

JOHN KEATS ON “THE VALE OF SOUL-MAKING”

Section from John Keats’s letter to his brother and sister-in-law, George and Georgiana Keats, written from 14 February to 3 May 1819; the present section was written as part of a longer one on 21 April 1819. Source: *The Letters of John Keats, 1814-1821*, edited by Hyder Edward Rollins (Harvard U.P., Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1958), pp. 100-104.

(...)

I have been reading lately two very different books Robertson’s *America*¹ and Voltaire’s *Siecle De Louis xiv*² It is like walking arm and arm between Pizarro³ and the great-little Monarch. In How lementabl[e] a case do we see the great body of the people in both instances: in the first, where Men might seem to inherit quiet of Mind from unsophisticated senses; from uncontamination of civilisation; and especially from their being as it were estranged from the mutual helps of Society and its mutual injuries – and thereby more immediately under the Protection of Providence – even there they had mortal pains to bear as bad; or even worse than Baliffs, Debts and Poverties of civilised Life – The whole appears to resolve into this – that Man is originally ‘a poor forked creature’⁴ subject to the same mischances as the beasts of the forest, destined to hardships and inquietude of some kind or other. If he improves by degrees his bodily accomodations and comforts – at each stage, at each accent [*sic*] there are waiting for him a fresh set of annoyances – he is mortal and there is still a heaven with its Stars abov[e] his head. The most interesting question that can come before us is, How far by the persevering endeavours of a seldom appearing Socrates Mankind may be made happy – I can imagine such happiness carried to an extreme – but what must it end in? – Death – and who could in such a case bear with death – the whole troubles of life which are now frittered away in a series of years, would the[n] be accumulated for the last days of a being who instead of hailing its approach, would leave this world as Eve left Paradise – But in truth I do not at all believe in this sort of perfectibility – the nature of the world will not admit of it – the inhabitants of the world will correspond to itself – Let the fish philosophise the ice away from the Rivers in winter time and they shall be at continual play in the tepid delight of summer. Look at the Poles and at the sands of Africa, Whirlpools and volcanoes – Let men exterminate them and I will say that they may arrive at earthly Happiness –The point at which Man may arrive is as far as the paralel state in inanimate nature and no further – For instance suppose a rose to have sensation, it blooms on a beautiful morning it enjoys itself – but there comes a cold wind, a hot sun – it can not escape it, it cannot destroy its annoyances – they are as native to the world as itself: no more can man be happy in spite, the world[l]y elements will prey upon his nature – The common cognomen of this world among the misguided and superstitious is ‘a vale of tears’⁵ from which we are to be redeemed by a certain arbitrary interposition of God and taken to Heaven – What a little circumscribe[d] straightened notion! **Call the world if you Please “The vale of Soul-making”** Then you will find out the use of the world (I am speaking now in the highest terms for human nature admitting it to be immortal which I will here take for granted for the purpose of showing a thought which has struck me concerning it) I say ‘*Soul making*’ Soul as distinguished from an Intelligence⁶ – There may be intelligences or sparks of the divinity in

¹ William Robertson (1721-1793), *The History of America* (1777), 10th ed., 4 Vols. (1803).

² In Charles Brown’s list of Keats’s books (*KC*, I, 256) Voltaire’s *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, 5 vols., appears.

³ The name looks like “Piziaro.”

⁴ *King Lear*, III.iv.III f., “such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art.”

⁵ Perhaps he had in mind “This dim vast vale of tears” from Shelley’s “Hymn to Intellectual Beauty,” line 17, which was published in the *Examiner*, January 19, 1817.

⁶ A. C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909), p. 222 n., says that Keats’s “intelligence” was probably suggested by Milton’s “pure Intelligence of Heav’n” (*Paradise Lost*, VIII. 180 f.). Sir Herbert Warren, *Nineteenth Century*, XCIII (1923), 64, thinks that Keats’s discussion is adapted from “the ancient doctrine of the *Anima Mundi* expounded by Virgil in the Sixth Aeneid.” See also the comments in Bernard Bosanquet’s *The Value and Destiny of the Individual* (1913), pp. 63-69.

millions – but they are not Souls <the> till they acquire identities, till each one is personally itself. I[n]telligences are atoms of perception – they know and they see and they are pure, in short they are God – how then are Souls to be made? How then are these sparks which are God to have identity given them – so as ever to possess a bliss peculiar to each ones individual existence?⁷ How, but by the medium of a world like this? This point I sincerely wish to consider because I think it a grander system of salvation than the chryst<e>ain religion – or rather it is a system of Spirit-creation – This is effected by three grand materials acting the one upon the other for a series of years. – These three⁸ Materials are the *Intelligence* – the *human heart* (as distinguished from intelligence or Mind) and the *World* or *Elemental space* suited for the proper action of *Mind and Heart* on each other for the purpose of forming the *Soul* or *Intelligence destined to possess the sense of Identity*. I can scarcely express what I but dimly perceive – and yet I think I perceive it – that you may judge the more clearly I will put it in the most homely form possible – I will call the *world* a School instituted for the purpose of teaching little children to read – I will call the *human heart* the *horn Book* used in that School – and I will call the *Child able to read, the Soul* made from that *school* and its *hornbook*. Do you not see how necessary a World of Pains and troubles is to school an Intelligence and make it a soul? A Place where the heart must feel and suffer in a thousand diverse ways! Not merely is the Heart a Hornbook, It is the Minds Bible, it is the Minds experience, it is the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity – As various as the Lives of Men are – so various become their souls, and thus does God make individual beings, Souls, Identical Souls of the sparks of his own essence – This appears to me a faint sketch of a system of Salvation which does not affront our reason and humanity – I am convinced that many difficulties which Christians labour under would vanish before it – There is one wh[i]ch even now Strikes me – the Salvation of Children – In them the Spark or intelligence returns to God without any identity – it having had no time to learn of, and be altered by, the heart – or seat of the human Passions – 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 – Seriously I think it probable that this System of Soul-making – may have been the Parent of all the more palpable and personal Schemes of Redemption, among the Zoroastrians the Christians and the Hindoos. For as one part of the human species must have their carved Jupiter; so another part must have the palpable and named Mediator⁹ and saviour, their Christ their Oromanes¹⁰ and their Vishnu – If what I have said should not be plain enough, as I fear it may not be, I will but¹¹ you in the place where I began in this series of thoughts – I mean, I began by seeing how man was formed by circumstances – and what are circumstances? – but touchstones of his heart – ? and what are touch stones? – but proofings of his heart? – and what are proofings of his heart but fortifiers or alterers of his nature? and what is his altered nature but his soul? – and what was his soul before it came into the world and had These provings and alterations and perfectionings? – 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? (...)

⁷ Keats seems to have been reading John Locke's *Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) – a copy of which occurs in Brown's list of his books (KC, I, 255) – especially Book II, chapter 27, "Of Identity or Diversity."

⁸ The word is apparently written "thee."

⁹ *Changed from* Mediation.

¹⁰ *Abudah; Or, The Talisman of Oromanes*, described on the program as "a new Oriental Fairy Tale, founded on one of the Tales of the Genii, in 2 Acts," was presented at Drury Lane on April 13-17, 19-22, 26, May 1, 7, 22. Keats had also read "The History of the Merchant Abudah: Or, The Talisman of Oromanes" in "Sir Charles Morell's" (or James Ridley's) *The Tales of the Genii; Or, The Delightful Lessons of Horam, the Son of Asmar* (1764), a copy of which (see Rollins, *K-SJ,II* [1953], 33) he presented to his sister in 1817. The first volume of it (undated) is now at Harvard.

¹¹ *For* put.