

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

THE INTUITIVE APPROACH IN KEATS

Walter Jackson Bate

Introduction by Maura Del Serra



NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

THE INTUITIVE APPROACH IN KEATS

WALTER JACKSON BATE

INTRODUCTION

BY

MAURA DEL SERRA

Also by Walter Jackson Bate

The Stylistic Development of Keats

From Classic to Romantic

John Keats

Coleridge

The Achievement of Samuel Johnson

The Burden of the Past and the English Poet

Samuel Johnson

British & American Poets: Chaucer to the Present

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

THE INTUITIVE APPROACH IN KEATS

WALTER JACKSON BATE

INTRODUCTION

BY

MAURA DEL SERRA



© 2012 by the Estate of Walter Jackson Bate
and Contra Mundum Press.

Introduction © 2012 Maura Del Serra.

First Contra Mundum Press edition 2012.
Originally published in 1939 by Harvard University Press.
Reprinted with permission of the Estate of W.J. Bate.

All Rights Reserved under International and Pan-American
Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced
in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including
information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in
writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer who may quote
brief passages in a review.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bate, Walter Jackson

Negative Capability: The Intuitive Approach in Keats /
Walter Jackson Bate

—1st Contra Mundum Press ed.

128 pp., 5x8 in.

ISBN 9780983697237

I. Bate, Walter Jackson II. Title.
III. Del Serra, Maura. IV. Introduction.

2012941553

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Converse Owen Smith to whom its subject is no stranger, this little volume is sincerely inscribed.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>A Polar Star That Never Closes Its Eyes</i>	
Introduction by Maura Del Serra	0
Negative Capability	0
Introductory Note	2
The Truth of the Imagination	6
The Sympathetical Nature of the Poetical Character	22
Intensity and the Concrete	44
Endnotes	74

A POLAR STAR THAT NEVER CLOSES ITS EYES

Introduction by Maura Del Serra

SHELLEY'S FAMOUS STATEMENT proclaiming that poets are "the unacknowledged legislators of the world," is, in Keats' case, not only true but also exceedingly moving: the "Adonais" celebrated in Shelley's epicedium is remembered by history as the young neo-classical-romantic genius, author of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn." For the last two centuries, Keats has occupied a fiery winged seat in the sky of fixed stars, those "bright stars" not only of English poetry (as he aspired to in life) but of the Western literary canon *tout court*. As Hölderlin before and Rilke after — who can be considered one of his heirs — Keats understood and lived poetry as a celebration and an absolute vocation, a lucidly oracular daemon of the primeval sacred, a Muse-Music of the unfathomable reality that ties the ephemeral to the eternal, the infernal dimension to the Elysian one, the merciless clamor of History and Power to the magical and silent eloquence of a Good that, platonically speaking, is considered the prerequisite for composing authentic poetry, and that is transposed into the hendiadys Beauty-Truth by way of the twin and specular dichotomy of Eros and

Thanatos (Life and Death, pleasure and pain, celebrated also by Leopardi). It is a theoretical knot that transplanted the classic tragedy into the Baroque *Streben* and then into European Romanticism. In the Anglo-Saxon world, the same knot was translated into the symbolism & decadent aestheticism of Ruskin and Pater, of the Pre-Raphaelites and Wilde, of Yeats and Wallace Stevens. All these poets had their "own" Keats (while in Italy his message was understood only — although superficially — by the young D'Annunzio, especially in his 1882 *Canto Novo*).

The noble, secluded self-awareness of "Junkets" — as his mentor Hunt jokingly called him — led him to "love human nature" and to "write in Man's honor" — according to the ethical and social enthusiasm of the time, influenced by enlightened philanthropy —, although he did not want "men to touch" what he wrote, to contaminate and distort it with their ideological utilitarianism (from his letter to Haydon dated December 22, 1818).

The life and work of Keats, from his biographical, lyrical, and speculative "adult cradle," which he identified with his Scottish tour in the summer of 1817, to the final Roman cradle-tomb of February 1821, by now marked by the forced refusal of writing and the temptation of suicide, run literally at the speed of his creative light and are characterized by what he called "allegory" or "allegorical life" (that is, symbolical). In his opinion, such a life ideal belonged only to his beloved Shakespeare, his perennial & unsurpassable source of inspiration — unlike Spenser and Milton — because of his metaphorical

