

KEATS---THE MAN AND THE MASTER

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### Keats---The Man and The Master

Time is the alembic in which all literature is tested, --- revealing the pure gold of eventual approval as distinguished from temporary popularity, or even, indeed, the lack of it. From that process has emerged the name of John Keats, the Man and the Master. The man, as we shall try to show, has been approved as quite different from the anemic and over-sensitive figure that grew up in the legends of his first half century of fame, and the master has been approved by some of the greatest critics of the age as ranking among the two or three supreme masters of poetic thought, couched in that ideal medium of both vigor and beauty, the English tongue.

First, as we have been taught by able predecessor on these programs, we must look to the background of the man. One of the earliest biographies of the young poet who lived but five months past his 25th year, came out in scarcely more than another 25 years after his death from the pen of Richard Monckton Milnes, who became the first Lord Houghton. He it was whom James Russell Lowell, a few years later (in 1854, to be exact) gently chided for some of his contentions. Lowell's essay is, to my mind, one of the ablest and one of the most penetrating and discriminating, in briefer compass, that have been written about this English poet.

Lowell calls attention to the fact that Keats was the second of four children and that, like Chaucer and Spenser, he was a Londoner by birth, but unlike them, was certainly not of gentle blood. "Lord Houghton", he says, "who seems to have had a kindly

wish to create him gentleman by brevet, says that (quote) 'he was born to the upper ranks of the middle class' (unquote). "This shows," says the smiling Lowell, "a commendable tenderness for the nerves of English society and reminds one of Northcote's story of the violin-player who, wishing to compliment his pupil, George III, divided all fiddlers into three classes, --- those who could not play at all, those who played very badly and those who played very well, assuring his majesty that he had made such commendable progress as to have already reached the second rank. We shall not be too greatly shocked by knowing that the father of Keats (as Lord Houghton had told us in an earlier biography) (quote) 'was employed in the establishment of Mr. Jennings, the proprietor of large livery-stables on the Pavement at Moorfields, nearly opposite the entrance into Finsbury Circus' (end quote). So that, after all" (allows our Yankee essayist) "it was not so bad; for first, Mr. Jennings was a proprietor; second, he was the proprietor of an establishment; third, he was the proprietor of a large establishment; and fourth, this large establishment was nearly opposite Finsbury Circus, a name which vaguely dilates the imagination with all sorts of potential grandeurs. It is true Leigh Hunt asserts that Keats 'was a little too sensitive on the score of his origin', but we can find no trace of such a feeling either in his poetry or in such of his letters as have been printed. We suspect the fact to have been that he resented with becoming pride the vulgar Blackwood and Quarterly standards, which measured genius by genealogies. It is enough," says Lowell, in a memorable conclusion on the matter, "that his poetical pedigree is of the best, tracing through Spenser to Chaucer, and that Pegasus does not stand at livery even in the largest establishments in Moorfields."

As a schoolboy, young John Keats was rather vigorous and stout in his defense of rights. In fact, he was known as being pretty handy with his fists when they were needed. However, few geniuses have had greater series of misfortunes. His father died from a fall from a spirited horse when John was in his ninth year; his mother died, leaving him a grief-stricken lad, moodily absenting himself from his fellows for days, when he was 15; his beloved brother, Tom, six years his junior, died in December, 1818, giving the poet's beleaguered mind a final release into the great era of the odes and the second "Hyperion"; a few months before that his "Endymion", which had been published in January, received the bitter attacks on Keats and the so-called "Cockney School" in Blackwood's Magazine, which bade the young apothecary "back to his gallipots", and a month later the ungenerous and indiscriminating notice in the Quarterly Review of Edinburgh; the same year he lost to America his beloved brother, George Keats, two years his junior, and his devotedly admired sister-in-law, Georgianna (an emigration which was a boon to Keatsiana) because to them he addressed the longest and most remarkable of his letters; in July of that year he caught the violent cold with complementary affections of the throat, which was the precursor of his fatal illness; yet the next year, 1819, the golden year of his production, he wrote "The Eve of St. Agnes", finished the first "Hyperion", wrote the ode to Psyche; wrote and published the surpassing "Ode to a Nightingale"; wrote "Lamia" and the second "Hyperion", began and finished the tragedy, "Otho the Great", which was directly intended for the theater, based on a plot by his closest friend and sometime financial abettor, Charles Armitage Brown, and composed the serenely beautiful "Ode to Autumn", as well as the "Ode on a Grecian Urn", with its unforgettable

last lines; the next summer his last volume, "Lamia" and other poems, was published; --- his fatal illness had begun that February, and on February 23, of the following year, 1821, he bade his devoted friend, the artist Severn, who had spent his last crown and his last ounce of energy in Keats' care, to lift him up, that he was dying. "Be firm", said he, "and thank God it has come."

