

Problem of Self-Consciousness: A Study on John Keats's Scotland Sonnets*

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Cheong, Seok Kweon. "Problem of Self-Consciousness: A Study on Keats's Scotland Sonnets." *Studies in English Language & Literature* 44.4 (2018): 1-15. The aim of this study is to examine and analyze Keats's Scotland sonnets written during his Scotland walking tour which represents the turning point in his poetic career. For Keats, the tour had very complex motivation, background, and results. Especially the sonnets regarding Burns memorials in Scotland allegorize the crisis of his poetic identity. Keats's crisis of self-consciousness was intensified by his confronting the residence of William Wordsworth and the actual circumstances of Robert Burns. Keats's realization at Burns's memorials of entangled web of human miseries and aesthetic perceptions did not resolve the problem. Rather, it put him more deeply into the problem of self-consciousness. (Chonbuk National University)

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I. Introduction

John Keats considered walking tour in the north of England and Scotland in 1818

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as a decisive step in his poetic career, and thus the tour had very complex motivation, background, and results. In his letter to Reynolds, Keats unfolds specific reasons for his desire to travel, since the travelling, mental and physical, is a typical romantic experience as a form of quest:

I have many reasons for going wonder-way: to make my winter chair free from spleen – to enlarge my vision – to escape disquisitions on Poetry and Kingston Criticism. – to promote digestion and economies shoe leather – I'll have leather buttons and belt; and if Brown holds his mind, – over the Hills we go. – If my Books will help me to it, – thus will I take all Europe in turn, and see the Kingdoms of the Earth and glory of them. (*Letters* 1: 268)¹

After mentioning his intention to escape from the burden of both inception and reception of his poetry, Keats further specifies the wishful reciprocation of his economics: his going to nature is to privatize it, and use it as fit material for his physical health and poetic re-creation, which will enable him to see “all Europe in turn.” At the end of the quotation, however, by seemingly innocuous biblical allusion to the scene of devil’s temptation, the whole character of escape is abruptly changed: from nature to culture, from reciprocal economics to imperial politics, and from exploration to seduction. By making the allusion, Keats seems to invite the temptation of self-interest, the devil in himself, which he hopes will take him up to a high mountain, and show him “all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them” Matthew 4: 8).

During the Scotland travel, what Keats met was not the nature which he expected but rather his other selves projected onto nature, or his troubled self-consciousness that haunted through the Lake District and mountains of Scotland. During this walking tour, as Morris Dickstein points out, “actuality, self-consciousness, and the tragic miseries of poets such as Burns intrude into Keats’ mind and deepen rather

¹ *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Rollins (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1958). All quotations of Keats’s letters are from this edition and hereafter will be documented by volume and page numbers in the text.

than alleviate his crisis [of self-confrontation]" ("The Divided Self" 4168-A).

Keats intended his visit to Scotland as a "means of annulling self" by approaching "such a shrine as the Cottage of Burns" or the Tomb of Burns (*Letters* 1: 323). The desire to annihilate self by appropriating and idealizing a poet who had a miserable life becomes a heavy burden to Keats's self-consciousness, especially his consciousness of the poetic career as he confronts the reality of Burns memorials.

Keats envisioned his Scotland tour not only as a careerist's investment but as a psychotherapeutic session to heal his troubled self-consciousness and to reconcile his divided selves. But the tour was in effect a psychomachia for him, since it provided him with both escape from and re-confrontation of the problem of self-consciousness which always beset him. The tour was, on the one hand, an escape from the poignant realities in London: from his helplessness for his brothers's illness, from the "Money troubles" (*Letters* 1: 142), and from the uncertainties about his poetic career; it was, on the other hand, an escape into his career project envisioned as a romance-quest, into the places of inspiration, the native places of his poetic precursors: Wordsworth and Burns. The paradox is that Keats self-consciously desires to have un-selfconscious success in the poetic career. This dilemma and its effects on Keats's poetic career is the main concern of this study, by discussing the sonnets written during the Scottish tour in the context of Keats's Romantic ideologies.²

