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John Keats and the Sensevil Sublime

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Abstract

This essay is divided into two sections. In the first, I argue the conditions for the Keatsean *Sensevil Sublime*, drawing upon adequate resources from political (Hobbesian) and aesthetic categories (Longinus, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant) to showcase the expansions and limitations of this Sublimity. A close-reading of "This Living hand, now warm and capable" (Written approximately in December, 1819, published posthumously, 1898) will enhance the literariness of my argument. Gradual difference, and deference from the 'sensible', the most recognizable Romantic characteristic of Keatsean poetry, is observed when the agencies of comprehension, ideological subjectiveness and moral superiority are conflated with Burkean, psycho-spiritual terror and its Longinian equivalent in simplicity, nobility and rhetoric. In the final section, the aforementioned sublime, evolving within putrefying sensibility against the ideological implications of the Wordsworthian egotistical sublime through de-personification of the ego and its somatocentric repositioning, shall be utilized in unearthing the potential of Keats's less-researched *sensevil* sonnet, "Why did I laugh tonight? No voice can tell", terminating in the generalization of such features and its specific contribution to the larger Romantic repository of the Keatsean sublime vis-à-vis Wordsworth.

Keywords: : Keats, Burke, Sublimity, Poetry, Sense.

On 23rd August 1820, John Keats addressed an epistle to Fanny Keats which, amongst other things, makes explicit the maleficence of the mind, and its correlation with the body – a psycho-somatic complex bearing more effect in ill-health than sound, marking the culmination of his interrelationship with the dynamics of sense:

> Do not suffer your Mind to dwell on unpleasant reflections – that sort of thing has been the destruction of my health – Nothing is so bad as want of health – it makes one envy

> scavengers and…There are enough real distresses and evils in wait for everyone to try the most vigorous health. Not that I would say yours are not real – but they are such as to tempt you to employ your Imagination on them, rather than endeavour to dismiss them entirely. (Gittings ed., 391-92, capitalizations not mine)

Keats confesses that his tuberculosis, which he unsuccessfully de-pathologizes, generalizing it under a broader rubric to escape the stigma of being a patient by universalizing the human condition ("destruction of my health"), was, from a non-diagnostic point of view, the product of "unpleasant reflections", which could either refer to the overarching nature of reflections enforcing permanent unease by deferring the absolute triumph of complete subjectivity/objective magnitude or the particular nature of this "reflection" contested against "pleasant reflection(s)" which, although undefined, is probably so for its Utopic *telos*. Whether the mind *might* be held responsible for the destruction of his health is, I think, a more pertinent question here, since the parenthetical connotation would suggest otherwise; It is possible that the euphemistic *beraten* justifies the possibility that the destruction of his "Mind" is the consequence of the suffering of his "body", or his "sense" (I shall use them interchangeably from this point onwards) that had contorted, or convulsed upon receiving unpleasant stimuli, and memorized its ramifications neurologically. This euphemism modifies itself into another less indirect *via negativa*where the parenthetical addresses (excesses?) nothing but health, which is the body in its abstract, philosophical sense.The two presences – first, the physical body itself (health in its most concrete, un-ill sense, when negatively defined) and next, the metaphysical presence of this body (the transcendent health, so to speak), therefore, takes precedence over the uni-dimensional, psychic motif – a Keatsean *différance* that temporalizes the logocentrism of the Romantic "mind", or more precisely, as I shall demonstrate, the Wordsworthian mind.[1] This is aggravated

by Keats's denunciation of "real distresses and evils" –another counterpoint to the anteriority of the mind. The objectivity of the object, the bodi-ness of the body, the sensibility of the sense is posited as the new subjective which is neither subject-obsessed, object-obsessed nor even objectively obsessed in the strict sense; instead, it is subjectively obsessed *sans* the subject, hence any subject except the individuating one–a Keatsean subversion of Wordsworth which is better recognized as *negative capability*. While I shall elaborate later upon the political aesthetic that "evils" imply with reference to sense, the subjectivity of a hyperobject pertains to the 'Sublime', in as much as an inflated hypersubject is vulnerable to the objectification commonly attributed to the 'Positive Sublime' which Wordsworth standardizes (logo-centralizes?) as the summit of that Romantic "mind", and which Keats negatively dis-accepts instead of rejecting, in a letter to Richard Woodhouse on 27th October 1818:

> As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am anything, I am a Member; that sort *distinguished* from the Wordsworthian [sic] or egotistical sublime; which is a thing *per se* and stands alone) 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 (Gittings ed., 157, italics mine)

Distinguished, but not different. The Keatsian "poetical Character" then, is anti-Wordsworthian and 'Sublime', which cannot be, for its trans-subjectivity is a product of the anxiety of Wordsworthian (mis)-influence.[2] Nor, as I speculate, is it qualified for the adage, 'Wordsworthian and anti-sublime', as Keats argues for the selflessness of the self, or in other words, the un-self-conscious "poetical character" of the self which deconstructs *introjecting* alone instead of standing alone. In continuation with this line of thought, its character-less-ness is, nevertheless, a "sublime" character, and the Keatsean anxiety of Wordsworthian influence

makes it more Wordsworthian than the egotistical sublime, except that its logocentricity supplements by exposing the limitations of egocentricity – a rupture powerfully assessed by Keats and analysed by Frederick Garber.[3] Counter-egocentricity is not counter-Sublime, and certainly not counter-Wordsworthian, and this is where Keatsean monstrosity breeds, where poet introjects poet, and the accretion of somatocentric Sublime begins, but how? I propose that it enthuses (synonymous with gusto in this context) itself by employing two methods:

a) *Depersonalizing the 'egotistical'*: The resource, as well as the methodology for this process, exists in the implicative dualism of "everything and nothing", where egotistical absolutes cannot be, but the Sublime cannot but be. This conjunction does not predicate the object anymore, as the no "thing" no longer implies the absolute subreptive potential of the individuating 'I'. Depersonalization involves a Universal ethical imperative that deconstructs the subject "self", also estranging the emphasis on the "subjective", or the subjectivity of the self. Counter emphasis on the anti-ego dominates, as Keats violently drags away egotistical logocentricity to its somatocentric equivalent – a classic example, I reiterate, of the Wordsworthian parergon where Keatsean sublime germinates.[4]

b) *Repositioning the Sublime*: This involves theoretical readjustment of the top-heavy mannerisms of the egotistical version, substituting it with the bottom-heavy, elevated and elastic sense in all its variations – an all-inclusive participation that does not renounce putrefied sense (recall Keats's earlier reference to distress and evil) so long as it fulfils sublime purposiveness. It is naturally meant to disrupt the Sublime's natural inclination towards monotheistic subjectivity by complicating its itinerary between inclination (towards absolute ego) and aversion (towards complete sense, its chief defence being pluralizations, led by objects), creating a case for enforced (dis)inclination that leads to tolerable aversion – a trajectory which would become,

ultimately, the landmark for the Keatsean Sublime. It would encourage “foul” over “fair”, “low” over “high”, “poor” over “rich” and “mean” over “elevated” without discarding its projected opposite altogether. How is such a possibility to be theorized?

This essay is divided into two sections. In first, I argue the conditions for the Keatsean *Sensevil Sublime*, drawing upon adequate resources from political (Hobbesian) and aesthetic categories (Longinus, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant) to showcase the expansions and limitations of this Sublimity. A close reading of "This Living hand, now warm and capable" (Written approximately in December 1819, published posthumously, 1898) will enhance the literariness of my argument.[5] In the final section, the aforementioned sublime shall be utilized in unearthing the potential of Keats’s less-researched yet *sensevil* sonnet, “Why did I laugh tonight? No voice can tell”, terminating in the generalization of such features and its specific contribution to the larger Romantic repository of the Keatsian sublime vis-à-vis Wordsworth.

I

Keats’s engagement with Wordsworth has been of moderate conceptual importance to scholars across the twentieth century, although much has been discerned historically, to the point of discovering his myriad allusions to Wordsworth’s epic poem, *The Excursion* as well as through Hazlitt, Hunt and Haydon.[6] This would, I think, become pivotal in the sensualisation of his plea to Fanny (from a personal point of view) and a re-textualization of the Sublime:[7]

> This living hand, now warm and capable
> Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
> And in the icy silence of the tomb,
> So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights (Edmund Blunden ed., pp. 364, ll. 1-4)