and lyrical-rhythmic *imagery* (see the letter-diary to his siblings George and Georgiana dated February 14 - May 3, 1819). This allegorical life, of which his works constitute the splendid glosses, implied an ascetic as well as tormented self-liberation from the “egotistical sublime,” whose most famous representatives were Byron and, although in a more complex and persuasive manner, the first admired and then criticized Wordsworth. It required a progressive de-personalization, both spiritual and psychological, a sympathetic objectification that was all encompassing and capable of projecting itself onto all other beings and things in nature. Keats’ sculpted poetic de-personalization, “hammered” by the tough biographical vicissitudes – orphanhood, the untimely death of his brother Tom, the crude critical reviews of his “Endymion,” his tormented love for Fanny Brawne – is carried out in the name of “Poetry’s naturalness” and in that of the poet himself, different from the “dreamer.” Such an idea will be famously, but more ambiguously paralleled by Rimbaud’s *voyant* of the “Je est un autre”; by Mallarmé’s wish for a “disparition élocutoire du poète”; by Pessoa’s trans-personal and multiple identity characterized by heteronomies and “abdication”; by Heidegger’s *Gelassenheit*, which he in turn inherited from Hölderlin and Rilke by way of the “pure nothing” of Meister Eckhart; and we should not forget Katherine Mansfield’s extreme determination to become, in her stories, “more duck than the duck, more apple than the apple,” as well as Eliot’s creative ethos. The latter admired Keats’ “acumen and

the depth of observation he scattered throughout his letters," and remarked how "there is hardly one statement of Keats about poetry, which [...] will not be found to be true." We could add that this holds true for every great poet, even though the mainstream and popular poetry — which Keats detested — would remain well within the egotistical-sublime tradition, based on demiurgism and supermanism, derived from Cartesian and Leibnizian subjectivism as well as the *Sturm und Drang* and German idealism.

Keats' empathic universalization is sensuously plastic in its covering the flesh of reality not with foresight but with visionary sight, which constitutes the objective correlative — to use Eliot's formula — of the poet's famous "Negative Capability," investigated in the now classic yet still unparalleled study by Walter Jackson Bate, which has been republished here. In it, the author reveals his meticulous zeal, remaining *tout entier à sa proie attaché* with a sort of linear devotion. This rather concrete theory, which Keats had been developing and which was finalized in his maturation between 1817-1818, was best expressed not in his lyrical poems — as we all know, he detested didactic poetry, which has "a palpable design upon us," and which does not "enter the soul" (from the letter to Reynolds, dated February 3, 1818) — but rather in his splendid and vibrant letters, and in one particular letter to Woodhouse dated October 27, 1818. There, Keats states that the "chameleon poet" is an entity without a Self, "it is not itself — it has no self — it is everything

and nothing. [...] A Poet is the most unpoetical of anything in existence; because he has no identity — he is continually in for — and filling some other Body — The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute — the poet has none; no identity....”

This “flight from personality,” as Eliot defined it exploring its ethical and aesthetic consequences, recalls also Musil’s Anders (Other, Different), later normalized into Ulrich, the protagonist of his *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* (The man without qualities, without personal characteristics), or the anonymous-autobiographical “K” in Kafka’s *Trial*. However, the philosophical and theological origins of this idea are based — more or less intuitively, given Keats’ vast autodidactic training — on Heraclitus’ purified “dry soul,” on Pythagorean doctrine — among whom Philolaus defined friendship (according to what Keats called an elective relation) as “the common thought of separate thinkers” — but also on Origen’s complete and “heretical” free-will and Pico della Mirandola’s concept of chameleonic man “animal of a varied nature, multiform and shifting being”; or even, according to the most benevolent and mind boggling theories of the Jewish Kabbalah, on the *tzimtzum*, that is God’s retreat from the world he created so it can truly exist “on its own.”

The poet is de-personalized through the empathic “affections of the heart” and the creative imagination

capable of translating beauty (which is identified with the Fancy-gardener), the giver of order that is truthful in and of itself like “Adam’s dream” (from the letter to Bailey dated November 22, 1817). This beauty can be identified with the “noble insects,” with the spider creator of lightness, with the sparrow that pecks the pebbles and rests on the windowsill. It can also, following Blake, lead to “the burden of Mystery” — that is, the natural Sacred — harbinger of the highest level of micro and macro understanding, dissipating, with its elusive awareness, the constantly looming solipsistic cerebral “fog,” as Keats states in his short lyrical manifesto “Where’s the Poet? Show Him! show Him!” Keats’ Muse, in her analogical richness, is anti-erudite and anti-intellectual (“Unintellectual, yet divine to me” from the song “To Fanny”), and strongly campaigns against Pope’s “rocking horse” disguised as an Acadian Pegasus (“Sleep and Poetry”), as well as against the materialistic and bourgeois pragmatism of his proto-industrial age.