Keats's "Romantic Axioms" are a by-product of these Romantic ideologies, since they share significant points with the poetic theories of other Romantic poets such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, and since Keats's axioms, like any other ideologies, "will necessarily be seen as false consciousness when observed from any critical vantage, and particularly from the point of view of a materialist and

² I borrowed the term "Romantic ideology[ies]" from Jerome McGann, *The Romantic Ideology* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1983). The term is liable to theoretical generalization, since it is loosely defined as "Romanticism's own self-representations" (1), and thus it overlooks the specific ideology by arguing, "one of the basic illusions of Romantic ideology is that only a poet and his works can transcend a corrupting appropriation by 'the world' of politics and money" (13).

historical criticism (McGann 12). Influenced mainly from Wordsworth, Keats formulated his own brand of “Romantic Axioms”: the organicism of poetic production (“If poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all.”); the harmonious correspondence between nature and human (“The setting sun will always set me to rights.”); and the creative power of wise passiveness (“Let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at; but let us open our leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive.”) (*Letters* 1: 238, 186, 232, respectively).

II. The Mirror and/or Lamp

One of the struggles Keats met with during this travel was the disillusionment of his romantic project. His “shrines” of Wordsworth’s Lake District and Burns’s Highlands did not nourish him with imagination as he hoped for; instead, they offered him “cold and strange” reality, as Keats writes in his sonnet, “On Visiting the Tomb of Burns.” These sonnets are, in every way, negative examples of Keats’s Romantic “Axioms” in poetry. Keats was painfully self-conscious of his careerist venture, as he comments of the sonnet “On the Cottage of Burns”: “I wrote a sonnet for the mere sake of writing some lines under the roof” (*Letters* 1: 324). During this tour, Keats wrote sonnets because he felt he had to as a poet visiting the “shrines” of Burns, whom Keats sentimentalized as “a poor unfortunate fellow” with a tone of whimsical self-pity (*Letters* 1: 319-20).

Most critics single-handedly follow Keats’s own evaluation of these sonnets during the Scotland tour, and condemn them with Keats that they are aesthetically “bad” and thus poetical “failures.” I would argue, however, that these sonnets’ “badness” provides significant material for us to re-evaluate Keats’s evolving idea on the production of poetry and its effect on the poet and the reader. Of the five

sonnets written during the Scotland tour, none has received favorable, or even serious, attention either by Keats or by the critics who followed Keats's own judgment. Most obviously, we have only scarce criticism on these sonnets; moreover, they were neither revised by Keats nor, save one, published during his life time. "To Alisa Rock" was published in Leigh Hunt's poetry anthology, *Literary Pocket-Book*, which is, according to Keats, "full of the most sickening stuff you can imagine" (*Letters* 2: 7).

But Keats sent those sonnets amid the descriptions of the scenery in his letters to Tom Keats. Thus Keats had in mind at least "an" actual reader when he framed the sonnets in his letters. Further, he wrote to Tom that the intended reader was neither exclusively singular nor secretive: "Let any of my friends see my letters—they may not be interested in descriptions—descriptions are bad at all times" (*Letters* 1: 301). Bad though they may be, there are two kinds of descriptions inevitably crossing each other: descriptions of what he sees and those of what he imagines or what he suffers from internally.

Keats's "Scotland Sonnets" show that these two kinds of descriptions are not as exclusive to each other as Keats thinks when he compares Byron's poetry to his: "[Byron] describes what he sees—I describe what I imagine—Mine is the hardest task" (*Letters* 2: 200). Keats's contrast of Byron's description and his own anticipates M. H. Abrams' distinction between mimetic and expressive theories of art using the metaphor of mirror and lamp (cf. 3-29). Neither mirror nor lamp, however, can be an exclusive metaphor for Romantic nature poetry, especially Keats's sonnets during Scotland tour, since the self-expression in language is yet another form of mimesis, and since the mimesis of nature is yet another form of self-projection. Even Hazlitt, Abrams' exemplary critic of expressive theory, complicates the mirror/lamp division by combining both:

Neither a mere description of natural objects, nor a mere delineation of natural feelings, however distinct or forcible, constitutes the ultimate end and aim of poetry .

