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Cartographies of Uncertainty: Negative Capability and Spatial Indeterminacy in Keats's Poetic Landscapes

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Abstract- This conceptual paper examines how John Keats converts negative capability from an epistemological principle into a spatial experience. Through close readings of "Ode to a Nightingale," "Ode to Psyche," "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream, and selected letters, it argues that Keats repeatedly locates uncertainty within darkness, thresholds, interrupted routes, partial prospects, and unstable points of orientation. These spatial structures prevent the poetic speaker from occupying a detached or commanding position. Instead, perception proceeds through sound, scent, touch, conjecture, and incomplete vision. Four findings emerge. Darkness redistributes rather than merely obstructs perception; thresholds preserve tension between incompatible states; fragmentary vision limits imaginative possession; and unstable orientation mediates between pastoral shelter and sublime exposure. Keats's landscapes consequently offer provisional forms of dwelling without resolving mortality, historical loss, or poetic vocation. The paper contributes to Romantic spatial studies by defining spatial indeterminacy as an organising principle through which negative capability becomes formally and sensuously perceptible. Keats's poetic landscapes do not map a route out of uncertainty; they create conditions in which uncertainty can be inhabited attentively.

Keywords- John Keats, negative capability, spatial indeterminacy, Romantic landscape, pastoral, sublime

I. Introduction

John Keats's formulation of negative capability has become one of the most frequently cited statements of Romantic poetics. In his December 1817 letter to George and Thomas Keats, he identifies the distinguishing quality of literary achievement as the ability to remain "in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts" without an "irritable reaching after fact & reason" (Keats, 1958, Vol. 1, pp. 193–194). Critical discussions have understandably treated this formulation as an account of imaginative receptivity, impersonality, scepticism, or resistance to philosophical closure. Yet Keats's language of uncertainty is rarely disembodied. In his poems and letters, uncertainty repeatedly assumes a spatial form. It appears as a dark passage, an obscured forest, an open casement, an inaccessible height, a mist-ending colonnade, a veiled face, an unfinished path, or a valley from which the observer cannot obtain a complete prospect.

The research problem addressed in this paper arises from the separation that often persists between discussions of negative capability and studies of Keatsian landscape. Negative capability is commonly examined as a theory of knowledge or poetic identity, while landscapes are discussed as forms of sensuous imagery, natural description, pastoral retreat, or sublime encounter. Such approaches illuminate important aspects of Keats's writing, but they do not fully explain why intellectual uncertainty so consistently takes architectural, geographical, and topographical forms. Keats does not merely describe a mind that lacks certainty. He constructs environments in which both speaker and reader must proceed without complete visibility or stable orientation.

This paper calls that recurring condition spatial indeterminacy. The term refers to a poetic space that can be entered and experienced but cannot be comprehensively surveyed, securely bounded, or reduced to one interpretive position. It is not synonymous with vagueness. Keats's indeterminate spaces are often sensuously exact: a scent, sound, flower, sculptural surface, step, shadow, or current of air may be perceived with unusual intensity. What remains uncertain is the relation of these local details to an intelligible totality. The perceiver is given enough information to inhabit the scene, but not enough to master it.

The paper asks two related questions. First, how do Keats's poetic landscapes translate negative capability into spatial and sensory form? Second, how do darkness, thresholds, incomplete vision, and unstable orientation mediate between pastoral security and sublime uncertainty? The selected texts permit these questions to be pursued across different genres and moments in Keats's development. "Ode to a Nightingale" presents a dark woodland navigated by sound and scent. "Ode to Psyche" imagines an inward sanctuary whose security depends on remaining open. "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" confronts the observer with fragmented magnitude and historical loss. *The Fall of Hyperion* turns poetic vocation into a sequence of gardens, temples, stairs, veils, and obstructed visions. The letters provide the conceptual vocabulary that links these poetic spaces.

The central argument is that Keats spatialises negative capability through environments that deny panoramic mastery while sustaining sensuous participation. In these environments, pastoral and sublime modes are not simply opposed. Pastoral shelter is repeatedly opened to mortality, estrangement, or darkness, while sublime magnitude is encountered through intimate bodily sensations. Keats's contribution lies in creating provisional spaces where uncertainty can be endured without either withdrawing into secure enclosure or claiming transcendence over what remains unknown.

