"This warm scribe, my hand": John Keats's Tactile Poetics

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1. Unlike voice and vision, touch compels us to return to our bodies: we touch other bodies, we move and try to find our balance, we feel ourselves feeling sensations and we need proprioception to realise where our bodies stand in space. Reading and writing cannot exist without the sense of touch: we must touch the page we read to turn it, we hold our books with our hands, and we need to hold the pen we use in order to write. Alternatively, even without books or pens, we still need our fingers to type on a keyboard and to hold electronic devices made for reading. The language of touch is rich, yet the body without which there could be no touch has been described by Jean-Luc Nancy as ultimately "uninscribable"[1] or untouchable because it can never be fully grasped in words. It is touched on, rather than seized. If so, how can we write about the ways in which texts touch us? How can writing account for the tactile — or haptic, when the sense of touch is extended to more than the skin — nature of experience, including memory and affects like pain and pleasure? Focusing on the tactile poetics of John Keats may provide a few answers to these questions as it offers valuable insights into what Sarah Jackson calls the "intimate relationship between the page and the surface of the body".[2] This article purposes to argue that Keats's tactile poetics demonstrate the poet's willingness to embody both human experience and the experience of writing itself. By figuring the sense of touch, his poems display a desire to meet with the other and with the world (both literally and metaphorically) in order to make sense of the duality of touch. The article will first return to Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of the body as a point of contact and separation. This theoretical frame will contribute to outlining Keats's poetics of touch, focusing on the role of contact and affect in the comparison between poetry and the beloved woman. More specifically, the article will consider Keats's "Ode to Psyche" in light of Nancy's *Corpus* and Derrida's focus on Psyche.[3] In both Nancy's essay and Keats's poem, the goddess Psyche "lies unaware" — she is observed and touched by a gaze. Psyche's body represents the body "that we try to touch through

1 J.-L. Nancy, *Corpus*, 113. All further references to Jean-Luc Nancy's *Corpus* will be taken from the bilingual edition translated by Richard A. Rand. Further references to the text will be abbreviated (*C* in text).
2 S. Jackson, *Tactile Poetics*, 1.
3 J. Derrida, *Le Toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy*.

thought" (*C* 122), as the poet endeavours to build a tangible yet entirely immaterial temple for her inside his brain.

Touch, the body, and the psyche

2. Touch is a resolutely physical sensation which may be hard to conceive of outside the realm of the body, contrary to hearing or vision which do not require direct contact with the skin to be felt. This is because, as Pablo Maurette has argued, when we talk about touch, we really talk about several senses that are all related to our bodies.[4] Touch is not only the epidermal feeling we get upon grasping an object or rubbing our hands together, but also an inward sensation that influences almost every aspect of experience. As Pablo Maurette puts it:

> Touch is the external, epidermal sensation of the outside world and also the intimate experience of our inner body. It is the sense of pleasure and pain in all their dizzying array of degrees and forms. It allows us to perceive the outside world not only as texture but also as pressure and temperature. It collaborates with the other senses to orient us in space and grants us the perception of our own bodies as living organisms. […] Last but not least, touch is the sense that governs affect. Everything that moves, thrills, agitates, and inflames us, everything that causes in us even the slightest affective movement, is ultimately experienced as a form of touch.[5]

According to Maurette, touch contributes to our understanding of our existence as bodies — or, as Jean-Luc Nancy would have it, as masses in space (*C* 77, 78) — and as feeling, affected beings. Only through somatosensation — including epidermal touch, proprioception, the vestibular sense, kinaesthesia, nociception,[6] and the perception of temperature — are we reminded of our presence in the world as physical entities. Moreover, because the sensations of pain and pleasure are connected to the larger sense of touch, all the innermost feelings that can be derived from these two original affects ultimately become embodied rather than disembodied or disincarnate, which is one of the main arguments of affect theory.[7]

3. The study of affect can thus be understood as a study of embodied responses: of responses mediated by the sense of touch whereby soul and body come into contact. Indeed, as Nancy argues,

