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Keats, the “Transparent Juice”, and the Charm of Imagination

“Some of the most transparent writing in English” (Plumly 2008: 362) is how Stanley Plumly defines a line from Keats’s “To Autumn”, an ode that Walter Jackson Bate had already described as “transparent before its subject” (Bate 1963: 581). In his introduction to an edition of Keats’s poems, Edward Hirsch writes that “many of his phrases and lines seem almost to have been formulated by the English language itself, as if he had become its vehicle, a transparent vessel” (Keats 2001: xvi). Keats’s poetry is endowed with a certain transparent quality which is not limited to its language but also characterises its landscapes, glistening with “the brilliance and transparency of the waters” (Camaiora 113): from the “river, clear, brimful, and flush / With crystal mocking of the trees and sky” (l, 421-22)¹ in *Endymion* to the “crystal space” of the “undisturbed lake” (12) in “How fever’d in the man, who cannot look”, just to name a couple. Keats’s transparency, however, seems to have more often dazzled his readers than elicited their critical interest. Whether Keats was aware of – and perhaps strived for – the transparent quality of his language and what part transparency plays in his poetry are issues that have never been addressed by critics.

The present article aims to shed some light – and possibly start a wider discussion – on the topic by focusing on the only occurrence of the term ‘transparent’ in Keats’s poetry and showing how it can be related to some key aspects of his views on imagination and poetry itself. Surprising though it may seem given how often crystal clear waters have been said to feature in his poetry, Keats has

¹ All quotes of Keats’s poems are from Miriam Allott’s edition *The Complete Poems* (1970).

recourse to the adjective 'transparent' only once, in *The Fall of Hyperion* (1819), to describe a liquid which is not the water of a river or a lake but rather a somewhat mysterious drink: "a cool vessel of transparent juice" (l, 42).² After pinpointing the properties and ambivalence of the potion with reference to the concept of *pharmakon* and to medical and toxicological theories of the time, the present analysis will focus on the vision-inducing quality of the drink and how it relates to transparency as signifying the clarity of vision that is gained by drinking it. In doing so, the metapoetic meaning of the scene will be foregrounded and the transparent juice will turn out to be a powerful and complex symbol for imagination.

At the beginning of *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, the poet-narrator finds himself in a luscious garden surrounded by "trees of every clime" (l, 19). That the scene takes place in a dream³ is made clear not only by the poem's subtitle but also by this detail: trees of different climes cannot grow in the same natural spot unless the place is governed by the alternative logic of dreams, where conflicting things can exist together without contradiction. In this dreamlike setting, the poet-narrator comes upon an abandoned "feast of summer fruits" (29). Driven by an "appetite, / More yearning than on earth" (38-39) he ever felt, which further confirms that he is now in a different dimension, he indulges in the remnants and, "after not long" (41), gets thirsty. He thus takes "a cool vessel of transparent juice" (42), which stands "thereby" (41), and drinks from it. The effects of "the domineering potion" (54) on the poet-narrator are immediate, overpowering, and life-threatening: "The cloudy swoon came on, and down I sank, / Like a Silenus on an antique vase" (55-56). He "struggled hard against" (53) it "but in vain" (54): "No Asian poppy or elixir fine / Of the soon-fading, jealous Caliph, / No poison gender'd in close monkish cell, / To thin the scarlet conclave of old men, / Could so have rapt unwilling life away" (47-51). Still, he does not die. He wakes up from his temporary loss of consciousness to find that his surroundings have completely changed and he is now in a desolate

2 Hirsch presumably had in mind this line when he called Keats "a transparent vessel".

3 Patricia Yaeger calls it "an internal landscape" (Yaeger 1986: 17).

marble temple in the presence of its solitary priestess Moneta, who will make him undergo another potentially deadly initiation rite and ultimately disclose to him a vision of the fate of the Titans.

