

**Of Poets, Dreamers, and Doctors: Keats's self-transformation as  
a "Physician to All Men"**

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## Of Poets, Dreamers, and Doctors: Keats's self-transformation as a "Physician to All Men"

The poet and the dreamer are distinct,  
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.  
The one pours out a balm upon the World,  
The other vexes it.

*(The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream)*

When the speaker of *The Fall of Hyperion* (1819) climbs upon the stairs of Saturn's temple, he raises an impassioned prayer to a veiled goddess, who is later revealed to be Moneta. "High prophetess", he implores her, "purge off, / Benign, if so it please thee, my mind's film" (I.147-8).<sup>1</sup> Moneta offers not so much an answer to the question as a prophecy, replying that the remedy lies in empathizing with the misery of humanity. "None can usurp this height", the prophetess says, "But those to whom the miseries of the world / Are misery, and will not let them rest" (I.149-51). In other words, only those who are aware of the misery of the world and experience it as if it were their own can climb the stairs of the altar. Though the speaker considers himself weak and unworthy, Moneta explains that it is exactly because he is a "dreamer weak" (I.164), that he has been admitted to the temple, so that he might be transformed into a true poet, someone who can "love their fellow even to the death" and "feel the giant agony of the world" (I.158-9). The dialogue between the dreamer and Moneta is controversial, but the most significant point to note about their distinction between poet, dreamer, and visionary—at least in light of Keats's thought and poetry—seems to be Moneta's argument for the ideal poet as a physician, an idea that significantly affects Keats's understanding of poetry as a remedy for human miseries. An examination of Keats's notion of the poet as a physician reveals a process of creative development from *Endymion* (1817), where Keats embraces a poetry of sensation, to the Odes and 'Bright Star' (1819), where Keats turns to the poetics of "negative capability".

In *The Fall of Hyperion*, Moneta insists that "the poet" and "the dreamer" are "opposite" of one another because the dreamer vexes the world, while the poet heals it (I.201-4). Moneta's important distinction between the poet and the dreamer is first introduced in the prologue to the poem, where Keats writes that everyone, "every man whose soul is not a clod", including fanatics and savages, can dream but only the poet can turn his visions into words—words which have the power to "save / Imagination from the sable charm / And dumb enchantment" (I.10-3). The difference between the poet and the dreamer is then further developed with the use of the metaphor of the poet as a physician. "Sure a poet is a sage", the poem's speaker observes, "A humanist; physician to all men" (191-3), an observation that in context establishes an implicit contrast between the speaker himself—an idle dreamer, and real poets—poets endued with the power to soothe the suffering of humanity (191-3). Here, Moneta intervenes and confirms to the speaker that he is "of the dreamer tribe" (200). After she has made it clear that the speaker is a dreamer, she concurs with his definition of the poet as a physician and explains

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Keats's works are from John Keats, *Complete Poems* (2019)

that the poet is more than the dreamer because he “pours out a balm upon the world” (201). The dreamer’s debate with Moneta sets out Keats’s views on poetry and in particular reveals that although he wished to believe that poetry could soothe pain, he was not without the suspicion that it might be an insufficient answer to human suffering. Keats’s fear that poetry might be inadequate to address the problem of suffering is evident from the fact that Moneta’s argument for the primacy of the poet over the dreamer stands in tension with the nature of the poem itself. Not only does Keats cast the poem as a vision within a dream, but in the prologue he warns the reader that whether the dream he “purposed to rehearse” within the poem “be poet’s or fanatic’s” will only be known after his death (I.16-18). Keats’s uncertainty as to whether his own poem will turn out to be a foolish dream or a prophetic vision further proves that he did not always have complete confidence in the special healing vocation the poet derived from his visionary power. Indeed, one might argue that the vision of *The Fall of Hyperion* does not so much “pour out a balm” upon the dreamer’s pain as “vex” it: to mount the stairs of Saturn’s temple, the hero must endure the “palsied chill” (I.124), the “cold grasp” (I.126) of death’s fingers around his throat, the “sharp anguish” (I.128) of his shriek within his head, and to see inside Moneta’s brain, he must face the extreme suffering of a “burning brain” for a whole month (I.397). Only by enduring intense pain—pain that Moneta describes as “What ‘tis to die and live again” (I.144)—does he gain the privilege to witness the downfall of the Titans and the triumph of the new Olympian gods. The dreamer’s “giant agony” (I.159) complicates any simple notion of the Keatsian poet as “a physician to all men” (190), often referred to in juxtaposition to the idea of the poet as nothing but “a dreaming thing” (168). In fact, these competing notions of the poet as “a physician to all men” and at the same time “a dreaming thing” speak to the conflicted attitudes in Keats’s mind about the figure of the poet-physician, a set of conflicted attitudes that are explored in *Endymion* and the 1819 spring odes.

