

Keats's Ethical Poetics between Jakobson and de Man: Non-Egotism, Negative Capability, and the Poetic Function

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Abstract. This paper repositions the modern stakes of Keats's ethical vision through the twin lenses of semiotics and deconstruction, taking non-egotism and Negative Capability as its pivots. It argues that Keats's bracketing of poetic subjectivity anticipates Roman Jakobson's account of the poetic function, the projection of equivalence from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination, and that it also offers a corrective to Paul de Man's reduction of Keats to "cognitive failure" and "rhetorical illusion." Through close readings of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *Ode to a Nightingale*, and *Lamia*, the study shows how Keats, mediating perception through sensuous form, stages the persistent tension between aesthetic illusion and rational disenchantment while legitimating affect as a mode of meaning-production. Rather than evading self-reflection, Keats models a disciplined suspension of subjectivity that allows the poem's self-referential patterns and metonymic economies to generate ethical force beyond the individual. The paper concludes that Keats's practice exhibits genuine foresight: the "linguistic uncertainty" achieved by suspending certainty does not collapse into nihilism but reframes deconstructive undecidability as ethically productive, offering a path for contemporary theory to reconcile formal autonomy with ethical responsiveness.

Keywords: Keats; Non-Egotism; Poetic Function; Negative Capability.

1. Introduction

The works of the Romantic poet John Keats are often regarded as a model of modern polysemous poetic expression, yet the ethical dimensions of his poetics have long been misread. Paul de Man tends to construe Keats's "Negative Capability" as a tactic for evading self-reflection, thereby yielding, on his account, an ethical deficit; a deconstructive preoccupation with ruptured reference further reduces Keats's poems to footnotes in rhetorical self-subversion. Such a reception obscures the radicality of Keats's ethics: already a century earlier, through the propositions of "non-egotism" and "Negative Capability," he anticipates the core concern of the modern semiotic and linguistic turn—namely, that the production of poetic meaning requires the bracketing of the logical subject so that the self-regulating operations of form can come to the fore.

In "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics" (1960), Roman Jakobson argues that the poetic function projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination, thereby directing attention to the message for its own sake rather than to external referents. This formulation resonates across time with Keats's insistence that the poet remain content with "uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts." The present article uses Jakobson as a theoretical bridge to show how Keats's ethical view prefigures semiotic principles and, on that basis, to challenge de Man's reductive interpretation of Keats; ultimately, it seeks to situate Keats's poetics within a modern framework of suspended subjectivity and foregrounded language.

2. The Core of Keats' Spirit Lies in Semiotics

Roman Jakobson's account of the Romantic poet is highly abstract, and his own focal corpus lies closer to Symbolist and Futurist poetics. Keats is mentioned only briefly in the "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics" (1960). It is therefore difficult to claim that Jakobson was directly influenced by Keats. In that statement, however, Jakobson formulates the famous theory of the poetic function, according to which language foregrounds the message for its own sake when the poetic function is dominant. Crucially, the poetic text generates meaning by projecting the principle of equivalence

from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination—through internally organized relations such as rhythm, rhyme, parallelism, and sound patterning—rather than by primarily referring to external reality or advancing logical argument (Jakobson, 1960). As Fry (2012) glosses the distinction, the metalingual function aims to render a sequence equational, whereas the poetic function renders an equation sequential. Read in this light, the autonomy of verse resides in its self-referential patterning, which asks readers to attend to paradigmatic equivalences as they are realized along the syntagmatic chain; authorial, utilitarian, and propositional intentions recede accordingly.

To what extent did Keats's "non-egotism" and "Negative Capability" anticipate this?

Although articulated within a Romantic culture that prized individual emotion, Keats's poetics strikingly converge with Jakobson's implied bracketing of the subject. By non-egotism Keats does not advocate the abolition of feeling, but a disciplined capacity to suspend fixed identity, doctrinal ideas, inferential habits, and the demand for certainty, thereby allowing the complexity of the perceived object to take precedence. As Ou (2009) shows, Keats's "capability of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" entails a willed restraint of explanatory and judicial impulses—a retreat from mastery into an open, receptive sensorium.

