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John Keats in Modern African Poetry: Tanure Ojaide

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Abstract

This essay is a comparative study of John Keats and Tanure Ojaide's poetry. It is anchored on Literary Romanticism as well as critical textual interpretation of the primary texts. A close reading of *The Selected Poems and Letters of Keats* by Robert Gittings and Ojaide's *Blood of Peace and Other Poems* and *In the House of Words* elucidates comparative Romantic significance. In this connection, the essay attempts to demonstrate that both poets assume Romantic similarities and differences in their poems through the world of birds, the world of seasons and the world of artistic objects. Moreover, they deploy simple everyday conversation, coupled with rustic subjects and imagery drawn from rustic situations and environment. Besides, one cannot fail to notice their imaginative brilliance towards these subjects.

Keywords: Keats, Ojaide, Romanticism, Autumn, Urn, Ivwri

Introduction

This paper is a comparative study of the romantic strands that are evident in the poetry of Keats and Ojaide. Our exploration extends into the world of nature – birds, seasons and artistic objects – and how the poets use rustic and ordinary everyday language to convey their thoughts. The poems for analysis are chosen

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from *The Selected Poems and Letters of Keats* by Robert Gittings and Ojaide's *Blood of Peace and Other Poems* and *In the House of Words*. Henceforth, these texts will be referred to as *Keats*, *Peace* and *House* respectively.

The theoretical background of this study is anchored on Literary Romanticism. According to the critic Rafey Habib, the concept refers to:

> [A] broad intellectual and artistic disposition that ... [deals with] an intense focus on human subjectivity and its expression, an exaltation of nature, which [is] seen as a vast repository of symbols, of childhood and spontaneity, of primitive forms of society, of human passion and emotion, of the poet, of the sublime, and of imagination as a more comprehensive and inclusive faculty than reason (408).

The point that emerges from the above insight is that literary romanticism is diverse. But to be more exact in this case, its main aesthetic disposition is on the relationship between humans and their intellectual engagements with "the sublime". In the opinion of Habib, the primary idea of "human subjectivity" raises the point of active engagement and expression for the creative mind. To this end, the meditative power of the Romantic artist plays "an active role rather than merely receiving impression passively from the outside world" (409). It is this heightened role of being "active" rather than passive in artistic creations that stresses the "constructive processes" of the Romantic writer.

Another significant aspect of Literary Romanticism is the central concern granted nature. In this connection, the revered position of nature elevates its status to the level of divinity. To the Romanticists, nature holds a crucial place on earth, both as a means to understand human thought and behaviour, as well as providing a "profound moral and emotional connection with human subjectivity" (409).

Besides, the critic also stresses the Romantic value in the reflection of childhood experience and memories coupled with the spontaneous disposition that is evoked through the response to "passion and emotion". Fundamentally, there is also the expression of the sublime that is crafted through the power of imagination. This brilliant use of the mind underscores the concept of originality demonstrated through rustic subjects and language. In this light, it is revealed that the Romanticists consider the vast and unlimited power of the "imagination as a more comprehensive and inclusive faculty than reason" (409).

When one takes into consideration these principles of Literary Romanticism with close introspection of Romantic poetry the facts begin to emerge concerning

Keats and Ojaide's poetry. Consequently, a close reading of their poems reveals their obsession with human subjectivity, nature, expression of the sublime, coupled with the imaginative use of rustic language and subjects of admiration.

There is no doubt that the poetry of Keats and Ojaide has received wide criticism. Cedric Watts' evaluation of Keats' poems delve into the different "thresholds" of the poet (9-16); Cleanth Brooks looks at Keats' Sylvan Historian (132-145); Peter Cairns is obsessed with the theme of transience (18-28); and the excellence of Keats' craftsmanship occupies the critical thoughts of Tony Afejuku (17-25). Besides, M.R. Ridley's critical focus is on Keats' Odes and Sonnet forms (97-102); similarly, Graham Holderness examines sensuous language in Keats' Odes (91-100); Ian Jack's postulation is on Keats' and the Mirror of Art (215); moreover, studies on Keats' across all facets of his work is the concern of John Middleton Murry (81); the Spring Odes form the thematic concern of John Bernard (98-118) and Brean Hammond examines the two types of sexuality in Keats' poetry(30-40).