4 P. Maurette, *The Forgotten Sense,* x.
5 *Ibid*., x.
6 The sensation of pain is now considered its own sense modality.
7 Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* defines affect as an autonomic system understood separately from cognition by the body. For Massumi, affect is about movement and about the reactions in our skin, our sweat and our glands: it is our body reacting to a situation before emotions can be named and before cognition seizes upon them to clarify, label and, in the process of naming, dampen them. Affect is therefore a primary, automatic response that creates a reaction in the body. See Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual,* 25-26.

even though some parts of our philosophical and religious traditions have emphasised the separation between soul and body, the "soul is nothing other than the experience of the body" (*C* 221). In that sense, the soul is the body experiencing its own existence or simply being a body. The soul is Psyche lying unaware: "the psyche is […] body, and this is precisely what escapes it" (*C* 122). The psyche, as the experience of the body, both experiences itself as body and cannot grasp its own being in the world, which leads back to the idea that while to touch is to be touched, the act of touching is always limited to a touching upon. This is what Derrida's development on the figure of Psyche revolves around: starting from Nancy's observation that Psyche is lying unaware, Derrida determines that Psyche, who is the synthesis of body and mind, is both corporeal and untouchable; she is both a subject and a body that others watch.[8] Those watching her learn something about her that she cannot know herself (in Derrida's example, what is unknown to Psyche is that she is lying or resting).[9] In that sense, Psyche is understood and therefore touched. Yet, at the same time, in the act of thinking and speaking, those who surround Psyche never come into physical contact with her, in the same way that any kind of touching must come to an end in order to preserve the integrity of the body.[10] Despite these contradictions, thinking about what touch means does not necessarily prevent contact entirely: it instead leads to a form of understanding we might liken to intuition or a touching upon.

4. The connection between psyche and body makes it possible to conceive of the fact that even the seemingly less physical aspects of human experience, like language, seem to have a tactile component. As Mirt Komel has contented in the introduction to *The Language of Touch*, language can "structure touching".[11] By this, Komel implies that touch may not be limited to its bodily dimension and instead be extended to the domain of language. Asking "how does touch structure language?", Komel shows that language itself is haptic.[12] The question also requires that we, as readers, consider the way touch is used in metaphors. A common example of such a metaphor would be to say we are touched by something even though no physical touch was involved — and to wonder: if there is "a haptic quality to language, are such metaphors really just metaphors?"[13]

5. Komel's answer to that question is that language is composed of three main sensory

8 J. Derrida, *Le Toucher*. Note that both Nancy and Derrida's arguments rely on a sentence borrowed from one of Freud's notes. However, as Derrida explains, Nancy never gives the exact reference to the note and only quotes the last sentence. See J. Derrida, *Le Toucher*, 22.
9 *Ibid*., 21-30.
10 *Ibid*., 28-30.
11 M. Komel, *The Language of Touch*, 1.
12 *Ibid.*, 2.
13 *Ibid.*, 2.

components: phonemes, which are the aural component of language, graphemes, which are the visual component, and haptems, which are the tactile component.[14] Taking Lacan's theory of *lalangue* further, Komel thus argues that words not only "touch each other" but also come into contact with each other through their visual aspect and "through their sound contacts, similarities, echoes and reverberations".[15] For Komel, the haptem of language therefore appears as the form touch takes inside language and is grounded in tactility so that touch becomes a prerequisite to the production of meaning and to our understanding of language. Metaphors of touch can therefore be understood as stemming from the sensory realm: they contain a sensory element that is then carried over to the cognitive sphere, much like affect is the prerequisite to emotion being transferred to the brain, named, and understood. In both cases, affect, metaphor and language function as ways to connect body and mind.

