CHAPTER - VII

ARNOLD ON KEATS
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It is quite unnecessary to speculate on the extent and the kind of influence that Keats had on Arnold. It is also difficult equate Keats's influence on Arnold, with that of Wordsworth or Byron because it was something which Arnold rather would avoid than aspire to, if possible. The Keatsian influence is something against which he waged a war. Arnold's dissatisfaction with the early poetry of Keats is strikingly noticeable as early as in his Preface to 1853 volume of poems. Keats was presented as an unhealthy or bad model for a young poet in 1853 preface solely because Arnold believed that poetry could perform its immense task if served by a style plain, direct, and severe. His adverse comments on Keats as mentioned in the preface are mainly directed towards his style and the kind of influence Shakespeare was believed to have had on Keats, and more than all this, his feeling that Shakespeare himself would be a bad model for Victorian poets.

As he wrote to Clough "the language, style and general proceedings of a poetry, which has such an immense task to perform must be very plain direct and severe, it must not lose itself in parts and episodes and ornamental work, but
must proceed forward to the whole," even though he had not clearly defined the so called 'grand style'.

It is a very ambiguous and vague issue and more so, it is very difficult to say what exactly Arnold meant by style since he appears to be hinting at a dichotomy between style and content here though elsewhere later he regards style as an integral part of the whole poem.

His statements on style such as

"style is the saying in the best way what you have to say;"¹

"The grand style arises in poetry when a noble nature, poetically gifted, treats with simplicity or with severity a serious subject."²

are meant to embody both a neoclassical concept as well as a romantic notion of style. Further, Arnold as indicated in his Preface of 1853, equated style with diction, imagery and prosody; he suggests three different meanings for style in the 1853 preface 'the choice of subject, the organisation or architectonics, and verbal expression.'


Arnold's case against Keats is presented in the preface particularly when he considered Shakespeare 'as a dubious influence, because while he chose great actions, and created great situations and characters, his gift of expression could run away with him.'

He criticises Shakespeare with due regard to his eminence; "that with all Shakespeare's gift for choosing subjects, he obscured action, of his plays by the exercise of a gift for, happy, abundant, ingenious expression." Thus he cites Shakespeare and Keats as examples for unpoetic nature of the moderns.

He vehemently calls Keats, 'a style and form-seeker'. He further, stated that Keats and Shelley were on a false track, when they set themselves to reproduce the exuberance of expression, richness and charm of Shakespeare.

Though Arnold's criticism of Keats is less severe than his criticism of other poets, like Shelley and Byron, Arnold manifestly disapproves the exuberance of Keats' style.

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Apart from Arnold's criticism of Keats's style, his rather harsh treatment of Keats, based on his examination of Keats' letters, is worth noting. It is found to be improper on the part of Arnold, to judge Keats's much praised romantic trait—sensuousness, as something ignoble. Arnold's conclusions in this regard are considered, as mere misreadings by several critics, as they find nothing unnatural in Keats' attitude.

Arnold, focuses his attention on certain other aspects of Keats' poetry than on mere sensuousness. Yet Arnold seems to be less perceptive, particularly, when he attempts to see elements of high character in Keats—they are character and virtue. Less perceptive, because he appears to be not sufficiently sensitive to the moral poems of Keats. Arnold agrees fully with Lord Houghton that Keats was the very soul of manliness and courage. Thus Arnold indicates to the average man and woman that their idol was something other and better than they knew; Arnold goes further to help those with another belief that Keats is one of the greatest of English poets if not fully by his performance at least by his promise, and that a merely sensuous man cannot either by promise or by performance be a very great poet ...4 Hence he cannot but look

for signs in him of something more than sensuousness, for signs of character and virtue.' This is certainly, a fairly high estimate of Keats in *The Essays in Criticism*. Probably it is Arnold's intention to save Keats from the sicklier kind of admiration as in the case of Wordsworth and Byron - he tried to rescue Wordsworth from the Wordsworthians, and 'Byron from his passionate admirers' who never got beyond the theatrical Byron. There is also the implication that Arnold is trying to caution contemporary poets to free themselves from the influence of the merely sensuous, which forms a large portion of Keats's poetry, though not the valuable and significant portion.