. . . The light of poetry is not only a direct but also a reflected light, that while it shows us the object, throws a sparkling radiance all around it. (Hazlitt 5: 3; qtd. in Abrams 52)

In order to analyze more critically Keats's sonnets during Scotland tour, then, we need to identify the problematic gap between the mirror and lamp, in which intertextuality and self-reflexivity are inexplicably blended. The rest of the paper will discuss, by focussing on the sonnets on Burns memorials, these sonnets' dramatization of failure for the poet who wants a clear-cut distinction between what he sees and what he imagines, and following de-idealization of his own Romantic ideology. These sonnets reflect and reflect on Keats's purgatorial suffering in the vale of psychomachia, physically exhausted in the mountains of Scotland and psychically bewildered in the moors of self-consciousness. This unsettled wandering anticipates the psychic escape from and return to the "sole self," his renewed self-consciousness, the paradigm on which Keats's 1819 sonnets and odes are based.

III. The Laputan Printing Press

Keats's sonnet "On Visiting the Tomb of Burns," shows his troubling mind as he realizes the wide gap between his expectation of nature and reality of surroundings of Burns memorial:

The town, the churchyard, & the setting sun,
 The Clouds, the trees, the rounded hills all seem
 Though beautiful, Cold—strange—as in a dream,
 dreamed long ago, now new begun
 The short lived, paly summer is but won
 From winters ague, for one hours gleam;
 Through sapphire warm, their stars do never beam,
 All is cold Beauty; pain in never done

For who has mind to relish Minos-wise,
 The real of Beauty, free from that dead hue
 Fickly imagination & sick pride
 Cast wan upon it! Burns! with honor due
 I have oft honoured thee. great shadow; hide
 Thy face, I sin against thy native skies.

After copying out the sonnet in his letter, Keats comments on the sonnet:

This sonnet I have written in a strange mood, half asleep. I know not how it is, the Clouds, the Sky, the Houses, *all seem* anti Grecian and anti Charlemagnish—I will endeavour to get rid of my prejudices, & tell you fairly about the Scotch— (*Letters* 1: 309; emphasis added)

The subject “all” and the verb “seem,” which appear in similar contexts in the sonnet and in the comment, are significant for our initial understanding of the poem’s mood. Besides the ambiguity of interpretation implicit in the word “seem,” the change of complement from “Cold-strange” to “anti Grecian and anti Charlemagnish” is important for our investigation of this “obscure” and “inchoate” sonnet (Murry 200, and Maxwell 79, respectively). The words “Grecian” and “Charlemagnish,” which Murry quickly interprets as “classical” and “Gothic” beauty, suggest Keats’s romantic tendency to mystify his remote ideals (Murry 201).

But Keats’s ironic description of Loch Lomond gives us a clue to his constant struggle for de-mystification and willingness to self-criticism:

Steam boats on Loch Lomond and Barouches on its sides take a little from the Pleasure of such romantic chaps as Brown and I—The Banks of the Clyde are extremely beautiful . . . the Evening was beautiful . . . yet was I worldly enough to wish for a fleet of chivalry Barges with Trumpets and Banners just to die away before me into that blue place among the mountains—I must give you an outline as well as I can. . . . [Hyder Rollins notes, “A rough pen sketch is given here.”] (*Letters* 1: 334)³