One surmises that Keats's apparition attempts to communicate from the grave, although the demonstrative "This" would not only add concreteness to the physicality of this physical "living hand", but also question whether the presentness of the present in "This" and "now" marks the gravity of rhetorical space between Life, and the microsecond which succeeds life-heat, before transitioning into loss of life-heat, thus thawing, I would presume, infinitely, concrete, unimaginative life into congealed, semi-living (hence partially dying) imagination. What is "warm" derives its capability from warmth, but this leads to another natural paradox – is the capability to be appropriated by the adverbial "now" which, in truth, validates the demonstrative value of physicality, or should it belong to the adjectival "warm" whose noun has been deferred by the conjunction "and", residing in the hinterland of meaning, separated by the preceding comma? The conditional "If" creates the necessary opposition between "warm" and "cold", but what it accomplishes, in reality, is the deference of concrete meaning, "now" suspended amongst physicality, presentness, congealment and death, aggravated even further by the Germanic origins of the English "earnest", alluding to the "grave", both literally and figuratively (seriousness, etc.).[8] "Grasping" becomes an ambiguous activity, as it symbolizes concrete presentness no longer, but the absent, apparitional present, the dying, the dead-ly, whose radical extreme would be, in the words of Paul De Man, the "frozen world of the dead" (854).

Ambiguity, however repelling, has always been the perpetual abode of the Sublime. When Keats utters the (high, since it occurs in the middle of the sentence, but lacking anterior or posterior sublimity, it has to weigh its entire sublimity on that line instead)Sublime line, "And in the icy silence of the tomb", one is drawn into an enclosure where physicality transcends, and abstracts itself from the physical by bifurcating the body into two portions: one that glaciates itself *within* the body, (hence the bodily, or the false consciousness of the body Universalized) and the other

which transcends *without* the body (clearing one enclosure, so to say), only to be trapped in another enclosure – the tomb. This parergonic Sublimity (icy, infinite silence), then, never escapes the larger system of bodies, and therefore is sublime (because it is, conceptually speaking, its own finiteness and infinity, doubly tombed in the paronomasiac "icy", silenced by the cacophony of transmigrating souls that reposition sensual responses from body to body, draped in the living spirit of death) without ever being non-sensual – counterproductive to the disinterestedness of aesthetic mediums.[9] Transitioning into Classical Sublimity, from this point onwards, becomes inevitable, as one diurnal movement (or a circular series, whichever is more applicable), irreversibly, transforms into an apparitional, psycho-physiological nightmare (" haunt thy days"), compounded firmly with affirmative verbs retaining their positions within the sentence. The near-synonymity between "haunt" and "chill" deserves speculation –while haunting at daytime is imaginatively far-fetched, the coldness of the night is mildly deferred through its dream; Dreaming, in this context, represents alleviation from waking nightmares, and Keats, albeit remarkably, ensures the un-repressibility of the repress-able by doubling down on it, but this obscure metaphor can be explained by the continuity (dream-ing), the simultaneity of apparitional reinforcement. Visual "chill" haunts before the physical sensation of "chill" absorbs, transforming its circumambient terror by relocating the transcendental permanently, within the *korper*, or the corporal. To a large extent then, the psycho-physiological terror of the Sublime is a reconfiguration of the Burkean treatise on obscurity and the Sublime.[10] The Iambic beat of its pentameter re-emphasizes the compulsive repetition of haunting, aided by the pluralized "day" and "night", forcing one to question if the waking and its ingrained dream-content ever ends or, philosophically speaking, whether the transcendental shall occupy the ethereal realm post-release, by the body. Heightening this complexity further, Keats writes:

That thou would[st] wish thine own heart dry of blood,

So in my veins red life might stream again, (5-6)

The wish – more precisely, the desire for wish-fulfilment introjects, from "thine" to "my", followed by the transferred epithet "red life" which implies, symbolically, that such introjection has taken place. Keats is unafraid of facing the situational, psycho-physiological paradox of one's heart drained "dry of blood", perhaps best realized by the poet's application of rhetoric through "thou", "thine" and "own", signifying dispossession, but also signifying how it plays a crucial role in spiritualizing the 'Subject' in question (hence the paradox: the need to die to live better, axiomatic), and how transplantation of life-blood in another (repossession within a hyper-subject, the Poet)serves its proper disposal by preserving the corporeality of another – the one tasked with poetry, not prosodic, or metrical embellishment. I argue that Keats's argument, in this fragment, is a re-definition of Poetry, where its actual cause is repressed, sublimated and presented in the cloak of ideal love, and its fundamental investigations, an amplification akin to the Longinian Sublime.[11] The afore-mentioned introjection is reiterated through the aquatic metaphor symbolized by "stream", which, although reinstating the transfusion metaphor, maintains a disinterested, if not obscure distance from the psycho-spiritual event through "might", resonating the Burkean dilemma. The poet's dead-ness cannot be absolute as its elevation, through the introjectable 'idea', remains incomplete, and cannot be completed until life is restored, deficiency of the corporeal sublime addressed and its moral adjudication set in order, for the wish would devolve into gratification if not compressed and rehabilitated alongside the moral imperative of the universe. Keats presses on to this deficiency towards the final section of the fragment:

And thou be conscience-calmed – see here it is –

I hold it towards you.

