

# Hyperion as Daoist Masterpiece: Keats and the *Daodejing*

Joshua M. Hall

*It should come as little surprise to anyone familiar with his concept of ‘negative capability’ and even a cursory understanding of Daoism that John Keats’ thought resonates strongly with that tradition. Given the pervasive, reductive understanding of Keats as a mere Romantic, however, this source of insight has been used to little advantage. His poem Hyperion, for example, has been roundly criticized as an untidy Romantic fragment. Here, by contrast, I will argue for a strategic understanding of Hyperion as a masterpiece in the Daoist tradition.*

It should come as little surprise to anyone familiar with his concept of ‘negative capability’ and even a cursory understanding of Daoism that John Keats’ thought resonates strongly with that Chinese philosophical tradition. However, given the near-universal mis-categorization of Keats a mere Romantic, this source of insight has been used to little advantage. *Hyperion*, for example, has been roundly criticized as an untidy Romantic fragment; on the contrary, we will argue strategically for an understanding of the poem as Keats’ Daoist masterpiece.

Keats wrote three longer poems, *Hyperion*, *The Fall of Hyperion*, and *Endymion*, the first two generally considered incomplete attempts at an epic poem, and the latter an unimpressive completed epic. Since literary criticism has historically tended to equate the worth or seriousness of a poem with its length, these three have received considerable critical attention, most of which finds the poems ultimately unsatisfactory. This is particularly the case for the original *Hyperion*. Against this historical trend, the present paper is an example of what happens when *Hyperion* is read as complete and satisfactory, which happens to coincide with reading it as a work in the philosophical Daoist tradition.

The subject of the poem *Hyperion* is the fall of the Titans at the hands of the Olympians, focusing on the Olympian sun-god Apollo’s replacement of the Titan sun-god Hyperion, thus the title of the work. In its final form, however, *Hyperion*

---

Correspondence to: Joshua M. Hall, Vanderbilt University, 2905 Burch Ave, Apt.13, Nashville, TN 37203, USA.  
Email: [joshua.m.hall@vanderbilt.edu](mailto:joshua.m.hall@vanderbilt.edu)

and Apollo each have very brief parts, and the longest and most philosophically rich passage in the poem is the speech of the Titan sea-god Oceanus in which he advises to the other Titans to accept this defeat as the inevitable will of fate.

The earliest criticism of *Hyperion* focuses on Oceanus's speech as expressing the theme of the poem, which, having been expressed, made finishing the rest of the poem unnecessary and functionally impossible for Keats. The second wave of criticism de-emphasizes the centrality of Oceanus's speech in the context of the poem's dramatic dialogue. In its place, these studies tend to valorize the roles of Hyperion and Apollo as these characters presumably would have developed had the poem been completed to its planned length. The influences of Wordsworth, Milton and Shakespeare, and biographical factors tend to weigh heavily in these analyses. The third wave, finally, reemphasizes the centrality of Oceanus's speech, but in a more nuanced and sophisticated way that finds the speech lacking in some way, thus giving the hypothetically-developed Apollo the potential to enact the aims of the poem more fully. Various critical frameworks tend to dominate these studies.

The present investigation will begin with a brief overview and interpretation of the *Daodejing*. We will then attempt a Daoist reading of the central speech of Oceanus, followed by a consideration of several previous studies of *Hyperion* in order to reveal certain Daoist moments and tendencies in those studies. Like the first and third waves of criticism, this Daoist interpretation will take Oceanus's speech as central, and like the third wave, it will offer a more nuanced interpretation of that speech. Finally, we will suggest a similarly Daoist interpretation of the rest of *Hyperion*.

### I. *Daodejing* as Theoretical Framework

The name *Daodejing* means literally 'The Book [*jing*] of the Way [*dao*] and its Power-Virtue [*de*]' or 'The Way's Virtue-Power Book'. Though traditionally attributed to Laozi, supposedly an older contemporary of Confucius, 'most contemporary scholars regard Laozi (literally "Old Master") as a mythical character and the *Laozi* [another name for the *Daodejing*] to be a composite work' though there may have been only one editor, working over a short period of time (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2003, p. 157). The text is derived from various sources, and is dated in the second or third century BCE, near the end of the chaotic and unstable Warring States period of Chinese history. Approximately half of the text is rhymed, and it consists of 81 chapters. The editors of one English translation of the *Daodejing* offer the following brief overview:

