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Psyche’s “Whisp’ring Fan” and Keats’s Genealogy of the Secular

IN A PREFATORY LETTER TO GEORGE AND GEORGIANA, KEATS CLAIMS TO have written the Ode to Psyche because he is “more orthodox than the Goddess be so neglected.”¹ In its most apparent sense, this pose of Hellenic orthodoxy sounds typical of the “Cockney classicism” that has increasingly come to define one aspect of Keats’s literary practice. Situating Keats in the “Cockney school” has helped to illuminate the worldly and oppositional character of poetry that previously seemed aestheticizing or escapist. In particular, Nicholas Roe and Jeffrey Cox have reemphasized the oppositional use to which Greek antiquity was often put.² By aligning himself with history’s victims—specifically that “old religion” made obsolete during the Augustan age, but arguably also its modern counterparts—Keats positions himself against the geopolitical power he often refers to simply as “Christianity.”³

But criticizing Christianity may not be as radical or as simple a posture as is sometimes assumed. A number of scholars, most recently Charles Taylor in A Secular Age, have argued that Christianity and secularism have more in common than Cockney classicism would suggest. Challenging “subtraction stories” of secularization, in which the emergence of “secular” values like liberal pluralism and autonomous state institutions is characterized as a re-

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mological religion, Taylor has argued that such values can be understood as developments of a specifically Christian logic.\(^4\) On this argument, Keats’s secularist program, which often seems to give him his subversive edge, may in fact be substantially continuous with what it claims to be critiquing. Moreover, recent critiques of secular politics, from scholars like Talal Asad, Gil Anidjar and others, pursue the more dramatic possibility that the “invention” of the distinction between secular and religious has served the interests of a state power bent on the management and coercion of its subjects. That distinction has been conditioned, they argue, by the governmental interests of colonial expansion, as well as the Orientalist scholarship that underwrote that expansion. Anidjar offers perhaps the most stringent version of this critique when he proposes that the secular is not just religion’s continuation by other means, but that both “the religious and the secular are terms that . . . have persisted historically, institutionally in masking . . . the one pertinent religion,”—that is, Christianity.\(^5\) To the extent that Keats’s paganism remains caught up in a critique of religion, it is open to the challenge that secularism “is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion, when it named its other or others as religions.”\(^6\) Keats may call Hunt’s Examiner a “Battering Ram against Christianity,” but both Hunt’s Religion of the Heart and Keats’s Ode to Psyche would, on Anidjar’s argument, be examples of Christianity carrying on in the form of “secularized religion.”\(^7\)

If this is right, and the interests of the secular are still those defined by Western Christendom, it raises a substantial problem for the Ode to Psyche. Even if we follow Mark Canuel in tracing an evolution in Keats’s thinking from an early, wholesale critique of religion as “vulgar superstition” into a


\(^7\) Letters, 1:137. On Christianity as “secularized religion,” see Anidjar, 59.
strategy of “logically symmetrical alliances with opposing beliefs,” such “toleration,” however much it helps articulate the politics of the Ode’s gesture toward its marginalized fellow-travelers, may not escape the challenge raised by Anidjar: namely, that such oppositional toleration is itself part of Christianity’s own mis-recognition. Keats’s “more orthodox” posture cultivates a rhetorical alliance with Greek paganism, but may fail to recognize the various ways in which this alliance sequesters Greek religion within the interests of Christendom.

At stake here methodologically is what we might call a “genealogy of the secular,” an analysis to which Keats’s poem is vulnerable insofar as its critique of religion proceeds by challenging Christian history and attempting to recover a pagan past which that history overwrites, a past understood to be more “tolerant” and “progressive.” Talal Asad has been the most influential recent practitioner of this genealogical method, which in the tradition of Nietzsche and Foucault would demonstrate that such ostensibly altruistic aims as toleration have been conditioned by particular structures of power, and thus have their own specific histories. For Asad, the history of the secular/religious binary must be localized both to the European tradition of Christian sectarian conflict from which it emerged, and the Enlightenment constraints within which “religion” was historically defined. That history, Asad writes, sees “not merely an increase in religious toleration,” but “a new kind of state, a new kind of science, a new kind of legal and moral subject.” The emergence of toleration presumes a particular, privatized construction of “religion” as a category, which means that its ostensibly neutral political strategy in fact presupposes specific terms of discourse.

And yet the Ode to Psyche is not just a potential target for genealogical critique, for it is also a document of that critique. Keats does not just move from a vulgar mode of oppositionality (i.e., a critique of religion) to a more nuanced opposition (i.e., reformist toleration), but at several steps demonstrates, performs, and recognizes the interrelatedness of those two projects. Around the composition of the Ode, Keats repeatedly shows that the project of seeking abroad for fellow dissidents is not so easy to separate from Orientalist practices of documenting the foreign. Even without endorsing Anidjar’s critique of Christianity, then, readers of Keats should find his

9. Talal Asad, Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 43. Asad contends that instead of attempting to define religion from an anthropological perspective, “[t]he anthropological student of particular religions” should proceed by “unpacking the comprehensive concept which he or she translates as ‘religion’ into heterogeneous elements according to its historical character” (54).
challenges useful both in testing the limits of Keats’s political strategies, and, more fundamentally, in recovering for the Ode to Psyche the global context those strategies imply. The first section of this essay situates Keats within the textual systems that scholars of Orientalism have associated with the production or “invention” of religion as an object of study, and the concomitant production of the secular. The second section uses that context to excavate the Ode’s negotiation of “fanaticism,” and to interrogate its relationship to the heathen forms its “more orthodox” posture would recuperate. Seen in this light, the Ode does not just protest the course of Western history, but offers a genealogy of the writing practices that make its own project possible. Ultimately, if Keats makes “religion” a universal aspect of human psychology and reaches out to its less authorized forms, he also demonstrates the particular, local history of that very rhetorical strategy.

