

CULTURE OF ANCIENT GREECE IN THE PERCEPTION OF JOHN KEATS

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The relevance of the research is caused by interest of a modern science to interaction of different types of art. The purpose of the article consists in the description of the way John Keats, a poet romantic of the 19th century, perceives the culture of Ancient Greece. The leading approach to the research of this problem was a careful analysis of John Keats's poetic works and letters, identification of cases of the poet's address to Ancient Greek culture and the analysis of those addresses. During the research it is revealed that Ancient Greece is perceived by the poet as an absolute ideal to which it is necessary to aspire in the creative work and where it is possible to go from the problems of everyday life. Images of Ancient Greek culture in John Keats's creative activity and letters are analyzed and it is proved that they are transferred through ekphrasis. The article reveals the use of direct descriptions of what Keats saw and the expression of personal feelings and experiences which appeared under impression of Ancient Greek art. The materials of the article can be useful to the scientists engaged into study of John Keats's creative work and interaction of different types of arts.

Keywords: poetry, John Keats, Ancient Greece, ekphrasis, culture.

INTRODUCTION

Modern science shows great interest to interaction of different types of arts, in particular, to the influence of ancient art on various periods of cultural history and literature. One of the literature periods addressing to the heritage of the ancient world is the English romanticism of the period from the end of the 18th to the beginning of the 19th century. It is rich in both the number of world famous representatives, and the range of art possibilities," including dramatic depiction of peripeteia of historical development, songs and ballades inspired by folklore motives, poems using fantastic and mythological images for the story about formation of the hero and his fight for spiritual independence» (Diakonova, 1973).

Keats's poetry introduced in English romanticism an element of Hellenism, new for that time (Aske, 1985), and also a cult of beauty and harmonious life pleasure. The peculiarity of Keats's creative heritage is the fact that critics and public in the 20th century recognized epistolary creativity of the author deserving the same admiration, as his literary attempts. Keats's letters" became a canon of English literary correspondence" (Strachan, 2003).

Keats's lyrics and letters are incorporated by the general subjects, filled with the ideas connected with the concepts of beauty and harmony. On the one hand, poet romantic Keats looks for beauty as a way of survival in the conditions of

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pressing reality, and on the other hand, he describes the beauty of simple surrounding objects, seeing it in the smallest detail of nature and in simple elements of reality. The beauty of ancient times is ideal for the poet, he sees the culture of antiquity a criterion of all surrounding reality.

Keats apprehended the spirit of Hellenism intuitively as he could read Greek poets only in translation. In spite of the fact that Keats had never been to Greece, all his creative activity is penetrated with the influence of the Greek culture, including philosophy, mythology, literature and objects of art. On April 27, 1818 Keats writes to Reynolds "I have written to George for some Books, shall learn Greek, and very likely Italian and in other ways prepare myself to ask Hazlitt in about a year's time the best metaphysical road I of can take. For although I of take poetry to be Chief, there is something else wanting to one who passes his life among Books and thoughts on Books.» (Grant, 2005).

METHODOLOGY

In the research we investigate an embodiment and functioning of Ancient Greek subjects of culture in John Keats's lyrics and letters.

The use of Ancient Greek mythological images by Keats is widely investigated in science (Walter, 1965; Sheley, 2007; Tate, 1974). However Keats's appeal to the art of antique Greece in poetry and epistolary has not become an object of research yet. We concentrated on this point in our work.

While addressing to study of Ancient Greek art objects in John Keats's lyrics and letters, it is necessary to specify the term "ekphrasis", which will be used further. Ekphrasis is "a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art" (Milner, 2002). Ekphrasis in the modern theory of culture is the subject of hot discussions, what is testified by the materials of Lausanne conference. Nowadays, the researchers, defining the content of concept, use the following formulation: ekphrasis - «any reproduction of one art by means of another» (Geller, 2002). It should be noted that a writer or a poet in the literary work does not depict objects, but his own reproduction of them- the thoughts, associations generated by a picture (Geller, 1995).

One of the modern research directions of Keats's creative activity is the search of the reasons of seemingly negative critics' relation to him and at the same time his huge popularity in the homeland. (Levinson, 1990; Roe, 1995; Dickstein, 1984). Great attention is also given to studying of Keats's letters which, in opinion of many Russian researchers, are separate works of the author and represent historical, biographic and literary interest (Homans, 1992; Eruvbetine, 1988).