According to the *Laozi*, the *dao* is the source, sustenance, and ideal state of all things in the world. It is 'hidden' and it contains within it the pattern of all that we see, but it is not ontologically transcendent [i.e. not an omnipotent God-entity] . . . Because of their unbridled desires and their unique capacity to think, act intentionally, and alter their nature . . . humans tend to forsake their proper place and upset the natural harmony of the Way. The *Laozi* seeks to undo the consequences of such misguided human views and practices . . . The text is more a form of philosophical therapy than the presentation of a theory. We are to be

challenged by its paradoxes and moved by its images and poetic cadence more than by any arguments it presents. (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2003, p. 158)

The most concise and comprehensive support for the claims in this overview can be found in the deservedly famous first chapter of the *Daodejing*:

A Way that can be followed is not a constant Way.  
 A name that can be named is not a constant name.  
 Nameless, it is the beginning of heaven and earth;  
 Named, it is the mother of the myriad creatures.  
 And so,  
 Always eliminate desires in order to observe its mysteries;  
 Always have desires in order to observe its manifestations.  
 These two come forth in unity but diverge in name.  
 Their unity is known as an enigma.  
 Within this enigma is a deeper enigma.  
 The gate of all mysteries! (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2003, p. 159)

The teaching begins by claiming that since the nature of reality is constant change and flux, anything that is utilized in order to define or name something as eternal (and therefore static) is necessarily inadequate. In other words, it is sometimes the case that a given name remains constant while the thing named evolves, and in other cases the thing originally named persists while the application or extension of the name changes. Therefore, according to this teaching, when one steps away from the activity of naming, then the Way shows itself as the ungraspable beginning of everything that is; and when one attempts to name it again, then one resorts to metaphor, comparing the Way to our cultural stereotype of the mother-figure—generous, natural, invisible, submissive, passive, flexible, and so forth.

Given the metaphysical premises of the first four lines, the teaching concludes that human beings should cultivate the practices of detached speculation (in order to achieve these epistemologically humbling insights) and also of unthinking involvement in the world (in order to return to one's place as merely one more being in the world). These two seemingly opposed practices or approaches are actually unified because the life of spontaneous, intuitive action—known as *wuwei*, 'going with the flow'—follows logically from understanding the structure of reality in this way.

The teaching ends by valorizing the primacy of intuition and poetic, metaphorical insight over rational, conceptual discourse and thought, ending with an appropriately enigmatic exclamation—'The gate of all mysteries!'

From the above overview and textual analysis, we can distill three central claims in the *Daodejing* with regard to our investigation. First, it understands the *dao*, the way that reality happens, as the giving of possibility. This is comparable to the way in which sunlight by its invisibility gives us the ability to see objects, or the future by its futurity gives us the possibility for ever-new present moments. 'The Way is like an empty vessel . . . It seems to be the ancestor of the myriad creatures' (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2003, p. 161).

Second, this understanding of the *dao* serves as a model for the *Daodejing*'s notion of *de*, which can be translated as 'virtue' and/or 'power', and which means acting in a natural, spontaneous, and intuitive way. Doing so, by tapping into the power of the *dao*, gives the actor a tremendous but counter-intuitive kind of power—like the power of the reed to withstand the storm, of the water to erode the rock, or of the servant to provide for the employer. Chapter 22 describes the sages, who

embrace the One [the image of the Way] and serve as models for the whole world . . . They do not affirm their own views and so are well known . . . Because they do not contend, no one in the world can contend with them. (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2003, p. 169)

In other words, genuine accomplishments will eventually be recognized even without self-promotion, and it is impossible to argue with someone who refuses to argue back.

And third, the fundamental mysteriousness of the world as understood by the *Daodejing* entails a strong epistemological skepticism about discursive rationality, which necessitates a therapeutic approach that valorizes non-discursive intuition as the only valid access into the *dao* and *de*. Chapter 71 probably best shows this epistemological skepticism and its corresponding methodology of philosophical therapy. 'To know that one does not know is best; Not to know but to believe that one knows is a disease. Only by seeing this disease as a disease can one be free of it' (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2003, p. 195).