6. These conceptions of touch derive from the way Derrida conceives of touch, leading us back to the way Jean-Luc Nancy relates writing and the body in his essay *Corpus*. For Jean-Luc Nancy, the body is always a foreign entity that can never be grasped fully though it is the very locus of existence (*C* 21). Because the surface of the other's skin, or even the surface of an object, cannot be penetrated without wounding or tampering, bodies and beings can only meet on the surface and eternally remind us of the distance between self and other, and between inner self and body (*C* 32, 33). Consequently, the body, though it is the vessel of every sense modality including somatosensation, can only ever be touched on. In that sense, the body exists as a kind of border, a liminal space that can merely be brushed upon but never crossed, which makes Nancy's definition of the body intrinsically connected to touch itself. Touching also means being touched, and one of the specificities of that sense modality is that it cannot happen without contact. Unlike other sensations that may allow us to see without being seen, or to hear without being heard, touch cannot exist without reciprocity. However, the idea of reciprocity also highlights one of the paradoxes of touch: this sense modality, even as it requires contact, also lays emphasis on the distance between self and other, since even when we touch another body, we can never blend with it or know what the other thinks or feels. Thus, the distance remains. The issue, for Nancy, is then to find a way to make thoughts and bodies come into contact with one another despite that distance, which he argues is possible through writing. In fact, Jean-Luc Nancy defines writing as touching:

> It has to be said that touching upon the body, touching the body, *touching* — happens in writing all the time. Maybe it doesn't happen exactly *in* writing, if writing in fact has an "inside". But along the

14 *Ibid*., 12.
15 *Ibid.*, 13.

> border, at the limit, the tip, the furthest edge of writing nothing but that happens. Now, writing takes its place at the limit. So if anything at all happens to writing, nothing happens to it but touch. (*C* 113, 114)

Writing, like touch, appears as a moment of contact and reciprocity whereby thoughts and bodies can come closer, which in turn makes it possible to momentarily bridge the gap between sense and senses, and between the writing self and the estranged hand that makes the action (*C* 24).

"This warm scribe, my hand"

7. The way Jean-Luc Nancy conceives of writing and of touch makes it seem as though writing were a tangible point of contact between thought and body. However, interestingly, that contact is never a fusion. Touch and writing are articulated around the same kind of duality: while both make experience and thoughts tangible, they also let them remain out of reach. This can remind us of Keats's images of bodies and lips always on the verge of touching or kissing, without ever actually doing so. Keats, who belonged to the second generation of British romantics, was particularly interested in the senses and in the relation between sensations and thoughts. He explored such connections in his letters and poems, focusing especially on the sense of touch. In "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (*KPP* 461-462), for example, the lovers are about to kiss, but cannot since they are frozen in time. Similarly, in "Ode to Psyche" (*KPP* 464-465), Psyche and Eros's wings brush one against the other but their lips do not touch yet, or anymore, depending on the perspective readers wish to take. Such images make tactility and hapticity the focus of Keats's poetry: everything is always on the limit, on the edge, seeking, feeling, touching, but also estranged and foreign.[16] Because of this focus on feeling and touching, sensations and sensuousness become the centre of Keats's work, as do bodies (and sometimes objects) in space. Upon giving up writing *The Fall of Hyperion*, he wrote to his friend J.H. Reynolds: "I wish to give myself up to other sensations" (*KPP* 359).[17] The poet also insisted that his poems should "take hold" of people and "give them either pleasant or unpleasant sensation" (*KPP* 364).[18] The poet's definition of his craft is not simply sensuous — it is entirely embodied: it relies on physical feelings and affects, and must be received

16 Images of merging, and mingling also abound in Keats's poetry, as is the case when Madeline and Porphyro make love in "The Eve of St. Agnes". However, even then, some kind of distance is maintained since the lovers meet as though outside the physical realm. Porphyro "melted, as the rose / Blendeth its odour with the violet" (*KPP* 455, l.320-321): instead of penetrating (and thus harming) his lover's body, they become one immaterial entity. Images of ingestion are also plentiful, but their intricacy would require a study of its own.

17 Letter to J.H. Reynolds, 21 September 1819.

18 Letter to George and Georgiana Keats, September 1819. The specific poem Keats refers to in the letter is *Lamia*.

by the body. In fact, even the poet himself understands his craft as based on feeling, since he seems to let sensation be his poetic muse.

