‘A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually in for [sic] and filling some other body’ (Keats’s letter to Richard Woodhouse, 27 October 1818).

Discuss Keats’s poetry in the light of this statement.

Rupert Swallow — May 2018
Word Count: 2990

O fret not after knowledge — I have none
And yet my song comes native with the warmth[1]

Keats's statement — 'A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no identity - he is continually in for [sic] and filling some other body'[2] — espouses two conceptions of the poet. Firstly, the poet themself is an unsuitable poetic subject and, more pertinently to Keats's poetic process, that the poet's lack of identity affords them the negative capability to create poesy.[3] The poet's rejection of essentialist certainties and consequently the multifarious states which they, lacking an identity themselves, can momentarily assume allows for close imaginative engagement with their subject matter and creates the notable intensity and semantic richness of Keats's poetry. However, this lack of identity simultaneously allows the poet to flit between different subjects moment by moment.[4] Within Keats's own poetry such fervent embrace of ambiguities led perhaps to the failure of *Hyperion. A Fragment* (henceforth *Hyperion*); 'Apollo only becomes the god of poetry by complete and painful knowledge'[5] and his passivity during his apotheosis shows the loss of his ability to identify sympathetically with his subject matter, and hence his failure as a model of Keats's identity-less 'camelion poet'.[6] The poem's fragmentary nature may even be seen as a result of this impasse; unable to accept the implications of this state of

[1] John Keats, 'To John Hamilton Reynolds', 19th February 1818, *John Keats: Selected Letters*, John Barnard, ed. (London: Penguin, 2014), p.117. All further references to Keats's letters will be taken from this edition, referred to as *KL*.
[2] 'To Richard Woodhouse', 27th October 1818, *KL*, p.263. Although Keats never explicitly constructs one, from the scattered and unsubstantiated musings in his letters critics have derived a fairly unified aesthetic theory centred around the creations of the visionary imagination and yet which does not wholly neglect the physical realm. The ideas underpinning negative capability and the chameleon poet, developed between the period of November 1817 and November 1818 and discussed below, are echoed throughout his writings. For example Keats writes that happiness 'can only befall those who delight in sensation, rather than hunger [...] after truth'. 'To Benjamin Bailey', 22nd November 1817, *KL*, p.70.
[3] *KL*, p.263.
[4] This propensity to associate with a multiplicity of subject matter is perhaps the reason Keats has been so variously interpreted over the last two centuries. See Jack Stillinger, 'Multiple Readers, Multiple Texts, Multiple Keats', *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology 96.4* (1997): 545-566.
[5] Robert Gittings, *John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1968), p.297.
[6] *KL*, p.263.

affairs, Keats ceases to write the poem. In doing so he exemplifies the importance of the 'camelion poet'[7] to his creative process.

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Remarkably, both aspects of the 'unpoetical' poet are explicitly juxtaposed in Keats's famous 'negative capability' letter to his brothers, written around 27th December 1817.[8] The subject changes with all the alacrity of a Lamia; one moment 'vermillion-spotted', the next 'golden, green, and blue' (*Lamia*, l.48), and yet the tenor of Keats's thought in this letter remains throughout a constant 'dazzling hue' (*Lamia*, l.47).[9] Initially describing Kean's *Richard III* Keats goes on to mention that he 'dined with Horace Smith & met his two brothers with Hill & Kingston & one Du Bois' some days later.[10] Dismissing these members of literary London — 'they are all alike'[11] — he writes: 'They talked of Kean & his low company — Would I were with that company instead of yours said I to myself!'[12] While his verse employs the rhetoric of the visionary imagination — 'There was a painful change, that nigh expelled/ The blisses of her dream so pure and deep.' (*The Eve of St. Agnes*, ll.300-1) — Keats, the poet, characterises himself as unpoetical in the first sense; he is, in the words of one reviewer, the 'meanest, the filthiest, and the most vulgar of our Cockney poetasters [...] an uneducated and flimsy stripling',[13] more at home with the 'humour' of Kean than the 'wit' of the Hunt circle.[14]

