

Keats's "Negative Capability" Figuratively Shown in *Hyperion* and *The Fall of Hyperion*

NIJIBAYASHI Momoko

Introduction

John Keats began writing his epic poem, *Hyperion: A Fragment* (hereafter, *Hyperion*), in late 1818 while nursing his dying brother, Tom Keats⁽¹⁾, but then in April 1819, he abandoned it unfinished. It was eventually published as a fragment the following year. He was an admirer of John Milton⁽²⁾, but he did not want his poem to become completely Miltonic. This is partly why he abandoned the poem. *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* (hereafter, *The Fall*), which was a rewrite of *Hyperion*, was composed between July and August 1819 after he had set aside *Hyperion* and was first published after Keats's death in 1856 (Wolfson xxvi–xxxv). As Keats kept the same theme in the new epic, *The Fall* includes several passages taken from *Hyperion*. Since the two poems were fragments, they are often considered poetic failures. They are incomplete, but Keats's concept of myth-making is clearly seen in them; that is, Keats's ambition to be a great poet is figuratively expressed in the *Hyperion* myth⁽³⁾.

In *Hyperion*, Keats uses the storyline of Titanomachy⁽⁴⁾, or the Titans' battle against the Olympian gods, to describe the Titans' dethronement and usurpation of the gods. In addition, he adapts the storyline of Milton's *Paradise Lost* (l. 70–75). Just as Milton's Satan in Hell envisages rebellion against God, the Titans in Tartarus (or Hell) conceive rebellion against the Olympian gods in vain. In their fall, like Satan, they lose their divine dignity. Despite his debt to Milton, Keats makes his own myth describing the Titans as human beings and emphasizing their emotions like pain and sorrow⁽⁵⁾. Keats implies that they are depicted as losers because of their inability to cope with feelings of regret: they cannot admit that they are dethroned.

In *The Fall*, the narrator, who tries to become a genuine poet, experiences the vision of the Titans. Keats's idea here is that the narrator can only become a genuine poet through the experience of the immortal, though he is mortal. Keats's own wish for such a vision is implied in the first-person narrative. The whole poetic setting owes much to Dante Alighieri's *Divine*

Comedy. A mortal poet travels through the world beyond mortality, and the experience is narrated by himself. Paul A. Cantor notes Dante's influence on Keats in the resemblance of narrative style and the structure of the quest in *The Fall*: "As many critics have noted, Dante begins to replace Milton as Keats's model in *The Fall of Hyperion*, as shown by the setting in a dark wood or the simple act of changing the name of the poem's divisions from *books* to *cantos*" (169). The idea that Dante, the poet-persona in *Divine Comedy*, progresses through three stages to acquire higher intellect expedient to becoming a better poet seems important for Keats. As Dante sympathizes with some sinners in Hell, the narrator in *The Fall* obtains true poetic sensitivity by sympathizing with the Titans' pain, which, according to Keats, requires negative capability and gains the power to "see as a God sees" (l. 304). This parallel contributes much to our understanding of Keats's poetic creativity and his myth-making.

Like the mortal narrator in *The Fall*, the sun god Apollo in *Hyperion* undergoes a death-like experience and resuscitation. This process is considered necessary for Keats to attain immortality. Preceding studies often point out that the pain accompanying the transformation of the protagonists is necessary⁽⁶⁾, but the difference in describing pain between the Titans and the protagonists remains to be explained in detail. While the Titans cannot overcome their mental pain, the protagonists develop their minds with their near-death experiences and resuscitations. Their capacity can extend even to bodily healing, as Michael E. Holstein mentions: "Healing the body and healing the spirit were closely linked in Keats's mind, and harmonizing these two goals was an abiding aim" (34). Putting this into consideration, the protagonists' resuscitations are to harmonize body and spirit, which seems to transform them into immortals; so that they can create great poetry.

