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Keats, Truth, and Empathy

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At one level, Keats's sonnet entitled *On Peace* (1814) is full of philosophical certainties. The speaker believes, for example, that a nation's people have a right to live in freedom under the rule of law, and that the rule of law should be applicable to everybody. Political and philosophical commitments of this kind do not seem to be called into question in this poem, or made the subject of an enquiry. On the contrary, it is as though we are confronted with somebody who, in certain central thematic respects at least, appears to know his own mind.

At a different but no less important level, however, this is surely a poem which is pervaded by uncertainty. The startled opening "Oh Peace!" is juxtaposed with interrogative doubt.[1] Some kind of glimmer of "peace" may have flickered in the war against Napoleon, but its significance and signification within the terms of the poem remain manifestly open to question. (The year, after all, is still only 1814.) The speaker may be experiencing joy, but he still yearns for it to be "complete[d]".[2] Just how this incipient "peace" is to unfold remains a question whose answer is conspicuously deferred, with the poem's historical consciousness in the closing line straining somehow to bridge a void between "horrors past" and a highly indeterminate "happier fate".[3] The poem thus ends by invoking the kind of liminality of thought – between presence and absence, between the "now" and the "not yet" – that so often seems to constitute the result (I do not say conclusion) of Keats's poetical ruminations.

We find, then, that while part of what this poem discloses can be adequately paraphrased (e.g. certain moral and philosophical stances), part of it cannot. The poem conveys not only the intellectual content of a certain state of mind, but something about that state of mind itself as a lived experience. If we are entitled to assume that certain aspects of experience are common to all human subjects (I want to concur with Edmund Husserl's view that we are), then we are entitled, too, at least to broach the possibility that a poem could disclose important aspects of experience in general. This in turn must lead us to take seriously the possibility that poetry, and perhaps literature more generally, could be pertinent in substantive respects to the field of phenomenology.

A number of interconnected philosophical and literary theoretical lines of enquiry seem to be presenting themselves. Firstly, if we are interested in literary disclosure and revelation, then there is the question of what kinds of content can be disclosed. I want to focus on the possibilities that literary disclosure could be affective, could be phenomenological, and could be moral. But we also need to think about how these different kinds of content might be inter-related, and whether there is something about literature which might make it especially conducive to affective, phenomenological, and moral disclosure.

Secondly, there are questions about the modality of disclosure in a literary context. Deductive reasoning is a perfectly good example of a modality of disclosure, but it is not one which is characteristic of literary experience, which is not to say that literature has no role to play in wider processes of rational enquiry, but that is a separate matter. Very often, however, it does seem to be appropriate to say of literary experience that it is as though one is encountering the particularity and uniqueness of another mind. Indeed, it is difficult to think of a work of literature for which this is not the case. In reading Keats's *On Peace*, it is as though one is encountering another mind expressing complex emotion in a unique and personal way. Intuitively, then, it seems right to say that there must be some kind of connection between intersubjectivity and the modalities of literary disclosure. Yet it is much harder to explicate just how a literary text could take us to another mind. Is the speaker in *On Peace* a construct of the imagination, or a construct of the text? I want to suggest that this is a question which is proper to the discipline of phenomenology. I have already suggested that the content of literary disclosure could be phenomenological. I now add the observation that phenomenology is unmistakably, and arguably by definition, the most appropriate means by which to explore the modalities of literary disclosure.

Thirdly, questions about the modality of literary disclosure seem to lead on to questions about indeterminacy of meaning. Earlier, I noted that aspects of the meaning of Keats's *On Peace* seem to be indeterminate. The opening exclamation "Oh Peace!" could express desire or surprise, or both. It seems to some extent to be up to the reader to surmise the degree of each emotion that is involved. The poem ends by looking forward to an unspecified "happier fate", but do we not value this closing line's indeterminacy precisely because there is something essentially indeterminate about yearning? We are also entitled to ask whether literary interpretation in general has an ineluctable moment of indeterminacy. Is there always a gap between poetical self-expression and self-disclosure? What is the phenomenological relation between the

experiences that we comprehend in artistic expression and the artistic phenomena themselves? Seeking answers to these questions is a way of entering the long acclivity toward a clarification of the relevance of intersubjectivity to indeterminacy in art, and the relevance of such indeterminacy to aesthetic value.