In compliance with the argument above, the return/retreat into "thou" is successful, since the Poet has resurrected from his grave, both literally and morally – literally, as blood circulation ensures the movement of his hands, demonstrated both persuasively ("see here it is"), as if the unbelievable perceptive experience ("see") forces the former's mind (syntactical alteration; action verb occupying the subject's position) to engage sublime aggregate(s) corporeally, but also appreciate the intellectual re-purposiveness of resurrection. What deserves further attention is Keats's anthropomorphized hand, parenthetically expressed/located, in order to maintain Burkean obscurity amongst the apparitional, human and divine. Moral valuation may be represented through his phrase "conscience-calmed", where it exposes, I think, the former subject's incapacity in sustaining conscience-storms, which, according to Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Judgement*, is hopelessly Sublime.[12] The fact that the dead, the ghastly must re-assume human form at the expense of his effete counterpart for communicating the importance of Sublime pedagogy to nescient, human subjects calms their conscience, for resurrective corporeality of the dead living has taught it, to the benefit or malefit of the living dead. What else could have crept in during metempsychosis is a hierarchy of values; when the poet writes "I hold it (the hand) towards you", it is a foretold circumlocution of "I have found your weakness *for* you" and "I will moralize it for you". Thus, the moral superiority of the resurrected individual is established; making perception an imaginative tool for the intellect is construed to be thoroughly Kantian, and thoroughly Sublime.[13] The finality of punctuation in the fragment emphasizes the completion of its moral imperative – the creative and redemptive possibilities of a Sublimity reared within the bounds of the body, through the admissibility of self vis-à-vis transfusion of life-blood for conducting sublime pedagogies, assuming moral superiority but also ensuring it is

"held out", or abstracted accordingly. This too, by way of a conclusion, raises two questions as we near the theorization of sublime sense:

The transfusion metaphor is problematic since unsustainable, derivative physicality harvested from the fragmentary status of Keats's piece, or the educated guess that physical transfusion of any kind, even when poetically divined, is ecclesiastically deemed deficient, and anything less than absolute saturation is of questionable quality – hence the apprehension that red life "might" flow again, albeit temporarily. While sublimity compensates for the limited threshold of sense by awakening the infinite, the paradox of sublimity em-bodying itself within the sense, or the absolute claiming any credibility *inside* the apparent is a cause for theoretic concern. It is possible that Keats internalized the philosophical axiom that sensuality acts as an unstable, infinitely regressive and ultimately deconstructive repository of the Sublime, being evil *because* of its deficiency, innate or transfusive, as Thomas Aquinas would firmly propose in 'On Evil':

> People have said that good insofar as it is deficient causes evil. But every deficiency has the nature of evil. Therefore, if good insofar as it is deficient causes evil, it follows that good causes evil insofar as good already has within itself some evil…therefore, either there is an *infinite regression*, or we will need to trace the cause of evil to a first evil, or we will need to say that good as such causes evil. (Davies ed., 68, emphasis mine)

More concerning is the elemental putrefaction of sense –not only is sublimity, according to Keats, housed in a body with transfused blood not its own, but the balance between ideological worth and sensual enforcement is also mildly tipped in favour of the latter through the evocation of apparitions, not angels, hauntings instead of divine visitations, souls entrapped within bodies, entrapped in tombs and what not. Despite the evocation of the Sublime, sensual overweight is caused by a diabolical pact between standard and putrefied sense which just about upholds the

elevational overtones, or so the Poet would make us believe, for the subject's individual worth forces the reader to look beyond the micro-morality contested between good and evil – another politico-philosophical revelation prosodically introjected by Keats, possibly from the sixth chapter of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651):

> For these words of good, evil, and contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: there being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the person of the man (Serjeantson ed., 43)

