

FROM NEGATIVE CAPABILITY TO NEGATIVE THEOLOGY: KEATS AND RELIGION

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Abstract

This paper attempts to establish a parallel between John Keats's views on poetry and the poetic self and the Christian mystical (apophatic) tradition known as Negative Theology. In particular, Keats's concept of 'negative capability' and 'vale-of-soul making' have been given extended consideration and are compared with related concepts in negative theology such as mystical union and ecstasy. This approach throws new light on the relation between religion and literature and between Keats's highly anti-Christian views and his highly spiritual outpourings in his poetry and letters. Though Keats rejected the ritualistic, orthodox tradition of Christianity, there is a striking resemblance between his ideas of the poetic self and creativity and the concepts and practices found in the Christian mystical tradition. Since the Christian mystical tradition is usually either not evoked in discussions of literature and culture, or dismissed as influence of neo-Platonism, the whole Romantic literary tradition is considered to be anti-Christian and anti-religious and to derive its 'spiritual' doctrines from Platonism. Keat's example shows that there were strong spiritual elements in Romanticism and that their roots go deep into a Christian religious tradition which has itself been a victim of neglect in literary studies. Some work has already been carried out in noting the relevance of the apophatic tradition to poststructuralism and this paper takes account of these developments in theological and literary research.

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Where difference of opinion regarding various writers as to their merits, ideas, and status exists among critics, the difference is rarely as contradictory and extreme as regards John Keats. Keats is taken on the one hand to be the preacher of 'arts for art's sake' kind of literature which revels in the appreciation of beauty, and on the other as the moral poet per excellence, one who preaches ethical and moral lessons through his poetry and letters. One theme in the differences of opinion regarding Keats is his relation to religion. In this matter, again, critics either declare him to be anti-religious or an extremely religious poet. The two poles are exhibited by the books of Robert Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp. Where Robert Ryan takes Keats to be essentially a religious person and poet in his book *Keats: The Religious Sense*, Ronald Sharp makes of him a complete aesthete in his book *Keats, Skepticism and the Religion of Beauty*.

In this article I attempt to deal with Keats's views on religion and to see whether Keats rejected religion wholesale or a specific representation of it in the orthodox Christian tradition. Religion can be taken to mean a specific religious tradition such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, or it may be taken to mean a spiritual orientation towards the world and a belief in supra-natural reality hidden beneath and beyond the visible world. It is in this second sense that Keats can be taken as a religious poet, and this sense is elaborated by Sonia Sikka in the following words: '. . . experiences of beauty associated with the sense that behind the appearances of separation, loss, conflict and death – the appearance of tragedy – there stands a reality in which these forms of imperfection are healed and resolved. This sense, taken seriously, is a religious (though not necessarily theistic) one. It raises the possibility of a type of optimism that is religious rather than secular in nature because it is based on a vision not on the conditions of factual existence, whether present or future, but of a reality that is supposed to transcend these conditions'.¹

In both his poetry and in his letters, Keats developed a framework for understanding and responding to the world he experienced and observed. The need for this framework, which he gave the name of the 'vale of soulmaking', arose out of his dissatisfaction with philosophy ('I have never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consequitive reasoning') and religion ('what a little circumscribed straightened notion!') in providing a proper approach to human life.² Though this framework and its related concepts of 'negative capability', 'mansion of many apartments', 'chamber of maiden thought', 'the finer tone' are not a part of any recognized sect or division of Christianity, Keats remained engaged with Christianity throughout his short but highly intense poetic career.

Keats's dissatisfaction with Christianity is evident in many of his letters and poems. His early sonnet 'Written in disgust of vulgar superstition'³ quite openly expresses Keats's discontentment with Christianity:

¹ Sonia Sikka, "On the Truth of Beauty: Nietzsche, Heidegger, Keats," *Heythrop Journal*, Vol 39, Issue 3 (July 1998): 244.

² All quotations from Keats's letters and poems have been taken from Jeffrey N. Cox, ed., *Keats' Poetry and Prose*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009)

³ *Ibid*, p.14

The church bells toll a melancholy round,
 Calling the people to some other prayers,
 Some other gloominess, more dreadful cares,
 More hearkening to the sermon's horrid sound.
 Surely the mind of man is closely bound
 In some blind spell: seeing that each one tears
 Himself from fireside joys, and Lydian airs,
 And converse high of those with glory crown'd.
 Still, still they toll, and I should feel a damp,
 A chill as from a tomb, did I not know
 That they are dying like an outburnt lamp;
 That 'tis their sighing, wailing ere they go
 Into oblivion -- that fresh flowers will grow,
 And many glories of immortal stamp.