Having thus presented a brief overview and analysis of the *Daodejing*, we will now consider the two distinct but related ways in which we will utilize the *Daodejing* as a theoretical source for the rest of the investigation. At one level, we will draw on the philosophical 'content' articulated in the *Daodejing*, and at another level, we will attempt to perform the poetic 'form' of the *Daodejing*. This means that we will take strategic advantage of the fact that the *Daodejing* is a therapeutic poetic process that performs the very therapy it describes to the reader *on* the reader, by virtue of its poetic form. Put differently, we will attempt not only to articulate the philosophical 'content' of the *Daodejing*, but also, and more importantly, to show that content by attempting to mirror its 'form'.

## II. *Daodejing* in Oceanus's Speech

To begin, we should note that the central speech of Oceanus does not result from Oceanus venturing his opinion unasked, but from a request for his counsel by his ruler, Saturn. This fact, I think, minimizes the legitimacy of the charge of sophistry brought against Oceanus by various critics—as well as by the narrator of the poem, who refers to Oceanus as both a 'Sophist and sage' (Stillinger, 1978, p. 168)—because the sophists of ancient Greece were criticized for using their knowledge for personal gain. Oceanus, however, has little or nothing to gain by offering the advice that he offers in his speech.

Perhaps the most significant resonance between Oceanus's speech and the *Daodejing* is that Oceanus is the God of the Sea, and thus of water—and water is one of the most important metaphors in the *Daodejing*. '[T]he highest good', one reads in Chapter 8, 'is like water. / Water is good at benefiting the myriad creatures, while not contending with them. / It resides in the places that people find repellent, and so comes close to the Way' (Stillinger, 1978, p. 162). Like the water described in this passage, Oceanus does not contend with the Titans, but simply offers a justification for their suffering; it is inevitable, it is for the best, and getting used to it is what they need to do. This position, like the low positions taken by water in the above passage, is repellent to people like Enceladus, but that is simply further evidence of its worthiness.

The *Daodejing* also observes, in comparing the *dao* to water, that 'The most supple things in the world [such as water] run roughshod over the most rigid' (Stillinger, 1978, p. 180). Oceanus's advice for supple adaptability is infinitely more powerful than the rigid refusal of Enceladus, Saturn and Hyperion to accept a new world that they cannot change. 'And so the stiff and strong are the disciples of death; / The supple and weak are the disciples of life' (p. 197). The resistance approach of Enceladus and his allies will lead to war and death, while Oceanus's approach would allow the preservation of life through compromise and adaptation.

It is also interesting that Oceanus is a father figure, whose daughter Clymene is described as sobbing in her mother's lap toward the beginning of Book II. This could be another reason why Oceanus prefers a peaceful, life-preserving approach to the situation—to secure the well-being of his daughter. Further, by the relationship of daughter to father, Clymene is able to preserve for Oceanus at least one part of his identity—his fatherhood—even though his identity as God of the Sea has been lost.

As Oceanus begins his speech, the narrator describes his words as 'murmurs' which are 'Caught infant-like from the far-foamed sands' (Stillinger, 1978, pp. 171–172). Infancy, with its naturalness, spontaneity and flexibility, is another prominent metaphor in the *Daodejing*.

Those who are steeped in Virtue are like new-born children . . .  
 Their bones are weak and sinews yielding and yet their grip is firm.  
 They do not yet know the union of the male and female, but their potency is at its height  
 This is because they are perfectly pure;  
 They can wait all day without growing hoarse.  
 This is because they are perfectly balanced. (Stillinger, 1978, p. 186)

Oceanus encourages the Titans to 'nurse their agonies' (Stillinger, 1978, p. 174) and insists that they 'must be content to stoop:' (p. 178) like the water in the above passage which is not ashamed to lower itself to the places other things are unwilling to go. Oceanus accuses Saturn of the blindness brought about by 'supremacy' (p. 185) as a result of which 'One avenue was shaded from [Saturn's] eyes, / Through which [Oceanus] wandered to eternal truth' (pp. 186–187). In other words,

Oceanus's mind was empty and open to possibilities from which others' minds were cut off by narrowness of perception, like that of Saturn.

The Titan sea-god then gives a brief cosmology, in which 'From Chaos and parental Darkness came' everything else. This dark origin is a point overlooked by most of the critics who read Oceanus's speech as advocating some kind of continual progress, and links this cosmic origin to the *dao*, which, 'Nameless', is 'the beginning of Heaven and Earth' (Stillinger, 1978, p. 159). And though there are definite progressive aspects to the history described in the speech, especially with regard to the increasing beautification of the cosmos, Oceanus claims that the Titans are not 'Thereby more conquer'd, than by us the rule / Of shapeless Chaos' (pp. 215–217). But if the successive historical stages do not involve each conquering the one that comes before it, then how can we be sure that any given stage constitutes a progressive achievement in relation to any previous stage?

