

## A Spiritual Guide for the Modern Age: The Figure of the Poet in the Letters and Poems of John Keats

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### ABSTRACT

Keats's religiosity, his Christianity, and Grecian "paganism" are common topics amongst Keats scholars, as well as the suggestion that he intended to create a new religion founded on aesthetics. However, few scholars have studied the nature of Keats's poet: how does one become a poet, and what is his ultimate social role? I argue that the role of Keats's poet is primarily a spiritual one, making sacred experience available to the Modern mind, which is increasingly secular and reason-driven. Through his poet, Keats salvages the essence of the world faiths, that which sanctifies life and makes it worthwhile. The poet must undergo a difficult epistemological journey towards truth in order to discover beauty, which is the heart of all spiritual elevation. By doing so, he creates an example for the Modern spiritual individual, who must come to understand truth and beauty for himself.

Keywords: John Keats, spirituality, Romanticism, poet, Ode on a Grecian Urn, beauty, truth, Negative Capability.

# A Spiritual Guide for the Modern Age: The Figure of the Poet in the Letters and Poems of John Keats

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## KEATS, THE ROMANTICS, AND THE SPIRITUAL CRISIS OF MODERNITY

The general preoccupation of the British Romantic poets can be summarized as the attempt to aid England in the transition to what was becoming the Modern world we know today. The major poets of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were a generation or two ahead of what would become a strongly secular culture, yet they had no immediate replacement that could fill the needs religion once served. The world of the Romantics was not quite like ours, but the seeds of modernity, planted almost four hundred years before, had begun to sprout. The scientific and industrial revolutions, and past years of both religious and political turmoil, had created a cultural landscape in which the tools of the past were of little use. Trust in and loyalty to a monarch, a stable class hierarchy, a livelihood tied closely to the land, and a religious approach to both the understanding of the universe and humankind's role in it—these were all in the autumn of their existence by the first quarter of the 1800s. Romantics such as Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, P.B. Shelley, and Keats saw themselves as the threshold guardians of history, desperately attempting to prepare humanity for what was becoming a secular, mechanized, technological, and science-driven world. Although their emphasis was less on the cause

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of cultural changes than on treating its effects, they nevertheless perceived that a greater current was sweeping through the West. Romantic literature is often read as a reaction to the purely reason-based values of the Enlightenment, itself one of the historical monuments built by modernity. But the Romantics, however enchanted with the Enlightenment concept of revolution, atheism, and humanism, were left feeling estranged from spirituality and the human heart. They could not return to the medieval mode of religion, but neither could they, as poets, fully accept the Enlightenment. Their self-determined mission to reinvent the human experience was what Shelley termed “the spirit of the age.”<sup>2</sup>

It is during this upheaval that John Keats came of age. For Keats (1795-1821), poetry serves a crucial epistemological and spiritual function for society. The poet must be not only a maker of words, but of truth; and the experience of poetry must be not only artistic, but spiritual. Poetry, he believes, can provide society a sense of the sacred, elevating, and consolatory aspects of religion, albeit outside the Church or Scripture. As he ultimately discovers in his many letters, truth is the knowledge of all that we can know, and then the acceptance of what we cannot—the skill of “Negative Capability,” as he called it, to be “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”<sup>3</sup> But truth alone cannot uplift and console. The work of the poet has to be beautiful as well as true: “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know,” Keats famously writes in “Ode on a Grecian Urn.”<sup>4</sup> For poetry to be an accurate reflection of the world, it must represent both the intense suffering of the human condition as well as beauty, that which makes mortal life worthwhile for its own

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<sup>2</sup> P.B. Shelley, “A Defense of Poetry,” in *Shelley’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Donald H. Reiman (New York: Norton and Company, 1977), 508.

<sup>3</sup> John Keats, *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, vol. 1, 1819-1821 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), 193.

<sup>4</sup> John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H.W. Garrod (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939), 27 v. 49-50.

sake, without the promise of a better afterlife (or what he considers “happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone”).<sup>5</sup> In his letters and one of his greatest works, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” the poet becomes a spiritual guide for the Modern age by serving as an example of how truth and an experience of the sacred may be attained in a secular world. This fascination with the secular spiritual experience is the beating heart of Keats’s work, contextualizing him within the zeitgeist of the Romantic Period.

Keats was without a doubt immersed in the political, social and religious conversations of time, and committed solving the riddles of his age. But, perhaps due to his youth, (he wrote most of his poetry over the course of a few years, and died in 1821 at the age of 25), middle-class education, and rather outcast status as a poet and ex-apothecary and medical student, in his own time he was deemed more fit to serve the ailing body than the ailing soul.<sup>6</sup> And yet, his treatment of the state of spiritual experience in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century is fresh and arguably even more Modern and Romantic than those of the poetic giants of his age: making his debut towards the end of the period, he was a product of Romanticism and fully engaged in its values, a true skeptic of the traditional religious structure and fully prepared to construct a new spiritual system atop the ruins of the old.

Little has been written on Keats's spirituality in the past forty years; that topic seemed most popular between the 1920s and 1970s. The focus of this paper is not to restart that tradition, but to draw together the loose ends and bring attention to a concept not explored to its full potential. Ronald Sharp put forth the theory of Keats’s “religion of beauty,” but Keats was not seeking to establish a new religion. His poet is not a priest, but a

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<sup>5</sup> Keats, *Letters*, 1:185.

