A ROMANTIC AND A SAMURAI: A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT MORTALITY
AND SOCIETY ACCORDING TO MIYAMOTO MUSASHI AND JOHN KEATS

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ABSTRACT

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John Keats, one of the most famous and frequently canonized British poets, has been the focus of enormous research. However, that research has typically focused on explications of his poems or discussion of his modes of thought in other pieces of British or sometimes American literature. Rarely has scholarship used Keats as an opportunity to look cross-culturally. The focus of this work is on creating a new context in for the work of British poet John Keats and the writer and samurai Miyamoto Musashi on the related subjects of death and truth in society. By examining them, both in terms of their writing and biographies, it is clear that neither author is complete without reading them in the context of a pluralistic discussion on death and society. By using both authors, a dialogue emerges on these subjects in which we can see a similarity in the human experience with truth and death as well as specific differences in their approach to what Musashi calls emptiness and Keats calls negative capability. By placing these two
authors within each other’s context, a new way of viewing their works emerges in that we see their works as individual struggles with human mortality as opposed to seeing them in their traditionally singular contexts and viewing them of universal theorists on the experience of dying.

By applying theories which deconstruct society’s influence over its members we can begin to understand the debate between Keats and Musashi on how people accept mortality. Furthermore, by examining the writing of these two authors in light of these theoretical perspectives, it is possible to see how these theoretical viewpoints began to play out in the lives of both of these artists. Finally, after looking at the diverging personal experiences of Keats and Musashi, we can again reconcile both authors through the idea of developing a pluralism of authorities and experiences on the subject of mortality.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

John Keats is one of the most famous and frequently canonized British poets and has been the focus of enormous research. However, that research has typically focused on explications of his poems or discussion of his modes of thought in other pieces of British or sometimes American literature. Rarely has scholarship used Keats as an opportunity to examine his perspectives on death and society cross-culturally. The focus of this work is on creating a new context in for the work of British poet John Keats and the writer and samurai Miyamoto Musashi on the related subjects of death and truth in society. By examining them, both in terms of their writing and biographies, it is clear that neither author is complete without reading them in the context of a pluralistic discussion on death and society. By using both authors, a dialogue emerges on these subjects in which we can see a similarity in the human experience with truth and death as well as specific differences in their approach to what Musashi calls emptiness and Keats calls negative capability, or the creative advantage a poet or artist has by being “in uncertainties.” By placing these two authors within each other’s’ context, a new way of viewing their works emerges in that we see their works as individual struggles with human mortality as opposed to seeing them in their traditionally singular contexts and viewing them of universal theorists on the experience of dying.
By applying theories which deconstruct society’s influence over its members we can begin to create a conversation on their subjects that includes the life experiences of Keats and Musashi and expands the contextual understanding of both authors. Furthermore, by examining the writing of these two authors in light of these theoretical perspectives, it is possible to see how these theoretical viewpoints began to play out in the lives of both of these artists. Finally, after looking at the diverging personal experiences of Keats and Musashi, we can again reconcile both authors through the idea of developing a pluralism of authorities and experiences on the subject of understanding and accepting death.

While there are apparent similarities in the subject and function of their work, it is important to look at the significant differences each author approaches the subject of the society from which they come. For both authors, biography is of vast importance in understanding their written work. For both authors the subject(s) they undertake in their writing are direct reactions to the circumstances of their lives (or deaths). Focusing on “Ode to The Nightingale” and The Book of Five Rings gives us a look into the written responses to the universal experiences of two influential authors form vastly different times and places, and so helps to the divergent, and ultimately convergent ideologies of these two authors. By analyzing them together, a new and necessary comparative approach can be achieved with regards to both authors.
CHAPTER 2

MUSASHI’S EXPERIENCE WITH MORTALITY AND DOMINANT SOCIETY

Biography

To understand the ways in which Musashi dialogues with Keats on the subject of understanding and responding to human mortality and truth in society, it is of necessary to study the ways in which they both dealt with the prospect of their own death. For both writers the threat of death lurked in every aspect of their lives. It is important to look at the ways in which their lives were in danger in order to understand how the threat of dying became a part of their writing. Examining them in terms of their biography also helps us to determine the differences between them so that, after understanding how they are different and what may have caused their differences, the ways in which their final philosophies are similar may be able to more thoroughly reconcile two seemingly different traditions of thought.

The life and stories surrounding Miyamoto Musashi generally relate to his martial accomplishments or some other facet of his construction as a warrior. This is important to acknowledge, because it defines his relationship to mortality. His relationship to death is defined by his martial conflicts, and his authority on the subject is inextricably linked to his stature as a martial figure. It is widely acknowledged that Musashi is a cultural
icon whose importance worldwide is difficult to ignore, but he is specifically important, not only as a figure of martial wisdom in Japan, but as a world-wide icon associated with the thought and philosophy which accompanies practitioners of martial arts which come out of Japanese warrior tradition. While he is widely known for the mythos surrounding his stature as a swordsman, his lasting legacy as a martial artist and philosopher comes in the form of his writing and painting. *The Book of Five Rings*, is not only a study in the life of a martial artist; it is also a romantic view of the natural world that responds to the fear of dying and the confounding nature of social living through a rejection of the dominant culture.