Can you think of any character in literary history, who, in only four years of active literary occupations, as Keats did from 1816 to 1820, and with physical and financial privations annoying him constantly, who built for himself such an enduring monument of fame; one so enduring that it qualifies as a beautiful and modest understatement the epitaph he suggested to Severn and which is now over his grave in the Protestant cemetery in Rome,

"Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

Water, indeed! When the name of Keats is forgotten, the English tongue will be no more, and London and New York will be

"one with Ninevah and Tyre."

I happened to have as a professor of poetry at Ohio University a delightful teacher, Professor Edwin Watts Chubb, and from his book, "Stories of Authors", I glean part of a magazine article by Charles Cowden Clarke, his schoolmaster's son and one of John's tutors, which I have never seen in any other place. He tells of the boy's pugnacious spirit and also that he read, terribly engrossed, even during his meal times. (Some of us may share breakfast with the headlines of the morning paper, but generally, I believe, our meals are divorced from our acquisition of mental provender.) "He had a tolerably retentive memory," says Clarke, to whom some of the earlier poetic epistles were addressed, "and

the quantity that he read was surprising. He must have in his last 18 months in school have exhausted the school library, which consisted principally of abridgments of all the voyages and travels of any note; Mavor's collection, also his 'Universal History'; Robertson's histories of Scotland, America and Charles V; all Miss Edgeworth's productions, together with many other books equally well calculated for youth. The books, however, that were his constantly recurring sources of attraction were Tooke's 'Pantheon', Lempriere's 'Classical Dictionary', which he appeared to learn" (learn"by heart", as we would say) "and Spence's 'Polymetis'. This was the store whence he derived his intimacy with the Greek mythology; here was he 'suckled in that creed outworn'; for his amount of classical attainment extended no farther than the 'Aeneid', with which epic, indeed, he was so fascinated that before leaving school he had voluntarily translated it into writing".

As a matter of fact, he finished the translation of the entire six books of Vergil after he had become a surgeon's apprentice at the age of 16. It was just five years later that he met Leigh Hunt, who proved a real inspiration to him. In that adviser's magazine, the Examiner, which Keats had read avidly at Mr. Clarke's school, was printed Keats's first published sonnet, beginning

"O, Solitude, if I with thee must dwell",

and that year also was written the sonnet, "On Looking into Chapman's Homer." From this to "The Cap and the Bells", written before the end of 1819, was a wide span. Yet the idea of anyone's entering that domain of fair poesy for the first time always thrills me somewhat as Keats was thrilled with his first glimpse of the heroes of the Iliad. For a young friend who recently began to read every-

thing that has been written by, or about, Keats, I wrote for a fly-leaf of the poems something that is a weak echo, but an appreciative, one of the tribute to Chapman. If you will allow me; a bit of a "Prelude to Great Music".

"Much have I travell'd in the realms of light  
With poets dreaming of a heav'n come true;  
The Paradise of skies' cerulean blue  
And visions ending not with dawning bright;  
Full oft with Passion's purple all bedight,  
Such visions as may still refulgent gleam  
When hov'ring o'er Reality's cold stream.  
Yet never did I feel their magic might  
Till I heard Keats speak with the honey'd phrase  
That still holds sway in Shakespeare's dateless realm  
(Puissant captains of sweet Fancy's helm)  
With him heard nightingales in musky ways;  
Saw young Endymion like a new world flow'r,  
And gazed, tear-dimmed, at that last holy Star."

The linking of Keats with the author of "Hamlet and "King Lear" is not new. One of the first that is now remembered especially was that of Matthew Arnold in an essay that was used to a preface to selections from Keats in a comprehensive anthology of English poets.

He quoted from a letter of the young poet in which he said: "O that something fortunate had happened to me or my brothers! Then I might hope, but despair is forced upon me as a habit."

Arnold goes on to say: "Nevertheless, let and hindered as he was, and with a short term and imperfect experience, -- 'young', as he says of himself, 'and writing at random, straining after particles of light in the midst of a great darkness,' --- notwithstanding all this, by virtue of his feeling for beauty and his perception of the vital connection of beauty with truth, Keats accomplished so much in poetry, that in one of the two great modes in which poetry interprets, in the faculty of naturalistic interpretation, in what we call natural magic, he ranks with Shakespeare. 'The tongue of Kean,' he

(i.e., Keats) says in an admirable criticism of that great actor and of his enchanting elocution, 'The tongue of Kean must seem to have robbed the Hybla bees and left them honeyless. There is an indescribable gusto in his voice; in 'Richard', 'Be stirring with the lark tomorrow, gentle Norfolk!' comes from him as through the morning atmosphere toward which he yearns.' This magic, this 'indescribable gusto in the voice', Keats himself, too, exhibits in his poetic expression. No one else in English poetry, save Shakespeare, has in expression quite the fascinating felicity of Keats, his perfection of loveliness. 'I think,' he said humbly, 'I shall be among the English poets after my death.' He is", adds the great Arnold, "he is with Shakespeare."

If Keats could only have had some prescience of that well-earned tribute to soothe him in that "posthumous life" of his which he endured with such noble fortitude and resignation!