Keats’s use of the image of the poet as a physician in *The Fall of Hyperion* has often been interpreted as a reflection of Keats’s desire to be a poet-physician himself, and it has prompted critics to take the dreamer’s tentative claim that “sure a poet is a sage; / A humanist, physician to all men” (189-90) as an explicit statement about Keats’s vision as a poet. Hermione de Almeida, for instance, discusses Keats’s poetic career in terms of his “poetic task as a physician who would heal the sorrows of mankind”.<sup>2</sup> Keats’s early poems, especially ‘Sleep and Poetry’ (1816) and *Endymion* (1817), incorporate a particular kind of poetry occasionally termed ‘poetry of sensation’ that may well seem to align with Keats’s understanding of the poet as a healer. Keats calls poetry “a friend, / To sooth the cares, and lift the thoughts of man” (246–7) as early as ‘Sleep and Poetry’, and in *Endymion* he explores the idea of poetry as “a friend” to “sooth” man’s “cares” to the fullest extent with images of sensuous delight that seem intended to alleviate human pain with pleasurable sensations. An apt illustration of this point can be found in the famous proem to Book I of *Endymion*, where Keats uses an especially seductive natural scene, that of the secluded bower, to evoke the joy experienced in the contemplation of a beautiful thing: “A thing of beauty”, he promises, “will keep / A bower quiet for us” (I.1-5), and as he leaves his open couplets free to overflow, he manages to summon for the audience

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<sup>2</sup> De Almeida, Hermione. *Romantic Medicine*, New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press (1991), p. 307

an overwhelmingly pleasurable sensual experience. In Book II, Keats conflates sight, touch, and taste to capture Endymion's lust at the "slippery blisses" (II, 758) of Cynthia's lips and at the "naked comeliness" of the goddess (II.615), and continues to develop this luxurious, indulgent atmosphere when he describes Endymion, clasped in Diana's embrace, as having "swoon'd / Drunken from Pleasure's nipple" (II.868-9). Keats's early attitude to sensuous experience is perhaps nowhere more evident in this poem than in the passages in which pain is aligned with drowsiness. This occurs in Book I, when Endymion awakens in a bed of poppies and notes that "through the dancing poppies stole / A breeze, most softly lulling to my soul" (I.556-7), and then again in Book IV, when the Indian Maid joins "Bacchus and his kin" in a drunken "folly" to soothe her melancholy (IV.199-206). In its emphasis on imaginative delight, *Endymion* represents a poetry of sensation rather than thought, or more specifically, a form of poetry that "offers the fancy an escape from bodily suffering into the realms of imaginative freedom", as Tom Clucas puts it.<sup>3</sup> It is a poetry that aligns pleasure with a temporary escape from reality and illustrates Keats's capacity to engage the reader in an experience of sensory delight characteristic of the poet-physician's quest to alleviate the sufferings of humanity. For all his desire to exploit the palliative potential of poetry, however, Keats had already acknowledged in 'Sleep and Poetry' that there would come a time when he would have to leave "the realm / Of Flora and Pan" (101-2). If on one hand his dream was to "Catch the white headed nymphs in shady places, to woo sweet / Kisses from averted faces" (105-10), on the other he believed that pleasure alone was not enough for a true poet, that after some time he would need to "pass them for a nobler life, / Where [he] may find the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts" (123-5). This period of transition would begin in December 1818.

As Brittany Pladek remarks, "after 1818 the poet turned seriously to the problem of suffering as he faced his brother Tom's death of consumption—and his own".<sup>4</sup> It is in the aftermath of the death of his younger brother, Tom, in December 1818, that Keats profoundly deepened his thinking and feeling about mortality and suffering. Keats's views on poetry also underwent an important shift at this point. As Pladek adds, Tom's death also brought him to question any previous idea he had formed about the palliative potential of poetry in light of "the tension between Keats's desire to heal and his uncomfortable recognition that pain, especially poetic pain, could be valuable".<sup>5</sup> This is evident from a letter Keats wrote four months after Tom's death to his brother George and sister-in-law Georgiana, where he describes pain not as an evil to be cured but as part of "a grander system of salvation than the chrystain religion".<sup>6</sup> "Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul?", Keats asks George, trying to find the most appropriate articulation for his idea that pain is necessary to human nature, because it is through suffering that our identity is shaped. This letter provides some of the background for Keats's remarkable poetic development in spring

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<sup>3</sup> Clucas, Tom. 'Medicalized Sensibility: Keats and *The Florence Miscellany*', *Keats-Shelley Review*, 25: 2 (2011), pp. 132-3.

