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"Keats and Shakespeare"

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Keats and Shakespeare*

MARTIN LINGS

Despite the two-fold title¹ of this talk, I propose to speak mainly about Keats, with Shakespeare as a shadow – albeit a gigantic shadow – in the background. If the talk had been three years ago, I could have said: 'It is almost exactly 200 years since the birth of John Keats.' He was born at the end of October in 1795, and he died in February, 1821, in his twenty-sixth year. But I intend to concentrate on the years 1818 and 1819, which were really the last two years of his life, because for almost the whole of 1820 and his seven weeks of 1821 he knew that he was dying and he felt no inclination to write. But in those two previous years it was extraordinary what he went through, and what he achieved. First of all, in 1818, he spent three months in the Spring at his youngest brother's bedside. Thomas, four years younger than John, was dying of consumption, and John himself had the premonition, which proved to be true, that he himself would die of the same illness. He spent the last three months of that year again at his brother's bedside until he died; he had his twenty-third birthday that October while he was with his brother. The middle brother, George – there were three of them – used to say that nobody had understood John so well as Tom; they were very close.

It was early in the next year that he met Fanny Brawne, and fell deeply in love with her. And early that same year he wrote *The Eve of St. Agnes*, which is said to have been written on the basis of that love. He wrote also *The Eve of St. Mark*, and in late Spring the same year he wrote the *Ode to a Nightingale*, then, later on, the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, and the *Ode on Melancholy*, and he began also revising his epic poem, *Hyperion*, the first version of which he was not satisfied with. But in the Autumn he broke away from that and he wrote the ode *To Autumn*. And then three months later he had the fatal haemorrhage which he knew would be the end; he just lived for another year

* Based on a lecture given at the Temenos Academy on 20 October 1998.

1. My title happens to be the same as that of a book written by John Middleton Murray about 75 years ago. There is however a considerable difference between his conclusions and mine.

what he himself described as a 'posthumous life'. But in the two great previous years there was the death of his brother, his insufficiently requited love, and the writing of some wonderful poems.

Tennyson was to say later that Keats would have become one of the very greatest of all poets had he lived; many critics rank him, on the *Odes* alone, as second only to Shakespeare among English poets. And Keats's own consciousness of his gifts includes the sense of a mandate to enrich the world, and in his case a sense of frustration through the increasing premonition of his own imminent death. After he fell ill for the last time he wrote to Fanny, his beloved, saying, 'if I should die, says I to myself, I have left no immortal work behind me, nothing to make my friends proud of my memory; but I have loved the principle of Beauty in all things. And if I had had time I would have made myself remembered.'

He had already made himself more than merely remembered by writing the great *Odes*; but his ambition was to write not them, nor epic poetry, but to write great plays which, like Shakespeare's, reveal the harmony of the Universe, that is, in Keats's own words, 'the balance of Good and Evil'.

It is doubtful to say the least if Shakespeare would have accepted these words, 'the balance of Good and Evil'. Still less would he have accepted another of Keats's formulations of the same outlook, 'the love of Good and Ill' as being the summit of wisdom. But Keats's more mature formulation, 'Beauty in all things', Shakespeare would have no doubt have accepted, subject to correct interpretation, of course.

Now allow me, by way of parenthesis, to touch briefly on the question of Keats's writing of plays. Of course, one cannot expect anybody to be such a born dramatist as Shakespeare, but Keats was a man of the theatre, he loved attending performances of Shakespeare, and was altogether fascinated by the acting of Edmund Kean, about whom he writes a great deal, and to whom he attributed a real understanding of Shakespeare. Reading what he says about Kean's performance of King Lear would make us all very anxious to attend such a performance if it were possible. But as to the plays which are published in volumes of Keats's works, *Otho the Great* is not really Keats's play; I have never heard of it being acted and I did not find it easy to read (I did go through it once but it left no impression on me); and *King Stephen*, the other play, is just a fragment. But over a hundred years after Keats's death these lines were found written in the margin of another unimportant

and unfinished poem called *The Cap and Bells*, and they appear to be a piece of dramatic verse which Keats had had the idea of writing, and they could be spoken as part of a love scene in a play, it seems to me, with great dramatic effect. Probably they were written addressed to his beloved Fanny but I am sure never sent to her – that would have been cruel. These are the lines:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd – see here it is –
I hold it towards you.