The transparent drink immediately appears to be a rather ambivalent substance, which is both noxious and beneficial to the poet-narrator. On the one hand, in fact, it could actually cause his death, as made clear by the fact that it is compared not only to a psychotropic drug like opium – "poppy" (47) – but also to proper "poison" (48), such as the one that was commonly thought to have been used to kill cardinals in the Vatican's political intrigues. On the other hand, however, the references to opium and Silenus, a companion of Dionysus who would sink down because of his drunken stupor, as well as the use of the term 'swoon', all point to the mind-altering properties of the potion. Indeed, it produces an altered state of consciousness that allows the poet-narrator to have access to the next stage of his visionary experience: the "old sanctuary" (62) which substitutes the garden. When he comes to his senses, "the dreamer has not really awakened", as Murfin and Stampone put it, but rather "he has entered a dream-within-a-dream" (Murfin & Stampone 2017: 33).⁴

That the same substances can have different, even opposite, effects is something Keats was aware of thanks to his medical education, which can thus provide some precious insights as to the nature and properties of the transparent juice. In *Romantic Medicine and John Keats* (1991), Hermione De Almeida points out that knowledge of the blurred boundary between healing and poisonous drugs characterised early nineteenth-century toxicology and pharmacy.⁵ Astley Cooper, the great surgeon-anatomist whose lectures Keats attended during his medical training at Guy's Hospital, argued that "there is no substance considered as poisonous which in very small doses is not capable of producing a beneficial effect" (Cooper 1830:

4 Dorothy Van Ghent had already made the same point: "This apparent awakening from sleep is one of those dreams within dreams that occur so frequently in *Endymion*, the sliding open of another panel in the mind upon more profound depths of vision" (1983: 225).

5 See De Almeida 1991: 147-55.

439-40), and vice versa. As suggested by De Almeida, this duality can be better understood and expressed through the notion of *pharmakon*, a Greek word which means both 'remedy' and 'poison', or, more precisely, indicates something that can at the same time be a remedy and a poison.⁶

In Ancient Greece the term was complexly multifaceted⁷ and originally associated with Apollo in his role as god of pestilence, whose plague brings both death and healing.⁸ Keats knew this aspect of the Greek god and, quite interestingly, evokes it in *The Fall of Hyperion*, when the poet-narrator invokes "far flown Apollo" (l, 204) and asks him: "Where is thy misty pestilence to creep / Into the dwellings, through the door crannies / Of all mock lyrists, large self worshippers / And careless hectorers in proud bad verse" (205-08). In these lines Apollo's function as god of pestilence intertwines with his more famous role as god of poetry. As a matter of fact, his relationship with the *pharmakon* also concerns the latter, as laurel, which is the symbol of Apollo and the poetic achievement he presides upon, shares the same ambiguity.⁹ Besides being worn as a wreath by renowned poets, in fact, laurel is a powerful narcotic and a source for prussic or hydrocyanic acid. Its poisonous properties were well-known in the early nineteenth century, as proven by the fact that in the first systematised study of toxicology, *Traité de toxicologie générale*, first published in 1813 and translated into English in 1815, M. J. B. Orfila documents the symptoms and causes of laurel poisoning.¹⁰ From the perspective of modern medicine, "its mythical intoxicating power and ability to induce breathless poetic frenzy were but the first and least of symptoms that included convulsion, paralysis, and coma" (De Almeida 1991: 147). The *pharmakon*-like duality of the laurel – its mythical ability to induce prophetic and

6 On the ambivalence of the *pharmakon*, see Derrida's seminal essay "Plato's Pharmacy" (1972).

7 For a study of the notion of the *pharmakon* in Ancient Greece, especially in relation to Plato and to his ideas of intoxication and ecstasy, see Rinella 2010.

8 See De Almeida 1991: 146.

9 See *ivi*: 146-47.

10 See Orfila 262-63.

poetic intoxication and its life-threatening toxicity – is precisely reminiscent of the potion in *The Fall of Hyperion*.

The transparent juice, which beneficially enhances the faculty of vision while causing a dangerous death-like state, appears to be one of the best examples of *pharmakon* in Keats's poetry,¹¹ albeit not the only one, for "Keats was richly aware of the potency of the *pharmakon*'s composite associations and irreducible properties in both the Western tradition and the medical research of his time" (De Almeida 1991: 155). Another meaningful reference can be found in *Isabella* (1818): "Even bees, the little almsmen of spring-bowers, / Know there is richest juice in poison-flowers" (103-4), lines which further suggest the idea of the inextricability, sometimes even indistinguishability, of beneficial and toxic actions, together with their common source. The quote from *Isabella* is even more interesting because bees are mentioned in relation to the transparent juice as well. Indeed, besides its effect and transparency, only the fact that it has been "sipp'd by the wander'd bee" (41) is revealed to the reader. The liquid thus seems to somehow resemble honey, which reinforces its identification with the *pharmakon*. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, in fact, physicians and naturalists discovered that, in spite of its generally positive connotations and proverbial sweetness, honey was "hardly pure sustenance or harmless salve" but rather "a complex substance that could on occasion convey virulent toxicity" (De Almeida 1991: 178). Thanks to his extensive medical and botanical knowledge, Keats was aware of the *pharmakon*-like ambiguity of honey and referred to it throughout his poetry,¹² such as in the quoted lines from *Isabella* or even earlier in a sonnet from 1817: "Hybla's honey'd roses / When steep'd in dew rich to intoxication" (10-11).