8. We can even go further and argue that Keats's poetics are based on contact since, in his own words, poems should "take hold" of them, as if they existed as bodies in the world that could physically touch people. Similarly, the poet tends to make hands and pens the very locus of writing as he does in the following lines: "Whether the dream now purposed to rehearse / Be Poet's or Fanatic's will be known / When this warm scribe, my hand, is in the grave" (*KPP* 498, I: l.16-18). These are the concluding lines of the short prologue to *The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream*, one of Keats's last and longest poems (*KPP* 498-510). The poem was intended as a reworking of the poet's own 1818 *Hyperion*, which he had since abandoned. The second version of the poem, though it was never finished either, includes some of Keats's richest reflections on being a poet. One of these is the reference to the "warm scribe, my hand", which quite literally embodies John Keats's idea of poetic creation and establishes him as a tactile poet: the reference to the scribe-hand not only stresses the connection between writing and the body, but more specifically locates poetic creation within the poet's hand. The poet's ability to write depends on the warmth of his hand: as long as he lives, he may write, but may not know the purport of his writing. Only after his death can the poet's words pass the test of time, and of existing beyond. This is reminiscent of Jean-Luc Nancy's argument according to which, in the act of writing, the body is left at the limit and "exscribed, to be lowed, infinitely broken, distributed among the multitude of bodies" (*C* 114, 115), which is what Keats might imply in the quotation from *The Fall of Hyperion*: the text becomes a body of its own, to be touched and made sense of beyond death; it is a mass in space which, like any human body, may only be touched on but seeks contact. Because of this, writing becomes bound to the sense of touch: it is indeed through the touch and movements of the hand that thoughts (here in the form of dreams) and the body can be united in the act of writing.

9. Yet, the use of the deictic "this" also makes the poet's own hand foreign and distant, as if it were a separate entity. Keats's conception of poetry therefore aligns with Nancy's remark on the writing self and the writing hand mentioned in the previous section: writing appears as a moment of contact and reciprocity because, as Nancy writes, "writing in its essence touches upon the body", but it is also "the exscription of our body: its being inscribed-outside, its being placed outside the text" (*C* 114). In Keats's lines, the hand is both inscribed onto the page and left at the limit. Likewise, the lines from the prologue of *The Fall of Hyperion* exemplify the poet's desire to reach out to the other and to the world even beyond the ultimate separation that is death. In associating the

words "warm" and "grave", Keats highlights the implicit "distance at the heart of touch" while also focusing the reader's imagination on a living hand, one that can touch and be touched.[19] The image of the poet's hand holding the pen is not, however, unique to *The Fall of Hyperion*. It appears as early as in "Sleep and Poetry" where the poet writes "O Poesy! For thee I hold my pen" (*KPP* 59, l.47) and the sonnet "When I have fears that I may cease to be" (*KPP* 118) where the speaker laments that he might die "before [his] pen has glean'd [his] teeming brain" (l.2). In both examples, the writer's pen is pictured as an extension of his body as well as a connection between the poet's self and his inspiration, between his own thoughts and paper, and between the reader and himself. The pen materialises the experience of liminality that characterises the acts of touching and writing; it is the intermediary between body and thoughts that sets the process of creation into motion. The act of writing thoughts out makes them visible (and so haptically touchable) and creates contact, which is, first and foremost, what the speakers of Keats's poems seek.

10. Keats's references to hands holding pens only constitute one of the many aspects of his tactile poetics. The poet's is indeed a poetry of touch in all the forms it can take including movement, skin, hands, lips, pain, taste, smell, temperature, and contact. These tactile poetics are composed of three different aspects. The first and most obvious one is the use of sensory vocabulary related to the senses of touch. This can be observed in the recurring use of verbs such as "feel", "touch", and "weave" in his poems, but also in the references to movement or the use of prepositions which locate bodies in space and allows them to move. A simple example of this can be found in "Isabella; or, The Pot of Basil" (*KPP* 430-445), when Isabella is described digging up her lover's head, never stopping "[b]ut to throw back at times her veiling hair" (XLVII: l.376). Combining a verb and a preposition, the phrasal verb "throw back" instantly conjures up the image of the hand pushing away the hair that sets Isabella's body into motion, while the use of the [-ing] form "veiling" both creates a static image that separates her body from us and instils a sense of movement, as if the hair kept moving back to veil the girl's eyes.