According to Jeffrey N. Cox, 'The poem expresses Keats's long-time skepticism about organized religion and his delight in a pagan alternative'.⁴ In his famous 'vale of soul-making' letter, Keats describes his view of Christianity: 'The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is "a vale of tears" from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven. What a little circumscribed straightened notion!'⁵

'Keats was by no means a-theistical or a-religious'⁶ states Douglas Atkins, despite the above quoted open confessions of anti-Christian feeling by Keats. Though Atkins agrees that Keats was 'rabidly anti-Christian',⁷ he also states that 'As Keats consistently expressed disapproval of conventional religion, especially Christianity, its founder, its fundamental text, and its clergy, he tried on different replacements largely of his own making'.⁸ According to Atkins, Keats's 'vale of soul-making' letter is 'the most extended treatment' of finding an alternative to Christianity. This particular letter, then, occupies a central place in consideration of Keats's religious views and has been given an extended elaboration in Robert Ryan's *Keats: The Religious Sense*. The relevant passages from this letter are given below:

Call the world if you Please "The vale of Soul-making." Then you will find out the use of the world (I am speaking now in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal, which I will here take for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which has struck me concerning it). I say "Soul-making," Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence. There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in millions, but they are not Souls till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. Intelligences are atoms of perception; they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God. How then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one's individual existence? How, but by the medium of a world like this? This point I sincerely wish to

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 330

⁶ Douglas Atkins, *Literary Paths to Religious Understanding*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 43

⁷ Ibid, 43

⁸ Ibid, 45

consider because I think it a grander system of salvation than the chrystain religion, or rather it is a system of Spirit-creation. This is effected by three grand materials acting the one upon the other for a series of years. These three Materials are the Intelligence, the human heart (as distinguished from intelligence or Mind) and the World or Elemental space suited for the proper action of Mind and Heart on each other for the purpose of forming the Soul or Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity. I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive, and yet I think I perceive it. That you may judge the more clearly I will put it in the most homely form possible. 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 and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! 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. As various as the Lives of Men are, so various become their souls, and thus does God make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the sparks of his own essence. This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity.⁹

In commenting on Keats's ideas in this letter, Robert Ryan writes, 'If there was one particular aspect of Christianity that made Keats feel the need for an alternative, it was probably the one he refers to so impatiently at the very beginning – the Christian response to earthly suffering'.¹⁰ It was the relation of human suffering to the concept of 'original sin' and the idea of redemption by divine intervention, writes Ryan, that Keats 'saw as little, circumscribed, and an affront to our humanity'.¹¹ In contrast, states Ryan, 'His own system, involving salvation through adversity rather than from it, is based on a more flattering view of human potential. Man is not the victim of his own stupidity nor a supine petitioner for a release from its consequences. He works out his own salvation by coming to terms with his natural condition'.¹² According to Ryan, this formulation 'also implies a new outlook on the nature of the world'.¹³ This new outlook regards the world of suffering as a part of the divine plan, and, therefore, 'even though suffering is woven into the very fabric of creation, that creation must be seen as essentially good – and essentially beautiful'.¹⁴

While Robert Ryan focused mainly on Keats's letters, JR Barth¹⁵ has argued for further exploration of the 'religious dimension' of Keats poetry. In doing so, Barth suggests that 'a middle path may be taken between, on the one hand, a thoroughgoing skeptical and secularizing view and, on the other, a view that would baptize Keats into something approaching Christian orthodoxy'. In this article, Barth carries out a reading of Keats's

⁹ Cox, *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, 330

¹⁰ Robert Ryan, *Keats: The Religious Sense*, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976): 207

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 208

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ J. Robert Barth, "Keats's Way of Salvation", *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 45, No. 2 (Summer, 2006), pp. 285-297

'Ode to Psyche', and 'The Fall of Hyperion' in light of Keats's concept of the 'vale of soul-making'. The 'Ode to Psyche', according to Barth, dramatizes only two of the 'three grand materials' that Keats had identified in the letter as necessary for soul-making: the mind and the heart. The pain and suffering which form the third essential element in soul-making, Barth states, appear in the 'greater poem' – 'The Fall of Hyperion'. In Barth's view, Keats may have left the earlier Hyperion poem unfinished because 'it did not sufficiently address his religious reflections and longings' and that 'The Fall of Hyperion may be – whatever else it is – Keats's attempt to dramatize his new system of salvation'. Concluding his commentary, Barth writes, 'Keats's "system of salvation" may not have been in the mainstream of religious thought, and it certainly lacked both doctrinal orthodoxy and theological clarity, but it may be said ultimately to have served him well, even as it gave birth to a poetry that has given hope and joy to generations after him'.

