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Negative Capability

Keats's and Coleridge's metaphors for poetic creativity

INTRODUCTION

Keats's negative capability letter is often cited in reference to his idea of poetic creativity. The interpretations centre upon two aspects, either on one of them or on both: the idea of self-negation, and/or the ability of retaining an imaginatively open state of mind. According to the first, negative capability is "the ability of the mind to detach itself from its own identity."[1] This is a concern of voice, the poetic self in Keats's poems is seen as refined of any biographical reference, operating rather as a "representative figure," and the poems are viewed as rendering the mind's process of discovery.[2] In this respect, Keats's choice of Shakespeare as his presidor shows an affinity of poetic temperament, since Shakespeare also erased concerns of his own identity in his works. Among the contemporaries Wordsworth's poetry meant a strong but troubled influence for Keats: he saw his own poetic practice as sharply different from the Wordsworthian "egotistical sublime," from a preoccupation with self-representation. In light of the other aspect, negative capability demands openness, a breadth of imagination in face of a

1 Paul de Man, "Introduction to the Poetry of John Keats (1966)," *Critical Writings, 1953–1978* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1989), p. 190.

2 Cf. the introductory chapter of Susan J. Wolfson, *The Questioning Presence: Wordsworth, Keats, and the Interrogative Mode in Romantic Poetry* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1986), especially p. 35.

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world of uncertainties.[3] This interpretation draws on the contrast of intuitive and rationalising tendencies of thinking, and focuses on the source of inspiration and the creative process in the poems. Negative capability calls for a reliance on intuition, and approximates passive receptivity, or Wordsworth's "wise passiveness." But negative capability can also be understood as the very activity of thought, and can stress "the energies of contradiction and irresolution, as the shaping power of imagination."[4]

These arguments, of course, can be seen as two sides of the same coin. How Keats ideas branched from each other is nicely shown when placing the negative capability letter, written in December 1817, alongside with another famous letter written a few weeks earlier, in November 1817, as Ágnes Péter does in her study.[5] In the earlier letter Keats ponders on what forms the "Men of Genius":

> I must say of one thing that has pressed upon me lately and encreased my Humility and capability of submission and that is this truth – Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect – by they have not any individuality, any determined Character.[6]

Keats claims in this letter that men of great intellect have no individuality but have "chameleon" or protean selves, to jump to later wordings of the idea. The negative capability passage starts out from the same question:

> what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessd 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 –[7]

A creative state of receptivity is demanded here, a preference for intuitive to rational knowledge. Both letters try to grasp a capacity felt necessary for "Men of Genius," thus it ensues that the phrase negative capability is used to embrace both ideas justifiably. Keats used the word "capability" in the first letter cited to write about the need for "Humility and capability of submission" in a world of

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3 Bate interprets the negative capability letter along this line in his famous biography. Cf. Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 242–259.

4 Cf. Susan Wolfson's interpretation of negative capability (Wolfson, p. 187).

5 Cf. Péter Ágnes, *Keats költészetelmélete és fejlődése* (Budapest, 1970), pp. 90–95.

6 *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958), vol. I, p. 184 (referred to as *Letters* hereafter).

7 *Letters* I, p. 193.

uncertainties. "'Negative' was to be the next word he would apply to the 'capability' he had in mind [...] though even 'negative' would still be far from adequate," Bate comments.[8]

This paper focuses on interpretations of negative capability as imaginative openness. I would like to explore possible implications of the metaphorical language of the passage in the context of the poems, and discuss Keats's idea of poetic creativity. A second concern of the essay is to interpret the role of Keats's critical remark on Coleridge. I will include a comparison of Keats's and Coleridge's view of the creative process, concentrating on their recognition of its inherent indeterminacy. In my interpretation I argue for what Tilottama Rajan writes in her book on figures of understanding in Romanticism: there are signs of a "shift in romantic aesthetics, from a concern with the text as a finished product that contains its own meaning to a concern with the creative and receptive processes as loci of meaning."[9]

INTERPRETATION EXPANDED

Arguing for a hermeneutics of indeterminacy, Geoffrey H. Hartman evokes Keats's negative capability as a quality, or rather labour, needed for doing criticism as well:

> indeterminacy does not merely *delay* the determination of meaning, that is, suspend premature judgements and allow greater thoughtfulness. [...] The delay is intrinsic: from a certain point of view, it is thoughtfulness itself, Keats's 'negative capability,' a labor that aims not to overcome the negative or indeterminate but to stay within it as is necessary.[10]

In *Criticism in the Wilderness* Hartman calls for a critical commentary which originates in the bewilderment the text causes in understanding and does not try to master the text, but discloses contradictions and equivocations. In Hartman's use of the phrase, Keats's negative capability stands for the sphere of indeterminacy in which interpretations move in face of the text.

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8 Bate, p. 237.

9 Tilottama Rajan, *The Supplement of Reading: Figures of Understanding in Romantic Theory and Practice* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 17.

10 Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Criticism, Indeterminacy, Irony," *Criticism in the Wilderness* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 269-270.

The principle of indeterminacy also implies, Hartman writes, that the text is not resolved into available readings, but a "willing suspension of disbelief," that is, a suspension of accommodating meanings is at work. When he terms the discourse of criticism "suspensive or negative," he interprets Keats's negative capability and Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" as instances of a similar concern.[11] While the phrases described imagination in respect either of creative work or of reception in their original sense, for Hartman the evoked ideas stand for a mode of negative, that is, dialectic or counter-affirmative thinking in the process of critical commentary.

Yet, this does have some result if we try to turn Hartman's approach to our account, to the explication of Keats's idea. It stresses, at the least, the element of indeterminacy and dialectic thought possibly present in Keats's negative capability. The relation can be established for consideration also as Hartman's claim for plurality, that the critical approach should free all ideas and theories "for contemplation, analysis and play" cannot be far-fetched from Keats's idea that the mind should be a "thoroughfare for all thoughts."

Similarly, negative capability is interpreted as strength of thought in Susan Wolfson's book on Wordsworth's and Keats's poetry. For Wolfson the phrase becomes metaphorical of a poetic language rich in interrogative practices, which express the questioning presence of the imagination.[12] She interprets negative capability as a state of indeterminacy, of experiential speculations, also endorsing the implications of self-negation.

The early poems of Keats, for instance, are read by Wolfson as inquiries into his poetic powers and self-definition, where displacement of these questions into idioms such as myths instigates creative exploration and leaves the problems provocatively indeterminate.[13] In her interpretation of the odes, Wolfson states that the poems "test the limits of Negative Capability against the mind's positive tendencies. Keats's term itself shelters these tensions in describing a strength of intelligence against a field of absences – absent certainties, absent knowledge, absent answers."[14]

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11 More importantly, of course, Hartman places his argument in the tradition of philosophical and literary thinking, his use of Keats's and Coleridge's phrases being metaphorical, rather than instrumental.

12 Wolfson, p. 17.

13 Cf. Wolfson, pp. 206–226.

14 Wolfson, pp. 331.

Wolfson also stretches negative capability over the boundaries of the poems, to employ the perspective of reader-response. Interpreting "Ode on a Grecian Urn," she states that the speaker's questions facing the urn is analogous to the reader's perplexity before the poem. Wolfson claims that Keats's odes strengthen the negative capability of their readers, as they are required to interpret a poetic language that fixes and unfixes, forms and transforms meanings. By the interrogative practices Keats's poetry retains a mystery of signs, and demands the questioning presence of the reader. Thus, in Wolfson's interpretation Keats's poems demand the ability of "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" also on the part of the reader.

The circumference of possible interpretations of negative capability is as wide at least as shown briefly above. Keats's phrase appears to embrace implications also on reader-response and on the practice of criticism, the common denominator being creativity and indeterminacy implied by negative capability.

INTERPRETATION FOCUSED

For Keats the autumn and winter months of 1817 were productive of insights into poetic creativity. In a letter written to a close friend, Benjamin Bailey at Christmas, he worded the famous passage:

> Brown & Dilke walked with me & back from the Christmas pantomime. I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dovetailed in my mind, & 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 isolated 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 other obliterates all consideration.[15]

These lines, particularly their metaphorical language, pose several difficulties. In his biography Bate gives a comprehensive interpretation of Keats's letter.[16] He

15 *Letters* I, pp. 193–194.