Oceanus also uses several metaphors of natural generation and life, such as that of the Titans as 'forest-trees' whose 'fair boughs / Have bred forth, not pale solitary doves, / But eagles golden-feathered, who do tower / Above us in the beauty, and must reign' (Stillinger, 1978, pp. 224–227). In other words, according to Oceanus, whom we noted above as a father figure, the Titans are entitled to a sort of parental or originary pride for what has come from them. Just as the *dao* is a formless emptiness that gives the possibility for existence to everything in the world, the Titans have made possible the most beautiful reign in the history of the gods. And this power to give existence, though it seems lowly, is actually more powerful than any showy power that the Olympians have seized. This last point also seems to problematize any interpretation of the speech as articulating unidirectional progress.

The speech closes with a description of the beautiful new God of the Sea, Neptune, and acknowledges his own 'sad farewell' as he surrendered his domain to his successor. Again contrary to general critical commentary of Oceanus as unfeeling, he seems fully capable of human suffering, such as sadness; he is merely better able to adapt to difficult change than the rest of the Titans. In other words, Oceanus is simply psychologically healthy, not unfeeling.

### III. Daoist-Sympathetic Readings of *Hyperion*

Before moving from our analysis of Oceanus's speech to a Daoist interpretation of *Hyperion* as a whole, we will first consider some literary criticism that is sympathetic to a Daoist interpretation of the entire poem.

Ragussis's nuanced study focuses on the poems' representation and enacting of language and silence. Ragussis begins his analysis with the following three images relevant for understanding Keats's three long poems (*Endymion* and the *Hyperion*): (1) filling the emptiness of the blank page, (2) clothing the existential nakedness of the poet, and (3) being nourished naturally and effortlessly, as opposed to the individual working to procure his or her own nourishment. With regard to the first metaphor, the filling of emptiness, Ragussis notes that, 'the blank page for Keats is a

terrible emptiness...’ (Ragussis, 1978, p. 36). Emptiness is perhaps the most important word in the interpretation of the *Daodejing* offered above, in its suggestion that the emptiness of the *dao* (i.e. the structure of the universe) is one that is necessarily incomplete, open, and full of possibility, always giving existence to the world and life.

With regard to the second metaphor, that of poetry as clothing, Ragussis observes that, ‘just as poetry dresses the world and the poet, so its heroic figures people his empty solitude with familiar shapes’ (Ragussis, 1978, p. 39). The *Daodejing*, though not unsympathetic to this issue of clothing or veiling, would place a greater emphasis on the idea that there are always further layers to be un-veiled. It argues that the veiling is actually so dense that one can only catch a glimpse of the ‘nakedness’ of the world through spontaneous intuitions of the structure of reality. And even then, the ‘nakedness’ of the world is seen to be nothing other than an endless process of veiling and unveiling.

Finally, with regard the third metaphor, that of ‘divine nourishment’, Ragussis remarks that, ‘The *Hyperion* poems replace private compulsion with universal necessity’, a development with Ragussis connects to Keats’s self-described quest to become more philosophical and less (what Keats perceived as) superficially and irresponsibly aesthetic (Ragussis, 1978, p. 39). Similarly, the *Daodejing* understands the *dao* as a universal and necessary source, in the face of which humans can either rebel futilely, or accept stoically in order to minimize suffering and promote happiness.

Ragussis then argues for what he describes as seemingly contradictory themes in the poem. The first is that silence and motionlessness symbolize the Titans’ loss of power, as contrasted with the potent language of the savior-poet. ‘The basic idea of the *Hyperion* poems’, he writes, ‘is a language of power’. Later on, however, in a passage that echoes Derrida’s deconstructive thought, Ragussis argues that, ‘language seems always on the verge of a final death, its meaning buried once and for all beyond understanding’ (Ragussis, 1978, pp. 62, 64). Thus, even the seemingly superior, more powerful (because more truthful) language of the poet is also subject to Titanic extinction.

