

Keats's Negative Capability: Parallel Concepts in Derrida's Theory of Deconstruction

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ABSTRACT

Among the romantics, Keats due to his anti-dogmatic stand approximates postmodernism. Postmodernism denies theological signification to a text and prefers a sceptic stand towards all the established conventions and hierarchies. Keats too in his letters dealing with the negative capability and poetical character denies certainties and fixities by preferring to be in a state of half-knowledge. According to him, a poet should be equally receptive to contradictory experiences without siding with any one of them. It is through participation in opposites that a poet can sharpen his sensibility and save himself from becoming an egotist. This opposition of preconceived ideas, stressing on doubts and mysteries, participation in all types of experience and negation of identity to self brings negative capability close to deconstruction. The paper attempts to discuss the theories of Negative Capability and Deconstruction in detail and explores if any affinities exist between the two.

KEYWORDS

Negative Capability; Deconstruction; Derrida; Keats.

Keats's letters of Negative Capability and Poetical Character in which he regards the mind of a poet as free from any pre-meditated philosophy and receptivity to all types of experience of life even the contrastive ones draw our attention towards the deconstructive enterprise. The paper attempts to examine if Keats's theory of negative capability paves the way for Post Structuralist Deconstructive paradigm, which prefers ambiguity, scepticism, incoherence, discontinuity, unpredictability, and heterogeneity and rejects authoritarianism, absolutism, determinism and dogmatism. It discusses in detail the two theories of Negative Capability and Deconstruction and explores if any parallelism exists between the two.

Negative Capability

Keats used the phrase 'Negative Capability' for the first time in his letter to George and Tom Keats, written on 21, 27 December 1817. Later on, he referred to it in certain other letters including the one which

deals with the observation of Dilke's character. For him, it stands for a mental state in which a "man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 43). Keats discovered this quality first in Charles Wentworth Dilke, his Hamstead neighbour. But it was through the Study of Shakespeare that Keats drew inspiration for cultivating it in his works.

In his letter of 17-27 September 1819, addressed to George Keats, Keats describes Dilke's character, calling him "a Man who cannot feel he has a personal identity unless he has made up his Mind about everything" (Keats 326) and one who will "never come at a truth as long as he lives; because he is always trying at it" (Keats 326). Keats finished "Endymion" in December 1817. The letters written during the composition of the poem show that all those days Keats had been profoundly devoted to the studies of Shakespeare. As a result of these studies, Keats

gradually dissociated himself from Wordsworth and his egotism.

In his letter to Reynolds from Burford Bridge, Keats wrote on 22nd November:

One of the three books I have with me is Shakespeare's Poems: I ne'er (never) found so many beauties in the sonnets – they seem to be full of fine things said unintentionally – in the intensity of working out conceits. Is this to be borne? Hark ye! (Keats 40).

This remark gives us a keen insight into the excited workings of Keats's mind. He was now driven toward the inherent qualities of Shakespeare's character. He held that poetry should not moralize or philosophize about life. He advocated pure poetry devoid of didacticism. This is evident in his letter of 3rd February 1818 in which he questions Reynolds:

For the sake of a few fine imaginative or domestic passages, are we to be bullied into a certain Philosophy engendered in the whims of an Egotist... We hate poetry that has a palpable design upon us (Keats 60-61).

This contrast between the Wordsworthian and Shakespearean character gave birth to his theory of Negative Capability.

Keats further expands the idea of 'Negative Capability' in his letter of 27 October 1818 written to Woodhouse. He writes,

As to the poetical character itself...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 chameleon poet (Keats 157).

The "Poetical Character" as enunciated by Keats in the above-quoted letter is that which has no identity of its own that can surpass its imaginative faculty and leaves an impression of its identity on what the imagination conceives.

For Keats, a poet is both receptive and chameleon. Unlike Wordsworth's, his voice is neither central nor dominant. The true poet is one who has nothing to impart but is gifted

with the capacity to subdue his own personality. He should be able to project himself into others' identities and actively participate in all types of experiences of life – fair or foul. He wrote to Richard Woodhouse on 27 October 1818,

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 (for so) press upon me that, I am in a very little time annihilated (Keats 158).

This poetical gift of self-annihilation which enables an artist to accept the opposites (the paradoxes and contradictions) of life does not allow the poet to remain egocentric.

Keats says that a poet who has no identity is certainly

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 (Keats 157).

Keats agrees with Hazlitt that a poet always remains impartial and never sides with the good or the evil. The moral sense of good and evil is not pertinent for dramatic composition. Referring to the moral sense Keats writes,

Though a quarrel in the streets is a thing to be hated, the energies displayed in it are fine; the commonest Man shows a grace in his quarrel – By a superior being our reasoning(s) may take the same tone – though erroneous they may be fine (Keats 230).