Among the Russian researchers of John Keats's creativity it is necessary to call Diakonova (2003), Vitkovskii (1998), Podolskaia (1986), Zverev (1995), Makarov (1993), Kasatkina (1985), Ertner (2002).

RESULTS

John Keats's first personal acquaintance with culture of Ancient Greece occurred in March, 1817. Thanks to Benjamin Robert Haydon, an English artist who examined the purchase of Elgin's collection by the English government and recognized its huge art value, Keats personally saw the grandness of the Greek heritage. The collection was picked by count Elgin and contained a set of Ancient Greek samples of sculpture, generally from the Athenian Parthenon." This collection actually represented the result of barbarous plunder of Ancient Hellas art monuments ..." (Rogov, 1966).

Keats writes two fine sonnets under the impression of acquaintance with the collection: "On seeing the Elgin Marbles" and "To Haydon" and sends them to Haydon as the sign of gratitude. Haydon's letters to Keats where he enthusiastically responds about the sonnets are still kept.

In the sonnet "On seeing the Elgin Marbles" Keats departs from the original tradition of ekphrastic work and does not describe sculptures as he has seen, but his personal perception of the Ancient Greek esthetic ideal seen in a flesh. Admiring Greek sculptures, Keats feels his own mortality and at the same time admiration and love to immortal creations of antiquity. The feelings of the lyrical hero mix up to convey a complicated mixture of feelings when receiving such enormous experience.

«Ode on a Grecian Urn» was written in May, 1819 together with other odes which have been included into the group of "great odes of 1819". The process of writing the odes was connected with the author's attempt to depart from his previous poetic forms and developed a new form of the ode. Keats was inspired to write this ode by Benjamin Haydon's article in the Examiner magazine from May 2 and 9, 1819, where Raphael and Michelangelo's medieval sculpture and the tradition of sacrifice in Ancient Greece are described. John Keats sincerely admired Haydon's picturesque creativity and trusted him in questions of esthetic taste. On January 10, 1818 Keats writes to Haydon (Grant, 2005): «Also, every day older I of get the greater is my idea of your achievements in Art, and I of am convinced that there are three things to rejoice at in this Age: The Excursion, Your Pictures, and Hazlitt's depth of Taste».

«Ode on a Grecian Urn» is penetrated with admiration by the Greek art which was familiar to Keats on theoretical works in this area. Keats also investigated the engravings of the Greek vases which were available in Haydon's office and traced over an engraving "Sosibyl's Vases" from «A collection of Antique Vases, Altars, Paterae» by Henry Moses. Among the works familiar to him were also the vases by Townley, Borghese and Holland.

The definition "Grecian" taken out in the title of the ode defines its contents. The ode bears the spirit of Greece on all the levels: in the images described by Keats as the elements of vase ornaments: in the plots developing through the questions of the lyrical hero; in vocabulary and ideological plan of the work.

One of the main subjects of the Ode is eternity. The stiffened heroes of antique times will never achieve the objectives (Wright, 2001) – “never, never, canst those trees thou kiss, Though winning near the goal”. But Keats does not worry about it. The figures on the vase embody ideal beauty, and this is the achievement of the prime target for the author of these words:” Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced - Even a proverb is no proverb to you till your Life has illustrated it.” (Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, February 14-May 3, 1819 (Grant, 2005). «Do not grieve» (Wright, 2001) - advises Keats to a young man who is eternally waiting for the kiss, as the beauty of his beloved will not disappear, and this is the highest happiness.

It is remarkable that the vase in Keats’s ode cannot be broken, there are no hints in the text on fragility of a material and possible sad future. Thus, a vase is an allegorical image of Ancient Greek culture which cannot be spoiled. Ideal in essence, culture is an embodiment of the fine:” Beauty is truth, truth beauty” (Wright, 2001) – is said by the vase itself. The beauty is the truth, happened once it cannot disappear, remaining the ideal image in memory of the future generations.

Straight-line ekphrasis appears in the last stanza of the work and even the word “urn” is given only in the ode name. The description of the vase is given indirectly through questions:

What leaf-fringed 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? (Wright, 2001).