According to his brief autobiographical information at the beginning of *The Book of Five Rings*, Musashi was born in 1584. His father was a landed samurai and senior vassal to the Shinmen Clan and his childhood was one that generally revolved around the martial arts. As a member of the samurai class he was a practitioner of several schools of martial arts (Wilson, *The Lone Samurai* 260). Because of his father’s place as a martial artist, Musashi was also trained from a young age. His early life as a member of the samurai class is important because it links him to a specific cultural tradition which he will subvert later in his life. His early experience in the life of a traditional samurai family demonstrates that he had a degree of familiarity with the institution against which he will ostensibly rebel later in his life. The events of his life both familiarized him with and distanced him from the dominant samurai culture. In this way his biography lays the groundwork for the writing he will do later in life as a product of samurai culture, but also as a person who has consciously and explicitly attempted to deviate from the traditional modes of success and behavior.
While Musashi enjoyed his training, his home life was not a happy one. At a young age his father divorced Musashi’s mother and became increasingly hostile towards him. In one particular instance, his father became upset with him after Musashi offered criticism to his father during a training exercise and threw a knife at his son. This then inspired Musashi to leave the care of his father and begin living with his mother. Not long thereafter he began traveling with his uncle, a priest (Wilson, *The Lone Samurai* 268).

This episode helps to show a specific moment in time where Musashi departs from the traditional institutions of the samurai class. His father, as a member of the institution, behaves in a manner which forces Musashi to exit that life and live with other members of his family. It is a clear demonstration of the schism that begins to exist between Musashi and the society which he was born into.

It was during his time with the priest that Musashi fought his first duel to the death. He was thirteen years old, and after insulting a wandering samurai decided to fight him rather than apologize for the insult. Thus began his life as a wanderer and warrior, and by extension, a person who straddles the life of a samurai (conformity to the institutional ideal) and his rejection of it. Over the next several decades Musashi continued to fight and win against numerous opponents which gained him renown. It should be noted that during this time period he was a largely transient man, a shugyosha or wandering martial artist (Wilson *The Lone Samurai* 230). As a shugyosha, Musashi likely would not have had a home of any kind, nor did he have a family or official title. As William Scott Wilson adeptly points out, “We have very few reliable facts about Musashi’s life,” (*The Book of Five Rings*, 14). What we do know about his life mainly
revolves around the few pages he wrote about himself, some official documents and the outcomes of his fights. This is largely an indication of how removed he was from the society at large. Often times a shugyosha would spend long periods of time living out of doors and between villages as they traveled. While these facts clearly show some detachment from the traditional world, they also show that, in some ways he conformed to society’s modes of behavior. While he did not have any official position in the society, he still grew up to be a warrior, much as his class would have demanded of him had he stayed a part of the mainstream society. This time in his life, shows that while Musashi certainly meant to subvert the received ideology of what it means to be a samurai/soldier, he did it from within the structure of society. He still fulfilled, essentially, the role which was chosen for him, albeit, in a more detached way.

For Musashi, his life played out very much in the way of a quintessential shugyosha, wandering from town to town accepting and fighting duels, and occasionally becoming involved in the military battles of his time. As he got older, however, he began to take notice of other art forms outside of the martial variety. In the early 1640’s Musashi gained a close relationship with the Hosokawa Clan and continued to teach and practice his skills with them. It was at this point in time when Musashi came the closest to becoming officially endorsed by an established clan. He, however was not endorsed when the leader of the clan tragically died. According to Wilson, directly following this “began a period in which the famous swordsman concentrated increasingly on poetry, tea, painting and sculpture,” (Wilson The Book of Five Rings 18). Only a few years later, he began to fall seriously ill and started to write his book, The Book of Five Rings. At the end of his life, Musashi retreated into Reigan cave on Mount Iwato. He meant to live out
the last of his days in the natural world but was reportedly convinced to return to his residence where his students could watch over him. He died shortly thereafter (Wilson *The Book of Five Rings* 19).

The end of Musashi’s life functioned similarly to the earlier parts of it in that he would subvert the common mode of behavior by performing normal functions of life in society, but in way that was different from the norm. It was not uncommon for samurai to compose poetry or paint, but Musashi’s writing, specifically *The Book of Five Rings*, is a demonstration of the necessity of departing from the norm. Even his death, in which he meant to die alone in contemplation in a natural setting but was taken back to a religious institution, shows his emphasis on living outside of society, but his tendency to make these assertions from within society.

**Musashi and Truth**

The importance of Musashi’s biography is readily apparent when we use it to examine his philosophy of living. As demonstrated through the knowledge we have of his life, he constantly faced death as a circumstance of his life. The way that he responds to the threat of death is a direct product of the threat itself. *The Book of Five Rings* is a manifestation of Musashi’s struggle with truth. He says in his final chapter “To be in the world and see things poorly. To be unable to distinguish one matter from another and to regard this as Emptiness-this is not the true Emptiness. All that is just the mind of confusion,” (145). By this he means that, to understand the world and, to be able to accept mortality, requires Musashi’s deconstructionist approach. By saying that his way is one in which Emptiness, which can be described as a full deconstruction of the world,
is what allows one to “distinguish one matter from another” assumes that there is a constructed world which obscures truth.

