

## Keatsian Romanticism: Supplementary Imagination and Quasi-Deleuzian Capability

Shivesh Singh  
MA in English  
University of Delhi

### Abstract

This paper undertakes a chronological study of Keats's work to give an alternative reading of Keatsian Romanticism. To that end, the study identifies two elements which are central to Keats's poetics. The first is Imaginary which consists of the conjurations of imagination which come from Classical myths, Medieval Romances and sometimes from the Bible. So far, these elements have been considered to be merely allusive but this study shows they are akin to what Derrida calls a *supplement*. The second is the famous concept of Negative Capability which has been studied as a wise passiveness which results in a binary tension in the text but this paper argues for a more creative interpretation of it based on its quasi-Deleuzian qualities. The paper traces these two elements in their multiplicity to give a new reading of Keatsian Romanticism

**Keywords:** Keats, Romanticism, Classical myth, Imagination, Negative Capability

### Introduction

John Keats, amongst English poets, holds a dear and tragic place. His life was colored with death and quest for beauty, both are reflected in his greatest works. One of his most significant contributions is the concept of Negative Capability. He defines it as the capacity of "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason... This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration" (Keats, *Selected Letters of John Keats* 60). Since then the concept has taken its own path and history, which Li Ou traces in her book "Keats and Negative Capability." Most studies focus on a multiple perspective and passive approach to understand this concept but this paper argues that Negative Capability is quasi-Deleuzian in essence and comes into play through the experiences of the Other which Keats often explores. Keats does not necessarily consider multiple perspectives but multiplicity itself - the difference is that the former is a more intellectualized understanding of the concept and the latter a more creative one. In addition to that, being a Romantic, Imagination played a crucial role for Keats. His imagery is densely colored with Classical mythology and Medieval Romances. In this, he was inspired by Wordsworth and, to a greater extent, by Leigh Hunt. They focused on the beautiful and the political aspect of the myth. Keats, this paper argues, saw more in it, to him Imagination came also from loss and absence - thereby making it *supplementary* to Nature. To make these claims, this paper analyzes the Imaginary and Negative Capability chronologically in his major works to present a coherent picture of the idiosyncratic Romanticism of John Keats.

### Literature Review

The present study identifies two important aspects of Keats's poetics: the supplementary Imaginary and the quasi-Deleuzian nature of Negative Capability. The literature on these is sparse in diversity, where not in numbers.

Starr, in his paper "Negative Capability in Keats's Diction", perfectly summarizes the general critical consensus regarding the concept. He states that Negative Capability is more than what Keats himself defined in the famous 1817 letter, it is in effect "a great expansion of experience, an identification with the wide area envisaged by Shakespeare, and a determination to see the individual in its proper relation to this vast field, so that personal difficulties could be subordinated" (Starr 59). The present study agrees with this. However, Starr interprets this expansion to be focused on an attempt to "never really succeed in establishing a wholly consistent attitude" (Starr 60). He finds in Keats "a kind of magnetic polarity of positive and negative forces" (Starr 62). Another predominant perspective focuses on Negative Capability as a quality which sharply contrasts Keats's sensibilities from Wordsworth and Coleridge, Wigod's "Negative Capability and Wise Passiveness" is a representative paper reflecting this attitude. Instead, this study argues that at the center of Negative Capability is a sort of phenomenological multiplicity which comes into being through Keats's experience of the Other. Li Ou's excellent book length study of the concept in "Keats and Negative Capability" considers the much wider scope of the concept. Though she considers the dramatic and self-effacing aspect of the concept which provides indispensable aid to the paper, her work does not focus on the Other to the extent that Keats's work deserves.

The connection with the Imaginary which this paper seeks to establish is not worked upon and seems to be largely ignored. The Classical imagination has been understood to be a part of Keats's politics, symbolism and Romantic Imagination. Haworth in her study "The Titans, Apollo, and the Fortunate Fall in Keats's Poetry" argues that Keats fell back on Christian theology in his attempts to build on the anti Christian works which focused on Classical mythology. Bewell's remarkable paper "The Political Implication of Keats's Classicist Aesthetics", explores the larger role of the Classical in poetic history. As such, these studies treat mythology in Keats in an excessively intellectual manner. The paper argues, instead, that its presence is predominantly personal and emotional for Keats. Some studies which are relevant to this end are not focused on the Classical. Kroeber's study in "The New Humanism of Keats's Odes", for example, explores how Keats's poetics "express a new kind of personal experience" (Kroeber 263) with focus on his odes. Boulger in his "Keats' Symbolism" states how for Keats, the "qualitative items in experience" are embodied in mythology (Boulger 248) - one of the central ideas that this paper explores. The anthologised chapters in *The Cambridge Companion to Keats*, edited by Wolfson, provide valuable insights relevant to Keats's work and the ideas that this paper seeks to present.