His Negative Capability, on the contrary, is based on a contemplative, solitary “indolence,” devoid of misanthropy, which closely resembles the Taoist *wu-wei* (non-action) that lends a mythical dimension to the evocative Memory. To Indolence, he dedicated an ode (“Ode on Indolence”), which he wrote, along with almost all the others, in that *annus mirabilis* 1818, and which is paralleled by “What Can I Do to Drive Away” (with its “Petrarchan” rejection of real love in favor of its dream image) as well as by the “Ode on Melancholy.” In these

two twin odes, Keats — an ex-surgeon — appropriates the Elizabethan legacy of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* through the refined analysis of transient human treasures (Joy that takes her leave with a hand over her mouth, Beauty "that must die"). Through *Indolence*, the poet evokes the three disquieting allegorical figures that appeared to him in profile, rotating as if in a relief on a "marble urn," sister to the more famous "Grecian Urn." These hooded, praying figures, which would later become cherished by the Pre-Raphaelites — Love, Ambition, and the beloved "my demon Poesy" — bear a striking resemblance to Dante's song *Tre donne intorno al cor mi son venute* [Three Women Have Come Round My Heart] from his *Rime*; but are also reminiscent of the rows of souls and the decorated reliefs found in *Purgatorio*: they are visualized by the poet in the fateful hour, and are finally exorcised as if they were *angheloï* of a false ataraxic tranquility and of a pre-Baudelairean dimension predicated on a hypnotic *plazer*, capable of chasing away the "annoy" of noisy and paralyzing mediocrity: "O, for an age so shelter'd from annoy, / That I may never know how change the moons, / Or hear the voice of busy common-sense!" Undoubtedly, this "annoy" — which Keats uses in the sense of a strong discomfort modeled after the Provençal "enueg," the opposite of *plazar* — is a precursor to Baudelaire's *spleen* (and he will turn it into the banner of the urban *dandy*). However, this "boredom" appeared also in Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, where it was called the "pure desire for happiness."

At the same time, in the self-therapeutic twin "Ode on Melancholy," Keats struggles to evoke the catharsis from the famous saturnine and depressive condition (the "wakeful anguish" and the "sorrow's mysteries") not by immersing himself in a nullifying Lethe, but rather, as in the "Ode to a Nightingale," by transforming himself into the impersonal and immortal beauty of Nature's cycles (the simple flowers, the wave's rainbow) and into the "beautiful" energies dissipated by a negative passion, the "rich anger" of the beloved woman. In the letter to his brothers George and Thomas dated September 21, 1817, Keats states confidently that in "a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration," and defines the Shakespearean Negative Capability as the ability to inhabit "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." It is an ability more specifically defined as indolence and a receptive passivity in the following letter to Reynolds dated February 9, 1818, where the frenzy of the Mercury-bee is skillfully juxtaposed against the stillness of the Jupiter-flower: "Now it is more noble to sit like Jove than to fly like Mercury: — let us not therefore go hurrying about and collecting honey, bee-like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at. But let us open our leaves like a flower, and be passive and receptive; budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every noble insect that favours us with a visit — Sap will be given us for meat, and dew for drink"

(this recalls the same stillness of “non-action” that Emily Dickenson evoked in “The Grass so Little Has to Do”). His radical anti-clericalism — based on the ideas of Hazlitt, Godwin, and Shelley and expressed in the poem *Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition* — will evolve rapidly in an *epochè* rigorous and at the same time anti-ideological, more stoic than post-illuminist. In much the same way, the immature romantic love for an “easeful Death,” considered an escape from reality — which characterizes Keats’ Spencerian and “Gothic” period (“The Eve of St. Mark,” “The Eve of St. Agnes,” “La Belle Dame sans Merci,” “Isabella”) — will grow, in 1818, into a more mature and articulated “system for the education of the soul [...] more valid than the Christian one.” That is, an understanding of the world not as a sorrowful “Vale of Tears,” but rather as an evolutionary “Vale of Soul-Making” (from the letter-journal entry dated February 14 – May 3 1819, addressed to his siblings George and Georgiana), dedicated to converting the impersonal Intelligence into a Soul or individual consciousness (and this soul-Making will be remembered, in the 20th century, by Jung and Hillman). The letter concludes with a strongly assertive rhetorical question: “I will call the *world* a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read — I will call the *human heart* the *horn Book* used in that school — and I will call *the Child able to read, the Soul* made from that *school* and its *hornbook*. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains & Troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? [...]

