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In Praise of Peculiar Bliss: Adherence and Innovation in John Keats's Personal Theology

MASON WALKER

The title of John Keats's 1816 poem "Written in disgust of vulgar superstition" makes it plain to the reader that the work embodies a spirited invective against religious faith. The poem spends most of its fourteen lines bemoaning the incessant sound of the ever-present bells, which "call... the people to some other prayers/Some other gloominess, more dreadful cares" (2-3). Keats hopes that these bells, along with the countless churches of which they are a part, will soon be "dying like an outburnt lamp" (11). He also declares that, in their absence, he hopes for "fresh flowers... and many glories of immortal stamp" (13-14). If the poem's preceding lines are a potent mixture of disgusted diatribe and despairing lament, its final two constitute a wholly surprising expression of hope.

They also prompt a significant question: Just what are the "fresh flowers" that Keats seeks? For what new kinds of transcendence would the destruction of conventional religion pave the way? An examination of Keats's body of poetic work and his letters, along with modern scholarship concerning both, will help us construct an answer. By utilizing these various sources, I maintain that John Keats, though not conventionally religious, had a highly creative and compelling personal theology of his own. More specifically, it is important to note that while this theology, like most Christian ones, sees suffering as a possible aid to redemption and salvation, its conception of what redemption and salvation entail diverges significantly from traditional Christian thought. Keats's personal theology, by contrast, centers on the ability of human beings to secure their own singular

redemption and salvation, and on the unique types of figurative immortality afforded to us by our knowledge of our own transience. Ultimately, this personal theology is, for all its rebelliousness, structurally dependent on Christianity; after all, it was by opposing Christian teaching that Keats slowly but surely formed spiritual and philosophical opinions of his own. While establishing and arguing for the existence of Keats's own personal theology, I also argue that these "fresh flowers" of religious thought grew from decidedly Christian soil.

I. The Value of Suffering

"There are no crown-wearers in heaven who were not cross-bearers here below." Charles Spurgeon, Baptist minister

When Christianity first emerged, one of its revolutionary currents of thought was a radically new attitude toward suffering, one rarely heard prior to the time of Christ. The ingenuity of the Christian solution resided in the way it saw value in suffering without dismissing or belittling the agonies that such suffering caused. With his abiding love of nature and intense interest in self-transcendence, Keats would be easy to regard as a sort of proto-Buddhist. However, in his response to human suffering, it is much easier to claim that he was a pseudo-Christian.

Keats's response to suffering was formed over the course of several years of protracted and powerfully engaged thinking. After all, a man whose family ranks are filled with the diseased and dying will likely ruminate upon this question. Yet Keats knew not only of external suffering but also of the internal torments of the mind; in "Ode to a Nightingale," he bemoans that "to think is to be full of sorrow/And leaden-eyed despairs" (27-28). As such, dealing with the problem of suffering was essential to Keats's own emotional and mental well-being. In *Keats, Skepticism, and the*

Religion of Beauty, Ronald A. Sharp suggests that Keats was aware of the need to reckon with this recurring obstacle, and he concludes that a significant amount of Keats's work can be read as an attempt to work out a philosophy that would serve as a "solution to the traditional religious problems of suffering" (25). While Sharp correctly identifies the problem of suffering as a central conceit in Keats's poetry, he is wrong to call Keats's response to the problem of suffering "a solution" to the traditional Christian approach. In fact, Keats's response to suffering is highly Christianized. Like the traditional Christian, Keats sees suffering as an aspect of existence that is assuredly permanent, always difficult, and yet often an integral part of that which is good.

This belief is most clearly and overtly outlined in "Ode on Melancholy," with its memorable statement that "Ay, in the very temple of Delight/Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine" (26-27). Keats's diction here is nothing short of brilliant, with a multiplicity of meanings that relay clearly and powerfully the interconnectedness of his two subjects. The use of architectural language implies that Delight and Melancholy are, quite literally, part of the same structure. In addition to being architectural, the language is also resonantly religious. In the world of John Keats, it is as if one enters the temple of Delight to pay *tribute* to Melancholy—to give thanks to her for often making Delight and other positive emotions possible. Here, Keats expresses a notably Christian outlook on suffering. He does not praise it in and of itself but instead acknowledges that it is inseparable from much that is worthy and desirable in this world. While "Ode on Melancholy" is Keats's clearest expression of suffering's potential value, he does address the subject in several other poems, including "Ode on Indolence." In that poem, he begs the winged spirits of Love, Ambition, and Poesy to leave him alone: "Ye cannot raise/My head cool-bedded in the flowery grass" (51-52). The spirits are attempting to stir Keats to energy and productivity,

but he knows that now is no time for urgency. If the insistent spirits were to remove his head from the grass and drag him back to the bustling activity of the world around him, he would have little to *produce*. It is this state of slow and lazy sadness, contemplation, and isolation that will ultimately give him the ability to create “visions for the night” and “for the day” (Keats 56-57). Only keeping his head in the dark of the grass will eventually ignite the light of inspiration that he needs in order to write well. Keats is not praising indolence simply for its own sake; wallowing in despair with a decided lack of reason is not an intrinsic good. But once again, Keats acknowledges that such suffering can be inseparable from some kinds of desired emotions. In this particular case, the emotion under examination is inspiration.