Though prepared in haste and written in trepidation, ~~with one eye on a book of engagements and another on the calendar,~~ this paper has done one great thing for me, personally, and I want to thank Professor Hopkins for the opportunity. That was the perusal of a book, only a decade or so old and one which has been on my reading agenda for some time, but to which I did not come until Keats stared at me solemnly and half-reproachfully from across the bars of heaven and said, "Now what are YOU going to do to my memory?" I refer to the great English scholar, John Middleton Murry's, "Keats and Shakespeare". If I should start quoting, the rest of this paper would be mostly Murry, not a bit musty and decidedly never a whit maudlin. And that latter is something that you cannot say about many memorials of the young, but safely immortal, Keats.

When I began to read through the pages of Murry, which held me more fascinated than any critical monograph ever has, I began to have some of the feelings that must have surged through Keats when he began to explore the "Iliad" or "King Lear". For clearness of exposition, for lucidity of treatment, for sedulous working out of a theory and for keen analysis of a poet's design for his own poetic life, I think that Professor Murry's book is almost unrivalled. If anyone cares at all for the creator of "Hyperion" and the mighty odes, he should place "Keats and Shakespeare" on a shelf beside the poems themselves and the remarkably revealing letters.

In his second chapter, Murry speaks of the four active years of Keats' creative powers in this way:

"Those four years are the most prodigious years in the life of genius of which we have record. No one, as far as I know, in any nation or at any time, has travelled so far along the steep road of poetic achievement in such a space of years; certainly no one in England. In four years to have achieved, with no advantages in education and against the dead-weight of a Cockney tradition, the opulent perfection of language, the living depth of poetical thought which is in 'Hyperion' and the 'Eve of St. Agnes' and the great Odes. It is a miracle," exclaims this peer of all the Keatsian critics. He continues:

"Yet this miracle happened, and we have record of the process. It appears to us as a quite natural miracle. The more closely we examine it, the less of a problem it presents, except in so far as the creation of every true work of art is an eternal problem. But the mere fact of this natural miracle must be emphasized, for a whole mushroom growth of literature has arisen out of the impossibility

for certain minds of admitting a smaller miracle of the same kind for Shakespeare. How (it is asked) could a grammar-school boy from the country, without contact with the university, without experience of the refinements of civilization, have written Shakespeare's plays? The sole and sufficient answer to such a question is that Shakespeare managed to do what he did precisely as Keats managed to do what he did, and that Keats managed to do far more in his four years than Shakespeare managed to do in the same space. Shakespeare could take his time; Keats had the vague foreboding of death unconsciously packing hours into minutes and years into months. Shakespeare had thirty years, where Keats had four."

And I think you will agree that Professor Murry's comparison is most just.

But before we go further into the life of this favorite of the Muses, I feel that we should envision something of what he looked like. For a long while, I had seen nothing of him but that portrait of him, from someone's drawing, I believe, which pictures him rather large-eyed and hollow-eyed, with white stock and soft collar, leaning his chin upon his left hand. But aside from the life mask, probably taken by his painter friend, Haydon, which gives an idea of his nose, long and straight, mouth sensitive but firm, and a strong chin, the most revealing picture of all, made from a pencil drawing of the poet, by his devoted friend, Charles Brown, shows us an apparently unstudied disorder of the coat; a firm and somewhat critical eye (though the picture is in profile); the facial profile much as the mask revealed, and the hair clustered in curly ringlets. His sister-in-law, Georgianna, whom he adored, wrote on the margin of Houghton's life of Keats that "his eyes were dark brown, large, soft and

expressive, and his hair a golden red." There is a lock of it in the Morgan Library in New York and it is reported to have been lighter than a Titian red, -- a "red sunset", Miss Lowell believed, "comes nearest the color." This sketch/<sup>was</sup>done when Keats was already ill, but it is to me one of the most suggestive likenesses of Keats. It was sent to the eminent Keats biographer, Sidney Colvin, by a descendant of Brown, and then by Sir Sidney transmitted to the National Portrait Gallery in London. There are also extant some excellent silhouettes which one may inspect in Amy Lowell's "Life of Keats", which were cut either by the artist Severn or by Brown. The perhaps rhapsodic George Felton Matthew said that he looked "like Mercury on a heaven-kissing hill."

This friend, Matthew, to whom Keats addressed one of his early poetic epistles, marks the beginning of the master's poetic life, for the greeting was included in that first slim volume of verse, a copy of which is in the British Museum, the edition of which Robert Browning said was identical with that which was found in the bosom of the dead body of Shelley. This volume, published by the Olliers in Cavendish Square, London, had on its title page an old drawing of the face of Shakespeare and on the same page a motto from Spenser, thus acknowledging in one page two of the artistic forbears to whom he felt most, and, indeed, was most indebted. The little book was dedicated to Leigh Hunt, who encouraged him first and who helped him to this publication. The verses included "I Stood Tiptoe Upon a Little Hill"; the sonnet to Solitude which Hunt had printed in his magazine, the Examiner; the sonnets to Haydon, which are remarkable only for their indication of devoted friendship; and the sonnet, "On the Grasshopper and the Cricket", which was written one

evening in competition with Mr. Hunt. It is a better one than the much elder Hunt's, too, --- containing in the sestet the lines

"The poetry of earth is ceasing never,  
In a lone winter evening, when the frost  
Has wrought a silence....."

