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Signs and light: Illuminating paths in the semiotic web

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At the edge of darkness: The penumbra of John Keats

ROBERTO BARONTI MARCHIÒ

The visible becomes so, not only in the fullness of radiated light, but also in dialogical relation to the play of shadow and light and the objects thus modelled, which, acting unobserved, make vision possible. Hence, whereas light may be 'die reine Identität mit sich und damit die reine Beziehung auf sich, die erste Idealität, das erste Selbst der Natur sei' (Hegel 1978: 31), it is also the condition on the basis of which the subject disengages from itself, insofar as the act of seeing obliges the spirit to emerge from its tautological relationship with the Ego and espouse otherness.

> In dieser Rücksicht ist das Licht nur das Manifestieren ... den besonderen Inhalt aber dessen, was es offenbart, außerhalb seiner als die Gegenständlichkeit hat, welche nicht das Licht, sondern das Andere desslben und damit dunkel ist. (1978: 31)

Light and darkness are not irreducible. They come into being in a manifold and interwoven *relational context*. It is this multiplicity that concerns us here, as we reach for the *limen*, the threshold, Derrida's *brisure*, where light recedes and the visible emerges from within the texture of the invisible, and vice versa.

In his *Zur Farbenlehre*, Goethe states that color is produced by the interaction of light and darkness, since when a uniformly white surface is observed through a prism no color is produced. This happens instead when there is some delimitation, an edge, an area of bordered shade.

For Keats, 'A drainless shower / Of light is poesy; it is the supreme of power' (*Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 235–236, in Keats 1985: 89). Yet, so much is he the poet of absence, of sunset ('The setting sun will always set me to rights', Keats 1958: I, 186), that only shade and obscurity seem congenial to him: 'For me, dark, dark, / And painful vile oblivion seals my eyes' (*Hyperion. A Fragment*, III, ll. 86–87, in Keats 1985: 305). To inhabit the shade meant for him, most of all, to be extraneous to the full luminosity of art and tradition, a luminosity that had faded irrevocably. His, the poetry

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'of a poet who had come too late, of the man from the land of sunsets, was memory, with its stare fixed on that which can no longer be seen, because it has disappeared' (Fusini 1984: 9). The poet may only speak of absence, of the aftermath of the divine, which remains as a mute incumbrance, against which *invocation* splinters and dissolves. The lucidity of the poetic metaphor thus partakes of extraneousness, of obscurity, and of silence.

Keats knows well that only in the oblique and waning light of poetry can the poet scan the invisible, searching for the presence of dead gods, or rather for the life-signs of their absence. His is a poetry of dusk, inhabiting the shade and alien to the fullness of light ('I am certainly more for greatness in a Shade than in the open day', Keats 1958: I, 414). In Keats, poetry dawns in a zone where light plays incessantly against darkness, with that innately Keatsian hope of encountering in there, where the poet despairs most of finding it: 'If I do hide myself, it sure shall be / In the very fane, the light of Poesy' (*Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 275–276, in Keats 1985: 90). Hence, the traditional invocation to the muses becomes the summoning-up of a 'fallen angel' (*Sleep and Poetry*, l. 242, in Keats 1985: 89), of deities 'who once had wings' (*Hyperion. A Fragment*, III, l. 91, in Keats 1985: 305), of 'souls of poets dead and gone' (*Lines on the Mermaid Tavern*, l. I, in Keats 1985: 225), of the mystery of a night bereft of its gods — distant and dethroned, yet still invoked, since

> die Götter können nur dann ins Wort kommen, wenn sie selbst uns ansprechen und unter ihren Anspruch stellen. Das Wort, das die Götter nennt, ist immer Antwort auf solchen Anspruch. (Heidegger 1981a: 40)

From this complex proximity of light and shade, charged with meaning and pain, the poetry of Keats takes life as the desire for, and involuntary memory in the present of a past and the things of a past which have ceased to be: an evocation, become a prefiguring, of what has yet to be and has not yet been. However, albeit poetry is born from recollection, its tending towards the light is not a *return*, since for Keats, such a closening is above all a *departure*, a re-embarking for the future, a turning-back to where we are: 'darkness is not the death of light but the hiding place of a future light' (Rajan 1980: 173). Recollection is an enclave in darkness, in the *umbra futurorum* of prefiguration, where remembering, rather than an act of memory *stricto sensu*, is instead a courting of oblivion, since

