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Poetics of the Subject

Representing Time and Gender: Keats's Prose, Keats's Poetics

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Texte intégral

- 1 Keats had as vexed a relation to time—particularly in respect to anticipation and the idea of the future—as he did to gender. In assessing Keats's poetics, indeed the two go together. This discussion concerns the intersection of issues of gender and of time at the level of representation in Keats's prose and in his poetics. First, I will focus on representations of time—specifically Keats's periodizing of his own poetic career and his decidedly prospective imagination, in relation to contemporaneous European historiographical transformations. Second, I turn to the way in which issues of gender become entangled with temporality in the poet's prose to suggest a fairly linear progression from feminine weakness to masculine genius, a “gendering of maturity” as Susan Wolfson has put it (91). Finally, however, through an alignment of the famous “Mansion of Many Apartments” letter with the “Ode to Psyche,” we can see how this poem reconfigures the letter's spatial pattern of gendered development so as to interpret the historiographical problems of the age as at least partly grounded in questions of gender and the process of subject-making.
- 2 In European historical writing during the age we now call Romantic, the present is increasingly structured so as to include, if not the future, at least the sense of a threshold into the future, from which the present comes to be understood. As recent research in the field of European historiography has established, together with this prospective tilt, the Romantic age witnessed, perhaps most notably, an intellectual turn toward periodicity in the shape of historical thought. James Chandler has introduced this research, by Reinhardt Koselleck, Benedict Anderson, and others, into the field of British literary Romanticism by way of the astonishing suggestion that, while in recent decades British Romanticists have denounced the writers they study for dehistoricizing poetic practices, the conceptual tools that these late twentieth-century critics use are, in fact, inventions of the Romantic age, authored by the very objects of their analyses: “it is precisely by our work of situating Romantic writers historically that we share their

blindness, their ideology" (4). With special attention to the emergence of "the new discourse of the spirit of the age in Britain," Chandler illuminates, on the one hand, a certain epistemological uncertainty attending various projects of defining the period, while he suggests, on the other hand, that the period is distinctive for the urgency of its attempts to define the present, emerging from its invention of periodicity itself (32). Koselleck's perhaps most provocative insight establishes that by around 1800, periodizations shaped historical thinking; moreover, while the present age, the new age (*Neuzeit*), was now seen as distinct from previous ages (Antiquity, the Middle Ages), "the difficulty of apprehending one's own time grew, since the course that it would follow could no longer be derived from previous history [...]. It was this fact, that the course of past time was obviously different from that of the present and the future, which robbed the annalistic 'onward-writing' of present incidents of its previous certainty" (254).

3 With Keats, the turn toward periodicity in the shaping force of time registers less at the level of historiography (though it does register there) than at the level of the subject. His thinking of his own poetic development in the terms of periodization is present from the outset; in *Sleep and Poetry*, for instance, the last poem included in his published 1817 volume, the speaker declares, "First the realm I'll pass/Of Flora, and old Pan" (101-2). He leans insistently toward a future "nobler life,/Where I may find the agonies, the strife/Of human hearts" (123-5) while, with equal insistence, he returns to the present and a very different notion of "the great end/Of poesy, that it should be a friend/To soothe the cares, and lift the thoughts of man" (245-7). The poem begs to be understood in a context that includes a future to which the poet aspires, and thus stages—presents the context for—a development over time that is nevertheless crucial to articulating precisely the present. In *Sleep and Poetry*, this temporal staging, moreover, invites all the uncertainties of the future into its purview. Keats's notion of the present includes a knowledge that is contingent upon temporal unfolding, subject to "The shiftings of mighty winds" and thus "the changing thoughts/Of man" over time, which constantly defers the possibility of "clear conceiving": "yet there ever rolls/A vast idea before me," Keats writes. And Paul de Man has thus observed: "Keats is steadily moving forward, trying to pull himself up to the level and the demands of his own prospective vision. None of the larger works—and we know that the larger works mattered most to him—can in any sense be called finished. The circle never seems to close, as if he were haunted by a dream that always remains in the future" (181). To that end, this temporal pattern presages formal, thematic, and epistemological dimensions of the poetry to come. Not the least astonishing in this vision of Keats is the paradoxical prospect of witnessing this staging of development—his framing of a "present" so as to project a moving beyond it—as an aspect of the 1817 volume which, even in his great poetry, he never does move beyond.