11 Marjorie Levinson and then De Almeida were the first to acknowledge the *pharmakon*-like quality of the "transparent juice" (see and Levinson 1988: 214 and De Almeida 1991: 157).

12 Even though Yaeger focuses her analysis on the phenomenon of honey-mad women in Charlotte Brontë's novels, her article is interesting not only because it takes into account honey-induced intoxication but also because she considers the poet-narrator of *The Fall of Hyperion* as an instance of "honey-mad man" (Yaeger 1986: 16).

The fact that bees are involved in the production of the potion, however, is particularly significant also because it foregrounds the metapoetic meaning of the drink and of the whole scene. In Keats's poetry and letters, bees are often used as powerful metaphors for the creative process and the role of the poet. The most famous instance is the comparison between the bee and the flower in his letter to J.H. Reynolds, dated 19 February 1818, where he bluntly states: "it seems to me that we should rather be the flower than the Bee, for it is a false notion that more is gained by receiving than giving" (Keats 2005: 93). This assertion, however, seems to contradict what follows and the metaphor actually blurs the line between giving and receiving as well as their respective association with the flower and the bee. As a flower "budding patiently under the eye of Apollo", Keats adds, we should passively wait, not doing anything but "taking hints from every noble insect that favors us with a visit" (ibidem). If it is true that the identification with the flower is initially presented as more desirable because its role is to give, it is also true that the flower is said to receive the visits of the bees and to take "hints" from them. As a matter of fact, in spite of its premises, the passage ultimately turns out to be an appreciation and praise of receptivity, arguably of poetic receptivity.¹³ Poets should not "go hurrying about and collecting honey-bee like, buzzing here and there impatiently from a knowledge of what is to be arrived at" but rather they should "open [their] leaves like a flower and be passive and receptive" (ibidem).

In a certain sense, the scene at the beginning of *The Fall of Hyperion* could be seen as somewhat equivalent to the content of this letter, as, by drinking the transparent juice, the poet-narrator receives something that comes – at least partially – from a bee. What is more, the very act of drinking places him in a passive and receptive position, and ingestion is another powerful metaphor for poetic re-

13 Among the countless critics who have interpreted the letter in poetic terms, it is worth mentioning Alan Bewell, who argues that Keats "uses the relationship between insect and flower to develop, in ways similar to eighteenth-century radical botanical writing, both an idealized version of what human sexual pleasure can be and a theoretical argument for what constitutes true poetic inspiration" (Bewell 1992: 85).

ceptivity.¹⁴ It is an action that complicates and defies agency, as the person who does it somehow loses their active role to acquire the passive one of the receiver. Open and receptive like the flower in the letter, the poet-narrator drinks the potion and is given something that is not limited to the juice itself. Determining what is gained through this receptive state is particularly important not only to interpret the poem but also to better understand Keats's theory of poetic receptivity. As already hinted, drinking the transparent juice leads the poet-narrator to have the vision of Moneta's temple, a vision which, in Karla Alwes's words, he "does not consciously invoke [...], but receives [...] through eating and drinking" (Alwes 1988: 197). He does not go hurrying about or buzz impatiently like a bee, he does not actively strive for the dream, but rather lets it come upon him not of his own volition, actually even against his will, as indicated by the adjective "unwilling" (51) and by the fact that he struggles against it.

