Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, and God: The Romantic Poetics of Doubt

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“I am however young writing at random, straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness without knowing the bearing of any one assertion of any one opinion… This is the very thing in which consists poetry.” – John Keats, “Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, 19 March 1819

“So prepare yourself to wait in this darkness for as long as you can, yearning all the time for Him whom you love. For if you are going to experience or see God in this life it can only be in this cloud and this darkness.” – Anonymous, The Cloud of Unknowing

INTRODUCTION

Long maligned and feared as the destroyer of faith, doubt has seldom been celebrated in Western religion and literature. It is seen only as a negation; shadow, not substance. And yet doubt can be “a creative, positive, and hopeful practice,” in the words of Jeff Gundy, “born out of the obvious gaps and lapses of our knowledge and wisdom.” 1 In this vein, doubt can be understood not as the absence of faith but as the sign of its presence. Doubt is the correlate to belief, and the two are the right and left hands of God, pushing us toward truth.

“The godfather of creative doubt,” Gundy writes, “is the boy genius John Keats.” 2 But Keats and his Romantic contemporaries were only a particularly vibrant flowering in a long, albeit neglected, tradition of Western doubt. In this essay, I will examine a sampling of the writings of Percy Shelley, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and John Keats, and relate them to two

2 Ibid, 467.
disparate theological strands—natural religion and Deism; and apophatic Christian theology.

And I will attempt to show that among the Romantics’ singular achievements was the reintroduction of a poetics of doubt into Western literature. Rejecting the zero-sum battle of positivist empiricism against institutional dogma, the Romantics opened a literary space in which faith and doubt could dance freely once again.

**MISTY MOUNTAINS AND “NATURAL RELIGION”**

Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s 1802 poem, “Hymn Before Sun-rise, in the Vale of Chamouni,” follows his experience of viewing Mont Blanc towering above the glaciers of Chamounix and the River Arve as an ecstatic vision of God’s creation. The speaker begins by addressing the mountain in a quintessentially Romantic contemplation of a sublime landscape:

The Arve and Arveiron at thy base
Rave ceaselessly; but thou, most awful Form!
Risest from forth thy silent sea of pines

The speaker’s meditation quickly melts into abstraction:

O dread and silent Mount! I gazed upon thee,
Till thou, still present to my bodily sense,
Didst vanish from my thought: entranced in prayer,
I worshipped the Invisible alone.

However, this abstracted prayer is interrupted by continued subconscious awareness of the scene:

Yet, like some sweet beguiling melody,
So sweet, we know not we are listening to it,
Thou, the meanwhile, wast blending with my Thought

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The prayer of Coleridge’s speaker fuses with visual observation, yielding an impassioned, multisensory wonder. He searches for the scene’s creator in terms reminiscent of God’s voice from the whirlwind in the Book of Job. “Who sank thy sunless pillars deep in Earth?” (36), the speaker demands of the mountain. He doesn’t make us wait long for the answer:

GOD! Let the torrents, like a shout of nations,  
Answer! and let the ice-plains echo, GOD! (58-59)

Coleridge’s speaker sees evidence of God’s handiwork in everything around him, and concludes by asking the mountain to convey back to Heaven the certainty of his belief, to
tell thou the silent sky,  
And tell the stars, and tell yon rising sun,  
Earth with her thousand voices, praises GOD. (83-85)

Coleridge’s idiosyncratic Christianity drew heavily on “natural religion,” the idea that “the Supreme Being has endowed man with sufficient reasoning power... to arrive at certain basic conclusions about his Creator’s existence and nature.” 4 Arising in 18th-century England out of an effort to demonstrate the compatibility of Christian doctrine with a Newtonian worldview, natural religion used Enlightenment philosophy and naturalistic observation to supplement or even replace revelation as a source of religious authority. Evidence of God’s existence and attributes were to be found in the order, harmony, and beauty of nature. William Paley expressed this view in Natural Religion, published the same year as Coleridge’s Chamouni.

In his famous “watchmaker analogy,” Paley asks us to imagine walking across a heath and finding a watch on the ground:

… the inference, we think, is inevitable; that the watch must have had a maker; that there must have existed, at some time and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer; who comprehended its construction, and designed its use.5

Paley bases his argument for the existence of God on this watch analogy, arguing that such complex, finely adapted structures as human eyes or the swim bladders of fish could not have arisen naturally, but rather show evidence of deliberate and intelligent design. The influence of the Industrial Revolution is palpable in Paley’s wide range of comparisons between biological and mechanical structures— at one point he even compares the human spine to a contemporary feat of engineering, the Iron Bridge at Bishop-Wearmouth. God’s attributes are similarly reverse-engineered through close observation of creation: for instance, Paley infers that God must be good, because each organism is equipped with features that seem designed to further that organism’s survival and well-being.