<sup>6</sup> Z. [pseud.], “Cockney School of Poetry,” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* 3 (1818): 524.

guide—more of a shaman than a clergyman. There is no social infrastructure that his poet must pass through, no vows to take, no robe to wear, no senior members or society to which he must conform. The poet is secular, Modern and humanistic in message as well as character, but also, it seems, timeless: driven by the conviction that the individual is autonomous and capable of understanding truth using his own, independent means; untethered from beliefs, ideologies, or methods circumscribed by any one time period, culture or religion; but also keen to the needs of his time and culture, using the language of the period to articulate a sense of the sacred. This work studies the development of such a figure and his ultimate social purpose, which is a spiritual one.

### **THE POET AS SEEKER AND SEER OF TRUTH**

In an 1818 letter to Richard Woodhouse, Keats sketches his concept of a “chameleon poet,” a figure who is a transparent and empty receptacle for the experiences of the world and a transcendent source of inspiration. “As to the poetical character itself...” he begins, “it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—it has no character.”<sup>7</sup> Having no character—and therefore no preferences—the poet is amoral and non-judgmental towards the world, experiencing life indiscriminately, with all its binaries and oppositions. The poet

enjoys light and shade – it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things, any more than from its taste for the bright one – because they both end in speculation (ibid. 1:386-387).

This “chameleon poet” is fascinated by the variety of the world, uninhibited by the bounds and dictates of virtue or religion. He imitates the world itself, capable of replicating every shade of the palette of human

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<sup>7</sup>Keats, *Letters*, 1:386-387.

experience—indeed, the poet celebrates its entirety. But this free engagement in the world as it is, rather than only the world as it should or ought to be, is not for the sake of deconstructing supposedly constrictive social structures or exploring and enjoying previously withheld carnal pleasures. The poet, by virtue of his non-discriminatory approach to the world, is neither harmed nor elevated by experiences which are no longer wrong nor right, but opens his mind to engage with the world at large and receive unfiltered truth.

Not only does the poet not discriminate against the truth of the world, he must allow himself to embody it. “A poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence,” says Keats, “because he has no identity, he is continually in for—and filling—some other body” (ibid.).

It is a disappointing and underwhelming claim for poets, and particularly remarkable coming from one who proposes a lofty and weighty role for true poets. But it is in the humility of Keats’s poet that his power becomes evident. Unlike others, “who are creatures of impulse, are poetical, and have about them an unchangeable attribute,” the poet “is the most unpoetical of God’s creatures,” without identity and eternally changeable (ibid.). And yet, the seemingly empty poet exists, and, moreover, writes, filled with a power that is beyond his own:

It is a wretched thing to confess, but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature— how can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with people, if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of everyone in the room begins so to press upon me, that I am, in a very little time, annihilated – not only among men; it would be the same in a nursery of children (ibid.).

Others, possessing their own identity, fill the empty poet so that he loses any concept of having an identity of his own. The poet’s mind speculates on the products of his imagination until he comes into contact with some

external identity, and then, like a chameleon placed in a new environment, takes on new colors. It is significant that Keats uses “annihilated” to describe this process of letting other identities fill one’s own—it suggests the complete giving up of the self, a total relinquishing of any self-protective impulses, desires, thoughts, opinions, or beliefs. Having no self, the poet “should write from the mere yearning and fondness... for the beautiful,” says Keats (*ibid.*, 1:388). All poetic thoughts that flow from the mind have a source beyond the non-existent poetic self: “even now I am perhaps not speaking from myself,” Keats admits, “but from some character in whose soul I now live” (*ibid.*). This quality is crucial for the poet if he is to be receptive of truth, yet capable of perceiving the specific needs of his time.

#### *A MANSION OF MANY APARTMENTS*

Truth, however, is not acquired all at once; and in his May 1818 letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, Keats outlines the epistemological process by which one progressively comes into knowledge of truth. He uses the metaphor of a “Mansion of Many Apartments” to describe the mind’s successive acquisition of what he understands to be truth:

I compare human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments, two of which I can only describe, the doors of the rest being as yet shut upon me—The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think—We remain there a long while, and, notwithstanding the doors of the second chamber remain wide open, showing a bright appearance, we care not to hasten to it; but are at length imperceptibly impelled by the awakening of the thinking principle—within us—we no sooner get into the second chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden -Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there forever in delight (*ibid.*, 1:280-281).

The first line of this section is the key. Two of these “apartments” of knowledge are open to Keats and available for exploration, while the

others are shut—but only for the time being. And yet, even though several apartments are open, many do not exit the initial rooms. The mind of the individual in the first room is too immature to see that the second door is “wide open;” the mind of the slightly more mature individual is too consumed by the delight of having acquired new and comfortable knowledge to consider other doors and wish to explore them. There are limits indeed on what can be known, but some limits are self-imposed.