What then, in Keats's 'This living hand, now warm and capable, could be connoted as the Sensevil Sublime? It is created in difference, and in deference with the 'Sensible' which, when compelled to co-exist with the Supersensible, deconstructs meanings by propagating, first, the paradoxical manifestation of the Self within the body which cannot be, yet despite this temporalizing, secondly, ensures that it holds steadfast to the sublime, now a fragmentary absolute, by overweighing it through a compound of sense and putrefied sense that reasonably defers the sensible by creating its necessary illusion of the ideological absolute, fulfilling the broad conditions of the Sublime, albeit fragmentarily. This theorization is a unique addition to the negative aspect of the Romantic Sublime instituted by Thomas Weiskel in *The Romantic Sublime*, and I shall, in the next section, briefly argue how the sensevil sublime metamorphoses from its *status quo* as a fragmentary absolute to the confines of sonnet-symbolism and sublimity in 'Why did I laugh tonight? No voice can tell'(1819).

II

> "Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those grimaces called *Laughter*, and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension

> of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves" (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 46)

Between February and May 1819, John Keats wrote a series of letters to George and Georgiana Keats where, in the midst of enquiring about their well-being, contemplating poetic principles, imaginative worth and indolence, he chanced upon some reflections on pleasure, and the threshold of laughter in the paraphernalia of existence:

> This is the world – thus we cannot expect to give way many hours to pleasure – circumstances are like clouds continually gathering and bursting –While we are laughing the seed of some trouble is put into the wide arable land of events – while we are laughing it sprouts is [*for* it] grows and suddenly bears a poison fruit which we must pluck – Even so we have the leisure to reason on the misfortunes of our friends; our own touch us too nearly for words. (Gittings ed., 228, editor's emphasis)

Part of the jinx, one surmises, is the notification that laughter probably, and expectedly is, an expression of pleasure which it may choose not to be, and yet mental expectation pre-empts the actualization of pleasure, partially because expectations are psychologicalpre-figurations, metaphorical/metaphysical ruptures, time-bound, channelized releases of "our world" into "the world", the reception of which dissipates, and with the concentric encirclement of one within the other, completes the psycho-metaphysical labyrinth between nature and mankind. This is why circumstances are "like clouds" but not vice versa. Under-restrictive laughter causes inflammatory consequences since it would immediately descend into the unconscious substrate of human minds, annihilating the psyche itself – whereas, over-restrictive laughter would suffocate instinctive relief into oblivion, rendering the subject inane, void of the pleasure principle and life, eventually. Laughter, therefore, functions "like" a double-edged sword,

manufacturing its own *annihilative*. What does Keats's prose narrative preceding his sonnet convey to his immediate readers? According to Anthony Howe,

> Important poetry, the letter-poem text implies in its form, is not simply an articulation of self and its intensification of the present moment; it involves, also, a recognition of the poem's status as a fragment, of the meaning inherent to the white space the poem occupies. (238)

The sonnet, 'Why did I laugh Tonight?', by this logic, has already begun vis-à-vis a combination of Keats's metaphors ("Circumstances are like Clouds", "seed of some trouble…wide arable land of events", "poison fruit which we must pluck"), universalization ("This is the world") and riveting ("touch us too nearly for words").Additionally, it has succumbed to the very fragment of its parergonic writing pad itself, fragmentizing space between itself and the "white space", the "white space" and the prose letter, and finally, the text of the "letter-poem" from its already fragmented "letter-prose", or more interestingly, both poetic antecedents and consequents – its prelude, interlude (the sonnet itself) and postlude (the epistle as it re-configures after poetic release).This is not commenting much on the Sublime status of the poem, as recognized, I think, with fair ease, by Martin Halpern.[14] As elucidated in the earlier poem, Sublime statuses are synonymous with Sublime stratifications, a circuitous manner of acknowledging the Unconditional in as many forms as it is supposed to (dis)appear. Thus, anaphoric references in "*Why* did I laugh tonight?" in the first line, "Why did I laugh?" and in the sixth, prefaced by subjective intrusion ("I say;"), its echo in the ninth line, signalling its turn from negation to affirmation, from ignorance to knowledge, from "I say" to "I know" to "I cease", followed by asyndetic, anaphoric negations in "No voice will tell:", "No God, no Demon", "O mortal pain!", implied negatives in "ever must I moan", "To question…in vain", "I…cease", its proximity to