II. Literature Review

Negative capability has long occupied a central position in Keats criticism. Bate (1963) associates it with Shakespearean openness and the poet's capacity to resist the imposition of a fixed philosophical identity. Sperry (1973) similarly regards uncertainty as central to Keats's poetic development, particularly in works that test but refuse inherited structures of romance, myth, and transcendence. These influential readings

establish that Keatsian uncertainty is not simply indecision. It is a disciplined refusal to subordinate the complexity of experience to an explanatory system.

Studies of the odes have further demonstrated that their power depends on unresolved movement. Vendler (1983) reads the odes as formally intricate acts of thought in which sensuous experience is repeatedly revised by reflection. Wolfson (1986) places interrogation at the centre of Romantic poetic form and shows that the questions in Keats's poems do not merely request answers. They preserve competing perceptions and prevent the poem from closing prematurely. Such criticism is especially relevant to "Ode to a Nightingale," whose final questions leave dream and waking, presence and absence, unresolved.

A second critical tradition emphasises embodiment, vulnerability, and historical pressure. Ricks (1974) draws attention to the bodily and emotional exposure of Keats's speakers, showing that sensitivity in the poetry is inseparable from risk. Levinson (1988) situates Keats's aesthetic forms within social and cultural conditions, challenging readings that turn receptivity into a purely universal or idealist principle. This intervention is important for spatial analysis because Keats's landscapes are culturally produced rather than innocent settings. A museum gallery, classical sanctuary, cultivated bower, or imagined grove carries histories of access, inheritance, dispossession, and belatedness.

More recent scholarship provides additional ways of understanding partial perception. Paterson (2012) argues that Keatsian mist does not merely obscure meaning; it can enable a mode of reading and thought less dependent on visual certainty. Ravinthiran (2022) examines distance as an active component of Keatsian feeling rather than a deficiency to be overcome. Roberts (2023), in discussing Keats's sleep states, shows how suspended agency can coexist with intensified sensory experience. These studies support the claim that diminished control need not result in diminished perception.

Scholarship on particular texts also clarifies the material and formal stakes of uncertainty. Jang (2020) interprets "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" through the materiality and mortality of the sculptural fragment, drawing attention to the tension between imagined grandeur and physical decay. O'Halloran's (2024) analysis of Keats's unwritten and unfinished epic ambitions demonstrates that incompletion is bound to the poet's conception of future work, imaginative potential, and artistic loss. Such accounts discourage the assumption that the fragmentary condition of *The Fall of Hyperion* can be reduced either to failure or to a perfectly completed aesthetic design.

Spatial theory offers a supporting rather than governing framework for the present argument. Tuan (1977) distinguishes abstract space from place as space made meaningful through bodily experience, attachment, and memory. Bachelard (1994) examines how rooms, corners, nests, and thresholds organise imaginative life. Keats, however, repeatedly interrupts the transformation of space into secure place. His rooms darken and open onto further passages. His bowers provide shelter but remain penetrable. His windows open onto night or perilous seas. His temples exceed the observer's powers of measurement. The relevant critical gap, therefore, is not a lack of

scholarship on negative capability, sensation, or landscape individually. It is the absence of a sustained cross-textual account of the spatial mechanisms through which Keats makes uncertainty inhabitable.

III. Methodology and Conceptual Approach

This paper adopts a qualitative methodology based on close reading and comparative conceptual analysis. The corpus has been selected purposively because each text connects uncertainty with a distinctive spatial configuration. The analysis attends to recurrent images, sensory patterns, directional markers, architectural structures, movements between enclosed and open spaces, and changes in the speaker's perceptual position. Rather than treating spatial imagery as decorative background, it asks how spatial arrangements shape knowledge, emotion, and poetic authority.

The concept of spatial indeterminacy is organised through four analytical categories. The first is **darkness**, which limits visual control and redirects perception towards hearing, smell, touch, memory, and conjecture. The second is the **threshold**, including doors, windows, stairs, veils, margins, and transitional states. Thresholds connect spaces while preserving difference between them. The third is **incomplete vision**, in which objects appear as glimpses, fragments, shadows, blocked forms, or magnitudes that cannot be measured. The fourth is **unstable orientation**, where the speaker lacks reliable coordinates of direction, scale, distance, or ontological position.