This second room, although ultimately unfulfilling for the truth-seeker, is where many, including great thinkers, remain. These are those “halfseeing” the “bourne of Heaven” but never truly entering it. But although he may be temporarily unable to travel to a room of more sophisticated thought, the poet must strive to shatter the false illusions of the second apartment and engage in “sharpening one’s vision into the heart [head?] and nature of Man—of convincing one’s nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression” (ibid.). He who wishes to become a “chameleon poet” cannot fill his knowledge of the world only with pleasantries; he must embrace it in its entirety, with its many painful realities. But such a struggle against a comfortable illusion ultimately has its rewards, “whereby this Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken’d and, at the same time, on all sides of it many doors are set open” (ibid.). Keats qualifies this hopeful statement, noting that the doors are “all dark—all leading to dark passages—We 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... if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them [those passages]” (ibid.). This, then, is the limit of knowledge and truth. Neither Wordsworth nor Milton could get past the darkened room, though they too saw the doors and Keats admits that Wordsworth rose above the mist (ibid.). The true poet, having conquered non-thinking and illusion alike, now stares into “dark passages” and is tasked with this heavy truth: that total and ultimate truth cannot be known. There will always be other doors and other dark



passages, ones we can never hope to know. This is why Keats writes to Bailey, “I have not one Idea of the truth of any of my speculations” (ibid., 1:243). But Keats is also determined to find hope within the barriers. As Emily Rohrbach notes in her book, *Modernity’s Mist*, “Keats’s poetic project is, finally, not to find a way out of the mist but to discover how to think and imagine from within it.”<sup>8</sup>

### NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

Keats discovers how to “think and imagine from within” the mist in perhaps what is his most famous letter, on the topic of “Negative Capability.” In a later letter, Keats suggests a “grander system of salvation than the chrystiain [sic] religion” (*Letters* 2:102), one which does “not affront our reason and humanity” (ibid., 2:103). Having studied Mavor, Robertson, and Voltaire, Keats was thoroughly aware of the 18<sup>th</sup> century value of reason, and his own thinking was thoroughly shaped by it.<sup>9</sup> Bate notes in his biography of Keats how the young poet often oscillated between lofty outpourings declaring his commitment to being a poet of experience rather than one toiling for knowledge—only to later rethink and rewrite his ideas on the matter (*Letters* 2:252). As a post-Enlightenment thinker, Keats was committed to reason and logic, and understood that the future belonged not to men of faith but to men of reason. Intellectual exercise was in itself a good for Keats: “Every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer—being itself a nothing,” he says, qualifying that the thought in itself has no value except for its effects upon the thinker (ibid., 1:242). And yet, he could “never be a Reasoner” (ibid., 1:243), and wished to be free from what Wordsworth called “meddling intellect.”<sup>10</sup> The spiritual, poetic Keats felt deeply that

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<sup>8</sup> Emily Rohrbach, *Modernity’s Mist: British Romanticism and the Poetics of Anticipation* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016): 5.

<sup>9</sup> Porscha Fermanis, *John Keats and the Ideas of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 11.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1963), 239.

reason could not explain everything—as his definition of truth demonstrates. The primary quality of his poet, and his main tool for achieving knowledge of truth, is not reason, but the capacity to embrace mystery. It follows that if truth is the understanding that truth cannot ultimately be known, the perceiver of truth must accept this and find ways of utilizing limited knowledge.

This reconciliation is what Keats called Negative Capability, a term that has since become highly popular among literary theorists. Bate recounts that Keats had been entirely alone in Hampstead for a week when he wrote it in the late December of 1817 and had this revelation. “It is felt,” Bate elaborates, “that Keats is now at a level of speculation from which he is beginning to touch on some of the highest functions of poetry.”<sup>11</sup> To George and Tom Keats, the poet Keats writes,

At once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, —that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine iso-lated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration (*Letters* 1:193-194).

Keats has already established that the poet is a figure of sacrifice; and relinquishing the conditioned Enlightenment grip on reason is the last of these sacrifices for the sake of poetic ability. But to Keats, this is not a negative sacrifice, despite the term's name: it is a liberation and an accomplishment. The poet is “capable” of being in an otherwise uncomfortable condition of “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts,” and is free from the mind's itching to rationally know or prove. He who is still solely committed to reason does not fully see truth. Coleridge, another

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 236-7.

contemporary Keats criticized, allows truth, a “fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratum of mystery,” escape him because he could not let go of the “irritable reaching after fact & reason,” and could not accept “remaining content with half knowledge” (ibid., 1:243). But this very infatuation with reason-based knowledge is in fact a mere reiteration of the self’s imposition upon poetry. However, in this scenario, it is the mind and not the self that wishes to have its desires confirmed by the external world. In describing to Bailey the peril of intellect, Keats warns, “We take but three steps from feathers to iron,” as all are too easily blinded by the convictions of their intellectual beliefs (ibid.).

Keats does not attempt to reconcile reason with mystery as he reconciles other oppositions, by making them harmonious; rather, he defines the limits of reason and suggests that Negative Capability is necessary for the poet’s complete understanding of truth. The urge to explain everything through reason inhibits the experience of truth; the search for objectivity closes us off from the reality of subjectivity. While Keats’ letters are demonstrative of his conviction that one must thoroughly contemplate the nature of the world and the mind, he recognizes that a fixation on explaining all through reason comes at the expense of truth. Negative Capability allows one to discover the extant but inexplicable aspects of life which also belong to truth. The inability to explain through reason and logic does not negate the reality of an experience or its truth. It only, at least temporarily, bars us from a rational interpretation of that experience. And the poet, as a self-effacing reflector of truth, cannot discriminate against experiences simply because they are less palatable to the post-Enlightenment mind.