Some of the more radical proponents of natural religion developed their philosophy into the 18th-century Deist movement, which saw Christianity as an unnecessary complication or perversion of natural religion, and God as a creator who simply ordained natural laws at creation, and subsequently played little or no role in human events. Coleridge himself found Deism unsatisfying to his basically orthodox Christian sensibilities, but he nonetheless retained

his faith in God as a natural force, intelligible through close observation of an ordered universe.

Right from the start in “Mont Blanc,” his poem on the same subject, Percy Bysshe Shelley casts doubt on Coleridge’s sunny certainty that God can be known through observation of nature.

The everlasting universe of things
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,

But its essence and influence are far more ambiguous:

Now dark– now glittering– now reflecting gloom–
Now lending splendour 6 (1-3)

The source of this ambiguity is the human mind, which constructs its perceptions in its “own separate phantasy,” (36) as it

Now renders and receives fast influencings,
Holding an unremitting interchange
With the clear universe of things around; (37-39)

Shelley’s speaker may derive certain impressions of “Power” and the sublime from the landscape, but he is reluctant to place his trust in perceptions that “One legion of wild thoughts” (41) can so easily interfere with.

John Keats’s mountain experiences seem to have yielded as little of “natural religion” as Shelley’s did. In August 1818, just over two years after Shelley wrote “Mont Blanc,” Keats and Charles Brown climbed to the top of Ben Nevis in the Scottish Highlands, where Keats

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composed a brief sonnet. “Sonnet Upon the Top of Ben Nevis” makes a tripartite scan of the view from the top of the mountain— but this is no stunning, clear-eyed panorama. “Ben Nevis” begins and ends with a setting “blind in mist” (2), and though he begins by calling on a Muse, Keats’s speaker is left blind to even his physical surroundings, let alone any spiritual animation behind them:

And there is sullen mist,— even so much
Mankind can tell of Heaven (6-7)

Even “man’s sight of himself” (9) is obscured, and the speaker can only observe with certainty the “craggy stones” beneath his feet (10). Calling himself a “poor witless elf” (11, with a pun on “self”), the speaker finally connects the obscurity of the scene with a larger epistemological blindness:

all my eye doth meet
Is mist and crag, not only on this height,
But in the world of thought and mental might! (12-14)

At one time, having rejected institutional Christianity as a young man in the intellectual circle of Leigh Hunt, Keats had for a time embraced a version of the “natural religion.” But it was an uneasy acceptance, and he longed for stability in his convictions:

“What a happy thing it would be,” he wrote to James Rice in March 1818,

...if we could settle our thoughts, make up our minds on any matter in five Minutes and remain content— that is to build a sort of mental Cottage of feelings quiet and pleasant— to have a sort of Philosophical Back Garden, and a cheerful holiday-keeping front one— but Alas! this can never be: for as the material


8 see the sonnet “Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition”
Cottager knows there are such places as france and Italy… so the spiritual Cottager has knowledge of the terra semi incognita of things unearthly; and cannot for his Life keep in the check rein.

(Keats, “To James Rice, 24 March 1818”) 9

And so he began to be conscious of natural religion’s inadequacy to the range of his imagination. He wrote the next day in a verse epistle to John Reynolds,

Is it that Imagination brought
Beyond its proper bound, yet still confined,—
Lost in a sort of Purgatory blind,
Cannot refer to any standard law
Of either earth or heaven?—It is a flaw
In happiness to see beyond our bourn
(Keats, “To J. H. Reynolds, 25 March 1818”) 10

This was the spring of 1818, when his brother Tom’s health was in decline. Keats, watching his brother succumb to tuberculosis, ran up against an increasingly disturbing awareness of the brutality and ugliness that coexist with harmony and beauty in nature. Later in his verse epistle to Reynolds, Keats describes a kind of horrifying seaside epiphany:

I saw
Too far into the sea; where every maw
The greater on the less feeds evermore:—
But I saw too distinct into the core
Of an eternal fierce destruction
And so from Happiness I far was gone. 11

It was the nail in the coffin of his natural religion. How could a benevolent creator have ordered life to subsist on death?