16 I briefly recapitulate Bate's chapter on negative capability here. Cf. Bate, pp. 237–263.

traces the inspirations that probably matured Keats's aesthetic views, and interprets the most important aesthetic speculations worded in these months: the need of intensity in style, the ideal of non-egoistic personality, and the sympathetic potentialities of the imagination. In this very broad context negative capability is glossed as the quality needed for an imaginatively open, receptive state of mind, in which reality can be captured in its concreteness and diversity.

In Bate's interpretation the prerequisite for the creative work of imagination is openness, the ability to abandon the hunger for settlement, for closure, for inscribing an identity and a rationalised system on reality. Analytic and systematic thinking dissects and confines the concreteness of experience into a rational frame, whereas negative capability requires strength of intellect to let the mind be a "thoroughfare for all thoughts." Besides, any systematic structure is a product of the "assertion of one's own identity," Bate writes. Imaginative openness offers insights, when, through a sympathetic identification with the object, the unity of the mind and the object is attained: "Truth" is felt as "Beauty." For a poet in possession of negative capability "the sense of Beauty" that realises this experience again and again "overcomes every other consideration, or other <rather> obliterates all consideration."

I would like to supplement Bate's interpretation with a focus on Keats's demarcation of his poetry from Coleridge's, and on the possible sources and implications of the metaphorical language of the passage.

1 Penetralia of mystery

In his definition of negative capability as "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" Keats probably evoked his reading the *Tintern Abbey* poem, and Wordsworth's phrase, which gained special significance for him. As we know from Benjamin Bailey's account of their passionate readings in autumn 1817, Keats particularly liked the following lines of Wordsworth's poem:

> That blessed mood,
> In which the burthen of the mystery,
> In which the heavy & weary weight
> Of all this unintelligible world
> Is lightened.[17]

17 As quoted by Benjamin Bailey (Bate, p. 214).

The phrase "burthen of the mystery" echoes in several letters, when Keats tries to define an adequate stance in a world where so little can be known for certain. It was quoted, for instance, in May 1818, in a long journal letter: extensive knowledge, emphatically including all departments of thought, Keats wrote, "takes away the heat and fever; and helps, by widening speculation, to ease the Burden of the Mystery."[18] Wordsworth's "heavy and weary weight" was replaced by "the heat and fever" of existence in this passage. Keats's use of words probably reflects his idea of poetic creativity, "fever" being a word often associated with the intensity of creative imagination in his vocabulary.[19] Hence the "burthen of the mystery" also connotes the burden of creative attitude to life. Also, "widening speculation" can be a call for continuous creative exploration of reality. Wolfson writes, "the poetry of no self enjoys a greater flexibility of 'speculation,' Keats thinks, and in his vocabulary *speculation* is virtually synonymous with dynamic expansions of thought."[20] Negative capability, or the state of "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" allows for experiential speculations.

The phrase "Penetralium of mystery" is most often sidestepped in the interpretations of the negative capability passage. According to the *OED*, penetralia are "the innermost parts or recesses of a building, esp. of a temple, the sanctuary or the innermost shrine" (Vol. XI, p. 472). Keats's use of the word visualises these confined spaces, and, referring back to the state of "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts," lends a spatial metaphor to a state of mind.

Strangely, the central symbolic scenes in Keats's poems where human limitations are transcended by means of the imagination, or where the essence of existence is lived through are often organised around a shrine or an altar, a sacred place. They are hidden and innermost recesses, where the poetic self, confronted with a godlike figure, goes through an initiation, penetrates into the truth. The temple of Delight in the "Ode on Melancholy," or the altar of Saturn in *The Fall of Hyperion* are all penetralia in this respect. Hidden and hiding a female figure, they are shrines to the imagination.

These scenes of understanding and initiation are markedly allegorical passages, and can be read as self-representations, dramatising the faith vested in

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18 *Letters* I, p. 277.