That is the end of my parenthesis and I must go on to point out that by nature Keats was endowed not only with amazing poetic gifts but also with a profound and penetrating intelligence, and with dazzling virtues. He was a personification of generosity – I would prefer to say magnanimity because it is more comprehensive – of resolution, sincerity, and resignation to the will of Heaven. He is always quoting, as though he is fascinated by them, the words which Edgar in *King Lear* speaks to his father when his father wants to put an end to his life; Edgar says to him

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming hither:
Ripeness is all.

And Keats, who loved especially *King Lear*, is – I repeat – always quoting those lines, always referring to them. They are, of course, the equivalent of Hamlet's words 'the readiness is all'. To be ready for death is all. And when Keats fell in love with Fanny Brawne, being all of one piece himself, sincerity personified, he fell totally in love and he expected her to do the same. He wrote to her,

Your self, your soul, in pity give me all.
Withhold no atom's atom, or I die.

But she did withhold more than an atom's atom. In fact, she seems to have withheld more than she gave, and Keats did die; but she was by no means the chief cause of his death. Nor, being what she was, could she have given more, though his life might have been prolonged a little if she had given more than she did give.

To return to the question of Keats's endowments, it must be said that above all his gifts, or rather let us say by reason of this combination of excellencies in the way of intelligence, will and virtue, he was a born mystic, that is, in need of the inner or esoteric aspect of religion, the way of sanctification, not merely the outer way of salvation, which was all that the religion of his upbringing offered to him.

He had been brought up as a Protestant and he was probably brought up to be prejudiced against Roman Catholicism – though he was much too intelligent to accept that, much too objective. But things were going wrong in religion already. It is indeed significant that at the beginning of the twentieth century, as I mentioned in my talk on René Guénon,² there was so much anti-religious prejudice in France which is after all a Catholic country. In the first two decades of the century, among the French so-called intelligentsia, the prejudice in question had reached such a pitch that Guénon, writing about religion, even went so far as to decide not to use the word 'religion' in his books at all for fear that they would not be read. He used the word *tradition*, he based his writings, his message, on what he called the Hindu tradition, he did not use the word religion. That was in the last century; but things were beginning to go wrong earlier on, and especially in Protestantism, which was much more vulnerable to decay than Roman Catholicism. Keats's upbringing as a Protestant meant that he had practically no knowledge of Christian doctrine, no knowledge of Christian mysticism, practically no knowledge of the lives of the Saints, or the meaning of sacraments, or even the full significance of rites. And being by nature a universalist he was put off by Christianity's exclusivism, maintaining itself to be the only valid religion. And by the time of these years which we are now considering, 1818–19, he had ceased to consider himself a Christian. He accepted Christianity amongst other religions, but as a believer, shrank from speaking about God as others do: for him God was a great mystery, and Keats had come by that time to rely more on his intelligence than on what the Christian religion gave him in the way of information.

2. Published as 'Frithjof Schuon and René Guénon' in *Sophia*, Vol 5, No. 2, and available on audio cassette from the Temenos Academy.

In a word, it was not difficult to think, as many did think at that time, that somehow religion had gone wrong. Keats's friend Leigh Hunt, for example, was always scoffing at religion; Keats himself was groping in the dark, intelligently but not always infallibly. As to Shakespeare, I have often mentioned Dover Wilson as having said very rightly that Shakespeare lived in the world of Plato and St. Augustine. Although it was after the Reformation, he was still, as I have always maintained, one of the last outposts of the Middle Ages. And Shakespeare was also a born mystic. But in his case his world, the world of Plato and St. Augustine, could give him the truths which he needed for his spiritual development. I repeat that Keats was also a born mystic, unlike Milton, Wordsworth, Shelley and Tennyson, and others. Hence Keats's certitude that Shakespeare was like a beloved elder brother to himself, a totally kindred spirit. Keats wrote in a letter,

They are very shallow people who take everything literally. A Man's life of any worth is a continual Allegory, and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life – a life, like the scriptures, figurative . . . Lord Byron cuts a figure, but he is not figurative. Shakespeare led a life of Allegory, his works are the comments on it.