(What a phrase that is, "when the frost has wrought a silence"!).

Then, too, it contains, "Sleep and Poetry", in which he personifies himself obviously, with

"Oh for ten years that I may o'erwhelm  
Myself in poesy".

Then later, ---

"And can I ever bid these joys farewell,  
Yes, I must pass them for a nobler life,  
Where I may find the agonies, the strife  
Of human hearts....."

It contained, too, a hint of his shrewd criticism of a few years later, when he speaks of things that

"Made great Apollo blush for this his land.  
Men were thought wise who could not understand  
His glories; with a puling infant's force  
They swayed about upon a rocking-horse,  
And thought it Pegasus --"

And the volume also contained the immortal sonnet, "On Looking Into Chapman's Homer", which gave Chapman a parallel immortality and also accorded to "stout Cortez" a place which rightfully belonged to Balboa.

This was a good start; Hunt reviewed it in several issues of the weekly *Examiner*, and it came to other attention. But the destructive critics bided their time. That time came when "Endymion" was published in April, 1818; George Keats and his bride sailed for America, settling in what Sir Sidney Colvin, betraying a truly insular view of geography on this side of the Atlantic, refers to as "the far west", Louisville."; John visited the lakes with Brown in June; on the next two months went with the same devoted friend on a

walking tour of Scotland; caught a violent cold on the Isle of Mull in July, and then came back to his home at Hampstead in August to face one of the most virulent series of reviews ever written about a rising literary genius.

The article in Blackwood's Magazine, bearing the signature of "Z", was the fourth of a series, titled "The Cockney School of Poetry", and was, it is now generally conceded, written by Lockhart, then fresh, oh very fresh out of Oxford and late from a head-swelling visit with Goethe at Weimar; Lockhart, the son-in-law and future biographer of Sir Walter Scott. The previous part of the series had been lambasting Leigh Hunt and, because of his patronage of Keats, it was natural that "Z" should pour the hot vials of his rage next upon the hapless Keats. Unfortunately the poet's friend, Bailey, had told Lockhart much of the young writer's background and had pleaded that he be spared the pillory of Blackwood's. Lockhart promised, yet three weeks later the review came out. Almost at the opening of the philippic, he said, referring to the volume of 1817, "The Phrenzy of the 'Poems' was bad enough in its way; but it did not alarm us half so seriously as the calm, settled, imperturbable drivelling idiocy of 'Endymion.'" Later he spoke of the "sickly fancy of one who had never read a line of Ovid", the Latin author who also had handled the Endymion theme, but of course Keats had that classic. Patronizingly the 23-year old critic spoke of the rising star as "only a boy of pretty abilities", whom Hunt was spoiling, and loftily used the phrase, "good Johnny Keats". Finally, he ventured a prophecy that the publisher would print no further volume, and added, "It is a better and wiser thing to be a starved apothecary than a starved poet; so back to your shop, Mr. John, back to 'plasters, pills and ointment boxes.'"

That was bad enough but the magazine had the bad taste to pursue the poor poet even after his death, in words really too vile to repeat. And then they heaped scorn upon Shelley's noble elegy of Keats, titled "Adonais", even to the extent of a parody, which begins:

"Weep for my Tomcat! all ye Tabbies weep,  
For he is gone at last! Not dead alone,  
In flowery beauty sleepeth he no sleep  
Like that bewitching youth, Endymion".

But to go back to that same summer. In September was published the attack in the Quarterly Review. It was edited by a man whom Colvin characterized as "the acrid and deformed pedant, Gifford" and he apparently passed on the duties of reviewing "Endymion" to one John Wilson Croker, who proceeded to croak worse than any school of frogs of which Aristophanes may ever have dreamed. He declared that he had not been able to wade through more than one book of the four which the poetic romance contained. He roared against the lack of (quote) "a complete couplet enclosing a complete idea in the whole book", and then he turned to disapprove, one after another, rhymes, scansion, verbal inventions and unrelated lines, never for once admitting any gifts of language, glint of imagination or gleam of poetic promise. There was some justice in this review and it was the more damaging for that reason, because the versification was not always perfect. The coinings of words, as Miss Lowell has pointed out, "were not always felicitous." Yet, to quote an earlier critic of the same family line, James Russell Lowell, this was the Keats who later "rediscovered the delight and wonder that lay enchanted in the dictionary".