Natural and Preternatural Histories

When Keats describes himself as “more orthodox th[a]n to let a he[a]then goddess be so neglected,” the “orthodoxy” to which he refers is an unstable designation. The term ostensibly refers to the sanguine and republican associations of Greek antiquity, for which the Ode declares it is “too, too late.” Yet reading the full range of inflections in Keats’s “more orthodox” stance, and a wider horizon for the Ode, will require reading against associations of orthodoxy with something pristine and pre-Christian. By the nineteenth century the term meant more. Initially a theological description—that is, believing what is objectively true—“orthodoxy” also carried the valence of scrupulous over-piety or rigidity that Keats associated with Christianity in Britain and a host of other practices at home and abroad. Unlike “heresy,” which originally indicates the adoption of one out of several available systems, “orthodoxy” implies truth claims from its first recorded use in the Nichomachean Ethics. Crucially, however, and in part due to the sectarian vocabulary deployed by the new science, the term gradually takes on a purely descriptive or anthropological function. Thus the Oxford English Dictionary cites uses of the term to refer, in 1728, to “orthodox Mussulmans,” and, in 1844, to “the orthodox religion of the Hindus.” It is not particularly strange, then, that in 1819 Keats should posture as an “orthodox” heathen. Pledging his allegiance to the pre-Augustan, pre-Christian age of “happy pieties” may imply a basic truth claim, in which “more orthodox” still means “more correct.” More obviously, though, Keats is performing an ironic orthodoxy that is both a cari-

cature of the over-pious heathen, and a pointedly unorthodox alternative to Anglican culture or Christian orthodoxy more generally. If one of the Ode's projects is to sanitize or secularize orthodox pieties and vulgar superstitions, Keats is still willing to align himself with those abject categories.

Keats’s thinking about religion in the modern world is shaped by this plurality of orthodoxies, and more specifically by the textual apparatus that underwrote the period's global consciousness. Keats’s access to mythology, artifacts of antiquity, and cultural capital in general has long been seen as textually mediated. However, when it comes to his engagement with “religion,” I want to suggest that such textual mediation, via encyclopedias and catalogues, raises a specific set of considerations. The anthropological catalogue of world religions was a crucial technology in the history of Orientalism, the discourse of pluralism, and—as scholars like Jonathan Z. Smith and Peter Harrison have suggested—in the “invention” or production of religion as a naturalized domain of human experience. Harrison has argued for a close relationship between the emergence of the concept of “religion” and “the development of a secular study of the religions” through the natural historical methods of the Enlightenment. For Smith, too, it is “the question of the plural religions” and their enumeration that “forced a new interest in the singular, generic religion.”

Parked alongside the work of mythographers was a set of texts concerned with the description of rituals, government, architecture, and the other concerns of the nascent study of distinct “cultures.” Smith points to this body of texts as crucial both in the invention of “religion,” and in the pluralization of the term, as the “religions” of the world:

Increased mastery of non-European languages led by the latter part of the eighteenth century to a series of translations and editions of religious texts. Missionaries, colonial officials, and travelers contributed ethnographic descriptions. Encyclopedias of religions, lexica, and handbooks (the latter, frequently bearing the title ‘History of Religions’) were produced to organize these materials.

Rather than the mythological compendia of Lempriere or Tooke, then, a good point of reference for Keats would be John Potter’s Antiquities of Greece. Often cited as a source for Keats’s poetic imagery, Potter’s text is a

11. This has been the case since Charles Cowden Clarke’s biography, but see especially Marjorie Levinson, Keats’s Life of Allegory (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

12. Peter Harrison, “Religion” and the Religions in the English Enlightenment (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2. Harrison contends that “the intellectual construct ‘religion’ is to a large measure constituted by the methods which are supposed to elucidate it” (13).


treatment of the institutional structure of Greek society: to follow the table of contents, it illustrates ancient Greece with regard to “The Civil Government,” “The Religion,” “The Military Affairs,” and “Some of their Miscellany Customs.” For scholars like Smith and Harrison, this methodology—the proto-anthropological, or in Harrison’s term “secular” study of religions—makes “religion” an aspect of the general human psyche, even as it generates a proliferation of descriptive texts that sought to catalogue differences. Thus, while the Ode to Psyche is often seen as internalizing Greek ritual, it might be productive to read in the opposite direction, and see what textual practices Keats has in mind.

One frequent point of reference for Keats’s engagement with the religions of the world is his “vale of soul-making” letter, which James Chandler has said the Ode “versifies.” Here Keats performs a global survey (most notably of Christendom, Persia, and Egypt), and amalgamates their common elements into a vision of the soul’s progress. His method does not resemble mythopoesis so much as the deism of someone like Herbert of Cherbury, who had famously moved from a comparative study of the world’s religions to the enumeration of universal “articles” of religion. That movement, which is also the movement of the “soul-making” letter, matches fairly well the genealogy of “religion” as a generic concept. More importantly, though, Keats has a variety of other ways of seeking abroad, and is often more self-conscious about the process. One such instance occurs a bit later, when Keats more explicitly theorizes the textual shape of global consciousness. Just over a month after sending the Ode to Kentucky, Keats wrote to Sarah Jeffrey about choosing a poetic vocation over a medical one. Despite affirming his decision, Keats qualifies it with a defense of his road not taken:

Your advice about the Indiaman is a very wise advice, because it just suits me, though you are a little in the wrong concerning its destroying the energies of Mind: on the contrary it would be the finest thing in the world to strengthen them—To be thrown among people who care not for you, with whom you have no sympathies forces the Mind upon its own resources, [sic] and leaves it free to make its speculations of the differences of human character and to class them with the calmness of a Botanist.