the oxymoronic “gaudy ensigns”, “Being’s lease” and the inflective potential in the fourth and tenth line,hyperbolic directives through exclamations (“Heart!”, followed by four exclamations in the two succeeding lines, defeated into another redundant interrogation), antagonistic synonymities (“No God, no Demon” to “Heaven and Hell”, “Verse, Fame and Beauty…But Death”, the exclamatory heart in the fifth line percolating into the polysyndetic eighth, alliterativeness (“human heart”, “see in shreds”, “intense indeed”)alternating with assonances (“God…Demon…response”, “must I moan”, etc.), aggravated by monosyllabic autarchy in the fifth, disyllabic blasts in the seventh, careful placement of disyllabic re-arrangements (“severe response”, “utmost blisses”, “very midnight”, “gaudy ensigns”, “intense indeed”) and the final, repetitive uncanny symbolized first by the Wordsworthian “gaudy”, next by death, capitalized on both occasions–signifying comparative analogies almost through the perpetuation of legal rhetoric (“lease”, “in-deed”), actuate the rhetorical set-up of the Longinian Sublime. This paves its way to Burkean obscurity: the sonnet begins with an evocation/indirect invocation to night, signifying natural obscurity contributing to rhetoric, leading to verbal negation and its subsequent assertion of the power of the unknown, or un-excavated fealty amongst nature, rhetoric gesticulations of the Poet and the assertive character of universal negation. This fealty is complicated further by divine intervention(s), or the lack of it – metaphysical ambiguity tripling with rhetoric and nature, which is not saying that the poet does not ask the right question for an answer to Obscurity; on the contrary, perspicuity of poetical approach is feigning innocence (One could call it Keatsean culpability), but the opaqueness towards Keats’s question could either mean that the question is too innocent to be answered innocently in the same tongue, or that it cannot be answered at all, concretely or abstractly. Sublime obscurity, therefore, pedagogizes reverential experience without an adequate “response”, save that of subjective

relinquishment to a 'non-answer'.[15] This obscurity of objective response is promptly confronted by the subject's self-reflexivity ("to my human heart I turn"), ensuringa rough transition ("at once") from factual to aesthetic inquiry, and a revaluation of an apparitional *bedeutung*, a metaphysics of presence differing and deferring infinitely from an objective answer *per se*. Metaphors of darkness transfixed physiologically, symbolizing rupture *within* in unambiguous terms ("Heart! Thou and I"), are further perpetuated from objective to inter-subjective, to intra-subjective isolation, and this becomes the primary, if not the primal cause behind the maintenance of Burkean sublime obscurity – hence the pre-fixture on "Why?" through "I say", for the poet has realized midway through his sonnet that 'His' question cannot be answered, but it can definitely be obsessed upon for the pleasure/admiration residing in an unanswerable question. Linguistic pre-fixtures embellish Keats's question; although he remains conscious of death when he proclaims that he would "cease", the reader realizes that neither the poet nor his sonnet has ceased to be – an obscurity regarding the poet's *vorsatz* (kept his readers in darkness, to put it in another way), whether he had embellished an obscurity through disinterested subjectivity doubling up with psycho-metaphysical ramifications. Perhaps, Keats's laughter had been, I argue, an ideological inflammation that, through the sonnet, egotizes infiniteness with rational relief, the incongruity of which is counterbalanced through primal gratifications traditionally evading rationalizations, as William Hazlitt had surmised in 'On Wit and Humour':

> The essence of the laughable then is the incongruous, the disconnecting [of] one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another. The first and most obvious cause of laughter is to be found in the simple succession of events, as in the sudden shifting of a disguise, or some unlooked-for accident, without any absurdity of character or situation. (Henley ed. n.p.)

Part of this Keatsean obscurity vaporizes with the Poet's consciousness of mortality "Being's lease", and a stronger case makes its presence felt, since sense (in its state of health) and putrefied sense (pathological response to impending death) positions the "Being" firmly, in sense's paronomasiac "leash". The balance of Wordsworthian Sublime, as stated at the beginning of the essay, has been contested and overturned, from the rational "ego" to the sensible, and the *sensevil*. This transformation reaches its Kantian zenith in the final couplet of the sonnet:

> Verse, fame and Beauty are intense indeed,
>
> But Death intenser – Death is life's high meed. (ibid., 13-14)