The world that Keats was born into had little to give him except what was left of virgin Nature. Above all Shakespeare was his teacher, but he could not ask Shakespeare questions. And despite his great gifts he was groping in the dark, without help. Did he know that 'we are such stuff as dreams are made on', to quote Prospero's words in *The Tempest*? He might have answered: 'The time will come for such truths, but now I am face to face with the world and must deal with that great problem first.' This man of twenty-four had discovered unaided – except, as he would have insisted, by Shakespeare's help – that this lower world is penetrated by God. And with all his close-knit sincerity he was concentrated on this wonderful truth and bent on conveying it to others. He had sensed directly something of the harmony of this lower universe. But Keats did not yet know, as Shakespeare had well known, that this harmony is not independent of higher harmonies, nor can this harmony in itself be expressed as 'the balance of good and Evil', as Keats had expressed it earlier, with reference to the plays of Shakespeare. The Divine penetration of the world necessarily involves the transcending of evil by Good. Even in *Othello*, where evil is at its

greatest, nobody could deny that in the harmony which undoubtedly one feels at the end of the play evil has been transcended by Good. The same is true of all Shakespeare's greatest plays, from *Hamlet* to *The Tempest*, so obviously true as to make it impossible for such a Shakespeare-devotee as Keats to persist in attributing to the supreme dramatist any such idea as 'the balance of good and evil'.

Keats needed to have certain things explained to him. He needed to know the difference between Good and evil. By difference, I mean their totally different substance, nature and origin. Traditionally speaking good comes ultimately from the Absolute. For Platonists the Absolute is pure positivity; it is το αγαθου, the Sovereign Good. And St. Augustine, and others beside him in all traditions, have maintained that it is in the nature of the Good to reveal Itself, to radiate. The Good must radiate; and radiation means eventually distance, that is, one might say, distance from God. And that distance is dangerous; there lies the origin of evil. The two things, Good and evil, are thus of totally different natures: Good springs from the Absolute directly: it is radiation gradually becoming less and less by distance; but evil simply comes from distance, it is a purely negative thing. So that the two things in themselves, Good and evil, are, I repeat, of different substances, different natures, different origins. Keats needed to have that explained to him. He also needed to have it explained to him that Paradise is in the nature of man; Paradise, where there is no evil, and no suffering. Paradise was lost at the fall of man but none the less Man's primordial nature was not lost, it remained buried under the rubble, one might say, of man's fallen nature, but it is none the less there under that rubble, and Paradise is still Man's true homeland. That is why children, in some respects wiser than their parents, are unwilling to accept a story that does not end 'and they lived happily ever afterwards' – that is instinctive wisdom on the part of children, not just wishful thinking. The modernist idea, that religion was invented by wishful thinking, is the opposite of the truth. Eternal happiness is what we are made for, and what we should aspire to. This is what all the great religions of the world teach us, each in its own way.

As to Christianity, in which Keats was brought up, the complexity of this doctrine presupposes the presence of a very strongly constituted spiritual authority capable of explaining the doctrine to the mass of the people, the laity, and answering their questions. Throughout the Middle Ages Christendom was dominated by spiritual authority. But

since then that authority has been pushed more and more into a corner, nor indeed can Christendom still be said to exist, for it has been replaced by the modern civilisation.