This tension, however, as Ragussis notes, is ‘true to the nature of Keats’s speculations’ and reflects Keats’s use of his imagination, which ‘thrives on a sublime tentativeness’, to ‘mistrust all its own speculations’ (Ragussis, 1978, p. 67). Furthermore, this ‘skeptical underthought and the fragmentariness of the *Hyperion* poems seem Keats’s only defense against the subterfuge of art...an early precursor of those deliberately “incomplete” works that dominate the twentieth century’ (p. 68).

Ragussis’s essay closes with the following perfect articulation of the *Daodejing*’s metaphysical orientation, an articulation that supports our Daoist tweaking of his three central metaphors in the Keatsian long poem above:

The blank emptiness that interrupts the Hyperions’ words is part of the space they fill, or rather, part of the space they fail to fill. The empty page creates a curious

frame around them, and in its own way is an articulate reminder that the void is permanent, that words are its interruptions and not vice versa. (Ragussis, 1978, p. 69)

Like Ragussis, Bode (2000) is interested in the concept of the hieroglyph in *Hyperion*, as a symbol for the inevitable temporality of all language. Corresponding to this inability of language to endure forever, Bode argues that *Hyperion* valorizes the suggestive, metaphorical powers of language. '[P]oetry', he writes, 'does not speak or spell its assessment of what it presents . . . Poetry relies on the power of its images' (Bode, 2000, p. 36). For that reason, according to Bode, 'Speeches such as Oceanus's encourage the erroneous notion that their "explanation" could be adequate'. This position is entirely sympathetic to the *Daodejing's* approach to the communication of ideas—through metaphorical indirection. 'No post-metaphysical epic', Bode insists, 'can say what the deeper meaning of suffering might be—or whether there is any meaning at all. You grasp it—or you don't grasp it' (p. 36).

Hartman (1974), finally, argues for a progression from a 'personal psychology' of Keats's loss of his brother to 'the psychology of art: a poet saving the grand, moribund symbols of the sublime mode' (Hartman, 1974, p. 11). 'The two psychologies', according to Hartman, 'are not without connection, if we think of Keats as deeply engaged in sympathetic, even magical, *nursing*' (p. 11). This calls to mind the *Daodejing's* presentation of the *dao* as a kind of 'Cosmic Nurse', an emptiness that feeds the world with possibility, like a wet nurse giving milk to a nursing infant. 'I alone differ from others', claims the speaker of the *Daodejing*, 'and value being nourished by mother' (Ch. 20, p. 168).

In even more explicit suggestion of Daoism, Hartman writes that '[Keats] is the Way' (Hartman, 1974, p. 13). And he himself connects for us the spectral mother, the idea of nurture and a concept of language. Though Hartman's orientation is psychoanalytic, its general approach is nevertheless (or perhaps, therefore) highly compatible with a Daoist framework, to which we will now turn directly.

#### IV. A Daoist Reading of *Hyperion*

Before beginning the analysis, we wish to note that in three variant texts of *Hyperion*, including a draft of the poem by Keats himself, the subtitle 'A Fragment' does not occur (Stillinger, 1978, p. 329). Regardless of Keats's possible intentions regarding this alteration, we will utilize the absence of the phrase 'A Fragment' as a strategic tool for thinking of and dealing with *Hyperion* as a complete poem.

The poem opens with Saturn in a near-comatose state after having lost the battle with and having been dethroned by the Olympians. He sits 'quiet as a stone' (I. 4), but his head 'seem[s] list'ning to the Earth, / His ancient mother, for some comfort yet' (I. 20–21). What seems initially to be a scene of absolute loss and finality thus pulses quietly with the potential for change, as the figure of the mother is invoked for comfort, in what could be understood as a sort of naturalistic therapy.

Next, Thea, the goddess-wife of Hyperion, arrives upon the scene with ‘listening fear in her regard’ (I. 37) and eventually wakes Saturn by her weeping. The two of them then have a conversation that can be understood as a kind of talk therapy, in which Thea allows Saturn to vent some of his considerable pain and to overcome the shock of his recent trauma. During this painful conversation, Saturn asks Thea to serve as a sort of mirror for him so that he can ‘see our [the Titans’] doom’ in her face (I. 97). This metaphor calls to mind the technique central to Carl Rogers’s humanistic therapy in which the practitioner ‘reflects’ back to the client what the client has just said in a way that allows the client to hear the client’s original words from a fresh perspective, all for the purpose of the client’s formulating a solution to the problem being articulated. The Rogerian therapist is thus a good metaphor for the *dao*, the Daoist sage, and the Daoist ruler, in that the therapist gives the client the space of possibility to actualize him- or herself.