### Elements of Keatsian Romanticism

This study seeks to establish the following elements as central of Keatsian Romanticism:

1. The Supplementary Imaginary: This is not just Romantic Imagination but any element that Keats conjures through imagination, for the most part these are from Classical mythology and Medieval Romances (Spenser). The paper argues that this Imaginary is *that dangerous supplement*. As Derrida puts it, a supplement is ambiguous; it could be both "a plenitude enriching another platitude" (Derrida 144) AND its place could be structured "by the mark of an emptiness" (Derrida 145). That is to say, the Imaginary (a plenitude) both

enriches the Natural (another plentitude) through Romantic Imagination AND the Imaginary, a supplement, fulfills a lack in Nature, through longing.

2. Quasi-Deleuzian nature of Negative Capability: This paper reads Negative Capability to be primarily manifested through experience of the Other. This Other can be mythical, imaginary, nonhuman and even metaphorical. This can be thought about through Deleuze's idea that "human thought and life can become and transform through what is inhuman" (Colebrook 56). Following this, Negative Capability occurs in "the impersonal, inhuman or anonymous plane of experience" (Colebrook 81) and it goes well beyond "goes well beyond knowledge and the human world" (Colebrook 81). This quasi-Deleuzian understanding of the term incorporates not only Keats's own definition of the term but the expanded understanding that Starr talks about (Starr 59). As quoted earlier, Keats describes Negative Capability against reason and fact, as such the Deleuzian suspicion of truth and established modes of structuring reality are challenged. As such, Negative Capability recontextualizes (or reterritorialises). These effects, combined, create a multiplicity of experience and a shifting perceptual center.

Then there is the Shakespearean quality of Negative Capability which Keats talks about. There isn't much inhuman experience in Shakespeare, as much is expected from a Renaissance writer. However, how Borges interpreted Shakespeare in his parable "Everything and Nothing" is rather interesting: "soul that inhabited [Shakespeare] was Caesar, who disregards the augur's admonition, and Juliet, who abhors the lark, and Macbeth, who converses on the plain with the witches who are also Fates. No one has ever been so many men as this man..." (Borges 231). Here, Shakespeare does not delight in Imogen and Iago equally, as Keats understood, rather Shakespeare became Imogen and Iago - he became the historical, mythic and imaginary Other. The experience of the Other makes Negative Capability fundamentally creative and, at its core, a multiplicity.

The paper explores these effects in Keats's poetry and shows that they are present in his early work as isolated instances and in his later work as central poetic elements.

### **Poems, 1817**

In March 1817, Keats published his first ever collection *Poems*. Though this was before his famous letter wherein he used the term negative capability, the concept, with its multiplicity, is present in this collection, along with the Imaginary.

Keats, in the dedication to the collection to Leigh Hunt, speaks of a "glory and loveliness" (Keats xvi) that has passed away. This is a key idea. The nature of this glory is almost "nostalgically pagan" (Wolfson 9): composed of nymphs, Flora and Pan. This is not merely a display of Keats's Classical education but the primary perceptual center that Keats experiences nature and the world through. The first poem of the collection, "I stood tip-toe upon a hill" is Wordsworthian in all but sensibility. The poet finds the rich scenery suited for a "greedy" eye to "picture out the quaint" (Keats 1). The adjective "quaint" used here describes the bending of a woodland alley. This imagery is significant because the quaintness of something implies that it participated in a past and remains a monument to it. The bending of an alley suggests an unknown which is right around the corner, except that this alley is "never ending" (Keats 1), as such the unknown is just out of reach. This thirst is quenched first by nature itself, but, by line 50, the Classical is already taking precedence over the

Natural. Keats conjures Apollo and his harps to praise the marigolds in a way which is not only imagination or fancy but also a longing: it is *that dangerous supplement*.