In both pieces, Keats adheres in no small part to the Christian response to suffering, which may be summed up thus: suffering, while not a good in and of itself, can be necessary to secure that which *is* in fact good. Keats’s personal theology, like that of Christians, holds suffering as a necessary difficulty that allows access to the ultimate “goods” — redemption and salvation. That said, his conceptions of redemption and salvation differs significantly from those of Christianity.

II. Beauty: The Great Redeemer

“The moon is utterly reasonable; and [yet] the moon is the mother of lunatics and has given to them all her name.” GK Chesterton, Anglo-Catholic apologist

Like Christian theology, John Keats’s personal theology includes the idea of redemption. However, in the realm of Keatsian thought, the word “redemption” denotes something very different. While Keats’s religious conception is not a Christian

one, it does have at its heart the same basic concern as the above statement by a famed Christian apologist—namely, the concern that reason and logic, when left unchecked, will levy serious difficulties upon mankind. We need the mysterious, the numinous, the wondrous. We need the beautiful. Indeed, Keats's sonnet "To Byron" contains a line uncannily similar to the Chesterton quote. Praising his fellow poet, Keats states that Byron's beautiful words make him feel "as when a cloud a golden moon doth veil/Its sides are tinged with a resplendent glow" (9-10). This is an excellent symbol for Keats's overall idea of beauty: Beauty is that which veils the frigid rationality of Chesterton's moon and thus introduces strangeness, variety, and wonder into a world filled with cold, uncaring reason. Beauty temporarily enriches a relentless reality. *Temporarily* is the operative word, for Keats reminds us time and again in his work that this redemption of the world is only momentary. In "Ode to a Nightingale," Keats bemoans the pain brought on by this transience: "Forlorn! the very word is like a bell/To toll me back from thee to my sole self" (71-72). The almost funereal tone of the passage conveys the powerful feeling that the author's transcendent experience is dying away and that he is returning to the sobering confines of the rational world. In negative terms, the suggestion remains that we cannot live in these moments of beautiful transcendence forever, but much of Keats's work also restates this conclusion in *positive* terms. We can, after all, live in such moments every now and then. Describing Keats's overall idea of beauty, Sharp states, "Beauty... is life affirming... and it is consoling. Beauty exercises an ameliorating effect on human suffering—not a permanent eradication of it but a soothing of the distressed spirit" (29). The critic is right to proclaim that, for Keats, beauty's temporary ability to soothe and console is exactly what makes it useful. It is not a permanent condition one may live in but a temporary balm to be savored. Sharp is also correct to note that Keats's idea of

beauty does not include the eradication of that which is ugly or undesirable about the world; as previously noted, Keats believes that only temporary redemption of this strange and damaged place is possible. The critic's claim that Keatsian beauty "ameliorates suffering," however, does not pay sufficient attention to a provocative paradox in Keats's personal theology. Yes, for Keats, beauty does "ameliorate suffering," but it also often *emerges* from suffering. After all, the beautiful temple of Delight has Melancholy at its center, and the poet's "beautiful visions" are a product of the quiet despair felt in the darkness of the grass.

Having concluded the discussion of Keats's personal theory of beauty, we may now provide a general summary of his theology. Like Christian theology, Keats's theology has a Great Redeemer. Yet unlike Christianity, with its promise of permanent redemption through Jesus Christ, Keats's redemption is only temporary; beauty comes and goes. What is more, Keatsian redemption is not won through any intermediary but rather by each individual who perceives unique patterns of beauty in the world. The idea of securing a *subjective* road to *temporary* redemption is a thoroughly un-Christian one, and yet, in order for Keats to *be* un-Christian, Christianity had to be there first, ready to be rebelled against, a structure to be dismantled. We see once again that Keats's "fresh flowers" came, in some ways, from old soil.

III. Salvation and the "Vale of Soul-Making"

"I am intent upon this one purpose... and with this goal in view I press on, eager for the prize, God's heavenly summons." St. Augustine of Hippo, Catholic theologian

We come at last to the ultimate end, or *telos*, of John Keats's personal theology: the possibility of salvation. It is here that Keats

most definitively diverges from the Christian blueprint, emerging with a conception of salvific potential compatible with the rationalism of his century and the mystic leanings of his mind. This aspect of Keats's theology needs examination, for it is here that his insights are the most creative and expansive. Sharp argues that Keats, while far from a flat-out rationalist, did build his idea of salvation upon a foundation of skeptic humanism; for Keats, "rewards, if any, must be experienced in this life" because Keats's theology functions "only in this kind of fully human framework" (51). Indeed, perhaps the phrase which best describes Keats's radically un-Christian sort of salvation is "fully human." Crafting any sort of salvation was, as Keats knew, a fundamentally unscientific, empirically unverifiable quest. Yet he still wished for his idea of salvation to reflect his so-called rational rejections of the Christian system of thought and the humanist conclusions to which those rejections had carried him.