We must remember that an attempt to theorise in a sustained fashion about the nature of literature will almost inevitably bring some meta-theoretical questions in tow, and not undesirably so. For academic scholars of literature, the impulse to theorise about literature is often strong, and in many respects appropriate. Sometimes it is desirable within academic discourse to seek to make claims about art in general, or about literature in general. One such claim, for instance, is that it can be fruitful and illuminating to construe the encounter with a literary work in intersubjective terms, and this is a claim that I want to broadly sustain. Let me point out that I am trying neither to legislate for how students and scholars of literature should go about their studies, nor ultimately to adopt an essentialist stance, either toward the processes involved in literary criticism, or towards some mistakenly transcendent idea of "literature". It does not, in my view, ultimately make sense to treat "literature" as a static concept curiously abstracted from the passage of history, or to expect it to function adequately as such, within either literary theoretical or philosophical discourse. We might say that the synchronic state of literary art in its dialectical relation to prevailing culture is subverted at all times by a refusal of self-identity, by an immanent tendency toward diachronic mutability, toward the subversion of culture, the overturning by literature of what literature itself once was; that, as Paul de Man suggests, there is "something about literature, as such, which allows for a discrepancy between [literary] truth and [critical] method";[4] that there is something about literature which makes it curiously resistant to theory; that literature is continually in a process of transforming itself; that bold claims about the nature of literature sometimes seem to invite or provoke the surfacing of counter-examples; and that, consequently, literary "theory", in spite of its name, cannot in the final analysis properly regard itself as theoretical through and through, but instead as being contaminated by what de Man calls a "necessarily pragmatic moment that certainly weakens it as theory".[5]

Yet, as de Man also suggests, literature's resistance to theory is really only one side of what can more properly be regarded as a kind of literature-theory dialectic or double-bind. For experienced literary scholars, a contemplative shift toward the controlled reflection upon the formation of critical method is arguably inevitable, and

certainly justifiable in virtue of a commonality and recurrence in the modalities of the production and reception of meaning and value across multiple literary works, or even large subsets of the canon. We might say that great literary works are always unique but never wholly *sui generis*, in the sense that their greatness is connected with their embeddedness within, and relation to, a tradition that precedes them, and usually with a contemporary milieu of co-influencing works. For this reason, the apprehension of patterns (I do not say laws) in the way that literary works often seem to operate is an important part of literary scholarship which can inform the development of a meta-critical and meta-rhetorical discussion engaging with such questions as the cognition of moral values in a literary context. I am not going to foreground the theory/anti-theory colluctation in this essay, but I don't deny its importance. It may even be constitutive of the study of literature itself. The main way in which it will manifest itself in what follows will be that I shall make every effort to refrain from purporting to make claims about "the essential nature of literature", and from assuming that the term "literature" refers in the end to something historically stable and self-identical.

John Keats certainly revelled in poetry's capacity to surprise those of a theoretical disposition, as his oft-quoted remark that "What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet"[6] seems to suggest. In this sense, it would seem that Keats's "chameleon poet" can not only disrupt the conceptual frames of systematic philosophers, but surprise theorists of literature too in ways that can never be fully predicted. Nonetheless, Keats's understanding of this putative poetry-philosophy polarity did not prevent him from thinking abstractly *about* poetry. Indeed, some of the concerns of this essay stem from the observation that Keats, a poet whose genius is as undisputed as his canonical place in the history of English literature, also bequeaths to us, in the text of his posthumously collated letters, a sophisticated body of meta-poetical writing, and a complex implicit theoretical understanding of his chosen art. I want enquire into the extent to which a coherent theoretical understanding of poetry may be extracted from Keats's meta-poetical thought. I propose to examine the text of Keats's letters in order to assess his account of the nature of poetry and its relation to truth, as well as his explanatory account of how poetry and poetical effects are produced.

I want to begin by noting that Keats has a particular conception of "sensations" which goes beyond any usual meaning of the term, and this notion is elaborated in his letters in some detail. In a poetical context, the "sensations" in which Keats's interest lies are also referred to as "passions",[7] and Keats takes the "passions" to encompass not

only the emotions (as the term is normally understood) but, perhaps most importantly, to include a faculty that Keats calls the "imagination". We must ask why this "imagination" should be construed as a "passion". The reason implicit in Keats's letters is clear: the imagination is both creative and intense. For example - a century before Proust did the same - Keats reflects upon the intensely evocative and synaesthetic powers capable of being invoked by a sensory fragment. (Keats's chosen example, an auditory precursor of Proust's Madeleine cake, is an old melody.)[8] It is via this notion of spontaneous intensity that Keats finds a conception of beauty. Intense passions are held to be "sublime", and it is precisely in this sublimity that they are "creative of essential beauty".[9] For this reason, Keats reaches the view that "[t]he excellence of every art is its intensity".[10]