For Musashi, the being able to deconstruct the world around him in such a way that Truth is known to him allows him to come closer to accepting death. He says at the beginning of the first chapter of his book “Now in writing this book, I am neither borrowing the ancient words of Buddhism or Confucianism, nor using old examples from the military chronicles or practices. Within the view of this one style, I will express the heart of Truth, using the Ways of Heaven and Kanzeon as mirrors,” (Wilson The Book of Five Rings 39). His goal is to gain a measure of insight and knowledge through the perfection of his art, not simply social or political success or even survival. His path towards wisdom is one that relies on inward meditation and perfection. The “Way” he refers to is his practice as a martial artist. He therefore intends to gain spiritual awareness through the act of perfecting himself with regards to the perfection of his chosen art (martial arts).

In some sense this is a very similar idea to the way in which Keats worked with his mortality. As I will discuss later in more depth, the act of creating poetry was a source of comfort and means of dealing with his mortality. While not so focused on using poetry to defeat death, it was nevertheless his goal to perfect it, likely in order to further help him deal with his mortality.

For him, this inward contemplation cannot be achieved in the mainstream culture of his time. The world he lived in provided too much distraction through its constructed ideas of actuality. Just as the above quote references that he means to express Truth
outside the language of the popular religions of his culture, he also references the need to teach himself with regards to his martial development. This is demonstrated by the fact that he says he will neither reference the language of popular religions or the works of traditional military thought. He even says specifically that “I have never had a teacher while studying the ways of the various arts and accomplishments, or in anything at all,” (Wilson *The Book of Five Rings* 38). Through these ideas Musashi marries the development of his wisdom and spirituality to the perfection of his chosen art of being a warrior. Similarly, the only possible way to gain the type of perfection he requires for the insight he seeks is to search inward and avoid the teachings of the rest of society.

**Theories of the Confounding Nature of Society**

*Derrida and Musashi*

Musashi’s desire to educate himself and live outside of the bounds of society has is something that has also been discussed in western philosophy. The idea that society corrupts the individual is a long standing idea that is, ironically, reflected in society’s literature and thought throughout time. While Musashi obviously would not have been aware of any type of western theory of society’s propensity to misguide, Derrida discuss human societies in a way that speaks globally. His theories describe societies in a general sense and therefore apply to a multitude of civilizations. He does not seek to describe only the people or society from which they hail or “global agents,” he views his subject in terms of “planetary subjects,” (Spivak 73), by which I mean that he discusses society as a planet wide phenomenon rather than in terms of a singular global actor.
Jaque Derrida’s ideas on the construction of society offer an important perspective on the perspective of *The Book of Five Rings* in that it gives an understanding of context it is written in. While Derrida does not offer insight into the Japanese society in which the book was written, he does offer a perspective on constructed reality which meshes well with Musashi’s ideas of being spiritually and martially stymied by a false view of the world.

In an interview entitled “Deconstruction and Actuality” Derrida gave after the release of his book *Spectres de Marx*, Derrida discusses the many ways in which we perceive society and the ways in which our perceptions of society warp our view of reality. He coins two terms which he uses as points to describe the way in which humanity constructs “actuality.”

*Spectres de Marx*, written in the early ninteties helps to parse out the state of Marxism in modern times through the apparatus of deconstruction. This mode of operating as a theoretical backdrop has been important in criticism of western literature, but also holds importance for traditions of though throughout the world. As Christopher Wise says in the introduction to his article “The Figure of Jerusalem and Jaque Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*” Deconstruction does not therefore offer us yet another footnote to Plato, or a new way of practicing Western philosophy, but a potentially liberating alternative to dominant Western modes of theorizing the real,” (Wise 79). This characterization of Derrida as a theorist, not necessarily tied to Plato and all of western philosophical thought but as a voice which means to shed former ideas on the notion of reality, is important in locating a theoretical perspective from which to engage Musashi.
It is of particular importance when discussing Musashi as he relates to Keats for the reason that Derrida marks the most significant difference between the two of them.

While Musashi, like Derrida is focused on a deconstruction of the world in terms of clearing “the clouds of confusion,” (Musashi, Trans. Wilson The Book of Five Rings 146), Keats is less concerned with deconstructing reality and seeing clearly, and more interested in the possibilities of uncertainties.

The discussion of “Deconstruction and Actuality” predominantly revolves around Derrida explaining two terms that he coins which help him to explain the nature of his theories of reality. The first, artifactuality, is, as Derrida says, “The first (artifactuality) means that actuality is indeed made: it is important to know what it is made of, but even more necessary to recognize that it is made,” (Derrida 76). He goes on to say that “it (actuality) is sorted invested and performatively interpreted by a range of hierarchising and selective procedures-fictitious or artificial procedures which are always subservient to various powers and interests of which their subjects and agents are never sufficiently aware,” (Derrida 76). The world we perceive and the reality we know is not necessarily actuality, instead we are only marginally aware of a constructed reality, the constructors of which are eternally obscure to us.