Not merely is the Heart a Hornbook, It is the Mind's Bible, it is the Mind's experience, it is the teat from which the mind or intelligence sucks its identity — ”.

Keats' fulminating ethical and aesthetic evolution, with his plans of studying in solitude and “writing freely but judiciously” and with discipline (from the letter to Sarah Jeffrey dated June 19, 1819), derive from a vision of himself as a self-deprecating “philosopher” and humanistic “priest” of the Soul (“Ode to Psyche”), and from a vision of fame as fierce miscreed and of Fantasy as “deceiving elf” (“Ode to a Nightingale”). These ideas led to a poetic tryptic that includes the aforementioned “Where's the Poet? Show Him! show Him!” — characterized by a universalistic and at the same time pre-Nietzschean atmosphere (“’Tis the man who with a man / Is an equal, be he king, / Or poorest of the beggar-clan, / Or any other wondrous thing / A man may be 'twixt ape and Plato; / 'Tis the man who with a bird, / Wren or eagle, finds his way to / All its instincts; [...]”) — “Welcome Joy, and welcome Sorrow” — which recalls Goethe and owes a great debt to the Book of Job, “Lethé's weed, and Hermes' feather, / [...] I do love you both together! / [...] Fair and foul I love together; / Meadows sweet where flames burn under;” and here Keats borrows from *Macbeth's* song of witches, with their famous chaotic reversal (“Fair is foul, and foul is fair”), which is however treated in a pre-Freudian synthesis of Apollonian & Dionysian, conscious and unconscious — and finally “Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell” — which is the mirror

of the love suffering caused by Fanny (as shown by the extreme lyrics and supplicant letters) — marked by the sweetness of pain and bearing the seal of death like “life’s high meed,” which, in its telos, even surpasses the cherished “verse, fame, and beauty.”

The poet’s dismissal of his own life, made “posthumous” by sickness and disenchantment, is sealed by the ascetic maxim, “My Imagination is a Monastery and I am its Monk” (from the letter to Shelley dated 1820, in which Keats tries to convince him to be less abstract and “more artist”). And the letter to Fanny dated 1820 sounds like the “double” of his famous self-epitaph dictated to Severn, and appears to be a less desperate but perhaps more moving final testament: “‘If I should die,’ said I to myself, ‘I have left no immortal work behind me — nothing to make my friends proud of my memory — but I have loved the principle of Beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remember’d.’”

In turn, the lyrical mirror of this disenchanted and resolute dismissal is the extreme “Ode to Autumn,” in which the Negative Capability leads to an almost complete disappearance of the Self from a generous, sweet, and fruitful nature, which is dominated by the soothing and chaste “stubble plains” in place of the unripe “songs of spring.” The same images run through the letter to Reynolds dated September 21, 1819: “chaste weather, Dian skies. I never lik’d the stubble fields so much as now —” And they will appear again, in the negative,

in the “dry grass singing” of Eliot’s *Waste Land* (“What the Thunder Said”).

Keats’ other great legacy — which he paid for in a literal way and upfront with his life — is that of having evoked, with an extraordinarily lucid greatness, the laws and the deep reality of the human condition, in order to combat the illusions, the lies, the hypocrisies, and the vanity that — as Simone Weil would show — poison and blind the soul: this is a point of view that shares the same substance as the cosmic and natural sacred, resembling a polar star that never closes its eyes, which constitutes the color of its light and the sound of its voice, a river that flows toward its estuary and at the same time toward its source, toward the continuous origin that beats in the rhythm of the human pulse, covering the mortals with the flesh of myth and the blood of knowledge.

Maura Del Serra

The excellence of every art is its intensity, capable of making all disagreeables evaporate from their being in close relationship with Beauty and Truth. [...] Several things dove-tailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously — I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason — Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetratium 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.

KEATS, Letter to George & Thomas Keats, December 21, 1817

To know a thing, what we can call knowing, a man must first *love* the thing, sympathise with it.

CARLYLE, *The Hero as Poet*

Keats certainly had more of the penetrative and sympathetic imagination which belongs to the poet, of that imagination which identifies itself with the momentary object of its contemplation, than any man of these later days.

JAMES RUSSELL LOWELL, *Keats*

Ebenso ist es mit einem Dichter. Solange er bloß seine wenigen subjectiven Empfindungen ausspricht, ist er noch keiner zu nennen; aber sobald er die Welt sich anzueignen und auszusprechen weiß, ist er ein Poet.