The lines 75-80, are the first published occurrence of a non-human perception in Keats. Keats thinks through the swarms of minnows, tries to feel how they experience the streamlet. He not only observes but, through imagination, participates when they “wrestle/ With their own delight” (Keats, *The Complete Poems of John Keats* 2). This experience of the Other later culminates in Negative Capability.

In the second poem of the collection, “*Specimen of an Introduction to a Poem*,” Keats follows Spenser and shows “enthusiasm for Spenser’s aesthetics in disregard of the moral allegory” (Wolfson 190). This too is quasi-Deleuzian, as it approaches *The Faerie Queene* rhizomatically in favour of Beauty and briefly, from line 50 onwards, speaks for Spenser, Leigh Hunt (Libertas) and himself. As such, this is an instance of Negative Capability in its cradle. This allows him to politically align his preference for a Royalist writer like Spenser - this is not a rational argument, but a creative one. The supplementary longing is also present in the poem. Keats wants to “revive the dying tones of minstrelsy/ which linger yet about long gothic arches” (Keats, *The Complete Poems of John Keats* 7), here the sense of an absence from the present is obvious. The world of chivalry and knighthood, for its beauty, not allegorical value, is what Keats longs for in this poem. In this collection, the “chivalric idealism” (Wolfson 12) and aforementioned *quaintness* is predominantly present in the poems “To Some Ladies”, “On receiving a curious Shell, and a Copy of Verses, from the same Ladies”, “To \*\*\*\*” and “To Hope.”

In a similar vein, the first verse epistle in the collection, “To John Felton Mathew” reterritorialises the revolutionary “brotherhood in song” (Keats, *The Complete Poems of John Keats* 19) through a “battery of Italian, classical, and English pastoral associations” (Wolfson 12) into a poetic purpose - opposed to a strictly political one. This early semantic recontextualisation/ deterritorialization will be important in Keats’s **later, more meritorious, work**. In the second epistle, “To My Brother George” he describes the poetic trance: “In air he sees white coursers paw, and prance,/ Bestriden of gay knights...” (Keats, *The Complete Poems of John Keats* 21). The trance opens a portal for the poet to witness the glory (lines 33-36). Here it is evident that for Keats, at the very height of poetic act there are mythical, medieval and imaginative augmentations to the world, not a heightened experience of the world itself. The poem then goes on to explore this experience as the experience of the Other and otherworldly: “These wonders strange he sees and many more.../With forehead to the soothing breezes bare,/ would he naught see but the dark and silent blue/With all its diamonds trembling through and through” (Keats, *The Complete Poems of John Keats* 22). Here, as with the minnows in “I stood tip-toe”, Keats’s imagination conjures an Other’s experience of nature that is quintessentially Romantic - it is the Romanticism of the Other.

So far the study has not even touched the most significant works of Keats and the supplementary nature of the Imaginative, the quasi-Deleuzian nature of Negative Capability and Romanticism of the Other are already evident. The next section of this collection are seventeen sonnets. They will be discussed only briefly, in two groups as different qualities of the supplement.

1. In the sonnet “Had I a man’s fair form”, Keats’s dissatisfaction with life is apparent. He bemoans not being a “knight whose foeman dies” (Keats, *The Complete Poems of John Keats* 28). The element of magic is also present in the last line with ‘spells and incantations.’ The sonnet “O Solitude!”, which is the first published work of Keats is also anthologised here. It begins with: “O Solitude, if I *must* with thee dwell” (Keats 30; emphasis added). Here Keats does not seek solitude in nature, like Wordsworth, rather considers it

something to be dealt with through nature. The octave of the sonnet describes “nature’s observatory” wherein he would prefer to dwell with Solitude but then the sestet undercuts that with a greater preference for human company, which is his “soul’s pleasure.” However, as Sperry Jr. interprets it, this pleasure is foreign to Keats, he is an “admiring outsider” (Jr. 196) to the intimate “sweet converse” which the sestet describes. This second preference for nature, as we shall see, is more prevalent in Keats’s work than its Romantic conceptions. This sonnet was first published in the May of 1816 in the *Examiner* and concludes with the “two kindred spirits” at the perceptual center - the earliest instance of the Romanticism of the Other. In these sonnets, the Imaginary is a *supplement* that fills a lack.

