

**Gregory Tate, “Keats, Myth, and the Science of Sympathy.”**  
***Romanticism* 22. 2 (2016): 191-202.**

Gregory Tate’s “Keats, Myth, and the Science of Sympathy” is a highly engaging piece of writing. The article’s central premise is that Keats’s poetry (particularly from 1817 to 1819) uses myth, particularly the abstractness of apostrophe, to mediate a “restrained form of sympathy” in his poetry. Such a model of sympathy, Tate claims, is influenced by Keats’s medical background and tutelage under the surgeon Astley Cooper and *The Hospital Pupil’s Guide* (1816), which is characterised by “benevolence” tempered by an objectifying “insusceptibility” to the patient’s pain (193). This attitude was advised to medical students to ensure “accurate diagnosis”: an overactive sympathy was deemed to be detrimental to effective treatment. Taking “Ode to Psyche” as a case study, Tate shows how Keats’s speaker enacts – particularly through the form of the ode – a “dialectic, seeking to synthesise intersubjective feeling and scientific impartiality” (193), just as Cooper and the *Guide* propounded. Tate suggests that, to Keats, both “myth and medicine are modes of knowledge which balance the observation of empirical evidence with subjective sensibility, and which also provide a set of general principles, a theory, to underpin that balance” (193).

The article firstly addresses the differences between Cooper and Keats’s emotional responses towards their patients’ pain: the latter being overly partial to sympathy. It then discusses the gradual professionalization of the medical profession, in which “the relation between professional impartiality and sympathetic feeling for patients emerged as a central issue in medical education” (192), before looking closely at Cooper’s lectures, *The Hospital Pupil’s Guide*, and the mythical persona, Aesculapius, behind its concept of sympathy. Here, Tate shows how Cooper’s model of sympathy was informed by “the objectification of subjectivity” (196), and how Keats’s writing reflects this. Indeed, Keats’s “poetry of 1819 makes consistent use of these objectifying strategies of internalisation and systematic observation. It also asks how these strategies might work in cooperation with the exercise of the sympathetic imagination” (197). Tate then explains how myth and apostrophe, to Keats, underpin this model of sympathy by offering a negotiation between “subjective feeling” and the “impartial explanation” of narratives (197). Finally, the article gives a perceptive close-reading of certain passages of “Ode to Psyche”, in which Tate shows how the poem reflects the ambivalent tug of sympathy and a “simultaneous identification [with] and resistance” from the addressee (198); the poet/speaker’s minute observations of Psyche and Cupid, together with his sympathetic inter-subjectivity and empirical interrogations, reflect Cooper’s model of medicine. This model, Tate argues, allows Keats’s poetry to “simultaneously involve connection with others, detached observation, and self-questioning reflection” (198).

Tate’s argument is convincing in its demonstration that, despite Keats’s abandonment of the medical profession, the poetry is influenced by a model of sympathy inherited from his training. Moreover, Tate cleverly aligns Keats’s acute sympathy with the pain and subjective experience of others, with his pervasive concerns with a sense of selflessness and a preoccupation with maturity (196). These insights are fruitful: they help shed light on Keats’s self-consciousness as a poet, and how myth works to mask a certain nakedness of feeling, or *lack* of feeling, which the poet may have deemed to be naïve. Particularly interesting is Tate’s reference to “biblical morality” (195) in Cooper’s model of sympathy. I would have liked further explanation

– perhaps in an endnote – of how the poem “In drear-nighted December” shows “the possibilities of [a] self-possessed stance significantly earlier in his career” (196). In addition, although the close-reading of the poem is persuasive, there are 23 lines not accounted for (lines 13-35). Indeed, lines 16-18, I would argue, are significant because they demonstrate an ambiguity in the amorous exchange of Psyche and Cupid, and seem relevant to *their* intersubjective sympathy, and the speaker’s portrayal of it.

Tate’s article will be of interest to those who want to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between Keats’s medical studies and his poetic practice. More suggestively, it also considers a fertile subject: sight, through a reference to Jonathan Crary’s argument that “theories of vision in the early nineteenth century evince a shift from models of abstract objectivity to a preoccupation with the subjective circumstances of the observer” (199). The study of sight is central both to science (in this case, through medical observation) and literature (vision, perception, narrative). Keats’s preoccupation with sight and perception is evident in “Ode to Psyche” (198-199), and in his poetry more widely, and, as Tate persuasively shows, it is inextricable from his poetic model of sympathy and myth.

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