<sup>4</sup> Pladek, Brittany. "In sickness not ignoble": Soul-making and the Pains of Identity in the "Hyperion" Poems in *Studies in Romanticism*, Fall 2015, Vol. 54, No. 3 (Fall 2015), p. 168

<sup>5</sup> Pladek, Brittany. "In sickness not ignoble", p. 164

<sup>6</sup> Keats, John. *Selected Poems and Letters of Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings and Sandra Anstey (Oxford: 1995), p. 175

1819. If in *Endymion* he had cast himself in the role of the poet as a physician, Keats now began to write more poetry that explored the notion of pain as necessary to shape individuality. The literal and figurative sedatives that filled his earlier poetry (wine, poppies, love, or reverie) are no more there in his mature work to lure his audience into a state of drowsiness, but to warn them about the threat opiates can pose to one's identity and sense of selfhood. "No, no, go not to Lethe", reads the first stanza of 'Ode on Melancholy', "neither twist" the roots of "Wolf's-bane" for its "poisonous wine"—"nor suffer thy pale forehead" to be touched by "nightshade" or "yew" (2-5). As he denigrates wolfsbane because the poisonous plant makes "shade to shade ... come too drowsily, / And drown the wakeful anguish of the soul" (9-10), the poem works to undermine his earlier faith in poetry's healing power, because here Keats implicitly sets relief against human identity and one's formation of selfhood. The most straightforward statement of Keats's understanding of the relationship between pain, pleasure, and identity is found in 'Ode to Psyche', where he promises to build "a fane" in honour of Psyche not made from wood, but made from "branched thoughts / New grown with pleasant pain" (51-2). Here again, in an even more vivid way than in 'Ode on Melancholy', we feel the poem to be something quite other than Keats's early verse, to express a new poetic sensibility he had not matured until 1818. This new poetic sensibility finds perhaps its most concise expression in phrases such as "aching Pleasure" (23) and "pleasant pain" (52), which describe not only the necessity but the beauty of suffering, one of the essential beliefs of the later Keats. For all these reasons, it is difficult to reconcile Keats's understanding of himself as a poet with the type of the 'poet-physician' after 1818, when he increasingly began to turn his mind to the idea of negative capability. As Ellen Nicholls remarks, "Negative capability suspends the reader in a painfully pleasurable state of anticipation that is never relieved", and in its "painfully pleasurable" nature it is an experience that seems to resonate with the mixed feeling of suspension between pain and pleasure suggested in the Odes with the terms "aching Pleasure" and "pleasant pain" as well as in 'Bright Star' with the image of the young lover "Pillow'd upon [his] fair love's ripening breast" (10).<sup>7</sup> 'Bright Star' attains a reconciliation between poetry of sensation and poetry of ideal aspiration, its first 'visionary' half and its second 'earthly' half being resolved into one to demonstrate that the poetry of sensation can rise beyond sensation to convey a mystical experience.

Keats always hoped to write poetry that would profoundly improve the human condition. From the first account of the poet as a "physician" in *Hyperion*, to the development of his own poetics of negative capability in the 1819 spring odes, he continued to wish his works might be of some benefit to his audience and illustrate the paradox found in Book I of *Hyperion*, "How beautiful, if sorrow had not made / Sorrow more beautiful than Beauty's self" (I.35-6). Keats's mature works test the notion that identity can be shaped by pain and express the idea that the pain that creates identity is the proper vehicle of poetry. As the proper vehicle of poetry, this pain can also be beautiful. But beauty is no palliative; poetry should not attempt to aestheticize pain into

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholls, Ellen. 'The 'Aching Pleasure' of John Keats's Poetry 1818-1820', University of Sheffield (2019), p. 148

pleasure for its own sake. Rather, poetry should always “sharpen one’s vision into the heart and nature of Man”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Keats, John. *Selected Poems and Letters of Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings and Sandra Anstey (Oxford: 1995), p. 54

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