The rage of "forlorn hope", emerging from self-accusation, despair, introspective non-answer and self-reflexivity is transformed, rather sublimated, first towards resistance, into a revelatory axiom, which, in a Kantian manner, transcends the sonnet itself by encapsulating his literary labour within the connotative brevity of "Verse", also ensuring that the profanation of infinite questioning is dammed systematically. Following it is the confounded birth of the "aesthetically sublime" through "Beauty", where intensification is implicitly suffixed by "pleasure", thus creating the first half of the Keatsian ideal of superiority in 'Why did I laugh?': the Poet had laughed at the conceptually "unlaughable", and derived intense [pleasure] from the concrete by-products of it; however, he realises, soon enough that the *aporic* superstructure of conceptualizing the unlaughable overpowers his axiom, and its annihilative magnitude, coupled by Keats's failure at language (using "intenser", a neologism, followed by parenthesis, and the repetition of "Death"), had substituted "pleasure" with both fear and reverence. Moral superiority dawns with the knowledge of admiration towards the *might* of the Unknowable, suspended within the aporic connotations of Death. How then, is Keats's sonnet an exemplar of the *Sensevil Sublime*?

The main proposition of this sonnet rests on a rejection of the ego-ideal and a re-conceptualization of the instinctive, "human heart", which is vested with the task of answering questions not naturally recognized in its argot. It results in the attenuation of stature for one, compensated by supererogatory “sense”. Keats has successfully theorized structures of power without gainsaying the valuation of categories involved, but re-adjusting accrual, and posited his *agon* against Wordsworth by counterbalancing ego-ideals and inverting the disproportionate role of sense within the egotistical sublime.

This act of counter-balance is not restricted by the participation of what one could denote as “healthy” sense, but overfed with notions, as well as tenets which can only companion “putrefied” sense– arguments of sense pertaining to reason, prefixed and suffixed by myriad exclamations, punctuation, parentheses and so on. Both moral superiority and sublimity in the final couplet albeit arise from the unhealthy contamination of the sensible by the under-sensible. Complicating this is Keats’s curtain-dropping moment, where everything but the “intenser” is evil; hence, Sensevil postulates the Sublime, and transcendence does not occur *despite* it. These, as I conclude, are to be considered the key characteristics, and the objective of the ‘Sensevil Sublime’, the *sui generis* of the Romantic “negative sublime”, and the culmination of 19th-century explorations of Self through sense.

Notes

1. ““To differ” in this sense is to temporalize, to resort, consciously or unconsciously, to the temporal and temporalizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfilment of “desire” or “will”, or carries desire or will out in a way that annuls or tempers their effect” (283). See Jacques Derrida’s “Differance” in *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays*

on Edmund Husserl's *Theory of Signs*, translated by David B. Allison for Northwestern University Press, 1973.

2. "It is a recurrent strategy of any anxiety to defuse what it considers threatening by magnification or minimization, by attributing to it claims to power of which it is bound to fall short" (5). See "The Resistance to Theory" by Paul De Man, published in *Yale French Studies*, vol. 63 (The Pedagogical Imperative: Teaching as a Literary Genre), 1982, pp. 3-20. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/2929828

3. "In the many situations in which one should be conscious of the object alone, or some blend of the self-subsistent object with the poet's perception of it, one too frequently discerns only the self so commanding an experience that it takes on an excessive proportion in the relationships set up in the poem" (411). See "Points of View and the egotistical sublime", published in *English Studies*, vol. 49, no. 1-6,1968 pp. 409-418. *T & F Online*, https://doi.org/10.1080/00138386808597305.For Keatsian acknowledgements of the egotistical sublime, see the second paragraph on pp. 105 in Philip Shaw's *The Sublime* (Routledge, 2009)."Knowledge and power are opposed in Wordsworth in a way that to Keats will seem itself archaic and rugged, superstitiously egotistical" (190), as *Thomas Weiskel* would state in *The Romantic Sublime* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019, open access editions).

4. "The Sublime is an un-naming accomplished by a purposeful forgetting, a forgetting of anterior texts. Where repression is an unconsciously purposeful forgetting, in and by the psyche, a poetic text does curious tricks, odd turnings, that render the unconscious only another trope as the poem both forgets to remember and remembers to forget…in the Sublime reversal one's own lustre derives from not using the rotted names, from throwing away the lights, the definitions, and from saying that what one sees in the dark is this or that, but not what another ever described

before one" (5, 9) See Harold Bloom's "Auras: The Sublime Crossing and the Death of Love", published in *Oxford Literary Review*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1981, pp. 3-19. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/43973628