Arnold establishes the fact that Keats is one of the greatest poets, by drawing up a catalogue of signs of 'character and virtue'. This catalogue has been subjected to much criticism again as Leon Gottfried points out, the catalogue by itself is certainly not sufficient to offset the "depreciation and innuendo of the opening pages as the opening characterisation of the sensuous and unbredman, though relatively brief, acquires importance, from sheer reason that it precedes the whole length of the eulogistic account Keats'
remarkable virtues. Still there is another section of readers
and critics who feel impressed and satisfied by the placement
of Keats with Shakespeare towards the end of the essay. Ac­cor­ding to them, the total weight of the essay is evidently in
Keats' favour notwithstanding the harsh tone of the opening
section. For all practical purposes, the catalogue is unde­niably an impressive one.

Major portion of the essay is a character analysis of
Keats. Arnold in his assessment of Keats first traces the
signs of virtue and character in Keats before approaching
actually the poet and his poetic achievement Arnold finds several
incidents from Keats life (as found in his letters) concrete
proofs to establish the fact that Keats is a man of great
character and virtue. To quote a few instances from the essay —
what Keats said to his friend Bailey on the occasion of a
quarrel between Reynold and Houghton; What Keats wrote to Bailey
on this occasion, according to Arnold the bear testimony to his
character and virtuous conduct. We are told, that Keats dis­played a wholesome attitude towards the virtues and vices of
men and a sound understanding of friendship as well as shrewd­ness and clear-sightedness in estimating the character of other
poets (Milton, Byron) and his own.
Arnold states that 'Keats had iron and flint in him'. He refutes the general opinion of the reviewers about Keats as a weakling, by saying "that he was, as his brother George says, was as much like the Holy ghost as Johnny Keats'. Arnold's analysis of Keats's character also seeks to correct the error into which many poets and critics of these times fell, as a result of the hostile criticism of the mind and art of Keats. Byron was convinced that Keats was 'snuffed by an article'. Even Shelley believed that the savage criticisms of Keats's work had hastened his death. On the contrary, according to Arnold, Keats was a man of strong character, displayed a fairly indifferent attitude towards this kind of public opinion and hence his attitude towards criticism is 'entirely faultless'. He accomplished his purpose and thereby silenced all unfriendly criticism.

He emphasizes that Keats's yearning for the beautiful, his master passion, was not sensuous but was truly an intellectual and spiritual passion. It was as Keats himself said "the mighty abstract idea of Beauty in all things." Keats was a great and noble spirit as he alone realizes the

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\[5\text{Ibid., p. 288.}\]
close relation between beauty, truth and joy and Arnold gives him due credit for this just and high perception in Keats. Unfortunately Keats's achievement was cut short by his untimely death. Finally Keats did recognise that 'place must be found for the 'ardours rather than the pleasures of song' in his own poetry. But Arnold appears to have dwelt upon this fact in rather brief manner and this fact is treated in a short paragraph in the whole piece. Arnold seems to be making just a passing reference.

Arnold considers Keats perfect in his shorter pieces. He admits that these shorter pieces have in them, the rounded perfection and felicity of loveliness of which Shakespeare is the master. Eliot comes closer to Arnold when he regards the Odes enough for his reputation and that Keats had a philosophic mind though to a lesser degree than Shakespeare. According to Arnold Keats is with Shakespeare in his gusto and gift of language. Although more consummately gifted than Wordsworth, Keats 'died having produced too little.' "For the second half of poetic interpretation, for that faculty of moral interpretation which is in Shakespeare Keats was not ripe," nor was he sufficiently mature as

"Ibid., p. 291."
an artist to produce great wholes like Agamemnon or King Lear. Arnold does not dwell much on the perfection of Keats's shorter pieces—Odes, and lets the poem he selected prove his assertion. "To show such work, says Arnold, is to praise it". If we set aside Keats' merit as a writer of letters, a man of courage and great character, a nascent Shakespeare and consider his poetic genius based on what he produced rather than what he promised," Can we say that Arnold was wrong in his assessment of Keats as Keats's poetry is richer in promise than in actual performance."

To a certain extent it is true, that Arnold is wrong to think so, as there is consistent evidence of Keats's early efforts - full of promise to produce mature masterpieces. By virtue of his odes, he takes the place beside Shakespeare, although in a limited way. It is needless to say that Arnold's essay is devoted mostly to Keats's character. There is very little discussion of his poetry.

He evades the question of true poetic interpretation, and the significance of the term 'natural magic', which he uses for one of these modes of interpretation "I will not
now inquire whether this sense is illusive, whether it makes us possess the real nature of things. "

"The interpretations of Science do not give us this intimate sense of objects as the interpretations of poetry give it." 