As Stuart Sperry persuasively argues, there are “certain incongruities of vision” in this description, “which not only fail to harmonize, but compete for attention” (140): a) the industrialized scene of steamboats and barouches not pleasurable to “such romantic chaps”; b) the grandeur and beauty of nature which remains only in dim re-presentation like a rough pen sketch; c) the remote idealization of wish for “a fleet of chivalry Barges with Trumpets and Banners,” summed up in the word, “Charlemagnish.” Ironically, Keats says he wishes for this anachronistically other-worldly scene, because he is “worldly enough.” Ian Jack compares Keats’s occasional sonnets during this tour to “the sketches which a painter makes as he travels about, to refresh his memory later.” Further, he argues, Keats is “viewing Scottish scenery through an imaginary Claude-glass . . . a ‘worldly’ processing that might have disgusted Wordsworth” (Jack 110-11). Wordsworth’s disgust is anybody’s conjecture, but the analogy of Keats’s Scottish sonnets to the landscapes seen through Claude-glass (a convex, dark or colored hand-held mirror, used to concentrate the features of a landscape in subdued tones) suggests Keats’s careerism as well as his romanticizations of nature.

Keats’s “worldly enough” strategy is figuratively coded in the beginning of the sonnet, “On Visiting the Tomb of Burns.” The sonnet begins by invoking a catalog of natural surroundings, like typical romantic nature sonnets such as Anna Seward’s sonnet which begins, “Now on hills, rocks, and streams, and vales, and plains” (Original Sonnets, no. 36). But the catalogue of nature in Keats’s sonnet is dislocated by the word “seem,” which rhymes with “dream,” and the rhyming words render nature deeply internalized and misplaced. Nature, seen by the “romantic chap” as Keats calls himself, is disfigured as a “dream”—one “dreamed long ago” at that.

In his letter to Reynolds written during this tour, Keats invokes not the poetic muse, but a satirist’s printing press, to describe nature:

³ For the facsimile of Keats’s pen sketch, see Ian Jack, *Keats and the Mirror of Art* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967) 110.

I'll not run over the Ground we have passed. that [*sic*] would be merely [nearly] as bad as telling a dream—unless perhaps I do it in the manner of the Laputan printing press—that is I put down Mountains, Rivers[,] Lakes, dells, glens, and Clouds, with beautiful enchanting, gothic picturesque fine, delightful, enchanting, Grand, sublime—a few Blisters &c—and now you have our journey thus far. (Letters 1: 322)

“The Laputan printing press” alludes to Gulliver’s travel to the grand Academy of Lagado, where “the most ignorant Person at a reasonable Charge, and with little bodily Labour, may write Books in Philosophy, Poetry, Politicks, Law, Mathematics and Theology,” “by practical and mechanical Operations” of randomly matching “all the Words of their Language in their several Moods, Tenses, and Declension” (Swift 156).

Keats’s allusion to the Laputan printing press makes a self-critical comment on his romantic ideology, and effects a satire directed toward his native concept on the use of language. Two projects of the Lagado Academy in relation to the problem of language-expression might be helpful to understand Keats’s almost sarcastic attitude toward natural descriptions, and toward the faith in harmonious correspondence between nature and language, when he invokes “the Laputan printing press”:

The first project was to shorten Discourse by cutting Polysyllables into one, and leaving out Verbs and Participles; because in Reality all things imaginable are but Nouns.

The other, was a scheme for entirely abolishing all Words whatsoever. . . . An expedient was . . . offered, that since Words are only Names for Things, it would be more convenient for all Men to carry about them, such Things as were necessary to express the particular Business they are to discourse on. (Swift 158)

Keats’s arbitrary catalog of nouns and adjectives for natural scene with the implication that any adjective can be matched with any noun “in the manner of Laputan printing press” signals his ironic disfigurement of himself as a “romantic chap,” and his continuous psychomachia to find his own poetic identity, without

romanticizing or sentimentalizing nature or Burns memorials.