These categories also clarify the relationship between pastoral and sublime modes. In this paper, the pastoral refers not only to rural imagery but to the promise of boundedness, shelter, sensuous locality, organic rhythm, and belonging. The sublime refers to experiences of obscurity, magnitude, mortality, historical distance, danger, and perceptual excess. Keats rarely permits either mode to remain pure. Pastoral spaces are disturbed by loss and estrangement, while sublime spaces retain intimate sensory points of contact. Spatial indeterminacy is the form through which their tension is sustained.

IV. Analysis: Spatial Forms of Negative Capability

1. The Letters: Chambers, Passages, Bodies, and Valleys

Keats's letters reveal how consistently he understands thought through spatial figures. The negative capability letter itself describes a condition of remaining within uncertainty rather than reaching impatiently beyond it. The verb implied by this formulation is not escape but dwelling. Uncertainty is a condition in which the poet must be capable of staying.

The letter to John Hamilton Reynolds of 3 May 1818 gives this condition an architectural structure through the "Mansion of Many Apartments." Keats compares human life to a building whose known rooms open onto further chambers. The first is an unreflective or "thoughtless" chamber. The second, the "Chamber of Maiden-Thought," initially appears bright and delightful. As perception develops, however, increased understanding reveals misery, sickness, heartbreak, and oppression. The chamber gradually darkens, while numerous doors open into passages that remain

unilluminated. Keats concludes that "We are in a Mist" and experience the "burden of the Mystery" (Keats, 1958, Vol. 1, pp. 280–281).

This metaphor reverses a conventional narrative of enlightenment. Greater intellectual vision does not produce a fully illuminated structure. It reveals the number and depth of spaces that have not been explored. Darkness is therefore not simply ignorance preceding knowledge. It is an effect of sharpened knowledge. The more the perceiver understands about suffering, the less adequate any simple map of good and evil becomes.

The "camelion Poet" letter of October 1818 introduces a comparable instability of position. Keats argues that the poet has no fixed identity because the poet continually enters other forms and bodies (Keats, 1958, Vol. 1, pp. 386–387). Poetic perception is mobile and participatory rather than detached. The observer cannot preserve a stable location outside the object being imagined. In the "vale of Soul-making" letter, human formation similarly occurs through exposure to circumstances within a world of difficulty (Keats, 1958, Vol. 2, pp. 101–102). The spatial metaphors differ—mansion, body, valley—but each makes development dependent on entering a condition that cannot be controlled in advance.

These letters provide the conceptual grammar of the poems. Negative capability is associated with entry, passage, altered position, and incomplete navigation. The poet's task is not to survey the mansion from outside but to move through its darkening rooms.

2. "Ode to a Nightingale": Darkness and Acoustic Orientation

"Ode to a Nightingale" begins with a desire to leave the burdens of human consciousness and enter the bird's apparently untroubled world. The nightingale sings within a "melodious plot / Of beechen green, and shadows numberless" (Keats, 1978, "Ode to a Nightingale," lines 8–9). The phrase combines pastoral enclosure with visual uncertainty. The plot suggests a bounded place, yet its shadows cannot be counted. From the beginning, security and indeterminacy occupy the same landscape.

The speaker imagines movement into the "forest dim," initially through wine and then through the "viewless wings of Poesy" (lines 20, 33). Imaginative transport does not produce clearer vision. On arriving near the bird, the speaker finds that "here there is no light" except what may be carried by the wind through "verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways" (lines 38–40). The woodland offers routes, but they wind beyond the reach of a comprehensive view. The speaker has entered the desired landscape without gaining command of it.

The fifth stanza establishes darkness as an alternative perceptual condition:

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs.

(Keats, 1978, "Ode to a Nightingale," lines 41–42)

Sight fails, but perception does not end. In "embalmed darkness," the speaker can "guess each sweet" through scent, seasonal knowledge, and tactile proximity (lines 43–44). Grass, thicket, fruit tree, hawthorn, eglantine, violets, and musk-rose emerge not as a visually ordered prospect but as a fragrant field of conjecture. The word "guess" is crucial. It names neither certainty nor arbitrary fantasy. The inference is responsive to evidence while remaining open to error. The speaker's relation to the landscape exemplifies negative capability because he accepts partial knowledge without abandoning attention.

