KL1).
 — *The Poems of John Keats*. Allott, M. ed. London: Longman, 1970.

— R.Gittings, ed. *The Ode of Keats and Their Earliest Manuscripts*. Ohio: Kent State U. P., 1970.

Ong, W. *Hopkins, the Self, and God*. Toronto: U.P. of Toronto, 1986.

O'Rourke, J. *Keats's Odes. Contemporary Criticism*. Gainesville, Fla. U.P. of Florida, 1998. —