19 Cf. Miriam Allott's note to the painfully self-ironic lines of *The Fall of Hyperion*: "Thou art a dreaming thing,/ A fever of thyself." Miriam Allott, *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 668–669.

20 Wolfson, p. 37.

imagination. In the ode Melancholy sits in the innermost shrine of the temple of Delight, and only that one is allowed to see her who can "burst Joy's grape against his palate fine," who learns that they can savour joy because they can savour sorrow and vice versa. The knowledge gained fuses sensuous and spiritual experience: the "soul shall taste the sadness of her might." Helen Vendler writes that the most striking discovery for Keats in the ode is that truth can be pursued in sensation, "that his own mind worked in ways which were best described by the vocabulary of Sensation, rather than the vocabulary of Thought."[21] In the last stanza of "Ode on Melancholy," Keats "begins to worship a complex emotional state, the acute nexus of pleasure and pain, from which, he realises, his creativity has always sprung."[22]

A similar central scene in *The Fall of Hyperion* is when the poet confronts Moneta in the shrine. The innermost recess of the sanctuary is her wan face behind the veil, and, even more hidden, the dark chambers of her brain. When Moneta unveils her face, it seems as if all possible narrative interest was vested on her face.[23] It becomes a depository of knowledge, as if it bore and depicted "the burthen of the mystery." She is Memory, witnesses and preserves all change, and the poet entering into her vision gains the knowledge that consciousness itself is irreversible. The self-confrontation thematised in the poem sets the question how the poet can be a "a sage;/ A humanist, physician to all men" with this knowledge.

The allegorical veiled female figures who impart knowledge in these scenes are figures of mentality. Melancholy stands for a mental state attained through experiencing the fullest emotional intensity, and absorbing willingly "the plenum of melancholy as well as the fullness of delight."[24] In *The Fall of Hyperion* Moneta is a figure of memory and represents the temporal aspect of human consciousness and of history. The poetic self must absorb their knowledge by the most bodily means of sensuous discovery, taste, or by a more intellectual one, entering into the vision of Moneta.

I think there is a valuable import of interpreting these penetralia of mystery in the poems for the negative capability passage. The scenes of understanding and

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21 Helen Vendler, *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, London: The Bellknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 184.
22 Vendler, p. 185.
23 Vendler, p. 213.
24 Vendler, p. 165.

initiation demand an emphatic reliance on the power of imagination on the part of the poetic self, as it is similarly requested in the negative capability passage. What appears, however, as a claim or deliberation in the aesthetic speculations of the letters, unfolds its problematic in the poems.

2 Coleridge

Another question that is problematical in the interpretation of Keats's negative capability is the use of the phrase itself, as it stands out from its context, and is thought to be a coinage, which does not appear in the letters again. Strangely, the paradoxical contrast of the two polarities itself, capability being something positive, sounds quite Coleridgean. But there is no agreement in criticism even about what inspired Keats's critical remark on Coleridge.

In his biography on Coleridge, Richard Holmes suggests that Keats seized on an earlier wording of Coleridge's "willing suspension of disbelief" as "negative belief" to define his negative capability.[25] Whether he assumes that Keats heard the very phrase discussed, read Coleridge's lecture published, or encountered the term "negative faith" in *Biographia Literaria* is not uncovered by Holmes. Coleridge used the term to clarify the nature of stage illusion in a lecture in 1808:

> all other Stage Presentations, are to produce a sort of temporary Half-Faith, which the Spectator encourages in himself & supports by voluntary contribution on his own part [...] I have often noticed, that little Children are actually deceived by Stage-Scenery, never by Pictures [...] The Child, if strongly impressed, does not indeed positively think the picture to be the Reality; but yet he does not think the contrary. [...] Now what Pictures are to little Children, Stage-Illusion is to Men, provided they retain any part of the Child's sensibility: except that in the latter instance, this suspension of the Act of Comparison, which permits this sort of negative Belief, is somewhat more assisted by the Will, than in that of the Child respecting a Picture.[26]

Coleridge's wording, the two opposing polarities are justified and expounded in their context, and the phrase appears again in *Biographia Literaria*. Though Coleridge's concern is drama, the idealised state of mind in the process of reception seems to resemble Keats's idea of negative capability, at least in the

25 Richard Holmes, *Coleridge: The Darker Reflections* (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998), p. 130.