The truth, so wrapped in mystery, is also subjective to Keats, but his Negative Capability allows him to see that subjectivity only leaves more room for poetic expression. “I do not think myself more in the right than other people and that nothing in this world is provable,” Keats writes to

Bailey (*ibid.*, 1:242). Realizing that there are many dark passages and rooms his mind has yet to explore, ones that will remain closed, and being only too well aware of the power of imagination to create the illusion of truth, Keats was loathe to confirm any of his “speculations.” “Almost any Man may like the Spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel,” warns Keats (*ibid.*, 1:231). But the subjectivity of truth does not render it useless. “Man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine Webb of his Soul,” says Keats, “and weave a tapestry empyrean--full of Symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his wandering of distinctness for his Luxury” (*ibid.*, 1:232). Using the faculties of one’s imagination, an individual can create meaning and a spiritual experience even within a world of uncertain and unstable truths. And although it might seem that this subjectivity will lead to chaos, that “it may at first appear impossible for any common taste and fellowship to exist,” Keats recognizes there are many ways up the same mountain: “Minds would leave each other in contrary directions, traverse each other in Numberless points, and all last greet each other at the Journey’s end” (*ibid.*). The variety of ways of understanding truth is for everyone’s benefit, and by sharing ideas “every human might become great” (*ibid.*). Differences and contradictions in thought should be explored; the poet should await with joy visits from new knowledge and ways of seeing the world, for they will enhance his knowledge of truth and bring his poetry to life. It is a view that takes into account the plethora of worldviews available around the globe, whether religious or otherwise, and declares that one gains by considering all of them. No one religion or worldview can lay claim to all of truth, but together they are all a part of a greater one. Freed of any circumscribers of what can and cannot be considered as truth, the poet can finally perceive truth and begin to create. “Let us open our leaves like a flower,” Keats poeticizes, “and be passive and receptive--budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every [sic] noble insect that favors us with a visit” (*ibid.*).

## BEAUTY AS SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

The result of the ability to receive unobscured truth, however, inevitably leads to the jarring realization that life is rife with suffering. As soon as the poet gains the courage to step out of the Chamber of Maiden Thought, which is religion and coddling philosophies, he realizes that the “World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness, and oppression” (ibid., 1:281). This is the difficulty of abandoning religion and faith for the sake of a secular, logic- and science-based worldview: the real nature of the world, which is often unbearably cruel, begins to feel meaningless and its unredeemed pain unbearable. The individual’s physical and even mental world is well-explained through science and logic, but one of the fundamental pillars of the human experience—the spiritual one—has been knocked out from underneath. “He realized from the beginning of his career both the problem he faced,” says Sharp, “how to find grounds for affirmation and hope in the absence of metaphysical certainty and in the presence of unavoidable suffering—and the solution to that problem.”<sup>12</sup> Keats understood that poetry, to be relevant to the Modern mind, could no longer rely on the dogma of the “pious frauds of religion” or the “halfseeing” illusory “bourne of Heaven” in the Chamber of Maiden Thought; but neither could poetry represent only reality without offering some sense of elevation, and consolation to the higher, spiritual part of an individual, the soul, as distinct from the purely cognitive mind.

An example of art depicting unredeemed but true misery can be found in Benjamin West’s painting, *Death on a Pale Horse*, which Keats saw at an exhibit, and afterwards left with a feeling of distaste. “It is a wonderful picture, when West’s age is considered,” he admits; however,

there is nothing to be intense upon; no women one feels mad to kiss;  
no face swelling into reality. the [sic] excellence of every Art is its

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald A. Sharp, *Keats, Skepticism, and the Religion of Beauty* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979), 24.

intensity, capable of making all disagreeables [sic] evaporate, from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth—Examine King Lear & you will find this exemplified [sic] throughout; but in this picture we have unpleasantness without any momentous depth of speculation excited, in which to bury its repulsiveness (*Letters*, 1:192).

As with Wordsworth and Coleridge, Keats admires West's skill but disapproves of excellent craft that does not also deliver profundity and create something useful for the soul. Without a meaning that aids the viewer, a skilled painting is just as egotistical as a poem written for the poet's adoration rather than for the reader. Keats's complaint is that West portrayed only the bitterness of life—but ugliness and misery alone are but a part of truth, though they tend to overwhelm at first and obscure life's joys. The painting depicts death coming to reap the wretched living—but the living in the painting, though they fight for life, are deadened figures. There are no characters to whom we can relate, “no face swelling into reality” or “women one feels mad to kiss;” the individuals in the painting are a blur, struggling, fainting, fighting, their figures and colors melting into each other. The king on his horse and the fainting maiden are generic and their purpose unintelligible. Death tramples over the crowd, yielding lightning bolts, wearing an expression of death-lust, and his sheer size dwarfs the humans and leaves the viewer with little hope for their survival. Perhaps this hopelessness is West's intention, and he meant to instill horror at the thought of our inevitable end—but it is on this very point that Keats strongly disagrees. If the Chamber of Maiden Thought gilds one's view of the world, a worldview such as West's reveals only the rust and rot—both are “halfseeing” and represent partial truth.