11. The second aspect of Keats's tactile poetics is the affective component, whereby touch becomes a way to feel both physically and emotionally. In the poem "To ———" (*KPP* 375-376), the speaker craves his lover's touch and struggles with "dismal cares" (l.28) that only the lover's touch or the memory thereof might alleviate. The speaker's emotions are not named, but instead described using tactile vocabulary. For instance, the "dismal cares" that affect the speaker "seize on [him] unawares" (l.29). As in Brian Massumi's conception of affect, the speaker's emotions are here

19 A similar image is used in the fragment "This living hand, now warm and capable" (*KPP* 378).

presented as autonomic, primary responses that precede naming and can only be understood as bodily sensations. Touch is the only way to make sense of the speaker's reaction (through the verb "seize") and to alleviate the pain, by "[resting] / my soul upon that dazzling breast" (l.48-49) or by remembering touch, since, for Keats, "touch has a memory" (l.4). Interestingly, here, the affective component of Keats's touch not only aligns with Massumi's definition of affect as the body reacting before cognition seizes upon emotions to name and clarify them, but also takes us back to Nancy's idea that body and soul are one and the same thing. Resting the soul upon the lover's breast and assigning a memory to the sense of touch are equivalent to resting the body; the soul in the poem is another word for what Nancy calls "the sensing body" (*C* 217).

12. The third component of Keats's tactile poetics is the restorative component which can only be achieved through contact with either a beloved person or with art. From the onset of his poetical career, the poet was interested in the representation of somatosensation, kinaesthesia and pain. All three aspects can be seen in such poems as "Dedication to Leigh Hunt" (*KPP* 20), which opens the first published volume of his poetry. In "Dedication to Leigh Hunt", the presence of touch is pervasive yet subtle. At first, straightforward, obvious references to haptic and/or tactile sensations may not catch the reader's attention. In fact, as is often the case in Keats's poetry, the reader may find him or herself drawn to the pictoriality of the text first. The visual aspect of his poetry has indeed been closely examined before, and the cinematic dimension of his work recognised.[20] This is hardly surprising since, in our predominantly visual and aural world, the lexical fields of vision and hearing tend to be much more varied than that of the other senses. Alternatively, haptic vocabulary might be used to stress a specific quality of something we see or hear, which might be interpreted in two contradictory ways. Either we can understand the use of touch-related words to describe vision and hearing as signs that touch is only an instrument and that these two sense modalities prevail over it, or we may conclude that even though we live in an ocularcentric world, even sight and hearing must be mediated by touch, which in turn rehabilitates touch as central to our understanding of the world we live in.

13. The constant mediation of touch has been corroborated by linguistic and neuroscientific research on synaesthesia, metaphor and mirror neurons, which play a part in the development of empathy. For instance, Paolo Della Putta has argued that:

> Embodied approaches to language propose that higher order mental processes, such as meaning

20 See for instance Sean Dempsey's "'Blank Splendour': Keats, Romantic Visuality and Wonder" (2013) and Orrin N.C. Wang's "Coming Attractions: *Lamia* and Cinematic Sensation" (2003), which both explore the role of the gaze and pictoriality in Keats's poems.

> construction, rely on the sensorimotor neural devices of our brains. [...] According to the Embodied Semantics paradigm, linguistic concepts are represented in the brain within partially overlapping neutral substrates recruited to enact and experience the action a word refers to.[21]

The brain derives meaning from sensation and partially recreates sensation upon reading words, meaning that when we read sensory-related or pain-related words, we can activate similar areas of our brains as when we experience sensations. In that sense, our thoughts and bodies really do become intertwined in the acts of reading and writing, all the more so when tactile and haptic metaphors are involved.