For Keats, however, the powers of the imagination are not only artistic but capable of engaging with truth. This is not to say that Keats wishes to abolish any philosophical sense to the term "truth". Though he admits to difficulty in seeing how deductive reasoning could give rise to truth, he nevertheless appears to concede (hesitatingly) this possibility. ("… I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning – *and yet it must be*."[11] (Emphasis mine.)) Indeed, he concludes his letter with a remarkably even-handed suggestion that Bailey strive for an harmonious combination of poetical and philosophical truth, accommodated by a

> […] complex mind, one that is imaginative and at the same time careful of its fruits, who would exist partly on sensation, partly on thought – to whom it is necessary that years should bring the philosophic mind. Such an one I consider yours and therefore it is necessary to your eternal happiness that you not only drink this old wine of heaven, which I shall call the redigestion of our most ethereal musings on earth, but also increase in knowledge and know all things.[12]

Keats is evidently content to permit a dual conception of truth. On the one hand, there is truth apprehensible by the "consequitive" deductive "philosophic mind",[13] and it is clear that knowledge of this kind of truth – a philosophically substantive knowledge – is not something that Keats necessarily discourages. On the other hand, there is what Keats calls

> [...] the truth of imagination. What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth, whether it existed before or not. For I have the same idea of all our passions as of love: they are all in their sublime, creative of essential beauty.[14]

This imaginational truth, then, is constituted in the imagination as beauty. We shall shortly have cause to return to the subtleties of the above passage, but I wish to highlight at this point the facts that, firstly, for Keats the imagination is a creative force, and secondly, the beauty it creates is not contingent or projected, but, in being "essential", is ascribed by Keats a certain ideality. Furthermore, imaginational truth, in contradistinction to its philosophical counterpart, is portrayed as "ethereal" and associated with "heaven".[15] Keats, indeed, is convinced of the "holiness"[16], no less, of the "heart's affections", the "passions" or intense emotions of which the imagination is counted as one.

Keats goes on to suggest that the apprehension of imaginational truth *as truth* is conditioned, firstly, by the apprehension of beauty by the imagination, and secondly, by an emergence or awakening of the subject from the imaginational mode of consciousness, for "[t]he imagination may be compared to Adam's dream: he awoke and found it truth".[17] Knowledge of imaginational truth *as truth* thus becomes conceived as the (dispassionate) correlate of the (passionate) apprehension of beauty. In the sense that sleeping as such involves the immanent possibility of awakening, the disclosure of imaginational truth for Keats is necessarily latent within the apprehension of beauty.

Philosophically speaking, the fact that Keats sets up a dichotomy between "philosophic" propositional truth and imaginational artistic truth itself seems to require some further explanation. Keats, the poet, presumably saw nothing unsatisfactory in elaborating upon the polysemous nature of the word "truth". Yet the following question seems difficult to ignore. What is it about poetical beauty that leads Keats to suppose that it has an essential connection with truth? What, to put it another way, makes Keatsian truth *truth*?

One possible explanation (an hypothesis that I shall shortly reject) is that Keats supposes that poetry engages with an unchanging metaphysical realm, and derives its truthfulness from such putative fixity. The *prima facie* evidence to support this idea is Keats's use of precisely the kind of quasi-religious terminology that I have already remarked upon. However, this line of explanation is undermined by the fact that Keats

equivocates on whether beauty exists before it is apprehended: the imagination seizes beauty as truth "whether it existed before or not".[18] Indeed, the imagination is hardly a passive observer of pre-given metaphysical entities, but instead "creative of essential beauty".[19]

The striking feature of Keats's account of the apprehension of beauty is the way in which he inverts the Platonic priority of essence over actuality. Indeed, this reversal provides us with the direction for a more promising explanation for Keats's claim that poetry has a necessary relation to truth, namely that Keats believes poetry's truthfulness to be attributable to a certain relation it has with the real world. More precisely, poetry, for Keats, is not truth-bearing because it necessarily tells us something about the world, but rather because it can invoke for the reader the content of real-world experience. For this reason, it seems to me, the Keatsian account of poetry is inextricably bound up with the role of consciousness. Let us examine more closely the way in which Keats implies a connection between consciousness and truth.