26 *The Collected Works of S.T. Coleridge* 5, *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature* (Princeton, London: Routledge and Kegan, Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 134–135.

demand for openness and sensibility. Yet, they have not more than the aspect of negativity as counter to affirmative thinking in common: Coleridge counters his conception to what might be called "positive faith," that is belief in something existent, whereas Keats contrasts negative capability with a capacity of finding and stating certainties. Even if, hypothetically, Keats came across Coleridge's "negative faith," he only borrowed the economy of the phrase.

As for the instigation of Keats's criticism, *Biographia Literaria* is most often mentioned, from different respects. Jack Stillinger thinks that Keats's surmises on imagination in autumn, 1817 were stimulated by his reading and discussing Coleridge's work with Benjamin Bailey. Specifically, he reads the famous letter where Keats compares imagination to Adam's dream as an attempt to counter Coleridge's statements about the imagination in chapters 13 and 14. Stillinger claims that "when, a month later (27 [?] December 1817), Keats chooses Coleridge to exemplify the lack of Negative Capability [...] he is surely thinking of *Biographia Literaria*."[27] Robert Gittings in his biography also suggests that Keats had not Coleridge's poems, for instance the *Sibylline Leaves* in mind, but the *Biographia*, and its critique of Wordsworth.[28]

Explanations hover around the influence of *Biographia Literaria* on Keats's aesthetic views. However, no overt reference to Coleridge's book, or to Keats's reading of it can be found in the letters, though *Sibylline Leaves*, which came out together with the two-volume work is mentioned. For this reason Kenneth Muir's explanation for Keats's critical remark as an indirect influence is for me more convincing. Muir argues that Keats most probably picked Coleridge as a counter-example because Hazlitt's harsh critique of *Biographia Literaria* still haunted him.[29] Hazlitt's piece was published in the August issue of *Edinburgh Review* in 1817 and was damning: "Mr. C., with great talents, has, by ambition to be every thing, become nothing. His metaphysics have been a dead weight on the wings of his imagination – while his imagination has run away with his reason and common sense."[30] Keats, who was probably familiar with Hazlitt's critique, caught a deeper and more sensitive insight into Coleridge's poetic development,

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27 Jack Stillinger, *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats's Poems* (Urbana, Chicago, London: The University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 152.

28 Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1970), pp. 261–262.

29 Kenneth Muir, ed., *John Keats: A Reassessment* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1959), p. 143.

30 Ralph M. Wardle, *Hazlitt* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), p. 205.

Muir claims. What Keats captured in his letter is that Coleridge is unable to rely on his creative power, and his preoccupation with metaphysics can be seen as a symptom of it. Also, Keats's attempt to disentangle his poetry from his contemporaries can be sensed: he rejected Wordsworth's egoism and Coleridge's metaphysics to form his own poetry and poetical ideal unfettered.

3 A fine isolated verisimilitude

As a reader Keats often singled out lines of poetry for their expressiveness and vivid images. He could physically enter into the image, as the legendary account of his reading Spenser's *Faerie Queene* tells: "He hoisted himself up, and looked burly and dominant, as he said, 'what an image that is – 'sea-shouldering whales!'"[31] Phrases and passages distilled from his intensive readings echo throughout the letters and present strong influence in the poems. Keats even worded some of his insights into poetry through this receptive experience: he admired the spontaneity of expression in Shakespeare's sonnets, where the strikingly vivid images are "fine things said unintentionally – in the intensity of working out conceits."[32] The demand for unintentionality is emphatic in Keats's ideal of poetry.