Shelley started to write a letter to the editor of the Quarterly -- which had manhandled him, also --- a letter in protest against the

treatment of "Endymion", declaring that Keats had (quote) "been thrown into a dreadful state of mind by this review....inducing a disease from which there are now but faint hopes of his recovery". (end quote) On second thought he did not finish the letter and never mailed it, but his outrage finally achieved its outlet, with enduring contumely, in "Adonais":

"What deaf and viperous murderer could crown  
Life's early cup with such a draft of woe?  
The nameless worm would now itself disown....

Live thou, whose infamy is not thy fame!  
Live! fear no heavier chastisement from me,  
Thou noteless blot of a remembered name!...  
Hot shame shall burn upon thy secret brow,  
And like a beaten hound tremble thou shalt --- as now."

But, although there is no way of knowing how this being put through the shambles of the reviewers lingered in the inmost heart of Keats, outwardly he was very brave about it. Hessey, his publisher, sent him a letter signed "J.S." that had appeared in the Chronicle.

"Praise or blame", Keats wrote in reply, "has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic on his own works. My own domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what 'Blackwood' or 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. J.S.," he admits, "is perfectly right in regard to the slipshod 'Endymion'. That it is so, is no fault of mine. No! Though it may sound a little paradoxical, it is as good as I had power to make it by myself. Had I been nervous about it being a perfect piece, and with that view asked advice, and trembled over every page, it would not have been written; for it is not in my nature to fumble."

Then he goes on to say that "the genius of poetry must work out its own salvation", and adds, "In 'Endymoin' 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."

That, my friends, takes not only courage from a young man, harassed by lack of either funds or bouyant health and ambitious to excel in his chosen art; it arises from a sort of inner and sustaining fire: the fire of genius which recognizes its own worth; has a sure feeling of its own possibilities, is willing to gamble with eventual destiny.

Later, he wrote to someone about letters in leading newspapers in his defense. One had been from the pen of his friend, Reynolds. He added: "I don't know who wrote those in the Chronicle," and then, as serene as a young god, looking with inspired eyes over the century to come, he declares, "This is a mere matter of the moment: I think I shall be among the English Poets after my death."

It was at about this time, following the reviews, that an unknown admirer sent him a letter and a sonnet of sympathy. On turning over the letter, he found enclosed also a 25-pound note. "If I had refused it," he says, "I should have behaved in a very braggadocio, dunder-headed manner; and yet," he adds, a bit wryly, "the present galls me a little."

In a letter to Leigh Hunt, in May, 1817, giving messages to mutual friends, he says, speaking of a certain Mrs. S., "Tell her to procure

some Fatal Scissors, and cut the thread of life of all to-be-disappointed poets." This was just before "Endymion" was published, just before the discouraging reviews were printed, just before the death of his brother, and all the rest of the train of personal misfortunes. He spoke jestingly at the time, but he spoke truer than he knew.

*can omit*  
There is often a fine glint of humor, too, in his epistles, as in the letter to his publishers, where he said, "I must endeavor to lose my maidenhead with respect to money matters as soon as possible-- and I will, too---so here goes." Taylor & Hessey, incidentally, were always most generous in their treatment and helped him over many a worried period. We trust that they eventually had their reward.

He admired Byron, but the author of "Don Juan" did not care much about Keats' earlier works and said so frankly. When Coleridge, walking with a mutual friend, <sup>met</sup> and Keats, after shaking hands with the young poet, <sup>he</sup> remarked, with uncanny prescience, "There is death in that hand". Keats met several other of the prominent literary men of his day. He sat for a time at the feet of Wordsworth but of course they had little in common, stylistically or otherwise, and though he admired the older sage, some of the latter's prosaics like

"The lake doth glitter,  
Small birds twitter"

finally got on his nerves and in a letter to Reynolds, penning an ironic apostrophe to Oxford, he parodied the Wordsworthian manner in telling fashion.

It was in a letter to Reynolds, also, in April, 1818, that he wrote a part of his poetic credo. "I have not the slightest feeling of humility toward the public", he wrote, "or to anything in

existence, but the eternal Being, the Principle of Beauty, and the Memory of Great Men." All of the names of these abstractions were begun, as was a frequent habit of his, with capital letters. Later in the same letter he declared, "I never wrote one line of poetry with the least shadow of public thought." And I believe, after studying many of the letters carefully and the testimony of his friends and enemies alike, that this was really true. He set up his own ideals as a kind of devotional shrine and before that, and that alone, he truly worshipped.

He wrote most of his deepest thoughts, his most penetrating observations, either to his men friends or in the treasurable long journal letters to George and Georgianna Keats in America. Only occasionally did he say anything worth while to his sister Fanny. However, in late August, 1818, writing from Winchester, he lamented to her that he had not been well enough to bathe in the sea, but admitted that he enjoyed the weather. "I adore fine weather as the greatest blessing I can have," he mused. "Give me books, fruit, French wine and fine weather, and a little music out of doors, played by somebody I do not know---not pay the price of one's time for a jog, but a little chance music--- and I can pass the summer very quietly without caring much about Fat Louis, fat Regent or the Duke of Wellington". ("Fat Louis", you will recall, was Louis XVIII of France.)