The poet's aim (and presumably the artist's as well) is not to depict only the joys or miseries of life—thereby shoving a certain view onto the receiver, and betraying a biased ego not fully committed to truth—but to assist the soul. Estranged from religion, which granted meaning and consolation, the individual needs a new source of aid in relating to a world

that has remained essentially the same in its portions of light and dark. The purpose of the poet's truth-seeking becomes evident: his is a spiritual goal. "With a great poet," realizes Keats, "the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" (*ibid.*, 1:193). Beauty is that which is life-affirming, Sharp claims (5), and is how Keats solves the difficulties of skepticism: with "aestheticism," "a principle of life and not just art that Keats intentionally offers as the foundation for a new religion"<sup>13</sup> (2). For the ego-less poet, his depiction of truth serves to console with beauty in the midst of horror.

This is why Keats criticizes West's painting for not being "in close relationship with Beauty & Truth." A beautiful work should make "all disagreeables [sic] evaporate," overcoming ugliness that makes one hopeless and despair with a more powerful beauty that reaffirms us that life is worth living. A work may provide "unpleasantness" granted that it excites "momentous depth of speculation... in which to bury its repulsiveness," for representations of misery alone, with no assistance for contemplation of them, do not aid the soul in its betterment. Ugly poetry or art strip life of its potential earthly sacredness. For the secular individual, there is no afterlife, and therefore the spiritual and sacred must be experienced during the mortal period. Works of misery that do not "bury" their "repulsiveness" are a kind of sacrilege, defacing the only realm left to the Modern individual.

### *THE VALE OF SOUL-MAKING*

In his April 1819 letter to George and Georgiana Keats, Keats attacks and overturns the view that life is primarily an experience of suffering, and lays the foundation for a new spirituality which his poet will serve. Keats criticizes the common perception of the world as being a "vale of tears," in

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<sup>13</sup> Ronald A. Sharp, *Keats, Skepticism, and the Religion of Beauty*, 5, 2.

which suffering must be endured as a meaningless fact of life, and considers it immature philosophy. The suffering of the world is not meaningless; rather, it is a “vale of Soul-making” in which humans gain individuality, identity, and a unique Soul, part of “God” yet distinct from him or anyone else: “The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is ‘a vale of tears’, from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven,” scoffs Keats, “What a little, circumscribed, straitened notion!” (*Letters*, 2:102) Instead, he suggests, “call the world, if you please, ‘the Vale of Soul-Making’. Then you will find out the use of the world” (*ibid.*). Even “in midnight,” says Keats in “To Homer,” “there is a budding morrow” (10). “The vale of tears” is “circumscribed” because, in self-pity, it ignores the other, joyous half of truth. It is also outdated, because it stands only so long as an “arbitrary interposition of God” is available to redeem the misery of the vale of tears, promising that one will be “taken to Heaven.” Keats was determined to create an earthly spirituality that did not require faith in an afterlife to make life worthwhile.

He begins by outlining the nature of the soul, and demonstrates that it is *because of* the suffering inherent in life that one can attain spiritual experience. Keats assumes that “human nature” is “immortal” (*Letters*, 1:102) and distinguishes between two metaphysical concepts: a “Soul” and an “Intelligence” (*ibid.*). A Soul is unique to each individual but possesses the “essence” of God, an “identity” and one who is “personally itself” (*ibid.*). An Intelligence, present in all human beings at birth, is akin to “sparks of divinity” which he calls “atoms of perception,” and “pure, in short they *are* God” [emphasis added]—but they are essentially alike and not unique entities (*ibid.*). An Intelligence, it might seem, is the perfect poet, having no self, no identity, and taking on the colors of everyone whom it encounters. But Keats’s poet is the product of a journey or a process, not one who is produced ready-made. And here is where he makes the great discovery to which scholar John Middleton Murry attributes Keats’s genius:



Intelligences are *developed* into unique souls by living in a world of suffering, a “system of spirit creation” (ibid., 2:102). The Soul is formed by three “Materials” Keats identifies: first, Intelligence, already present, a piece of “God” within an individual, the seed from which the Soul develops; second, “The World” or “Elemental Space”, or, as Keats also describes it, a “school instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read,” the environment of life with its “Pains and troubles,” posing tests and challenges and allowing the Heart to “feel and suffering in a thousand diverse ways;” and third, the “Human Heart,” a guideline or “hornbook” which helps interpret and direct experience, the “Minds Bible... the Mind’s experience... the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity” (ibid., 2:102-3).

In an approach that echoes Buddhist thought, Keats proposes that the problem of suffering is the foundation on which the world religions were built—and therefore the foundation for the spirituality of the poet. The Vale of Soul-making is none other than a path to salvation, phrased poetically and in less overtly religious diction. It is an alternative to religion’s treatment of the subject of suffering, wherein the individual comes into full consciousness and development of his Soul. The process of “Spirit-creation” which Keats outlined is a “grander system of salvation than the chrystian [sic] religion,” one which does not “affront our reason and humanity” (ibid.), that is, it does not require one to put aside reason in favor of superstition, nor does it exclude the majority of people who belong to another faith or way of thinking.