ECKERMANN, *Gespräche mit Goethe*

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

THE INTUITIVE APPROACH IN KEATS

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The letters of Keats have elicited considerable study and analysis, particularly during the last two or three decades. The attention has been well bestowed. For few poets have been gifted with a more penetrating insight into the workings of their art than that which Keats possessed; and, with the exception of a few marginal annotations, the entire body of Keats's criticism is to be found only in his letters.

Concentrated analysis of the letters, however, may still prove rewarding. For Keats's discussions of poetry revolve to a large degree about his conception of the nature of the artist's character and his approach to his subject; and room certainly remains for further examination of Keats's conception of the poetical character accompanied by illustration from his own work. The quality which characterizes both the poet and his approach Keats designated by the term, *Negative Capability*; and it is the critical articulation of the philosophy of *Negative Capability*, Keats's own abidance by it, and the peculiar bent of mind which gave rise to it, which I have essayed to clarify and describe.

I wish to express my indebtedness for many helpful suggestions to Professors John Livingston Lowes, John Nash Douglas Bush, and Robert Hillyer, to Mr. Philip A. Smith, and to my tutor, Mr. Charles A. Steel.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

In general, the 1939 Harvard University Press edition of Bate's original text has been replicated as is; however, several minor alterations have been made to the text:

instead of retaining italics in poem titles, as Bate had them, such have been put in quotes;

brackets have been added around ellipses and footnotes have been made into endnotes;

in addition, and most significantly, wherever Bate regularized Keats's punctuation (eliminating dashes, adding periods, question marks, etc.) and made it uniform, erasing its idiosyncratic character, it has been restored;

finally, English translations from Bergson's *Creative Evolution* have been added in brackets, following the original French, which Bate quoted in his premier publication.

I

THE TRUTH
OF THE IMAGINATION

THE EXCLAMATION, “O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts,” has too often been quoted out of context. It occurs in an early letter to Benjamin Bailey, in what is perhaps Keats’s first extant discussion of the Imagination:

I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart’s affections and the truth of the Imagination — What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth — whether it existed before or not, — [...] The Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream, — he awoke and found it truth: — I am more zealous in this affair, because I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive [sic] reasoning — and yet it must be — Can it be that even the greatest Philosopher ever arrived at his Goal without putting aside numerous objections — However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations rather than of Thoughts!¹

This passage contains Keats’s first distinction between the logical element of the intellect and the imagi-

native, intuitive faculty, and his insistence not merely that the use of the Imagination is the more efficacious means of arriving at truth but that it is actually the only way by which truth can be grasped. "Consequitive reasoning" is the power of categorizing and representing objects as externally related to one another. It is almost *quantitative*, so to speak, embracing what is measurable; it is mediate, in contrast to the Imagination, which is intuitive and immediate; it analyzes rather than synthesizes, and it dissects rather than creates. It is essentially an outward view of phenomena, and never succeeds in grasping the reality within. The Imagination is the direct opposite: it looks inward, grasping by an effort of sympathy and intuition the hidden intention and reality of life; and what it seizes, synthesizes, and creates "must be truth — whether it existed before or not."

This arbitrary division of the Imagination and the logical faculty, with an insistence on the greater validity of the former, has been paralleled during the present generation by Bergson's thesis that the intellect and the instinct are turned in opposite directions — the former towards inert matter and the latter towards life.² There is, as it were, a definite *geometrical tendency* in the intellect:

L'intelligence, telle que Kant nous la représente, baigne dans une atmosphère de spatialité à laquelle elle est aussi inséparablement unie que le corps vivant à l'air qu'il respire. Nos perceptions ne nous arrivent qu'après avoir

traversé cette atmosphère. Elles s'y sont imprégnées par avance de notre géométrie, de sorte que notre faculté de penser ne fait que retrouver, dans la matière, les propriétés mathématiques qu'y a déposées par avance notre faculté de percevoir.³

[Intelligence, as Kant represents it to us, is bathed in an atmosphere of spatiality to which it is as inseparably united as the living body to the air it breathes. Our perceptions reach us only after having passed through this atmosphere. They have been impregnated in advance by our geometry, so that our faculty of thinking only finds again in matter the mathematical properties which our faculty of perceiving has already deposited there.]