In the “vale of soul-making” letter, Keats looks outward in order to define a basic human condition. Here, considering the Indiaman, a life among strangers and foreigners acts as a discipline forcing him inward, to the

mind’s “own resources.” Yet Keats’s hypothetical doctor turns inward only to turn outward again. His mind is, like the chameleon poet’s, nothing in itself, but remains dependent upon the external differences it recognizes and classes. This passage has some of the same ambivalence I want to mark in the *Ode to Psyche.* The botanist’s disciplined “calmness” seems like one antidote to what Nigel Leask has called the “anxiety of empire.” However, Keats recognizes that calmness as a desideratum that the mechanic exercise of classification can endeavor to realize.

This attitude toward botanical classification is one that Alan Bewell has helpfully placed in the context of middle-class amusements, where botany is “linked to leisure, recreation, wealth, and a nature that was no longer a part of everyday life.” So too, classifying “the differences of human character” is for Keats at once disciplined and frivolous, calming and diverting. Of course, as Bewell has also shown, the botanical catalogue was one mode by which European expansion manifested itself textually. Like the catalogues of religions J. Z. Smith studies, the botanical imagination is part and parcel of the encyclopedic subtext that ultimately bolstered European identity. The Orientalist’s and the naturalist’s outward gaze toward exotic difference ultimately comes back home. On my reading, Keats’s invocation of “orthodoxy” is caught up in this double-movement: he gestures toward something at once universal, and deeply private; but that gesture remains entangled with the outmoded, the un-authorized, the foreign and abased. If the “vale of soul-making” letter enacts this movement, the “Indiaman” passage puts it under closer scrutiny as a mechanism of simultaneously countenancing and containing difference.

With this in mind, let us revisit the main analog to the “Ode to Psyche” in the letters leading up to it. In January 1819 Keats attended the consecration of Lewis Way’s chapel at Stansted. Here he witnessed a gathering of the public and the clergy in their ceremonial best. The satire that ensues makes one almost certain that when Keats describes himself as “orthodox,” he means “anti-Christian.” He writes:

The only time I went out from Bedhampton was to see a Chapel consecrated. . . . This Chapel is built by a Mr Way a great Jew converter—who in that line has spent one hundred thousand Pounds—He maintains a great number of poor Jews—Of course his communion plate was stolen. . . . The Consecration was—not

amusing—there were numbers of carriages, and his house crammed with Clergy—they sanctified the Chapel—and it being a wet day consecrated the burial ground through the vestry window. I begin to hate Parsons—they did not make me love them that day—when I saw them in their proper colours.  

The tone here is quite different from that other consecration, of Psyche’s temple. The open vestry window parallels, but gives quite a different impression from, the Ode’s anticipatory “casement ope at night.” The general tenor of Keats’s satire is of a piece with his previous critiques of superstition, but the scene raises additional questions, specifically as to how he understood the relationship between Christianity and Judaism. We know that the east window of Way’s chapel, best known for furnishing details for Keats’s *Eve of St. Agnes* and *Eve of St. Mark*, depicted exclusively Old Testament imagery. Keats seems to caricature Way for this emphasis on a particularly Hebraic brand of Christian ritualism, for his naïve charity toward apparently ungrateful individuals, and for the paradox inherent in “maintaining” a population he is simultaneously trying to render extinct through conversion.

Yet, despite the genuinely anti-Semitic aspects of that satire, the Jews emerge as a relatively sympathetic body that exceeds both Way’s scrupulous piety and the representational limits of Keats’s caricature. We are told that Way maintains Jews, but not that any attended the consecration. If the juxtaposition of Way’s charity and his losses by theft casts aspersions on the company he keeps, the passive construction (“his communion plate was stolen”) assigns no agency. The satire relies, however, on the suggestion that just as Way’s conversion project seems to have come to fruition—that is, just as he is consecrating this chapel, on the feast of St. Paul’s conversion, for a Jewish or until-recently-Jewish community—that community takes back the essential article, the communion plate. Its absence suggests both that Way fails to create a uniform Christian communion, and that the consecration of his chapel, like the conversion of the Jews, must remain essentially incomplete and compromised. If the Jews comically undermine Way’s efforts at conversion, they do so implicitly, from the margins of the text. By Way’s own logic of conversion, of course, there should be no Jews left in attendance at his chapel’s consecration, the Old Testament imagery notwithstanding. Like the Greek heathen in the *Ode to Psyche’s Augustan*  

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21. The range of issues this broaches exceeds the scope of this essay. For a more nuanced picture of how the category of the “Semite” or the “Semitic” structures European discourses of the religious and the secular, see Tomoko Masuzawa’s *The Invention of World Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Anidjar’s *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature.*
prehistory, the history of conversion is a history of erasure. What remains for Keats’s critique is a collection of Christian clergymen, and in fact it is the parson who subsequently emerges as his primary target.

