

Thesis.

The Poetry of Keats.

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The Poetry of Keats.

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The Poetry of Keats.

In Keats poetry we find traceable very little of his personal or outward life, but very much of his real, inward life, which really is what we are all striving to find. But although dates and outward facts are not as interesting as the inward life and thoughts of a man, they are necessary in order to get the setting for his life.

John Keats, the second of four children, was born in London in 1795. His father was employed in a large livery stable, kept by a Mr. Jennings, whose daughter he had married. Mrs Keats was, in personal appearance "tall, with a large oval face, and a somewhat saturnine demeanour," but she was very successful in winning the affections of her children, especially John. The elder Keats is spoken

of as "being a man of sense and energy."

In 1804, his father was killed by a fall from a horse, and soon after this, Keats, in company with his two brothers, was sent to the school of Mr. Clarke at Enfield. His first years here were distinguished chiefly by his desire to imitate the example of an uncle, who had been a soldier. On account of his fighting and his marked sensitiveness, he won the name of being a "compound of pluck and sensibility." He was very popular, and his playmates thought that he would probably be a great soldier when he became a man. During his school-life he did nothing wonderful as a student of literature, his chief accomplishment being the translation of the Aeneid by Virgil. Besides this, he had a small knowledge of Shakespeare and was well-versed

in books of mythology, being well acquainted with the gods, nymphs, and heroes portrayed there.

In 1810, he left school and was apprenticed for five years to a surgeon, Mr. Hammond, at Edmonton, near Enfield. His master was a good surgeon and Keats applied himself to the study of medicine, until he fully decided to take up literature as his life work. If he had decided to adopt the medical profession as his own, it is probable that he would have made a success of that. His nearness to Enfield gave him the opportunity of visiting the son of his old instructor frequently, and thus enabled him to continue his studies, for which he had a great liking. It was from this son, Charles Cowden Clarke, that in 1812 he borrowed Spenser's "Faerie Queen", the first of Spenser's

works that Keats read. He was enchanted with Spenser from the first and loved to go to Enfield and read his works with Charles Clarke. Besides Spenser, his literary studies consisted chiefly of Milton, Shakespeare and Chaucer.

In 1817, his first book of poems appeared. It was a small volume, not great in itself, but promising better things. However, it attracted the attention of Leigh Hunt, who was much pleased with it, and reviewed it in the Examiner. In closing his review he said, "Here is a young poet giving himself up to his own impressions and reveling in real poetry for its own sake." Beyond this review, little public attention was called to this production, but in 1818 when Endymion, his first work of any length, was published, a storm of abuse fell from Blackwood's and the Quarterly.

Cidymion is a mythological poem, and although it is not what we would call a great production, still it has many passages in which the poetry is exquisite. Keats himself knew that the poem was not a success, and so stated in the introduction, but the critics took no note of this. Although he suffered keenly from these cruel thrusts, still he judged his own work more harshly than anyone else, and in a letter to his publisher in October 1818, he wrote as follows concerning the treatment of his work:- "I cannot but feel indebted to those gentlemen who have taken my part. As for the rest, I begin to get acquainted with my own strength and weakness. Praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic of his own works. My own domestic criticism

has given me pain without comparison beyond what Blackwood's and the Quarterly could inflict; and also when I feel I am right, no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary re-perception and ratification of what is fine. -----

I have written independently without judgement. I may write independently and with judgement hereafter. -----

In Endymion I leaped headlong into the sea and thereby have become better acquainted with the soundings, the quicksands, and the rocks, than if I had stayed on the green shore, and piped a silly pipe, and took tea and comfortable advice.

I was never afraid of failure; for I would sooner fail than not be among the greatest." It has been said by many that the articles in Blackwood's and the Quarterly killed Keats, but me

see from the preceding that this cannot be so. In another place he writes, "There is but one way for me. The road lies through application, study, and thought. I will pursue it." In these words and in his later works, we see and feel the real Keats, and are satisfied that George Keats, his brother, was right, when he said, after reading the article in Blackwoods, which referred to Keats as "Johnny Keats", "John is as much like the Holy Ghost as Johnny Keats." The only plausible reason for this treatment is that Keats belonged to a different political party from the editors of these magazines. Then, also, he had been befriended by Leigh Hunt, who was at sword's point with the members of the Tory party. The men who thus attacked Keats thought they could hurt the party by this cowardly method.