Likewise, Negative Capability names a receptive, non-interventionist stance. It resists the imposition of personal will or ready-made theory upon experience so that relations among things may disclose themselves. At this spiritual core it accords with Jakobson's emphasis on poetic self-reference: meaning emerges from the poem's internal equivalences and parallelisms (cadence, echo, juxtaposition of images) rather than from external information or discursive reasoning. Keats's "negativity" thus licenses the poem's own formal energies to operate without being overridden by the poet's instrumental intentions.

Accordingly, non-egotism and Negative Capability can be read as anticipating the functional essence of Jakobson's account: poetic meaning arises when the everyday cognitive subject (logic, knowledge-claims, practical intention) is held in abeyance, giving priority to formal relations and to the self-organizing force of linguistic signs. Keats approaches this from the side of creative ethos and consciousness, asking the poet to "hide" the self so that the poem may be; Jakobson approaches it from functional analysis—showing why a self-referential text demands that attention shift from reference to symbolic organization. Both converge on the condition that makes poetry what it is: a suspension of habitual cognition and subjective intervention, permitting musical, formal, and structural relations to lead the production of meaning. This is the psychological groundwork Keats laid, a century early, for language's "self-acting" state. If de Man found in Yeats the emblem of grammar/rhetoric tensions, Keats's own "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" can be seen to dramatize the perilous slide from similarity to asserted identity, staging precisely the pressures that later theory would anatomize.

When de Man concluded in his 1954 thesis that Keats's poetry "has its difficulties, but they are difficulties of feeling and not of language" (de Man, 2014a), he was, in a limited sense, regrettably right, and yet that very "difficulty of feeling" is what Keats's semiotic discipline was designed to legitimate.

3. Keats' Shadow Lies in Rhetoric

3.1 De Man's Reading of Ode on a Grecian Urn: Ethics as Rhetorical Illusion

Having used Jakobson to lift Keats's insight beyond its immediate historical horizon, I now turn to the ethical stakes of rhetoric in de Man's reception. De Man observes—cautiously—that while it would be false to claim Keats escapes human suffering into a trance-like ideality, one can still say that he moves away from the burden of self-knowledge into a world shaped by sympathetic imagination, poetry, and history, "a world that is ethically impeccable, but from which the self is excluded." Read as Siebers (1990) summarizes it, this construes Negative Capability as a tactic for evading self-reflection, producing a self-marginalized and therefore incomplete ethics. The irony,

however, is that de Man's own linguistics of reading tends toward what *Ode on a Grecian Urn* itself calls "Cold Pastoral!"—a valuation of textual impersonality that deconstruction can hardly disavow.

The imagined "voice" of the inanimate at the close of "Semiology and Rhetoric" (de Man, 1973) exemplifies a drive to purge subjective intention; yet that voice remains a trope produced by fissures in syntax, a rhetorical effect internal to the text. Hence de Man's attraction to the sacrificial tableau in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*: ethically "impeccable," but rhetorically constituted through what may be called a grammaticalization of rhetoric—a public scene detached from any posited subject and activated by quasi-automatic patterns. To seize that meaning is, for de Man, to refuse "our" readerly projection and submit to textual undecidability. Acknowledging grammar's momentary suppression of rhetoric at this juncture still returns us to rhetoric as the direction of meaning. Keats's depiction of isolation on the urn both transcends linear time and intimates an insight into how meaning is generated within the textual system. If de Man concedes this, he must also admit that any linkage between sacrifice and reality is not given but constructed—which begs the question: what, here, exceeds Jakobson's account of internal organization?