I am going rather desultorily, and without much direction, through the letters, asking you to share with me a few tidbits now and then that I think rather choice, but unable, in this hurried excursion, to give you much of the prefatory and explanatory context.

The Oxford Press, by the way, has printed them in two beautiful volumes, in which the original collection by H. Buxton Forman has been gone over, and added to, and lovingly edited, by his son, Maurice Buxton Forman, so that they are now almost as complete and authentic as they ever shall be.

While I am speaking of important Keatsiana, I should specially mention the two-volume biography by the late Amy Lowell. A poet herself and from a line of poets, she appreciated Keats deeply; studied almost every conceivable source about him in America and many in England. In fact, she almost, as Professor Murry observed, "wrote the life of Keats, for good and all." A slight lack of the judicial temperament at times; a tendency to let her enthusiasms, pro and con, betray her, and a disposition to leap to conclusions on certain matters of doubtful fact, keep it from being a truly definitive work. However, it is so important that it occupies a very high place in the annals of Keatsian scholarship. Her object, as she said in her frank preface, was <sup>(quite)</sup> "to make the reader feel as though he were living with Keats, subject to the same influences that surrounded him, moving in his circle, watching the advent of poems, as from day to day they sprang into being." (end of quote) This vividness, this almost pictorial quality does the reader a rich service in helping him to live along with, and understand the poet, as he grew and developed.

"Men of genius," wrote the young philosopher to his friend, Bailey, who later went into the ministry, "men of genius are great as certain ethereal chemicals operating on the mass of neutral intellect, but they have not any individuality." But shortly he

adds that he could not do justice to this subject "under five years study and three volumes octavo." He goes on with some personalities and then resumes a conversation they had had about the imagination. Suddenly certain, he declares, "What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth" and then, exactly a year and a half later, he said the same thing unforgettably in verse as the conclusion of his "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

In January of 1819, the year that produced many of the better sonnets, the odes and the two "Hyperions", he wrote a letter to Haydon which suggested two or three interesting matters of impulse and tastes. Some of it is in regard to a young art student, Grips, whom Haydon had wanted to aid and for whom the generous Keats tried to raise financial subscriptions. Then he did a few beads on the rosary of friends and idolatries. "Every day older I get", he says, in the final paragraph, "The greater is my idea of your achievements in art; and I am convinced that there are three things to rejoice at in this age--- 'The Excursion', your pictures, and Hazlitt's depth of taste."

Well, Wordsworth's "Excursion" has survived, and certainly the criticisms of Hazlitt, but Haydon is made immortal largely by his persuading the British nation to buy the Elgin Marbles and by Keats honoring him with the admiring friendship of a genius ten years younger. Haydon was, we read, rather wanting in balance in his pictures, many of them on sacred subjects, and he was certainly wanting in matters of judgment in art, as well as in personal matters. At one time, he exhibited for a week in a certain building in London where General Tom Thumb was also to be seen. Haydon's show had 133

visitors in that time and the midget drew 120,000. At the age of 50, he ended his rather checkered career with suicide.

In a letter to Reynolds early in that same year, the meditative young poet (remember he was then but 22), wrote one of my favorite short letters from his pen. "I had an idea," he began, "that a man might pass a very pleasant life in this manner---let him on a certain day read a certain page of full poesy or distilled prose, and let him wander with it, and muse upon it, and reflect upon it, and dream upon it, until it becomes stale---but when will it do so? Never. When man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect, any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting-post towards all 'the two-and-thirty palaces.' How happy is such a voyage of conception, what delicious diligent indolence!" And so he goes on in a passage redolent of Shakespeare, and in as fine a style as Lamb or Hazlitt, and then he comes to the sentence I like best: "Now it appears to me that almost any man may, like the spider, spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel" (there is scarcely a phrase, even in his best poems, more suggestive to the imagination than that) "his own airy Citadel. The points of leaves and twigs, " he says, "on which the spider begins her work, are few, and she fills the air with a beautiful circuiting. Man should be content with as few points to tip with, the fine Web of his Soul, and weave a tapestry empyrean,--- full of symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his wandering, of distinctness for his luxury."

There is considerably more to this letter which he concludes by saying, "I was led into these thoughts, my dear Reynolds, by the beauty of the morning operating on a sense of idleness," and then

before he closes he includes a little poem of 14 lines (but not a sonnet) about what the thrush told him concerning idleness, which I did not recall ever having seen in the usual collections of Keats' poems.

Occasionally, he indulges in a bit of nonsense which sounds like a page out of a Shakespearean comedy, "Midsummer Night's Dream", for example. Not the least striking is in a letter to Haydon: "It is a great pity that people should, by associating themselves with the finest things, spoil them. Hunt has damned Hampstead and masks and sonnets and Italian tales. Wordsworth has damned the lakes; West has damned wholesale. Peacock has damned satire; Ollier has damned music; Hazlitt has damned the bigoted and the blue-stockinged (how durst the man?). He is your only good damner, and, if ever I am damned, damn me if I shouldn't like him to damn me."