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[7] *KL*, p.263.
[8] 'To George and Tom Keats', 21st-27th December 1817, *KL*, p.77-80.
[9] John Keats, *Lamia*, *John Keats: Selected Poems*, John Barnard, ed. (London: Penguin, 2007), p.200. All further references to Keats's poetry will be taken from this edition.
[10] *KL*, p.79.
[11] *Ibid.*
[12] *Ibid.*
[13] 'Review signed Z', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (August 1818), iii, pp.519-24. Quoted in *Keats: the Critical Heritage*, G.M. Matthews, ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p.99-101. Other reviewers were equally scathing. See for instance John Wilson Croker, 'Review of Keats's *Endymion*', *Quarterly Review 19* (April 1818): 204-8.
[14] *KL*, p.79.

After discussing this dinner, the letter moves on to a conversation Keats had with Brown and Dilke while walking back from the Christmas Pantomime a few days later. At this moment 'several things dovetailed in [Keats's] mind'[15] and he describes the quality of 'Negative Capability'[16] central to his poetic musings around this time.[17] For Keats the key to the 'poetical Character',[18] the quality that goes to 'form a Man of Achievement',[19] is the ability to remain 'in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact or reason'.[20] Similarly the conception of the 'camelion poet',[21] who 'has no self [...] is everything and nothing [...] has no character', which Keats describes to Woodhouse almost a year later imagines the poet as a figure suffused with this quality of negative capability.[22]

As Germaine Greer often remarks with respect to feminism, to define something is to limit it. Keats's 'camelion poet',[23] seen in opposition to the 'Wordsworthian or egotistical sublime'[24] and the 'virtuous philosopher' of empirical knowledge, resists definition.[25] The poet is instead characterised by their ability to enter imaginatively into a multitude of possible states and be equally at ease with any of them. Paradoxically then, the lack of knowledge, which negative capability presupposes, leads not to an emptiness in the poet. Rather Keats, in this letter to Woodhouse presents, an anti-essentialist dramatisation of the

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[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] See for instance 'To Benjamin Bailey', 22nd November 1817, *KL*, pp.69-72.
[18] *KL*, p.262.
[19] *KL*, p.79.
[20] *Ibid.*
[21] *KL*, p.263.
[22] *KL*, p.262.
[23] *KL*, p.263.
[24] *KL*, p.262.
[25] *KL*, p.262. He was later to write similarly: 'Do not all charms fly/ At the mere touch of cold philosophy?/ [...] Philosophy will clip an Angel's wings,/ Conquer all mysteries by rule and line,/ Empty the haunted air, and gnomed mine —/ Unweave a rainbow' (*Lamia*, ll.229-37).

burgeoning creative mind.[26] In a similar vein, and seemingly anticipating deconstructive intimations of the impossibility of definitive interpretation, Keats writes: 'I have an idea that a Man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner — let him [...] read a certain page of full poesy [...] until it becomes stale — but when will it do so? Never'.[27] Aware of the semantic multiplicity of language and the restrictiveness of definitions implied by empirical knowledge, the poet actively enters into the identities of all around them and their experiences and so produces poetry replete with an 'excess of textual meaning'.[28]

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A major effect of the diminution of personal identity consequent to the state of negative capability is that it affords the poet, 'filling some other body', sympathetic identification with their subject matter.[29] Such effects can be felt both in Keats's use of form and in his easy interchange of perspectives; Garrett Stewart writes that 'vowels are for Keats a passion, consonants an ecstasy, syntax a life force' and Keats's manipulation of form and lexical devices work symbiotically with his poetry's easy interchange of perspectives, this interchange itself engendered by the state of negative capability.[30]