3.2 The Fall of Hyperion and the Limits of Deconstruction

The pressure of that question sharpens with *The Fall of Hyperion*. In de Man's deconstructive optics, metaphor and metonymy are reconfigured as antagonistic forces at the heart of language (cf. de Man, 1979): metaphor fabricates identity, veiling the gap between sign and meaning beneath stable figuration; metonymy, by contrast, exposes contingency through proximity, unmooring any asserted sameness. Read this way, "fall" in the title becomes exemplary: as a participial form it suggests an event in progress, inviting slippage toward the reader's own cognitive "falling." The fatal reciprocity is familiar: metaphor leans on metonymic adjacency to underwrite its identity-claim, while metonymy is continually misrecognized as metaphoric depth. Caught between the illusion erected by metaphor and the void disclosed by metonymy, aesthetic activity appears paralyzed; every attempt to grasp tragic meaning in *Hyperion* dissolves into a game of signs.

De Man underscores the polysemy of "fall," withholding decisions about whether Hyperion functions as proper or common noun, and whether "falling" is literal or figurative. Keats, on this telling, re-opens process and thus seems to assist de Man's anti-symbolic charge. Yet Moneta, the figure with "half-open, half-closed" eyes, returns a historical consciousness to the poem, not by restoring a transcendent subject but by allowing "fall" to function, in effect, as a shifter (in Jakobson's sense): an index that organizes an aesthetic sequence rather than a doctrine that closes it. Aesthetic experience can thus continue. Yet De Man, obsessed with dissolving the myth of the blending of subject and object, here becomes a reader who stubbornly removes himself from the system and extends the aesthetic experience infinitely. At this stage, even the expression of the poet's initial tacit approval of the failure of aesthetics, characterized by paradoxical syntax, vanished, and perhaps he himself realized that a large, intolerably obscure group of symbols was possible linguistically but not ethically, which his early rejection of Keats had caused him to overlook.

The final paragraph of "Semiology and Rhetoric", on the "rhetorical grammatization of semiology" and the unreliability of the very language by which "man names and modifies himself" (de Man, 1973), can be read, without forcing, as a tacit acknowledgment of intention as effect: the text's internal orders simulate an intention that no sovereign subject guarantees. If so, the circuit bends back toward Jakobson's functional insight, and farther still toward Keats's ethical sympathy: beyond a self-evacuating subject, the reader still encounters an automatic, metaphorically signalled intention: *I am writing poetry*. Wordsworth cultivates such signalling; Milton submerges it. Keats, by contrast, keeps it legible precisely by suspending certainty and legitimating feeling within the formal self-reference of the poem.

4. "Aesthetic Failure"

4.1 Negative Capability and the Logic of Suspension in *Ode to a Nightingale*

If "Negative Capability" is taken, by some deconstructive readings of *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, as a retreat from self-awareness, then the self-dialogue of *Ode to a Nightingale* is far from the mere repetition that Bloom suggests (Bloom, 2009). Because any escape from the self must be continuous and dynamic, the poem stages a progressive suspension of the perceiving subject. Stanza V is crucial: the "world of song" is established not by positive description but through negatives and conjectures, "I cannot see," "I guess," "embalmed darkness", until stanza VI, where the speaker declares that "Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain--To thy high requiem become a sod" The poem carefully differentiates a bodily self from a feeling/waiting self; the latter's sustained receptivity confirms a disciplined bracketing of subjectivity, adopting a rigorous, hesitant stance in which analysis is held in abeyance.

