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Synaesthesia in the poetry of John Keats

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Abstract

Image & imagery, literary study of imagery, seven kinds of mental images, synaesthetic imagery, John Keats' imagery, blend of sensations, visual kinaesthetic & visual olfactory image in *Hyperion*, Visual tactile & visual organic image in *Endymion*, visual gustatory imagery in ode to nightingale, Keats' taste of vintage evokes sensations, synaesthetic imagery -the province of poetry.

John Keats is a sensual poet; his poetry is focused on vivid, concrete, imagery, portrayal of the physical and the passionate; and immersed in the here and now. One nineteenth century critic went so far as to assert not merely that Keats had "a mind constitutionally inapt for abstract thinking," but that he "had no mind." Keats's much-quoted outcry, "O for a life of Sensation rather than of Thoughts!" (Keats' letter to Benjamin Bailey, November 22, 1817)¹

John Keats' imagery ranges among all our physical sensations: sight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, temperature, weight, pressure, hunger, thirst, sexuality, and movement. He repeatedly combines different senses in one image, i.e., he attributes the trait(s) of one sense to another, a practice called *synaesthesia*. His synaesthetic imagery performs two major functions in his poems: it is part of their sensual effect, and the combining of senses normally experienced as separate suggests an underlying unity of dissimilar happenings, the oneness of all forms of life. Richard H. Fogle calls these images the product of his "unrivalled ability to absorb, sympathize with, and humanize natural objects."

This paper aims at observing some of the mental images in the poems of John Keats which are identified by the psychologists: visual (sight, then brightness, clarity, colour, and motion), auditory (hearing), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste) tactile (touch, then temperature, texture), organic (awareness of heartbeat, pulse, breathing, digestion), and kinaesthetic (awareness of muscle tension and movement).

The Visual Auditory Image | Sound

Hyperion, leaving twilight in the rear, Came slope upon the threshold of the west; Then, as was wont, his palace-door flew open *smoothest silence*, save what solemn tubes, Blown by the serious Zephyrs, gave of sweet And *wandering sounds, slow-breathed melodies*; And like a rose in vermeil tint and shape, In *fragrance soft, and coolness to the eye*, That inlet to severe magnificence Stood full blown, for the God to enter in. (*Hyperion*, I,209-10)²

Here again, Keats blends sensations in the most beautiful way. When he describes how *Hyperion's* palace doors



open, a visual image, he creates a synaesthetic image of their sound — *smoothest silence* — a tactile description of an auditory “silence”. When the Zephyrs blow Keats first describes their noise as “wandering sounds” — a visual and arguably kinaesthetic image — and then as *slow-breathed melodies* (an *organic and visual* description of the *auditory* “melody”). Keats describes the palace door with the imagery of a vermeil rose “in fragrance soft, and coolness to the eye”. Notice how fragrance is described synaesthetic ally by the tactile *soft* and how the vermeil colour is described as having *coolness* to the eye. While these last examples aren’t really *visual*, I couldn’t resist pointing them out. They are equally rare and beautiful synaesthetic images.

The Visual Olfactory Image | Smell

I included this latter quote because, although it’s not a *visual* olfactory image, it nevertheless evokes an equally synaesthetic experience of smell— the flower’s odour as a sound, a sweet peal of music. The example that Fogle finds most compelling, however, comes, once again, from Keats’s *Hyperion*. He writes:

Taste-images occur with relative infrequency in Keats’s synaesthetic imagery, but such as appear are powerful and vivid. On one occasion he combines taste with smell to produce one of the strongest of all his sensory images:

Also, when he would *taste the spicy wreaths of incense*, breath’d aloft from sacred hills, instead of sweets, *his ample palate took Savour of poisonous brass and metal sick...* (*Hyperion*, I, 186-89)³

The Visual Tactile Image | Touch

This is much more difficult to example. The tactile and the visual generally go hand in hand — if anything, it’s the difference between writing *she moved her fingers over the rough of his palms* or *her fingers tripped over his gravelled palms*. Sometimes the tactile can be applied in the most unexpected ways. In *Endymion*, Keats writes:

Where had he been, from whose warm head out-flew That sweetest of all songs, that ever new, That aye refreshing, pure deliciousness, Coming ever to bless The wanderer by moonlight? to him bringing Shapes from the invisible world, unearthly singing From out the middle air, from flowery nests, And from the *pillowy silkiness* that rests Full in *the speculation of the stars*.⁴

The Visual Gustatory Image | Taste

Perhaps the best-known passage typifying the synaesthetic fusion of taste and visual imagery comes, again, from Keats. Rather than steal Fogle’s thunder, we’ll let *him* introduce it:

The synaesthetic imagery of Keats reaches its highest level, however, in the complex fusion of sense,



emotion, and concept in the second stanza of the Nightingale:

O, for a draught of vintage! that hath been Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth, *Tasting of Flora and the country green, Dance, and Provençal song, and sunburnt mirth!* O for a beaker full of the warm South, *Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene, With beaded bubbles winking at the brim, And purple-stained mouth...*⁵

Keats has attained to the utmost degree of synthesizing compression in this passage, packing into a few lines what prose could not have expressed in many times the number of words he has employed.

Only the very best wine-tasting critics could dream of aspiring to this kind synaesthesia. For Keats, the taste of the vintage draught doesn't evoke memories of other tastes, but of a whole world of sensation: the visual *Flora and country green*, the kinaesthetic *dance*, the aural *Provençal song*, and the organic and tactile *sunburnt mirth*. Top that. Right? But Keats isn't content to stop there, the beaker is *full of the warm south*. Woe to the recovering alcoholic who reads this poem. I've never had a vintage draught and I could take or leave most wines, but this makes my mouth water.

The Visual Organic Image | Heart, Breath and Pulse

These images are *more* than exceedingly rare, Fogle offers the following from *Endymion*:

And down some swart abysm he had gone, Had not a heavenly guide benignant led To where thick myrtle branches, 'gainst his head Brushing, awakened: then the sounds again Went noiseless as a passing noontide rain Over a bower, where little space he stood; For as the sunset peeps into a wood So saw he *panting light...* (*Endymion*, II. 376-383)⁶

In T.S. Eliot's *Ash Wednesday*, the tactile imagery of the sandy earth is transformed into a salt savor. This isn't as strictly synaesthetic as Shelley's imagery, but more like Keats'. Eliot was a keen reader of Shakespeare and Keats. It may be no coincidence that he used the same word, *savour*, as Keats. Eliot might well have been directly inspired by the passage for Keats' *Hyperion*. Remember, it was T.S. Eliot who said that "good poets borrow, great poets steal".⁷

In your light, the head is speaking, It reads the book.

It becomes the scholar again, seeking celestial Rendezvous.

Picking thin music on the rustiest string,

Squeezing the reddest fragrance from the stump

Of summer.



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Summing up, we can say that poetry comes to Keats as a '*joy wrought in sensations*' and he accordingly advised Shelley to '*load every rift with ore*'. Be it ode or sonnet or narrative poetry, Keats is richly sensuous. Keats' sensuousness is not only delicate and delicious but also aesthetic and delightful.

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