It is understandable, but perhaps not entirely unremarkable, that Keats should use the word "heart"[20] – a metaphor, commonplace enough, for the emotions – to signify the locus of those aspects of experience he calls "the passions"[21]. Perhaps "heart", in implying a separation from the brain, reinforces the idea of Keats's proposed opposition between philosophical and poetical truth. Nonetheless, the drawback of this trope, in my opinion, is that it gives the misleading impression that Keats considers the passions to be devoid not only of deductive reasoning, but of thought in general. This surely is not Keats's view. The imagination, after all, is itself conceived as one of the passions. And, as we have seen, it is the imagination, according to Keats, which apprehends certain experiences as beautiful.

Moreover, the generalised notion of thought as such turns out to be significant in relation to Keats's understanding of the emotions. The absence of thought, in Keats's view, corresponds to an inchoate state of nascent consciousness that he calls the "infant or thoughtless chamber".[22] It should not go unremarked that Keats has almost nothing to say about this condition, other than to configure it as a transient phase of pre-cognitive immaturity. The significance of the "infant chamber" lies simply in the fact that it is a primal state from which we find ourselves "imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle within us".[23] Thought, or the "thinking principle", is an immanent awakening in which consciousness finds itself in a second chamber, apparently full of "pleasant wonders",[24] and with which we are initially "intoxicated".[25] However, the paradoxical nature of this chamber of thought is such

that it lends acuity to our understanding of "the heart and nature of man",[26] and "convinc[es] one's nerves that the world is full of misery and heartbreak, pain, sickness, and oppression".[27]

The allegorical fashion in which Keats portrays the forms of consciousness (in terms of chambers in a mansion) serves the purpose of marking out a relatively clear trajectory of discrete mental states. From an initial state of cognitive limbo, consciousness comes, through thought, to an understanding of the world, and from there to a recognition of suffering in others. Furthermore, Keats goes on to suggest that the awareness of suffering in the world gives rise to a state of depressed subjectivity, as the "chamber of maiden thought becomes gradually darken'd".[28]

Keats's image of the darkened chamber signifies an obscured condition of partial knowledge, for in it "[w]e see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a mist. *We* are now in that state. We feel the 'burden of the mystery'".[29] However, this darkening of consciousness, that Keats considers to be an inevitable result of thought, is not an eventuality that Keats proposes to avert through some kind of poetical line of flight. On the contrary, it is precisely the exploration of this depressive "chamber", and the "dark passages" onto which it opens, that Keats considers to be an undertaking of profound poetical significance. For this reason, the Wordsworthian quality that Keats picks out for praise is that his "genius is explorative of those dark passages".[30] And Keats attributes the epistemic power implicit in the idea of such exploration to Wordsworth's cognitive gift for "think[ing] into the human heart".[31]

This idea of the poetic exploration of suffering further illuminates the connection Keats makes between poetic beauty and truth. The poetry that Keats calls for is "true" in the sense of being grounded in real-world experience; and what could be more real, more earthly, than our apprehension of "misery and heartbreak, pain, sickness, and oppression"?[32] The combination of Keats's conviction that poetry is truth-bearing with his commitment to the poetic importance of real-world experience is strongly suggestive that Keats believes the apprehension of poetic beauty to have an important recognitional aspect.

An important paradox now presents itself in Keats's conception of poetic truth. How is Keats's proposed sense of rootedness in the world to be reconciled with his conviction about the "holiness of the heart's affections"?[33] A dialectical emergence of the heavenly from the earthly is indeed one of the central motifs of Keats's thought, both theological and literary. From the "mist" of anxiety associated with suffering, in which "[w]e see not the balance of good and evil",[34] there emerges (according to Keats's

theological view)[35] the (non-spatiotemporal) soul, an identity forged only by the heart. This pattern of an immanent permanence within transience – an ideal "beyond" accessed precisely through a vicissitudinous actuality – is replicated in Keats's account of poetic beauty and truth. For from the poetical engagement with the experience of suffering, according to his meta-poetical position, comes the imaginational apprehension of poetic beauty, and a realisation of its truth.