This perception of the world presents some significant problems for humanity. As Derrida says “The reality of actuality, however individual, irreducible, stubborn, painful, or tragic it may be- only reaches us through fictional devices,” (Derrida 76). For a person searching for truth, the construction of reality would be something that would impede any real enlightenment, it would be what Musashi calls “the clouds of confusion,” about which he says “He (one following the Way) polishes the two hearts of
his mind and will, and sharpens the two eyes of broad observation and focused vision. He is not the least bit clouded, but rather clears away the clouds of confusion,” (Musashi, Trans. Wilson *The Book of Five Rings* 146). Musashi discusses the importance of focused vision and clearing away the notions of the constructed reality.

Derrida is sure to express that all perception of actuality is a construction of some kind or another, or at least we are all sufficiently unaware of what is actual and what is constructed that we essentially experience simultaneity of realities in which all “actuality” is simultaneously actual and artificial, Derrida calls it “Artifactuality” and “Actuvirtuality”. Musashi discusses this same idea from the perspective of someone enlightened to the realities the actual world saying “But when you see things from the straight Way of the mind, taking in the world at large, you will see that each person will have the preferences of his own heart, and each eye will have its own distortions,” (Musashi, Trans. Wilson *The Book of Five Rings* 146). In some sense, these are the same ideas, that at various points one person sees another person’s reality as false and constructed and the subject believes themselves to understand reality, while both exist in reality which is constructed by their own biases.

Derrida’s theory compliments Musashi’s final chapter very well. The entire discussion of Emptiness, which is the telos of the book, revolves around the ability of a subject to see through the constructions of society and understand the world around one’s self. Musashi says “The heart of Emptiness is in the absence of anything with form and the inability of to have knowledge thereof,” (145). The idea of artifactuality, constructed reality, is what emptiness exists in absence of. Derrida is important to understanding Musashi because, in some sense, Musashi explains emptiness and Derrida explains what
Emptiness is not. Musashi touches on the subject of living in constructed reality discussing being “unable to distinguish one matter from another,” but to understand the idea of what Emptiness is devoid of requires theory that explains what its antithesis is.

Further complimenting Derrida’s idea of multiple levels of constructed reality is the name Musashi gives his philosophy: The Way. The Way is discussed as a process with Emptiness at its end. As Musashi says “Make the heart of Truth your Way,” (146). The act of deconstructing the world is a process, it requires moving through multiple layers of construction. By reading Derrida as a companion to Musashi, the nature of the Way as a process is more evident. It is the process of deconstruction. Derrida does depart from Musashi in that he does not believe full deconstruction is a possibility, whereas Musashi evidently believes himself to have reached Emptiness.

Bringing the works of Derrida to the subject of Musashi helps us to understand his Way better. Derrida helps to give us the idea that the Way and deconstruction are processes rather than explicit revelations. It may at first seem that both Musashi and Derrida discuss deconstruction, or the Way in terms of knowing or not knowing, but Musashi’s idea of a way, in concert with Derrida’s explanation of multiple levels of constructed reality demonstrate a perspective of both in which understanding actuality is not a matter of knowledge, but rather a continued development towards a goal of Emptiness.

**The Book of Five Rings and Musahί’s Philosophy**

The book is built into five scaffolding chapters which help one to understand the philosophy of the author over the course of five major steps. The first chapter (Earth)
lays the groundwork for the main thrust of Musashi’s philosophy in the final chapter (Emptiness). He designates each chapter with an elemental title which he uses to describe the nature of the subject he discusses in each one. He writes the book from the point of view of someone giving advice and so the earlier chapters tend to have more concrete lessons for winning confrontations. Today, the book continues to be read as a standard for businessmen to learn negotiation skills since the 1980’s (Cate 62).

Musashi begins his book with the Earth chapter, thus named for its broad treatment of the philosophy he will later discuss more specifically. Musashi says “By knowing the large, you know the small; and from the shallow, you reach the deep. By drawing out a straight road across the topography, I have thus named this opening chapter the Earth Chapter,” (Wilson 47). The opening chapter provides descriptions of the world in which Musashi, and, presumably, his followers lived. The chapter subheadings describe things like “The Way of the Martial Arts.” He also uses this chapter to describe the reason for dividing the book into five different parts.

After having laid the groundwork in the opening Earth Chapter, Musashi continues to describe his way in the Water chapter. The water chapter takes as its focus a more esoteric idea. Musashi says “Taking water as a model, ones makes the mind like water. Water follows the form of either an angular container or a round container, it becomes either a small drop or a great sea,” (47). Here, Musashi discusses one of the most central aspects of his way: the frame of mind one needs to achieve in order to set themselves along the way that Musashi describes. This chapter begins by speaking broadly about the general frame of mind one must cultivate in order to behave in a way that will help someone to succeed in his way. As the chapter continues, Musashi
becomes more and more specific on ways in which someone should consider different aspects of the samurai life. It may, at first, seem that Musashi is robbing the reader of the self discovery that he finds touts earlier by addressing these areas that one must study. However, his advice is generally open-ended, and he makes it clear that the subject (reader) will only understand the principle he is explaining when they have investigated in themselves. This is evidenced by the fact that, of the 32 brief passages that comprise this chapter of the book, 25 of them encourage the reader to independently investigate the principle themselves. So, while Musashi does try to guide the reader, he does encourage self discovery as opposed to simply accepting his word.