Ronald A. Sharp, on the other hand, has given Keats's alternative to Christian religion the title of 'religion of beauty' based on the principle of 'aestheticism'.¹⁶ However, Sharp is quick to explain that by aestheticism he does not have in mind 'the literary movement at the end of the nineteenth century' but rather 'a principle of life and not just art that Keats intentionally offers as the foundation of a new kind of religion'.¹⁷ According to Sharp, 'This tenderhearted element in Keats springs directly out of the tough-minded and it involves neither escape nor the visionary imagination, both of which Keats considered the bane of the first generation of romantics. Instead, Keats develops a fully humanized religion of beauty, paradoxically rooted in skepticism and offered as an alternative not to the inescapably painful world but to the Christian response to that world'.¹⁸

Caroline F. E. Spurgeon has treated Keats's 'religion of beauty' as an example of the mystical tradition in English literature (*Mysticism in English Literature*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011, paperback edition, first published, 1913). Dividing the mysticism found in English literature into four categories (mystics of love and beauty, mystics of nature, philosophical mystics, and devotional and religious mystics), Spurgeon places Keats in the category of the 'mystics of love and beauty'. In relation to her own definition of mysticism as an experience of unity in diversity, Spurgeon states, 'The idea, underlying most deeply and consistently the whole of his poetry, is that of the unity of life; and closely allied with this is the belief in progress, through ever-changing, ever-ascending stages'.¹⁹ According to Spurgeon, *Sleep and Poetry*, *Endymion* and *Hyperion* represent 'the three stages of thought, or attitudes towards life, that the poet must pass'.²⁰ These three stages are: the animal, the unreflective enjoyment of nature, and sympathy with human life. Commenting on the following lines from Oceanus' speech in *Hyperion*,

¹⁶ Ronald A. Sharp, *Keats, Skepticism, and the Religion of Beauty*, (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979): 2

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 2

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 2-3

¹⁹ Caroline F. E. Spurgeon, *Mysticism in English Literature*, [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011 (first published, 1913)]: 52

²⁰ *Ibid*, 52-53

We fall by course of Nature's law, not force
 Of thunder, or of Jove ...
 ... on our heels a fresh perfection treads,
 A power more strong in beauty, born of us
 And fated to excel us, as we pass
 In glory that old Darkness ...
 ... for 'tis the eternal law
 That first in beauty should be first in might.

Spurgeon writes, 'This is true mysticism, the mysticism Keats shares with Burke and Carlyle, the passionate belief in continuity of essence through ever-changing forms'.²¹

Some elements in Keats's 'system of salvation' also relate to traditional Christian mysticism. His description of the 'intellect' as being the higher element from which the 'soul' descends into the world and gains an individual identity through experience recalls the mystical philosophy of Plotinus which, according to many commentators, has been highly influential in the development of Christian mysticism. Plotinus's system, as explained by Andrew Louth, consists of a hierarchy of three principles or hypostases – the One or the Good; Intelligence; and Soul. According to Louth, in Plotinus's system, 'Soul is the level of life as we know it, the realm of sense-perception, of discursive knowledge, of planning and reasoning. Beyond this, there is the more unified realm of Intelligence, nous'.²² While these similarities may be merely incidental, they have been noted to suggest that though Keats rejected the more orthodox and institutionalized form of Christianity, his thoughts reflect an inclination towards mysticism.