The Intellect, which is essentially categorical, remains outside of phenomena, taking from this external position the greatest number of views which it possibly can. It draws life into its own rigid molds, giving it an artificial order, and brings it to us only after translating it into terms of inertia. Instinct, on the other hand, enters life, grasping the intention and simple movement which connect it and give it significance:

L'intelligence, par l'intermédiaire de la science qui est son oeuvre, nous livrera de plus en plus complètement le secret des opérations physiques; de la vie elle ne nous apporte, et ne prétend d'ailleurs nous apporter, qu'une traduction en termes d'inertie. Elle tourne tout autour, prenant, du de-

hors, le plus grand nombre possible de vues sur cet objet qu'elle attire chez elle, au lieu d'entrer chez lui. Mais c'est à l'intérieur même de la vie que nous conduirait l'*intuition*, je veux dire l'instinct devenu désintéressé, conscient de lui-même, capable de réfléchir sur son objet et de l'élargir indéfiniment.⁴

[Intelligence, by means of science, which is its work, will deliver up to us more and more completely the secret of physical operations; of life it brings us and moreover only claims to bring us a translation in terms of inertia. It goes all round life, taking from outside the greatest possible number of views of it, drawing it into itself instead of entering into it. But it is to the very inwardness of life that *intuition* leads us, by intuition I mean instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely.]

The logical element of the intellect can no more know life than it can conceive of the progress of movement. It concerns itself with *immobility*; and immobility is only *apparent*. In its contemplation of movement, for example, the intellect can direct itself only to past, present, and future positions; it represents becoming as a static series; and when it tries to form an idea of movement, it does so only by reconstructing from a sequence of immobilities.⁵ Instinct, however, by what might be called a "divining sympathy" can grasp the hidden significance and force at work beneath phenomena:

Quelle que soit la force que se traduit dans la genèse du système nerveux de la Chenille, nous ne l'atteignons, avec nos yeux et notre intelligence, que comme une juxtaposition de nerfs et de centres nerveux. [...] [But it can be known] par une intuition (*vécue* plutôt que représentée) qui ressemble sans doute à ce qui s'appelle chez nous sympathie divinatrice.⁶

[Whatever be the force that is at work in the genesis of the nervous system of the caterpillar, to our eyes and our intelligence it is only a juxtaposition of nerves and nervous centres. [...] [But it can be known] by an intuition (*lived* rather than represented), which is probably like what we call divining sympathy.]

The regaining, by an effort of sympathetic intuition, of the intention that runs beneath life, is the task of the artist: "C'est cette intention que l'artiste vise à ressaisir en se replaçant à l'intérieur de l'objet par une espèce de sympathie, en abaissant, par un effort d'intuition, la barrière que l'espace interpose entre lui et le modèle."⁷ ["This intention is just what the artist tries to regain by a kind of sympathy, in breaking down, by an effort of intuition, the barrier that space puts up between him and his model."]

I have ventured to recapitulate Bergson's distinction between intuition and the intellect for the purpose of clarifying Keats's theory of the poetical character, which anticipates, to a striking degree, Bergson's own thesis.

"Consequitive reasoning" is for Keats an essentially artificial process; it is at home only in the mathematical, measurable world of its own construction. "What the Imagination," on the other hand, "seizes as Beauty must be Truth." The Imagination enters life,⁸ identifying itself momentarily with the object of its contemplation; and it has only — as Hazlitt said of Shakespeare — "to think of anything in order to become that thing, with all the circumstances belonging to it."⁹ "Consequitive reasoning," however, draws life out into itself, into its own already constructed molds, distorting it to fit the shapes of these molds. It deduces, analyzes, compresses, and reshapes.

A "consequitive man,"¹⁰ who searches for a truth by means of "consequitive reasoning," shuts himself up in a circle of articulated formulae, premises and results, definitions and conclusions. The poet who possesses the quality of *Negative Capability* will be "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, *without any irritable reaching after fact and reason*";¹¹ and it is precisely this "irritable reaching after fact and reason" which characterizes the search of the "consequitive man" for truth, until it is small wonder that

... the dull brain perplexes and retards.

Coleridge, says Keats in the same passage, exemplifies the "consequitive man" who pursues truth in this fashion: "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." Poetic truth, precisely because it is glimpsed only intuitively, can never be seen and known with a clarity and accuracy sufficient to satisfy the exacting demand of the logical faculty; there is always about it an air of "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts," of "half-knowledge." And Coleridge, after having momentarily broken through the barrier which space puts between the artist and his object, and glimpsed "a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery," — Coleridge, says Keats, seeks to justify this "verisimilitude" intellectually, with an "irritable reaching after fact and reason," and to dissociate from it the air of "uncertainties," "mysteries," and "half-knowledge"; he demands that each of the rigid molds of his logical faculty be satisfactorily filled by the truth or phenomena which he is contemplating; and because he is unsuccessful in his attempt, he allows the poetic "verisimilitude" which he has grasped to dissipate itself.