The line "Darkling I listen" condenses the poem's perceptual method (line 51). Darkness removes the speaker's ability to locate the bird visually, while song creates an intense but unstable orientation. He knows the bird through a sound whose source cannot be possessed. This acoustic relation also complicates the fantasy of death. To cease upon the midnight while the bird continues singing would promise release from human suffering, yet it would also make the speaker "a sod" incapable of hearing (lines 55–60). Union with the pastoral ground would extinguish the sensory consciousness that makes the imagined union desirable.

The song then crosses temporal and geographical boundaries. It reaches Ruth "amid the alien corn" and opens "magic casements" onto "perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn" (lines 67–70). The pastoral field becomes a place of exile, while the domestic casement opens onto danger and estrangement. The threshold no longer separates a protected interior from a threatening exterior; it holds both within one image.

As the song withdraws, the poem becomes briefly cartographic. Its route passes meadows, a stream, a hillside, and neighbouring valley-glades (lines 75–78). Yet this increasingly precise geography records disappearance rather than recovery. The landscape can trace the movement of the sound but cannot arrest it. The closing questions—whether the experience was vision or waking dream, whether the speaker wakes or sleeps—leave him without stable ontological coordinates. The poem ends not by solving the uncertainty but by locating the speaker within it.

3. "Ode to Psyche": The Open Sanctuary

"Ode to Psyche" begins with another unstable perceptual event: "Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see" the goddess (Keats, 1978, "Ode to Psyche," line 5). The speaker has been wandering "in a forest thoughtlessly" when he encounters Psyche and Cupid resting in deep grass beneath leaves and beside a brooklet "scarce espied" (lines 7–12). The scene resembles an enclosed pastoral sanctuary, but it is discovered accidentally and seen only partially. Its status remains suspended between waking perception and dream.

Psyche's historical belatedness is presented as a deprivation of place. Unlike older deities, she possesses "no shrine, nor grove, nor oracle" and no established forms of worship (lines 35–36). The repeated negatives produce a sacred geography of absence. The speaker responds by offering himself as priest and architect. He will construct a "fane / In some untrodden region of my mind" (lines 50–51).

The internal sanctuary may initially seem to resolve Psyche's placelessness. Yet the "untrodden region" is not a fully known or mastered territory. It is available for imaginative creation precisely because it has not been mapped. The temple is built from "branched thoughts," "dark-cluster'd trees," "wild-ridged mountains," streams, birds, bees, and sleeping Dryads (lines 52–56). Mental space assumes the form of an intensified pastoral landscape, but its forms remain irregular and expansive. The mountains rise "steep by steep," trees spread "far, far around," and Fancy produces "stars without a name" (lines 54, 58, 61).

Namelessness protects the landscape from becoming a completed catalogue. Fancy remains fertile because it "will never breed the same" forms repeatedly (line 63). The sanctuary therefore offers dwelling without fixity. It shelters Psyche but remains capable of alteration.

The final image brings this balance into focus: the speaker promises "A bright torch, and a casement ope at night, / To let the warm Love in" (lines 66–67). The torch provides local illumination rather than total daylight. The open window makes the inward temple permeable to what comes from beyond it. Night remains outside and around the aperture, while love enters through a threshold that must not be closed. The pastoral sanctuary achieves security not by excluding uncertainty but by maintaining an opening towards it.

4. "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles": Fragmented Magnitude

"On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" begins with an encounter between aspiration and bodily limitation. The sculptures evoke "each imagined pinnacle and steep / Of godlike hardship," yet this upward orientation tells the speaker that he must die (Keats, 1978, "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," lines 3–4). He compares himself to "a sick eagle looking at the sky" (line 5). The eagle retains the visual and symbolic relation to height but lacks the power to ascend. Its orientation is sublime, but its body remains grounded. This image denies the speaker the traditional position of the sublime observer who survives danger and converts it into intellectual elevation. Looking upwards produces an intensified knowledge of mortality. The marbles are described as "dim-conceived glories of the brain," and the encounter causes "a most dizzy pain" (lines 9–11). "Dim-conceived" combines cognitive activity with obscurity, while dizziness records the loss of stable spatial position.