Moreover, as stated by Lara Quinney the influence of Neoplatonism on Romanticism has been noted to be considerable by a number of critics. According to Quinney, Coleridge, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Blake, all had read the works of Thomas Taylor who in the 1790s had translated all the dialogues of Plato into English.²³ Though Kathleen Raine states that she has 'no direct evidence of Keats's having read Taylor' she refers to the works of other critics to suggest that Keats absorbed Platonism from his intellectual environment. By the time Keats came to write, Plato and the Orphic theology were in the air, and he adopted them rather as we do current usage than as a poet who is forging a new imaginative world, as Blake was'.²⁴

However, MH Abrams has assertively challenged the view that Keats was a Platonist. He states that some critics have wrongly attributed Platonism to Keats on the basis of his pronouncements on the nature of imagination and poetry as 'ethereal', 'spirit', 'spiritual', 'empyrean', and 'essence': 'In the traditional vocabulary of criticism, such terms have commonly been indicators of a Platonic philosophy of art, and this fact has led some commentators to claim that Keats – at least through the time when he wrote

²¹ Spurgeon, *Mysticism*, 55-56

²² Andrew Louth, *The Origins of Christian Mystical Tradition: From Plato to Denys*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007): 36-37

²³ Lara Quinney, "Romanticism, Gnosticism, and Neoplatonism" in Charles Mahoney, ed., *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2011): 412-413

²⁴ Kathleen Raine, "Thomas Taylor, Plato, and the English Romantic Movement", *The Sewanee Review*, Vol 76, No. 2 (Spring 1968): 256

Endymion – was a Platonist in his theory about poetry, which he conceived as aspiring to transcend the material world of sense experience’ (Abrams, “Keats’s Poems”, in Robert Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp, eds., *The Persistence of Poetry*, 11).²⁵ To challenge this view, Abrams refers to the findings of Stuart Sperry who has discovered that instead of deriving the descriptive vocabulary for poetry and imagination from Plato, Keats had actually derived the descriptive words from natural science, particularly, Chemistry. According to Abrams, terms like ‘ethereal’ or ‘spirit’ were ‘applied to various phenomena, and especially to the basic procedures of evaporation and distillation’.²⁶

What Abrams does not give due consideration is that Keats’s Platonism may have been filtered through Christian mysticism. The similarities between Keats’s system of ‘soul-making’ and Plotinus’s mystical philosophy have already been noted. There are, however, even more points of convergence between Keats’s ideas about poetry and imagination and the Christian mystical tradition. From Keats’s ‘vale of soul-making’ letter, it seems that he takes the Soul’s attainment of individual identity through pain and suffering as a positive thing and that this goes against Plotinus’s mystical philosophy as for Plotinus, the Soul’s entry into the world and taking of individuality means an increase of distance between the Soul and the One. However, as Louis Dupre describes, ‘Some time during the twelfth century, Christian piety underwent a basic change: its approach to God became more human and affective’ (entry on Mysticism, Lindsay Jones, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., p. 6348-9). According to Dupre, ‘The humanization of man’s relation to God transforms man’s attitude toward a creation in which God now comes to be more intimately present. An interpersonal, and hence more creaturely, relation to God is ready to accept each creature on its own terms and for its own sake. In this respect its attitude differs essentially from the image mysticism that holds the creature worthy of spiritual love only in its divine core, where it remains rooted in God. The love mystic also cherishes its finite, imperfect being, which, resulting from a divine act of creation, is endowed with a sacred quality of its own’ (6349). ‘As the incarnational consciousness spread to all creation,’ continues Dupre, ‘divine transcendence ceased to imply a negation of the created world. Thenceforth God’s presence has been found within rather than beyond creation. Precisely this immanentization of the divine accounts for the earthly quality of Christian love mysticism and for its followers’ deep involvement with human cares and worldly concerns’ (6349).

This is the mystical tradition that Keats’s system of ‘soul-making’ reflects. Another point of convergence between Keats’s ideas on poetry and Christian mysticism is his coinage ‘Negative Capability’. Keats defined ‘Negative Capability’ as the ability to remain ‘in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (Norton Critical Edition, 109). Li Ou (Keats and Negative Capability, Continuum, 2009) has carried out a book length study of the concept, explaining its anatomy, discussing its genealogy, and describing its heritage. However, Ou has not traced the genealogy of ‘negative capability’ to any mystical origins. Yet, ‘negative theology’ seems to offer a religious elaboration of Keats’s concept and thus highlight the highly religious nature of Keats’s thoughts. According to Denys Turner, the

²⁵ M.H. Abrams, “Keats’s Poems”, in Robert Ryan and Ronald A. Sharp, eds., *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 11