The process, minus its violence, is reminiscent of Keats's famous notions of negative capability and "diligent Indolence" (Keats 2005: 92) and, in general, of his recurring idea that poetic creation takes place when the mind is in a passive, receptive state that, as Porsha Fermanis points out, "often seems analogous to the state of the mind during sleeping and dreaming" (Fermanis 2009: 131). That all these ideas are strongly linked in Keats's mind is showed by the fact that the term "diligent Indolence" belongs to the same letter as the comparison of the flower and the bee. This letter also includes Keats's other famous metaphor of the spider spinning "from his own

14 As Barbara Kowalik points out, "Keats often describes poetic creation through an ingestion metaphor" (2015: 37). She does not interpret this association in terms of receptivity, but she mentions this specific passage from *The Fall of Hyperion* as an example. Keats's images of ingestion and his allegory of taste are taken into account also by Denise Gigante in "Keats's Nausea" (2001). In this regard, it may also be interesting to recall the long-standing equivalence between the stomach and the brain. As early as in the 4th century, Augustine called memory "the stomach of the mind" (Augustine 2008: 191) in his *Confessions*, but similar analogies were still popular in Keats's time: in 1802, for instance, the French physiologist Pierre-Jean-Georges Cabanis claimed that "the brain digests impressions" (quoted in Marquer 2018: 38) as the stomach digests food.

inwards his own airy Citadel" (Keats 2005: 92), which, from a meta-poetic perspective, means that poets should find the source and materials of their poetry from within themselves. In true Romantic fashion, their receptivity should not be directed towards the outer world but rather towards the inner one, which leads us back to *The Fall of Hyperion* and to the poet-narrator who, by being receptive, gains access to a further level of his own vision.

The visionary and dream-like nature of his experience suggests its metapoetic dimension, which so far has been considered rather sketchily through indirect references and parallels with the letters but is far more explicit and pervasive in the poem. The incipit itself clearly identifies dreams as the source of poetry when it states that all human beings, including "fanatics" (1) and "savage[s]" (2), "have their dreams" (1) but only those who have "visions and would speak" (14) can aim to be poets. The narrator himself aspires to be a poet and says that the future readers will have to decide "whether the dream now purposed to rehearse / Be poet's or fanatic's" (16-17). The dream is precisely the content of the whole poem, as indicated once again by the subtitle. Unlike the majority of Keats's other heroes, the poet-narrator "never returns to another reality", as the dream "supplants all else" (Alwes 1988: 197) and is the only reality of the poem. Van Ghent accurately describes *The Fall of Hyperion* as a "recession of dream behind dream, like the sliding open of panel behind panel in the mind" (Van Ghent 1983: 211), mind which, given the relationship established between dreaming and poetry-making, appears to be caught in the process of creative thinking.

Within the general metapoetic frame of the poem, it is reasonable to assume that the transparent juice acts as a metapoetic symbol as well, even though it has never been interpreted as such by critics. First of all, the poetic connotation of the potion is somewhat cryptically suggested by its association with the god of poetry, Apollo, and his most poetic symbol, the laurel, through their shared *pharmakon*-like quality. At a closer look, however, the reference to Apollo is far more relevant and structural than this indirect hint, as the story of the fall of Hyperion is precisely the story of the fall of the Titans in favour of the rise of the Olympian gods. Among them a prom-

inent role is played by Apollo himself, who is destined to replace Hyperion. Although *The Fall of Hyperion* was interrupted before his appearance, the god is featured in Keats's first attempt at the same story, *Hyperion*, begun in the autumn of 1818 and abandoned in the spring of 1819. Furthermore, in this version Apollo is the protagonist of a scene that is strikingly similar to the one of the transparent juice. Apollo is suddenly overcome by "wild commotions" (III, 124) "most like the struggle at the gate of death" (126), "as if some blithe wine / Or bright elixir peerless [he] had drunk / And so become immortal" (118-20). The similarity between the two scenes has been acknowledged by many critics¹⁵ and the "bright elixir"¹⁶ has been called – perhaps not surprisingly given its ambivalent nature and its direct association with the god – a *pharmakon*.¹⁷ By substituting Apollo¹⁸ with a first-person poet-persona, who, like Apollo, "die[s] into life" (130) but in order to achieve visionary power rather than immortality, Keats makes it clear that his second rewriting of the story – and of this scene in particular – is far more focused on issues of poetics and his own poetic process.

The most poetic quality of the transparent juice, however, is its ability to elicit visions, since poetry has been said to have origin in dreams, in a state in which the mind is passive and receptive, i.e., a somewhat unconscious state that resembles dreaming. The potion provides access to the visionary experience by inducing an alteration in the consciousness of the poet-narrator, as proven by the fact that it produces a "swoon" (55) resembling the effects of opium or wine consumption and makes him feel as though he has "slumber'd" (57). Keats is here referring not simply to the longstanding *topos* of poetic inspiration as intoxication but also to his medical knowledge of mind-altering substances, which greatly interested the Romantic

¹⁵ See, for instance, Van Ghent 1983: 246; Sperry 1994: 319; McLane 2000: 208; Gigante 2001: 507; Leveson 2001: 123, 133-135.