Assonance is for instance notably employed to great and varied effects throughout his oeuvre. One might for example select the line 'What leaf-fring'd legend haunts about thy shape' ('Ode on a Grecian Urn', l.5) from a plethora of possibilities to show how melodious

[26] '"Essentialism conceives the referent of the name as if it were the referent of a definition." [...] The essentialist conceives of reality as preexisting the act of phrasing and assumes the primacy of the definitional regimen.' Keats, by contrast, assumes that the mind itself has no essential qualities, but rather takes on the qualities it perceives through its sensations. Sedgwick, Peter, and Alessandra Tanesini, 'Lyotard and Kripke: Essentialisms in Dispute', *American Philosophical Quarterly 32.3* (1995): 275.
[27] *KL*, p.115.
[28] Stillinger, 'Multiple Readers, Multiple Texts, Multiple Keats', p.555.
[29] *KL*, p.263.
[30] Garrett Stewart, 'Keats and Language', *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, Susan J. Wolfson, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.135.

vowels, interlacing with bilabial and palato-alveolar fricatives — 'leaf-fring'd legend' — conjure in this case the bucolic tranquility of the 'flowery tale' ('Grecian Urn', l.4) depicted on the urn. By contrast, as the long, melodious 'a's become short, flitting 'i's in the final line of 'To Autumn' — 'And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.' ('To Autumn', l.34) — the sense of intransigence developed throughout the poem receives its most delicate enunciation.

Similarly, Keats's ability to imaginatively enter into a variety of subject positions creates poetry suffused with wry humour, as well as emotional affect. For instance, the zeugma in the climactic closing moments of *Lamia* — 'Lycius' arms were empty of delight,/ As were his limbs of life, from that same night' (*Lamia*, ll.307-8) — focalises on Lycius's personal experience of lost love in the first clause, line 307, before withdrawing into the distance of historical narrative in line 308. In doing so the lines ironically question the authenticity of 'Lycius' delight' by their syntax's implicit, incongruous comparison between it and death.

Such effects are also present in Keats's earlier poetry. In the sonnet 'On the Sea' (April 1817) the focus on the general state of the natural process in the first quatrain shifts to the specific image of the 'very smallest shell' ('On the Sea', l.6) in the second, and, in the sestet, the poem finally focalises on the state of the solitary observer. The expansively general opening lines — 'It keeps eternal whisperings around/ Desolate shores' (ll.1-2) — similarly display Keats's sympathetic use of form. The use of plurals — 'whisperings' and 'shores' — and the third-person pronoun in these opening lines provide a despecified evocation of the endlessly repeating process of the waves. The notable sibilance of 'keeps …

whisperings … Desolate shores' and the shift from 'e' sounds — 'keeps eternal' — to 'i' sounds — 'whisperings' — on the stressed beats of the iambic feet captures the inward rush and collapse of the waves on the shore. The consequent return of the waves into the sea, marked by the word 'around', the first line's fluvial enjambment into the second, and the returning assonant modulation to 'e' sounds — 'Desolate shores' — focalises upon the process of the sea's action, implicitly evoking its tidal surges. Such interplay of 'e' and 'i' vowel sounds continues throughout the poem — 'mighty swell … 'tis in such gentle temper … Winds of Heaven' (ll.2-8) — sonically providing a continuous suggestion of change and process.

Likewise, in the specific image of the 'very smallest shell' (l.6) Keats juxtaposes the sea's alternatingly benevolent and destructive sides. The phrase itself requires delicate enunciation, consequently evoking the transience of the shell's state of rest and its fragility in comparison to the strident stresses on 'the Winds of Heaven' (l.8) which placed it there.

Furthermore, in the sestet the urban 'din/ Of towns and cities'[31] enters the *locus amoenus* which the octave initially establishes. Crucially the experience of 'uproar rude' (l.11) is imagined from the perspective of an individual observer of this seascape, rather than the ahistorical narrative viewpoint of the octave. The contrast is particularly marked as the stasis of the observer — 'Sit ye near some old cavern's mouth and brood' (l.13) — is at odds with the dynamism of the sea.