Soon after attending Way’s consecration, Keats brings the scene directly into the context of the long history of writing about religions. His relationship to the figure of the “parson” in that letter is a striking instance of the proximity between critique and sympathy. After remarking, “I begin to hate Parsons—they did not make me love them that day—when I saw them in their proper colours,” Keats goes on to paint a psychological portrait of the social constraints upon the parson’s psyche. In short, “He must be either a Knave or an Ideot [sic]—And there is no Man so much to be pitied as an ideot parson.” Soon after, Keats revisits the parson, in what looks like a hopeful narrative of the extinction of religion:

Parsons will always keep up their Character, but as it is said there are some animals, the Ancients knew, which we do not; let us hope our posterity will miss the black badger with the tri-cornered hat; Who knows but some Revisor of Buffon or Pliny, may put an account of the parson in the Appendix; No one will then believe it any more than we believe in the Phoenix.

Readers of Edward Said will recall the importance of writers like Buffon to the prehistory of modern Orientalism. Interestingly, Keats’s invocation of the natural historical catalogue performs at home the simultaneous documentation and marginalization that Said traces on a global scale. Keats uses the catalogue as a satirical tool, in response to a display of overwrought piety he would like to see extinct. The passage is a good example of what Keats will theorize as the “calmness of a botanist”: being “thrown among people” with whom he has little to no sympathy allows him to class the “differences of human character” in the form of the natural historical catalogue. Leigh Hunt will later take Keats’s hint and publish his three-part “Praeter-Natural History of the Most Degenerate Animals of the Human Race.” The third installment of the “History” is closest to Keats’s original suggestion, and takes up what Hunt calls the “Fire-Threatener, Star-Gazing

23. Letters, 2:70.
24. For Said’s treatment of “classification,” one of his “four elements” of eighteenth-century precursors to modern Orientalism, see Orientalism (New York: Vintage, 1979), 120 ff.
Howler, Field-Preacher, or Bête de Chauvin." Nevertheless, Hunt's elaboration of the satire differs from Keats's original suggestion in some telling ways. The "Praeter-Natural History" uses the catalogue as a means of lampooning that which actually exists, rendering it an abnormality or a curiosity. Keats does something similar when he names the "black badger with the tri-cornered hat," but his parody is driven by a horizon of extinction that seems only implicit in Hunt's text. For Keats, the natural historical catalogue does not come into play until the parson is already a thing of the past. Adding an appendix to Buffon would simply be a matter of record-keeping, recording a peculiar phenomenon for an incredulous posterity.

At least at face value, the *Ode to Psyche* is an attempt at revival. The new, self-appointed priest will approximate a creed outworn. However, that project sits uncomfortably next to the "appendix" to Buffon, in which the textual return to an outworn form is explicitly a mode of critique, leveled at "vulgar superstition" as it persists in the modern world. Like the "appendix" to Buffon or Pliny, the *Ode* presents itself as a commemorative text: it is already too late for the cult of Psyche, and the priest who would minister to her. Keats may recognize the parson as a potential ally, or a fellow victim ("there is no Man so much to be pitied as an idout parson"). Yet this strategy of sympathy is continuous with Keats's anthropological imagination, which at once documents the religious and anticipates its extinction.

This may not be a problem for readings of the *Ode* that focus on its internalization or sublimation of Greek ritual; but it may be if we take the claims of Cockney classicism seriously. For if the now-defunct "old religion" is a Cockney ally, the *Ode* marks an increased ambivalence in Keats's deployment of that rhetorical strategy. To be sure, he recognizes that the catalogue can be useful in the critique of vulgar superstition. In the *Ode*, though, where he begins by seeking a rhetorical alliance with Greek paganism, he becomes increasingly reflexive about the coexistence of those two projects, of recruitment and critique. Rather than seeing Keats as looking back to a past form that, by virtue of its pastness, is available aesthetically, we can see him as engaged with something that is very much alive, and which his rhetoric *produces* as past, even as it must keep it available for a strategy of allied dissent. It is not that far from Lewis Way's engagement with Judaism. His architectural project reproduces Hebrew imagery in a symbolic register, even as it implies a horizon of extinction for the people.

Milton's *Nativity Ode* had provided a catalogue of pagan deities, made defunct by the advent of Christian history. As is now well known, in the

Ode to Psyche Keats attempts to reverse Milton's project by writing a new catalogue, one that re-produces paganism and renders it available again. However, given Keats's familiarity with the natural historical catalogue as a mode of critique, he must also have recognized the risk that his poem would simply be an appendix to Milton's catalogue. Writing this poem, which he calls "the first and the only one with which I have taken even moderate pains," but also one written "leisurely," and in a "peaceable and healthy spirit," Keats approaches his subject with that ambivalence that can only be avoided by the Botanist's disciplined calmness. The tension of the Ode arises from Keats's competing approaches to a rhetorical alliance with Greek religion. As I turn to the Ode itself, I want to consider the ways in which it mirrors, in microcosm, the history of Orientalist scholarship that simultaneously renders religious phenomena visible and becomes complicit in their erasure. Given his frequent depiction of the catalogue as an engine of extinction, it seems likely that Keats is thinking about what he erases in the act of producing an internal approximation of what he calls the "old religion"; and given his relationship to the others he produces (the Dissenting churches, the Jews, the Greek heathen), he may not have been entirely happy about that change.