The third chapter, the Fire chapter, is a practical guide to his form of martial art. It is a companion chapter to the Water chapter in that one discusses internal principles one must consider, while the other address the external issues of being a member of the warrior class, and how to deal with them. In terms of understanding Musashi in relation to Keats, this chapter is less importance than others because of its emphasis on understanding how to fight another person in seventeenth century Japan. It does offer some insight into the ways in which Musashi exercised his art, but it doesn’t offer as much to the reader in terms of understanding his perception of life and death.

The Wind chapter, which comes next does offer us some insight into Musashi and his views of the other styles of martial arts and their consumerism. In one section, sub headed “Using Many Techniques with the Sword In Other Styles” he says “Teaching people many techniques with the sword makes the Way into a saleable item, and the knowledge of many techniques is for the sake of impressing the beginner,” (131). This line is important and representative of the sentiment running throughout this chapter. He
wants to distinguish himself from other styles, not simply because he perceives himself to be more talented, but more importantly, because they are tainted by a consumerist agenda. This pairs very well with Derrida and his discussion of the way in which we interpret actuality. Just as Derrida critiques our perception of actuality because of the confounding variable of personal interests, teachers of other styles present the “Way” in a manner that suits them financially, thereby causing a disconnect in the student’s mind between what may truly be beneficial for them, and what the teacher is telling them.

The final chapter is the Emptiness chapter. Interestingly, it is by far the shortest chapter, at about five pages in length, while the others range from about twenty to thirty five pages. It is also the most important chapter in that it is the end result and destination of the rest of the book. The construction of the book is similar to an extended essay in that each chapter is meant to individually develop a single aspect of his philosophy into his concluding chapter. While the maxims that he describes earlier are parts of his “Way,” this chapter is where he describes fully what his way is. He says

While you are yet ignorant of true Emptiness, you may think through your own certain Way, relying on neither Buddhism nor the laws of society, and think it is good. But when you see things from the straight Way of the mind, taking in the world at large, you will see that each person will have the preferences of the their own heart, and each eye will have its own distortions. This is turning your back on the way.
Know the meaning of this, and make the straightforward your foundation.

Make the heart of truth your Way. (146).

This is in essence the point of the entire book. It is his strategy to survive his world and find a truth that allows him to ease the concerns of mortality. It is an interesting passage that both reflects and refutes Keats’ idea of negative capabilities in favor of a positive truth. In both cases the authors search for the emptiness, the state of being freed from concerns, but Musashi decides that it is possible to find that emptiness while Keats does not.

**Musashi: Living Within and Beyond Society**

This uncertainty and the quest for a life in which Musashi could find “actuality” manifested itself in his rejection of society. It may appear to some, Musashi, seemingly did not release himself fully from the confines of his society. He defined himself as a samurai and a martial artist. He fulfilled the role of the warrior throughout his life. This is very evident in the fact that he chose to fight in duels and military battles in order to grow in his stature as a samurai. While he may have lived alone at times and attempted to learn to live without the aid of others, the actions he took may clearly be seen as conformity to a code of behavior. He performed the actions and duties required of him as member of his social position.

While this fact demonstrates that Musashi did not live beyond the bounds of his society, the way in which he performed these roles was in fact quite different than his peers. In many ways Musashi subverted the traditional mode of being a member of society while maintaining membership in the society. In this way he is able to remain a
figure of cultural dissonance, or even cultural freedom while working within the
established metanarrative of the samurai culture that was established by his society and
trying to grow beyond it. For Musashi, Truth can be found in the perfection of one’s
work or art. Interestingly, this is a theme which resonates with Keats who discusses
negative capability, or a state of uncertainty, to help himself grow with regards to his
chosen art and method of grappling with his death.

The relationship between Keats and death is one of the most important
undertakings of his poetic life. It is his interaction with his mortality that demonstrates
both the convergence and divergence of himself and Musashi. While Musashi faced death
in a very confrontational way, Keats experienced his death in a more protracted and
personal fashion. Unlike Musashi, he was not a samurai or a warrior of any kind, and
while he did not experience the threat of death in a confrontation, he did live with the
knowledge of his impending mortality. This difference in the ways in which these two
authors experienced death demonstrates their potentially different approaches to their
subject. This fact is important in terms of understanding Keats and the way his poems are
taught, scholarship often ignores how personal it is and the importance of multiple
sources of thought in order to understand both Keats and his subject.

Contemporary research on Keats has focused primarily on explication and
pedagogical approaches to his poems. Recent publications in Keats studies such as John
Kandl’s “The Timeless in Its Time: Engaging Students in a Close-Reading and
Discussion of the Historical Contexts of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn'” in 2003, offers
students a helpful tool in gaining some understanding of close reading and to understand
the work of Keats in a broad sense, but it is not helpful in understanding death, which
Keats takes as his primary subject. Reading Keats alone, without another voice, such as
Musashi’s limits the view of death to not only a strictly western perspective, but a strictly
Keatsian perspective.