Reading *Biographia Literaria* Keats must have relished Coleridge's extended metaphors for the imaginative process, as, for instance, the passage on the water insect in chapter 7, Holmes notes.[33] Though we cannot ascertain how much Keats read of *Biographia*, this passage can still be considered as an interesting parallel to Keats's "snail-horn perception of Beauty," a subtle image of creative sensibility in the letters. Interpreting the two passages side by side may suggest what Keats must have meant by "a fine isolated verisimilitude" in his critical remark on Coleridge.

The beautiful image of the water-insect and its motion reflected on the sunny bottom of the stream appears in Coleridge's ongoing discussion of association in *Biographia Literaria* as follows:

> Now let a man watch his mind while he is composing [...] Most of my readers will have observed a small water-insect on the surface of rivulets, which throws a cinque-spotted shadow fringed with prismatic colours on the sunny bottom of the brook; and will have noticed, how the little the animal *wins* its way up against the stream, by alternate pulses of active and passive motion, now

31 Bate, p. 33.
32 *Letters* I, p. 188.
33 Holmes, p. 456.

> resisting the current, and now yielding to it in order to gather strength and a momentary *fulcrum* for a further propulsion. This is no unapt emblem of the mind's self-experience in the act of thinking. There are evidently two powers at work, which relatively to each other are active and passive; and this is not possible without an intermediate faculty, which is at once both active and passive. (In philosophical language, we must denominate this intermediate faculty in all its degrees and determinations, the IMAGINATION. But in common language, and especially on the subject of poetry, we appropriate the name to a superior degree of the faculty, joined to a superior voluntary controul over it.)[34]

Coleridge evokes a natural phenomenon to grasp the process of thinking and understanding in metaphorical language. The movement of the small animal, swimming now by the current, now against it, visualises two opposite powers at work while thinking or writing poetry. The active phase rests on the exertion of will-power, the passive on surrender to the power of the current. The dialectic of the two propels the process. Concerning the creative process, in the active, self-conscious phase the mind is in control, makes, for instance, compositional decisions, whereas in the passive it is controlled, through a reliance on the inspiration from the materials it works upon. The passage emphasises the importance of the balance of the two, and seems to defy the possibility of closure in the process.

It is worth noting here that Katherine Wheeler takes Coleridge's extended metaphor to stand for the reading process, for the kind of reading *Biographia Literaria* itself requests.[35] In the current of narration, Wheeler explains, the passive phase is analogous to reading sequentially, in a linear way. But, in the meanwhile, the mind should also "gain a fulcrum to propel itself upward against the stream. Such specifically metaphorical passages in the *Biographia* are fulcra," they halt the reader and offer reflexive pauses.[36] Wheeler differentiates between the two types of reading accordingly, the one linear, the other reflexive, and claims that the depth and inwardness of reflexive passages actually lend coherence to the surface fragmentariness of *Biographia*. More importantly for my argument here, she claims that the metaphorical passages in *Biographia* most often thematise the act of

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34 *The Collected Works of S. T. Coleridge* 7, *Biographia Literaria I–II* (Princeton, London: Routledge and Kegan, Princeton UP, 1983), Vol. I, pp. 124–125. (Hereafter referred to as *Biographia*.)

35 Katherine M. Wheeler, *Sources, Processes and Methods in Coleridge's Biographia Literaria* (Cambridge, London et al.: Cambridge University Press, 1980). See especially pp. 82–85.

36 Wheeler, p. 84.

understanding, and should be read self-reflexively. I think the water-insect passage in particular refers the reader to their own self-experience, to observe their own processes of thinking.[37]

Engell and Bate interpret the water-insect metaphor as anticipating the definition of imagination in chapter 13, the phrase "in all its degrees and determinations" possibly differentiating the degrees named there as primary and secondary imagination.[38] The state which is passive in relation to the other can thus be interpreted as the primary imagination of perception, which is instinctive, a reflex of the mind. The water-insect is yielding to the power of the mightier current as the mind yields to a myriad of stimuli, and creates a picture of the world around. The active state, conversely, can be the secondary, poetic imagination, which co-exists "with the conscious will." The act of will instigates and controls the poetic imagination: "This power, first put in action by the will and understanding, and retained under their irremissive, though gentle and unnoticed, controul reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities."[39]