The fragmentary condition of the marbles deepens this instability. Their physical presence testifies to an artistic and historical world that cannot be restored as a whole. The viewer encounters grandeur through damaged matter. As Jang (2020) observes, material endurance and mortality become inseparable in the sonnet. Imagination can project a lost magnitude, but it cannot cancel decay or historical displacement.

The closing images widen abruptly into "a billowy main," "A sun," and "a shadow of a magnitude" (Keats, 1978, "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles," lines 13–14). These images do not produce a coherent visual composition. Sea, sun, and shadow alter the scale of the encounter faster than the observer can stabilise it. A shadow indicates the presence

of a form while withholding its complete dimensions. “Magnitude” names greatness but does not measure it.

The poem therefore treats fragmentary perception as an ethical and aesthetic limit. The sculptures orient the speaker towards history, artistic greatness, and mortality, but they do not yield a recoverable totality. Negative capability consists in allowing the fragment to remain both materially present and imaginatively incomplete.

5. *The Fall of Hyperion*: Passage, Trial, and Incomplete Vision

The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream enlarges Keats’s spatial grammar into a narrative of poetic vocation. The poem opens by questioning the status of dreams and the distinction between poet and fanatic. That distinction, the narrator suggests, may only be determined after the dreamer’s death (Keats, 1978, *The Fall of Hyperion*, Canto 1, lines 1–18). Authority is deferred before the dream landscape appears.

The dream begins in a garden where trees “of every clime,” fountains, flowers, fruit, and a vine-covered arbour create an image of extreme abundance (lines 19–45). This space appears to offer pastoral security in concentrated form. It combines shade, fragrance, food, water, softness, and shelter. Yet its plenitude is excessive and strangely uninhabited. The remains of a feast suggest prior consumption and unexplained absence.

After eating and drinking, the narrator falls into a “cloudy swoon” (lines 55–61). When consciousness returns, the garden has disappeared. Pastoral enjoyment has functioned as a threshold rather than a destination. The speaker awakens within a vast sanctuary whose dimensions defeat measurement. Looking upward “to fathom the space every way,” he sees columns that end north and south in “mist / Of nothing,” while dark gates obstruct the east (lines 84–96). Directional markers are present, but they do not orient him. North, south, east, height, and distance become names for inaccessible limits.

The staircase before Moneta’s altar intensifies this structure. The speaker must reach the steps before the burning leaves are extinguished or die on the pavement. As he struggles forward, his body becomes cold and numb. Life returns when his foot reaches the lowest stair (lines 117–144). The threshold is physically exact: one step separates death from continued consciousness. Yet crossing it does not lead to mastery. It grants access to a more demanding uncertainty.

Moneta explains that the ascent is possible only for those who experience the world’s suffering as suffering rather than spectacle (lines 147–153). Spatial elevation is therefore ethically qualified. The narrator does not rise above misery; he gains poetic access through susceptibility to it. This differs from a sublime ascent in which height confers dominance. Here, elevation increases responsibility.

Vision remains incomplete after the ascent. Moneta’s face is veiled. Her eyes are half closed and directed away from external objects, while her mind contains dark chambers where tragic histories remain active (lines 243–290). The poem transfers vision from external survey to an interior archive of suffering. When the narrator enters Moneta’s

vision, he encounters a sunken vale and the fallen Saturn. Yet even his enlarged "ken" receives only a "half-unravelled web" of events (lines 305–320). Greater capacity does not produce total comprehension.

The poem's fragmentary form reinforces this pattern without making incompletion itself a simple artistic triumph. As O'Halloran (2024) demonstrates, Keats's unfinished epic projects carry both imaginative possibility and the pain of unrealised ambition. *The Fall of Hyperion* ends while the narrator is still undergoing initiation into historical and poetic vision. Its garden, temple, stairs, veil, mental chambers, and valley form a sequence of provisional locations. Each passage expands perception while revealing another obstruction. Poetic vocation emerges not as arrival at an elevated viewpoint but as the capacity to continue within partial vision.