14. Despite the visual and aural biases of language, many elements in Keats's "Dedication to Leigh Hunt" are focused on touch. The incense rising from the imaginary temple is described as "wreathed incense" (l.3) meant to "meet the smiling day" (l.4), so that touch comes to unify a synaesthetic vision. The personification of daytime is commonplace, and the wreathing of the incense does indicate a budding fascination with images of bodies and objects becoming interlaced, while the choice of the verb "meet" implies a desire for contact, a contact that the speaker of the poem seems to seek. Writing the dedication to Leigh Hunt is a way of reaching out to the other poet and getting in touch with him, figuratively and potentially literally as well.

15. The most interesting verb here is the verb "wreathe", which presupposes a coming into contact. Contrary to metaphors of violent touch, wreathing is a form of entanglement that respects the frontier between bodies and allows the parts that are touching to come into contact while remaining separate. Wreathing does not recoil from touch: while it touches lightly because it never (op)presses, it does not avoid contact or forgo a touch that is already too close either.[22] This is where the first two components of Keats's tactile poetics converge. Figures of wreathing and entanglement abound in the poet's work: they are represented as tactile images that usually contain an affective component suggesting a character or the speaker's desire for contact, reciprocity.

16. For instance, in "Ode to a Nightingale" (*KPP* 457-460), the speaker lies in a dark bower and can only recognise the plants surrounding him through the senses of touch and smell; he can only "guess each sweet / Wherewith the seasonable month endows / The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild" (l.43-45). While the presence of touch is not obvious, it is suggested by the verb "guess". Moreover, in the juxtaposition of "grass", "thicket", and "fruit-tree wild", natural images form a kind of flowery entanglement further depicted as "Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves" (l.47).

21 P. Della Putta, "Embodied Semantics", 21.

22 See S. Jackson, *Tactile Poetics*, 7. According to her, tactful reading implies reading carefully, attentively, but not tampering with the text. This can be equally applied to human touch.

In this passage, even though "cover'd up" is the only explicit tactile reference, words still touch each other. The juxtaposition is what weaves the plants together in a protective shell that affects the speaker's mood and allows him to be more in touch with his own mortality. In this example, the tactility of the poem is therefore revealed not only in the use of tactile lexis, but also in the use of commas as points of contact between words that foster exchange between the natural world and the self, as well as between thoughts and the body.

17. Another example can be found in "The Eve of Saint Agnes" (*KPP* 445-456). At first, the two main protagonists, Madeline and Porphyro, cannot quite meet because of the discrepancy between what the young woman sees and hears in her dream and what she finds upon waking up. The young lady's plea for contact leads to a physical union of the lovers tactfully expressed in the poem as the blending of the smells of the violet and the rose as "[i]nto her dream he melted, as the rose/ Blendeth its odour with the violet" (l.320-321). It is only after the bodies, colours and smells have touched and become woven one into the other that Porphyro and Madeline can finally meet. Consequently, even after the bodies have touched, there is still a form of tact in the absence of violence and penetration: the poet's haptic and tactile poetics then acquire another meaning as they come closer to the poetics of healing.

18. As Sarah Jackson has noted, "[d]espite the suspicion surrounding it, however, touch is also revered for its healing potential — the laying on of hands, the 'Midas touch' or the 'Royal touch'".[23] The touch of poetry, the touch of a lover's hand, the temperature of a bower all hold restorative power. The most obvious example of such restorative touch is the poem "To Hope" (*KPP* 36-37), in which the poet writes: "Sweet Hope, ethereal balm upon me shed / And wave thy silver pinions o'er my head!" (l.29-30). First, the verb "shed" is particularly tactful insofar as it implies touch through dispersion over a surface while avoiding full penetration. The shedding of light or balm allows for contact with the surface without violation of the intimacy of the subject. Moreover, because it is repeated five times in the poem, the verb creates echoes and reverberations that allow words to resonate and to envelop the reader's mind quite like the restorative "balm" of hope. Secondly, the choice of the word "balm", which is repeated twice, makes touch restorative. Balms and unguents are indeed forms of medicine that require being applied directly onto the body by one's own hands or by the hands of another so that touch itself becomes quite as soothing as the medicine itself. The restorative power of touch is not limited to ideals and art. Contact with a lover's body similarly holds some kind of healing strength.