Fans, Fanes, Fanaticism

The Ode to Psyche is an important stage in Keats's formulation of the "botanical" stance, with its private space tied to the wider world. In what follows I want to suggest that the Ode positions its internalizing or sublimating movement against a background of outward-looking textual practices. If the poem has long been discussed as a catalogue of ritual elements, it is also fundamentally conditioned by the botanical, anthropological, and otherwise natural historical catalogues with which Keats had already engaged. The poet, who offers to stand in for Psyche's missing prophet or priest, primarily performs his scrupulous religious observances by describing them—repeating them, twice over, in the central passage of the poem. In fact, this exotic "orthodoxy" or "ancient fervour" that Keats claims to be performing is also what he is documenting—or producing. Those two designations for the pagan are not clearly laudatory, but have much in common with what Keats elsewhere—most famously as the first word of The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream—refers to under the heading of fanaticism. That poem's stated project is to find the poet's proper place within or outside of its taxonomy of overzealous religious types. The Fall of Hyperion's posture is pointedly uncertain:

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.

(16-18)

If *The Fall of Hyperion*’s poet ultimately distinguishes himself from the fanatic and the savage, he does so by virtue of his ability to communicate his dreams in writing. In the *Ode to Psyche*, where the “warm scribe” is content to supply the “heat / of pale-mouth’d prophet dreaming,” we can locate a more subtle encounter with fanaticism.

Fanaticism is an apt term for the *Ode*’s indulgent display of that alternative orthodoxy Keats calls the “ancient fervour” of “the old religion.” As Jeffrey Cox has argued, Keats’s erotically charged portrait of Psyche, like the “warm love” the poem anticipates in its concluding lines, is a sociable gesture that takes aim at Wordsworth’s “egotistical” apotheosis of the individual mind. Interestingly, the radical openness of that “warm love” matches one description that makes “fanaticism” a conservative watchword. In *Biographia Literaria*, Coleridge had already published his diagnosis and etymology of the term:

A debility of the imaginative power, and a consequent necessity of reliance upon the immediate impressions of the senses, do we well know, render the mind liable to superstition and fanaticism. Having a deficient portion of internal and proper warmth, minds of this class seek in the crowd *circum fana* for a warmth in common, which they do not possess singly.

Coleridge is discussing “that complex feeling, with which readers in general take part against the author, in favor of the critic,” and he ultimately sets a model of the private but congenial author against the irritable crowd of reviewers and readers who league together against him. Coleridge’s comment shows that the radical potential of sociability is susceptible to less positive characterizations, like this caricature of fanaticism. Such inflections complicate Keats’s deployment of the rhetoric of “warm love.” If the *Ode*’s paganism draws on a typically Keatsian notion of joyful or cheerful worship (which in fact develops the primitivist or animistic sentiments of Wordsworth’s *Excursion*), Keats’s resistance to the “egotistical” also edges toward a countenancing of the fanatic.

The *Ode* is clearly an example of Keats’s pagan posturing. However, it is

also a catalogue or documentation in its own right, one that orients itself toward particular empirical data. Compared to *The Fall of Hyperion*, the poet of the *Ode* resembles a botanist wandering through the forest and documenting what he sees. Throughout this documentation occur echoes of fanaticism—and they are, pointedly, nothing but echoes, traces, suggestions, and abbreviations. In the version of the poem Keats sent to Kentucky, the first datum recorded is as follows:

> I wandered in a forest thoughtlessly,
> And on a sudden, fainting with surprise,
> Saw two fair Creatures couched side by side
> In deepest grass beneath the whisp’ring fan
> Of leaves and trembled blossoms, where there ran
> A Brooklet scarce espied:
>
> (7–12)

The “whisp’ring fan” of line ten picks up graphically and sonically on the “fainting” observer, who almost misses the brooklet but sees and documents the deific lovers. However, it is the near-concealing “fan” that is ultimately concealed. Due to the lines’ enjambment, this “fan” is at least initially suggestive of an enthusiast standing over the lovers, a figure who would be either a double for the poet’s ostensible project of natural religion, or a secretive whisperer that it documents, like an anthropological catalogue. Keats has portrayed figures of whispering devotion before, notably in *The Eve of St. Agnes’s* beadsman. The beadsman’s “frosted breath / Like pious incense” (6–7) creates a sonic effect comparable to what “whisp’ring” achieves in the *Ode*. The *Ode’s* enjambed line suggests a recurrence, in Hellenistic guise, of *The Eve’s* Medieval portrait of “ancient fervour.” Of course, the portrait of the beadsman is an emphatic image in *The Eve*. It sets the scene for Porphyro’s claims of devotion, which are delivered in a whisper for much of the poem. The *Ode’s* “whisp’ring fan,” on the other hand, is at best a temporary image. The sentence continues over the line break, and makes the initial suggestion syntactically untenable: its proper referent is a covering of fan-shaped foliage.

In fact, the poem’s textual history writes out the “whisp’ring fan” altogether. The version ultimately printed, like most subsequent editions of the poem, describes the deific figures beneath a “whisp’ring roof / of leaves.” The change from “fan” to “roof” effaces the context of fanaticism: though the break in the rhyme scheme is a trace of that effacement, there is no in-
dication of what has been covered over. The *Ode* is well known for its
dematerialization of Greek religion, as exemplified by the ritualistic cata-
logue repeated in the third and fourth stanzas. However, this earlier allu-
sion to the “whisp’ring fan” dematerializes fanaticism in a more thorough
way, first grammatically and then editorially, rendering it invisible or illegi-
ble. Like Lewis Way’s deployment of Hebrew imagery in his chapel, the
*Ode* shows a basic ambivalence between preservation and erasure. Way’s
architectural projects lead to an increase in Hebrew imagery, but his aim is
to diminish the Jews in number, through his efforts at conversion. Keats’s
critique of Way’s strategy, taken together with his conjectures about a fu-
ture “appendix to Buffon,” suggests an awareness of the ways in which in-
creased documentation and visibility can paradoxically serve the opposite
ends, conversion and extinction. In the *Ode*, then, it makes sense that Keats
should register the “fan,” but should do so only ephemeral.

