

Ode to Psyche and Keats's Soul-Making

Mohammad Al-Hussini Mansour

Banha University

Faculty of Arts

English Department

The "Ode to Psyche" appears in Keats's long journal-letter to his brother George and his wife Georgiana at the beginning of May 1819 (*Letters*, II, 58-109), in the company of the sonnet "Why Did I Laugh Tonight?" and "La Belle Dame Sans Merci." The letter is full of wonders—sadness and joy, poetry and playfulness, gossip and philosophy, a cricket game and the famous encounter with Coleridge on his leisurely walk towards Highgate, but the most important section, in itself and for our present purpose, is the reflection (April 21st) on "the vale of Soul-making" (*Letters*, II, 100-104). It is almost immediately preceded by Keats's own theoretical conversion of theological doctrine into existential experience: his axiom not of a Christian "soul-saving," not even of a Greek "soul-knowing," but of an empiricist "soul-making." The structure of the event is strongly tripartite, like the ingredients that go into it:

These three materials are the *Intelligence*—the *human heart* (as distinguished from intelligence or Mind) and the *World or Elemental space* [. . .].

(*Letters*, II, 102)

It is crucial, for Keats, that "soul making" is a process, that the soul not only comes into being through the coming together of "three materials"—mind and heart and the world of human suffering—but that the process continues in the ongoing growth of the soul. He expresses that such a system of soul-making formed out of the interaction of "mind" and "heart"—or intelligence and passion—within "life" or the world of circumstances, constitutes an archaic model on which the Christian metaphor of soul-saving was patterned:

It is pretty generally suspected that the Chr[i]stian scheme has been copied from the ancient persian and greek Philosophers. Why may they not have made this simple thing even more simple for common apprehension by introducing Mediators and Personages in the same manner as in the hethen mythology abstractions are personified— [. . .]

(*Letters*, II, 103)

The mediating role between "mind" and "life," which generates the birth of "soul" or "identity"—the "altered nature" of an intelligence or "Spark" born without a sense of personal selfhood (as children are)—is attributed to "the heart, or seat of human Passions,"

An intelligence<s>—without identity—and how is this Identity to be made? Through the medium of the Heart? And how is the heart to become this Medium but in a world of Circumstances?

(*Letters*, II, 103-104)¹

So heart or passion is accredited with an intermediary function that effects the transformation of "intelligence" into "soul" within the context of "life" or actuality. This role of intercession or *in-between* is also reserved for *eros* by Plato (though not in its humanizing but divinizing function) in whose ontological scheme Love (as "lover") carries the soul to the vision of Ideas, and Particularly that of beauty (*Symposium* 202e-203a). Thus, in both the Keatsian and the Platonic scene, passion is the "third" conciliatory medium between the dialectical interplay of forces.

Two poems on "fame" and one on "sleep" intervene between the philosophical and the poetic treatment of the "soul" theme in the letter under consideration. The sonnet "To Sleep," opening with an invocation to the "soft embalmer of the still midnight" to "Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards / And seal the hushed Casket of my soul" (*Letters*, II, 105), introduces an image of mental self-containedness and self-sufficiency that receives amplification in a letter to John Hamilton Reynolds in the August of the same year; gradually, the

¹ Paradoxically, the only creature deprived of "identity" (and consequently of "soul"?) is the poet who, as Keats supports in an earlier letter of October 1818, "has no Identity" (I, 387); the poet's lack of "self" is defined as an absence of consistency in conduct and opinion, the disappearance of "identical nature," or for that matter "nature" as such, Keats asserts; this "void" is filled by the identities of the objects and people in the surrounding world.

importance of the world of circumstances or life is minimized, and "soul" achieves an authenticity independent of actuality:

My own being which I know to be becomes of more consequence to me than the crowds of Shadows in the Shape of Man and women that inhabit a kingdom. The Soul is a world of itself and has enough to do in its Own home— Those whom I know already and who have grown as it were a part of myself I could not do without: but for the rest of Mankind they are as much a dream to me as Miltons Hierarchies. I think if I had a free and healthy and lasting organisation of heart and Lungs—as strong as an ox's—so as to be able unhurt the shock of extreme thought and sensation without weariness, I could pass my Life very nearly alone though it should last eighty years.

