

Shahidha K. Bari, *Keats and Philosophy: The Life of Sensations*. London and New York: Routledge, 2012, pp. 184. £80.00. ISBN 9780415888639.

In a letter to Benjamin Bailey written on 22 November 1817, John Keats unmistakably rejects rationalism with his famous exclamation ‘However it may be, O for a Life of Sensations rather than Thoughts!’. As definite as this might sound, Keats’s self-declared preference for ‘Sensations’ over ‘Thoughts’ nonetheless indicates an engagement with the philosophy of perception, in particular the empirical theories of Locke, Berkeley, Hume and Hartley, as well as the ontological issues raised by Kant’s perceptive idealism in his *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). To that end, Keats – in the same letter – deals with the dichotomy between ‘Genius and the Heart’, and the characteristics of ‘Men of Genius’ and ‘Men of Power’, emphasising the significance of ‘the authenticity of the Imagination’ and the function of Truth (‘what the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be Truth’), and concluding that he has ‘never yet been able to perceive how anything can be known for truth by consecutive reasoning’. As can be seen, Keats went to great length to reconfigure the relationship between ‘perception’, ‘reason’, and ‘truth’, which, among other things, would allow him to more fully understand the role of the ‘Imagination’ in poetic composition, thus arranging and interpreting our sense impressions and rendering our perception of reality more meaningful. Although initially welcoming the value of “delight in sensation” – here mindful of Wordsworth’s “sensations sweet” (l. 28) in *Tintern Abbey* – Keats’s greatest preoccupation soon turned into the idea of a reconciliation between the senses and the reason, eventually focusing on the role of ‘a complex Mind – one Who would exist partly on Sensation partly on thought’ (LJK, I, 254).¹

It therefore appears as if theory, knowledge, intellectual and philosophical understandings are equally evoked in Keats’s ‘Life of Sensations’. In light of these concerns, Shahidha Bari’s intention in her recently published *Keats and Philosophy: The Life of Sensations* is to re-evaluate Keats’s poetry by taking into account the philosophy of twentieth-century phenomenology. In comparison to the philosophy of perception of Keats’s own time – which Bari, despite her book’s subtitle, surprisingly neglects to illustrate (or even mention) – phenomenology argues for the subjectivity of experience – the world to be perceived as it appears to us – and against the noumenal reality of ‘Things as They Are’. Written for a specialist audience, Bari’s book explicitly concentrates on ‘the nature of touch’ (Chapter 1) – although it is not entirely clear as to why the other sensory modes such as sight, smell, hearing and taste are excluded, given the importance of synaesthesia in Keats’s work – ‘the evocation of presence’ (Chapter 2), ‘the poetics of ecology’ (Chapter 3), ‘the thinking of freedom’ (Chapter 4), and ‘the weight of grief’ (Chapter 5) (xiii). In order to identify the ‘phenomenality’ of Keats’s poetry, she meticulously interweaves a range of Keats’s letters and poems (the odes and the longer narratives – with the exception of *Hyperion* and *Endymion* – are purposefully omitted), and moves away from the tradition of earlier Keatsian criticism, characterised by what she defines as ‘the careful historicisation of a limited canon’ (xv). To that end, Keats’s poems are read alongside the phenomenological ideas of twentieth-century theorists such as Heidegger, Nancy, Derrida, and Lacoue-Labarthe. Kant, somewhat remarkably, is mentioned only in relation to Lyotard – and not until the end of Chapter 1 (21 ff.) – when it would undoubtedly have been more pertinent to commence with a Kantian reading of the Sublime.

Although Bari judiciously points out that ‘the philosophical approach to Keats’s work is not a new venture’ (xiv), her particular contribution to knowledge in the field of Romantic

¹ Quotations from Keats’s letters are taken from *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821: Volumes 1-2*, ed. Hyder Edward Rollins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press) and are cited parenthetically thus: LJK, I, 278.

studies is to make a distinctive case for Keats's phenomenological poetry. The book is thorough in its coverage of the relevant philosophical and theoretical fields. Bari offers astute readings of Keats's poems (Chapters 3, 4, and 5 are especially good) and presents particularly fresh accounts of *Endymion*, *Hyperion*, and some of the lesser-known 'ecological' lyrics such as 'After Dark Vapours', 'Blue – 'Tis the Life of heaven', and 'To Ailsa Rock'. Though not always written in firm, clear, and elegant prose – at times repetitions of concepts and typographical errors, as well as some unwieldy and convoluted syntax undermine the force of the argument – Bari's study is a useful addition to Keatsian scholarship, demonstrating how phenomenologically modern Keats's poetry is in a world where 'vapours become miasma, air becomes carbon monoxide, blue becomes ultraviolet, and light becomes radiation' (85). Presenting us with a poet-philosopher whose 'ruined gods, feeling subjects and errant heroes come alive in the light of the present day' (152), Bari helps the reader to consider the significance of Keats's poetry and its legacies in twentieth-century thought. Having identified some shortcomings, there is much to admire in this provocative study, which ultimately develops a sound understanding of its intellectual field and makes a valid and worthwhile contribution to knowledge in the subject area. The only thing I'm left wondering at this point is: why is there no mention of Merleau-Ponty?

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