²⁶ *Ibid*, 11-12

'Christian way of life' is 'distinctively 'negative' or 'apophatic', and is characterized by three 'metaphors of negativity' – 'interiority', 'ascent', and 'light and darkness'.²⁷ According to JR Barth, 'Keats was an inveterate searcher after truth rather than one who ever felt he had a firm grasp of it'.²⁸ If this is true, then how could he be content with remaining in 'uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts'? In the 'apophatic' tradition of Christian mysticism, the final illumination, the ultimate truth, is paradoxically, dark and ineffable, a 'Cloud of Unknowing'. According to Louis Dupre, for Gregory of Nyssa, one of the founders of 'negative theology' in Christianity, 'the soul's mystical ascent is a slow and painful process that ends in a dark unknowing – the mystical night of love'.²⁹ Keats's chosen way of searching for truth was through imagination, intuition and experience instead of being through dialectical reasoning, theological deduction, and empirical observation. It was a 'negative' and passive/receptive way instead of the positive and active one of 'irritable reaching after fact and reason'. Keats expressed this idea through the image of the bee and the flower in a letter to JH Reynolds:

Man should not dispute or assert, but whisper results to his neighbour, and thus by every germ of Spirit sucking the Sap from mould ethereal, every human might become great, and Humanity, instead of being a wide heath of Furse and Briars with here and there a remote Oak or Pine, would become a grand democracy of Forest Trees. It has been an old Comparison for our urging on—the Bee hive—however, it seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the Bee, for it is a false notion that more is gained by receiving than giving. No, the receiver and the giver are equal in their benefits. The flower, I doubt not, receives a fair guerdon from the Bee. Its leaves blush deeper in the next spring, and who shall say between Man and Woman which is the most delighted? 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 favors us with a visit.³⁰

Thus, Keats's way of finding the truth was to let the truth come his way than to go out in search of truth or to explore nature inquisitively and to press upon it with questions demanding clear cut answers. This passivity, or negation of will and self, is again an important element in the Christian mystical tradition. Louis Dupre, describing the mystical theology of Dionysus, writes: 'Through constant negation the soul overcomes the created world, which prevents the mind from reaching its ultimate destiny'.³¹ However, this negation is not a denial of sensory experience. Keats's highly sensuous language in his poetry contradicts any such denial of the self. On the contrary, self negation or negative capability consists in letting the self become a receptacle for the experience of the world, first emptying any contents of will and self identity from it, so that it can be filled to the brim with the experience of nature without filtering out any impression or thought – as Keats wrote in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 'The

²⁷ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 1

²⁸ Barth, "Keats's Way of Salvation", 285

²⁹ Encyclopedia of Religion, 2nd ed., s.v., "Mysticism"

³⁰ Cox, *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, 127

³¹ Encyclopedia of Religion, 2nd ed., s.v., "Mysticism"

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' (Norton Critical Edition, 371-372).³²

Thus, self negation in Keats does not lead toward asceticism but towards a fullness of experience and sensations so that their very fullness, the very intensity of the light that shines upon the negatively capable poet, causes a kind of 'unknowing' and leaves the poet in 'uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts'. It is an uncertainty caused by excess rather than by dearth of experience and knowledge. In his poems, the poet seems to be intoxicated by the beauty of the objects he views and the images he creates for various ideas. At times Keats's language becomes highly erotic, as in the *Eve of St Agnes*, and at other times it conveys the impression of ecstasy. This language, again, is reflected in the mystical tradition in the description of union with God which is often conveyed through sexual vocabulary. Louis Dupre, paraphrases Gregory of Nyssa as describing 'the mystical life as a process of gnosis initiated by a divine eros, which results in the fulfillment of the soul's natural desire for union with the God of whom she bears the image'.³³ Ecstasy, again, is a central element in mystical experience and, according to Arvind Sharma, 'For many, the classical focus of the discussion of ecstasy is still provided by mysticism, notwithstanding the elaboration of the role of archaic and chemical techniques in this context' (2680).³⁴ While discussing the concept of ecstasy in various religions, Sharma states that it plays a central role in Christian mysticism. He quotes John Cassian and the anonymously authored text 'The Cloud of Unknowing' to show the place ecstasy occupies in Christian mysticism.³⁵

Another effect of negative capability is the experience of sympathetic identification with the objects and beings the poet finds himself among. Keats stated this idea in a letter to Richard Woodhouse (27 October 1818).³⁶ The relevant passages are given below:

1st As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime, which is a thing per se and stands alone), it is not itself—it has no self—it is everything and nothing—it has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated. It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. 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. He is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. If then he has no self, and if I am a Poet, where is the Wonder that I should say I would write no more? Might I not at that very instant have been cogitating on the Characters of saturn and Ops? It is a wretched thing to confess but is a very fact that not one word I ever utter

³² Cox, *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, 371-372

³³ Encyclopedia of Religion, 2nd ed., s.v., "Mysticism"

³⁴ Encyclopedia of Religion, 2nd ed., s.v., "Ecstasy"

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Cox, *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, 294-295

can be taken for granted as an opinion growing out of my identical nature. How can it, when I have no nature? When I am in a room with People, if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself, but the identity of everyone in the room begins to press upon me that I am in a very little time annihilated. Not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children.