Kola Eke's critical insight into the poetry of Ojaide is on "the indispensable poor"(29-36);Sayed Sadek explores the post-colonial heritage in Ojaide's poetry(88-104); Tayo Olafioye focuses his critical appraisal of the impact of Ojaide's poetry on the society(166); while Zaynab Ango's insight is on the ecocritical perspective (313-322). In addition, Obari Gomba's critical argument is on the repressive movement in the Niger-Delta through the slick alliance (27-35); the rhetorical strategies is evident in Asomwan Adagbonyin's discourse on the issue (181-193); Aderemi Bamikunle examines Ojaide's search for a poetic voice (63-82); and the de-commodification of the environment is the concern of Uzoechi Nwagbara (191-213). On her part, Enajite Ojaruega looks at eco-activism through a comparative perspective between Ojaide and Mda's narrative works (31-46) and Ogaga Okuyade's focus is on the mythography of Ojaide's poetry(59-76). With these critical insights, it is evident that little or nothing has been done towards a comparative study of Keats' and Ojaide's poetry. Therefore, this study explores a comparative commentary on Keats' and Ojaide's poetry, as depicted through the world of birds, seasons and artistic objects.

The World of Birds

Appreciation of nature is predominant in Keats and Ojaide's poetry. As one reads their poems, the subject of birds and their admiration for natural things become evident. Although, there are varying degrees of similarities and differences in their presentation of ideas, yet there is beauty in their words. One of the great Odes of

Keats entitled "Ode to a Nightingale" is significant in this case. To Keats, in the world of birds, the "Nightingale" is quite appealing. The opening stanza of the poem gives us a clue into this thought:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and lethe-wards had sunk:
'Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,
But being too happy in thine happiness, -
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease (*Keats* 124)

The captivating feeling of the speaker is recognizable in the above lines. Undoubtedly, the enthusiasm is drawn out of his "happiness" and admiration for the "light-winged Dryad of the trees". The metaphor is rich. In the words of the speaker, the exhilarating feeling of his senses could be compared to the influence of poisonous and drug-related substances within his body system. The words "hemlock" and "Opiate" are very significant in this light. The poetic effect of their uses is functional. They evoke the "aches" and sleepiness engendered by the mere sight of the "Nightingale". As the poem continues, one notices that the effect of the bird on the speaker takes him to an unconscious (Lethe-wards) state of mind. He is said to "sunk" into such consciousness, not out of "envy" of the bird's "happy lot" but in utter admiration of its "happiness". In other words, the speaker's enthusiasm is stimulated by the bird's "happiness". This sense of delight in the appreciation of nature is one of the core principles of Literary Romanticism.

On his part, Ojaide's commitment to nature is not far-fetched. A study of some of his poems reveals that he is concerned as much about the world of birds as Keats. As pointed out earlier in this essay, there are varying degrees of similarities and differences in their appreciation of nature. To Ojaide, the world of birds transcends the Nightingale's. The poet wants his readers to capture the essence and power of nature through a holistic perspective. Ojaide's reverence is generic in tone rather than specific. In one of his poems entitled "Birds of Admiration", his thought is graphically suggested with literary brilliance. Hear him:

They evoke admiration
as they spread out over the sky.
None of them plucks from the other's plumes
to speed up its own flight;
none is *All-of-you*,
because there's no tortoise in their lifescape,
No unevenness in the sky they plough (*Peace* 27).

One of the ideas that strike any reader of this poem is the divergence between this poem and Keats "Ode to the Nightingale". In the poem, there is no mention of a particular bird. Yet, it is evident that the speaker is eulogistic towards the world of birds. To him, the sight of birds in the sky is enough to spark evocative power of admiration. He is impressed by the manner in which "they spread out over the sky". Here, the use of celestial imagery evokes pictures of birds flying with their wings spread out without hindrance. Besides, there is an unusual sense of peace and freedom embedded in the poet's admiration. This idea of peace and freedom is seen in the third line as each of them is not envious of the other. There is no sense of covetousness and selfishness. Every bird is free to use its "plumes/to speed up its own flight". If anything, the use of aircraft imagery underscores the glory of nature. Moreover, it should be noted that a very vital expression that is significant to one's understanding of the world of birds is that "none of them plucks". In the word "plucks" is invested the idea of theft, greed and selfishness. Consequently, the creatures of the sky are full of decency. Closely connected with this, is the poet's use of the proverbial trickster figure of the "tortoise" to elucidate his admiration for the world of birds.

