

Forget Revolution: The Figure of Reading in Keats's *Hyperions*

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[T]he signifier is to be taken in the sense of the material of language. The trap, the hole one must not fall into, is the belief that signifieds are objects, things. The signified is something quite different . . . it always refers to meaning, that is, to another meaning. The system of language, at whatever point you take hold of it, never results in an index finger directly indicating a point of reality; it's the whole of reality that is covered by the entire network of language. {1}

Given their historically overdetermined topical interest, it is difficult not to read John Keats's *Hyperion: A Fragment* and *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream* in relation to the French Revolution and its aftermath. For many critics, however, the two fragments constitute Keats's allegorical disavowal of political revolution, in the name of a poetical one. Ronald Paulson, for example, asserts that Keats "associates the process of revolution with the movement from sublime to beautiful." Political revolution, according to this reading, becomes the "model for [Keats's] own projected 'revolution' in writing poetry." {2} Alan J. Bewell, on the other hand, reads in *Hyperion* Keats's ambivalent attitude toward the "liberal ideology of progress" as represented by Napoleon Bonaparte. {3} Both Paulson and Bewell, however, feel the need to distance Keats from serious commitment to revolutionary politics, and their readings of the fragment tend to aestheticize Keats's politics by giving full credit to Oceanus' assertion that "first in beauty should be first in might." {4} For Bewell, such an assertion "rewrites political revolution in non-violent, aesthetic terms." {5} For Paulson, only Oceanus "sees that the innocence of [the Titans'] existence required the revolution that transforms beauty into sublimity, and that this will in turn lead to a higher form of beauty-through-knowledge." {6} Oceanus, in fact, forgets himself when he makes that statement, a fact which most critics tend to forget or repress, and to which I will return later.

What Paulson reads as a dialectical movement becomes the "cyclical action" in Marilyn Butler, who observes that Keats is far from "welcoming revolution like a nineteenth-century progressive." It becomes, instead, an allegory of life: "The cyclical action of 'Hyperion' expresses the necessitarian truth, that life is change and must embrace change in all its forms, including defeat and death." {7} Such an interpretation is all the more striking in that it comes immediately after a longish quotation from Keats's September 18, 1819 letter to George and Georgiana, in which Keats does expound, however jejune, a dialectical view of the Revolution. Critics, it seems, either try to pull the political tooth out of Keats or flatly deny that he has one at all. As a result, they tend to either aestheticize his politics or politicize his aesthetic performance and see it as wanting. Take Bewell once more for example. His reading of *Hyperion* is predicated on the assumption that Keats began writing the poem with the "intention of adopting not only an Enlightenment genre, but also a political ideology." But, failing to find an adequate language for Apollo, Keats is said to experience "discomfort" not only with that ideology but with the language of that genre as well. Keats's career in poetry thereafter seeks therefore "to deal with

his sense that he is, perhaps, as much an outsider in politics as he was in poetry.”{8}

Bewell's reading is well received by Marjorie Levinson, who sees Keats as living a life of allegory, an allegory in which Keats's self-fashioning overcomes his drawbacks in terms of class, literary, and sexual politics. What Bewell calls “Napoleonic allusion” becomes in Levinson “Napoleonic inscription,” by which she reads *Hyperion* as an allegory of legitimacy. “Hyperion, the Sun God,” she writes, “looks very much like an inscription of that symbol of a more recent and occidental old order: Louis Quatorze / Quainze.” In Keats’s Apollo, she reads a “Napoleonic inscription, the phonetic resemblance (Apol-Napol) motivated by a narrative gesture.” {9} Inscriptions are readable, provided the memory such a reading draws on is not lost, and Levinson’s reading of the inscriptions is legitimate insofar as we are willing to make some allowance for the historical telescoping such a reading demands. (After all, Napoleon, committing anachronism, did equate himself with the revolution that saw the fall of the Sun King’s head.) Still, there remains the legal problem of usurpation both the Titans and Olympians have committed. And here’s Levinson’s solution:

By the formal economy of [*Hyperion*], Keats implies that although historical necessity and natural law support the Olympian cause, *authority* is somehow on the side of the fallen Titans. What reader feels for Olympus? . . . Keats urges us to focus [sic.] the Olympians as usurpers even as he indicates their temporal and natural claims. In effect, the separates authority (Hyperion) from legitimacy (Apollo), giving the latter a bad -- or rather, ‘bad’ -- name.) {10}