[31] William Wordsworth, 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey', ll.26-7, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature: Volume D, The Romantic Period*, 9th Edition, Julia Reidhead, ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2012).

In the sonnet's juxtaposed focal points Keats again exemplifies the benefits of 'filling some other body'. Perhaps exemplifying the poet's lack of identity, the narrative voice does not itself intrude upon the scene; the only moment which signifies its presence is when the observer is addressed — 'Oh ye!' (l.9) — which both marks the sonnet's turn and establishes a distance between poetic voice and addressee, who may be the observer, the reader, or both. Keats thus subtly and imaginatively enters into the situation of the solitary observer, imagined in the poem's final image as starting suddenly from their contemplation 'as if the sea nymphs quired' (l.14), while simultaneously establishing a degree of narrative distance.[32] '[Filling] some other body', Keats's sonnet changes focal points as fluidly as its metre evocatively echoes the action of its subject, the sea.

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Moreover, although the poet's lack of identity was first given poetic voice in the verse fragment 'Where's the Poet?', the idea receives its most extended and dramatic treatment in *Hyperion*. Representing his most sustained attempt to fulfill his *cursus poeticus* in epic, Keats, passing

> 'the realm [...]
> Of Flora, and old Pan
> [...] for a nobler life,
> Where [he] may find the agonies, the strife
> Of human hearts' (*Sleep and Poetry*, ll.101-25)

, shows the importance to his creative process that the poet 'has no Identity' and 'is continually in for [sic] and filling some other body'.[33] Sperry notes that the 'treatment of

[32] Similar perspectival effects in *The Eve of St. Agnes* have been noted and commented on at great length, particularly with reference to the bedroom scene and the contrasting viewpoints of 'Young Porphyro [...] gazing on that bed' (*St. Agnes*, l.197) and of the 'warm gules on Madeline's fair breast' (*St. Agnes*, l.218) which implicitly assert her perspective. Depending on how these moments are interpreted the poem may be by turns a paean of masculine voyeurism or a deconstruction of traditional roles of masculinity. See particularly Jack Stillinger, 'The Hoodwinking of Madeline: Scepticism in *The Eve of St. Agnes*', *Studies in Philology 58.3* (1961): 533-555; Earl Reeves Wasserman, *The Finer Tone: Keats' Major Poems* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967); Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

[33] *KL*, p.263.

the fable of the fallen Titans and the emergence of a new race of gods represents [Keats's] attempt to [...] dramatise competing ideas of the poetic character and method'.[34] Gittings similarly describes how Keats 'put into Apollo all his own confused search for and part-achievement of a wider knowledge';[35] initially 'a poet of the Keatsian nature', Apollo succeeds to a state of experience in his transformation.[36] Apollo, before and after his apotheosis, thus embodies two conceptions of the poet. The first state is the 'fearless yet [...] aching ignorance' (*Hyperion*, III.106-7) of negative capability and the second of 'knowledge enormous' (*Hyperion*, III.113). The failure of the first *Hyperion* is that its climax, Apollo's apotheosis, is at odds with this first conception of the poet which Keats is so wedded to. Apollo's transformation, over as soon as it is effected, might thus be read as an allegory of Keats's own poetic development.

As with *Hyperion*, in his letters Keats similarly dramatises his own confusion relating to this question of knowledge. In a letter of February 1818, whilst in the midst of composing *Hyperion*, he writes 'I have come to the resolution never to write for the sake of writing, or making a poem, but from running over with any little knowledge and experience which many years of reflection may perhaps give me — otherwise I will be dumb.'[37] However, Keats does not keep 'even remotely'[38] to this decision, perhaps exemplifying the importance of 'uncertainties, mysteries, doubts' in his poetic process.[39]

[34] Sperry, p.155.
[35] Gittings, p.297.
[36] *Ibid.*
[37] Keats, quoted in Gittings, p.294.
[38] Gittings, p.294.
[39] *KL*, p.79.