> remembering for Keats is not an activity of the mind, or the spirit, consciously involved in the labour of *recollection*, but alludes instead to the ontological status of the modern poet, his being ontologically in second place, the last to arrive ... recollection conceived as an immersion in the abandonment of time, to whose song the poet surrenders — the eternal return of the primordial Song. (Fusini 1984: 14)

Recollection is therefore oblivion of the self, an oblivion in which the poet stands free of his work, that finds its voice without him, since '[he] can say nothing about it' (Keats 1958: I, 141), as Keats declared regarding his own *Endymion*. One writes in pursuit of dispossession, the loss of the past, in search of *another* identity, through the invention of new canons, in accordance with the most ancient of principles: 'That which is creative must be new' (1958: I, 374).

All that remains for the poet to do is to bring this absence to light, resuscitate a perennially unended song and sing the impossibility of its ending:

> The visions are all fled — the car is fled
> Into the light of heaven, and in their stead
> A sense of real things comes doubly strong,
> And, like a muddy stream, would bear along
> My soul to nothingness: but I will strive
> Against all doubtings, and will keep alive
> The thought of that same chariot, and the strange
> Journey it went.
> (*Sleep and Poetry*, ll. 155–162, in Keats 1985: 87)

Darkness is the incipient muteness of poetry, always on the point of thickening with shade, of drowning, of sheering death. In Keats, writing is not an excursion into the searing light of day, but a hanging-back in darkness, in a 'dark light' ('No light, but rather darkness visible', in the word of the much-loved Milton in *Paradise Lost*: I, l. 63). Similarly, for Heidegger, light stands in intrinsic relation to darkness, which it does not remove, but rather preserves:

> Der Dichter freilich sieht ein Leuchten, das durch sein Dunkles zum Scheinem kommt. Das dunkle Licht verleugnet nicht die Klarheit, wohl aber das Übermaß der Helle, weil diese, je heller sie ist, um so entschiedener die Sicht versagt. Das allzu feurige Feuer blendet nicht nur das Auge, sondern die übergroße Helle verschlingt auch alles Sichzeigende und ist dunkler als das Dunkle. ... Der Dichter bittet um die Spende des dunklen Lichtes, worin die Helle gemildert ist. Aber diese Milderung schwächt das Licht der Helle nicht ab. Denn das Dunkle öffnet das Erscheinen des Verbergenden und bewahrt in diesem das darin Verborgene. Das Dunkle bewahrt dem Lichten die Fülle dessen, was es in seinem Scheinem zu verschenken hat. (Heidegger 1981b: 119)

Keats treatment of light and dark is not the conventional bringing to 'light' of that which lies *repressed* in consciousness, a dialectical

casting-out of shade. Nor is it a re-statement of the presuppositions underpinning cognitive and expressive conceptions of art. On the contrary, it sets out to re-evaluate the work of art, starting from its obscure foundations, lingering in the shade, to allow the work to maintain its essential relationship with obscurity, since art is not aimed at unveiling a particular type of reality, but instead detaches itself from consciousness; it is the coming of darkness, a plunging into night, an invasion of shade. The work shines with visible obscurity, light drawn from the depths of opacity. It does not limit itself to the said or seen, but includes whatever is obliquely suggested — the inaudible, the latent and unseen.

> The blaze, the splendor, and the symmetry,
> I cannot see — but darkness, death and darkness
> Even here, into my centre of repose,
> The shady visions come to domineer.
> (*Hyperion. A Fragment*, I, ll. 241–244, in Keats 1985: 289)

The activity of writing subsists on this problematic, but essential relationship with obscurity. The author must 'learn to live with his innate desperation, become aware that his sense of impotence and exclusion is by no means the negative absolute of the unpoetic, but, on the contrary, the prerequisite and conduit of vision' (Sabbadini 1986: xviii).