4 A similar sense of periodizing appears as well in Keats's more private meditations, his letters to friends, where these issues of history and subjectivity first come into contact explicitly with issues of gender. The significance of "smokeability" in the Keatsian idiom, for instance, lies at this intersection. Several critics have observed that Keats "regards the capacity to smoke a piece of writing, to surpass its stage, as the capacity to establish it as feminine and oneself as masculine" (Chandler, 401)¹. In respect to his poem *Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil*, he had worried about his work's vulnerability and expressed a wish not to publish it: "I can get it smoak'd at the Carpenter's shaving chimney much more cheaply" (*LJK* II 174). And he declares his own progression in these very terms when he writes, on December 31, 1818, of two poets whose work no longer impresses him: "Mrs. Tighe and Beattie once delighted me—now I see through them and can find nothing in them—or weakness—and yet how many they still delight! Perhaps a superior being may look upon Shakespeare in the same light—is it possible? No—This same inadequacy is discovered [...] in Women with few exceptions—the Dress Maker, the blue Stocking and the most charming sentimentalist differ but in Slight degree, and are equally smokeable" (*LJK* II 18-19). That is, a more vulnerable stage

identified as feminine precedes, in sharp contrast, a masculine achievement, like Shakespeare's, at the stage to which Keats suggests he has advanced.

5 In line with this pattern of gendered development, though on a slightly grander historical scale, the Keats that Andrew Bennett has described—first in *Keats, Narrative, and the Posthumous Life of Writing* (1994) and then in *Romantic Poets and the Culture of Posterity* (1998)—refuses to pander to his contemporary reading public, made up predominantly of women; instead, he conceives of himself (as did many of his male contemporaries) as writing for a future, ideal, male audience. Bennett's reading provides a suggestive way of thinking about the exchange between the poet and his publisher Richard Woodhouse over revisions Keats had submitted to *The Eve of St. Agnes* insofar as it gives the poet's retort about his intended audience a temporal spin. That is, according to Woodhouse, Keats's revisions had rendered the poem in its sexual implications "unfit for ladies"; Woodhouse records Keats's famous reply: "He says he does not want ladies to read his poetry, that he writes for men [...]" (LJK II 163). From the point-of-view of historical reception, if the great poetry of the present age will find its proper male reading audience at some later historical moment, then to say that one does not write for women is to say that one does not write for the present reading public but for some future one.

6 What I am warming up to suggest is that in "Ode to Psyche" we find more complexity in respect to gender identifications and development than has appeared in the demarcations of linear progression I have thus far been tracing. Doing so, however, requires me to rehearse one more instance of Keats's shaping of a gendered development in a letter that has been often aligned precisely with this ode. The pattern of moving beyond an inferior, feminine stage is depicted spatially in the letter of 1818 to Keats's poet-friend J. H. Reynolds, in which Keats compares "human life to a large Mansion of Many Apartments":

7 The first we step into we call the infant or thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think—[...] we no sooner get into the second Chamber, which I shall call the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, than we become intoxicated with the light and the atmosphere, we see nothing but pleasant wonders, and think of delaying there for ever in delight: However among the effects this breathing is father of is that tremendous one of sharpening one's vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing ones nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression—whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken'd and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open—but all dark—all leading to dark passages—We see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist—We are now in that state—We feel the "burden of the Mystery," To this point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote "Tintern Abbey" and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those dark Passages. (LJK I 280-1)

8 The light, bright, and feminine atmosphere of the "Chamber of Maiden-Thought" is transcended by a "father[ing]" into the next phase, the phase of seeing "into the heart and nature of Man," where pain and oppression first enter one's purview. In prose, then, Keats depicts a clear movement from feminine lightness to masculine Genius. What this pattern might begin to suggest is that in Keats's great poetry, almost all of which was composed in 1819, we would find a decidedly masculine subjectivity, the poetics of a subject finally freed from the earlier attachments to weaknesses perceived as the feminine. While Keats's letter on the "Mansion of Many Apartments" is a key text to "Ode to Psyche," its arrangement of "chambers" contains a politics of staged and gendered development far simpler than what we find in the ode, where three kinds of development are at work: first, the development of the speaker's mental life on the model of the "large Mansion"; second, the historical development of the mythical Psyche; third, a progressive identification of the speaker with Psyche, of subject with object, which disrupts, to some extent, the former two patterns.

9 Quickly sketched, the poem starts from the "remembrance dear" of the speaker's recent encounter of Cupid and Psyche "in deepest grass" and frozen embrace, an encounter that already rests upon an epistemological uncertainty between dreaming

and consciousness: "Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see/The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?" Next comes a present description of the goddess's state of lack and the speaker's entreaty to be allowed to rectify her state and, finally, the poem arrives at the speaker's declaration of his project for the future.