My study aims to show that Keats's idea of a genuine poet appears in the protagonists' acceptance of mental pain, which is negative capability. Since it is the power to accept and overcome suffering by the poet's susceptibility, the paper closely examines the protagonists' transformation discussing how the defeated Titans are compared to and eventually transformed into human beings. It aims to demonstrate that, while describing the divine world, Keats appreciates and celebrates humanity through the spiritual progress of the protagonists, and especially negative capability, which can accept and still overcome emotions of pain.

1. Keats's idea of reality

In "Ode on Melancholy," written in May 1819, Keats describes how delight and sorrow are intertwined in humanity: "Ay, in the very temple of Delight / Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine, / ... His soul shall taste the sadness of her might"⁽⁷⁾ (25–29). Keats shows that

melancholy resides even in the delight of human beings and depicts melancholy as essential also to ephemeral beauty: "She dwells with Beauty – Beauty that must die" (21). Defining the sadness of reality as intrinsic to beauty, he insists that the one who knows joy can "taste the sadness of her might." The poem's message suggests that the person who has negative capability, the power to accept pain, naturally possesses the ability to relish beauty. Keats discusses negative capability in his letter to George and Tom Keats on 21, ? 27 December 1817:

I had not a dispute but a disquisition with Dilke, on various subjects; several things dove-tailed in my mind, & at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed [sic] 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. (Gittings 43)

Keats explains that negative capability is the attitude in which one is capable of "being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." Keats thinks that this ability is necessary for the "Man of Achievement" like Shakespeare. While it does not concern the "fact & reason" of things, this power equally accepts pain and pleasure. Clarence Dewitt Thorpe regards negative capability as essential to Keats's poetic perception: "The poet must be willing to take the universe as he sees it, making use of his best perceptions without 'irritable reaching out' after the unattainable, and that, even though his is only half-knowledge" (95–96). As Thorpe observes, the poet has to accept the things he sees as they are; these things will help his aesthetic eye appreciate the truth of reality. The poet can also equally receive contradictory emotions.

In a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds dated 3 May 1818, Keats ponders on this problem as he confronts the "burden of the Mystery" (Gittings 95), which he metaphorically explains in the progress of human development through "a large Mansion of Many Apartments" (95). It is the necessary progress for human beings in their path to confront severe reality, and the power of negative capability is required to go through this process. Keats explains that the first step is to enter "the infant or thoughtless Chamber," where we remain for a long time, unaware of the door that opens onto the next stage. The second chamber is called "the Chamber of Maiden-Thought," where we hope to linger forever enjoying the pleasures of an ideal world. "However," says Keats, "among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man – of convincing ones [sic] nerves that

the World is full of Misery and Heratbreak [sic], Pain, Sickness and oppression" (95). The chamber darkens, and other doors open, all of which lead to "dark passages." In the "dark passages," human beings are supposed to contemplate the mystery of the world: "We see not the ballance [sic] of good and evil. We are in a Mist – *We* are now in that state – We feel the 'burden of the Mystery'" (95). He suggests that human beings must not only take refuge in happy and pleasurable emotions but persevere sufferings. Through this experience, human beings eventually can confront mysteries like the cruel reality of death that we cannot solve. Therefore, by progressing "a large Mansion of Many Apartments," human beings can develop their minds to endure what they must confront in the world. Keats's idea about contrary feelings, negative capability, and the progress of the soul serves as the aesthetic and philosophical base for the *Hyperion* poems.

Keats depicts Apollo in *Hyperion* and the narrator in *The Fall* as explorers of these "dark passages" who seek to better understand the mystery of the world. Keats refers to "Tintern Abbey" in his letter, calling Wordsworth one such explorer of the "dark passages": "he is a Genius and superior (to) us, in so far as he can, more than we, make discoveries, and shed a light in them" (Gittings 95). Keats considers that human beings must explore the passages: "Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them" (95). The progress through the chambers is spiritual growth toward gaining negative capability to accept reality. Keats's idea of exploring the "dark passages," is represented by the death-like experiences and resuscitations of Apollo and the narrator, who gain poetic creativity appropriate for the "Man of Achievement" (43). On the other hand, the Titans like Saturn and Hyperion have got lost along the path of self-exploration. They cannot develop their minds as Apollo and the narrator do, who endure pains through their struggle to become poets.