Saturn then remarks that he has ‘left [his] own strong identity, [his] real self’, thus bringing him tantalizingly close to both Keats’s famous ideal of the ‘poetic character’ without a fixed identity, as well as the similar ideal of ‘the sage’ in the *Daodejing* (I. 114). In Chapter 49, one finds that ‘Sages do not have constant hearts of their own; / They take the people’s hearts as their hearts’ (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2003, p. 182). In other words, the sage is so completely flexible and adaptable that he or she loses any static identity whatsoever, and can thus work with other people in a therapeutic way to help them overcome their own rigid, fixed identities. This flexibility is valued, of course, because the world is constantly in flux, and to resist that flux produces suffering. This understanding of the world as perpetually in flux is also the reason why for contemporary psychology, all mental illness boils down to just one word—rigidity. Flexibility means adaptability, which entails adjustment and the possibility for happiness, while rigidity means inability to adapt, which entails suffering.

Unfortunately, Saturn wastes this opportunity for therapeutic self-development, returns to his rigid mindset, and becomes inspired to try to restore his previous identity and power by actually creating a new world. Such resistance is of course a common reaction to loss and confusion, but since the Titans have been fated to surrender their reign to the Olympians, Saturn’s efforts are ultimately in vain. And when his attempt at creation fails, Saturn asks, ‘Where is another Chaos? Where?’ (I. 145). In other words, Saturn needs the absolute potential that exists in the emptiness and disorder of complete chaos if he is to fashion a new world, and there is no such chaos available. He reaches out to the *dao*, but since he is acting contrary to the flow of nature, he receives no power, because the *dao* only conveys power to those who follow *wuwei*.

But despite this failure, Saturn is nevertheless able to ‘make quake’ (I.146) the chief Olympians, which limited effect then inspires Thea to hope again for the possibility of victory for the Titans. She therefore decides to lead Saturn to where the Titans are hidden away in order to inspire them as well. Again like the *dao* in its aspect as the mother who continually gives beings possibility, ‘with beseeching eyes she went / With backward footing through the shade a space’ (I. 153–154) allowing him to follow.

The poem then turns to the ‘palace bright’ of Hyperion, where the sun god shudders ‘unsecure’ (I. 168). His scrupulously described anxiety and fear soon gives way to a god ‘full of wrath’ (I. 213) who by ‘stamp[ing] his foot’ (I. 222) ‘jarr[s] his own golden region’ (I. 214). Hyperion then cries out in pain to the elements, and questions them about the Titans’ fall much as Saturn has just questioned Thea, with no hope of a satisfactory answer. He then attempts to start the day six hours early, but is thwarted, as was Saturn in his attempt at creation, by the inexorable laws of nature. Both figures struggle against necessity because of an unwillingness and/or inability to accept traumatic change.

Hyperion, like Saturn before him, then receives a potentially therapeutic visitor of his own, the now-ethereal father of the Titans. Coelus laments his own intangibility and correspondent inability to act on the situation, but repeatedly urges Hyperion to fight back. ‘[D]o thou strive’ (I. 337) Coelus commands, and ‘Be thou therefore in the van of circumstance; yea, seize the arrow’s barb before the tense string murmur’ (I. 343–45). Thus, though Coelus possesses the intangibility and omnipresence of the *dao*, what he urges seems entirely contrary to the *wuwei* ethos of the *Daodejing*, for which strenuous contention is never the best path. Unfortunately, Hyperion follows Coelus’ advice, as Saturn followed Thea’s, and plunges to the earth to find the Titans, thus ending Book I.

Book II opens with a description of a group of Titans huddled together in mourning over their lost powers and identities, in a ‘den where no insulating light / Could glimmer on their tears’ and where loud noises drown out ‘their own groans’ (II. 5–6). Despite the general trend among critics to see this as one more static, sculptural scene in the first two books, it seems that there is significant psychological activity occurring. The Titans are engaged in a communal outpouring of grief, which constitutes an important, cathartic aspect of the healing process for many people in mourning. And it is this absence of major physical activity that gives the Titans the possibility to mourn for their lost selves.