(Letters, II, 146-47)

Despite this inversion of realities and priorities, even situations of consorting with that indifferent "rest of mankind" can be taken as occasions to strengthen "the energies of Mind":

To be thrown among people who care not for you, with whom you have no sympathies forces the Mind upon its own resources, and leaves it free to make its speculations of the differences of human character and to class them with the calmness of a Botanist.

(Letters, II, 115)

So the "world of circumstances" proves to be a life of "extreme thought and sensation," of "passion" rather than "action," of centripetal "acts of mind" rather than centrifugal activities. As such, soul-making may paradoxically be seen not as the construction of identity or "habitual self" but its deconstruction, the desire to overcome "self" consciousness.

Keats gives a detailed account of his sources for the "Ode to Psyche"—the incentive that provoked its writing and the methodology that shaped it:

The following Poem—the last I have written in the first and the only one with which I have taken even moderate pains—I have for the most part dash'd of my lines in a hurry—This I have done leisurely—I think it reads the more richly for it and will I hope encourage me to write other thing[s] in even a more peacable and healthy spirit. You must recollect that Psyche was not embodied as a goddess before the time of Apuleius the Platonist who lived after the Augustan age, and consequently the Goddess was never worshipped or sacrificed to with any of the ancient fervor—and perhaps never thought of in the old religion—I am more orthodox than to let a hethen Goddess be so neglected—

(*Letters*, II, 105-106)

The intentional or unintentional pun of an "orthodox" paganism, points towards another Platonist, Thomas Taylor, whose translation of *The Fable of Cupid and Psyche* published in 1795 may have been a possible source of information for Keats, together with "Mary Tighe's *Psyche*, Lempriere's essay on psyche, in his *Classical Dictionary*, and William Adlington's translation of Apuleius (1566)" (Solomon 92).

The poem celebrates an internalized ritual, very much along the lines of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn":

O Goddess! hear these tuneless numbers, wrung
By sweet enforcement and remembrance dear,
And pardon that thy secrets should be sung
Even into thine own soft-conched ear:
Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see
The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?
I wander'd in a forest thoughtlessly,
And, on the sudden, fainting with surprise,
Saw two fair creatures, couched side by side
In deepest grass, beneath the whisp'ring roof
Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
A brooklet, scarce espied.

The characteristics of the introductory stanza are: first, an attitude of regret, almost repentance, for having exposed the "secrets" of the goddess to profane ears²—mysteries that bear the hue of remembrance or recollection; the cyclicity or self-reflexiveness of the poetic act, since the poem is spoken to the ear of Psyche—the "conch" metaphor bearing echoes of a "speaking" that is almost a "listening";³ ambiguity surrounding the interpretation of the experience, of the manner "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?" ("Ode to a Nightingale" VIII); the

² Kramer classifies the ode as a "theophanic" poem and explores the relation between poetry and theophany, or language and "presence," in terms stressing that "the imagination that sees the gods is never strong when it sees them. Remembering or desiring the imaginative power embodied in theophany, the theophanic poet and his poem call the gods by name; and as Holderlin explains, one does not call the gods by name if one is in their arms" (485).

³ Heidegger often alerts us to the relation of speaking to listening, not in the conventional manner of a listener that is the receiver of the speaker's utterances, but a "speaking-as-listening": "Speaking is of itself a listening. Speaking is listening to the language which we speak. Thus, it is a listening not *while* but *before* we are speaking" (*On the Way to Language* 123). Such attentive receptivity to the sound of silence is posed by Heidegger as the presupposition of speech: "Mortals speak insofar as they listen. They heed the bidding call of the stillness of the difference even when they do not know that call. Their listening draws from the command of the difference what it brings out as sounding word. This speaking that listens and accepts is responding" (*Poetry, Language, Thought* 209). A passage more closely relevant to the issue at hand can be found in his discussion of Georg Trakl's poetic work. The line which becomes the focus of Heidegger's thoughts on poetry is "Soul then is purely a blue moment," following upon a commentary on the poem "Ghostly Twilight"; Heidegger enunciates: "The poet's work means: to say after—to say again the music of the spirit of apartness that has been spoken to the poet. For the longest time—before it comes to be said, that is, spoken—the poet's work is only a listening. Apartness first gathers the listening into its music, so that this music may ring through the spoken saying in which it will resound. The lunar coolness of the ghostly night's holy blue rings and shines through all such gazing and saying. Its language becomes a saying-after, it becomes: poetry" (*On the Way to Language* 188).