2. The Titans

In describing the losers like Saturn and Hyperion in *Hyperion*, Keats represents their symbolic deaths by their stone-like features and their emotions of pain and anguish. As James Ralston Caldwell points out, Keats is "violating the myth" (1086) by describing the Titans from the non-traditional perspective that they lose their dignity as immortals and gradually possess human-like emotions.

Saturn's stone-like appearance is comparable with the Grecian urn in Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn."⁽⁸⁾ In *Hyperion*, Saturn and the nature that surrounds him are in silence: "Sat gray-hair'd Saturn, quiet as a stone, / Still as the silence round about his lair" (l. 4–5). The alliteration of the "s" sound represents this silence, while Saturn is depicted as an inanimate

sculpture. We can compare the description of the stone-like stillness of Saturn with that of the Grecian urn itself, which is almost inviolable: "Thou still unravish'd bride of quietness, / Thou foster-child of silence and slow time" (*Grecian Urn* 1–2). In his ode, Keats describes the engraved images of the urn, especially with the youths in the second stanza: "Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave / Thy song ..." (15–16) and "Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss, / Though winning near the goal ..." (17–18). The urn has immortalized the youths in their immovable, silent state. Affected by the silent figures, their town becomes desolate like the lair of Saturn: "And, little town, thy streets for evermore / Will silent be; and not a soul to tell / Why thou art desolate, can e'er return" (38–40). The world of the urn is complete in itself; the actions of the figures are acknowledged in the inner world of the urn, while it keeps its "silent form" (44) outside. Similarly, the stillness in the world of *Hyperion* is sublime, and it extends to Saturn's physical characteristics; his right hand is described as "nerveless, listless, dead, / Unsceptred" and his "realmless eyes" as closed (l. 18–19).

Saturn's emotions are observable in the way that his physical features and pain are described. As it has been pointed out that Keats's Saturn is modelled on the figure of Lear in William Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Cook 592), Saturn's despair and pains are so strong that they appear in his physical features. Saturn's sorrow at the loss of his realm reminds us of the sorrow of Lear⁽⁹⁾, who is deceived by his first and second daughters. In his physical and emotional condition⁽¹⁰⁾, Saturn becomes human, not a deity, and his pain and agony are shown as follows:

This passion lifted him upon his feet,
And made his hands to struggle in the air,
His Druid locks to shake and ooze with sweat,
His eyes to fever out, his voice to cease. (*Hyperion* l. 135–138)

Saturn's agony appears at his feet, hands, locks, eyes, and voice. Like a man, he suffers from the negative passion that makes him temporarily active with struggle and sweat. He is also compared to an old man awaiting death: "Until at length old Saturn lifted up / His faded eyes, and saw his Kingdom gone" (l. 89–90) and "As with a palsied tongue, and while his beard / Shook horrid with such aspen-malady" (l. 93–94). Saturn's mortality is again indicated in the scene in which he accompanies Thea to the recess of the other Titans in Book II. Seeing who is with him, he becomes despaired like mortals: "As with us mortal men, the laden heart / Is persecuted more, and fever'd more, / ... Where other hearts are sick of the same bruise" (2. 101–104). "[T]he same bruise" of the other Titans indicates "the laden heart" of Saturn. The

pain and despair of the Titans are illustrated as the wound incompletely healed. The word “fever” appears previously in the description of Saturn’s physical pain: “eyes to fever out” (1. 138). Keats uses this word here as a passive verb “fever’d” and metaphorically illustrates Saturn’s emotion suffering from illness. The poetic lines continue: “So Saturn, as he walk’d into the midst, / Felt faint, and would have sunk among the rest” (2. 105–106). Saturn’s “laden heart” is further overwhelmed as he perceives the other Titans’ sorrow and despair. This portrayal of Saturn suggests that he is becoming like a mortal, losing the dignity of his divinity.