From this time on he worked assiduously, but in the latter part of the year he was called to the bedside of his younger brother Tom, who was dying of consumption. At this time he himself had contracted the disease and should have been taking care of himself instead of his brother. It was a great bereavement when his brother died, but he attempted to forget his sorrows in working, producing during this period the volume which contained his greatest works, *Hyperion*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *Lamia*, *Ode to a Grecian Urn*, and the *Ode to a Nightingale*. This was published in 1820, and in this same year his physical condition became so alarming that he was obliged to go to Italy as a last resort. He was accompanied by Mr. Severn, an artist and a close friend. He went first to Naples and later to

Rome, although by this time there was no hope of recovery. During these last days he suffered so much that he hoped for death and watched the countenance of his physician each day to find the sentence which he so hoped for. He was passionately fond of flowers, and once during this last sickness he said, "I feel the daisies growing over me." Before he died he asked to have the following inscription on his tombstone: "Here Lies One Whose Name Was Writ In Water", which request was faithfully carried out. On the 23rd of February, 1821, he died and was buried in the Protestant cemetery of Rome, where his grave is covered with beautiful daisies.

Of Keats' works, three may be taken as representative;—The Eve of St. Agnes, Hyperion, and the Ode on a Grecian Urn.

The Eve of St. Agnes is based on the legends and superstitions of the Middle Ages, which it portrays very clearly and beautifully. As we read on through the story, it almost seems at times, as though we heard the sweet music of Porphyro's lute or saw Madeline's beautiful face as she was so peacefully sleeping, waiting for her lover. Indeed, the poem is couched in such beautiful and harmonious language that it seems as though we had at last found the union of the beautiful and the intellectual.

Hyperion, although but a fragment, impresses us with its beauty before we have long pursued it. The easy, natural, felicitous expression wins our favor at once and we feel with Hunt, that it is "not faultless, but nearly so." It was never finished because Keats decided that it had too many Miltonic

inversions in it. The story is based on classic mythology, with the scene laid in the beautiful isles of Greece. It represents the fall of Saturn and his attempts to regain his throne, being told in language that at times seems to be almost inspired by the gods of whom he wrote. Much praise is due to Keats for the original way in which he treats the mythological characters, representing them not as mere creatures of the imagination, but endowing them with qualities and passions like our own, only higher and purer. In this way he has surpassed all other writers, and has shown his creative power. After reading this poem, we realize that there was more to Keats than mere exquisiteness of expression, — that he sometimes rises to the sublime. The critics also, seemed to realize this, for

they received Hyperion with almost extravagant praise, appearing to have properly estimated the work of the young poet, at last.

In his shorter poems, Keats excelled even more than in the longer ones; indeed it may be said that he made a perfect success of these. The Ode on a Grecian Urn is a beautiful description of a beautiful object — it almost seems that an ode could be no more nearly perfect. After reading it one realizes better than ever before the last words of this poem: — "Beauty is truth, truth, beauty, — that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Although Keats' works are so fine and appeal to our higher emotions, still we must admit that he had some obvious faults, which, however, is no more than we should expect when we remember that he died at the age of twenty-five. If he had been allowed to live

longer, it is probable that he would have overcome most of these. One of the greatest of his excellencies is his style. Before this time English poetry had been artificial and stilted, but in the almost unconscious expression of Keats we find a welcome change. Milton says that poetry should be "simple, sensuous, impassioned", and Keats surely fulfils the two latter requirements to a remarkable extent, yet withal combined with the ideal. Although Keats' poetry is sensuous, it is so in the highest meaning of the word; he himself has designated it "a yearning passion for the Beautiful," and when we say beautiful, we strike the keynote, for he was absorbed in that to such an extent that it sometimes excluded even the consciousness of self.

Two other poets were almost contemporaneous with Keats, —

Wordsworth and Byron. These three men were the means of redeeming English poetry from the artificiality and shallowness of Pope's time. But, although contemporaneous they were very different. Wordsworth was a conscious reformer; he saw that English poetry had fallen to a state from which it must be redeemed as soon as possible, and therefore he set about to do it. Keats helped just as surely, but almost unconsciously. In the words of our American author, Lowell, "Wordsworth was the deepest thinker, Keats the more essentially a poet, and Byron the most keenly intellectual of the three." Keats' mind was broader, more able to see all sides of a question, than either Byron or Wordsworth; he was able to judge them correctly, both as to their literary merits and as men. As to their influence on the later poets, Wordsworth helped most to change their ideas; Keats, their forms;

while Byron is chiefly interesting for what is indicated in his writings, rather than for what he wrote.

In Keats' poetry we see the ideal combination of thought and expression, of meaning and music, as it were. We are charmed with the exquisite detail which we find throughout and with the spontaneousness of expression, which seems to come from his heart only to enter into ours. He has shown that poetry in the truest sense of the word, must be sensuous, although refined by what may be called a new sense, underlying all the others and working in harmony with them. To really appreciate this wonderful poet, we should not try to absorb too much at a time, but rather read it slowly, sip by sip, as a bee gathers honey from the flowers. An added charm will be forthcoming if we can go to those beautiful woodland places, about which he so loved to sing. If this method is followed,

we will find ourselves, even in
this practical old world of ours,
thinking with Keats and ready to
say with him;—

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever."

Finis.