- 10 This movement in time (from past to present to future), however, is also marked by a specific development of mind, recalling key aspects of Keats's letter on the mind as a Mansion. In the initial encounter, the speaker has "wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly, / And on the sudden, fainting with surprise,/Saw two fair creatures [...]" Reached in thoughtless, directionless, almost passive wandering, the natural, protective haven "beneath the whisp'ring roof/Of leaves and trembled blossoms," the place of his first encountering the couple, is a kind of thoughtless chamber, and what it engenders is unconsciousness; the speaker here "faint[s] with surprise"—experiences weakness and vulnerability—in a world in which Psyche can be seen simply as a "happy, happy dove." The spatial aspect is clear. In the fourth stanza, however, thoughtless wandering has been replaced by the "shadowy thought" of an actively "working brain." Moreover, the bower and the mind merge; landscape turns into the speaker's mindscape, constructed of "branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain." In this progressive blurring of the distinction between subject and object, the landscape-mindscape, moreover, becomes a kind of sexscape. But first, I turn to the historical development concentrated in the middle two stanzas.

- 11 Keats's acknowledged source for the Psyche myth was Apuleius's prose narrative *The Golden Ass*, written toward the end of the second century AD. Just before copying out the poem in a letter to George and Georgiana Keats, he writes: "You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the time of Apuleius the Platonist who lived after [sic] the Agustan age, and consequently the Goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervor—and perhaps never thought of in the old religion"; he adds, "I am more orthodox tha[n] to let a hethen Goddess be so neglected" (*LJK* II 106). Keats's characterization of Psyche here as well as in the poem displaces the neglect of Apuleius's plot, in which Venus complains of the neglect of her own worship due to the very attentions paid to the beauty of the mere mortal Psyche. Outside the narrative embodiment by Apuleius, the neglect in Keats's account is located, instead, in Psyche's (historical) reception, as he addresses her: "O latest born and loveliest vision far"; "O brightest! though too late for antique vows, /Too, too late for the fond believing lyre" (24, 36-7). Psyche is "latest born" because, in Apuleius's narrative, she is the youngest sister, but her embodiment in narrative by Apuleius, her textual birth, is also late: as Keats puts it, "after the Agustan age, and consequently the Goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervor." Embodied in narrative at an unfortunate historical moment, she is "too late for antique vows." James Chandler has suggested that Keats attempts thus to pick up where Apuleius left off; this involves not "striving to recapture Apuleius' moment," but rather "continuing a process that Apuleius had advanced and that a millenium and a half of Christianity had interrupted" (416). In other words, the neglect has been a consequence of the appropriation of the discourse of the soul by a dominant Christianity, followed by "the mechanist strain in Enlightenment moralist philosophy," which neglected to acknowledge a psyche or soul at all (416). Keats offers his own historical moment, however, as a potential turn:

Yet even in these days so far retir'd
From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,
Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired. (40-3)

- 12 The poem represents itself thus as the proper—if deferred a millennium and a half—response to the birth of the goddess. But the time of "happy pieties" registers a twofold significance in that not only from a historical point of view is the poet far removed from the ancient world of "fond believing" in Greek and Roman mythology, but also in respect to his own poetical career, he has left "the realm of Flora and old Pan." In other

words, recapitulated in the shape of his own poetic development, Keats has experienced, through a dilation of the lyrical moment, the historical progress of the Western world since antiquity.

13 This moment brings us also to the third kind of development to which I alluded: the progressive identification of subject with object. The line “Fluttering among the faint Olympians” dovetails distinct grammatical possibilities: does “Fluttering” refer to the activity of Psyche’s “lucent fans” or to the imaginative activity of the speaker, the “I”? If, as Thomas Pfau has suggested in his article “Rhetoric and the Existential: Romanticism and the Question of the Subject,” “Rather than being the origin of expression, the subject—in a highly tentative and provisional sense—presents itself as the referent of expressive acts of a consciousness,” then Keats’s subject here is suspended between what Psyche—the psyche—possesses (“thy lucent fans”) and the claims of the individual ego (511).²

14 Moreover, when the speaker announces, “I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspired,” one recalls Psyche’s most defining characteristic aside from her beauty: her insistence on the proof of the senses. In Apuleius’s narrative, twice Psyche’s curiosity to know *by her own eyes* ostensibly sets her love for Cupid back. This identification is underscored by the next line in the suggested grammatical substitution of “me” for “thy”: “So let me be thy choir [...],” which is to suggest the speaker as mere transmitter (“thy voice, thy lute”), Ode *from* Psyche, and thus to acknowledge the very otherness of poetic powers.