It would however perhaps be true to say that it has always been easier for a Christian to slip into doctrinal error than it is for a Jew or a Muslim. The Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church both affirm the truth of the two natures, Divine and human, of Jesus Christ. It was only the human nature that suffered crucifixion, but the Second Person of the Trinity is thought of as One Person, and the Blessed Virgin is often invoked as 'Mother of God'.³ There seems to be thus, as it were, something of a half open door to the heresy of a 'suffering God'. 'I am not prepared to believe in a God who does not suffer.' During the course of my life I have heard words to this effect spoken by several different persons and no doubt many of you have had the same experience. I mention this because Keats had fallen into that very error, as is clear from his poem *Hyperion*, which is about the Titans being overcome by the Olympians, that is, by their children. Saturn, Rhea, and Hyperion, are being replaced by Zeus, Hera and Apollo. The divine suffering which he portrays is an immensely compassionate suffering which embraces all mankind, and which suffers far more than any human being can suffer. It may well be that Keats's Christian upbringing was in no way instrumental as regards this error. He would no doubt have argued, in defence of it, that not to have experienced suffering is a limitation which cannot be attributed to God. The world-wide traditional answer to this is that suffering belongs to the planes of illusion which are altogether transcended by the Divine Reality. 'We are such stuff as dreams are made on.' But transcendence does not mean ignorance of what is transcended. On the contrary it implies comprehension in the double sense of understanding and encompassing. Divine Knowledge is by definition Omniscience.

But Keats was far too intelligent to be obsessed by this error, and it did not last. At the end of 1819, when he was revising *Hyperion*, he suddenly abandoned it; and having broken away from that, he wrote one of his most serene and beautiful poems, the ode *To Autumn*. That was in the Autumn of 1819, and it was in the following Spring that he

3. In this connection it is most instructive to read James Cutsinger's article 'The Mystery of the Two Natures' in *Sophia*, Vol. 4, No. 2.

entered into his last illness. He had given himself to his own dying brother, and one of his friends, Joseph Severn, now gave himself to Keats after he fell ill, and he went with him to Italy in 1820. He died there in February 1821, and Joseph Severn was with him the whole time – I will come back to this. But I will first draw your attention to Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn* which, like his last ode, also has a most serene beauty. I would just like to read to you a passage from that, because it is also relevant to what we have been speaking of, that is, the penetration of this world by God, and the harmony of the universe. I will not read the whole poem but here is a vivid description from one of the stanzas:

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
 To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
 Lead'st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
 And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
 What little town by river or sea-shore,
 Or mountain-built with peaceful citadel,
 Is emptied of its folk, this pious morn?
 And, little town, thy streets for evermore
 Will silent be; and not a soul to tell
 Why thou art desolate, can e'er return.

And this is the end of the poem; he addresses the urn:

When old age shall this generation waste,
 Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
 Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st
 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty, – that is all
 Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

By Truth Keats clearly means God, and Beauty of course is a manifestation of God. This touches on the question of the Divine penetration, the mystery which Keats had discovered, that is, which he had felt directly, and which he was bent on giving to mankind in plays, the Divine penetration of this lower universe. It is a wide-spread doctrine that the Divine Qualities do penetrate the world and, according to the older religions, all the other worlds level with it on the great chain of

successive worlds which Hinduism calls the *samsara*. That penetration is the transcendent aspect which enobles even the world we live in; and perhaps the most immediately clear example of it is penetration by Justice. The Divine Justice penetrates this world, and from that reality the Far Eastern religions have evolved the doctrine which is sometimes termed in English the doctrine of concordant action and reaction. This means that one can do nothing without there being the exact reaction to it that it deserves. The reaction may not come till after death, but one cannot escape from the Divine Justice which penetrates the whole of manifestation. There is bound to be for every action the perfectly concordant reaction. This doctrine is especially prominent in Taoism and, I think, in Buddhism, but it is implicit in every religion. It is expressed in *King Lear* by Edgar when he speaks to his dying, illegitimate half-brother Edmund about their blinded father:

The gods are just, and of our pleasant vices
 Make instruments to plague us.
 The dark and vicious place where thee he got
 Cost him his eyes.

