

Faery Lands and Meeting Places: Imagination, Intelligence and Negative Capability in The Poetry of John Keats and Martin Lings

By Adib Faiz

Ever let the Fancy roam,
Pleasure never is at home:
At a touch sweet Pleasure melteth,
Like to bubbles when rain pelteth;
Then let the winged Fancy wander
Through the thought still spread beyond her:
Open wide the mind's cage-door,
She'll dart forth, and cloudward soar.¹

Friends, if in earnest we would travel, let none trust
His fellow for a pilot, but, since go we must
Upon that shoreless ocean beyond fathom deep,
And up that mountain where no summit crowns the steep,
Knowing this night is not our element, yet knowing
None other, let us watch the stars to guide our going.²

Speaking of his years as a student, the late Dr. Martin Lings once remarked, "...I loved the poetry of Keats. Next to Shakespeare, he was one of my favourite poets".³ When comparing the lives and poetry of John Keats and Martin Lings, it is not difficult to see why the latter had an affinity for the works of the former. In the same way that Keats found in Shakespeare "a totally kindred spirit", Lings found in Keats a similar

¹ John Keats, "Fancy," in *Selected Poems and Letters of Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London: Heinemann, 1976), 91, lines 1-8.

² Martin Lings, "The Stars", *Collected Poems* (Cambridge: Archetype, 2002), 22, lines 9-14.

³ *Shakespeare's Spirituality In Perspective: An Interview with Dr. Martin Lings*, produced and directed by Ira B. Ziman. Running time: 2hrs 1 min, 16:00.

soul, one who saw beauty as a means of moving beyond the earthly state to attain something higher.⁴ As poets, the two men shared a characteristic called ‘negative capability’, a theory of authorship conceptualized by Keats and adhered to by Lings. However, their application of this theory was marked by a difference in perspective, with Keats and Lings emphasizing the imaginative and intellectual faculties respectively. This essay seeks to explore the use of negative capability in the poetry of Keats and Lings, highlighting the similarities and differences between their works. After considering each author’s theoretical conception of negative capability, the essay will examine the manifestation of these concepts in two poems, namely Keats’ ‘Ode to a Nightingale’ and Lings’ ‘The Meeting Place’ (the text of Lings’ poem appears at the end this essay). Though the recognition of higher truths through beauty and the quest for transcendence are key themes in both poems, the difference in each speaker’s perspective ultimately leads to differing endings. Rather than examining the poems in isolation, the essay examines how each poem deals with three elements: the recognition of beauty and the longing to overcome separation from it, the negation of the ego and the reception of higher truths, and the possibility – or impossibility – of resolution and transcendence.

A Tale of Two Poets

Though the works of these poets can be compared on a theoretical level, we should note that both men had similar backgrounds and inclinations. Despite being born about a century apart, the lives of Keats and the young Martin Lings bear striking similarities. Both were raised as Anglicans in an age when Christianity was progressively losing its hold over the West. In both periods, there was an increasing dissonance between religious doctrine and the surrounding world’s modern outlook. Both men had more or less rejected the religion of their upbringing, with Lings’ description of Keats paralleling his own state prior to reading Guenon’s books; both possessed “practically no knowledge of Christian doctrine, ... Christian mysticism, ... [or] the lives of the Saints”.⁵ But this rejection of religion was by no means a rejection of spirituality.

⁴ Martin Lings, *Enduring Utterance: Collected Lectures (1993-2001)*, ed. Trevor Banyard (London: Matheson Trust, 2014), 123.

⁵ Lings, *Utterance*, 122.

Keats' objections to Christianity came from his desire for "a grander system of salvation" involving the interaction of "the *Intelligence* ... or Mind", "the *human heart*", and "the *World* or *Elemental space*".⁶ Similarly, Lings' objection to religion was not motivated by a rejection of God - the young man prayed nightly - but due to his impression that "religion offered nothing to ... [his] intelligence".⁷ His reaction was "to make a creed of something else", fashioning for himself "a "religion" of beauty, centered on nature and on art".⁸ As we shall see, the tendency to love beauty, art, and nature for the sake of things above and beyond this world was also an attribute possessed by Keats, who perceived all these elements as various openings onto something greater.

Negative capability

Keats' theory revolves around the concept of 'negative capability', which he observed in Shakespeare and strove to achieve in his own writing. Negative capability is inextricably linked to the pursuit of truth and loving "the principle of beauty in all things".⁹ For Keats, "a great poet" is one for whom "the sense of beauty overcomes all consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration".¹⁰ Keats' choice of the word 'obliterate' is telling, for it indicates that the pursuit of beauty demands a form of effacement. This involves emptying the egoistical self - the self rooted in one's own earthly desires - in order to make room for the reception of the truth via one's 'imagination' "without any irritable reaching after fact and reason", and to consequently manifest that truth in the form of beautiful and enduring art.¹¹ Hence, the total effacement of the egoistical self can only result in the reception of absolute Truth - that is, an underlying universal and perennial principle - which consequently allows the poet to create an "immortal work" of beauty.¹² Keats memo-

⁶ John Keats, "To George and Georgiana Keats, Wednesday [21 April 1819]," in *Selected Poems and Letters of Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (London: Heinemann, 1976), 117, sic.

⁷ *Perspective*, 4:26 - 6:20; "Martin Lings - Conflict Between Science & Religion," Matheson Trust2, *Vimeo*, video, March 11, 2011, 2:00. <https://vimeo.com/20915656>.

⁸ Martin Lings, *A Return To The Spirit: Questions and Answers* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2005), 2.

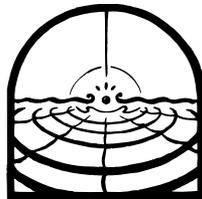
⁹ John Keats, 'Letter from John Keats to Fanny Brawn, February 1820,' in *The Letters of John Keats*, Vol ii, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge: MA, 1958). 263.

¹⁰ John Keats, 'Letter from John Keats to George and Tom Keats, 21 December 1817 (extract),' *Romanticism: An Anthology*, ed. Duncan Wu (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 1405.

¹¹ Keats "George and Tom" 1405.

¹² Keats "Brawn" 263.

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