"suddenness" of the event and the loss of waking consciousness—"fainting with surprise"—that the vision of "awakened eyes" produces; and, finally, the clearest dramatic formulation that we have in Keats of the "intercourse" of polar oppositions in the form of female/male, human/divine given through the mythical personages of Psyche and Eros, the "two fair creatures couched side by side."

The erotic imagery reproduces the unconventional "suspension" of consummation that can be perceived in stanzas II and III of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn"; here, too,

Their arms embraced, and their pinions too;
Their lips touched not, but had not bade adieu
As if disjointed by soft-handed slumber,
And ready still past kisses to outnumber
At tender eye-dawn of aurorean love.

(ll. 16-20)

The discovery of "twoness" which means the splitting of the original, undifferentiated "one," is given in this poem not in the conventional Romantic iconography of mind *vs.* nature, or man *vs.* world, but in the Neoplatonic or alchemical tradition of "female" *vs.* "male." The poem is a ritual enactment of the play of *psyche* and *eros*, the encounter of consciousness with affect-charged impulses and feelings, within a formalized context induced by the meditative awareness that "observes" the "psycho-drama." As a result, a clarity of perception coexists along with the perceived performance, in a paradoxical and simultaneous dialectic: "I see, and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd" (l. 43).

The experience of an altered state of mind connected with the arousal of sexual energy (the love-play of Psyche and Eros) is directed into a devotional "mimesis" that gives full attention to an extended and intensified "playing," while withholding ultimate climax. This is rhetorically embodied through the repeated negations of stanza III,

Nor altar heap'd with flowers;
Nor virgin-choir to make delicious moan

Upon the midnight hours;
No voice, no lute, no pipe, no incense sweet
From chain-swung censer teeming;
No shrine, no grove, no oracle, no heat
Of pale-mouth 'd prophet dreaming.

(ll. 29-35)

and the reiterated negative superlatives ("too") indicating excess, in stanza IV. Ceremonial representation engenders awareness of the "fact" and "quality" of the nuptials (*hieros gamos*) of Psyche and Eros (the power surge in the soul), and as a result delimits it and gives the poet a chance to direct the ecstatic outrush into the imaginative channel of poetry.

From the opening of stanza III to the very last line of the poem Eros remains "withdrawn," and imagery unfolds the celebration of Psyche, the late-comer to the Greek pantheon, whose worship in Keats's view has been unduly neglected, or "perhaps never thought of in the old religion." Suspended between the old science of mythology and the new science of psychology, Keats effects a psychologizing of myth, resembling in its mechanics the "psychological" treatment of ontology initiated by British empiricist philosophers. Seeing himself in the role of priest or hierophant of a goddess who has not received historical recognition, he seems determined to perform all the archetypal hieratic gestures that attest to the mysteries of the soul's dialectic with the erotic visitation in a way which summons Keats's habitual sense of the "labyrinthine" and "Daedalian" nature of the creative imagination. Stanza IV makes a formal inversion of all the negations of Stanza III into affirmations, replacing the absoluteness of "no" by the agonizingly subversive pattern of me/thy:

O brightest! though too late for antique vows,
Too, too late for the fond believing lyre,
When holy were the haunted forest boughs,
Holy the air, the water, and the fire;
Yet even in these days so far retir'd
From happy pieties, thy lucent fans,

Fluttering among the faint Olympians,
I see and sing, by my own eyes inspir'd.
So let me be thy choir, and make a moan
 Upon the midnight hours;
Thy voice, thy lute, thy pipe, thy incense sweet
 From swung censer teeming;
Thy shrine, thy grove, thy oracle, thy heat
 Of pale-mouth'd prophet dreaming.