Hence, darkness, other than the 'alienated' dimension of the subject, is the area which the poet inhabits, the *limen* of an unresolvable tension between irreconciliable opposites, neither of which can be superimposed on the other, where darkness is dispelled only to reappear: 'a vast shade / In the midst of his own brightness' (*Hyperion. A Fragment*, II, ll. 372–373, in Keats 1985: 302). The relationship between light and darkness is neither of contradiction nor of derivation, but rather of mute implication, reversibility, and reciprocal interfusedness.

In this penumbra of otherness the work unveils herself to the poet. It is she that the poet incessantly scans, on the threshold between light and darkness, writing in her whatever independently of him is thought and developed in his mind. In a letter dated the 27th of February 1818, Keats writes that 'if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all' (Keats 1958: I, 238–239). The poet must never go in search of poetry, but abandon himself to her, allow himself be found and allow himself to be written:

> it is more noble to sit like Jove than to fly like Mercury — let us 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 — budding patiently under the eye of Apollo and taking hints from every noble insect that favors us with a visit. (1958: I, 232)

The author remains absent, separate from his work. Subject to an inevitable distancing, he divests himself of his identity; his work precedes him, anterior to him and to his self-consciousness as a poet. Whence, for Keats, feeling means feeling like *nothing* (cf. 1958: I, 322), since the poetical character does not exist in 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'. The poet is a chameleon 'continually filling some other Body'. He is 'the most unpoetical of any thing in existence', unfaithful to his every word, so radical is his condition of mutation and contradiction. His word is *infinite*, never bound within itself, always open and unfinished, because the other lodges in the self, in a self which is never its home. It is con-located there, never assimilated: conversely, 'even now I am perhaps not speaking from myself; but from some character in whose soul I now live' (1958: I, 387–388). Writing is being written.

Keats maintains, therefore, that poetry must flow naturally — 'the rise, the progress, the setting of imagery should like the sun come naturally to him [the reader] — shine over him and set soberly although in magnificence leaving him in the Luxury of twilight' — but also that it should 'surprise by a fine excess and not by Singularity — it should strike the Reader as a wording of his own highest thoughts, and appear almost a Remembrance' (1958: I, 238). This excessiveness places poetic language 'more or less beyond any productive or functional discourse', such that 'in its essential detachment from life, it maintains a certain relationship with darkness and observes human things from the "furthermost threshold" ' (Ponzio 1994: 44–45, my translation). As Keats writes in a letter dated the 3rd of February 1818: 'We hate poetry that has a palpable design on us' (Keats 1958: I, 224).

The poet is the most essential and the most superfluous of beings. His language must be at once natural and excessive, always unstable, never transparent or instrumental:

> Within language there is a simultaneous play of gain and loss: it would seem that poetry's principal function is that of bringing to light this precarious, medial state in all its instability and danger — once the decision has been made, of course, to disengage oneself from the habitual transparency and instrumentality of language. This condition of instability, oscillating between the twin poles of a multiform silence (the chaste silence of the poetic word and the insolent oblivion of commonplace speech), becomes eloquent to the degree that it preserves its inconstancy and ambiguity. (Rovatti 1988: 44, my translation)

Poetry is a distancing from the world, from one's age and individuality, its glance falls on life from beyond life, from communion with death: 'in the work of art ... there is an inevitable presentiment of death, but of death overcome, fended off, "the death of the other, seen from the point of view of whoever has survived him" ' (Ponzio 1994: 151). Keats writes: 'I have an habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existance' (1958: II, 359). The writer is he who, having slouched off the chains of his age, writes in anticipation of death, resigned to that death which writing requires of its voice. Hence, in Keats's letters, reflections such as these alternate with thoughts of his own death, perceived as the author's death as a man, the annihilation of his individuality and immersion, without reserve, in the boundless dimensions of the Cosmos. In death, one's *own* word goes absent, whence the poetic text becomes, always, *the other*.