23 *Ibid*., 59.

19. In the sonnet "Bright Star" (*KPP* 337-338), John Keats's speaker longs to feel his lover's breath and chest forever as if contact with the lover's body and feeling the lover's vital breath could keep the speaker himself alive. It is poetry's touch that becomes a healing force. This, in turn, creates a connection between the beloved woman and the poetic art. In *Endymion* (*KPP* 147-239), the speaker insists that "[a] thing of beauty is a joy forever" (I: l.1) that can create a bower for us:

> Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.
>
> Therefore, on every morrow, are we wreathing
>
> A flowery band to bind us to the earth,
>
> Spite of despondence, of the inhuman dearth (l.5-8)

The speaker of the poem later clarifies what "a thing of beauty" really is: such things belong in the natural world and the sky but can also be "tales" (I: l.22), so that art again comes to hold some restorative power that manifests in the form of touching, and more specifically "wreathing". In focusing so closely on touch, Keats creates a poetics of liminality and contact that fosters healing and allows the readers' and poet's bodies to come into contact while always maintaining the necessary distance for the preservation of and reparation of life.

Psyche lies unaware: John Keats's "Ode to Psyche"

20. The value of ending this analysis of Keats's tactile poetics with the "Ode to Psyche" (*KPP* 464-465) is that it allows us to leaf through all the layers of his artistry but also to reconsider Jean-Luc Nancy's own figure of Psyche. In "Ode to Psyche", the speaker of the poem strives to keep Psyche within reach, to make her visible and touchable and to make her a goddess worth encountering. This is nevertheless only possible if the goddess herself takes shape and becomes a mass that inhabits a physical space: a body that can be held and beheld. The poet does so either by describing Psyche's human form, at the beginning of the poem, or thanks to the physical mediation of temple-building that both invites contact with the goddess and keeps other bodies at bay.

21. The poem opens on the image of the Goddess Psyche lying on the grass. Like Freud's Psyche, whom Jean-Luc Nancy uses as the starting point of many of the arguments in *Corpus*, Psyche lies exposed and doesn't know it (*C* 25).[24] In Nancy's essay, Psyche, who is unaware of her own existence because she is asleep, is therefore presented as a pure experiencing body (*C* 85-86): she is

24 « La psyché est étendue, n'en sait rien. » J.-L. Nancy, *Corpus*, 25.

a mass — a physical mass (*C* 35) — lying in space, occupying space. She is also the goddess of the soul: she embodies a union of body and soul and becomes the locus of Keats's poem. However, while Nancy extrapolates on the image of Psyche alone, in the poem, the Goddess already exists in a world of contact. She does not simply exist as a lone body in space, she exists as a touched and touching body, as a body about to touch and to be touched again by another body — Eros's. The lovers are pictured in an embrace: "Their arms embraced, and their pinions too; / Their lips touch'd not, but had not bade adieu" (l.16-17). Psyche and Eros both touch and do not touch: they meet without melting one into the other so that their bodies can meet tactfully.