5. "The very last poem Keats ever wrote conveys a sense of frustration, rage toward the frustrating object, in this instance, Miss Brawne, and attempts to awaken in her the same guilt for not saving his life which Keats himself lived with in regard to his various losses" (503). See "Object Loss, Dreaming and Creativity" by James W. Hamilton, published in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1969, pp. 488-531.https://doi.org/10.1080/00797308.1969.11822704. Also refer to pp. 467 in James I. Porter's *The Sublime in Antiquity* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

6. A reliable perusal of their interrelationship is presented by Clarence D. Thorpe in "Wordsworth and Keats – A Study in Personal and Critical Impression", published in *PMLA*, Vol. 42, No. 4,1927, pp. 1010-1026, *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/457549. Another comprehensive source of Keats scholarship and its Wordsworthianisms is Beth Lau's "Keats's Reading of Wordsworth: An Essay and Checklist", published in *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1987, pp. 105-150. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/25600637. See pp. 131-32 for this Paper. To conclude, "What we know all too well is what he didn't like, a self-centred and self-satisfied attitude that he saw in Wordsworth's personality and poetry" (51), as Leon Waldoff fittingly opines in "Keats's Identification with Wordsworth's Selective Affinities", published in *Keats-Shelley* Journal, Vol. 38, 1989, pp. 47-65. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/30210399.

7. "Because fragments are materially indeterminate and evoke more than the part they present, they are a potent source of the sublime – neither whole nor part, they exhibit an inexhaustible

potentiality" (22). See *Romanticism and Visuality: Fragments, History, Spectacle* by Sophie Thomas (Routledge, 2008).

8. See this link: https://www.etymonline.com/word/earnest#etymonline_v_939.

9. "Ende sees the Sublime as an illusion – not "morally sinister", as Weiskel calls it, but aesthetically perverse…Keats reached his ultimate solution in the "sublime pathetic" which, without completely sacrificing the search for otherness, retains a "commitment to sorrow" (198). See W.P. Albrecht's "The Tragic Sublime of Hazlitt and Keats", published in *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1981, pp. 185-201. *JSTOR*, https://doi.org/10.2307/25600295.

10. "Everyone will be sensible of this, who considers how greatly night adds to our dread, in all cases of danger, and how much the notion of ghosts and goblins, of which none can form clear ideas, affect minds, which give credit to the popular tales concerning such sorts of beings…*In thoughts from the visions of the night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, fear came upon me and trembling…then a spirit passed before my face*" (81, 83). See Part II, Section III (Obscurity) and Section IV from Edmund Burke's 'A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful'. All quotations from Robert R. Clewis's *The Sublime Reader* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

11. "In my opinion, in the fact that sublimity depends on elevation, whereas amplification involves extension; sublimity exists often in a single thought, amplification cannot exist without a certain quantity and superfluity" (156). See Longinus's 'On Sublimity' in *Classical Literary Criticism*, edited by D.A. Russell and Michael Winterbottom for Oxford University Press, 2010 (reprint).

12. "Every affection of the STRENUOUS type (such that is, as excites the consciousness of our power of overcoming every resistance is *aesthetically sublime*, e.g., anger, even desperation (*the*

rage of forlorn hope but not faint-hearted despair)" (125). See 'Analytic of the Sublime' in *The Critique of Judgment*, translated and edited by James Creed Meredith for Clarendon Press, 1973 (Reprint).

13. "No matter what tension of the imagination they [religion, society, culture] produce, can in no way lay claim to the honour of a *sublime* presentation, if they do not leave behind them a temper of mind which, though it be only indirectly, has an influence upon the consciousness of the mind's strength and resoluteness in respect of that which carries with it pure intellectual finality (the supersensible)" (ibid., 126).

14. "For Keats is not laughing at anything so much as he is laughing *with*; and at its most intense, this act of laughing-with takes on qualities of emotional exaltation much closer to the sublime tradition in poetry than to what is generally considered to the comic tradition" (80, emphasis in original). See "Keats and the "Spirit That Laughest", published in *Keats-Shelley Journal*, Vol. 15, 1966, pp. 69-86. http://www.jstor.org/stable/30209857.

15. This is a worthwhile subversion of the Burkean Sublime, although I would not suggest it invokes the comical, strictly; instead, a thin strip of absurdity transgresses Sublime soil, drawing its epistemic limits around 'laughing' which is original. For further study on the subject, see "Japing the Sublime: immature aesthetics" in *Keats's Boyish Imagination* by Richard Marggraf Turley (Routledge, 2004), especially pp. 91 and 97.

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Bionote:

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