While Keats's ideas regarding salvation may be seen in some of his poems, most especially his two *Hyperion* fragments, it is in his 1819 letter to George and Georgiana Keats, that he most clearly outlines his vision of a "vale of Soul-making." Keats introduces it as follows: "The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is a 'vale of tears' from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary imposition of God and taken to Heaven—what a circumscribe[d] straightened notion! Call the world if you Please 'The vale of Soul-making'" (505). First, it is worth discussing precisely why, within Keats's theology, the "common cognomen" is ultimately wrong. The Christian system of salvation may be otherworldly, but it does feature a strange lack of mysticism that is actually anti-Keatsian. For when the "vale of tears" is wiped away, *all* is revealed—every facet of a Higher Kingdom, every great truth about the world, every conceivable question regarding our ways of being and thinking and believing. For Keats, who in "To Homer" praised the

strange perceptivity of those with “triple sight in blindness keen” (12), there is something seriously important about mystery, about the strange way humans are situated between the un-seeing of animals and the all-seeing of a Higher Power. This is a uniquely human position, and, as Sharp reminds us, Keats aimed for his personal theology to be a uniquely human creation.

Keats also took offense at the idea of God’s “arbitrary imposition” of redemption. As critic Robert Ryan notes, Keats’s attempt to make a blanket criticism of Christianity based upon this issue is flawed: “What Keats is rejecting is, apparently, a Calvinist understanding... he does not seem to be aware that there are other authentic theological traditions—the Catholic and the Arminian Protestant, for example—that place a higher value on personal spiritual development” (199). Keats does seem wrongly to ascribe some aspects of pre-destination to all of the Christian faith, not just certain denominations. But it is not clear that a denomination which places “a higher value on personal spiritual development” would have ultimately won Keats over. In his writing, he places the *ultimate* value on personal spiritual development. As he attempts to craft a “fully human” personal theology, there is no room for the idea that those humans need some sort of all-powerful intermediary to save them. Indeed, when Keats does discuss the idea of God, he *integrates* it into this most human of salvation theologies by locating the deity within the human mind. “Intelligences,” he states, “are atoms of perception... in short they are God” (505). This is not to say that man is akin to the all-powerful Christian God—to say so would negate Keats’s emphasis on half-seeing. But man’s intelligence, like God, helps to provide him with the wisdom needed to secure salvation. There is no “summons,” to use a phrase from the above Augustine passage. We are, ultimately, saved by our own singular human traits.

Equally offensive to Keats’s idea of salvation is the sort of

“Heaven” that God would summon us *to*. In addition to being a place of everlasting clarity, this Heaven would also be a place of everlasting joy, of eternal sharing in God, who is objectively the greatest good. But rather than this everlasting bliss and understanding, Keats suggests that a salvation theology should concern itself with the following question: “How then are these sparks... ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each one’s individual existence?” (505). This understanding of salvation centers around one of our most singular traits as a species. Part of what makes humans unique is the fact that, unlike, say, nightingales, our songs are not the same. We are capable of producing different perspectives on the world and, as such, are capable of unearthing wildly differing ways to find beautiful redemption and meaning in it, thus saving ourselves from a dull and despairing life. We see now that, for Keats, a fully human salvation is fully *individual* and therefore rests in finding “a bliss peculiar to each one’s individual existence.”

Ultimately, the salvation aspect of Keats’s theology is built upon our unique human qualities: our singular faculties of perception, our chronic lack of surety, and our certain appointment with death. For Keats, salvation is won via an individual’s own ability to find “bliss peculiar” and to redeem the world in his own way. Of course, like all other aspects of Keats’s theology, it cannot be entirely new; it relies on the Christian beliefs it resists. But Keats’s theory of salvation, his establishment of a *telos* that celebrates “the pain alone, the joy alone, distinct” to being a human being (174) is perhaps the most richly unique—the most exhilaratingly and most exclusively Keatsian—of all the man’s theological conceits.

Conclusion

In today’s age, many object to Christian theology on the

grounds that it is insufficiently rational. So did Keats. Yet he also objected, in a way, to its *excessive* rationality. To Keats, Christianity promoted superstitions that insulted the intelligence, but by attempting to erect a thought system that would categorize and explain all of life, it also possessed an inherent lack of mystery, along with a serious dearth of possibilities for individual discovery. Ultimately, Keats held on to the greatest piece of wisdom he could locate within the system of Christianity: the value of suffering. Then, by rejecting the rest, he began to form a system of his own, one that insists that we redeem and save *ourselves* by making our own unique and beautiful responses to a world that is uniquely and beautifully mysterious to us. In Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, a work also replete with discussions of seeing, a character realizes that "[t]he great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead, there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" (Woolf 161). According to John Keats, these "matches struck in the dark" are the stuff of our hard-earned salvation.

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