Something similar happens to the next “fans” that appear in the *Ode.*
Psyche’s “lucent fans” are the poem’s main evidence that the goddess is not
entirely beyond recovery. The poet testifies:

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 inspired.

(40–43)

If, as I have been suggesting, the *Ode*’s main context is the anthropological
catalogue, what does it mean for the documenter to see Psyche’s “lucent
fans”? As in the case of the earlier “whisp’ring fan,” the “anthropological”
reading is momentarily available. The comma-marked pauses and inverted
syntax (“Thy lucent fans . . . I see”) initially suggest that we are reading an-
other catalogue of things that are no more: this age is far retired from happy
pieties, from Psyche’s lucent fans, and so on. “Lucent” links up to Keats’s
portrayal of fanaticism as heat (e.g., “ancient fervour”), but also to his invo-
cations of the religious as a viable desideratum for modern subjectivity: for
instance, the *Ode*’s final anticipation of “warm love,” or, in the sonnet
“Bright Star,” the “steadfast” celestial body that watches “like nature’s
patient, sleepless Eremite / The moving waters at their priestlike task”
(4–5).32 Keats also uses this imagery when he is making precisely the oppo-
site point: the “Vulgar Superstitions” sonnet turns on his conviction that
the church bell and other signs of religious activity “are dying like an
outburnt lamp” (11).33 Of course, when this pivotal sentence of the *Ode*

32. “Bright star, would I were stedfast as thou art.”
33. “Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition.”
comes to its completion, it is clear that these latter-day heathens have never been tenable figures in the poem: given the syntax, “lucent fans” can only plausibly signify a set of starry wings, a symbolic celestial body rather than an anthropological phenomenon.

Yet Psyche’s “lucent fans” remain a sticking point for poetic interpretation. The question remains as to whether or not there is convincing evidence for the endurance of Psyche or her cult in the modern world. Her “lucent fans” face the same stark set of alternatives marked out in “Bright Star”: to “live ever—or else swoon to death” (14). These alternatives are most apparent in the ambiguity of the phrase “lucent fans.” While it invokes the wings associated with Psyche’s butterfly image, it also suggests one fanning the fire, which, unlike the “outburnt lamp” of “Vulgar Superstition,” would then increase in vigor as time goes on. In light of the imperialist panic of the “Indiaman” passage, such a revival might be as much a hopeful possibility as a potential problem. Of course, Keats elsewhere uses the term “lucent” with precisely the opposite meaning, that is, translucent. The poem has already questioned the veracity of its empirical observations. In fact as soon as the opening invocation of the goddess is completed, there follows the question: “Surely I dreamt to-day, or did I see / The winged Psyche with awaken’d eyes?” (5–6). This is the fundamental question of the Ode: Psyche may be only potentially recreated in the individual mind, but she may (or may not) also be empirically observable in the real world. In the draft Keats sent to George and Georgiana, the uncertainty is more sustained, and the first stanza ends with a question, not the published version’s celebratory declaration, about whom he is addressing. The speaker recognized the “winged boy” as Cupid, but asks: “who was thou, o happy, happy dove? / His Psyche true?” (21–23). If he is hopeful about Psyche’s endurance, Keats is also questioning the narrative of extinction he anticipated when he wrote the “Vulgar Superstition” sonnet, or when he conceived of the “appendix to Buffon.” For in the earliest versions of the Ode, it remains a genuine question whether those “lucent fans” are the mark of an eclipse or covering-over (that is, a narrative of the extinction of religion), or a figure of someone just beginning to fan the fire. The question remains for the increasingly globally conscious Keats whether that progressively secularizing history is contradicted by other empirical data.

To briefly map the metamorphosis of “fans” in the poem: the word initially appears to indicate a fan of grass that cools and perhaps partially conceals the couched lovers. The phoneme is picked up by the poet figure,

34. As opposed to Hyperion’s “pure fanes / of all my lucent empire” (238–39), we might consider the “semi-lucent mist” of Endymion (385) or the “lucent syrups” of The Eve of St. Agnes (267).
“fainting with surprise,” and then the "lucent fans" that ostensibly inspire the poet-observer. With other echoes along the way ("Fairer" Psyche against the "faint Olympians"), this pattern culminates in the "fane" the poet declares it his intention to build. This mental "fane" returns the poem to its ambivalent performance of fanaticism and to Keats’s caricature of Way’s temple as a locus of overwrought piety. If the poet-priest overwrites the “fan,” then, he does so most clearly with the letter “e.” The letter that changes “fan” to “fane” bears the weight of Keats’s supplement to the sensuous and outmoded heathen forms. What Keats adds may be typically internalizing and mentalistic, as the mental fane retreats from the external world of the empirically observed “fan.” Yet adding that “e” also returns us to the etymological origins of “fanaticism”: in Coleridge’s redaction, the overwrought piety of a crowd, gathered (like those at Way’s consecration at Stansted) around the fane, “circum fana.” If the poem enacts and performs Psyche’s worship and so seems more sympathetic, it is worth noting that the dedication of Psyche’s temple may well be a reworking of the scene that inspired the “Praeter-natural History.”