V. iii. 171-74

But Divine Beauty – and this what Keats is telling us – penetrates this world as surely as Divine Justice does. There is, however, a difference of level. In man, made in the image of God, beauty is outward and goodness is inward, whereas, by inverse analogy, the Beauty of God is more of a secret than his Goodness is. Beauty ranks among the very highest and most inward Aspects of God. That is why the sacred arts which are by definition expressions of the Divine Beauty, are in the hands, in all traditional civilisations, of the mystics, that is, those who belong to the inner aspect, the esoteric aspect, of religion, as Keats did, if not fully in fact, at least in potentially and by his nature. And he was conscious of the penetration of this world by Transcendent Beauty. That is what he is seeking to express in this ode, *To Autumn*. Here are the first and last stanzas:

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness!
 Close bosom-friend of the maturing sun;
 Conspiring with him how to load and bless

With fruit the vines that round the thatch-eaves run;
 To bend with apples the moss'd cottage-trees,
 And fill all fruit with ripeness to the core;
 To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells
 With a sweet kernel; to set budding more,
 And still more, later flowers for the bees,
 Until they think warm days will never cease,
 For Summer has oe'r-brimm'd their clammy cells.

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?
 Think not of them, thou hast thy music too,
 While barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
 And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;
 Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn
 Among the river sallows borne aloft
 Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;
 And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;
 Hedge-crickets sing; and now with treble soft
 The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft,
 And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.

Now just a few words about the end. I have already mentioned that when Keats entered into his last illness his friend Joseph Severn insisted on keeping him company until the very end. Joseph Severn was himself a devout Christian; as to Keats, he felt within himself the need for a religion, and Christianity was the only religion within reach. It had to be made use of, and Severn was providentially just the right person to be with Keats. I am sure I have read somewhere that in his last days Keats asked Severn to read him some of the *Psalms*; and no doubt amongst those which Severn read would have been the psalm which contains the words:

The Lord is my Shepherd;
 I shall not want.

What is certain however is that Keats asked Severn to read to him during those last weeks extracts from Jeremy Taylor's book *Holy Living and Holy Dying*. Jeremy Taylor was born just within Shakespeare's lifetime and the book is very highly spoken of by many people. He was

a Protestant but verging on Catholicism, what we would call in English very High Church, and he got into trouble under Cromwell for that. He was put in prison more than once. He had been at one time actually chaplain to Queen Henrietta Maria, and he took the King's side very definitely in the Civil War. Keats evidently felt that this book was just what he needed. Until then he had not felt capable of giving himself to the practice of religion, despite the fact that he was no doubt far more profoundly religious than the average church-goer. But one likes to think that the essential possibility of worship was realised for him at the end, and it seems certain that it must have been realised. He was not too ill to pray, and prayer is the quintessence of religion. In particular, to go back to the book which was being read to him, prayer is the quintessence of 'Holy Dying'.

That, I think, is all I had intended to say; but if there are any questions anyone would like to ask I will try to answer them.

* * *

Q. Do you know the phrase 'This vale of soul-making'?

I recognise it; it sounds like a phrase of Keats. It must be in a letter. He certainly used that phrase 'soul-making' and he had the idea that one of the purposes of life was to make one's soul. He says somewhere that soul-making consists of forming one's identity; and he was worried by the fact, so he said, that children do not have time to make souls. But all religions teach that children can go straight to Paradise.⁴ We have only to quote the words of Christ, 'Suffer the little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven' (*St. Matthew*, 19. v.14 – cf. the opening of chapter 18 of the same). None the less, despite the error about children, the phrase 'this vale of soul-making' suggests that Keats had grasped the essential as regards understanding the question: 'To what end are we born into this world?' The universal traditional answer is that every man's true identity is his own particular human perfection as man 'made in the image of God'. That is the domain of the Lesser Mysteries. They lead up to the Greater Mysteries which are concerned with the Supreme Identity, the secret Oneness of every being with the Divine Self. The realisation of that is the aim and end of all religion.

4. For a remarkable example of a childlike mode of sanctity see the forthcoming new edition of my book *The Eleventh Hour*, Appendix C.

Q. Was the Ode on a Grecian Urn written after his move to Italy?

No. I don't think he wrote anything after that move. It was written in the summer of the previous year, 1819, the summer leading to the autumn that inspired his ode *To Autumn*, which was one of his last poems.

Q. Because the words 'Soul' and 'Spirit' are used in so many different ways by so many different people... perhaps you could give a definition of the two things in the light of the sacred interpretation?