A search through the recent publications on Keats and his work yields virtually no
research that links his writing to others. While Keats’ mode is a deeply personal one, his
theme of mortality and humanity require to be read in more expansive contexts. Keats is
a necessary point from which to discuss western literary tradition and thought, and
research on him has neglected to provide a necessary comparative point of view from
which to examine him and his work. His subject of human mortality is one that is
necessarily applicable to all people in all places, and his methods of approaching the
subject and the tools he employs for wrestling with it are an instance from which
dialogue on the myriad ways in which people experience their perception of mortality.
By adding depth to research on Keats and “The Nightingale” it becomes apparent that
universal tone in which “The Nightingale” is sometimes read is only appropriate on a
personal level for Keats.
CHAPTER 3

JOHN KEATS: POETRY AND DEATH

Keats’ Life and Death

As mentioned earlier, Keats’ poetry as it relates to mortality, is specific to him. It engages with his perception of dying, and offers his personal perspective on the subject. In order to understand the ways in which Keats’ alone is inadequate to discuss the subject of mortality, it is important to discuss his personal and unique experience with it. In understanding the way in which Keats experienced death, we can understand how his poetry may have been informed by his life, and furthermore, we can see how both Keats’ and Musashi’s relationship with death could have informed their divergent perspectives on the matter.

Keats’ experience with mortal illness began in 1819. It was in this year that his tuberculosis became a serious problem. The following year physicians instructed him that he would not survive another “English winter” and so he and friend, Joseph Severn, traveled together to Italy where Keats could find respite from the cold wetness of England. Unfortunately, the six week voyage was a brutal affair for the young poet, and it likely worsened his condition (Perkins 1183). For a few months Keats lived in Rome before his death in February of 1821.
During the final period of his life, Keats’ preoccupation with death and the fleeting nature of human life is evident in several places. One of which, of course, being what he intended for his epitaph: “Here lies one whose name was writ upon water,” (1184). In addition to wishing not to have his name on his tombstone, he also referred to the last months of his life as his “posthumous existence,” (1184). These lines display the fear and uncertainty that he felt at the end of his life. His intended epitaph in particular tells of a feeling of impermanence and insignificance. Both of these lines hint at a person who was grappling with impending mortality.

These anecdotes are indicative of the type of experience that Keats had with his death. His voyage to Italy and his “posthumous existence,” and epitaph are indications of his need to deal with his impermanence. They show a preoccupation with existence, which is something that is evident in “The Nightingale” and is also a marked departure from Musashi, whose preoccupation is with elevating his mind and spirit to a level where the mind or self is no longer the focus. Their different approaches, and different lives, show the ways in which Musashi’s need to overcome death and his adversaries can bring about a completely different approach to death than Keats, who struggled with the nature of his existence postmortem.

**Keats’ Nightingale – Dealing with Existence, and Being Conscious**

Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale” focuses on his fear of dying and his attempt to escape his fear, but also his state of being as he grapples with the subject of death. This poem, being written after his diagnosis but before his move to Italy, demonstrates Keats’ ongoing struggle with how to live with his mortality. He demonstrates this sentiment
clearly and poignantly in the third stanza when he says “Fade far away, dissolve, and
quite forget / What thou among the leaves hast never known,” (In 21-22). These lines
reflect a similar sentiment to Musashi, who wishes to shed his mindfulness. For Musashi,
it is more like a fear of death which comes along with existence of the self and for Keats
it is a knowledge of death, inherent to his humanity. In both cases the authors perceive
their death and fear it. Keats’, jealous of the nightingale, wishes to the world that he may
find a way to escape being human and looks for comfort in many places, the first being
alcohol: “O’ for a draught of vintage! That hath been / Cool’d a long age in the dep-
delved Earth,” (In 11-12). He then turns to poetry: “Away! Away for I will fly to thee, /
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards, / But on the viewless wings of Poesy,” (In 31-
33). Keats acknowledges that neither will truly free him from his predicament, but he
hopes to find a respite in the momentary release from himself that both offer
him. Interestingly, these poetic scenarios involve an alteration of his consciousness.
They involve the existence of the mind separate from the human body. The effect of
being drunk is important, because it alters his state in a predicatable way, whereas
“poesy,” imagination, involves the author, Keats, creating for himself a place or state of
being in which the concern of death is non-existent.

The quest for release from the worries of being human, as seen in “The
Nightingale” is not only referenced in the poem, but the poem itself exists as a type of
cathartic experience in which Keats uses to mitigate his fears. Keats needed a way of
coping with his death and he found it in his poetry. “The Nightingale” is not simply an
explanation of Keats emotions and desires, but a way of coping with them in themselves.
For Keats, writing and poetry could have had a soothing effect on his condition, or at least the way in which he dealt with and accepted his condition. “The Nightingale” itself demonstrates for itself its own worthiness in helping to allay the fears of the author, if only for a time. Keats himself writes “Away! Away! For I will fly to thee, / Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards, / but on the viewless wings of Poesy,” (31-33). These lines are nothing if not a clear demonstration of the power poetry had in Keats’ view. Its placement, after the speaker moves away from the mind altering effect of alcohol to help him forget about his death, shows it as a logical progression in his own mind beyond mind altering substances. The imagination, the ability for the mind to perceive the world in new ways, and to create a poetic voice with which to deal with the prospect of being mortal and explaining is in itself a cathartic experience.