Commenting on Keats's ideas of the poetic self related in the letter above, Mark Sandy states: 'The Keatsian self is forever in potential, wavering between 'everything and nothing', verging on self-discovery and self-invention through writing, enacting its own irretrievable loss' (*Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley*, 20).³⁷ However, this idea of a poet's lack of identity in relation to Keats's formulation of the 'vale of soul-making' suggests a different perspective. In Keats's system of salvation, souls acquire identity through the experience of change and suffering in the world. Before such an experience, the souls are intelligences or sparks of divinity which in turn 'are atoms of perception; they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God'. It seems that Keats is suggesting that the poet exists at the level of intelligence, either as someone yet to acquire a personal identity or as someone who has relinquished personal identity through the exercise of negative capability. At the level of intelligence, the poet has the potential for acquiring any identity that experience brings his way. Whether this places the poet above the ordinary human beings or below them in status remains ambiguous in Keats's writings. Keats explores this idea in *The Fall of Hyperion*.³⁸

Firstly, self negation is presented as death or a near death experience:

'What am I that should so be saved from death?
What am I that another death come not
To choke my utterance sacrilegious here?'
Then said the veiled shadow 'Thou hast felt
What 'tis to die and live again before
Thy fated hour. That thou hadst power to do so
Is thy own safety; thou hast dated on
Thy doom.' (lines 138-145)

The words of both the speaker ('another death') and the goddess ('to die and live again') suggest that the speaker has died a symbolic death and it is only through such a death or negation that he is granted the vision he is relating in the poem. Though this is suggestive of the idea of the mystical union in Christian mysticism – and later in the poem the speaker is able to see through the eyes of the goddess and in a sense becomes identical with her – the tone is painful and gloomy instead of being ecstatic as in the descriptions of the experience of mystical union found in mysticism.

However, to attain such a vision, 'to see as god sees' (line 304), the speaker has to negate his self and identity. In the earlier *Hyperion* poem, the god Apollo acquires knowledge of everything through the goddess Mnemosyne: 'Knowledge enormous

³⁷ Mark Sandy, *Poetics of Self and Form in Keats and Shelley: Nietzschean Subjectivity and Genre*, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2005): 20

³⁸ Cox, *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, 501

makes a god of me' (Hyperion, line 113), yet this knowledge causes him to 'die into life' (Hyperion, line 130).³⁹ In *The Fall of Hyperion*, the speaker, who, according to Paul De Man,⁴⁰ plays the same role as that of Apollo in the earlier poem, acquires knowledge of hidden mysteries only after he has gone through his own (symbolic) death. Thus, the speaker's situation comes out as a paradoxical one: only when he is nothing can he be everything. According to Turner and Davies, this is the 'formation of the self in suffering and dereliction under the weight of the divine presence'.⁴¹ Only when the poet relinquishes the desire to know everything with certainty and precision and becomes content to live in 'uncertainty, Mystery, doubt' is knowledge granted to him. And precisely because this knowledge is overwhelming, it causes a kind of oblivion and darkness upon the poet and causes him to 'die into life'. According to Denys Turner, in Christian mysticism 'it was commonly agreed that as the soul ascended to God it would approach a source of light which, being too bright for its powers of reception, would cause in it profound darkness'.⁴²

Thus, the above discussion shows that despite being vocally anti-Christian, Keats had a religious inclination which is evident in his letters and poems. Keats's mind was inclined towards mysticism and many of his ideas regarding poetry and the identity of a poet can be interpreted in the context of Christian mystical tradition of negative theology. This approach towards Keats's poetry and letters can lead to a newer direction in Keats studies than the ones being followed in criticism. It can also lead to a further exploration of the relation between religion, art, and beauty – as Keats famously wrote in 'Ode on a Grecian Urn':⁴³:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

³⁹ Cox, *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, 495

⁴⁰ Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986): 16

⁴¹ Olivier Davis and Denys Turner, *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002): 2

⁴² *Ibid*, 3

⁴³ Cox, *Keats's Poetry and Prose*, 462