In order not to write in the manner of Laputan printing press, Keats resorts to the scene of dream, his favorite figure for poetic conception from his early poetry on.⁴ The immediate site (“The Town”) has been disfigured by the sight (“seem”); the disfiguration is further distanced from the object by the complement “strange” (L. extraneous, that is without) as well as by the simile (“as”) used to introduce the dream-vision. By making the actual site a dream-vision farther removed from sight, the strangeness tends to qualify the dreamer rather than the scene. The speaker, as a perplexed dreamer, is further alienated from his dream itself because of the temporal dislocation of his dream (“I dreamed long ago, now new begun.”).

The alienation of the speaker from his actual experience through his “strange” perception and through uncertainty of dream, is further deepened by the seasonal misplacement in lines 5-6. Because of the inability to appreciate nature without “prejudices,” preconceived sentimentalization of the place, nature is seen as “Cold-strange,” and summer he now experiences is a momentary, almost hallucinatory escape from “winter[']s ague.”

IV. The Sense of Misplacement

The sense of misplacement in Keats’s Scotland sonnet is intensified when we consider that Keats had bundled all three volumes of Cary’s translation of Dante’s *Comedia*. Keats’s reading of Henry Cary’s translation of Dante is complicated since it signals not only the absence of the original text, but also marks the family romance of sonneteers. Dante is well known as the writer of the sonnet-sequence, *Vita Nuova*, to his absent lover, Beatrice. Psychologically, Keats’s Scotland tour can

⁴ Keats’s whole poetic career from “Sleep and Poetry” to “The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream” is, in a sense, an ongoing struggle to define the complex relationship between dream and poetry, or dreamer and poet. Thus the figure of dream has become a self-reflexive metaphor for poetry in Keats’s poetry.

be seen as a search for the absent parent. The family romance is seen through Keats's intertextual engagement with the family of sonneteers and song-writers: Dante, Cary, Wordsworth, and Burns. The meeting place is the textual space, the "cold" and "strange" Dante's Hell, into which the father-figure, Virgil, leads Dante.

Keats read the early part of *Inferno* during the trip. As Robert Gittings points out, Cantos 2-8 of *Inferno*, which Keats read during the Scotland tour, are full of "cold" images: "wind, rain, hail, snow, mud, and water" (Gittings 15). Thus even before the introduction of "Minos" in line 9, the phrase "winter[']s ague" (line 6) puts the speaker in Dante's second circle of Hell, where

. . . . as in large troops
 And multitudinous, when winter reigns,
 The starlings on their wings are borne abroad
 So bear the tyrannous gust those evil souls. (Dante 19)

Through the contrast of "paly summer" and "winter[']s ague," the dream-vision is disfigured into the scene of Dante's second circle of Hell where the carnal sinners are punished by winter gust. Mis-reading of nature corresponds to mis-reading of text. This multi-layered misplacement of the scene accelerates the speaker's anxiety of perception. The speaker's failure of aesthetic response ("all seem / Though beautiful, Cold-strange") becomes the fixation of failure ("All is cold beauty."). Morris Dickstein's comment on this transformation tends to over-universalize this failure: "The deficiency is in the world, as well as in [Keats] himself, and not in this scene alone but in 'all' such beauty" (*Keats and His Poetry* 172). John Middleton Murry, on the other hand, interprets line 8 as Keats's personal confession of pain: "We feel that Keats, at this moment, was really suffering," since the line "comes with a strange and unexpected vehemence" (Murry 200). If I am not comfortable with Murry's personalized, sympathetic reading of the line, I am even less comfortable with Dickstein's universalizing, empathic interpretation.

Both Murry and Dickstein consider line 8 as two independent, assertive sentences: “All is cold beauty” and “Pain is never done.” Hence, “a strange and unexpected vehemence” and “the universality of pain” (Murry 200; Dickstein, *Keats and His Poetry* 172). Both arguments, however, as I already indicated, are based on an unauthoritatively emended text, and tend to lessen the troubled self-reflexivity in the sonnet. With the original punctuation of Jeffrey’s transcript, the syntax of the line is heavily dependent on the preceding and the following. And now the lines mean: “Since all seem, through beautiful, cold and strange . . . all is cold beauty” and thus “pain is never done for who has mind to . . .” Read thus, lines 9-12 become, instead of a rhetorical question expecting self-justifying answer, a self-reflexive, ironic description of the speaker’s “strange mood.” Then, the sentence, “Pain is never done.” rather than independently representing “the universal of pain” with “an unexpected vehemence,” is doubly conditioned by and dependent on the preceding anxiety of perception and the following, ironic qualification.