The Keatsian cognition of beauty centres on a moment of "seizing" which manages at once to be both a form of *creation* (for, as we noted earlier, the imagination is "creative of essential beauty")[36] and, I suggest, a special kind of *recognition*. The idea of a recognitional aspect to the apprehension of beauty is of assistance in rendering intelligible Keats's otherwise somewhat puzzling claim that the experience of beauty in art is connected in some essential way with truth. But in suggesting that the recognitional experience of beauty is also simultaneously creative, Keats seems to be implying that such an experience is to be phenomenally differentiated in some important way from a more straightforward perception or apperception of something ostensibly pre-given or prior to the artistic encounter itself. What seems to be missing from Keats's account is some further and more detailed explication of what it means, and why it should be plausible, to think that the "recognitional" and "creative" dimensions of aesthetic experience should co-exist in such an intimate way. Although Keats does not fully elucidate this matter directly in his letters, he does go some way toward attempting to explain poetic effects. He does this, however, neither through appealing to textual considerations, nor through addressing cognitive matters relating to the reader. Instead, he focuses upon the cognitive skills possessed by the poet. It is to this aspect of Keatsian thought that we shall now turn our attention.

According to Keats, the paradox of beauty we have just considered is made possible by the feature of poetic genius that Keats aptly calls *negative capability*:

> Several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a man of achievement, especially in literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously. I mean *negative capability*; that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.[37]

It is, as Keats's wording implies, an existential rather than an epistemic talent, for it is "*being in* uncertaint[y]" (emphasis mine). And this being is not distracted or interrupted by "any irritable reaching after fact and reason". The implication of Keats's description is that negative capability is a non-fleeting, sustained dwelling within uncertainty. The sense of stability thus implied provides the ground for the elevated certainty of beauty that Keats believes great poetry intimates. As Keats suggests, doubt is swept aside when "with a great poet the sense of beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration".[38]

In one sense, which illuminates Keats's understanding of the relation between poetry and philosophy, the "uncertainties" Keats has in mind can be understood to include the kind of paradoxes and equivocations that philosophy often sets out as a matter of course to disentangle. In this respect, Keats conceives of poetry as preceding philosophy, and as residing precisely *in* the questions that straight-talking philosophical argument purports to answer, or at least examine rationally. In a different, more practical sense, however, the uncertainties that interest Keats also include the real-world anxieties inherent in human suffering. Indeed, Keats admires Wordsworth, as we have seen, precisely for elucidating such "dark passages" of consciousness. Yet Keats's attitude towards Wordsworth's poetry is ultimately ambivalent. Perhaps Keats's most central worry is that Wordsworth's poetry has the tendency to draw attention to the narrator's own mental activity, at the cost of an immersion in lived experience. Wordsworth, in Keats's view, gives the poetic self, its imaginative powers and mental prowess, an undue conspicuousness. In a letter of 3rd February 1818 to John Hamilton Reynolds, Keats goes so far as to imply that Wordsworth's self-consciousness is ultimately both intrusive and constrictive:

> Poetry should be great and unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject. […] Why should we be owls, when we can be eagles?[39]

The owl, Keats seems to suggest, holds forth (however wisely) as a self-conscious intellect; preferable, by implication, is the eagle soaring instinctively and unreflectively.

Keats therefore opposes his own conception of poetry not only to philosophical enquiry as such, but also to the Wordsworthian predilection for explicit cognitive introspection. The Keatsian alternative entails a dissolution of poetic self-identity, an

effacement of subjecthood brought about through an inhabitation, so to speak, of the objects of contemplation. In a privileging of difference over identity, Keats conceives of the poet as exemplifying a protean changeability. Indeed,

> [t]he poetical character [...] is not itself – it has no self – [...] What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet. [...] A poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence, because he has no identity, he is continually in for – and filling – some other body.[40]

Keats thus proposes a displacement of an authoritative poetic voice by an ostensible merging of poetic consciousness with its field of contemplation.

In his book *Keats the Poet*, S.M. Sperry seems ready to assimilate all of Keats's musing and speculation about the poetical character into an expanded conception of Negative Capability,[41] even though Keats does not always invoke this term explicitly. In this essay I am not primarily concerned with the hermeneutical question as to whether Keats conceives of Negative Capability as actually encapsulating the poetical character, or instead considers Negative Capability to be a particular aspect of it. It is important, however, that we do not blur the distinction between two different claims about the capabilities of poetry. On the one hand, there is the claim that the poet has a capacity for empathic identification to such a degree that the subject-object dichotomy collapses. On the other hand, there is the idea of the poet dwelling in ambiguity and paradox, an expressive mode that Keats places in opposition to rational argument. Let us examine these two aspects of the poetic character in more detail.