Keats's ideal as a poet was the impersonality of genius in art. He was convinced that fascination of mystery in other things and a sympathetic identification with them by the power of self-absorption in the objects around him were more greatly needed by a poet than his private self. Keats wrote to Bailey,

I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness – I look not for it if it be not in the present hour – nothing startles me beyond the Moment. The setting sun

will always set me to rights – or if a Sparrow comes before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel (Keats 38).

A great poet is never interested in reason and deliberate efforts but sympathetically absorbs himself in the essentiality of his object.

Referring to Dilke's character, Keats wrote to George Keats, "The 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 "(Keats 326). Keats believed that a poet should imbibe the impressions as they come to him without trying to impose upon them anything from his own self. This can be done only when one leaves one's ego apart and participates impartially in the act of creation. The capacity to make the mind free from the various impressions that fall upon it continually and to make it receptive to every kind of human experience whether joy or sorrow is the measure, according to Keats, of the poetic strength. Keats specifically writes,

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 (Keats 66).

Poetry in Keats's view has its origin in sense impressions. The work of a poet, according to him, is totally creative. In a letter to Hessey, dated 8 October 1818, he wrote, "The Genius of poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself" (Keats 156). Keats disapproves of straining after fact and reason. Keats held that the sensations should be intense and sufficiently varied. This is what he means when he says, "Poetry should surprise (us) by a fine excess and not by Singularity" (Keats 69). The intense and varied sensations can be created through the high imaginative process and only by a pure poet who possesses Negative Capability.

Deconstruction

Jacques Derrida, a French Philosopher, changed the course of literary criticism by

questioning the Structuralist's notions of centre, unity, identity and signification. In his paper entitled "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences", presented at the John Hopkins University in 1966, Derrida interrogates the nitty-gritty of Structuralism as laid down by Ferdinand De Saussure and Claude Levi-Strauss. Derrida in his revolutionary paper attacked the traditional and structuralist paradigms focusing on the underlying structures and systems, which provide stability to a text. Derrida initiated his discussion on Deconstruction from Saussure's concept of the relationship between a signifier and a signified. According to Ferdinand De Saussure, linguistic signs consist of a signifier and a signified. A signifier has no inherent and logical relationship with its signified. Meanings are arbitrarily and conventionally associated with the signs. Contrary to Saussure's notion of arbitrariness of signs, Western metaphysics assigns transcendental signification to them. According to Western metaphysical ideas, signifieds are permanently associated with signifiers as they are the words of God (Logos). This logocentric conception of signifiers attaches absolutism and permanence to signifieds. Derrida challenges the logocentric notion of finality and metaphysical signification and regards signifiers in a constant state of flux and fickleness as their interpretation depends on the context in which they are used. Meanings are context-dependent and are used in relation to other signs in a syntagmatic relationship. Hence the interpretation of a sign is an exercise in movement along the horizontal chain where the search for a meaning of a signifier never reaches the stage of finality but takes us to another signifier. Since linguistic signs are used in different contexts, they cannot have a single transcendental meaning.

According to Derrida, signifiers achieve their signification through their opposition with the other signifiers. Further, meanings are deferred infinitely as a context refers to another context and, in this way, defers the assignment of a fixed meaning. Derrida coined the term 'defferance' to include both 'differ' and 'defer'. Derrida believes that like signifiers, a text too is not an absolute and

transcendental entity as it is full of contradictions, paradoxes, ambiguities, allusiveness and metaphors. The metaphoricality and the contextuality always postpone a text to reach a final meaning and make its interpretation indeterminate. Derrida believes that the use of the sign is never perfect. We use a sign under compulsion as no better sign is available to us. Hence every sign leaves a 'trace' and is used under 'erasure'. A sign is used and at the same time, it is erased as it is inadequate.

In his "Of Grammatology," Derrida discards the traditional metaphysical concept of the priority of speech over writing. Philosophers from Plato, Aristotle to Saussure and Claude Levi-Strauss believe that speech is primary because of its substantial existence and concreteness than orthographic expression, which they think, is a manifestation of spoken word and therefore is only a signifier of the signified. These philosophers hold speech to be physical, authentic and truthful than writing, which they regard as unsubstantial and abstract. These philosophers have regarded the priority of speech over writing as phonocentrism. Since these philosophers also assign transcendental authority to signs, Derrida calls logocentrism as phonocentrism.