(ll. 36-49)

The negation/excess/affirmation model becomes a system of psychic "technology" for the exploration and synthesis of "being." It leads to an attitude of unconditional acceptance, the unqualified "Yes" of the opening line of stanza V, which triggers an entry into the "untrodden region" of the soul where one-sidedness and fragmentation is overcome:

Yes, I will be thy priest, and build a fane
 In some untrodden region of my mind,
Where branched thoughts, new grown with pleasant pain,
 Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind:
Far, far around shall those dark-cluster'd trees
 Fledge the wild-ridged mountains steep by steep;
And there by zephyrs, streams, and birds, and bees,
 The moss-lain Dryads shall be lull'd to sleep.

(ll. 50-57)

As "pleasant pain"—opposites fused or reconciled—gives rise to "branched thoughts"; a conjunction is effected, though in a fashion contrary to empiricist tenets, between sensation and thinking—reminiscent of those "Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears" of Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (l. 20). Vegetative intellection, almost a counterpart to the "sylvan historian" of the Grecian urn, suggests an integration of experience, a totality which acknowledges in "thought," and in every detail, all parts of the soul—intellective, emotive, instinctive—including the dark side of life as

well, "those dark-clustered trees" and the "wild-ridged mountains." Wholeness, therefore, does not exclude these "negative" phenomena; it does not seek to eliminate adversaries but to establish a "conversational" relationship with them, which transforms their destructive energy. Darkness, evil, conflict, pain, tragedy can apparently instruct in ways that light, good, harmony, pleasure, romance cannot; so, psychic fulfillment does not consist in the enhancement of one opposite to the suppression of the other, but in the con-fluence of both.

The poem ends with an image of circularity, of progressively concentric circles denoting the self-sufficiency of mind that Keats so expressly put in the same letter: the soul as "a world of itself" enduring the "shock of extreme thought and sensation without weariness." The outer circle of steep mountains, "feathered" by the cluster of dark trees, creates an image of expansive seclusion, a "wide quietness," an open dimension of being, a state of relaxed alertness and panoramic vision:

And in the midst of this wide quietness
A rosy sanctuary will I dress
With the wreath 'd trellis of a working brain,
 With buds, and bells, and stars without a name,
With all the gardener Fancy e'er could feign,
 Who breeding flowers, will never breed the same:
And there shall be for thee all soft delight
 That shadowy thought can win,
A bright torch, and a casement ope at night,
 To let the warm Love in!

(ll. 58-67)

Within this field of attention a third circle is built, a flowery bower, "rosy sanctuary" bearing connotations of the mystical rose or rose garden. The successive stages from an inscape of "wild mountains" and "dark trees" to "wreathed flowers," are products of a

consciousness that is paradoxically idly active.⁴ As the conscious mind opens up channels between itself and the unconscious through working with sensations and feelings, a "warmth" develops at this point, a compassionate attitude of fundamental acceptance of oneself, while still retaining "critical" intelligence. The "shadowy thought" of an awareness that is "experiential" rather than "historical" in its content and "attitude" creates the condition of stability and stillness, necessary prerequisites for the visitation of the departed "Love."

As the mind strips itself of every conditioning, every knowledge, in the "shadow" of thought that has understood the "nature" of thought, it becomes surprisingly quiet and silent; such "silence" witnesses the arrival of Love. The possibility of reconciliation, of communion between Psyche and her divine husband, occurs in a spaciousness and stillness "won" in the poem not by enforced tasks, as it happens in the Apuleius fable (97-133), but by the twilight of "indolence" or shadowy consciousness, which leads—or "teases"—outside the field of conceptual thought. Actually, the poem implies, to go beyond thought—and time—which means going beyond suffering and sorrow, is to be aware of a different dimension of existence called "love." Stanza V may be read as an Epithalamion, a song of celebration of the nuptials of Psyche and Eros who reappears in the final line. The unmistakable imagery of sexual union that concludes the poem, "A bright torch, and a casement ope at night, / To let the warm Love in!" not only turns "promise" into "actuality," but makes an allusion to Prometheanism in the "bright torch," the fire that is the agent of transformation, the common source of sexuality and creativity.

⁴ An interpretation of the "vegetation" metaphor in terms of "nature as thought" (rather than "thought as nature") is offered by Bunn (584); along similar lines, Waldoff argues that "Keats's inner landscape represents a Wordsworthian state of feeling and Mind that Keats associates with the presence of Psyche, as Wordsworth had earlier associated it with the presence of Nature" (417). Yet another "Wordsworthian" reading is offered by Zak who contends that "The Ode's finale [. . .] implicitly enacts Keats's version of Wordsworth's marital engagement with earthly existence" (89).