"Where is Keats, who is lacking in all but natural magic? He is far from the main stream his work remains, one of the minor currents of modern poetry."

As Leon Gottfried says, "Arnold's puritanism has often been enough held accountable for some of his less judicious critical performances, such as his essays on Keats and Shelley."

The aim seems to be not so much to reach a real estimate of Keats, it is as with Byron, to clear away certain fallacies in contemporary taste, and thus to place Keats's fame on a surer and firmer footing.

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7 Ibid., p. 61.
8 Ibid., p. 61.
10 Ibid., p. 144.
He, instead of seeking to study the literary thought, and the philosophical development of the poet, makes up a catalogue of signs of 'character and virtue', which only reduce his work to a biographical sketch on Keats.

Arnold on the other hand, could have devoted more pages to the study of the basic assumptions of Keats and their concrete manifestation in his own poetical works. "What imagination seizes as beauty must be truth."

"What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet."

Arnold's contention that although he was not ripe for the kind of moral interpretation given by Shakespeare, Keats, in spite, of his short and harassed life, accomplished so much in life, may be examined more closely. The statement 'he was not ripe for the kind of moral interpretation' does not sound reasonable enough; as, at any rate, Keats's poetry speaks of feelings that are both spontaneous in utterance and philosophical in spirit. 'Keats managed to do far more in his four years than Shakespeare managed to do in the same space'.

It is indeed a miracle as Middleton Murry calls it, to have achieved within a short space of time, opulent per-
fection of language, and the living depth of poetical thought in the great odes and Eve of St. Agnes; not to speak of his earlier verse.

A greater amount of thought has been packed into the poetry of Keats' first volume.

And other spirits there are standing apart
Upon the forehead of the age to come.

In 'sleep and poetry', Keats is defining poetry by poetry when he says poetry is

Might half-slumbering on its own right arm
A single line, at once conveys so much about poetry, strength, ease, majesty, naturalness, a softness as of sleep, a relaxation of all tensions, sovereignty of instinctive comprehension—one could capture manifold implications from this line, from the so-called immature Keats.

Keats' poetic mastery, is incomparable. 'He utters himself in poetry'. The poetic mind of Keats can make miracles with a 'sweep of imagination' such as transforming the nightingale into an immortal bird.

Thou was not born for death, immortal bird;
No hungry generations tread thee down .....
or can impose eternity on the temporal by 'emptying the little town of its folk'

What little town, by river or sea shore
Or mountain built with peaceful citadel,
Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?
And little town, thy streets for evermore
Will silent be ....

The triumph through despair, the deep wisdom attained through attainable objects of beauty like the urn.

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to men, to whom thou say'st,
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', that is all
We know on earth, and all ye need to know.

or the sheer felicitations of words and phrases, the patterning of images, the blending the religious, magical and spiritual elements as found in a poem like Eve of St.Agnes.

Ah, silver shrine, here will I take my rest
After so many hours of toil and quest,
A famish'd pilgrim - sav'd by miracle.

Middleton Murry is right, when he says,

"We should hold it in our grasp if we could know by what means the pure poet, the exemplar of complete humanity, attains to that 'genuineness of being' of which his work is the natural utterance."

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Arnold's underestimation of Keats's sensuousness can be refuted by drawing attention to what Fogle said about Keats's poetic experience. "The unique quality of his poetic experience arises from his wholehearted love of the external world, at first, instinctive and spontaneous, later conscious complex and philosophical. The rapturous enumeration of natural beauties in *Isle of the Dead* represents the early much the deeper and subtler perceptions of the *Ode to a Nightingale*, the *Ode on Grecian Urn*, and the *Ode on Melancholy* reflect the later. The power and concentration of the contemplative attitude in Keats are a result of his conviction that appearances can be trusted to the full; that Beauty and Truth reside in the phenomenal world itself, and may be found there if one will take the trouble to seek them out." 12

"His belief in the necessity of accepting the fullness of experience has its counterpart in what Prof. Finney called, "the principles of excess, intensity and spontaneity in his imagery" (CL Finney The Evolution of Keats's Poetry. I 245),

"Keats's sense of the fullness and complexity of human modes of experience, the irony begotten of this sense, and his acceptance of experience, are most notably presented in the great *Ode*." 13


13 Ibid., P. 198

14 Ibid., P. 209