Derrida regards the traditional concept as a vulgar concept and shifts to graphocentrism by emphasizing the importance of writing. However, in the 'Derridian' sense 'writing' is not merely confined to orthography. It has a wider connotation and implies 'difference', 'trace', and 'arch-writing'. Linguistic signs receive significance through their difference from one another. The meanings of the signs are also deferred as like the grafting of different coloured roses on the mother rose plant, different references and contexts are grafted on the mother text to defer its meaning endlessly. These contexts defer the meaning of a text endlessly and leave a trace, which is never filled. The function of deconstruction is to show the different shades and colours, which diffuse from a text on which they are grafted.

Before Derrida, Structuralists regarded a text as a finished and final corpus having a

centre to control the whole. They regarded a text as a symmetrical and unified whole due to its cohesiveness and coherence. Derrida holds the opposite view and regards a text as acentric and asymmetrical. According to him, a text has no centre to control its content and direct it towards a particular goal. In the absence of a core, its meaning diffuses in different directions and remains open to infinite interpretations. Derrida writes in "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences, Writing and Difference":

The centre had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play . . . in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse – provided we can agree on this word – that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely (Rice and Waugh 151-152).

The task of a critic is not to take the printed words as definite end signifieds but they are traces which only give hints towards the direction and the path of exploration which when pursued leads us to further traces. Thus, every sign is used and at the same time is erased as the definite signification of a text is not possible. All the practice in deconstruction is to demonstrate the indeterminacy of a text by unravelling the contradictions, paradoxes and oppositions inherent in it. A deconstructionist explores the metaphoricality and literariness of a text that extends its meaning indefinitely as there are texts within a text and this intertextuality compels a reader to read many more texts from which various references, allusions and citations have been used. According to Rice and Waugh,

Deconstruction is a twofold strategy of, on the one hand, uncovering and undoing logocentric rationality and on the other, drawing attention to the language of the text, to its figurative

and rhetorical gestures and pointing up the text's existence in a web of textuality, in a network of signifiers where no final and transcendental signified can be fixed (Rice and Waugh 148).

A practitioner of deconstruction challenges the traditional notion of a text by deconstructing the traditional hierarchies and preferences on which a text is built and shows how the ignored and the marginal contradict the main text.

A deconstructionist foregrounds the marginal elements of a text by demonstrating how marginality constitutes the main text. Deconstruction explores the dynamic nature of linguistic signs and investigates the plurality and multiplicity of their interpretations as the repetition of signs in different contexts assigns them different connotations. However, the movement towards other texts, in order to comprehend the meaning of a text, ultimately proves to be a mirage and an endless activity as it leads us to further and further interpretations. Even the contextual meaning is not fixed and is deferral as even contexts are embedded within a context and any attempt to describe a context yields a new context.

A deconstructionist questions the absolute knowledge and challenges the conventionally established ideas, which have been assigned transcendental signification by arriving at just the opposite results. According to Professor Mohit K. Ray,

The best way to deconstructive criticism is to start on the New Critical line, identify the mechanics of coherence and unity in the light of New Criticism and then turn round and point out the gaps in the argument, the lacunae, the elements of wishful thinking and thus turn against the text itself (Ray2002: 200).

Negative Capability: Parallel Concepts in the Theory of Deconstruction

Keats was a romantic to the core. According to him, poetry should come "naturally as the leaves to a tree" (Keats 70). He always passionately longed for "a life of sensations rather than of thoughts" (Keats 37). He believed that truth does not lie in science

and philosophical reasoning, but in art. In art, the aim is not as in science to solve the problems and arrive at the final results but rather to explore them. In the endeavour to explore the problems, an artist only approximates them. Keats's romantic leanings and cravings for the individual freedom and life of sensations anticipate deconstructive concepts of undecidability, readerly text and intertextuality.

In defining the role of a poet in the creative process, Keats wrote, in one of his letters to James Augustus Hessey:

The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man: It cannot be matured by law and precept, but by sensation and watchfulness in itself – That which is creative must create itself. (Keats 156).

Keats's advocacy for openness and receptivity to various types of experiences for a poet chimes well with Derrida's concepts of indeterminacy of meaning and free play. In his letter of 13 March 1818 written to Bailey, Keats writes:

I am sometimes so very skeptical as to think Poetry itself a mere Jack a lantern to amuse whoever may chance to be struck with its brilliance – As a Tradesman say everything is worth what it will fetch, so probably every mental pursuit takes its reality and worth from the ardour of the pursuer – being in itself a nothing ... (Keats 73).