The inability of the "consequitive man" to remain "content with half-knowledge" is owing, in large part, to his determination to "make up his mind about everything." In a letter to his brother George, Keats instances his friend, Dilke, as a "consequitive man":

He thinks of nothing but his "Political Justice"¹² and his Boy. Now the first political duty a Man ought to have a Mind to is the happiness of his friends. I wrote Brown

a comment on the subject,¹³ wherein I explained what I thought of Dilke's character. Which resolved itself into this conclusion. That Dilke was a man who cannot feel he has a personal identity unless he has made up his Mind about everything. The only means of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing — to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts. Not a select party. The genius is not scarce in population. All the stubborn arguers you meet with are of the same brood. They never begin upon a subject they have not preresolved on. [...] Dilke will never come at a truth as long as he lives; because he is always trying at it.¹⁴

Keats, in this discussion of Dilke, is again suggesting that the "consequitive man," in contemplating phenomena through a logical screen, imposes an artificial order and arrangement upon what he sees. Keats intimated that Wordsworth's poetry had a "palpable design"¹⁵ upon the reader; and it may be said that the reason, in its attempted approach to truth, has a "palpable design" upon the phenomena which it contemplates.

"Consequitive reasoning," moreover, will not arrive at truth because it is consciously deliberate in its attempt: "Dilke will never come at a truth as long as he lives; because he is always trying at it." The reason sets out on its search for truth with something of a "palpable design" upon the object of its contemplation, regarding it with a hawk's eye, with the intentness of a praying-mantis; and it rejects as unsatisfactory any "fine isolated verisimili-

tude caught from the Penetralium of mystery” precisely because of the aura of “half-knowledge” surrounding that verisimilitude. The approach of the analytical, rational element of the intellect is voluntary and deliberate — that is to say, conscious. Consciousness is proportionate with the power of choice; it lights up the zone of possibilities and potential activity which surround and encompass an act or thought;¹⁶ and hesitation, deliberation, and choice are its accompaniments.

In contradistinction to the approach of the intellect, that of the Imagination is unconscious and without deliberation and choice; and the riveting of itself to that which it embraces is immediate — its function, that is to say, is *instinctive*.¹⁷ In a letter to his brother George, Keats wrote:

The greater part of Men make their way with the same instinctiveness, the same unwandering eye from their purposes, the same animal eagerness as the Hawk — [...] I go among the Fields and catch a glimpse of a Stoat or a fieldmouse peeping out of the withered grass — the creature hath a purpose and its eyes are bright with it. But then, as Wordsworth says, “we have all one human heart” — there is an ellectric [sic] fire in human nature tending to purify — so that among these human creatures there is continually some birth of a new heroism — The pity is that we must wonder at it: as we should at finding a pearl in rubbish — [...] Even here¹⁸ though I myself am pursuing the same instinctive course as the veriest human

animal you can think of — I am, however, young writing at random — straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness — without knowing the bearing of any one assertion, of any one opinion — yet may I not in this be free from sin? May there not be superior beings amused with any graceful though instinctive attitude my mind may fall into, as I am entertained with the alertness of a Stoat or the anxiety of a Deer?¹⁹

The Imagination is almost animal-like in its instinctive approach to truth; it “has a purpose and its eyes are bright with it.” There is an echo here of the earlier characterization of *Negative Capability* as the quality which distinguishes the poet who approaches his object immediately and intuitively, glimpsing a “fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery,” and remaining content with the “half-knowledge” with which he has been favored. Keats here is attempting to follow precisely the same line of procedure: “I myself am pursuing the same instinctive course as the veriest human animal you can think of [...] straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness — without knowing the bearing of any one assertion, of any one opinion —”

This intuitive, imaginative element of the mind is essentially synthetic, not only in the concrete shaping and expression of truth but in its momentary seizure of truth as well. It is synthetic in its grasping of truth because it does not, like the reason, detect only particular attributes and qualities; it penetrates beyond the external, and by

a momentary divining sympathy, "feels upon its pulse,"²⁰ as it were, the hidden movement and intention which lie beneath. The Imagination "struggles," says Coleridge, "to idealize and unify. It is essentially *vital*, even as all objects (*as* objects) are essentially fixed and dead."²¹ Through a kind of fellow-feeling rather than from articulate and logical representation, it comprehends, grasps, and *feels* the peculiar force at work within the object of its contemplation. It conceives rather than perceives; its function will be that, almost, of a *common sense*, in the Aristotelian sense of a faculty in which the various reports of the several senses are reduced to a common apperception; and it will grasp an object with all the qualities and attributes of that object amalgamating and fusing themselves into a concrete unity of a general sensation or conception.