At this point, one is compelled to comment on the speaker's use of negative expressions in the poem. The repetition of negatives such as "none" and "no" reinforce the admirable and beautiful qualities of nature. Moreover, the agricultural imagery "plough" gives the reader a metal picture of a farm. By implication, the "sky" is seen as the farmland of birds, which they "plough" with exciting "unevenness".

In the succeeding lines of the poem, the unity and love in the community of birds is noticed. The recognition of these admirable qualities makes the lines beautiful in its composition. It reads:

And they pull each other along,
Devouring a whole region of distance
In their calibrated moves –
there's no cabal of flamboyant crooks
leaving behind the multitude
to a miserable state.
...
Don't tell me you aren't mean,
You rival of a man!
But these birds evoke my admiration
As they spread out evenly over the sky (*Peace 27*)

The level of unity on display in the first three lines of the quoted passage is impressive. In the context of the poem, it seems birds do not move individually. There is a sense of communality in their world. They prefer to occupy "a whole region of distance" as a family. One is impressed in the manner in which they flock the sky in articulate and measured movements. In a way, the poet's diction appeals to the reader's sense of sight. In other words, the visual senses are made to imaginatively picture flocks of bird gliding in one accord beautifully in the sky.

Interestingly, one of the fascinating insights in this poem is the poet's skilful comparison of the world of birds with the political landscape of man. Through a sense of careful observation, one could see that "there's no cabal of flamboyant crooks" in the bird's family. There is beauty and honesty in their love for each other. There is no sense of despotism and imposition in their world. On the contrary, however, in the political landscape of man, a group of selected persons assume the position of corrupt status. In this guise, they exhibit all manners of crooked deeds that turn the people into a "miserable" lot. Ojaide's acquaintance with the political realities of humans is the reason behind this poetic thought. As a poet, he has immersed himself in deep contemplation and meditation of romantic feelings in sharp contradiction with our political realities. Through his poems, one begins to appreciate the rare wisdom in the world of nature. In fact, it seems that in the simplicity of nature is found a minefield of wisdom that is richer than man's crooked ways. Consequently, there is a clarion call for us through Ojaide's poems to begin to extract priceless perception from careful observation of nature. In this light, Keats and Ojaide's exploration of the world of birds stamp their positions as romantic poets.

The World of Seasons

Another Romantic feature that is recognizable in the poetry of Keats and Ojaide is their probing into the world of seasons. Of course there are differences and similarities in their poetic articulation, yet, one cannot fail to notice their love for nature. In one of his poems entitled "Ode to Autumn", Keats' reverence for seasonal cycle is revealed with glaring imagery. The poem begins with a note of apostrophe:

SEASON of mists and mellow fruitfulness,
Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
Conspiring with him how to load and bless
With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eves run;
To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
And still more, later flowers for the bees,
Until they think warm days will never cease,
For summer has o'er-brimm'd their clammy cells (*Keats* 157).

The lines are loaded with metaphorical expressions of suggestive power. The description of the season reveals that it is not only misty, but it is one that is synonymous with exciting productivity. Besides, the climatic and agricultural images point to the distinctive nature of the season. It is seen as the "close bosom-friend of the maturing sun". The use of the solar image emphasizes the inseparable connection between "Autumn" and the "sun". To grasp the poet's diction, one has to be familiar with the closeness that exists between best friends. This analogy of best of friends is what Keats uses to illuminate our understanding of the season of Autumn and "the maturing sun. By extension, the sense of joy that pervades the world of plants during Autumn is underscored.

Ojaide's poem entitled "Kwanza" compares beautifully with Keats "Ode to Autumn." First, it is a poem about a season of bountiful harvest and fertility just like "Autumn". Second, it celebrates the romantic concept of nature. However, "Kwanza" is associated and connected with the southern hemisphere in sharp contrast to "Autumn". In addition, Ojaide focuses on the season itself rather than its transient

nature as depicted by Keats in his poem. A look into some of the lines in the poem reveals Ojaide's romantic insights:

> The first fruits of the tedious season
> Blossom beyond the pale of public eyes
> The wind, excited from a spiced carriage,
> Blows the fruitful tidings with zest.
> The savour already fills the palate
> With draughts of unprecedented smiles.
> Each day adds more gold to the robes
> That the land sweated to procure from industry;
> Each vision is filled with fields of fertility (*Peace* 125).