Like Saturn, the sun god Hyperion gradually loses his immortality. He initially comes across as lively and active in *Hyperion* Book I, but this impression fades in Book II, which suggests his defeat. In the final scene, Hyperion becomes like a stone statue, and his appearance is indicated as a symbol of the fallen Titans: “... a vast shade / In midst of his own brightness, like the bulk / Of Memnon’s image at the set of sun ...” (2. 372–374). Hyperion stands in silence and without movement, accentuated by the iconic image of Memnon, who is supposed to utter a sound at twilight ⁽¹¹⁾. These lines also indicate a contrast of shade and brightness with “the set of sun,” which suggests the declining position of Hyperion as a sun god. Saturn symbolises the defeat of the ruler, while Hyperion that of the last hope for the Titans.

Even in Book I, the sun god Hyperion anticipates succumbing to human-like emotions. He inhales the incense that rises from the underworld, and gradually admits to an all too human fear: “For as among us mortals omens drear / Fright and perplex, so also shuddered he –” (1. 169–170) and “But horrors, portion’d to a giant nerve, / Oft made Hyperion ache” (1. 175–176). Hyperion’s emotional state of “Fright and perplex” and “horror” is described with bodily words such as “shuddered” and “ache” that reveal his loss of dignity and immortality. From the incense, he senses his defeat by the Olympian gods. Later, in the words of the sky god Coelus, Hyperion’s emotions are depicted as those of human beings:

Now I behold in you fear, hope, and wrath;
 Actions of rage and passion; even as
 I see them, on the mortal world beneath,
 In men who die. (1. 332–335)

Hyperion’s emotions of “fear, hope, and wrath” and the actions that accompany them, “Actions of rage and passion”, suggest his transformation into a human being. Saturn and Hyperion experience emotions of pain and anguish when confronted with the superiority of the Olympian gods, because they cannot admit the fact that they have been defeated. Their loss of authenticity suggests that they have lost their qualifications to be rulers. According to Keats’s

poetics, Saturn and Hyperion lack negative capability. They will be unable to proceed through the "dark passages" of the human mind in Keats's concept of "a large Mansion of Many Apartments" and finally lose their divine power⁽¹²⁾, degenerated to become human beings.

3. Apollo and the narrator

The protagonists, Apollo in *Hyperion* and the narrator in *The Fall*, suffer in their ways. They experience the pain and agony of death eventually to obtain the pleasure of life through their resuscitations, which is necessary to progress through the "dark passages" of the human mind⁽¹³⁾. The human narrator and the divine Apollo both cannot evade their fates of suffering as Robert M. Ryan argues: "Keats paints a fairly bleak picture of the human situation: man is created susceptible to suffering and placed in a world where suffering can be neither avoided nor eradicated" (198). Unlike the Titans, the protagonists can overcome physical suffering by their mental susceptibility. They intuitively seem to have negative capability, which Keats thinks is necessary to become genuine poets. Apollo's physical pain is depicted as follows:

Soon wild commotions shook him, and made flush
 All the immortal fairness of his limbs;
 Most like the struggle at the gate of death;
 Or liker still to one who should take leave
 Of pale immortal death, and with a pang
 As hot as death's is chill, with fierce convulse
 Die into life: so young Apollo anguish'd:

 Apollo shriek'd; – and lo! from all his limbs
 Celestial (*Hyperion* 3. 124–136)

Apollo's pain and anguish are evidently death-like because the passage includes the words "death" and "die": "the struggle at the gate of death," "pale immortal death," "a pang / As hot as death's is chill," and "Die into life." Keats uses various expressions to illustrate Apollo's reaction to pain: "wild commotions," "struggle," "pang," "fierce convulse," and "anguish." However, unlike the Titans, Apollo, even "at the gate of death," is destined to "Die into life;" death is the necessary gate for his rebirth⁽¹⁴⁾. Keats represents this miracle by an oxymoron, "with a pang / As hot as death's is chill." Thus, "chill" relates to death and "hot" to rebirth. This contrast helps readers appreciate how Apollo experiences pleasure after the pain of death.