However, Keats does not at this point attempt to overturn the religious traditions that came before him. While he suggests that Christianity’s metaphysics are flawed (and hence producing the theological struggles Christians attempt to resolve), Keats goes on to note that Christianity and other world religions are connected to each other through the “system of Soul-making” (ibid.). This system, Keats states, “may have been the Parent

of all the more palpable and personal Schemes of Redemption, among the Zoroastrians the Christians and the Hindoos” (ibid.). “Keats's attitude towards religion was already essentially that of the modern historical relativist,” says Sharp, because he “sees all myths and religions as purely human phenomena—not as true or false but as so many attempts to give meaning to human life.”<sup>14</sup> This is what Keats refers to when he says that “Minds would leave each other in contrary directions, traverse each other in Numberless points, and all last greet each other at the Journey's end...” so that “every human might become great”” (*Letters* 1:232). To be clear, Keats believes that any faith, when practiced with a “philosophic Mind” which seeks to “increase in knowledge and know all things,” and found fulfilling, is worthwhile: “it is necessary to your eternal Happiness,” Keats writes to his orthodox friend Bailey, “[have] this old Wine of Heaven which I shall call the redigestion of our most ethereal Musings on Earth” (ibid., 1:185). It is the humanistic nature of his “speculation” that makes it so accessible to all, whether the believer or the atheist, and makes it so true—because any individual, independent of culture, Church, or religion, and in harmony with his rationality, may free himself of the struggle to escape suffering and come into knowledge of his spiritual nature. “He seriously thinks that the system of soul-making he has apprehended is the fundamental and essential religious truth, of which all religions are partial and simplified statements...” says Murry, “what he is saying is something of importance to all men.”<sup>15</sup>

#### *ETERNITY AND THE CONSOLATION OF BEAUTY*

The religions of old had, for thousands of years, established a way of relating to the eternal, and provided a sense of comfort, perhaps even a shield, against suffering and mortality. In the Vale of Soul-making letter,

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<sup>14</sup> Ronald A. Sharp, *Keats, Skepticism, and the Religion of Beauty*, 15.

<sup>15</sup> John Middleton Murry, *Keats and Shakespeare* (London: Oxford University Press, 1925), 141.

Keats distilled mythologies to their essence, and found that all spirituality comes from our shared experience of suffering, and our shared need and endeavor to come to terms with it. Viewing all religions as mythologies, and therefore on an equal footing, Keats could not, however, use one religion's response to suffering as the basis for his spirituality. He used the diction of Christianity, and the imagery and figures of Greek mythology, but they did not define his approach to the eternal and the consoling. Every faith has a different version of the afterlife, or the eternal, and what is required to conquer suffering—therefore Keats would have to find not only what common issue the faiths all sought to address, but again distill their responses into something common, universal, and palatable to the logical mind and independent individual. The concept of what is “eternal” might vary amongst religions—but earthly experience, like suffering, is available to all. Keats would therefore have to derive his immortality from the mortal state. “There is in Keats' cosmology the knife-edge where the two [mortal and immortal] meet,” says Earl Wasserman, “and are indistinguishably present.”<sup>16</sup> On this knife-edge Keats could reconcile religion, which is preoccupied with the immortal, and secularity, which refuses to deny the reality of physical and mental experience in favor of the spiritual. It is in this line of thought that he realized, “this earthly love has power to make/ Men's being mortal, immortal”<sup>17</sup> (“Endymion,” I:834-44). He finds his mortal-based immortality in “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” in which art, as a physical expression of the earthly, is capable of symbolically attaining the eternal. “The mere external aspects of an urn would not make it beautiful, a thing of art,” says Thorpe, “It is rather that the symbols executed there... that has the power to set aflame the mind and soul of the imaginative observer: that is true art, that, beauty; that is truth preserved in enduring form for the ages.”<sup>18</sup> The urn of the famous poem is itself a

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<sup>16</sup> Earl R. Wasserman, *The Finer Tone* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1953), 15.

<sup>17</sup> John Keats, *The Poetical Works of John Keats*. Ed. H.W. Garrod. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939. Print.

<sup>18</sup> Clarence Dewitt Thorpe, *The Mind of John Keats* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1926), 131.

physical art form and historical artifact which is a vehicle for the primary art form, image reliefs. The speaker of the poem gazes at the depiction of a long-gone Hellenic, mythic world, which comes to life in his imagination and causes him to muse on the nature of art, beauty, and eternity.

The urn, having survived since the days of the Ancient Greeks, still exists to represent that age, but also something common to all ages. However, while the physical urn is a historical artifact, a “Sylvan historian,”<sup>19</sup> the reliefs are more than that: they embody the mythology of their time, and their people’s spiritual relationship to the world. The youth chasing his beloved maiden, and the priests bringing a cow to the altar to be sacrificed, are by no means biographical or historically accurate, though they were made in their own time. Rather, they illustrate the mythic life of the Greeks, that which was essential to them—and therefore all humanity—rather than that which is culturally temporary. To capture this mythos for posterity, the images must speak to the soul, and freeze life: rendering it life-like but not life itself, immortal but depicting mortals. The “Bold Lover” can never “kiss,/ Though winning near the goal,” but his beloved “cannot fade” and he will “For ever... love, and she be fair” (ibid., v.v.17-20). Never “can those trees be bare,” and the “Fair youth” will never cease to play his song (ibid., v.v. 15-16). All is suspended in the moment just before its achievement or consummation so that the viewer can contemplate its mythological significance rather than its temporal purpose. The urn itself is an “unravish’d bride of quietness” (ibid., v. 1); it has not quite entered the circle of life which guarantees decay and death, and is not in the realm of sensuous expression and sound. It is “a ravishing that can never become ravishment.”<sup>20</sup> This is because the eternal does not partake in the expressions of the physical world; that is, it is lifeless but immortal: or, as Keats writes in *Endymion*, it is because “silence was

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<sup>19</sup> John Keats, “Ode on a Grecian Urn,” v. 3.