The two-paragraph definition of imagination in chapter 13 has become the crux of *Biographia Literaria*. Not only the interpretation of the definition, but also its immediate context, the letter written to a friend is polemical. To quote the different standpoints is not my concern here. To counter the passage on the water-insect and its interpretation of imagination to the definition of chapter 13, however, offers an interesting point. There, at the centre of *Biographia* is "the theory of imagination as a synthesising faculty that creates unity out of multeity so as to bring about the self-construction of the subject in a personal version of the Eternal Sum or I Am."[40] Here, imagination as an intermediate faculty refers to a suspension of closure and an engagement in a process of continuous self-construction and self-deconstruction, constitution and deconstitution of mean-

37 Another metaphoric description of the passive and active phases of imagination at work in the reading process appears in chapter 14: "The reader should be carried forward (...) by the pleasurable activity of the mind excited by the attractions of the journey itself. Like the motion of a serpent, which the Egyptians made the emblem of intellectual power; or like the path of sound through the air; at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which again carries him onward. Precipitandus est *liber* spiritus, says Petronius Arbiter most happily" (*Biographia* II, p. 14).

38 *Biographia* I, p. lxxiii.

39 *Biographia* II, p. 16.

40 Rajan, p. 104.

ings. As an intermediate faculty imagination strives not for a unity, but immerses in the contemplation of the play of multeity.

The intermediate aspect of imagination appears elsewhere in *Biographia*. Coleridge's use of the word is perhaps best understood in light of his discussion of the strength of thinking in

> leaving a middle state of mind more strictly appropriate to the imagination than any other, when it is, as it were, hovering between images. As soon as it is fixed on one image, it becomes understanding; but while it is unfixed and wavering between them, attaching itself permanently to none, it is imagination [...] a strong working of the mind.[41]

Coleridge's metaphorical passage on the water-insect can be taken as a "fine thing," a vivid image Keats would have favoured when reading *Biographia Literaria*. Yet, it is obviously not said unintentionally: Coleridge inserted the image as an illustration, an "emblem of the mind's self-experience" in the discussion, and analysed it to sketch a theory of imagination. Probably, Keats would have seized upon a similar image with a "sense of Beauty," and would have considered it to be an intuitive insight, which cannot be dissected and analysed.

Keats's metaphorical description of the creative process as a "snail-horn perception of Beauty" was worded in a letter written to the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon in April 1818. His friend is addressed as a fellow-artist, with whom Keats shares the experience of creative work:

> I have ever been too sensible of the labyrinthian path to eminence in Art (judging from Poetry) ever to think I understood the emphasis of Painting. The innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at the trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of Beauty – I know not you many havens of intenseness – nor ever can know them – but for this I hope not you atchieve is lost upon me... [42]

The source for the subtle recognition is self-reflection, a "watchfulness in himself," which for Keats is perhaps the strongest motivation through which a poet comes to maturity. Keats believes, the creative process is an intimate experience, its emotional and intellectual intensity cannot be captured fully in

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41 "The Seventh Lecture" (1811–12) in Coleridge's *Shakespearean Criticism* quoted by Wolfson, p. 325.

42 *Letters* I, pp. 264–265.

words. Moments intense in the birth of the work are necessarily lost to the recipient, even if they are familiar with the creative work of other arts. Sceptical as to what can be known and conveyed, Keats seizes the image he finds to suggest what cannot be analysed.

The moment of perceiving and creating beauty is described in the passage, as imagination can only be captured, metaphorically. Keats uses an image of nature, though also evoking a literary experience, an image he found especially vivid in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* and copied in the letters:

> Audi – As the snail, whose tenders horns being hit,
> Shrinks back<s> into his shelly cave with pain,
> And there all smothered up in shade doth sit,
> Long after fearing to put forth again... [43]

The phrase "snail-horn perception of Beauty" evokes sense perception, strangely combining the tactile and visual in the image of the sense organ of the snail, to describe an aesthetic experience. The attributes, as if by sympathetic imagination identifying with the snail, beautifully evoke the sensitivity of the creative mind. The "perception of Beauty" refers to that moment when a unity of the mind and its object is found, which comes half through perception, half through creation.