Apollo is a god from the beginning, that his death-like experience, “pale immortal death,” seems to suggest his death as a god in a metaphysical way. His rebirth means his birth as a true Olympian god ⁽¹⁵⁾.

The narrator in *The Fall* undergoes a death-like experience like Apollo ⁽¹⁶⁾. He is forced by the goddess Moneta to climb the steps so that he will not be suffocated by the cold. The narrator feels that he is dying: “Slow, heavy, deadly was my pace: the cold / Grew stifling, suffocating, at the heart; / And when I clasp’d my hands I felt them not” (l. 129–131). The word “deadly” and the coldness indicate the narrator’s pain, as well as his death-like state. On reaching the lowest stair, life pours into his toes, and he revives: “One minute before death, my iced foot touch’d / The lowest stair; and as it touch’d, life seem’d / To pour in at the toes” (l. 132–134). As in Apollo’s case, the lines focus on the narrator’s physical, not mental, suffering, described as “suffocating, at the heart” or “the sharp anguish of my shriek” (l. 126). His suffering is expressed again by an oxymoron. “[T]he cold” (l. 129) is contrasted with the image of the burning gummed leaves that represent the narrator’s life. The contrasting images of cold and heat indicate his approaching death and what remains of his life:

The sands of thy short life are spent this hour,
And no hand in the Universe can turn
Thy hour glass, if these gummed leaves be burnt
Ere thou canst mount up these immortal steps. (l. 114–117)

The “hour glass” refers to the narrator’s remaining life, his coldness figures pain and mortality, and the heat of the gummed leaves suggests his life. As the birth of Apollo is described “[a]s hot as death’s is chill” (l. 130), the heat of the leaves seems to be the narrator’s pleasure of birth. Like Apollo, the mortal narrator also understands the pain of death-like experience as a prelude to the pleasure of rebirth. They become genuine poets by acquiring negative capability, finally reaching the realm of divinity.

Conclusion

Through these *Hyperion* poems, Keats’s deep interest in contrasting human emotions is presented. For Keats, the contrast denotes the dichotomy of life and death, and to transcend these is to transform into a genuine poet. To the two different courses of suffering by the Titans, and Apollo and the narrator, Keats adapts his philosophical notion of mental growth, “a large Mansion of Many Apartments.” Keats celebrates how Apollo and the narrator

overcome their pain by gaining negative capability, which leads them to appreciate life and its kernel, pleasure. While the Titans are unable to overcome their pain and anguish, Apollo and the narrator undergo death-like experiences and resuscitate. Here, Keats's myth-making appears in the metamorphoses of divine into human and human into divine. In these poems, Keats emphasizes the importance of negative capability for human beings to develop their minds and endure what they must confront in the world. It is a way to appreciate the truth of reality. Learning what is delightful in life, Apollo and the narrator become what Keats thinks as genuine poets.