<sup>20</sup> Wasserman, *The Finer Tone*, 20.

music from the holy spheres” (II:675). The silence of the “soft pipes” that play “Not to the sensual ear, but.../ to the spirit ditties of no tone” (“Grecian Urn” v.v. 12-14) leaves us wanting and unsatisfied, for our sensual needs have not been fulfilled: so our imaginations are forced to seek and probe for something more than earthly, for the meaning behind the lifeless life: “What men or gods are these? What maidens loth?/ What mad pursuit? What struggle to escape?/ What pipes and timbrels? What wild ecstasy?” (ibid., v.v. 8-10). “Heard melodies are sweet,” admits Keats, “but those unheard/ Are sweeter,” for this “silent form, dost tease us out of thought/ As doth eternity” (ibid., v.v. 11-12;44-45). The urn does “not directly communicate at all, but” rather allows “the unindividualized self of the poet to come into the presence of mystery... Art does not communicate by thrusting its meaning upon the observer but by absorbing him into a participation in its essence.”<sup>21</sup>

Though the melodies are unheard, and the piper will pipe forever and the lover will never earn his kiss, there is a vividness even in their preservation. The inevitability of mortality and the progression towards death has been paused so that the viewer can savor life itself: the image will “never bid the Spring adieu;” the “happy melodist, unwearied” seemingly oblivious of death is “For ever piping songs for ever new;” and all is “For ever warm and still to be enjoy’d,/ For ever panting, and for ever young” (ibid., v.v. 22-27). The urn has deliberately chosen to meditate on spring, a period of blooming life, when mortality seems conquered, for the time being, as all living things renew themselves and bring new life into the world. This vividness, moreover, is everlasting because is not a Grecian experience: we do not hear the pipes or the voices of those chasing and laughing and running, which are all specific to those individuals. The distance the urn provides us through this lifeless life allows us to share in a universal experience of the joy of life.

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<sup>21</sup> Wasserman, *The Finer Tone*, 51.

But the celebration of life, and the fact that the life depicted no longer exists in the physical world, forces Keats to become sadly aware of life's opposite, that state towards which life is but a process: death. The intensity of life and knowledge of its needful conclusion "leaves a heart high-sorrowful and cloy'd" (ibid., v. 29). By the fourth stanza, Keats shifts his meditation away from the eternal depiction of life, and instead towards what those in the past did to come to terms with death. "Who are these coming to the sacrifice?" he asks; in his immersion in springtime, he did not see the pagan "mysterious priest" leading the "heifer lowing at the skies" to a "green altar" (ibid., v.v. 31-33). The "little town" with its "peaceful citadel" is "emptied of this folk, this pious morn" (ibid., v.v. 35-37) as all have gone to worship and attempt to appease the gods that can summon death or bless the living. Even in the midst of the most delightful celebration of life, these people pay their respects to the gods, to participate in something larger than themselves, something immortal, and prepare a sacrifice that alleviates the anxiety of mortals. They, like us, look past the immediate images in the urn towards something eternal. "The sacrificial altar towards which the procession goes is, then, dedicated to heaven, to a realm of pure spirit," says Wasserman.<sup>22</sup> We cannot hear the chants of the priests or the lowing of the heifer, but we can relate to their understanding that their world, too, is transient, and their attempt to associate themselves with something eternal. But despite these efforts, their generation passed away: the "streets for evermore/ Will silent be; and not a soul to tell/ Why thou art desolate, can e'er return" ("Grecian Urn" v.v. 38-40).

The fourth stanza ends on a melancholy note, for Keats realizes that art preserves some of the present— "When old age shall this generation waste,/ Thou shalt remain," but it is not an afterlife. The people who

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<sup>22</sup> Wasserman, *A Finer Tone*, 42-43.

inspired the procession on the urn, and their mythology and way of life, are dead; and so too will Keats's generation pass, becoming nothing more than a non-human artifact depicting lifeless life. That, however, is not the point—rather, it is that through his probing into the extra-sensuous meaning of the urn, the speaker has come to associate himself with a people across the historical timeline, and, as a result, learned to associate with all humanity and the universe in general: first, with all life and all that is mortal; then, with the mortal yearning for the immortal. “It was leading him to a poetry whose central theme would be humanity...” says Thorpe, “of the character, sentiment, and passions of mankind, yet with the divine touch of eternal truth upon it, within the breath and spirit of the infinite.”<sup>23</sup> “This spiritual communication,” says Wasserman, “is the meaningful silence that Keats attributes to the urn.”<sup>24</sup>

But the figures looking up towards the heavens, as does Keats, do not answer his most urgent question: how eternity is to be accessed, or in other words, how death may be overcome. They are as alive, as mortal, and as mystified as he. But he has been asking the wrong question. The urn, like Keats's poet, is not meant to have “a palpable design upon us,” for “Poetry should be great & unobtrusive, a thing which enters into one's soul, and does not startle it or amaze it with itself but with its subject” (*Letters* 1: 224). The urn, like the poet who brings spiritual guidance, is “a friend to man” who does not deliver an answer, but directs the individual to experience life in a spiritual way, “stepping... towards Truth” with all its subjectivity and mystery. “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,” speaks the urn, “—that is all/ Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” (“Grecian Urn” v.v. 49-50). Beauty, only mentioned in the second to last line of the poem, makes a startling entrance as it reveals itself to have been the muse behind all that felt moving and real and true. There is no promise or certain

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<sup>23</sup> Thorpe, *The Mind of John Keats*, 157.