Thus, Levinson converts a potential political radical into an intentional sympathizer of the *ancien regime*, using what she calls a “post-structuralist method” to interpret “the age’s dominant structures of feeling: the ideological subject-forms underlying its diverse political positions.” {11} Theoretical trappings notwithstanding, Levinson's reading agrees with the authority of the critics discussed earlier. Like them, she is more interested in defending the received notion that Keats lived in the felicitous marriage of beauty and truth, even if he had to forge that poetic identity for himself. Like them, too, she falls back on imperative categories such as “historical necessity” and “natural law,” which are based in fact on Oceanus’ questionable authority. Questionable, because Oceanus is forgetful, and hence content with the *status quo*, namely, the Titans’ statue-like existence. And Levinson forgets that Oceanus forgets the revolution that fells the Titans. But such is the surprising effect of sympathy. As Oceanus identifies with Neptune, so does Levinson identify with the Titans. Like the other critics, Levinson feels so much for the Titans as to give a multi-layered transference reading: “Keats *would* have us identify Saturn with the narrator of ‘Hyperion.’” {12} With transference, one enters an uncertain terrain. For it is no longer sure where to locate the “structures of feeling” or to what extent what she calls Keats’s “subjectivity” or “subject-form” is a matter of style or the effect of a critic’s transference. {13} But, taking sides with the Titans, she certainly takes Keats's politics too lightly.

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Instead of the structures of feeling, we should probably address the structure of transference, of reading, and of transference reading in which what one says about the text says perhaps as much about the texture of his or her own subjectivity. Rather than a method of reading, such a prerequisite is a reminder that the most innovative of our reading is more often than not the result of our enabling ignorance. Paradoxical as it may seem, this is what Barbara Johnson states, in “Nothing Fails Like Success,” as a categorical imperative that we must keep “forgetting what we

know how to do.”{14} With characteristic lucidity and economy, she denounces the institutionalization of deconstruction on the one hand and, on the other, defends deconstruction against charges from the literarily conservative and the politically radical. Against the former, she highlights the "other" logic of deconstruction that seeks to subvert the either/or logic of binary opposition. One of the examples she gives is the opposition between the objectivity and subjectivity of the act of reading:

deconstruction seems to locate the moment of meaning-making in the nonobjectivity of the act of reading rather than in the inherent givens of a text, but then the text seems already to anticipate the reading it engenders, and at the same time the reader's "subjectivity" is discovered to function something like a text, that is, something whose conscious awareness of meaning and desire is only one aspect of a complex unconscious signifying system which determines consciousness as one of its several effects. {15}

Deconstruction, that is, seeks to question the boundary lines between objectivity and subjectivity or between object and subject. Johnson's defense against the politically radical is that, as a discourse "based on the questioning of boundary lines," deconstruction "must never stop questioning its own." {16}

In other words, it must question the limits of the literary text. "The question," for her, "is how to use history and biography *deconstructively*, how to seek in them not answers, causes, explanations, or origins, but new questions and new ways in which the literary and nonliterary texts alike can be made to read and rework each other." {17}

Johnson, in fact, still argues from within the limits of the literary text, although the limits are pushed back to include what has supposedly been foreclosed by New Criticism. She still maintains some implied borderlines between literary discourse and a somewhat narrowly defined politics, for which, as both Bewell and Levinson argue, one needs to adopt an adequate and proper language, or at least a parody of that language. Consequently, her ethics of reading seems to sidestep the issue raised by *politically* radical critics like Terry Eagleton, who faults Paul de Man for "an unremitting hostility to the practice of political emancipation." {18} Johnson fails, in short, to demonstrate that the act of reading knows no boundary, not only between literary and historical, but also between literary and political, discourse. Nevertheless, her ethical imperative of forgetful reading can indeed be invoked against Eagleton's political demand for emancipation. Like Levinson's post-structuralist method, Eagleton's accusation against de Man is predicated on a forgetting, not of what one knows *how* to do, but of *what* one knows how to do. There is, of course, a world of difference between *how* and *what*. For, in a remarkable flash of hindsight, Eagleton (like Diderot) conflates by the name de Man uncle and nephew, and that, too, in the name of emancipation. All these allegories of forgetting, as we shall see, are prefigured by Keats's *Hyperion: A Fragment* and *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, in which the act of reading is explicitly posited as a political act. As a political act, reading is potent when aided by, but vulnerable in the absence of, memory. The possibility and impossibility of reading is founded precisely on its fragile tie with memory, namely, with the constant threat of the loss of memory, a loss that mourning seeks to overcome. Reading is prone to error because writing tends to decompose into mere figures, inscriptions, or memory traces, which are the material base of language. To the extent that, for Keats, the act of reading has revolutionary consequences, such ambiguity of reading is also inherent in the notion of revolution: namely, between the sense of