Before his ascension, the mortal Apollo's mind is at rest — 'I here idle listen on the shores/ In fearless yet in aching ignorance' (*Hyperion*, III.106-7) — subject to the 'delicious diligent indolence'[40] which was a Keats family trait. Essentially characterless Apollo is yet able to identify imaginatively with the profusion of sensations, experiences and interpretations surrounding him.[41]

> Goddess benign, point forth some unknown thing: [...]
> stars by thousands! Point me [...]
> To any one particular beauteous star,
> And I will flit *into* it with my lyre,
> And make its silvery splendour pant with bliss. (*Hyperion*, III.95-102, my emphasis)

Leaving aside the somewhat overbearing luxuriance of phrases such as 'silvery splendour' which recall the earlier florid idiom of *Endymion* for which Keats was so lambasted in *Blackwood* and *The Examiner*, this passage exemplifies Apollo's ability, pre-deification, to enter actively 'into' his, any, subject matter. He does so in just the same manner as Keats himself, who for instance writes that 'The setting sun will always set me to rights — or if a sparrow come before my window I take part in its existence and pick about the gravel.'[42] Apollo's negative capability allows for his easy interchange of perspectives and, inspired not by knowledge but a simple appreciation of his subject's intrinsic qualities, he creates poesy that '[pants] with bliss'.

However, in his apotheosis, Apollo leaves the state of negative capability which earlier produced the

> 'blissful golden melody [...]
> the rapturous hurried notes
> That fell, one after one, yet all at once
> Like pearl beads dropping sudden from their string' (*Hyperion*, II.280-4)

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[40] *KL*, p.115.
[41] 'Mrs Abbey was saying the Keatses were ever indolent — that they would ever be so and that it was born in them — Well whispered Fanny to me, If it is born in us how can we help it'. 'To George and Tom Keats', 5th January 1818, *KL*, p.83.
[42] 'To Benjamin Bailey', 22nd November 1817, *KL*, p.72.

whose beauty so startles and horrifies Clymene. Contrastingly with his earlier active statement 'I will flit into it with my lyre', Apollo's beatification begins with him noticing that

> Knowledge enormous *makes* a God *of me.*
> [...]
> Creations and destroyings, all at once
> Pour *into* the wide hollows of my brain,
> And *deify me* … (*Hyperion*, III.113-8, my emphasis)

Apollo becomes a receptacle 'into' which 'knowledge enormous' flows. The repeated 'into' shows the change from his previous, active state of poetic creation, to his new, passive state of knowledge. Such passivity, arguably stemming from *Hyperion*'s unresolved 'tension between ambition and static introversion', leads to Apollo's loss of his previous, negatively-capable (non)self.[43] In doing so he simultaneously loses the ability of Keats's ideal, Shakespearean poet to turn 'the forms of things unknown [...] to shapes and [give] to airy nothing/ A local habitation and a name'.[44]

Moreover, with knowledge comes a connection with human history and a consequent loss of connection with nature. Epic similes link the Titans —

> [Enceladus's] ponderous syllables, like sullen waves
> In the half-glutted hollows of reef-rocks
> Came booming thus, (*Hyperion*, II.300-7)

— to an idealised *locus amoenus* of the natural world. Initially Apollo has a similar connection:

> And in the morning twilight [he] wandered forth
> Beside the osiers of a rivulet,
> Full ankle-deep in lilies of the vale (*Hyperion*, III.33-5)

[43] Vincent Newey, '*Hyperion*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and Keats's Epic Ambitions', *Cambridge Companion to Keats*, p.70.