The poem's metaphoric lift what you call the process of "filling its entity" coincides with the suspension of explanatory knowledge. However, the undeniable fact is right before our eyes: The afterlife is already being depicted, and the poem's understanding of death is so clear and absolute that here the poet's mission to suggest to the reader of a universal truth has been accomplished, a moment of exquisite metaphor and transcendence, which De Man has not noticed and still earnestly proclaims the illusory nature of the symbol and the impossibility of the fusion of the subject and object. However, the undeniable fact is right before our eyes: The afterlife is already being depicted, and the poem's understanding of death is so clear and absolute that here the poet's mission to suggest to the reader of a universal truth has been accomplished, a moment of exquisite metaphor and transcendence, which De Man has not noticed and still earnestly proclaims the illusory nature of the symbol and the impossibility of the fusion of the subject and object. De Man's insistence on the illusoriness of symbol and the impossibility of subject-object fusion (Zhang, 2013; de Man, 2014a) misses the point that Keats legitimates a difficulty of feeling as an ethical mode of meaning-production. In this sense the "failure" is cognitive only in the most restricted, propositional sense; aesthetically, the poem succeeds by authorizing affect within a self-referential form.

Yeats's later theorization of the "anti-self" (Vendler, 2007) extends this Keatsian logic: the echo that answers the self must be sustained by a continuous grammar, metrical and syntactic patterning that underwrites meaning, implying that the relation between self and anti-self is more metaphoric than merely metonymic. The point returns us to *The Fall of Hyperion*: when the poet asks, "Titans are gods too; and why do they suffer?", the poem recalls a historically attuned self whose knowledge of death, mediated by Moneta, binds private suffering to the world's. Keats's aversion to self-assertion thus reads not as aesthetic failure but as a temperamental restraint: the self-endures repeated cognitive shortfall while aesthetic form continues to do its work. Even Bloom, more candid than de Man on this score, concedes as much.

This is the earned reward of Keats's "Negative Capability" his foresight. Proximity to his own death may sharpen the stance, but it ratifies the Montaignian "pleasant scepticism" that precedes it. De Man's scepticism, as he admits elsewhere, cannot wholly escape Montaigne either: if subjectivity interposes an opaque screen between object and mind, "life consists in an endless series of failures of this order," yet retains "the power to take stock of them all" (de Man, 2014b).

4.2 Aesthetic Tragedy and Metonymic Collapse in *Lamia*

De Man's insights into love and death prove thinner than Keats's *Lamia*, which makes explicit the role of aesthetic value in desire and self-undoing. *Lamia*'s metamorphosis from a "vermilion-spotted, golden, green, and blue" serpent to a "full-born beauty new and exquisite" is an ultimate aesthetic illusion. Its value lies not only in intense sensuous pleasure but in the romantic promise that exceeds the mundane; this is the "beauty" for which Lycius suspends reason. Keats clarifies that aesthetic value is both the origin of attraction and the curtain that sustains illusion, concealing a potentially destructive truth; importantly, this curtain also foregrounds poetry's self-referential means.

Crucially, the poem refuses to leave illusion at the level of pleasure. The pre-transformation form already bears an uncanny loveliness that foretells danger. The more brilliant the human beauty becomes, the more subversive it is as the other—as the nonhuman truth. Thus, the contrast does not amount to mere "disguise" and "revelation"; it constitutes a metonymic structure in which the radiant human form stands adjacent to and conceals the serpentine essence. The part (human appearance) arouses love that seeks possession of the whole that cannot be fully known. The structure is unstable by design: the more successful the appearance, the more total the collapse once truth breaks through.

Enter Apollonius. His analytical intervention forces a cold metaphor "She is a serpent!" that equates part and whole, interrupting the poem's affect-laden metonymic economy. By reducing appearance to essence, he denies the independent value of aesthetic representation and its constitutive role in emotional construction. This is precisely what Keats resists: analysis that tears the woven veil of beauty through which love and life acquire meaning.

Accordingly, the tragedy of *Lamia* allegorizes the predicament of aesthetic value: beauty can weave the strongest of dreams and ignite the fiercest of loves, yet it cannot endure the absolute disenchantment of reason, especially when beauty's ground is heterogeneous and dangerous. Lamia's "snakeness" figures an inescapable otherness, a deathward drive beneath appearance. Keats both exalts the zenith of aesthetic illusion and soberly forecasts its vulnerability before "truth." He touches more directly than de Man the soul's permanent contradiction: we long to be intoxicated, to love, to transcend under beauty's shelter, and yet we cannot evade the pull of truth and the itch of rational cognition. The poem's tragic power issues from this irresolvable tension and from the double role of aesthetic value as both redemptive and destructive.