In this environment of despair, it is interesting that the one figure who is described as experiencing positive emotion is Asia, who is ‘prophesying of her glory; / And in her imagination [stands] / Palm-shaded temples, and high rival fanes, / By Oxus or in Ganges’ sacred isles’ (II. 57–60). According to Vitoux, this passage predicts the rising importance of Asian religious/philosophical traditions, which is an interesting suggestion since our investigation is based in the Asian philosophical tradition of Daoism.

When Saturn arrives, he becomes overwhelmed with emotion at the pathetic sight of the Titans, which reaction the narrator explains as the tendency of suffering people to suffer more when in the company of ‘other hearts’ that ‘are sick of the same bruise’ (II. 104). Saturn then launches into what initially seems to be an extended rhetorical question as to why the Titans are powerless and broken, but which ends as an actual question to Oceanus, who ‘Ponderest high and deep; and in thy face I see, astonished, that severe content / Which comes of thought and musing: give us help!’ (II. 163–166).

After Oceanus’s speech, the narrator wonders why none of the Titans initially respond to the speech, indicating that the reason is either ‘pos’d conviction, or

disdain' (II. 244). That they have been genuinely persuaded, then, is out of the question, at least for the narrator. Eventually, however, Oceanus's daughter Clymene ('whom none regarded' [II. 248]) speaks, though the narrator remarks she 'answer'd not, only complain'd' (II. 249). And Clymene prefaces her speech with a humble admission that she is 'here the simplest voice, / And all my knowledge is that joy is gone' (II. 253). The dialogue thus moves from the Titan considered most wise, if disingenuous, to the one considered least wise.

Clymene then relates her despair at having heard the (not yet divine) Apollo's music, and having been overwhelmed by its music with 'joy and grief at once' (II. 289). After she finishes her speech, the narrator compares her voice to a 'timorous brook / That, lingering along a pebbled coast, / Doth fear to meet the sea' (II. 392). That the voice of the daughter of the former God of the Sea should be compared to a body of water seems appropriate, but that it would 'fear to meet the sea' seems strange, until one reads the following lines. '[B]ut sea it met, / And shudder'd; for the overwhelming voice / Of huge Enceladus swallow'd it in wrath' (II. 302–304). The sea thus becomes, interestingly, a metaphor for Enceladus', not Oceanus', speech.

Enceladus then attempts to rally the Titans to war, insulting Oceanus and Clymene as 'over-wise' (II. 309) and 'over-foolish' (II. 310). He also refers to Clymene's speech as 'baby-words' and labels Oceanus the 'sham Monarch of the Waves' (II. 319). Enceladus then remarks that though he 'scorn[s] Oceanus's lore', he is not motivated solely by 'loss of realms' (II. 334) and appeals to the fact that '[t]he days of peace and slumberous calm are fled' (II. 335) as a further justification for the violence he proposes.

Enceladus ends his speech by announcing the arrival of Hyperion, after which the narrator describes the effects of Hyperion's radiance:

Till suddenly a splendor, like the morn,  
Pervaded all the beetling gloomy steeps,  
All the sad spaces of oblivion,  
And every gulf, and every chasm old,  
And every height, and every sullen depth,  
Voiceless, or hoarse with loud tormented streams:  
And all the everlasting cataracts,  
And all the headlong torrents far and near,  
Mantled before in darkness and huge shade,  
Now saw the light and made it terrible. (II. 357–366)

The multiple images of water and emptiness in this passage resonate with the *Daodejing's* description of the *dao*, and it is interesting that all of these *dao*-like phenomena of nature make the light, formerly compared to the morn, 'terrible'. This perception is probably related to the 'the most hateful seeing of itself' (II. 370) below. The narrator then describes the figure of Hyperion in the midst of his own radiance as 'a vast shade / In midst of his own brightness' (II. 372–373). We will return shortly to the issue of radiance as a potentially negative or problematic phenomenon.

Inspired by Hyperion's presence, first Enceladus, then three other Titans shout out Saturn's name, after which Hyperion responds in kind. And in the last three lines of

Book II, the narrator describes ‘the Mother of the Gods, / In whose face was no joy, though all the Gods / Gave from their hollow throats the name of “Saturn!”’ Their mother figure is empty of joy and their throats are hollow, but despite these indications that their plan of action is unnatural and against the grain of fate, they are nevertheless resolved to war.