In this poem, Keats does not seem to be tormented by his obstinate questionings into the nature of love: Can love be divided into the sacred and the profane, the human and the divine, or is there only one "love"? Is love emotion? Is love pleasure and desire? All these queries indicate that he was wrestling with a cluster of concepts on love, ideas about what it should or should not be, a codification developed by the culture to which he belonged. In the "Ode to Psyche" love is presented as a fine quality of warmth and intensity "invited" by the gradual wasting away of "thought" and "self," where the duality created by the notion of "I" and "Other" disappears in a unity, a communion; love becomes the natural expression of that oneness, beyond the dialectic of opposites—itsself bearing no opposite because it integrates all. Eros in this poem, and elsewhere in Keats, embodies an impulse to leave the restrictive world of dualism, to restore the primordial state, to surmount the experience of binary existence conditioned by the conflict, the drama of "self" and "otherness" in both its personal and transpersonal aspects. In searching the absolute meaning of *Eros*, Keats's exploration into the metaphysics of love bears the question mark of "truth" as well as of "method." Recognizing and accepting the principle of the "hermaphrodite," whose origins lie in Plato's *Symposium*—through the Dyad towards the Unity—(189e-191d), he ironically assesses—and detracts—sexual love as the most universal form of man's desperate effort to eliminate duality.

In the "Ode to Psyche" all the subversive and unpleasant characteristics of Love are muted—even the snakelike or dragonish aspect that is stressed in the original Apuleian myth; the sufferings that Psyche endures under the compulsion of Goddess Aphrodite, in order to regain her husband whom she lost through her inordinate curiosity to "know" and "see," are also silenced.⁵ Keats's choice of the archetypal story is justified by Ian Jack who supports that "the myths in which Keats was most deeply interested tended to be those which

⁵ For a reading of the fable as an analysis of feminine psychology, see Erich Neumann, *Amor and Psyche*.

can be used to describe the origin of poetry. Keats probably knew the remark of Agathon in *The Symposium* that Eros is not only a poet himself but also 'the source of poetry in others'" (208). Keats admits as much when he declares, "for I have the same Idea of all our Passions as of Love they are all in their sublime, creative of essential Beauty" (*Letters*, I, 184), or when, fore-echoing the "branched thoughts" of the ode he formulates his third "axiomatic" proposition, that "if Poetry" (thriving in the "Luxury of twilight") "comes not as naturally as the Leaves to a tree it had better not come at all" (*Letters*, I, 238).

Works Cited

- Apuleius, Lucius. *The Transformations of Lucius Otherwise Known as the Golden Ass, by Lucius Apuleius*. Trans. Robert Graves. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950.
- Bunn, James H. "Keats's *Ode to Psyche* and the Transformation of Mental Landscape." *ELH* 37 (1970): 581-94.
- Heidegger, Martin. *On the Way to Language*. Trans. Peter D. Hertz. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971.
- . *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.
- Jack, Ian. *Keats and the Mirror of Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.
- Keats, John. *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*. Ed. Hyder Edward Rollins, 2 vols. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958.
- . *Poetical Works*. Ed. H. W. Garrod. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956.
- Kramer, Lawrence. "The Return of the Gods: Keats to Rilke." *Studies in Romanticism* 17 (1978): 483-500.
- Neumann, Erich. *Amor and Psyche: The Psychic Development of the Feminine. A Commentary on the Tale by Apuleius*. Trans. Ralph Manheim. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956.

- Plato. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961.
- Solomon, Harry M. "Shaftesbury's Characteristics and the Conclusion of 'Ode on a Grecian Urn.' " *Keats-Shelley Journal* 24 (1975): 89-101.
- Waldoff, Leon. "Theme of Mutability in the 'Ode to Psyche.'" *PMLA* 92 (1977): 410-19.
- Wordsworth, William. *Poetical Works*. Ed. Thomas Hutchinson (1904), new ed rev. Ernest de Selincourt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936.
- Zak, William F. "To Try that Long Preserved Virginity: Psyche's Bliss and the Teasing Limits of the Grecian Urn." *Keats-Shelley Journal* 31 (1982): 82-104.