There's no problem about that. The Spirit belongs to the next world, the Hereafter, the world of the Heavens and the Paradises. If you consider the hierarchy – this is something Keats really needed to have explained to him and it would not have been explained in the religion in which he was brought up. To define briefly the hierarchy there is first of all the Absolute Itself, that is, in other words, Absolute Infinite Eternal Perfection. This is God in the highest sense. Then below that there is the Personal God, still at the Divine level. This is the level of the Christian Trinity and the Hindu Trinity *sat-chit-ananda* which is more or less the same. That is not at the Absolute level but it has been called the relative Absolute. Then comes the Spirit, which has a Divine aspect and a Celestial aspect. It is said in Genesis that the Spirit of God breathed upon the face of the waters and the waters were divided; and you have in Hinduism the doctrine of the Upper Waters and the Lower Waters. The Upper Waters are what we call the world of the Heavens, the world of the Paradises; the Lower Waters are this world. 'The *Koran* says the same: it speaks of the Two Seas, the Salt Bitter Sea which corresponds to this lower world, which is the 'universe' Keats is speaking of in his phrase 'the harmony of the universe', this lower world, which is also penetrated by the Divine Presence, and the Fresh Water Sea of the next world which is what is called sometimes the Waters of Life.

Now the domain of the Spirit is the next world. As I said the word Spirit also has a Divine aspect as well as a Celestial aspect. In Christianity it is the Divine aspect which is stressed, the third person of the Trinity is that Divine aspect, the Holy Ghost; in Islam it is the Celestial, the created aspect of the Spirit which is stressed. But both religions admit the two... I remember once in Egypt, I was going in a tram along the Pyramids Road up to the village just below the Pyramids where I lived for five years. Having collected all the tickets the tram conductor came and sat by me and said 'I want to ask you a question: is

the Spirit created or uncreated?' – that sort of thing would not happen in England. And I said, both created and uncreated, I explained to him what I've just said.

Then comes the Heart, which is the centre of the soul but which is none the less on the other side of the boundary, it is on the celestial side, it is as it were the dividing-place between the two seas, the two waters, sometimes represented by a rock. And the Heart is the gate to the Spirit; but it is beyond our reach. Mystics in all mysticisms speak of the Eye of the Heart; the opening of the Eye of the Heart is the first aim of every kind of mysticism, purification of the soul in order that the Eye of the Heart shall open. It is what man lost at the Fall, the eyesight of the Heart; he was cut off from the Heart. Now it is on the other side of the boundary. On this side of the boundary, that is, lower than the Heart, the soul, the psychic substance, begins. And the Intelligence which comes straight from the Divine Light becomes human only when it enters the psychic substance; before that it is pure Spirit. And the word Intellect was used throughout the Middle Ages to define the spiritual faculty which was concerned with the next world, not with this world, and which was the faculty of the Heart: the throne of the Intellect is the Heart, in the sense that I've just mentioned, which is again beyond this world, beyond our reach in this world. Then, you might say, the first purely psychic faculty is the mind, or reason. In the Middle Ages students were taught that the reason is the handmaid of the Intellect; it works under the direction of the Intellect; but it is given us for this world, it is a worldly faculty. And you could say that the domain between the reason and the boundary which would take us to the Heart if it were open, but which is closed, is the domain of intuition. You can use the word intuition as being in that part of the Intelligence which lies on this side of the boundary but above the mind; it still retains some parts of the Intellect, it comes from the Intellect but is not pure Intellect, it has certain intellectual aspects, which we call intuition. The soul also has other faculties – memory, imagination – and the senses are partly psychic and partly bodily. That is where the soul joins onto the body, through the five senses. It is said that when a man is dying, normally speaking, the last faculty he retains is his hearing. That is the highest of the senses. The lowest, the first to be lost, is his sense of smell, then his taste, then his sight, then his touch, and finally his hearing.