¹⁶ White notices that "bright" sometimes refers to transparent substances in Keats's poetry; see White 1996: 14.

¹⁷ See Gigante 2001: 507.

¹⁸ Apollo's relationship with poetry is only hinted at through the mention of his "lyre" (*Hyperion*, III, 101).

sciences of the mind and of the body.¹⁹ As Alan Richardson points out, Keats was well acquainted with the ability of opium and similar substances to affect consciousness, thus producing “an opening to the unconscious mind” (Richardson 2003: 144). This is the reason why, “in addition to its associations with death and sleep, opium also evokes dreamlike and visionary states in Keats’s poetry” (ibidem). In this regard, he mentions the poppy-scented breeze which brings the visionary dream of Cynthia (l: 568-74) in *Endymion* as well as the transparent juice in *The Fall of Hyperion*, and goes on to identify the specific poetic faculty involved in such visionary states: “These narcotic (or super-narcotic) effects suggest that the poetic imagination, like cognition generally, can be aroused and enhanced by fumes and potions” (Richardson 2003: 144).²⁰

Imagination has not been mentioned so far but it is directly related to most of the issues that have been discussed.²¹ Apart from famously being the most important faculty in Keats’s theory of poetry-making, it is also the reason why poetry and dreaming are intertwined. As one of his most well-known sayings recites, “the Imagination may be compared to Adam’s dream – he awoke and found it truth” (Keats 2005: 54). Like dreaming, imagination must be free to wander without rational constraints and take over the mind when it is in a state of passive and receptive indolence so as to produce the visions that are the source of poetry. As Keats suggests in his account of the workings of imagination as early as in “Sleep and

19 “An interest in mind-altering substances runs throughout the embodied psychologies of the Romantic era, from Darwin’s remarks on the effects of opium and other forms of ‘drunkenness’ (Z I: 240-48), to Davy’s (and Coleridge’s) experiments with nitrous oxide, to George Combe’s ironic account of the ‘promiscuous’ attacks on Gall and Spurzheim made more heated by collegial drinking” (Richardson 2003: 142).

20 A similar process takes place at the beginning of “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819) according to Gareth Evans: “The sedation that envelopes the poet at the start of the Nightingale ode gives him access to his imagination” (Evans 2002: 48).

21 I attempted a comprehensive overview of Keats’s ideas concerning the imagination by taking into account all the occurrences of the term in his poetry and letters in my previous work, *A Gordian Shape of Dazzling Hue: Serpent Symbolism in Keats’s Poetry* (2017): 28-37.

Poetry” (1816), imagination must be allowed to “freely fly” (164) in order to bring the poet “to the fair / Visions of all places” (62-63) and to produce great verse, which will seem to be written under “so strange influence / that we must ever wonder how, and whence it came” (69-70). The imagination operates in a visionary state beyond the conscious control of the poet who does not know where inspiration comes from and how, thus rooting the source of creativity in the unconscious mind. That “imagination” (l, 10) is the faculty engendering the “dreams” (1) and “visions” (14) that are the substance of poetry is restated precisely in the declaration of poet-ics at the beginning of *The Fall of Hyperion*. As Van Ghent once again insightfully notes, it is “his apprehension of the unconscious sources of his poetry and his anxiety for emergence into conscious control of his mental life” (Van Ghent 1983: 246) that Keats is confronted with in the poem.

In the light of what has been said so far, the transparent juice – which affects the poet-narrator through the receptive act of ingestion, overpowers him against his will and produces an altered state of consciousness giving him access to a visionary experience – turns out to be a perfect symbol for the poetic imagination. To the potion the poet-narrator owes the vision that not only will disclose the true nature of a poet and the fate of the Titans but will also ultimately constitute the poem itself, which is indeed, as repeatedly said, “a dream”. The poet-narrator himself asserts it in explicit terms: “That full draught is parent of my theme” (46), which means that the transparent juice is “parent” – i.e., the source, the origin – of what is written,²² just like imagination is the source of poetry. This line testifies to the special significance of the potion in the poem as a whole, and indeed Stuart Sperry argues that, because of this, “the detail [of the transparent juice] and its interpretation are of vital consequence” (Sperry 1994: 319). Still, the drink has never been the subject of a dedicated study and its relationship with the imagination has been acknowledged only in passing comments by a couple of critics but without giving rise to a comprehensive interpretation,

22 With regards to the transparent juice, Gigante asserts that “its consumption is clearly productive of verse” (Gigante 2001: 506).

as is being attempted here. Sperry himself notices that the draught “seems in its effect to represent [Keats’s] own re-enactment of the Fall itself – the poet’s recourse to the transforming power of the imagination” (Sperry 1994: 320), and Alwes writes that the potion “overtakes him (l, 53-54, 55), just as the imagination itself has so often ‘overtaken’ Keats” (Alwes 1988: 198), but neither of them develops their insights, nor do they take into account the “transparent” quality of the drink.