**Negative Capabilities in Society and in “The Nightingale”**

While poetry was a way of coping for Keats the way in which he produced his poetry and the components that allowed him to construct his poetry are equally important and valid subjects to study in understanding Keats Musashi together. As discussed earlier, one’s involvement in society limits one’s view of truth. Both Derrida agreed that reality is a human construct. For Musashi this necessitated uninvolving himself in normal society, but for Keats, it presented him with the opportunity to continue to engage in his cathartic practice. Society, as a device to perplex and keep obscure the mysteries of the world, helps to keep him in uncertainties. For Keats, the ability to know what is true or to have a sense of certainty would be unimportant.
According to Keats the ability to exist in uncertainty, negative capability, is what allows an author to be able to write effectively. It is even apparent in “The Nightingale” in the final lines “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music:—Do I wake or sleep?” (79-80). The poem is a contemplation of the nature of being in uncertainties. His meditation on death and his attempts to free himself from it are predicated on different ways in which he attempts to add ambiguity to the state of his existence.

Keats discusses the nature of negative capabilities in a letter he wrote to George and Tom Keats following a trip to the theatre (December 21-27, 1817):

what quality went to form a man of achievement especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously-I mean negative capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason-Coleridge, for instance, would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetrallum of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half knowledge. This pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us not further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration (1276).

For Keats to continue to write and be concerned with beauty, he must be willing to not search for truth. This is another place in which what seems to be a similar message is
quite different with regards to Musashi. Where Musashi’s goal is to cut through the confusion surrounding society that he may elevate himself to “Emptiness,” Keats goal is to remain uncertain. The confounding nature of society that Derrida discusses would be of little concern to him because the goal for a Keatsian poet would not be cutting through illusions to understand the nature of death but rather to simply be uncertain. Neither accepting the illusions of society as true or searching for a truth beyond them is important. By concerning himself with a quest for truth, he would be taking a step backwards, away from poetry and imagination and the catharsis they provide.

This is another example of how the life experience of these authors’ lives demonstrate the need for multiple points of perspective in understanding their poetry. Without understanding negative capabilities as a theoretical perspective, set against other ideas of the importance of understanding the production of truth, it seems as though Keats’ work and Musashi’s work are guides capable of standing alone.

Keats sees negative capability as a central part of being a poet. Describing it as the central force in what made Shakespeare great certainly attests to his belief in the power of negative capability. Furthermore, with beauty as the central goal of the poet, one of the most important things to Keats would be to remain in an environment in which he could experience the unknowingness of society that he not be in search of a way to escape the world of men, lest he be lost to knowing and thus unable to enjoy the act of creating poetry.

Negative capability in “The Nightingale” deals predominantly with the nature of consciousness and existence. The poem is written in what seems to be a daze, the
speaker is in some sense unaware of where he is or how the music of the nightingale comes to him and the poem itself is about forgetting what it means to be mortal. The first line “My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains / My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,” (ln 1-2). The entire poem starts off, framed by this proclamation of “drowsy numbness.” Later, in the third stanza, the lines “Fade far away, dissolve and quite forget what thou among the trees hast never know,” (ln 21-22). Clearly, the speaker longs to be free of the fear of dying, like the bird is. The final lines of the poem also hint at the theme of negative capability which runs throughout the poem: “Was it a vision, or a waking dream? / Fled is that music-Do I wake or sleep?” (ln 79-80).

The imagery through these lines are all of perceptual uncertainty. The human speaker is not fully aware of his surroundings or condition. The poem speaks of forgetfulness, a state of being unable to recall the events of one’s experience in a way that allows them a positive answer of where they are and how they got there. Forgetfulness is a state of being which is possesses inherent negative capability. To forget is to be unaware, at least to some extent of one’s own self. The final line of the poem is even more poignant in its negative capability. The question of whether the speaker is waking or sleeping, alive or dead is one of the most fundamental metaphysical questions. It shows an uncertainty in an existential sense of how one exists. It does not offer an answer; the quandary is the art in itself.
Divergence from Musashi

Despite their similarities in subject and intention of removing one’s self from the perception of death, Keats diverges from Musashi in important and profound ways. As mentioned earlier, Keats did not ever leave the society he lived in and thus lived with the confounding nature of the society around him. This demonstrates a separation in terms of ideology and how to accept death. Whereas Keats saw unknowing as the spark to his creativity and poetry, Musashi saw it as an impediment to his art, and by extension, something that could lead to his death.

This is potentially due to the different ways in which the authors were confronted with their mortality. Perhaps, as someone dealing with the confrontational nature of death in combat, Musashi would have required a more positivistic approach to understanding his world and mortality, while Keats needed to approach the subject of himself in an intimate type of way. “The Nightingale” certainly reflects concerns and desires similar to Musashi, but it presents them in a much more human type of way. Where Musashi wants to rise above the position and situation of normal people, Keats focuses on explaining himself. It is a type of catharsis as opposed to a device to teach from.