It is precisely because of this embracing, conceiving quality which characterizes its apprehension of truth that what the Imagination seizes "must be truth — whether it existed before or not"; for into the Imagination's apprehension of its object are woven the very subtlest threads of association, which escape the scrutiny of the intellect but which strike, however faintly, a common emotional note, which the logic may not detect but which the intuition will feel. These concomitant associations blend into chords of feeling which are not analyzed, picked apart, or dissociated from the phenomenon which they surround. They will be united and intermingled with the fusion already gained by the Imagination, the function

of which is in character so essentially like that of a *common sense*; for they will form an inseparable part of the truth of that phenomenon, and are a necessary accompaniment of a true poetic insight;²² and the Imagination, in this sense, will look upon “the Sun the Moon the Stars, the Earth and its contents, as materials to form greater things — that is to say ethereal things.”²³

This imaginative, highly intuitive faculty is to be trusted above all else. “Consequitive reasoning,” in its abstraction, is an artificial construction; and reality cannot be “settled” to fit its rigid scaffolding:

Oh, never will the prize
 High reason, and the love of good and ill,
 Be my award! Things cannot to the will
 Be settled, but they tease us out of thought;²⁴

“Reason,” as Coleridge wrote, “is aloof from time and space; the Imagination has control over both.”²⁵ Mobility and immobility alike are its subjects; and the fusion of the two, the union of quality and quantity, the Imagination alone can feel and conceive; for it seizes and explains creation in terms of creation, and life, in terms of life.

It is for this reason that a “life of Sensations” — or, as Keats might have said, of “intuitions” — is to be preferred to a life “of thoughts.”



COLOPHON

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY was typeset in InDesign 5.0.

The text & page numbers are set in *Adobe Jenson Pro*.

The titles are set in *Charlemagne*.

Book & cover design: Alessandro Segalini

NEGATIVE CAPABILITY is published

by *Contra Mundum Press*

and printed by *Lightning Source*, which has received Chain of Custody certification from: The Forest Stewardship Council, The Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification, and The Sustainable Forestry Initiative.



CONTRA MUNDUM PRESS

Contra Mundum Press is dedicated to the value and the indispensable importance of the individual voice.

Contra Mundum Press will be publishing titles from all the fields in which the genius of the age traditionally produces the most challenging and innovative work: poetry, novels, theatre, philosophy — including philosophy of science and of mathematics — criticism, and essays. Upcoming volumes include the first translation into English of Nietzsche's "Greek Music Drama," Miklós Szentkuthy's *St. Orpheus Breviary: vol. 1, Marginalia on Casanova*, Elio Petri's *Writings on Cinema and Life*, and Louis Auguste Blanqui's *Eternity by the Stars*.

For the complete list of forthcoming publications, please visit our website. To be added to our mailing list, send your name and email address to: info@contramundum.net

Contra Mundum Press

P.O. Box 1326

New York, NY 10276

USA

<http://contramundum.net>

Walter Jackson Bate's canonical 1939 study of Keats's concept of NEGATIVE CAPABILITY is a genealogical treatise that elucidates the socio-political, aesthetic, and intellectual composition of Keats's most famous poetic idea. He discloses its relation to Hazlitt's idea of gusto and to Shakespearean notions of impersonality and intensity while also demonstrating how NEGATIVE CAPABILITY presages Bergson's notions of intellect & intuition.

Bate reveals how the key elements of Keats's poetic concept are disinterestedness, sympathy, impersonality, and dramatic poetry, defining NEGATIVE CAPABILITY as "the ability to negate or lose one's identity in something larger than oneself — a sympathetic openness to the concrete reality without, an imaginative identification, a relishing and understanding of it."

With NEGATIVE CAPABILITY, Keats railed against the rampant egotism of his epoch and challenged the certainty of its claims to knowledge. While embracing reality, Keats urged the necessity of abiding in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts.

This new edition brings back into print Bate's indispensable work, and features an introduction by the distinguished Italian poet, playwright, & literary critic Maura Del Serra. With its republication, Eliot's proclamation on Keats is given new force: that "there is hardly one statement of Keats about poetry which ... will not be found to be true ..."



Contra Mundum Press

ISBN 978-0-9836972-3-7



9 780983 697237

WWW.CONTRAMUNDUM.NET