2. In “Written on the day that Mr. Leigh Hunt left prison,” he uses Spenserian imagery to describe Hunt’s grandeur. “To a friend who sent me some roses” is lush with imagery from Classical mythology and Medieval romance. In “To my brothers” Keats brings an added warmth to the “busy flames” by comparing their crackle to “household gods” (Keats, *The Complete Poems of John Keats* 30). Similarly, in “To one who has been long in city pent” he calls the nightingale with its originary name, Philomel. In these sonnets, the Imaginary is an enriching *supplement*.

Then there are the Sonnets “On Leaving Some Friends At An Early Hour”, “Addressed to Haydon”, “Addressed to the Same”, “On The Grasshopper and Cricket”, “To Kosciusko” and “Happy England! I could be content” which are rather conventionally Romantic and aren’t very remarkable for the aims of this paper. However, among the sonnets in this collection is Keats’s first truly great poem and one of the central texts of British Romanticism: “On first looking into Chapman’s Homer.” In the first line of the sonnet, “Much have I travell’d in the realms of gold”, the meaning of “gold” is very ambiguous and quite some critical attention has been paid to it (Johnson 7) but, for the perspective that this paper seeks to bring, the word “travell’d” is more significant. It is opposed to the post Chapman experience of breathing (“Yet did I never breathe its pure serene”) and watching (“Then felt I like some watcher of the skies”). The latter, “watcher” is in another important contrast with “travell’d”: “travel” is more active and “watcher” is rather passive. The passive “watcher” is also a noun and not a verb, therefore it is no longer Keats who is traveling but a “watcher in the sky” who is watching through an inhuman eye- a significant shift in perceptual center, an experience of an imagined Other. This is an instance of quasi-Deleuzian Negative Capability.

In the last poem of this collection “Sleep and Poetry”, Keats takes us back to the world of “Flora and of Pan” (Keats, *The Complete Poems of John Keats* 37) and imagines it to be a place where “he can pursue nymphs” and “woo sweet kisses,” and where one of the nymphs will entice him on” (Bloom 72). This is not eroticism in any form, instead we are back in the “Glory and Loveliness” from the Dedication to the collection, except here Keats himself shows the fulfilment that the Classical *supplement* promises. However, he adds that “I must pass them for a nobler life, / Where I may find the agonies, the strife / Of human hearts”, there is a tension here which Li Ou reads as this: “‘sleep’ suggests an impulse to be delivered out of the world, ‘poetry’ signifies a revelatory power and truthful insight into the world” (109). However, Li Ou misses that ‘sleep’ and ‘poetry’ are both components of Keats’s ‘poetry.’ The chief tension, indeed one of the central tensions in Keats’s work, is between strife of life and fulfilment in the Imaginary - Poetry both engages and delivers from

the world, it is an internal tension - best captured in the *dangerous supplement* i.e. the Imaginary.

### ***Endymion: A Poetic Romance, 1818***

*Endymion* was published after Keats's famous 1817 letter and a more mature Negative Capability is present, despite the "immaturity" (Keats, *The Complete Poems of John Keats* 46) of the poem. As Keats puts in the preface, the subject of the poem is the bright and beautiful mythology of Greece. As such, the Imaginary as a supplement is prominently exhibited in this work. In Book 1, "A Thing of beauty..." is a joy "spite of despondence" and even in "gloomy days" (47). The "glories infinite" of the Imaginative, Keats says, is with us even when there is "gloom o'ercast" (lines 25-33). As an enriching supplement "classical mythology is used as a means of explaining, in a secular way, the psychological complexity of consuming spiritual states" (Bloom 43). Here Keats also identifies himself "spiritually with the belief-system of classical mythology" (Bloom 43), exhibiting an intellectualized form of Negative Capability which is often discussed. Keats also identifies with Endymion on multiple levels, from his diction to the uncertainty of his tone and characterisation. As Wolfson puts it, Keats was the "unhappy twin of his "Brain-sick" hero" (Wolfson, *Reading John Keats* 39). As Keats and his contemporary critics believed, *Endymion* is not a work of great poetic merit. Its position, however, in Keats's career is central. As the analysis of the poems in *Poems* (1817) showed, Negative Capability and the Imaginative in early Keats was present in nooks and corners of the poems. *Endymion* represents a transition from that towards more mature Keats. As Swann puts it after *Endymion* "Keats finds his poetic voice... and becomes canonical Keats" (Wolfson, *The Cambridge Companion to Keats* 21). Li Ou contextualizes this shift better: "the artistic world cannot but be built on the very ground of human experience, as [Keats] has already realized from his failure in *Endymion*: 'That which is creative must create itself'" (Ou 86).