Keats's metaphorical description places the emphasis on the indeterminacy of the creative process, and on the impersonality of the creative state. The compositional decisions, he writes, "take place between the intellect and its thousand materials," thus the creative mind and its materials appear to work upon each other, the former being much like an agent. A similarly impersonal view is worded elsewhere in the letters: "But as I was saying – the simple imaginative Mind may have its rewards in the repeti[ti]on of its own silent Working coming continually on the spirit with a fine suddenness."[44] This passage might be interpreted as recalling moments when recognitions, memories, which were absorbed and dissolved to be part of the self, suddenly leap into the mind, and become formative of experiencing reality. Perhaps the nicest implication of the

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43 *Letters* I, p. 189. Jonathan Bate traces the inspirations of the passage and claims that the image of the snail is combined with a line which Keats probably borrowed from Hazlitt's account of Shakespeare's mind at work: "In Shakespeare there is a continual composition and decomposition of its elements, a fermentation of every particle in the whole mass" (Jonathan Bate, *Shakespeare and the English Romantic Imagination* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986], p. 170).
44 *Letters* I, p. 185.

passage is that these moments may come continuously also on "the simple imaginative Mind," not merely on "Man of Achievement."

Woodhouse explains in his commentary on Keats's mode of writing: "He has said that he has often not been aware of the beauty of some thought or expression he has composed and written it down. It has then struck him with astonishment – and seemed rather the production of another person than his own. [...] It seemed to come by chance or magic – to be as it were something given to him."[45] Strangely enough, there are no signs of the indeterminacy described in the passage in Keats's corrections in the drafts of the poems. Most of them, even the odes, were written rather as "extempore effusions," Stillinger claims, and where the drafts show processes of revising, their concern is primarily stylistic. In his exciting study Stillinger tries to resolve the puzzle: "The revisions within the drafts, then, are of interest mainly negatively: they have so *little* to do with the creative process. Either some trial-and-error activity of initial composition took place in Keats's mind before he ever put pen to paper, or else we must believe what Woodhouse reported from conversations with Keats: there was never any significant amount of trial-and-error activity at all in the process – a large share of Keats's lines came "by chance or magic."[46] Textual criticism remains just as sceptical about what can be known from the extant drafts as Keats is about what can be grasped and conveyed from the intensity of the creative process.

Keats's comparison of the creative process to a "labyrinthian path" warns of its "negative" aspect, that composition is full of digressions, dead-ends. The "innumerable compositions and decompositions" lay bare a state of indeterminacy, an inner frissure of the creative mind. It is here that Coleridge's and Keats's views of the creative process come closest. The very process of thinking, of writing constantly regenerates meanings, keeps them unsettled, in an undecidable play, both of them seems to say. Yet, Keats fixes the moment of creation when the synthesising desire of the mind perceives and creates a unity, "Beauty." For Coleridge, secondary or poetic imagination is co-existent with the conscious will, depends on it, as it dissolves and dissipates so as to re-create. An act of will is emphatically entailed in the creative process, and imagination is often described as work, struggle, it being a mental effort, as opposed to Keats's insistence on a reliance on the intuitive powers.

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45 Quoted by Jack Stillinger, "Keats's extempore effusions and the question of intentionality," in: *Romantic Revisions*, ed. Robert Brinkley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 312.
46 Stillinger, "Keats's extempore effusions," p. 312.

Keats tried to demarcate his "province of poetry" as sharply different from the contemporaries, while also bearing their strong impact on the poems. His numerous reflections on Wordsworth's poetry, and its troubling influence can be traced in Keats's letters. In contrast, there is practically no reference to Coleridge in the letters, though even his impact can be felt for instance in Keats's "Isabella," or "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." Keats did not write critical comments upon Coleridge's poetry, as evidently he did not feel it a need to extricate his poetry from Coleridge's influence. The only criticism in the negative capability passage comes as repudiation. In spite of all this, however different the poetry it produced, a common concern of theirs can be detected for that "pleasurable activity of the mind," which takes place in the creative process.