<sup>24</sup> Wasserman, *The Finer Tone*, 51.

knowledge of an afterlife, or of eternity; even the urn itself will one day waste away, albeit more slowly than its mortal maker. The viewer must resign himself to Negative Capability in order to realize that concrete knowledge of what is eternal is not what matters. Rather, it is the experience and delight of living, the process of soul-making, the partaking in humanity's sorrows and joys which connect us to the past and future, and the inspiring sense of the greater, the immortal, the mysterious which surrounds us, out of reach for the mind but perceptible to the soul. Keats resigned himself to let go of the need to rationally explain the world; and so too he resigns himself to spiritual mystery, and finds peace:

...thou must wander far  
 In other regions, past the scanty bar  
 To mortal steps, before thou cans't be ta'en  
 From every wasting sigh, from every pain,  
 Into the gentle bosom of thy love.  
 Why it is thus, one knows in heaven above ("Endymion," II:122-128).

Coming to the actual "bourne of Heaven" was hard-earned, as Keats chose an even darker, more uncertain, and more mysterious chamber in which to seek a truer relationship to the world. The experience of beauty, that secular word for our common and universal spiritual experience, is less concrete than a notion of the afterlife, but it allows Keats to transcend himself: "I feel more and more every day," he says, "as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone but in a thousand worlds" (*Letters* 1:403). "With reference to a work of art, Beauty is the emotional recognition of the life-truth revealed there,"<sup>25</sup> and beauty is enough. "Keats does not hate the world for not being a heaven," says Wasserman, "To him it is the source of rich beauty, an opportunity for an enthrallment in the essence of the sensuous; and it differs from heaven in its condition of being, not in its kind."<sup>26</sup> The afterlife was the promise of religion to ameliorate the pain of mortality; but Keats finds that there is

<sup>25</sup> Thorpe, *The Mind of John Keats*, 128.

<sup>26</sup> Wasserman, *The Finer Tone*, 43



joy in life itself, with its vividness and suffering and mystery. The mystery allows him to partake in all human spiritual experience, and he enjoys the beauty that all mortals past, present, and future are capable of knowing. This beauty is, very simply, the recognition of the existence of the higher in the lowly. It sanctifies the world as it is, true, painful, and joyful all at once, and proclaims that it is all good. Helen Vendler describes it best in *The Odes of Keats*: “the sublimity—and ecstasy—of art is therefore granted as one moment along the span of life, a moment in which, by the intensity of art, all disagreeables are made to evaporate 'from their being in close relationship with Beauty & Truth.’”<sup>27</sup>

It is the sense of beauty that pulls the poet’s soul through the dark passages of the Mansion of Many Apartments, and towards truth. “I never can feel certain of any truth,” says Keats, “but from a clear perception of its Beauty” (*Letters*, 2:19). The annihilation of the self to perceive all ways of coming into truth, the chameleon poet’s assimilation with all humanity and time, and the skill of Negative Capability that allows the him to embrace mystery rather than hastily accepting false answers, whether they are grounded in faith or reason, are not simply for the acquisition of the most accurate available knowledge. The poet is in search of a spiritual sense that is common to all; something that, like the urn, can speak to both its generation and the future one. This experience, which Keats called beauty, may be religious or secular, ancient or Modern, Western or Eastern, communal or individual. It is human, full of life, mortal; yet it speaks to our mysterious, inexplicable sense that there is something greater than us in this world, beyond the reaches of the body and the mind, towards which we can aspire. We know it when we see it, although the various religions have different words for it and different explanations. It tells us that celebrating life in its entirety is, in itself, a kind of worship.

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<sup>27</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), 134-5.

## CONCLUSION

Keats approaches his poetry with the mindset of one seeking to help an old culture pass the baton to a new one, to preserve a sense of sacredness and celebration of life yet not dismiss the advances of the Renaissance and Enlightenment which often conflict with the claims of faith. Yet, he did not merely want to replace religion; Keats understood that religion was not only an outlook and relationship to the universe, but an entire social system. The Church had its priests, whose purpose was to guide the soul. Likewise, poetry, if it was to serve the coming age, had to be more than a new Scripture. Keats's solution is the poet, an exemplar for the spiritual Modern man, nimbly navigating a secular, globalizing, and reason-based world. The poet, by virtue of his character, knows what is eternally beautiful and true; but he also understands the age in which he is writing, and is keen to the best means of delivery of these eternal themes. Ever since Virgil guided Dante to see the underworld, poets have worked closely to make the spiritual available to the earthly. Keats's poet speaks directly to us, the future, fully modernized society which his life's work intended to serve.

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