This difference in situation and focus is part of the need to be a part of or separate one’s self from society. Keats found a method to cope within society and through its confusion, Musashi needed to find his truth elsewhere.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS

Why These Two Authors

The subject of death and coping with it is the major theme of both Musashi’s and Keats’ work. Central to that theme is the performance of each one’s chosen life style. In terms of studying the subject of Keats and Musashi

Keats views death as a uniquely personal experience, one that a human struggles to accept rather than defeat. Musashi, on the other hand experiences mortality in a way that is necessarily oppositional. It is, for him, an obstacle to overcome. Throughout The Book of Five Rings he tries to define the way in which one can defeat the fear of death. It is not really even a way to cope so much as it is a way to win against the fears and concerns that afflict the rest of the world. This idea of opening a conversation on how different perspectives affect the way in which we view death is important in seeing both of these authors in new ways. While they both speak universally, addressing the lives and concerns of all people in all times, it is apparent when reading them together that this is not the case. Adding new voices to the discussions from both authors changes the way in which we view either of them. By reading them together, we decentralize the discussion of both of them. The ways in which an American of British audience views the subject of mortality does not need to focus only on British or American authors, and
in fact, the discussion is strengthened by understanding it in a larger context. While mortality is a universal experience the way in which we address it is not, and so to understand the language we use to discuss it, a decentralized position is necessary.

Similar ideas apply to the ways in which we view the interaction between society and mortality. Keats’ contemplation in the midst of ambiguity in society contrasts with the idyllic existence and freedom that Musashi sought. Keats copes with death through poetry and negative capability, which, in some sense, require some type of confusion which society can provide, while Musashi attempts to overcome death, and by extension the society which can mislead him. Placing Musashi in the tradition of social theorists like Derrida adds Musashi to an ongoing discussion of the way in which people interact with society as well.

**How One Helps Us to Understand the Other**

Musashi offers an interesting and unique perspective on death and society. It is one in which he rejects the fear of mortality and compels himself towards a state in which he can find a kind of warrior’s enlightenment. While the prospect of dying in combat is obviously a concern for Musashi, as demonstrated in both his biography and the fact that he constructed a book and strategy for defeating it, his life demanded that he find a way to cope with his fears and misgivings over the life that he lead, and so his philosophy concerning life and death reflected such a necessity. Keats is important because he offers an opposition to Musashi. Facing a death, a more certain type death, Keats offers a different type of understanding of mortality.
Keats provides an oppositional opinion in the way that a person can perceive society, themselves and the world around them. To read Musashi or Derrida gives the reader only one perspective on truth, which is that it is impossible to be found within the confines of conforming to the norms and mores of society. Derrida explain the ways in which society constructs a reality, and Musashi gives the reader an application of those ideas in his dealing with the threat of death. When we read that in light of Keats and his idea of negative capabilities, we no longer see Musashi as someone who had a comprehensive understanding of society and the best way in which to deal with it. While his tone is one of complete confidence, we realize that his book is a creation of himself, and despite his efforts to shield himself from the influences of society he cannot prevent them from entering into his philosophy. The first sentence of the final chapter, the “Emptiness” chapter which provides the essence of his philosophy says “The heart of emptiness is in the absence of anything with form and the inability to have knowledge thereof,” (145). While this seems to be an indication that peace of the mind and the truth of the world are found in shedding the trappings of the world, Wilson explains in an endnote that this idea seems to be taken from Mahayana Buddhism, a faith which Wilson states Musashi was “undoubtedly acquainted with,” (154). Keats may help us to understand that Musashi may have also been in a state of negative capability brought on by his confusion in the face of society and his intent to shed society.

Musashi also helps us to read Keats in a similar way. Keats has been read for a long time in a similar way that Musashi has. They both speak to the universal human experience of death, and we have understood them in absolute types of ways. The way that each has affected the cannon of their respective cultures is profound, and they both
represent instances of important cultural significance on the subject of dying. Keats gives a sense of death as an affliction that human look for solace from. By reading Musashi alongside Keats, however, we recognize that this emotion or at least approach to the subject of human mortality may not be as universal as it may have seemed. Musashi helps by disagreeing with Keats in a large and intercultural discussion of humanity.

While many western poets and authors have discussed the nature of human mortality, it is important to set this discussion between writers from disparate times and regions. Both authors speak with global and universal appeal that it is important that a the discussion not only happen in the occident or the orient, but across places and times.

**Where These Discussions Take Place**

One of the most important aspects of this discussion between Musashi and Keats is where it would take place. The question of why these two authors necessarily comes back to the purpose of reading them together, in context of one another. The obvious situation for this debate happens in the classroom. While Keats has been a mainstay of western literary education, this paper demonstrates that to read him alone does not help to expand the discussion surrounding mortality and the ways in which we deal with it. It is important then that the classroom adapt to help students expand their perspective of the subject matter and the authors themselves by reading across historical and cultural contexts. By pairing authors such as Keats and Musashi, students gain more of a new perspective on Keats and can see them as taking part in wider discussions rather than stagnant ideas, compartmentalized into specific academic contexts.

Cappeluti, Jo-Anne. "For the Love of Nothing: Auden, Keats, and Deconstruction." Philosophy and Literature 33.2 (2009), 345-357.


WORKS CONSULTED