"Kwanza" is a term in Kiswahili that celebrates the season of first fruit and fertility. In the above lines, the speaker is celebrating the bountiful harvests of the "Kwanza". He refers to it as "the first fruits of the tedious season". The bounty is so impressive that it "blossom beyond the pale of public eyes". It is a season of unprecedented yields. In the succeeding lines of the stanza, the speaker reveals that the excitement in the poem's setting is beyond humans. "The wind" is seen participating in the euphoria of the season as well. In the context of the poem, "a spiced carriage" is the product of the wind's excitement. The bounty on the "carriage" seems impressive and spicy that "the wind" has no alternative but be happy with such a sight. Consequently, it "blows the fruitful tidings with zest". From the speaker's perspective, the "fruitful tidings" engineer tremendous energy in "the wind". Besides, the word "zest" is one of the words that intensify the enthusiasm of "the wind". One has to imaginatively move into the poem's setting to appreciate the impact of "Kwanza" in the world of man and nature. Instructively, it is noticed that the poet conveys the seasonal impact through a brilliant use of gustatory imagery. In this connection, the appetite of the people is stirred by the mere sight of fruits. Consequently, their faces are illuminated with "unprecedented smiles" of the looming satisfaction of their sense of taste. Suffice it to say that the fruitful bounty is not only impressive, but it is a source of revenue for the people. By so doing, "each day adds more gold" to the people's purse. The unprecedented blessings of "Kwanza" are so enormous that "each vision is filled with fields of fertility". In this sense, there is an appeal to the reader's sense of sight to visualize the scale of fruitfulness and fertility in the fields.

The World of Artistic Objects

Keats and Ojaide's Romantic intuitions are also visible in their articulation of artistic objects. In their poems they reveal their appreciation of these objects with clarity of purpose and vision. As usual however, a smart reader of their verses will most likely observe significant comparative dimensions. The recognition of these factors is crucial to the proper evaluation of these poems. In depicting the world of artistic objects, one of the great Odes of Keats comes to mind. It is entitled "Ode on a Grecian Urn". To Keats, the Urn epitomizes beauty and immortality just on first sight. His articulation of these virtues points to his appreciation of the Urn's qualities. The poem's first stanza is very insightful. It reads in this manner:

THOU still unravish'd bride of quietness,
Thou foster-child of silence and slow time,
Sylvan historian, who canst thus express
A flowery tale more sweetly than our rhyme:
What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape
Of deities or mortals, or of both,
In Tempe or the dales of Arcady?
What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?
What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?
What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy? (*Keats* 127)

The "Grecian Urn" is an ancient artefact with artistic drawings engraved on it. Keats' contact with this Grecian artistic object stirs up his romantic sensibilities. The poet's appreciation is mainly coming from the artistic depiction on the Urn. In expressing the object's beauty, the poet uses apostrophe to imaginatively capture its alluring presence. Consequently, he considers it as an "unravish'd bride of quietness". To the speaker, the Urn is a female entity. Hence, its beauty could be depicted through sexual imagery. He sees the object as a virgin "bride" who has not been explored sexually. By extension, the "bride" is not only an unexplored entity, but she is full of "quietness". By using the word "quietness", the speaker reveals the mute nature of the object.

Ojaide's response to the world of artistic objects is charged with the sublime. In one of his poems entitled "Meeting",Ojaide relates his contact with a three-dimensional artistic figure. The poem reads this way:

Today fantasy lifts its cloak of mist
and I embrace the warrior in person.

Beast, human or spirit, I light a lamp
to clear the way he wants me to pass

he who loses no contest
and overwhelms with heat (*House* 14).

The artistic object in question is called *Ivwri* in many parts of Urhobo clan. *Ivwri* is the god of war and it is said to possess human and animal forms and represents the control and focus of aggressive power. The poem is written after the poet lifted the artistic object to his chest. This little information gives us a clue into the three-dimensional artistic figure. As the title of the poem suggests, the poet is having a "meeting" with this revered object. From the first line of the poem, the speaker is emphatic about the supernatural powers that *Ivwri* possesses in relation to his contact with it. There is gladness in his language that he has finally departed the realm of fantasy and has "embrace the warrior in person". A look at the poet's diction reveals that his appreciation of the artistic object is basically supernatural. In the second line, the speaker's use of the word "warrior" shows his acceptance of the figure as the god of war. Consequently, his relationship with the "warrior" paves way for him to confront and conquer either "beast, human or spirit". As he lights a lamp, there is a supernatural infusion of the warrior-spirit into him. Therefore, one is not unaware of the use of celestial and thermal images to underscore the power of the supernatural.