Given that the adjective is not common at all in Keats’s poetry – in fact this is its only occurrence –, the choice to use it to describe the potion must have been deliberate and particularly meaningful. If it is true that the magical power of the juice stands for the “charm” of “imagination” (l, 10), then its transparency alludes to some characteristics of the poetic faculty. In one of the only instances in which the transparent quality of the drink has been taken into account, however cursorily, Kelly Grovier remarks that the “‘transparent juice’ has helped [the poet-narrator] to see transparently” (Grovier 2008). His isolated comment becomes far more telling within the interpretative frame of the present analysis, which has highlighted how the main property of both the drink and the imagination is precisely the ability to engender visions. Transparency is indeed commonly associated with sight and, more precisely, with clarity of vision:²³ in conditions of transparency one sees clearly without anything interposing or blurring or concealing what is seen. An opposition between clear vision and clouded sight runs through the whole passage. By drinking the transparent juice, the poet-narrator falls prey to a “cloudy swoon” (55), which temporarily clouds his sight but only to grant him access to a further level of vision. His perception of Moneta’s temple seems almost to be amplified: “I raised / My eyes to fathom the space every way” (81-82), albeit not limitless: “it seem’d that filmèd clouds / Might spread beneath” (63-64) the sanctuary,

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 23 It may be interesting to note, as Wilson does, that transparency has also been traditionally associated to clarity of vision in the sense of prophetic or mystic sight rather than physical seeing, a sense that could be considered to be more akin to the visionary experience of the poet-narrator in *The Fall of Hyperion*: see Wilson 2003: 7-15.

whose priestess first speaks from behind “white fragrant curtains” (106). Even when the poet-narrator gets a better view of her after undergoing a near-death experience that is a perfect counterpart of the drinking of the potion (121-134), she still appears to him as a “veilèd shadow” (141), a “tall shade, in drooping linen veil’d” (196). Even these veils, however, are bound to be lifted.

The visionary experience which the transparent juice induces in the poet-narrator appears to be governed by the same repeated dynamic that was at its origin: through different trials and stages he progressively removes the veils and films clouding his sight and acquires a power of clearer vision. The perfect transparency which was symbolised by the potion is ultimately gained when, as Van Ghent puts it, “the Dreamer asks Moneta to clear away the film from his mind” (Van Ghent 1983: 233), a question that once again is formulated in terms of vision: “I ask’d to see what things the hollow brain / Behind environ’d: what high tragedy / In the dark secret chambers of her skull / Was acting” (276-269). In order to show him the “high tragedy” that is the fate of the Titans, Moneta has to remove her veils (255-56: “with sacred hand Parted the veils”), but it is not enough: the poet-narrator needs not only to see her face but also to look directly into her brain, and indeed he does. As suddenly as when he had been translated from the garden to the marble temple, from one dream to another dream within a dream, so he now finds himself “deep in the shady sadness of a vale” (284). Moneta’s sanctuary has disappeared and they are both at the presence of Saturn himself, that is, in the scene inside Moneta’s brain, an even further level of vision, a dream within a dream within another dream.

The scene is the ultimate realisation of the premises – and promises – of the drinking of the transparent juice.²⁴ Through its ingestion

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 24 Van Ghent acknowledges the substantial correspondence between the two scenes: “In *The Fall*, the Dreamer will drink of that ‘bright elixir peerless’ not metaphorically but actually, when he eats of the divine meal in the grove of the gods; and the psychological symbolization of rebirth will be repeated, in almost the same terms, when from Moneta’s ‘electral’ brain the Dreamer receives an influx of archetypal ‘memory’ that gives him ‘power . . . of enormous ken, To see as a god sees’” (Van Ghent 1983: 220).