The claim that the poet must be capable of empathic identification is, of course, hardly controversial. Who would suggest that a poet can do without an imaginative understanding of human nature, a sense of what it might be like to be somebody else? Yet the striking feature of Keats's position is the degree of subject-object identification that he requires. In Keats's view, the adequate poetical treatment of others and otherness requires a complete effacement of the self. For Keats, furthermore, poetry effects an important transformation of subjectivity. The transformation which begins in self-negation finds its consummation in the percipient creative discovery of new identities to inhabit and animate what was previously locked in alterity. Keatsian poetic consciousness not only empathises with its objects, but actually *becomes* them, and this is made possible only through a dissolution of the self.

This is indeed a bold literary claim, and Keats, rather than attempting a theoretical explication of how this might be possible, instead sets up Shakespeare as the paradigm, an exemplar of Negative Capability whom Keats strives to emulate. Spurning the self-conscious Wordsworthian cogitations, Keats seeks to emulate instead the Shakespearean demonstration of a comprehensive range of human sympathies, and perhaps most significantly for Keats, Shakespeare's sympathy for human suffering. The theoretical question remains, however, as to how a transformation of consciousness, of the kind Keats describes, could be so complete as to annihilate one's own identity. In this sense, while Keats's elaboration in his letters of the concept of Negative Capability is theoretically suggestive, he ultimately appeals to the concrete historical context of English literature rather than explicitly theoretical considerations.

Our analysis of the Keatsian understanding of poetic empathy has led us to a preliminary sketch of the kind of cognitive acrobatics that Keats implicitly advocates, and I have configured this as a kind of transformation of consciousness. The other Keatsian claim that we have identified, which pertains to dwelling within "mystery", relates not only to the cognitive requirements that Keats places upon the poet, but also to the Keatsian conception of the production of poetic meaning. In many ways, Keats's theoretical understanding of poetic meaning emerges from his postulated opposition between poetry and philosophy. An important aspect of this opposition is conveyed in his vigorous stipulation that

> We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us – and if we do not agree, seems to put its hand in its breeches' pocket.[42]

The poet, in other words, must renounce the didactic disposition prevalent in philosophical argument. In its place, ambiguity and indeterminacy take root, not as undesirable consequences of loose, unrigorous thinking, but as the unpremeditated outcome of the empathic transformation of consciousness. Indeed, it is clear from his admiration for Shakespeare that Keats takes such indeterminacy, which may "crystallise a paradox",[43] as Sperry puts it, or, I might add, give rise in many cases to a proliferation of possible meanings, to be a hallmark of the canonical work. Yet Keats leaves a further theoretical question unanswered. If a poetical consciousness can dwell within existential uncertainty and anxiety, can anything be said in theoretical terms about the nature of such an experience, and about its relation to the poetic text?

In this essay I have sought to assess the extent to which a theoretical understanding of poetry may be extracted from Keats's meta-poetical thought. Keats turns out to take a deeply cognitive approach by providing a detailed account of both the nature of poetic experience and the special creative talents peculiar to the poet of true genius. His description of the latter goes some way to explaining certain aspects of the former. However, in emphasising the particular abilities of the poet, Keats tends to remain causally upstream of a theoretical explication of how the literary text itself produces its effects.

Keats's discussion of the poet's capacity for empathic identification helps to explain why he believes poetry has an essential connection with truth, by implying that poetry in some sense collapses the subject-object dichotomy. The implicit notion of subject-object identity renders Keats's account deeply philosophically suggestive, but unfortunately this important poetical matter does not receive, at Keats's hands, the kind of theoretical elaboration I suspect it deserves. In this respect, Keats is more inclined to tell us *what* poetry can achieve than specify precisely *how*, either in purely textual terms, or in terms of the reader's cognition of the text.