Notes

- (1) Tom died of tuberculosis, which was also the disease that killed the poet.
- (2) Elizabeth Cook mentions Keats's allusion to Milton in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats of September 1819: "The Paradise lost [sic] though so fine in itself is a corruption of our Language – it should be kept as it is unique ... Life to him would be death to me. Miltonic verse cannot be written but in the vein of art ..." (515).
- (3) The two poems, *Hyperion* and *The Fall*.
- (4) According to Cook, Keats takes the theme of Titanomachy from, for instance, Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Hyginus' *Fabulae*, and J. Lemprière's *Bibliotheca Classica* (592).
- (5) Paul A. Cantor notes that Keats's mythmaking differs from the other Romantic poets: "When Keats shows the first of the gods wondering of the primeval divine joys 'how they came and whence,' he abandons the original purpose of the Romantic creation myth: to point the way to recapturing paradise by looking back to man's original happiness" (177).
- (6) Helen E. Haworth mentions that Apollo's resuscitation is like that of the Christ: "Apollo is a Christ-like figure; like Him he assumes the suffering of the entire world; like Him he undergoes death that he might live" (642).
- (7) The texts of Keats's poems cited in this article are from *The Major Works*, edited by Cook.
- (8) In describing the urn and the Titans, Keats was influenced by the Elgin Marbles, the collection of marble sculptures and architectural fragments from the Parthenon in Athens that were sold to the British government in 1816 and have since that time been displayed at the British Museum. Two of his poems refer to the collection, "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" and "To B. R. Haydon, with a Sonnet Written on Seeing the Elgin Marbles", written shortly before 3 March 1817. The first of these was written after he was taken to see the collection by his friend, the painter Benjamin Robert Haydon, who had championed them since first seeing them in 1807. Keats's letters also reveal his admiration for natural stones.
- (9) In his sonnet on the play, "On Sitting Down to Read *King Lear* Once Again", Keats's view of Shakespeare's genius is characteristically ambiguous: "Must I burn through; once more humbly assay / The bitter-sweet of this Shakespearian fruit" (7–8). And in a letter to his friend Richard Woodhouse on 27 October 1818, he famously describes Shakespeare as a "camelion Poet": "A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity ... he is certainly the most

- unpoetical of all God's Creatures" (Gittings 157). Keats's notion of "negative capability" is indebted to the "bitter-sweet" nature of Shakespearean drama.
- (10) Keats's description of Saturn has an autobiographical context, since, during the period when he was writing *Hyperion*, his younger brother was on the verge of death: "The writing of the poem was so bound up with the period of Tom's illness and death" (Cook 592). Keats took care of his brother up to his dying moment, while his experiences as an apprentice at Guy's Hospital gave him many opportunities to observe patients on the verge of death. Keats's description of Saturn's suffering seems to be derived from his observations of dying human beings.
 - (11) As Miriam Allott notes, an Egyptian statue (described by Baldwin and Lemprière) is "supposed to utter a melodious sound when struck by the rays of the rising and setting sun" (433–434). Ian Jack comments on the Egyptian features of Hyperion's palace (170).
 - (12) Haworth regards the fall of the Titans as necessary for future generations: "Out of the degradation of the Titans shall arise benefit for all the world" (643).
 - (13) Richard Harter Fogle comments on Keats's double vision that he "does not, like Shelley, contrast and oppose to each other heat and cold as Evil and Good, but accepts them as equally good, interesting, and desirable" (77).
 - (14) Carl Plasa notes that this description of Apollo derives from the Miltonic influence: "For Apollo to give birth to himself, 'Die into life' and secure autonomy, is for Keats to become caught in the figuration of the poetic death-in-life which for him defines the condition of a post-Miltonic autonomy" (145).
 - (15) Apollo is a heroic figure in Keats's poetic vision: "Keats makes clear in his letter to Haydon – but also in a sense the hero of all his poetry and of his entire poetic career" (Jack 176). Keith D. White compares Hyperion with Apollo in the aspect of nature versus art: "Hyperion represents the old Keats, and as such is the nature god. Apollo becomes the god of art, Keats's new concern" (120).
 - (16) Different from Apollo, the narrator's poetic ability also relies on the vision of the Titans articulated by the priestess. For Aileen Ward, it is this vision that makes him a poet: "The veiled priestess promises the dreamer a vision of the primeval warfare between the Titans ... the vision which will make him a poet" (339).

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