As a sceptic more radical than Keats, de Man ultimately rejects the common cognition of death, the hope that aesthetic form might fail productively by folding whatever subject remains into the turbulence of grammar. He elevates allegory's priority, compelling signs to confess the break between sign and meaning, yet refuses to relinquish the ambition for total consistency. Rhetoric remains rhetoric. If perpetual mastery of language is a superstition, it is one that does not understand love and death, the two pressures under which Keats tests, and vindicates, the ethical claim of aesthetic form.

5. Conclusion

Keats's ethical vision turns on a productive paradox: the poet must withdraw the self so that the poem may achieve a formal self-identity; that formal autonomy, in turn, grounds ethical meaning through aesthetic value. Read through Roman Jakobson and Paul de Man, the modernity of this paradox comes into focus. Keats's scepticism is not a mystifying retreat but a discipline of suspension that legitimates feeling and perception as modes of understanding. Jakobson's account of the poetic function, the projection of equivalence from the axis of selection onto the axis of combination, converges with Keats's demand that the poet "give way" to the complexity of the object by bracketing authorial will and propositional certitude. Both point to a common poetic ethics: to produce meaning, poetry must interrupt everyday cognitive hegemony and let the energies of form lead.

De Man's deconstructive reading, by contrast, is caught in its own aporia. On the one hand, his appeal to a grammaticalization of rhetoric in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* severs text from reference; on the other, his insistence on the undecidability of "fall" in *The Fall of Hyperion* blocks determinate uptake. Such absolutized disconnection cannot account for the ethical force of aesthetic construction that Keats stages, for instance, *Lamia's* metonymic "snake/beauty" economy, where beauty shelters emotion even as reason's disenchantment threatens to extinguish it.

Keats's foresight lies here: through the ethical practice of aesthetic illusion, he anticipates a post-structural "language crisis" without capitulating to nihilism. In *Ode to a Nightingale*, the "feeling self" entertains death as an aesthetic consummation while knowledge is suspended; in *Lamia*, Apollonius incarnates analysis that martyrs' aesthetic value. These poems show that Keats's ethics is not the "cognitive failure" de Man posits, but an ethical poise: metaphor and pattern are tools by which suspended certainty gives shape to human longings for love, death, and transcendence. Only

in the dialectic of subjective suspension and the defence of aesthetic value can poetry both preserve linguistic autonomy and fulfil an ethical vocation.

Future work may proceed along two coordinated paths: Firstly, it focuses on Keats's differentiated ethical projection of nature imagery from that of Wordsworth and Shelley. For example, analyse the non-involving presentation of 'the misty fruits' in Keats's Ode to Autumn (subject withdrawal), and the ethical reflection inspired by 'the rocky outcrops and the orchard' in Wordsworth's Tyndale (subject intervention), or the fusion of subject and object (subject expansion) in Shelley's Ode to the West Wind. or Shelley's 'Ode to the West Wind' in which the subject and object merge (subject expansion) in 'If I were a falling leaf and flew with you'. By analysing the writing strategies of the three writers on the shared image of 'tree', we can pinpoint the core specificity of Keats's ethical outlook - resisting the hegemony of the subject's interpretation with the object's self-discipline. Secondly, Keats's proposition of 'suspended certainty' can be examined within the framework of Maurice Blanchot's "l'écriture neutre" to explore how the poet's self-abnegation leads to the production of intransitivity (e.g., in Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé's 'Blank Page'). At the same time, it bridges Giorgio Agamben's theory of potentiality, analysing the relationship between 'resting in doubt' and 'the power of unfulfillment'. The philosophical isomorphism between 'resting in doubt' and 'the power not to act' is analysed.

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