“overturning” and “return,” {19} between the revolution that saw the fall of the Sun-King and “the *revolution* that is the rhythm of a sun’s course,” {20} between the possibility and impossibility of revolution as critics of a politically radical denomination would read it.

“Allegory,” Christopher Norris writes in his explication of Paul de Man’s essay on Pascal, “involves a perpetual suspension of meaning, a detour through the various tropes, figures, and modes of oblique signification where language can never reach the point of simply saying what it set out to say.” {21} In light of the fact that Keats’s fragments have more to say *about* reading than most of their critics would countenance, I will proceed to read them, the fragments, as first and foremost an allegory of reading. There is something so chrematistic about the economy of the fragment form that one is tempted to think that nothing succeeds like failure. And it is doubly tempting when one “failure” succeeds another, as is the case with Keats’s *Hyperion: A Fragment* and *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, which capitalize on our deep-lying need for a sense of totality. As fragments, they are highly productive, on the one hand, of totalizing readings that seek to fit them into the grand design of literary and political history; and, on the other, of persistent speculations concerning the totality of which they should have been a part, and from which they are supposed to have been rudely severed, for reasons ranging from the murderous calculations involving the precursor’s death to the utterly chancy event of the author’s own literal death. With the arrest of death, however, the fragments acquire a peculiar life or afterlife of their own, at once demanding and resisting conjectures about the completion of the teleological movement that has been suspended. By the paradoxical logic of the seductive resistance, they are open to surmises about which they remain stubbornly silent. In order to resist such a seduction, it is therefore necessary to stay content with the entirety of what is literally said. Such a totality is not a second best, for it is *the* totality that escaped us in our expectation of an encounter with totality.

In Keats’s *Hyperion: A Fragment* and *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, success or failure of reading has catastrophic consequences: they are doomed to fall who fail to read as their successors do. The fall of the Titan is prefigured by the unreadability of the signs of the sun, the “hieroglyphics old”: “the glancing spheres, / Circles, and arcs, and broad-belted colure” (*H*: 1.273-77). With their meaning lost, the signs become once again mere inscriptions, unrecognizable traces of circles and semi-circles. As the signifiers and signifieds fall apart, Hyperion loses his power to make the sun run, and his “operations of the dawn” (*H*: 1.294) end up in a stillbirth. Fallen, Saturn fails to find the cause of his fall in the “old spirit-leaved book,” which once served as his “firm-based footstool” or the fundament of his reign. Study as he may, his deep reading in “Nature’s universal scroll” finds nothing but the “sign, symbol, or portent / Of element, earth, water, air, and fire” at war with each other, a “quadruple wrath [that] / Unhinges the poor world” (*H*: 2.133-51). Instead of the fall itself, which is ultimately unreadable, we are given the cause and effect of the fall. A poor reader, Hyperion is heading for the fall that turns Saturn into a poor reader. They fall because they forget how to read, and as a result of the fall they forget how to read. Circularity seems to be the fate of reading, whose decree even the gods must obey. They fall because they fail to make sense of the figure reading makes: the circle, which is also the proper figure for revolution and, according to Jacques Derrida, “the rhythm of a sun’s course.”

On the other hand, Apollo’s apotheosis is predicated on his skill of reading the unreadable, the

silent face of memory. For the “Father of all verse” (*H*: 3.13), the crowning moment involves a scene of instruction, in which Mnemosyne teaches what he knew but forgot. Before the intervention of Mnemosyne, Apollo has already acquired certain aspects of the fallen Saturn or Hyperion. Plagued by a “dark, dark, / And painful vile oblivion,” he tries to overcome the loss until “a melancholy numbs my limbs; / And then upon the grass I sit, and moan, / Like one who once had wings” (*H*: 3.86-91). The restoration of memory takes the work of mourning, which he entreats Mnemosyne to perform by apostrophizing her harp that “wailleth every morn and eventide” (*H*: 3.108-09). Before getting a response from Mnemosyne, he proceeds to “read / A wondrous lesson in [her] silent face,” from which he incorporates a body of potent knowledge, “as if some blithe wine / Or bright elixir peerless I had drunk” (*H*: 3.111-119). With the act of apostrophe, mourning and memory are orally incorporated. But in order that mourning or an invocation of mourning can restore memory, the latter has to be given a face to begin with. Apostrophe and prosopopeia work in tandem. Reading memory's face begins by giving memory a face, by which one re-members what one knows all along.