15 This performative blurring of the line between subject and object would seem to bear the mark of “Negative Capability,” the mark of “the chameleon Poet” who “has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body,” and such a blurring of a divide that is usually taken for granted has led certain critics to the claim that the poet is thus appropriating and filling a distinctly feminine role (*LJK* I 387). Margaret Homans, for instance, refers to the “apparent femininity of his negative capability,” noting his “appropriation of the feminine”; she goes so far as to say, “if gender is a social construct, and if to be socially powerless is to be ‘a woman,’ then Keats can be classed among women” (341-3). Diane Long Hoeveler similarly notes “Keats’s appropriation of the feminine as an object of exchange” and concludes: “Psyche can be read on some level as the triumph of the middle-class woman author, while she is also Keats’s appropriation of that role for himself as male and middle-class poet” (241). Anne Mellor puts it this way: “A self that is permeable, continually overflowing its boundaries, melting into another, and being filled by another has historically been associated with the female, and especially with the pregnant woman who experiences herself and her fetus as one [...]. Keats identifies the true poet above all with the capacity for *empathy* or *sympathy*, a quality everywhere associated with women in his day” (216). However, Keats unequivocally articulates negative capability as an alternative *masculinity* for which his model is another male writer, Shakespeare.³ While a crucial aspect of “Ode to Psyche” I wish to address—the blurring of subject and object distinctions or the sense of “melting into another” (Mellor)—would seem to deliver this discussion into the line of thinking about Keats that I have briefly outlined above, I would instead introduce another illustration of this phenomenon from someone feminist criticism has far less easily embraced: Sigmund Freud. In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud notes that, aside from the experience of the infant at the breast and certain pathologies, there does exist one state, “admittedly an unusual state, but not one that can be stigmatized as pathological,” in which the clear lines of demarcation between the ego and the outside world threaten to dissolve: “At the height of being in love, the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away. Against all the evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares that ‘I’ and ‘you’ are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact” (13). Certain pathological adults, infants at the breast, and human beings in love—regardless of gender, one presumes, though Freud says “a man”—all share if not a theory of negative capability, at least a capacity for it. A blurring of the line between the speaker and Psyche, therefore, need not indicate, as some would argue, an appropriation of powers distinguished as feminine.

16 The identification *across* genders takes place most vividly at the ode's turn, near the close of the third stanza, and appears the enabling factor for the shift toward the future of the final stanza—at once the poem's most affirmative and uncertain expression. Shelley's elegy on Keats, *Adonais*, depicts the poet as the "youngest, dearest one" (46), "the loveliest and the last" (51), in an echo of Keats's Psyche, who is "latest born and loveliest vision far." Critics since have observed this similarity between speaker and goddess, but have not explored its aesthetic and historical implications. While the speaker declares most assuredly, "Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane," what he declares he will encounter by doing so is precisely the unknown, "some untrodden region of my mind." And the final posture of desire is poised thus upon a horizon of profound uncertainty in anticipation of the future while the space of the present is outlined only in negative terms (Psyche has no voice, no lute). From this vantage, the poem begins to register the historiographical transformations described by Reinhardt Koselleck and others. Since the course of Psyche's cultural role in Keats's cultural present (and future) cannot be derived from her role in the past, his poetic embodiment reflects this difficulty, the difficulty of apprehending how a present incident will look from the remove of some unknown future.

17 A degree of uncertainty is present, to be sure, from the poem's outset, in the ontological question of seeing or dreaming, but within the scenic encounter of Cupid and Psyche, the speaker's subject position seems relatively clear. This initial scene, however, is radically transformed in the stanza's chiasmic counterpart, the fourth stanza. While spatial boundaries in the letter seem a given, the very notion of spatial orientation is precisely what the "Ode to Psyche" radically unsettles by way of questions of gender. Thus while this discussion owes much to recent historiographical criticism on Keats's work, what we have missed in describing the poem's historiographical "scene" is the way in which it ends in a radical unsettling of the internal "scene" itself. And so, when James Chandler asks in *England in 1819*, in a reading of "Ode to Psyche," "But what is the scene of this utterance? The scene depicted *in* the utterance is clear enough [...] . How might we understand the scene of the utterance that describes such a scene?" (417), I suggest that as the position of the subject is brought into question, the sense of spatial orientation in relation to the "scene"—and thus also the idea of a determinate scene itself—is rendered less than clear. For in the fourth stanza, the protective haven has become the speaker's mindscape, while Cupid appears notably absent, *perhaps* to indicate that the speaker has assumed his male subject position as "priest" of Psyche's temple, a position of love toward the goddess. But the poem's closure suggests curiously otherwise:

And there shall be for thee all soft delight
That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
To let the warm Love in! (64-7)

18 The speaker's anticipation of what "there shall be" for Psyche becomes Psyche's anticipation of the arrival of Cupid, god of "Love," in an allusion to Apuleius' tale in which Psyche awaits her husband each night: an identification suggested in the internal rhyme "*be [...] thee*." The position of the speaker in this "scene" then is left radically double. Anne Mellor is the only critic to my knowledge who has noticed a doubled gender identification, and she sees it as Keats's triumph in occupying both gender positions: "Keats triumphantly and climactically occupies the positions of *both* the female and the male lover [...]" (221). I find its ambiguity of position as exhilarating, but less knowing, less certain than the idea of triumph would indicate. What this doubling at the level of the subject does is to unsettle the sense of spatial orientation, of the sense of their being a decidable "scene" as a given, thus to open itself to the notion of the possible.

19 Through the element of anticipation, the speaker's identification across genders at the close of the poem, however subtle, indicates a distinct break both from the gender implications and from the reliance on spatial contours of the letter on the "Mansion of

Many Apartments.” Identifications aside, if we are to imagine the speaker still as removed from the scene as he is in the first stanza, for instance, would the point-of-view be coming from inside or outside the “casement ope at night”? Stuart Sperry’s brilliant discussion of this letter-poem relationship, which suggests that the letter’s “tentative conclusions become the subject of reconsideration in Keats’s ode,” nevertheless remains within the spatial terms of the letter; Sperry writes, “Indeed the recognition the ode finally intimates is that for the poet of the present day there can be no escape from shadowiness and subjectivity, that the effort to push further into the region of the unknown leads only to the perception of further passages and implications, that it results in a sense of ultimate inconclusiveness that is ironic” (258-9). Helen Vendler employs the letter even more directly in her discussion of “Psyche”: “we sense a positive effort, at the close of the ode, to stave off the encroaching dark passages” (59). My effort to more substantially differentiate the two literary productions derives from my sense that a remarkable achievement of the ode’s particular aesthetic is to *represent* what the letter can only describe: the radical change in the experience of time (and space) that takes place in the process of the mind’s coming to awareness.

20 As gender identity has played a lead role in the idea of a subjectivity, the tentative identification across genders leaves the subject position far from fixed. “Ode to Psyche” explores the relation between subject and object rendered fragile in the process of the mind coming to awareness, coming potentially toward not just a new comprehension of things, but a new position as subject of which objects are, to some extent, a function. Arrived at through a history of the Western world insofar as Psyche’s neglect has been its symptom, the final stanza reflects the intensity of anticipation that troubles the recording of contemporary history during Keats’s time, but Keats records this at the level of the subject, and so historiographical uncertainties would seem reflections of a not-yet-resolved gender confusion. Thomas Pfau explains, “the constantly present horizon of temporality causes a consciousness, reflecting and writing on its potential selfhood, to remain at all times provisional. Yet this incapacity of consciousness to make its founded meanings of self-hood coincide with itself *does not challenge its factual existence* as consciousness but merely *causes a deferral of its intended, unified referent: the self*” (511). From the point-of-view of “Ode to Psyche,” part of that deferral would rest upon the subject-making process of gender identification.

21 Keats’s kinds of irresolution, his sense of deferral, enable his poetic to say these complexities of modern experience; in “Psyche,” the surprise of encounters—sustained without fainting—between the painful, joyous, serious, and ludic is that of a disparate interiority woven into poetic continuity. For this kind of complexity, Keats’s writings are illuminated by theoretical meditations on literary subjectivity, and those meditations, too, enriched by his challenging example.

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Notes

1 See, for instance, Susan Wolfson, "Keats and Gender Criticism," (92); and James Chandler, *England in 1819* (401).

2 For this suspended dynamic of the speaker's identity, I disagree with James O'Rourke's omission of "Psyche" (along with the "Ode on Indolence") from his recent study of the odes: "In neither of these poems does an ongoing dialectic of linguistic displacement and condensation accelerate to the point of annihilating a stable and centered persona" (O'Rourke, xi).

3 See Susan Wolfson's extensive treatment of this issue in "Keats and Gender Criticism."

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