Keats opposed any logical reasoning by a poet and regarded perception and intuition as the main tools of a poet. Even when Keats regards Beauty as identical to Truth, the Truth he talks about is the one, which is reached through perception and not through logical reasoning. In November 1817, Keats wrote to Bailey: "I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination – what the imagination seizes as Beauty must be the truth – whether it existed before or not" (Keats 36-37). A year later Keats wrote to his brother George, "I never can feel certain of any truth but from a clear perception of its Beauty" (Keats 187). In his definition of Negative Capability Keats very

clearly stated that he is always haunted by “uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats 43). To remain in an uncertain and sceptic state of mind is a gift for a poet as it keeps him away from reaching any finality and conclusion.

According to Professor Rajnath, “Deconstruction envisages a state of mind in which diametrically opposed and irreconcilable ideas exist simultaneously with no possibility of a synthesis which can lead to certainties. Although Keats does not talk about irreconcilable ideas, uncertainties presume such a situation, while reason removes uncertainties to arrive at certitudes” (Rajnath 15, 16).

Keats was against any moral stance and final position in poetry. He denies fixities, certainties and absolutism to a poetical character that according to him should not take any moral and personal stand but rather remains passive and receptive. He wrote to his brother George (17-27 September 1819): “The 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” (Keats 326).

A Poetical character, according to Keats, should remain inconsistent and rejoices in paradoxical, antithetical, heterogeneous and various conflicting attitudes towards life, which keep him away from acquiring any definite identity and personality and consequently becoming an egotist. Like the poetical character of Keats, a text for Derrida is a heterogeneous entity without any fixed centre to control and assign itself meaning. For want of a centre, a text becomes a polylexical entity and a reader has to endlessly engage himself in a pursuit to find out the intended meaning of the text which he is never able to capture as instead he finds contexts and traces which constantly modify the meaning and indefinitely delay a text from reaching any definite identity and metaphysics.

Keats came out heavily on Wordsworth for being didactic and Shelley for being idealistic. Keats’s opposition to dogmatism and reaching after finality in poetry is echoed in Derrida’s deconstruction, which denies any finality and fixity to the meaning of a text. For

Derrida, the meaning of a text is undecidable, indeterminate and illusory. A text cannot be tied down to a fixed meaning as various contexts or ‘traces’ play upon its meaning and extends it indefinitely. When Keats was referring to Dilke’s character by calling him a man who “will never come at a truth as long as he lives; because he is always trying at it”, (Keats 326) he refers to an uncertain, mysterious and skeptical state of mind that distances a person from reaching a particular philosophy and truth. As Keats denies philosophical and moral limits to a text so Derrida denies any transcendental signification to it.

According to Derrida, in both scientific and poetic texts, words are phonocentric and depend for their interpretation on the contexts in which they are used. The readers engage themselves in the endless game of guessing the intent of the writer, which ultimately proves to be an illusion. Keats believes that by allowing himself to various types of contrastive experiences like pleasure and pain, rich or poor, high or low, mean or elevated, a poet schools his intelligence. These dichotomies keep a poet away from reaching a final philosophy. As Derrida denies a final meaning to a text so Keats opposes a poet to reach any final philosophy or knowledge, which would make him a propagandist rather than a poet. Bernard Blackstone writes,

For Keats’s is the philosophy of no-philosophy, the doctrine of the undocinaire. For him, years could never bring the philosophic mind. Truth is neither an accumulation nor a progressive understanding; truth opens out from moment to moment, and what is true today may not be true tomorrow, and what is true for one man may not be true for another. (Bernard Blackstone 257).

Roland Barthes in his essay “Death of the Author” revolts against the deification of the author and assigning divine authority to his words. According to him, as soon as a text is released, the author is dead and the reader is born to interpret it. The death of the author relieves a text from authority. Barthes distinguishes between ‘writerly text’ and a

'readerly text' and opines that a text is an endless play of signifiers upon which a reader has to work to discover its meaning which he is never able to accomplish as a text refers to another text. This 'indeterminacy' and 'undecidability' of meaning in a text has a close resemblance to Keats's 'negative capability' and 'poetical character', which too are against assigning any fixed and absolute identity and personality to a poet.

Like the exponents of Deconstruction and Reader-Response Theory, Keats objected to reaching after any philosophical goal and motive. Keats's preference for remaining in

the state of "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts" (Keats 43) rather than "reaching after fact and reason" (Keats 43) echoes the deconstructive programme of Barthes and Derrida. Just as the exponents of Deconstruction and Reader-Response Criticism deny any identity to a text, Keats denies any personality and identity to a poet. Keats's poetical character "is the most unpoetical of anything in existence" (Keats 157). It is receptive, flexible and open-ended and participates in all types of experience – even of the opposite nature and sides neither with one of them. Consequently, it never arrives at the final results but ends in guesses.

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