Even more Shakespearean in flavor is a long passage, which I shall not take time to quote which rings the changes of nonsense on some woman he knew who was "as thin as a lynch-pin." It appears in one of the long journal letters to America, No. 114 in the Forman collection. It covers 54 pages in one of those Oxonian volumes and it was begun on February 14, 1819, the Golden Year of Keats' poetic production, and was finished on the third day of May.

It contains much gossip and not a few revealing things, like this. One Mr. Lewis of Hampstead had been talking with Mrs. Brawne. They spoke of Keats and the man said, "O, he is quite the little poet." "This", comments the one of whom they spoke, "is abominable. You might as well say Bonaparte is quite the little soldier. You see", he sighs, "what it is to be under six foot and not a lord."

What he thought about the clergy of the Established Church in England came out in this same letter, after he had attended a consecration where he saw the brothers of the cloth, he thought, in their true colors. "A parson," he commented, "is a lamb in a drawing-room and a lion in the vestry." Keats was not at all agnostic, he was a kind of pantheist, who seems to have believed in some such Over-soul as did Emerson later. Later in this same letter he admitted that possibly thousands of people had hearts completely disinterested, but he could remember but two: Socrates and Jesus. He did not like some of the aspects of formal religion, adopted by Christ's followers. "Yet through all this," he says, "I see his splendour".

"Know thyself", said the Greek philosopher. Following such a motto, in this letter Keats showed that he was really trying to weave from within his own airy citadel." Just a few months before he had written "Hyperion". About this period he had also done his incomparable "Eve of St. Agnes". In April he had written the sonnet, beginning,

"Bright Star, would I were steadfast as thou art",

which Houghton and Colvin and other biographers have believed was written on the last journey to Italy, but which Amy Lowell, and perhaps others before her, showed was written about April, 1819, because a holograph of it appeared in Fanny Brawne's copy of Dante, as well as in the copy of Shakespeare's poems which Severn inherited from the poet after the last sad watch in Rome. The older belief even appears in a scene from "Aged 26", the play about Keats which was on Broadway three years ago.

But back to the letter. "Nothing ever becomes real till it is experienced," he meditates, and then, sententiously, he adds, "Even

a proverb is no proverb to you till your life has illustrated it." Quietly he tells his relatives in America, "I am even afraid that your anxiety for me will lead you to feel for the violence of my temperament, continually smothered down." He did not at first intend, therefore, to have sent them a sonnet which follows; "but look over the last two pages," he advises his correspondents, "and ask yourselves whether I have not that in me which will well bear the buffets of the world." Then he confesses that he wrote the poem with his mind "and perhaps he must confess with a bit of his heart". It followed:

"Why did I laugh tonight? No voice will tell:  
No God, no Demon of severe response  
Deigns to reply from heaven or from hell.---  
Then to my human heart I turn at once---  
Heart! thou and I are here sad and alone;  
Say, wherefore did I laugh? O mortal pain!  
O Darkness! Darkness! ever must I moan  
To question Heaven and Hell and Heart in vain!  
Why did I laugh? I know this being's lease  
My fancy to its utmost blisses spreads:  
Yet could I on this very midnight cease  
And the world's gaudy ensigns see in shreds.  
Verse, Fame and Beauty are intense indeed,  
But Death intenser---Death is Life's high meed."

He adds to that portion of the letter, "I went to bed, and enjoyed an uninterrupted sleep. Sane I went to bed and sane I arose."

In this remarkable epistle we find that claret was his favorite beverage: preferably, I suppose,

"a draught of vintage, that hath been  
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delvèd earth",

and here, too, we learn that his palate specially favored "the breast of partridge, the back of a hare and the backbone of a grouse."

The poetry included in this letter was amazing in its quantity---two or three impromptus, an imitation of Spenser, the sonnet just quoted, another suggested by a dream of Paolo and Francesca inspiration,

two sonnets on fame, one apparently being written almost as he went along; then the beautiful sonnet on sleep, ending

"Turn the key deftly in the oiled wards  
And seal the hushed casket of my soul";

also the sonnet that pleaded for strength and vitality in the sonnet form; the ode to Psyche, and the ballad, "La Belle dame sans merci," which is utterly different from anything else that Keats ever wrote. It evidently had just been written for there are many changes indicated in the holograph and in Forman's edition of the letters you can see how the poet revised and re-revised, always for the better. Leigh Hunt later talked him into some further alteration, but in some of the best editions of the poems you will find the lines just as they were sent in this letter to America.

Before he copies down, in this truly amazing letter, the "Ode to Psyche", he comments: "The following poem---the last I have written--- is the first and only one with which I have taken even moderate pains. I have for the most part dash'd off my lines in a hurry. This I have done leisurely---I think it reads the more richly for it, and will, I hope, encourage me to write other things in even a more peaceable and healthy spirit."