Keats’s mental “fane” thus does more than sublimate the materiality of Greek religion. Instead, the “fane” remains phonetically and conceptually dependent upon the “fan,” as the exotic and somewhat frightening textual correlative to the poem’s interior space. That is, if the Ode has the recognizably “secular” aim of universalizing the humanistic paganism of the pre-Christian era, it nevertheless remains aware of, or writes into its history, the exotic forms on which that position remains dependent. Psyche is not just a metonymy for the essence of human religion, but one goddess among many cults. She is a member of the diverse array toward which Europe looks, and by which an essentialized “religion” is constituted. It is primarily in his awareness of these conditions of writing that we can mark Keats’s genealogy of the secular.

In John Potter’s proto-anthropological Antiquities of Greece, Keats would have found one referent for his idea of Hellenic “orthodoxy.” Given the pivotal moment of the Augustan age that Keats singles out in the prefatory letter, Potter’s is a text he would have found congenial. Potter describes, in fact, a fervor which literally cannot let a goddess go without due worship.

He writes:

[T]he Grecians in general, and the Athenians in particular, were so excessively superstitious,—that they would not be content to worship their ancient Deities, but frequently consecrated new ones of their own making; and beside these, assum’d into the number of their own, the Gods of all the Nations with whom they had any Commerce. . . .

[T]here was a Custom that oblig’d them to entertain a great many
Strange Gods, whence it was that they religiously observ'd the . . . Feast of all the strange Gods. . . . Nay, so fearful were the Athenians of omitting any, that, as Pausanias tells us, they erected Altars of unknown Gods.\(^{35}\)

Keats's claim that he is "more orthodox than to let a heathen goddess be so neglected" equivocates between two versions of inclusiveness: one an ancient superstition, in the etymological sense of over-scrupulous piety; and the other a modern global consciousness, marked by its encyclopedic textual apparatus. In fact, Potter continues to address the moment that Keats implicitly addresses in the Ode, the moment when polytheism encounters and is absorbed by Christianity. Specifically, Potter points to the passage from Acts in which Paul, preaching in Athens, is brought before the Areopagus "to give an Account of his new Doctrine."\(^{36}\) This is, of course, where Paul identifies the "unknown God" as the one "God who made the world and all things therein," and who "dwelleth not in temples made with hands" (Acts 17:23—24). This would be the moment at which Greek "orthodoxy" becomes the vehicle for its own disenchantment. After attending the consecration of a chapel—by a famous converter of Jews, on the feast of St. Paul's conversion—and after writing off that religiosity by writing it into history—Keats consecrated his own temple-of-the-mind, as a multifaceted engagement with an outmoded orthodoxy. But that outmoded orthodoxy closely resembled his own drive to look beyond Christendom for alternatives. James Chandler has looked at this under the rubric of late antiquity's "skepticism."\(^{37}\) As I return more explicitly to claims about the secular, I want to think about how this "skepticism" might, like Pascal's wager, be coextensive with the performance of orthodoxy, in the doggedly inclusive form that Keats both targets and dramatizes. In Potter's Antiquities Keats would have found a portrait of Greece that, as Anidjar says of Christianity, "actively disenchanted its own world."\(^{38}\) This is a moment where Keats, if he has not already done so, would have to question whether the heathenism he calls in as an oppositional gesture might have too much in common with his ostensible target.


\(^{36}\) Potter, Archeologia graeca, 185.

\(^{37}\) On Chandler's reading, "Later antiquity is marked by a skepticism that we may hold responsible for the faintness of the older Olympian gods and the fading of their hierarchy," a historical moment which Chandler sees as coextensive with the rise of Psyche, "the apotheosis not of fideism but of skepticism" (England in 1819, 412).

\(^{38}\) Anidjar, "Secularism," 60.
Keats and Secular Criticism

Thus far I have been arguing that despite its Hellenistic focus, the *Ode to Psyche* covers much of the same ground as scholarship more clearly marked as Orientalist. Specifically, it draws on the same exoticizing and documentary textual apparatus that, according to J. Z. Smith and Gil Anidjar, underwrote the production of “religion.” Of course, Smith and Anidjar have somewhat different relationships to Orientalism. While Smith is concerned with the scholarly construction of religion, Anidjar is more concerned with how the emergence of religion also involves the emergence of its secular opposite, and above all how that emergence was conditioned by local interests. After identifying what he calls Smith’s “typically polemical fashion” of reducing religion to a scholarly construct, Anidjar presents his own polemic, arguing for an equivalence between the history of writing about religions and the history of secularism: in short, he writes, “Orientalism is secularism.”39 For Keats, the implications of this claim are most pressing where they concern the possibility of a radical literary work, or of criticism that attempts to recover an oppositional voice.

Anidjar takes issue with critics like Aamir Mufti, Bruce Robbins, and others who look to Edward Said as a model for “secular criticism.”40 While Anidjar aligns himself with Said’s belief in the critical power of “an isolated voice . . . standing consciously against the prevailing orthodoxy,” he wants to distinguish that oppositional stance from the language of “secular criticism” in which Said himself describes it.41 This is because Anidjar sees “Orientalism,” “Secularism,” and “Christianity” as coextensive operations, and interchangeable terms. Said knew this, Anidjar says, “by which I mean that he demonstrated it.”42 For that reason he thinks Orientalism made its most significant contribution as a critique of Christianity, and that if Said was to do justice to his own insights, he should have articulated himself not as secular, but as anti-Christian.