V. Discussion

The analysis identifies four ways in which Keats makes negative capability spatially perceptible. First, darkness redistributes perception. In "Ode to a Nightingale," the absence of light produces heightened attention to fragrance and song. In the "Mansion of Many Apartments" letter, darkness accompanies rather than precedes intellectual development. In *The Fall of Hyperion*, mist and shadow expose the inadequacy of panoramic vision. Keatsian darkness is therefore not an empty absence. It creates a field in which knowledge becomes sensory, conjectural, and provisional.

Second, thresholds preserve unresolved relations. The open casement of "Ode to Psyche" permits love to enter without eliminating night. The magic casements of "Ode to a Nightingale" join enclosure to peril. The stair in *The Fall of Hyperion* marks a passage from passive dream to ethically burdened vision, but it does not provide a route beyond suffering. A threshold connects states while refusing to collapse their differences.

Third, incomplete vision limits imaginative possession. The unseen flowers, scarcely visible brook, sculptural fragments, mist-ending columns, obstructed face of Saturn, and veil of Moneta all prevent the perceiver from converting the object into fully available knowledge. This limitation has ethical significance. To perceive incompletely is to acknowledge that the object exceeds the observer's interpretation.

Fourth, unstable orientation mediates pastoral and sublime modes. Keats's pastoral spaces offer local forms of shelter, sensory pleasure, and organic belonging, but they do not remain sealed. The nightingale's woodland recedes; Psyche's temple requires an open window; the garden of *The Fall of Hyperion* becomes an entrance into historical suffering. Conversely, sublime uncertainty is registered through intimate bodily sensations: scent, coldness, numb feet, tears, sound, marble, and shadow. The pastoral makes the sublime inhabitable, while the sublime prevents pastoral enclosure from becoming an illusion of permanent safety.

The paper's principal contribution is therefore to redefine negative capability as a practice of spatial dwelling. It is neither passive indecision nor unrestricted ambiguity.

It requires the capacity to remain attentive within an environment whose total structure cannot be known. Keats's speakers move, listen, infer, hesitate, ascend, and look through openings, but they do not acquire a final commanding position. Spatial indeterminacy gives formal shape to this disciplined incompleteness.

The study is limited to selected poems and letters in which spatial uncertainty is especially pronounced. It does not claim that all Keatsian landscapes function identically, nor does it provide a comprehensive history of the pastoral and sublime traditions. Its conceptual categories are intended as interpretive tools rather than fixed classifications.

VI. Conclusion and Future Work

Keats's poetic landscapes are cartographies of uncertainty because they orient perception while withholding a complete map. Forests, chambers, windows, temples, stairs, shadows, and valleys are not simply scenic elements. They organise the speaker's relation to knowledge, mortality, history, and poetic vocation. Through them, negative capability becomes a bodily and spatial practice.

"Ode to a Nightingale" replaces visual command with acoustic and olfactory attention. "Ode to Psyche" constructs an inward sanctuary whose vitality depends on remaining open. "On Seeing the Elgin Marbles" locates sublime magnitude within material fragmentation and bodily weakness. *The Fall of Hyperion* turns the poet's development into a sequence of difficult passages through spaces that cannot be fully measured or interpreted. The letters show that this spatial logic belongs to Keats's broader understanding of intellectual and poetic life.

These texts also demonstrate that pastoral security and sublime uncertainty are mutually dependent in Keats. Pastoral images provide provisional shelter and sensory orientation, but sublime pressure opens them to death, history, and otherness. Sublime experience, in turn, becomes bearable through concrete sensations and limited places. Keats does not reconcile these modes into harmony. He allows them to remain in productive tension.

Future research could extend the framework to *Endymion*, *Hyperion*, "To Autumn," "The Eve of St. Agnes," and the Scottish tour letters. These works would permit closer examination of roads, borders, weather, interiors, seasonal change, and embodied travel. Material-historical research might compare Keats's imagined spaces with Regency museum culture, landscape aesthetics, and the actual environments of Hampstead and the British Museum. Digital mapping could also trace movement, directional language, and acoustic distance across the poetry. Such approaches should preserve the central insight of negative capability: the most revealing map of Keats's landscapes may be one that records not only visible routes and locations, but also the points at which sight fails, direction becomes unstable, and interpretation must remain open.

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