In the third stanza, the artistic god is cast as one "who loses no contest/and overwhelms with heat". These metaphorical expressions are packed with meanings. First, they reflect the speaker's unyielding confidence in the figure. Second, there is evidence that the god of war knows no loss in any way. Third, the warrior is one that overcomes his adversaries with fire. In the word "heat" the reference to thermal imagery occurs again. The reoccurrence of this image is not mechanical, rather it emphasizes *Ivwri's* instrument of war.

In the successive lines of the poem, the speaker continues to voice his admiration for the artistic figure. In a show of confidence and faithfulness, he bursts forth with powerful prayers to the *Ivwri* with utmost calm and fidelity. Hear him:

Give me peace, not just calm
Some restlessness I really desire

Give me the fire to consume adversities
Make me chief warrior of peace
…
Ivwri, let male factors fail –
Destined hand, protect me

One embracing you knows no fear,
One beyond the reach of hostile fire! (*House* 14)

In the above lines, the speaker is filled with supplications. His supplications are loaded with repetitive expressions such as "give me peace…", "give me the fire…" There is every indication that the speaker is in dire need of spiritual powers. His "desire" transcends "peace" and calmness. He wants "some restlessness" to calm his "desire". As his supplications grow, he demands for "fire to consume adversities". Again, the poet resorts to the use of thermal imagery. The creative brilliance of this image is that it transfers one to a fire scene. Here, one could vividly visualize how fire consumes materials of "adversities". The speaker wants to "consume adversities" like "the fire". In addition, he wants the position of "chief warrior of peace". In other words, his request for power is not for ostentatious reasons; rather it is for peaceful purposes – to "convert foes to close friends".

The last two stanzas of the poem highlight the speaker's feelings towards the attack of men. *Ivwri* is admonished to thwart and put to naught all the evil strategies of men. The speaker solemnly seeks his protection from the artifices of men. In his imagination, he has "embraced" the god of war, therefore, he "knows no fear", since one with *Ivwri* is "beyond the reach of hostile fire!"

Conclusion

This study has shown that the poetry of Keats and Ojaide has comparative value. Consequently, our literary investigation has led us into the Romantic issues explored in their poems. From our study, there is evidence that both poets share similar romantic perspectives - the world of nature – preferably the world of birds, seasons and artistic objects. Suffice it to say rather, that there are degrees of similarities and differences in their poetic snapshots of these subjects.

In the world of birds, we have shown that Keats is concerned with a specific bird. In fact, his concentration is on the "Nightingale." When we compare this poem with Ojaide's insight, we found out that Ojaide takes a general view of the world of birds. The poet's admiration stems from the perceived peace and freedom he sees

in their interactions with each other. The poet uses his poem to reveal rare insight about the world of birds that is beneficial to man. The reader of Ojaide's poem in this regard is puzzled by the display of wisdom exhibited by this rare breed of nature.

The world of seasons is another aspect of Literary Romanticism that both poets explore. Keats relationship with the Northern Hemisphere underscores his "Ode to Autumn." However, Ojaide's picture of the world of seasons is captured from the Southern Hemisphere. Specifically, "Kwanza" is what grasps his attention. The similarity of "Kwanza" and "Autumn" is seen in their relationship with bountiful harvests. In "Kwanza's" case, the poet praises the blossoming influence of the season on the first fruits. The season is replete with huge and unprecedented abundance.

The concentration of both poets on the world of artistic objects is just as sublime as the earlier subjects. Keats' fancy is caught by the "Grecian Urn". The *Ivwri* on the other hand is the artistic object that attracts Ojaide's attention. Contrary to the Urn, the *Ivwri* is said to possess supernatural powers. In fact, it is given the respect of a god in some clans. The poet's praise for the object is seen in his worship of it. Reading the poem, there is evidence that Ojaide believes in the supernatural status of the figure.

Finally, there is one thing that is common among the two poets in this study. The mastery of poetic expression is superb. Consequently, their poems are replete with fantastic use of poetic imagery. One fundamental insight that is discovered in their articulation is the close-link between understanding the imagery and the poem as well. This is crucial to the idea of comparative study like this one. In sum, the relationship that Keats and Ojaide share as Romantic poets is very vital to our overall comprehension of Literary Romanticism in modern African poetry.

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