

Keats' "Negative Capability"

The Romantic¹ poet John Keats (1795-1821) coined the phrase 'Negative Capability' in a letter written to his brothers George and Thomas on the 21 December, 1817. In this letter he defined his new concept of writing:

I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.

What Keats is advocating is a removal of the intellectual self while writing (or reading) poetry - after all:

*Beauty is truth, truth beauty - that is all
Ye know on earth and all ye need know
— Ode on a Grecian Urn, lines 49-50*

Throughout his poetry and letters Keats proposes the theory that beauty is valuable in itself and that it does not need to declare anything for us to know that it is important. That is, beauty does not have to refer to anything beyond itself:

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination - What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth - whether it existed before or not - for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty.

- Keats in letter to Benjamin Bailey (Saturday 22 November, 1817)

It is this ability to hold onto a beautiful truth despite the fact that it does not fit into an intellectual system that Keats praises in [Shakespeare](#). He criticises Coleridge for letting go 'by a thin isolated verisimilitude... from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge' where he should realise that 'beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration' (Keats in a letter to his brothers [Sunday 21 December, 1817]).

Keats' poems are full of contradictions in meaning ('a drowsy numbness pains') and emotion ('both together, sane and mad') and he accepts a double nature as a creative insight. In *Ode to a Nightingale* it is the apparent (or real) contradictions that allow Keats to create the sensual and hedonistic feeling of numbness that allows the reader to experience the half-swooning emotion Keats is trying to capture. Keats would have us experience the emotion of the language and pass over the half-truths in silence, to live a

life 'of sensations rather than of Thoughts!' (letter to Benjamin Bailey [Saturday 22 November 1817]). Keats here can be seen to be extending Kant's² principle that much thought is sublingual by making the meaning of words less important than their 'feel'. Since you can very often not find the exact word that you need (showing that much of your thinking occurs without language) Keats often deals in the sensations created by words rather than meaning. Even if the precise definition of words causes contradiction they can still be used together to create the right ambience. Negative Capability asks us to allow the atmosphere of Keats' poems to surround us without picking out individual meanings and inconsistencies.

Whatever the complicated relations between Truth and Beauty and their respective definitions, what matters to Keats are moments of intense feeling that combine 'thought' and 'emotion' in appreciating beauty. This explains why much of Keats' poetry is devoted to catching, and holding, moments of beauty. Keats addresses this desire directly in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (lines 15 - 20) where he writes,

*Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal - yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, tho thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair.*

Throughout this poem, and many others, Keats captures moments, like that of the 'fair youth' stooping to kiss his lover, and holds them to prevent change and decay, revelling in that moment of perfection.

In many of Keats' poems this need to hold a perfect instant leads to an excited tone, an almost excessive use of superlatives and an atmosphere of crushing, voluptuous intensity as Keats demonstrates the depth of his appreciation for the beautiful and in the act of appreciation creates poems as exquisite as that which he is admiring. Keats' Negative Capability is the ability to bask in the beautiful without questioning either it or his methods of description. In other words to take beauty simply as it is.

¹ Romanticism, The Romantic Movement : a literary movement, and profound shift in sensibility, which took place in Britain and throughout Europe roughly between 1770 and 1848. Intellectually it marked a violent reaction to the Enlightenment. The stylistic keynote of Romanticism is intensity, and its watchword is 'imagination'. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*.

² Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) German philosopher.