the poet-dreamer can see and enter Moneta's temple, consequently gaining access to such a perfect clarity of vision that makes her skull itself something transparent through which he can see. "This seeing which is not a seeing" (Pyle 2003: 453), not in the sense of external sight, and is of the same kind as Moneta's eyes, "visionless entire [...] / Of all external things" (267-68), corresponds to the visionary power of imagination. Keats seems here to be representing his own poetic imagination at work, and indeed this last vision consists in a nearly literal rendition of the beginning of the first *Hyperion*. "The difference between these lines and those of the original is that the landscape has become a vision of the dreamer, and is now seen through his eyes" (Alwes 1988: 208). It is as if Keats himself lifted a veil to show us the inside not only of Moneta's brain but of his own, so that we see the process through which the imagination conjures "the dream or vision that makes up the poem" (Van Ghent 1983: 239), that is, "the source of the poem in the most concrete sense" (ivi: 238). The process entails immediacy of vision, as insightfully noticed by Murfin and Stampone in their analysis of the quotation marks in the poem: "Moneta's speech – which hangs like a veil between mind and mind – falls away, as do those quotation marks which, in Keats's poem, have thus far marked the otherness of Moneta to the dreamer-speaker" (Murfin & Stampone 2017: 34). The image of the veil is evoked once again, this time in relation to Moneta's speech, which, by losing its quotation marks, becomes transparent and indistinguishable from that of the poet-narrator. At first, in fact, Moneta describes the scene,²⁵ but it is soon clear that her mediation is no longer necessary. Having acquired "a power within [him] of enormous ken / To see as a god sees, and take the depth / Of things as nimbly as the outward eye / Can size and shape pervade" (293-96), the poet-narrator has now unmediated access to the vision: "The lofty theme / At those few words hung vast before my mind / With half-unravell'd web" (296-98). He sees directly the scene that Moneta was describing.²⁶

25 "then Moneta's voice / Came brief upon mine ear: 'So Saturn sat / When he had lost his realms'" (290-92).

26 "I sat myself / Upon an eagle's watch, that I might see" (298-99).

The visionary power of the poet-narrator appears to be modelled after mind-to-mind communication, i.e., a mode of communication that is not mediated by language but entails immediate access to the mind of the other. Interestingly, similar kinds of communication have often been described in terms of transparency. This is the case of John Peters's description of Aquinas's idea of angelic communication, in which the interlocutors can dispense with the mediation of words and enter into direct contact with the interiority of the other: in conditions of "transparent bodies and transparent thoughts" (Peters 1999: 64), "the self and the other would both be transparent to behold" (ivi: 77). Peters investigates how the same ideal of perfect unmediated communication was at the root of nineteenth-century Spiritualism²⁷ and of its precursors at the beginning of the century, mesmerism and sympathy. The latter relies on a similar transparency between people allowing them to communicate directly without the need for language. In their studies of the notion, Ildiko Csengei and Seth Lobis respectively mention "the assumptions of transparency, virtue and disinterested sympathy" (Csengei 2012: 2) that characterised the non-verbal communication of sensibility and "the immediacy and transparency of sympathy" (Lobis 2015: 258). These examples are not strictly pertinent to *The Fall of Hyperion* but are functional to better delineate a conception of transparency as synonymous with immediacy and directness, which corresponds to the one suggested by the relationship between the juice and the power of unmediated vision it bestows.

In *The Fall of Hyperion*, however, the imagination which is symbolised by the potion appears to be related also to another, seemingly opposite idea of transparency. Transparency, in fact, can also be understood as the epitome of effective mediation, in that it entails the presence of a medium which, by being transparent, mediates so perfectly that it does not even seem to be there and becomes invisible. This point is highlighted by Ludwig Jäger in relation to mediated communication. Starting from the non-figurative definition of transparency as a mode of visibility in which the "mediated" rather than the "medium" is visible (Jäger 2015: 83), he goes on to call

27 See Peters 1999: 64.

'transparency' "any state in which communication is not 'disrupted,' i.e., in which the medium itself is not in the focus of attention" (*ibidem*). The application of this idea to communication is particularly relevant to *The Fall of Hyperion* and to the notion of imagination it presents. The ability of imagination to produce the visions that constitute the source and substance of poetry, in fact, is not enough to actually create poetry. As the poet-narrator makes clear in the incipit of the poem, "every man whose soul is not a clod / Hath visions" (l. 13-14), yet most men "live, dream, and die" (7) "bare of laurel" (7), which is here evoked as the symbol of poetic achievement. What is required in order to be a poet is the "utterance" (6) of the vision, "for Poesy alone can tell her dreams" (8).