The technique used by Keats revives the gods described in a picture and the people, invisible they appear in our imagination more distinctly. This is what Keats wants for ancient art – for it to live in memory and imagination which cannot sadden it with unworthy affairs.

Three pictures are shown on an ancient ballot box: a young man or a god running for the desired maiden, an evergreen tree and sacrifice of a virgin cow. Each of them, showing an antique plot, reveals Keats’s plan. Love, beauty, the nature and loneliness these are subjects exciting the poet.

Keats’s image of the vase is collective and timeless. The vase does not simply comprise the pictures of Ancient Greek reality, it exists simultaneously in Ancient Greece and England of 1819 when John Keats writes his great ode, and during any period of the future when a reader opens Keats’s volume.

So, in «Ode on a Grecian Urn» John Keats eulogizes culture and its manifestations, such as music, literature, sculpture and painting as the highest embodiment of the beauty, which is the highest manifestation of all the being for

Keats. The Ancient Greek culture acts here as the cornerstone and the example of ideal creation, the period which is necessary for studying and esteeming.

The image of a Greek vase as an example of fine and decorative arts is also met in «Ode on Indolence». The ode also contains ekphrasis. The heroes of Love, Ambition and Poetry appear in Keats's lyrical hero as engravings on a turning vase. The image of a vase in the ode can be treated in various ways. First, the Vase which has come from Ancient time, indicates allegorically the eternity of art and eternal items: love search, aspiration to self-realization and poetry service. At the same time, the turning body of a vase is a continuous movement of life, the development of any plot, even apparently finished Ancient Greek engraving.

There is also a sending to the Ancient Greek sculpture in the same piece of work:

... And they were strange to me, as may betide
With vases, to one deep in Phidian lore ... (Wright, 2001).

The adjective "Phidian" is a hint to Pheidias, an Ancient Greek sculptor who took part in the construction of Parthenon in the Athens Acropolis and was the sculptor of the Zeus statue in Olympia, one of the 7 wonders of the world.

Ancient Greece for Keats is a timeless concept. He does not simply admire the fine period in the history of culture and art, does not worship the founders of antique sculpture and literature, but introduces the elements of different culture perception in his everyday life and creative activity. This approach of Keats found the brightest reflection in his letters. He writes in the letter to Benjamin Bailey on October 28-30, 1817 (Grant, 2005): "Then Reynolds: every time I of see him and mention you he puts hand to his head and looks like a son of Niobe's". Or in the letter to Bailey on October 8, 1817 (Grant, 2005): "... I hope Appolo is not angered at my having made a Mockery of him at Hunt's". Apollo in Keats's creative works and letters represents the voice of reason, the judge of the beauty, criterion of his own acts and actions.

Homer was one of Keats's favorite antique authors. Keats did not only devote him lines in his letters, but whole lyrical works as well. For example, Homer is mentioned in "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer", "Sonnet to Homer" and "To Apollo".

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The analysis of images and plots of John Keats's lyrical works and letters makes it possible to decipher the author's perception of Ancient Greek culture. At this point the concept ekphrasis becomes the key one at the description of one piece of art by means of another. Ekphrasis in Keats's lyrics does not represent only the direct description of objects of Ancient Greek art, but also the mediated transfer of this object perception through feelings and emotions of the author.

The analysis of John Keats's lyrical and epistolary heritage shows the perception of Ancient Greek culture by the poet romantic. The heritage of the past is accepted by Keats as an unattainable ideal which is necessary to study carefully and perceive as a kind of rest from oppressive reality. Keats studies Ancient Greek culture through poetry, therefore the poet uses Greek motives, objects, mythology and desires to learn Greek to perceive culture directly.

Descriptions of objects of culture and art can be met both in author's lyrics and letters and represent a special type of ekphrasis. In his works Keats does not give direct characteristics of Ancient Greek objects of art, being a poet romantic he expresses personal impressions and emotions received from the culture of the past.

Keats accepts Ancient Greek culture as a synonym of beauty as supreme value. Keats brings the beauty of Greek culture into his creative works through images and ideas.

Acknowledgements

The work is performed according to the Russian Government Program of Competitive Growth of Kazan Federal University.

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