Most pointedly, Anidjar sums up the problem with the language of secular criticism Said leaves to his inheritors:


40. Bruce Robbins has influentially suggested that Said’s invocations of the secular take aim not at religion, but at nationalism (“Secularism, Elitism, Progress, and Other Transgressions: On Edward Said’s ‘Voyage In,’” *Social Text* 40 [Fall 1994]). While Aamir Mufti seconds Robbins’s defense of critical secularism, he thinks Robbins need not apologize for that position’s “supposed privilege and elitism.” On Mufti’s argument, Saidian secularism specifically entails “secularist arguments enunciated from minority positions” (“Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 [Autumn 1998]: 107).


[T]o uphold secularism (or, for that matter, religion) as the keyword for critical endeavors and projects today is, I am afraid, not to be all that worldly. It is to oppose the world rather than that which makes it what it is not (or at least not yet). It is to oppose the world and those who inhabit it rather than those who make it unlivable.43

On the face of it, this rereading of Said and secular criticism sounds like it pinpoints a particularly Keatsian mode of false consciousness. What begins as an oppositional stance and a return to worldly rather than ideological concerns ultimately reveals its own complicity with the prevailing orthodoxy. The challenge is most poignant because Keats himself often identifies Christianity with, in Anidjar’s words, “those who make [the world] unlivable.” On the one hand, we have here a version of Said who should have articulated himself as anti-Christian, in order to do justice to his own lessons in Orientalism. On the other, we have Keats, who often did articulate himself as anti-Christian, but on Anidjar’s argument could not have been as thorough or oppositional in that stance as he might have imagined. Nevertheless, Keats often seems to know this, if only—as Anidjar says of Said—because he demonstrated it.

Anidjar’s rejoinder to secular criticism is thus helpful in gaining a critical perspective on Keats’s humanism, and on British dissent more broadly. Yet Keats produces a particularly double-minded brand of dissenting rhetoric. He alternately deploys the textual strategies of Orientalism, and articulates the limitations inherent in those strategies. The genealogical work by which he renders visible the origins and commitments of his own textual practice is clearest in the ways that the Ode compromises its own “more orthodox” posture. In order to consolidate his humanistic claims, Keats must qualify his rhetorical alliance with the marginalized, and reduce that alliance to the subtext of fanaticism that the poem erases in its own progress. In other words, what Canuel calls Keats’s “logically symmetrical alliances with opposing beliefs,” that pluralistic presupposition that makes possible a secular public sphere, threatens to edge closer to an overwriting of difference. However, I have also suggested that Keats pushes this challenge to pluralism further. The orthodoxy Keats invokes refers not just to the deauthorized, Hellenic-tinged radicalism of the Cockney School, but also to the superstitious inclusiveness that drove late antiquity into extinction, and, if Anidjar is right, continues to structure the descriptive pluralism of Orientalist (or secularist) discourse. On this reading, neither tolerance nor pluralism is nearly strong enough to counteract the globalizing logic of Christianity.

If Keats’s understanding of inclusiveness matches the portrait in Potter’s

Antiquities, his Ode's commitments might look rather different. Of Greek architecture, Potter writes:

Temples were built after that manner, which they thought most agreeable to the Gods, to whom they design'd they should be dedicated; for as Trees, Birds, and other Animals were thought sacred to particular Deities, so almost every God had a form of Building particular to himself, and which they thought more acceptable to him than any other.  

This is a somewhat bathetic context for Keats's mental fane. If he seems to be deifying the mind of man, the consecration of the human mind might also simply serve as the most "agreeable" materials available for Psyche's temple. The poem's mental architecture need not regenerate Psyche in the modern world, but may be more pointedly fitting her back into a wider catalogue of Greek deities and their attendant cults. Most importantly, if Psyche is all too easy to read as the definitive universalizing of religion, Potter's anthropology would offer a reminder that this apparent universal has an inherently local character, within a wider array of possibilities.

Paradoxically, then, Keats critiques pluralism not by eschewing it, but by employing a still more rigorously pluralist logic. He builds on strategies common to British Dissenting culture, rather than those that drive Anidjar's work. Yet Keats's literary project runs up against some of the same problems Anidjar identifies. The logic of toleration does not accommodate all religious forms with equal ease. It fails, for example, to address what it constructs as "fanaticism" on truly reciprocal terms. The process of seeking abroad for the victims of global political power thus anticipates more recent problems attendant on global "outreach." Nevertheless, Keats seeks a rhetorical strategy that can enable the ostensibly secularist strategies of alliance with even these most marginal figures. The Ode's radical openness might point up the limits of a pluralist public sphere, but it also offers one effort to countenance that which exceeds that realm's criteria. If Keats tacitly critiques secularism's Orientalist subtext, he also recognizes that disabling its outward gestures would disable a potent oppositional strategy: one which ultimately looks not to a long continuity with Western history's primitive, animistic origins, but to recalcitrant forms of religion on the horizons of empire.

"Secular" might not be the best keyword for Keats's oppositional project, then. The poem's particularly literary intervention, on my reading, lies

44. Potter, *Archœologia græca*, 188.
in the way it draws on the competing rhetorical strategies that both enable and trouble the recovery of religion. If Keats's oppositional project recognizes itself as implicated in the history of what it critiques, it remains reflexive, self-critical, but not necessarily "secular." Perhaps this explains why, in working through the Ode, Keats's strategy was not to present himself as more secular—that is, freer from religion—but "more orthodox."

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Bibliography