Keats's idea of the poet dwelling within uncertainty, and his attempted syncretism of truth and indeterminacy, cohere with his view that poetical thought is alien to philosophical reasoning, and that poetry has the capacity to realise complex emotion by evoking real-world pre-reflective experience. However, in the absence of any cognitive elaboration, it remains ultimately mysterious as to what Keats thinks it might mean, existentially, to "be" in such uncertainty, and how such "being" might be invoked by the poetic text. While not rejecting the notion of propositional truth, Keats believes that poetry has an essential relation to a different, non-propositional form of truth. One of the aims of this essay has been to explore the degree of justification, implicit or explicit, that Keats provides for this view. I have discounted the possibility that Keats believes poetry to engage with an unchanging metaphysical realm on the grounds that he equivocates on whether poetic beauty exists before it is apprehended. Keats is committed to the ideality of both poetic beauty and truth, but remains metaphysically neutral. I have argued that a more likely explanation, though not explicitly articulated by Keats, is to be found in the importance he attaches to real-world experience, and that the truthfulness of Keatsian truth consists in the poetic role of experiential recognition. The resulting double aspect to poetic truth, its Janus-like relation with ideality and actuality, is a paradox that Keats certainly registers but does not fully explain.

While Keats's notion of Negative Capability is certainly primarily concerned with explicating the abilities required of the true poet, it would be mistaken to think that Keats attaches little theoretical significance to the role of the reader. On the contrary, it is clear from his account of aesthetic value, and the nature of the apprehension of beauty and its relation to truth, that the reader of poetry is not conceived as a passive and humble admirer of the poet's craft, but instead turns out to be inseparable from the Keatsian understanding of poetry itself. The reader, and more precisely, the role of consciousness, are implicated in the very constitution of beauty.

Considerations of poetry's oppositional relation to rationality contribute to Keats's suggestion that poetic beauty can emerge in a context of indeterminacy of meaning. In a very particular sense, a sense easily misconstrued, this position liberates the reader from a felt obligation to somehow master a text's meaning, an obligation which amounts in itself to a dialectical domination of the reader *by* the text. Accordingly, the reading act itself can come to be conditioned by an *a priori* acceptance of the possibility of multiple readings. It may seem tempting, if slightly overwrought, to characterise this as some kind of transcendental emancipation of the reader. The necessary possibility of different readings certainly seems to emerge naturally from Keats's thought. Nonetheless, we must not forget that Keats also places formidable demands upon the reader. As I have argued, Keats implies that readers apprehend poetic beauty only by accessing aspects of their own real-world experience in a recognitional encounter with the text; by exploring the depressive "dark passages" of consciousness; by being in uncertainty, suffering, anxiety. The Keatsian vocation for the reader is to live the emotion of the text, and to recognise certain of its aspects as one's own. It is, in this sense, a call to empathy.[44]

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Notes

[1] Lines 1-4.
[2] Line 7.
[3] Line 14.
[4] De Man (2000), p.333.
[5] De Man (2000), p.337.
[6] Letter from John Keats to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818. Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.387.
[7] Letter from John Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, pp.184, 186.
[8] Ibid., p.185.
[9] Ibid., p.184.
[10] Letter from John Keats to George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.192.
[11] Letter from John Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.185.
[12] Ibid., p.186.
[13] Ibid., p.186. Keats borrows the phrase "philosophic mind" from Wordworth's *Ode: Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, line 189.
[14] Letter from John Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.184.
[15] Ibid., p.186.
[16] Ibid., p.184.
[17] Letter from John Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.185.
[18] Ibid., p.184.
[19] Ibid., p.184.
[20] See, for example, Letter from John Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, Letter from John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 May 1818, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1., pp.184, 281-2, and Journal-Letter from John Keats to George and Georgiana Keats, 14 February to 3 May 1819, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.2, pp.103-4.
[21] Letter from John Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, pp.184, 186.
[22] Letter from John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 May 1818, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.280.
[23] Ibid., p.281.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid.

[29] Letter from John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 May 1818, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.281. The phrase "burden of the mystery" is a quotation from Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey*, 39.
[30] Ibid., p.281.
[31] Ibid., p.282.
[32] Ibid., p.281.
[33] Letter from John Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.184.
[34] Letter from John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 May 1818, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.281.
[35] For some of Keats's theological views, see the Journal Letter from John Keats to George and Georgiana Keats 14 Feb - 3 May 1819, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.2, pp.102-4.
[36] Letter from John Keats to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.184.
[37] Letter from John Keats to George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.193.
[38] Ibid., p.194.
[39] Letter from John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 February 1818, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.224.
[40] Letter from John Keats to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, pp.386-7.
[41] Sperry (1973), pp.243-4.
[42] Letter from John Keats to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 February 1818, Rollins (Ed.) (1958) Vol.1, p.224.
[43] Sperry (1973), p.247.
[44] From a theoretical perspective, one of the most arresting features of Keats's meta-poetical thought is the way in which it connects with some of the central concerns of twentieth-century phenomenology.

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