

Keats and the Religion of Love

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Standing on the deistic tradition in the Post-Enlightenment age, Keats endeavours to establish a peculiarly humanized 'religion of love' on his own; in this religion very much emphasis is placed on "the Heart's affections" creative of "essential Beauty" in collaboration with imagination.

Keats's religion of love shows itself in *Endymion* in the two contrasting forms—the "clear religion of heaven" in the first Book and the "dusk religion" of the earth in the last. It is noteworthy that Keats's use of the word 'religion' throughout his poetic works is made only twice, which is in *Endymion*, a love romance. The first half of the poem depicts repeatedly how Endymion comes very near to attaining "fellowship divine" with the heavenly beauty through the "clear religion" and thereafter falls into disappointment and despondency due to the sudden disappearance of the beauty. The protagonist's—the poet's—dissatisfaction with the inefficiency of the joy-oriented religion of the first kind introduces the sorrow-oriented, "dusk religion" into the poem. This new religion of melancholy puts the youth in the state of mind where "the heart's native hell" can be changed to "Dark paradise"; the "dusk religion" thus provides the Keatsian version of salvation in a very paradoxical way.

Although *Endymion's* happy ending, where the celestial beauty (Cynthia) and the melancholy beauty (the Indian maiden) get united, may seem to suggest the poet's trust in his two-faced religion of love, yet the preface to the poem clearly shows that Keats was far from satisfied with his religion as an enduring system of salvation.

Therefore, all of his major poems, especially love poems, persistently concern themselves with the problem of salvation through his religion of love, with growing emphasis on the "dusk religion". However, Keats's

attempt fails, as is seen in the fragmentariness of the two Hyperion poems.

The main reason for this failure lies in Keats's "poetical character" which "nothing startles beyond the Moment." As long as Keats holds on to his "sensations"-oriented character in experiencing and creating "essential Beauty", his "happiness" cannot last beyond the moment either through the "clear religion" or through the "dusk religion", both of which are in essence highly aesthetic, emotional experiences. Relative lack in Keats of "consecutive reasoning" or "philosophy" appears to have caused his failure in making his religion of love "a grander system of salvation than the christian religion", to which he refers as "vulgar superstition."

The "Cave of Quietude" lines (*Endymion*, IV, 512-48) strongly suggest that Keats is potentially a very religious poet. Keats's own system of salvation through the "dusk religion" strikingly resembles "the salvation through self-despair, the dying to be truly born, of Lutheran theology", which William James describes in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This fact leads us to imagine, in spite of Keats's contempt for "the pious frauds of Religion", that had he lived only half as long as Wordsworth, he might have come much closer to such a religious poet as Wordsworth or Dante than is commonly expected, whose poems—*The Excursion* and *The Divine Comedy*—the young poet adored with all his heart.