By the same token, the poet-dreamer's deification in *The Fall of Hyperion* is contingent on reading the “wan face” (*F*: 1.256) of the relatively humanized Moneta. Relatively, because hers is a visage “deathwards progressing / To no death” (*F*: 1.260-61). Unlike the way Apollo reads Mnemosyne's silent face, however, the poet-dreamer reads Moneta's as a face that not only speaks but, more importantly, reads. With eyes “visionless entire . . . / Of external things” (*F*: 1.267-68), what that face reads turns out to be the fragments of a decaying-but-never-to-decay text called *Hyperion: A Fragment*. The text, in other words, is dis-membered, only to be re-membered by the “warm scribe my hand” (*F*: 1.18) and transcribed onto the cold face of Moneta, who, by her power of translation, is inscribed as an ideal interpreter within the text called *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*. As a mortal-immortal translator, she renders the unreadable of the natural-supernatural into human speech:

“Mortal, that thou may'st understand aright,
I humanize my sayings to thine ear,
Making comparisons of earthly things;
Or thou might'st better listen to the wind,
Whose language is to thee a barren noise,
Though it blows legend-laden through the trees --
In melancholy realms big tears are shed,
More sorrow like to this, and such-like woe,
Too huge for mortal tongue, or pen of scribe. (*F*: 2.1-9)

The warm scribe's translation of Moneta's translation, however, is not meant for the pedestrian or literal-minded readers. It prescribes a special order of reading or viewing: vision, dream, or dream-vision. Properly speaking, the text is presented as a script for performance in the theater, as evinced by such dramaturgical imagery as “rehearse” (*F*: 1.16), “scenes” (*F*: 1.244), “acting” (*F*: 1.279), and even the slant reference to Shakespeare's theater in the phrase “globed brain” (*F*: 1.245). One also recalls the host of phantoms in the first book of *H* which are compared to the crowd in a theater (253-56). But Keats's is posited as literally a mental theater or a theater of memory, for the scenes as narrated in *F* are said to be “enwombed” behind the “hollow brain” (*F*: 1.276-77) of Moneta. It therefore demands to be read with the mind's eye or, literally, an eye that sees into the mind or brain of the goddess of memory. Given the predominance of the scopic imagery in *F*, Keats's revision of *H* seems to represent an attempt to

consign it to memory for endless rehearsal and immediate re-presentation. All it takes to “see as a God sees (*F*: 1.304) is to invoke Moneta as “Shade of Memory” (*F*: 1.282). When Keats dreams, he dreams himself not only waking, but also seeing. What’s more, he not only sees himself seeing, but sees himself reading and writing, rereading and rewriting the text/script of *Hyperion*. Such is the vertigo of re-vision triggered by the “Antichamber of the dream” in *F* (1.1-293).

In providing a frame for *H*, moreover, the antichamber also creates a fold in *F* that encloses not only *H* but *F* itself as well. At stake here is the disparity between the narrative structure and the chronological order of the events contained in the two fragments. Let me briefly retrace the chronological sequence of the events in *H* and *F*. In the beginning, according to Oceanus’ account (*H*: 2.190-231), there were Chaos and “parental Darkness,” who gave birth to Light. Then Light, “engendering / Upon its own producer,” brought forth Heaven and Earth, parents of the Titans. As the Titans are overthrown by their offspring, so will the Olympians, according to the law invoked by Oceanus, be driven by “another race” to mourn their lot. In *F*, the Olympians too have fallen, as indicated by the poet-dreamer’s apostrophe that calls on the “faded, far flown Apollo” to punish the “mock lyrists, large self worshipers, / And careless Hectorers in proud bad verse” (1.204-08). It is open to speculation who displaces the Olympians or whom the mock lyrists and careless Hectorers supplant. But it is certain that, at the end of the line is the visionary company of one, the poet-dreamer, who alone acquires the power to “see as a God sees.” Yet this thematic and linear model, which also informs most political readings of the two fragments, is profoundly at odds with the peculiar temporal and narrative structure of the two fragments. As the antechamber folds the chronological sequence back upon itself, so does the poet-dreamer at the end of the line start the sequence all over again. Thus, the temporal and narrative movement is circular, capable of infinitely repeating itself on the one hand and creating a sense of no ending on the other.