### ***Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and Other Poems, 1820***

This collection is the last one that Keats saw published and can easily be considered to contain Keats's greatest achievements. At this point, the supplementary role of the Imaginary and the quasi-Deleuzian nature of Negative Capability have become a more organic and centralized presence in Keats's Romanticism. *Lamia*, the first in collection, is a narrative poem embellished with Keats's knowledge of the Classical world. It lacks coherence and many interweaving threads. It establishes itself against order, "philosophy will clip an Angel's wings, / Conquer all mysteries by rule and line" (Keats, *The Complete Poems of John Keats* 155). *Lamia* herself is perceived to be *multiplicitous* as "some penanced lady elf, some demon's mistress, or the demon's self" (142) she is a "strange combination of beauty and beast" (Ou 129). The shifting perceptual center and the Other in this poem appear as dramatic personas. The narrator pokes fun at poets, thus distancing himself from Keats and then there are the various characters themselves.

Keats was not very fond of his work in the next poem, *Isabella*. He recognised the Negative Capability that went into his various dramatic personas but found his capacity to "enter fully into the feeling" (Keats, *Selected Letters of John Keats* 352) lacking, this was not the case, he says, with *Lamia*. However, *Isabella* is more dramatic in texture than the former, Li Ou even considers it akin to a Jacobean tragedy (119). This dramatic quality, Li Ou associates it with Negative Capability, reached its height in the next poem, *The Eve of St. Agnes*. Its rich imagery and multiple characters - or rather dramatic Others - give it a cinematic quality. The ending of the poem with Beadsman's death is a form of recontextualisation which "draws attention to its disagreeable background" (Ou 128). The supplementary nature of the Imaginary is very prevalent in this poem as well with the spell and the dream supplement the aforementioned "disagreeable background."

Next in the collection are the ‘Great Odes,’ which are considered to be the pinnacle of Keatsian Romanticism, starting with *Ode to a Nightingale*. Here Keats feels the happiness of the Nightingale and imagines a world far removed from his own. He calls the bird immortal and gives it mythological significance by imbuing it with Classical (“Dryad of the Trees”) and Biblical (“song that found a path/ Through the sad heart of Ruth, when”) connotations. Therefore, Negative Capability and the supplementary Imaginary, for the first time, are the central poetic elements. In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, Keats famously claimed that beauty is truth, as such, truth for Keats is something to be experienced not known which again enforces the Deleuzian quality of Negative Capability, this same sentiment was present in *Chapman* within the aforementioned Travelling/Watching binary. The experience of multiplicity and the Other reaches its greatest heights as Keats conjures the experience of the figures on the Grecian urn and not only experiences their longing but their eternity while also experiencing his own mortality. *Ode to Psyche* captures the supplementarity of the Imaginary in its purest form. Keats here directly addresses the pagan goddess Psyche and uses her to talk about his own thinking while also considering her a proper goddess. The presence of Psyche is thoroughly ambiguous, does it enrich or does it fill in a lack? Keats leaves no answer. The ode *To Autumn* merges the achievements of *Ode to Psyche* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. He does not merely personify Autumn but creates a whole self for it: Autumn sits “[carelessly] on the granary floor”, it sleeps and has hair. He consoles autumn, “Where are the songs of spring? Ay, Where are they?/Think not of them, thou hast thy music too” and feels the mourning of the gnats. This is Negative Capability so diffused within the texture of the poem that there is no other content but itself. The autumn season itself supplements the spring, as the Imaginary Autumn supplements the season it is fashioned after. In these odes Keatsian Romanticism reaches sublimity and perfection.

### Conclusion

This chronological study of Keats’s work offers an alternative reading of Negative Capability as more than just receptive empathy resulting in opposing forces within the text but as a quasi-Deleuzian quality of Keats which allows him to explore the multiplicity of experience and beauty. It also presents the Imaginary as a supplementary presence in Keats’s corpus not as just allusions and literary devices. At first, in the collection *Poems*, these elements are scattered but prevalent and after *Endymion*, particularly in the great odes, these elements are not only central but are the very essence of Keats’s Romanticism.

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