Through his “strange” dream-like perception, the speaker becomes alienated from the reality, and “venoms” “the Real of Beauty,” as Moneta, in *The Fall of Hyperion*, which Keats was to write the next summer with heavier allusion to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, admonishes the dreamer:

Every sole man hath days of joy and pain
 Whether his labours be sublime or low—
 The pain alone; the joy alone; distinct:
 Only the dreamer venoms all his days,
 Bearing more woe than all his sins deserve. (1: 172-176)

As “painful joy” or “joyful pain” are the properties of the dreamer who “venoms all his days,” the “cold beauty” is represented as oxymoronic perception, since “beautiful” and “cold” are shown as antithetical in lines 2-3. The oxymoronic quality of the confused dreamer becomes more ironic when he is somehow likened to Minos, the impartial judge of Hell, who “stands, / Grinning with ghastly feature”

(Dante 18). For the speaker, who projects all his dream-vision—disfigured by “fickly imagination and sick pride”—onto the natural scene, “pain is never done,” since he can never relish “The Real of Beauty,” however he “has mind to” (Yost 225).

H. E. Briggs asserts that the phrase “Fickly imagination and sick pride” refers not to Keats himself but to the Scottish people. Briggs’s argument wholly depends upon pointing out Keats’s “prejudices” toward Scottish people, and concludes Keats had no mind to relish “the Real of Beauty,” because “Keats’s disposition, like Burns’s, was Southern, his imagination luxurious” (309-11). But, because of his uncritical embrace of Keats’s sentimentalization of Burns as the basis for explication, Briggs’s attribution of “fickly imagination and sick pride” to the Scottish people fails to account for Keat’s self-reflexivity mediated in the phrase.

V. Conclusion

Keats’s conflict of self-consciousness as a poet, as represented in the Scotland sonnets, becomes clear. Unlike Hazlitt who dismissed Burns’s sentimentality, Keats, standing in front of Burns’s tomb, cannot see Burns’s life, literally blocked by the tomb, and metaphorically clouded by his “fickly imagination” (his sentimentalized self-projection onto Burns) and “sick pride” (his self-conscious desire to be “among the English poets”). The suppression of Burns’s name until the last moment in the poem supposedly dedicated to Burns’s death memorial indicates the speaker’s “sin” of self-projection and self-consciousness. The awkwardly phrased command, “Great shadow, hide thy face!”, is, in a sense, the sonnet’s sour-grapes confession of its inability to see Burns’s shadowy face. The suppression and erasure of the shadowy face which already could not be seen closes the sonnet with a tone of self-condemnation.

As Dante opens *The Divine Comedy* when he was “In the midway of this own mortal life,” Keats’s 1818 tour to Scotland represents the turning point in his poetic

career. And the sonnets on Burns's memorials allegorize that crisis. Dante's danger of self-interest, allegorized by the panther, lion, and she-wolf, was overcome by his meeting with an older poet, Virgil. Keats's crisis of self-consciousness, however, was intensified by his meeting with the actual circumstances of an older poet, Burns.

In contrast to Dante's Medieval restraint, Keats's Romantic excessiveness of self-consciousness led him to perform one of Blake's "Proverbs of Hell": "You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough" (Blake 90). Keats not only watches the sinners of Hell in his own psychomachia, but enacts and judges the sufferings of self-consciousness in the sonnets on Burns memorials. Keats's realization at Burns's memorial of entangled web of human miseries and aesthetic perceptions does not resolve the problem; it rather puts him more deeply into the problem of self-consciousness.

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