22. The speaker of the poem then seizes the vision: moved by what his eyes behold, he writes and pleads. Stanzas two and three are structured in very similar ways, both opening with the apostrophe "O" and ending with the line "Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming". Several more lines are repeated with variations. For instance, line 32, which reads "No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet", becomes "Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet", line 46. It seems as if the speaker of the poem offered to let Psyche speak through him, or to let his body serve as a vessel through which Psyche could exist and reach out, with her voice, words, and music to the world. Despite the absence of words related to touch, the parallel structures of stanzas two and three create a resonance within the poem: this may be the "haptem" of language, to quote Komel, that is, a point of contact between the visual and the aural, between what is and what could be, between past and present, between the absence of a physical temple to the goddess and its creation by the speaker-poet attempting to encounter the sleeping deity. The process of naming what the Goddess never had is also based on a logic of touch and contact. The repetitions of "no" and "nor" bind the clauses together, so that rather than creating a sense of absence, they fill the space of the page as well as the speaker's and reader's mental spaces with sensations and sounds. In the meantime, they fill the reader's mouth with echoing sounds that touch one another so that the poem itself becomes a feeling, moving and worshipping body.

23. The last stanza is the one that best represents the convergence of thoughts and living bodies as thoughts become "branched thoughts" (l.52) and "the wreath'd trellis of a working brain" (l.60) take on vegetal forms that let pain and pleasure mingle. Affection, physical sensation and thoughts meet as the newly woven temple lets "the warm Love in" (l.67). Throughout the ode, the world of touch, pain, pleasure, temperature, vision is recreated within the poet's mind thanks to a structure that makes the physical world (in the first stanza) meet with the speaker's inner world of "branched thoughts" (in the last stanza). The parallelism between stanzas two and three thus appears as the

point of contact between the outside and the inside, between the unconscious and the conscious, between experience and cognition, and between body and mind.

24. Moreover, Keats's choice of Psyche as a humanised goddess illuminates his desire to make body and thought touch. Giving Psyche the form of a woman (rather than that of a butterfly — the other form that Psyche usually takes in mythology) lying unaware,[25] Keats precedes Freud and Nancy in embodying existence. For Nancy, the image of Psyche lying exposed and unaware is a representation of neither pure matter nor pure self-knowledge. Instead, this exposed, unconscious Psyche is the form of a body in the process of existing without reflecting on it, which makes her an embodiment of existence itself (*C* 85-86). In the poem, Psyche is also only a body: a loving body, a body in love, a body craving and on the verge of contact but also one that does not know it is here and that, being asleep, does not feel itself feeling and touching. Psyche is, as Nancy puts it, the body experiencing and living. Yet, Psyche is also a representation of the world of thought and mind, so that through figuration and writing, Keats allows for a reconnection of body and mind. In that sense, writing is restorative, as Keats allows the body to reach for the mind so they may become woven not from the outside but from within the poet's mind. Body and thought can thus meet through a poetic medium. The page and the poetic creation carved inside it function as a skin: they act as an envelope that may be touched and touches in return, but one that also keeps us at a distance since penetrating the page would eventually lead to the poem's destruction. Psyche therefore becomes as much inscribed on the page as she is exscribed from the poet's mind, she is — thought and body — exposed and consequently ready to be touched.

25. According to Sarah Jackson, tactful reading means that we come sufficiently close to the text to give it the attention it deserves and requires and that we simultaneously keep enough distance so that we do not, as readers, intrude upon the text or tamper with it.[26] This poetics of tact is at work in "Ode to Psyche". While Psyche has all the attributes of a beloved woman — lips on the verge of kissing, arms embracing, and love — being inside the speaker's mind, and because she inspires him to create, to weave and sing, she may also stand for poetry. If we understand Psyche as both the embodiment of poetry and as an embodied woman, then Keats's poetics can be measured not only by its tactility but also by its tact or tactfulness. The speaker of the poem weaves a tangible temple of thoughts but is also careful not to tamper with the scenery and to leave the scene of Psyche and Eros untouched, without penetrating Psyche's body or altering it. In that sense, the poem shows the

25 As mentioned in an earlier note, the phrase "lying unaware" is a rephrasing of Freud's phrase, used and translated by Nancy: « la psyché est étendue; n'en sait rien. » (*C* 26).

26 S. Jackson, *Tactile Poetics*, 7.

reader the reparative power of touch and exemplifies ways to act as well as to read tactfully, coming close to the innermost parts of the self or the text, without tampering with them.

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