Book III begins with the narrator insisting on a change of subject, citing the muse’s inability ‘to sing such tumults dire’ (III. 3) as those of the fallen Titans. The story then turns to Apollo, who meets with Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory and one of the lost and wandering Titans. Apollo complains to her that ‘dark, dark, / And painful vile oblivion seals [his] eyes’ (III. 86–87), the source of which oblivion he does not understand. He then asks the Goddess ‘Where is power?’ but, like a Rogerian therapist or a Daoist sage, she does not give him the answer, but instead remains silent, giving him the possibility of finding his own answer. ‘Mute thou remainest—’, he accuses her, ‘mute! yet I can read / A wondrous lesson in thy silent face: / Knowledge enormous makes a God of me’ (III. 111–113).

Apollo then elaborates, describing how ‘[n]ames, deeds, gray legends, dire events, rebellions, / Majesties, sovran voices, agonies, / Creations and destroyings, all at once / Pour into the wide hollows of my brain’ (III. 115–117). In other words, his emptiness, ignorance, and mortality made it possible for the acquisition of fullness, knowledge, and divinity. Book III, and the poem, then end with an intense (some say ‘grotesque’) description of Apollo’s painfully wrenching deification.

And though the poem ends in the middle of this transformation, we nevertheless know enough about the future poet-sovereign to know that he has acquired omniscience, and that he has experienced this knowledge and its acquisition as pain. And if Oceanus is correct, this means that Apollo has gained the knowledge of the nature of reality as change and flux, to which a Stoic submission is the most appropriate response. The *Daodejing* observes that ‘Good fortune rests upon disaster; / Disaster lies hidden within good fortune’ (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2003, p. 188). The sage realizes this fact, that the pendulum of fortune always swings back and forth, and that when things are at their worst, they are therefore necessarily about to improve. Thus, the bleak situation of the Titans indicates that things are about to get better for them, if they will follow *wuwei*, going with the flow of things—a fact that Apollo must possess as part of his newly-gained omniscience.

We also know that Keats could not present Apollo as the next supreme ruler of the cosmos, but only as the replacement for the Sun God: a secondary leader in the Titans’ administration, and a figure described by his father Coelus as his ‘brightest’ but not ‘first-born’ son. Thus Apollo is by analogy more closely linked to light and shining than to absolute power. And as noted above, the *Daodejing* understands light as that which makes things visible to us only and exactly by being itself in-visible. ‘Those who make a display of themselves’, like Hyperion, and unlike Apollo, ‘are not illustrious’ (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2003, p. 170).

The *Daodejing* also describes the sage as one who is ‘Shining but not dazzling’ (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2003, p. 188). And unlike Hyperion, who torments the Titans at the end of Book II with his awe-inspiring radiance and his inspiration to

renew the fight against the Olympians, Apollo begins as a lowly mortal poet, realizes (like the Daoist sage) that suffering is the fruit of wisdom, and never shines in a blinding radiance—the poem ends before he can do so, before his transformation into a deity is even complete.

As a character in the poem, Apollo is the future Sun God who never takes his rightful throne and never even finishes becoming a god, and he thereby in a sense makes room for the most important action of the existing poem, which is the existential struggle of the Titans with their traumatic fall from power. As Chapter 17 of the *Daodejing* states, “The greatest of rulers is but a shadowy presence . . . When their task is done and work complete, / Their people will say, “This is just how we are”” (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2003, p. 167). This invisible power seems to characterize well Apollo’s role as the unseen and self-abnegating poetic ruler.

For example, and in closing, we note that though it is Hyperion, not Apollo, whose name emblazons the title of the poem—whose name ‘dazzles’ the reader—it is instead Apollo who is arguably the most important figure in even the existing version of *Hyperion*—the figure that truly shines, and shines in such a self-effacing way as to make the rest of the poem visible.

## References

- Bode, C. (2000). Hyperion, the fall of hyperion, and Keats’s poetics. *Wordsworth Circle*, 31, 31–37.
- Hartman, G. (1974). Spectral symbolism and the authorial self: An approach to Keats’s hyperion. *Essays in Criticism*, 24(1), 1–19.
- Ivanhoe, P.J., & Van Norden, B.W. (2003). *Readings in classical Chinese philosophy*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Ragussis, M. (1978). *The subterfuge of art: Language and the romantic tradition*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Stillinger, J. (1978). *The poems of John Keats*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Copyright of Asian Philosophy is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.