[44] *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.I.16-8. For Gittings it is important that Keats often models his conception of the ideal poet with reference to Shakespeare's example: 'Unconsciously, though not for the first time, he was equating his own poetic nature with that of Shakespeare, whose "innate universality" he had just noted in the margin of *Troilus and Cressida*.' (Gittings, p.297) For instance Keats writes early in 1817 'I never quite despair and I read Shakespeare — indeed I shall I think never read any other Book much'. 'To B. R. Haydon', 11th May 1817, *KL*, p.36. See also *KL*, pp.77-80.

However, as he ascends to godhead by the influx of 'knowledge enormous' Apollo begins a process of acculturation which severs this link, taking him out of his previous states both of innocence and negative capability. Such acculturation, as 'Names, deeds, grey legends, dire events, rebellions' (*Hyperion*, III.114) enter, and so define and shackle, his being, conflicts with the beneficent 'state of nature' he had previously occupied.[45] At the climax of his apotheosis, racked by paroxysms of painful knowledge — 'Soon wild commotions shook him' (*Hyperion*, III.124) — Apollo is even described as the again-passive object of a cultic ritual:

> During the pain Mnemosyne upheld
> Her arms as one who prophesied. (*Hyperion*, III.133-4)

Hyperion and Apollo pre-apotheosis represent the same negatively-capable conception of poetry. Both are characterised by the 'half-ignorance and half-knowledge which Keats had once seen as the creative state'.[46] In fact, in January 1819, a month after the death of Tom and shortly before he finally gave the poem up, Keats notes the undesirability of knowledge: 'The more we know the more inadequacy we discover in the world to satisfy us — this is an old observation; but I have made up my Mind never to take any thing for granted'.[47] Comments such as these suggest that Keats could not accept the rejection of negative capability implied by the transformation of the mortal Apollo and the simultaneous supremacy of this deity over Hyperion that transformation would affect.

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[45] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, G.D.H. Cole, trans. (London and Toronto: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1923), p.40.
[46] Gittings, p.297.
[47] 'To the George Keatses', 31st December 1818, *KL*, p.285.

Moreover at the very moment when Apollo is overwhelmed by knowledge — 'Apollo shrieked, and lo!' (*Hyperion*, III.135) — and completes his transformation, the poem breaks off. This perhaps exemplifies the importance of the 'camelion poet' to Keats's conception of poetic creation;[48] unable to accept this final indictment of his theory of negative capability, Keats cannot write further. In his search for poetic progression, Keats 'had thought himself to a creative standstill' and *Hyperion* consequently founders on the rocks of its own imaginative innovations.[49] With the influx of culturally-linked knowledge, poetry no longer 'comes [...] as naturally as the leaves to a tree'[50] and so does not come 'at all'.[51] In so doing Keats, somewhat ironically, creates a fragment which exemplifies both the critical need to form a unitary opinion, and poetry's countervailing resistance to definitive interpretations.

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To conclude, Keats's statement — 'A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually in for [sic] and filling some other body' — draws attention to points central to his poetic ideas.[52] It hints both at the poet's unsuitability as a subject of poetry themself, and, crucially, also posits a figure who assumes a polyvalent, associative position of imaginative sympathy. Such a conception of the 'camelion poet', suffused with negative capability, allows Keats the freedom to move between subject positions and creates the delightful ambiguities so characteristic of his verse.[53] However, Keats's attachment to this poetic philosophy is also the cause of his failure

[48] *KL*, p.263.
[49] Gittings, p.297.
[50] 'To John Taylor', 27th February 1818, p.121. Moreover, the strain of his brother Tom's death had made the composition of book three a laboured process. I am indebted for this observation to Angus Graham-Campbell, in his address at the Athenaeum, 11th April 2018.
[51] *KL*, p.121.
[52] *KL*, p.263.
[53] *Ibid.*

to complete *Hyperion*. Unable to rescind his view of the importance of the quality of negative capability to the poet which continuing would have required, Keats broke off the poem.

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