> Men of Genius are great as certain ethereal Chemicals operating on the Mass of neutral intellect — by they have not any individuality, any determined Character. I would call the top and head of those who have a proper self Men of Power. (1958: I, 184)

The term that Keats applies to this slipping free of the bounds of the self is *Negative Capability*, 'that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (1958: I, 193). The poet equipped with this ability to reside in the shade thrives on unanswered questions, neither transforming the *negative* dialectically into the positive, nor subsuming it into a voyage towards self-realization, of which it forms a passing phase:

> The Odes of Keats, like those of Shelley, are centred on a series of dialectical contrasts, where the oxymoron reigns sovereign. However, the real source of their extraordinary originality, and the position of prime importance which they occupy in European Romantic tradition, is that the perfect synthesis which they attain is not 'positive', but rather founded on the inutterable, on *impasse* and defeat ... irreconcilable contraries, which gradually blend. (Sabbadini 1996: 460)

For Keats, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, 'le sensible, ce ne sont pas seulement les choses, c'est ausisi tout ce qui s'y dessine, même en creux, tout ce qui y laisse sa trace, tout ce qui y figure, même à titre d'écart et comme une certaine absence' (Merleau-Ponty 1960: 217). This negative presence 'leaves a trace' because it is not absorbed and cancelled out by the light of being. From this it follows that poetic language is rightly discreet, devoid of any intention to understand and comprise the other. It keeps its distance, guaranteeing a certain remoteness, where the poet

is left to his failure ('I am sometimes so very sceptical as to think Poetry itself a mere Jack a lanthern to amuse whoever may chance to be struck with its brilliance'. Keats 1958: I, 242) and to his solitude ('Tonight I am all in a mist; I scarcely know what's what', 1958: II, 167).

> der Dichter beschreibt nicht, wenn er Dichter ist, das bloße Erscheinem des Himmels und der Erde. Der Dichter ruft in den Anblicken des Himmels Jenes, was im Sichenthüllen gerade das Sichverbergende erscheinen läßt und zwar: *als* das Sichverbergende. Der Dichter ruft in den vertrauten Erscheinungen das Fremde als jenes, worein das Unsichtbare sich schicket, um das zu bleiben, was es ist: unbekannt. (Heidegger 1954: 200)

The cone of obscurity, the 'dark light', in which Keats lingers and in which his work takes form, is a zone of darkness in which darkness is unveiled, it is the invisible 'que l'on ne peut cesser de voir, l'incessant qui se fait voir' (Blanchot 1968: 215–216). Shade is the terminal contrast between irreducible poles, or, more precisely, the terminal obliqueness of literary language, so inconclusive and bereft of power as to permit a meditation on paradox in which no one term can ever prevail:

> 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. (Keats 1958: II, 80)

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On seeing: Light in Leopardi and Baudelaire

ANTONIO PRETE

Luce incerta e impedita (Uncertain and hindered light)

In July 1820, in the pages of his *Zibaldone*, annotations, excursions, and variations on Montesquieu's *Essai sur le goût*, Leopardi set out a theory of gazing in relation to a theory of pleasure. The unlimited or vague, the boundless, or 'bello aereo' (airy beauty), undefined, vastness of view are all ingrained in the ancient poets, as they are in children. In the 'sentimentale moderno' (modern sentimental), the pleasure of such sentiments corresponds to the pleasure of plunging into 'pensieri indeterminati de' quali l'anima non sa vedere il fondo nè i confini' (indeterminate thoughts of which the soul cannot see to the bottom or find the boundaries). This rejection of limits, this pleasure based on losing one's gaze in open spaces (which Montesquieu attributes to 'curiosité'), is treated by Leopardi as being the very foundation of pleasure: the desire that the experience of pleasure be without limits. This same 'desiderio dell'infinito' (desire for the infinite) can also result in a taste — in those 'situazioni romantiche' (romantic situations) — for a 'veduta ristretta e confinata' (a confined and restricted viewpoint). Both the indefinite losing itself of a gaze and a way of seeing which looks for boundaries arise from the same 'desiderio dell'infinito' (longing for the infinite): 'The reason is one and the same, that is a desire for what is infinite, so that in place of what can be seen the imagination can set to work and what is fantastic can take the place of what is real. The soul imagines what it cannot see, what that particular tree, that hedge, that tower is hiding from our view, and wanders off into an imagined space and sees things which it could not if the view was totally unrestricted because the real would then exclude the imaginary' (Leopardi 1991: July 1820 *passim*). In the notion of limits one finds inscribed a transcendance of such limits. Even though any attempt to go beyond — its 'interminati spazi' (interminable spaces) and 'sovrumani silenzi' (superhuman silences), its 'profondissima quiete' (deepest quietude) — leads first to a

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