Just as Moneta, the priestess of his unconscious creative power, has to "humanize [her] sayings to [his] ear" (ll. 2) in order to make them understandable to a mortal, so the poet has to translate the vision of his imagination into words in order to make it understandable to the reader. As Maureen McLane points out, in *The Fall of Hyperion* "the mediation between immortals and mortals becomes an explicitly linguistic mediation", thus representing "one version – the immortals' version, as it were – of Keats's theory of the work of poetry itself" (McLane 2000: 208). Poetry is an act of mediation, a linguistic mediation between the unconscious source of creativity and the written work that aims to communicate it to the reader. As stated at the beginning of the poem, "imagination" can be saved "from the sable charm / And dumb enchantment" (l. 10-11) – to which it falls prey precisely when it is "dumb", that is, when it does not tell its dream – only by "the fine spell of words" (9). These must be the words of someone who has "loved, / And been well nurtured in his mother tongue" (14-15). If it is true that the "feast is an objective correlative for the 'mother tongue' the poet needs for his poetry" (Yaeger 1986: 17) and, as I have been arguing, the juice is a symbol for the imagination, its transparency may then hint at another aspect of Keats's theory of imagination and poetry, namely the aspiration to a transparent language. In order to fully and authentically translate the dreams of imagination into poetry, the poet would need to have recourse to the "spell" (9) of words that can act as a transparent

medium and render the dream without any distortion or adulteration, just like something can be perfectly seen through a sheet of glass. Yet, the transparency of language that makes a true poet is an ideal that is far from being easily achieved, and indeed, in *The Fall of Hyperion*, transparency is always gained at a high cost, a cost which often comes close to death. Transparent language is itself a dream, whose failure may be signified by the fact that the poem is left unfinished and the vision is never entirely translated into words.

I will conclude by returning to the very beginning – that is, to the ambivalence of the *pharmakon* – and coming full circle. If the imagination needs to be saved "from the sable charm" (10) that would make its dreams those of a fanatic or a mere "dreaming thing" (168), then the imagination itself appears to be an ambivalent power.²⁸ Without the "fine spell of words" (9), such power results only in the solipsistic visions of the "dreamer" who "venoms all his days" (175) and is "distinct, / Diverse, sheer opposite" (199-200) to the poet. That imagination can be "sickly" (11) Keats had already acknowledged in "On Visiting the Tomb of Burns" (1818) and in the verse-letter he sent to Reynolds on 25 March 1818, in which he contemplates the possibility that imagination may turn out to be detrimental when "brought / Beyond its proper bound" (78-79) and not subjected to "any standard law" (81). Keats returns to such doubts and concerns about the true nature of imagination in *The Fall of Hyperion*, which, rather than being a celebration of the visionary power of imagination as source of poetry,²⁹ is an exploration of its ambiguity and, above all, of Keats's "anxiety" (Van Ghent 1983: 246) towards his own imaginative faculty and creative potential. Indeed, the whole poem revolves around the uncertainty whether he is truly a poet or just a dreamer. Just as the *pharmakon*-like "transparent juice" can kill

28 The importance of ambivalence to how Keats's imagination works has been acknowledged by many critics: see Blackstone 1966: 257; Ricks 1974: 208; Flesh 1995: 150; Grovier 2008. However, only Newlyn links Keats's ambivalence to how Keats sees his own imagination when she mentions "his ambivalent attitude [...] to imaginative power" (Newlyn 1993: 250).

29 This is confirmed by the fact that, in this poem, "Keats uses the term 'dreamer' in a somewhat different way from that which is usual in his poetry" (Leveson 2001: 129) and which is generally positive.

but also give access to a higher visionary experience, so the imagination can produce the sterile dreams of a dreamer who gives no “benefit” (167) to anybody but also elicit the visions that the poet translates into words and communicates to others, thus pouring “a balm upon the world” (201).³⁰

30 In her study of Keats's plants and botanical knowledge, Fiona Stafford links the ambivalent effect of the transparent juice to the uncertainty whether the poet-narrator is a poet or a dreamer, but without relating the two aspects to their middle term, that is, imagination: “The swoon that follows [drinking the transparent juice] resembles ‘What ‘tis to die and live again’, leaving the speaker uncertain as to whether he is a poet, pouring out a healing balm, or a dreamer; causing only irritation” (Stafford 2018: 78).

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