11 Ibid, 109-110
Shelley seems to have noticed a similar “eternal fierce destruction” in nature at Chamounix, and he uses it to symbolize the failure of human concepts and language. Lines 84-94 of “Mont Blanc” present a broad catalog of “all the living things that dwell/ Within the daedal earth” (85-86), past and future— but all are impermanent. They “Are born and die; revolve, subside, and swell” (95). But “Power,” on the other hand, “dwells apart in its tranquility/ Remote, serene, and inaccessible” (96-97), like Mont Blanc towering above the living world. The mountain, the “naked countenance of earth,” from its liminal space at “the boundary of the sky,” sends forth a “flood of ruin” that overthrows “the limits of the dead and living world” (98-113) and obliterates the impermanent things below. “Vast pines” are left “Branchless and shattered,” while “The race/ Of man, flies far in dread” (111-118). The wreckage symbolizes our words and ideas— even the ones drawn from nature— the inadequate thoughts and perceptions with which humans try to understand ultimate reality. They are destroyed by actual contact with that reality.

THE CLOUD OF UNKNOWING

So without precise perceptions or stable metaphors to work from, Shelley’s speaker is forced instead to circle around an unnamable center, aware that something is there, but able to speak of it only in terms of what it is not. In religion, this is known as apophatic theology (from the Greek apophasis, “denial,” literally “unsaying”), a type of theological thinking that seeks to describe and clarify one’s knowledge of God by stating what God is not. Apophatic theologians hold that God transcends everything the human mind can know, and so the

12 Shelley, 231-233
concepts and attributes we ascribe to God, however useful they may be, ultimately fall short of
the infinite reality of God, being only the products of finite minds. As the anonymous author of
the 14th-century English mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing* puts it, “You are going to ask me,
‘How am I supposed to think about God himself? What is he?’ and I can only answer, ‘I have
no idea’… nobody can think about God’s essential being. So I must be willing to leave all the
things I can conceive with my mind on one side and choose for my love the one thing I cannot
think about.” 13

In Christianity (and especially in the Eastern Orthodox tradition), apophatic theology is
known as the *via negativa*, the contemplative path of negation, by which the spiritual seeker
sets aside the illusory and incomplete knowledge of the *logos* and *dianoia* (intellectual and
rational aspects of the mind) and strives instead with the *nous* (mind of the heart) toward total
union (*theosis*) with God. Though privileged as the superior mode of contemplation in Eastern
Orthodoxy, the *via negativa* has stayed mostly on the fringes of Western Christianity. The *via
positiva*, contemplation of God as revealed in Scripture (for Protestants) and through the
authority of the church (for Catholics), has traditionally been dominant. But it is by no means
absent in the West. The author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* was in the sporadic but omnipresent
line of Western apophaticism, along with theologians and mystics like John Scottus Eriugena,
St. John of the Cross, and Meister Eckhart. And he seems to have read and translated the works
of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (the pseudonym of a fifth- or sixth-century Syrian

Christian writer, widely considered the chief authority on Christian apophaticism) into English.

Though Shelley, the avowed atheist, would not likely refer to the subject of his contemplations as “God,” his negatively phrased “unsaying” language is reminiscent of Pseudo-Dionysius’s discussion of negative terminology in Scripture: “Then there is the scriptural device of praising the deity by presenting it in utterly dissimilar revelations. He is described as invisible, infinite, ungraspable, and other things which show not what He is but what in fact He is not. This second way of talking about Him seems to me much more appropriate, for, as the secret and sacred tradition has instructed, God is in no way like the things that have being and we have no knowledge at all of His incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility.” 14 This “second way of talking” is the way by which Shelley arrives at a degree of knowledge about fundamental reality—by stating emphatically and poetically what he does not and cannot know.

Throughout “Mont Blanc,” a litany of negative terms—ceaselessly, unsculptured, unresting, unremitting, unfathomable, inaccessible, voiceless, etc.—state the speaker’s paradoxical (un)awareness. These negative terms appear 24 times in this poem of only 144 lines, clustering around descriptions of the mountain and of the sublime “Power.” In one particularly dense cluster, we first encounter the mountain itself:

Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,
Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene. (60-61) 15

15 Shelley, 230.
Mont Blanc, almost by Romantic convention, easily yields itself as a symbol of the sublime essence or “Power” behind existence. The sheer inaccessibility of the mountain renders it “A desart peopled by the storms alone,” utterly separate from the realm of human experience. Yet despite this, its awesome presence still irresistibly draws human speculation. And, Shelley seems to say, if the physical mountain is inaccessible and irresistible, then its origin– its creator– must be doubly so:

Is this the scene
Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young
Ruin? Were these their toys? or did a sea
Of fire, envelope once this silent snow?
None can reply– all seems eternal now. (71-75)

“AWFUL DOUBT,” “THE BURDEN OF MYSTERY,” AND “PARTICLES OF LIGHT”

So without observation of the natural world, and without reliable language, how are we to grasp fundamental reality? Shelley, for his part, seems to have been as certain of his faith in a fundamental power as he was of his disbelief in the Christian God. His Mont Blanc speaker detects something ineffable and yet essential behind the sublime experience of Mont Blanc:

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
So solemn, so serene, that man may be
But for such faith, with nature reconciled. (76-79)

These central lines form the apophatic heart of the poem. Mild faith and awful (in the old sense; awe-full) doubt are presented not as mutually negating opposites, but as thesis and antithesis, yielding as synthesis a spiritual knowledge of something utterly beyond human understanding. It cannot be intellectually grasped; it is “not understood/ By all,” but it can be accessed when “the wise and great and good/ Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.”
The unnamable center of reality persists:

Mont Blanc yet gleam on high:— the power is there,  
The still and solemn power, of many sights,  
And many sounds, and much of life and death. (127-129)

“And what were thou [Mont Blanc], and earth and stars, and sea,” the speaker finally asks, “If to the human mind’s imaginings/ Silence and solitude were vacancy?” Shelley finishes with a final twist: by paradoxically setting silence and solitude in opposition to vacancy, he makes an apophatic statement of faith in ultimate Power. Yes, the silence and solitude at the summit of Mont Blanc are absolute. Yes, ultimate Power is unnamable, indescribable, and incomprehensible. But Mont Blanc’s silence and solitude are not vacancy, but fullness of the richest kind, and the speaker’s inability to articulate anything meaningful about ultimate Power is not nihilism, but a faith that surpasses understanding.

And Keats, for his part, began to grasp that doubt could be a valuable, beautiful, even desirable thing, and the exploration of “dark passages” might yield both insight and poetry. He articulated this in his justly famous 1818 letter to John Reynolds, in which he compares human life to a “Mansion of Many Apartments,” each apartment representing a stage of mental development. One is the “Chamber of Maiden-Thought,” a place of youthful delight—but one of the effects of remaining in this chamber is:

that tremendous one of sharpening one’s vision into the heart and nature of Man—of convincing one’s nerves that the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression— whereby This Chamber of Maiden Thought becomes gradually darken’d and at the same time on all sides of it many doors are set open— but all dark— all leading to dark passages— We see not the balance of good and evil. We are in a Mist— We are now in that state— We feel the ‘burden of the Mystery.’ To this point was Wordsworth come, as far as I can conceive when he wrote ‘Tintern Abbey’ and it seems to me that his Genius is explorative of those
dark Passages. Now if we live, and go on thinking, we too shall explore them.
(Keats, “To J. H. Reynolds, 3 May 1818”) 16

Shelley expressed the unknowability of ultimate reality, but it was Keats who was to take it further and express perhaps the highest flowering of the belief/doubt dialectic in Romantic poetry. The great challenge of Keats’s thought and writing was to find a way to live, to “go on thinking” with candor, courage, and creativity, with “the burden of Mystery.” And his great theological achievement was to recognize the gap between reality and understanding as a generative place— the wellspring of poetry, and the forge of greatness.

Keats formulates the tension of living with the unknown in a December 1817 letter to his brothers George and Tom as “negative capability,” the quality that goes “to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature,” and that makes us “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts.” 17 Negative capability, to Keats, is a kind of epistemological courage in one’s approach to the world, a refusal to settle for easy answers, sensual escapism, or nihilistic despair. And it is an apophatic approach, in that it prefers the embrace of mystery over any “irritable reaching after fact and reason.” 18 Keats understood that, as much as we might desire a “mental Cottage” in our weaker moments, it is not through comfortable certainty but through a continual conscious choice to remain in the cloud of unknowing that we arrive at meaningful truths. The beauty is in the dance of negative capability with ineffable mystery, in doing what Keats would describe a year later as “straining at particles of light in the midst of great darkness.” 19

16 Keats, Selected Letters, 124
17 Ibid, 60
18 Ibid, 60
19 Ibid, 271