To put it schematically, we can also trace the circular movement in the chiasmatic relationship between the titles and the endings of the two fragments. On the one hand, *H* actually deals with the fall of the Titan and ends with the ascent of Apollo. On the other hand, the newly deified poet-dreamer bears witness as *Hyperion* rushes and flares on at the end of *F*. In *H*, *Hyperion* falls because, like Saturn, he falls victim to what Jacques Lacan calls “formal fixation” {22}: he stands “like the bulk / Of Memnon’s image at the set of sun” (*H*: 3.373-74). In *F*, however, he resumes the heat of action, rushing and flaring on. With the two endings crossing each other out, circularity occurs in which *Hyperion* falls and rises again, only to fall and rise again, and so on and so forth.

But then again, everything returns eternally in the two fragments, including revolution and the catalyst of revolution: Mnemosyne, Moneta, forever mourning. The return of memory, however, is not the return of the same. Memory returns as memory-traces, to be retroactively given a face so as to become legible. Reading as revolution involves the abrupt transition from assuming to assumption of meaning. Facing the goddesses of memory, both the Father of all verse -- namely, Apollo -- and the poet-dreamer begin their reading with guesses, surmises, fathomings, and probings. Strong readers both, they know how to invoke memory to anticipate knowledge at the slightest hint, be it the mute face of Mnemosyne or the very first sentence of Moneta’s story. With meaning won, they immediately proclaim their title to godhead. The precipitation of meaning, moreover, involves not only textual but also sexual violence. Whereas Apollo quivers

into his new identity, the poet-dreamer performs autopsy or biopsy on Moneta to see the things inside “the dark secret Chambers of her skull” (*F*: 1.278). Such is the constitutive origin that a successful reading revolution must forget, in order to achieve the identity of authority and legitimacy. But Keats shows his hand, because he tries to remember. His lesson, then, is Oceanus’ eternal law in an inverted form: the first in might should be the first in beauty. And his construction of the antichamber, which has the effect of containing the whole house of revolutions, will deconstruct the edifice from within. In trying to remember his revolution, it becomes a failed revolution that is capable of endless circulation.

Oceanus’ forgetting revolution, on the other hand, is so successful, so winning, that it seduces critics into identificatory readings. This can perhaps exemplify the persuasive power of Oceanus’ “proof” (*H*: 2.177), which draws on the authority of “Nature’s law” (*H*: 2.181), the “eternal law / That first in beauty should be first in might.” An ideologue who aestheticizes politics, he seeks to literally naturalize power transitions. The truth, as Enceladus has pointed out twice, is that he forgets his defeat by Neptune (*H*: 2.317-319). Rebuked and humiliated, he is still capable of feeling of revenge. But this is a fact that the critics tend to forget.

Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 32.
2. Paulson, *Representations of Revolution (1789-1820)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 283.
3. Bewell, "The Political Implication of Keats's Classicist Aesthetics," *Studies in Romanticism*, 25 (Summer 1986), p. 221.
4. My discussion of Keats's Hyperion poems is based on *The Oxford Authors: John Keats*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990). All subsequent references to the poems appear in the text, their titles abbreviated respectively as H and F.
5. Bewell, p. 221.
6. Paulson, p. 284.
7. Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 151.
8. Bewell, p. 229.
9. Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory: The Origins of a Style* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), p. 196-97.
10. Levinson, p. 197
11. Levinson, p. 33 and p. 35
12. Marjorie Levinson, *The Romantic Fragment Poem: A Critique of a Form* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 177.
13. Levinson, *Keats's Life of Allegory*, p. 36.
14. Johnson, *A World of Difference* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), p. 16.
15. Johnson, p. 13.
16. Johnson, p. 14.
17. Johnson, p. 15.
18. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), p. 10.
19. Steven B. Smith, "Hegel and the French Revolution: An Epitaph for Republicanism," in *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*, ed. Ferenc Feher (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 221.

20. Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. The Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), p. 6.
21. Norris, *Paul de Man: Deconstruction and Critique of Aesthetic Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 95.
22. Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), p. 17.

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