Q. When you said that there are people who could not believe in a God

that does not suffer, and a personal God that does suffer, and a pure Spirit that does not, this was in the Early Church a very big problem, as you know, because the gnostics of Alexandria believed that God was absolutely helpless watching the suffering of Mankind, and that the Devil, as it were, was doing all the work, and this is why we had suffering in the world because God, who was pure Goodness, was sitting up there weeping, so to speak, for Mankind.

But that was a monstrous heresy. It is the radiation of God's Goodness which causes, in the end, evil by distance. I forget who it is who complained: 'We are told that God is Goodness itself and All-Powerful: how then do we explain evil. If God is Goodness Itself, and All-Powerful, He could stop evil.' He may be All-Powerful without being Good, or He may be Good without being All-Powerful, either would satisfy logic; but that He should be both Good and All-Powerful means that evil does not exist. But evil does exist. The answer to that question was given by Frithjof Schuon in one of his books⁵ – and it is very convincing and very profound – that God is All-Powerful because He is the Absolute, He is Absolute Infinite Perfection; and that All-Power is powerful against everything but his Nature; that All-Power can do nothing against the Nature of God, it is all-powerful over everything else but it cannot stop the radiation of Good from God, it cannot stop the Sovereign Good's radiation of Itself. And it is that radiation which produces distance. There is no evil, needless to say, in the Divine, and by extension there is no evil in what one might call the Divine Aura, that is the Next World, Heaven, the domain of the Paradises. The Paradises have no suffering and no evil because they are too near to the Absolute.

Q. Why does radiation create distance?

Radiation is usually defined as a spreading or a moving in all directions, or in many directions, from a centre. If the movement is powerful, a tremendous distance will ultimately be as it were measured out in all or in some directions from the centre. Creation is the result of radiation from the Divine Centre, and evil becomes possible after a certain distance is reached. God acts to rectify evil, to put things right. But a thousand years in His Sight are but as yesterday – it is not in His nature to be always interfering. None the less religion after religion is brought to put things right.

5. *Islam and the Perennial Philosophy*, ch. 9 'The Problem of Theodicies', pp.167–68.

Q. May I put in a word for Platonic tradition? You have spoken most interestingly about Keats's relationship, or non-relationship, within the Christian heritage which was, of course, that of this country, and his environment, but I am thinking of the Platonic revival at that time, through the translations of Plato and Plotinus and the whole of the neo-Platonic literature, by Thomas Taylor the Platonist; and there was one work of Taylor's that was almost a best-seller, and that was Plotinus' Concerning the Beautiful. And that belonged to Keats's friend Bailey, in Oxford, and was very widely read; and the 'Thing of Beauty', 'Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty' – I think one cannot disregard these Platonic statements. And of course Taylor himself was eager to produce an anti-Christian revival of the Platonic theology, and had many followers at that time, particularly among the Romantic poets. I just wanted to put in a word for the Platonic Tradition about which you have spoken, really very interestingly indeed.

Keats may very well have read this book and I am glad you spoke of it. Thank you also for mentioning Thomas Taylor's eagerness 'to produce an anti-Christian revival of the Platonic theology.' It would of course be misleading simply to add, in this context, that Keats also was a Platonist. But being, as he was, a profoundly intelligent young man, in love with Truth, he was thereby inevitably something of a Platonist; and it may well be that his understanding of the Platonic formulation 'Beauty is the splendour of Truth' which dominates his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, was more direct and deeper rooted than that of any 'official' Platonists, possibly even including Taylor himself. In any case it was a grave mistake for Taylor to be anti-Christian. He should on the contrary have been eager to throw Platonic and Neoplatonic light on certain points of Christian dogma; and at the same time he should have drawn certain conclusions from the fact that neither Socrates nor Plato nor yet Plotinus had received a mandate from Heaven to found a religion. They were great sages; but they had no spiritual path to offer, no way to God, no Heaven-sent method, no sacraments, no performance of rites.

In any case, we have seen, it was not Thomas Taylor but Jeremy Taylor who entered into the last days of Keats with his profoundly Christian book *Holy Living and Holy Dying*, which is evidently in harmony with Keats's indelible Platonic leanings, otherwise he would not have listened to it.