In his letters, Keats writes of “negative capability,” which he defines as “when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” In other words, the poet must be willing to remain in doubt so that he can imagine himself as someone else: the “I” in the poet is not the poetic self, but instead is a persona the poet inhabits. Unlike the Wordsworthian “egotistic sublime,” Keats conceives of the poet as lacking his own identity:

A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body—The Sun, the Moon, the Sea and Men and Women who are creatures of impulse are poetical and have about them an unchangeable attribute—the poet has none: no identity—he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God’s creatures.

It is ironic that the poet himself is the “most unpoetical of all God’s creatures,” implying that the poet as subject is lackluster. The Poet’s role then, is to be “Chamelion” and imagine himself in another’s sensibility, or “fill some other Body.”

With this philosophy of poetry in mind, it seems somewhat surprising that the speaker in Keats’ *The Fall of Hyperion* is Keats himself (or at least a poet) and that a major theme of this epic fragment is the artist’s quest for identity, which I argue is related to Hyperion’s fall and Keats’ own fall—his imminent death. What does it mean that the titans are replaced by another set of Gods, or more specifically, Apollo the god of poetry and prophecy replaces Hyperion? Geoffrey Hartman in his essay, “Spectral Symbolism and Authorial Self in Keats’s ‘Hyperion,’” writes, “Nothing lightens the sufferance of temporality, except that it is the gods themselves who are subjected to time, and the poet suffers their suffering rather than his own” (68). Hartman thus proposes that the gods stand in for the poetic self. They, like Keats, are running against the clock;
it is only a matter of time before Keats will die and the Olympians will expel the titans. Because Romanticism is known for working in allegory, perhaps we can read Hyperion’s fall as being representative of the poet’s own plight.

The last three lines of the first stanza—“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”—suggests the relationship between poetic vision (or dream) and death. We will only know whether or not the poem, The Fall of Hyperion, is the work of a religious fanatic or a poet when the “warm scribe my hand is in the grave,” or when the creator is dead. Perhaps “fanatic” and “poet” are not mutually exclusive. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “fanatic” as “Of an action or speech: Such as might result from possession by a deity or demon; frantic, furious. Of a person: Frenzied, mad. Obs.” Thus instead of the poet “filling some other Body” such as the body of a God, the deity possesses the poet. The poet’s vision of Hyperion’s fall, then, is can be read as psychological, or the poet’s inner conflict on the nature of art.

Moneta, the goddess of memory and mother of the muses, challenges the speaker’s conception of the role of the poet. In order to enter the temple, the speaker must defend poetry, or at least justify the poet’s influence on the world.

What benefit canst though do, or all thy tribe, to the great world? Thou art a dreaming thing. A fever of thyself.

A “fever of thyself” (or fits of poetic inspiration) is evocative of Wordsworth’s “egotistical sublime” in that it renders the self as the source of inspiration rather than some exterior object. Perhaps this is why the rest of the poem focuses on the figures of the titans and their torment rather than Keats’ own torment as a poet. Keats does not want to share the same fate as those poets who revel in an egotistical “fever of thyself.” Apollo, the god of poetry and prophecy, uses
his “misty pestilence” (read disease) in the dwellings of bad poets, who (according to Duncan Wu’s footnote) could be Byron, Wordsworth and Moore, Keats’ contemporaries.

Hartman argues that Keats “plunges” or “relapses” into “mythic abstraction” through the “fever” of poetry. Moneta metapoetically criticizes the personalized dream vision of the Fall of Hyperion and through this condemnation, she causes Keats’ to take part in a “counter-identification” and move towards the impersonality of myth (Hartman, 62). After his discussion on the nature of poetry with Moneta, the speaker becomes privy to the titans’ suffering, and in effect disappears as a character, as he acts as an outside observer.

Hartman uses a historicist approach by linking this “fever” to Keats’ brother Tom, who at the time, was dying of tuberculosis. Tom’s fever was a source of inspiration for Keats’ letter about poetic identity: Keats’ wrote that, he, like his brother, lived in a continual fever. Reading “fever” in both the literal and inspirational sense, links poetry with death. Therefore, the “fever of thyself” has the potential to consume Keats and force him into a state of paralysis.

The poet thus lives in a constant state of negation. The first stanza argues that The Fall of Hyperion is a dream, and that it is the role of “Poesy” to “tell her dreams/with the fine spell of words…” The vision is the “fever” of inspiration, which the poet translates into language. Yet in line 199, the speaker tells Moneta “the poet and the dreamer are distinct,” that “the one pours out a balm upon the world,/the other vexes it.” These lines describe constant renewal and destruction. Dreams and poetry do not work together as argued in the first stanza, but instead work in opposition. The word “balm” is interesting because it could mean, an aromatic preparation for embalming the dead (implications of death/fever here) and also something that is meant to sooth, just as the poet is a “physician to all men,” or a prophet. If The Fall of Hyperion is a poem written in the language of a dream or a vision, then the poet is in an intermediary
world, a liminal space between life and death, and, just like the Gods, the poet is paralyzed by questioning his place is within the cosmos. This poem is at the moment just before Hyperion and Keats fall.

It seems safer, then, to resort to “negative capability” by having the speaker go on a “Danteque dream-voyage” (Hartman, 60), and therefore displace his own fears of mortality onto the Gods. The problem, then, is that humans become completely removed from the epic narrative, which is why it’s a tenuous to argue that Keats meant for Hyperion to mirror his own difficulties as a dying poet. It is important to note, however, that Apollo replaces Hyperion, and that both Gods are associated with poetry and with fire. Hyperion is only mentioned in Canto II, but get a sense of pathos as the speaker observes the God, “blazing on his orbed fire,” holding on to life, like Keats holds onto his spark (or fever) of inspiration, but that light of inspiration (at least for Hyperion and Keats) is about to go out.