Then he copies down the sonnet on the sonnet, in which he showed that he was yearning for new forms, as well as new meanings---

"Misers of sound and syllable, no less  
Than Midas of his coinage, let us be  
Jealous of dead leaves in the bay wreath crown."

In the last paragraph of this invaluable letter, he wrote, "This is the third of May, and everything is in delightful forwardness; the violets are not withered before the peeping of the first rose."

Creatively, Keats was in tune with that forward season. Between

the first and the last of May, he had written successively the "Ode on a Grecian Urn", that on Melancholy, that to a Nightingale and the "Ode on Indolence"; in the summer he did "Lamia", which gave the title to the 1820 published volume, and wrote the tragedy, "Otho the Great", to suggestions from Brown, an opus with which they had hoped to enlist the interest of the tragedian, Kean. In September, he wrote the "Ode to Autumn", which also appeared in the 1820 volume, resumed the "Vision of Hyperion"; wrote some of the poems to Fanny (in fact, one to her was the last work in THAT form) and finally the rather long but unfinished poem, "The Cap and Bells", which was the last important thing he ever wrote, except his epitaph,

"Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

During this magical May, he wrote most of the things by which he will be longest remembered, and he probably composed them, as he says he did the "Psyche", with assiduous care. He was calm; he was contemplative; he had developed a philosophy of life, rather incomplete, to be sure, and he had developed a personal philosophy of poetry. He was sure of his means, and, in his own mind, he was sure of his matter. Beauty ever walked before him, a Greek goddess in body, yet wearing the iridescent and lovely draperies of an English inspiration.

Not one of the poems has everything in it that made Keats a name to like with Shakespeare. There are the beauties of old Greece and of mythology in "Hyperion" and "Endymion"; a great sense of the luxuriated word in "The Eve of St. Agnes"; a marvelous feeling for form, in which richness vied with stylistic restraint in the best of the sonnets; a simplicity and beauty, of both structure and deduction, in the "Grecian Urn".

Only one of them will I allow myself the luxury of quotation, because I have a feeling that it has in it more of the verbal magic that it is possible to infuse into our mother-tongue than anything else that has been written in English since before the days of Chaucer. It is the

Ode to a Nightingale

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk.  
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains  
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk:  
Tis not through envy of thy happy lot,  
But being too happy in thy happiness,  
That thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,  
In some melodious plot  
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,  
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

O for a draught of vintage! That hath been  
Cool'd a long age in the deep-delved earth,  
Tasting of Flora and the country-green,  
Dance, and Provencal song, and sunburnt mirth!  
O for a beaker full of the warm South!  
Full of the true, the blushful Hippocrene,  
With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,  
And purple-stained mouth;  
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,  
And with thee fade away into the forest dim:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget  
What thou among the leaves hast never known,  
The weariness, the fever, and the fret  
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;  
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last grey hairs,  
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin and dies;  
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow  
And leaden-eyed despairs;  
Where beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,  
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

Away! Away! for I will fly to thee,  
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,  
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,  
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards:  
Already with thee! tender is the night,  
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,  
Cluster'd around by all her starry Fays;  
But here there is no light,  
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown  
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
 Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
 But, in embalmèd darkness, guess each sweet  
 Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
 The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
 White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;  
 Fast-fading violets cover'd up in leaves;  
 And mid-May's eldest child,  
 The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,  
 The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.

Darkling I listen; and for many a time  
 I have been half in love with easeful Death,  
 Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,  
 To take into the air my quiet breath;  
 Now more than ever seems it rich to die,  
 To cease upon the midnight with no pain,  
 While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad  
 In such an ecstasy!  
 Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain---  
 To thy high requiem become a sod.

Thou wast not born for death, immortal Bird!  
 No hungry generations tread thee down;  
 The voice I hear this passing night was heard  
 In ancient days by emperor and clown:  
 Perhaps the self-same song that found a path  
 Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,  
 She stood in tears amid the alien corn;  
 The same that ofttimes hath  
 Charm'd magic casements, opening on the foam  
 Of perilous seas, in faery lands forlorn.

Forlorn! the very word is like a bell  
 To toll me back from thee to my sole self!  
 Adieu! the fancy cannot cheat so well  
 As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.  
 Adieu! Adieu! thy plaintive anthem fades  
 Past the near meadows, over the still stream,  
 Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep  
 In the next valley-glades:  
 Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
 Fled is that music:--- do I wake or sleep?

And THIS poem was written by a young genius, who, the following February, ill and discouraged, hopelessly in love with a girl, who really appreciated him and who was a much worthier character than some half-fictional records have indicated, wrote to her saying:

"Now I have had opportunities of passing nights, anxious and awake, I have found other thoughts intrude upon me. "If I should

die,' said I to myself, 'I have left no immortal work behind me--- nothing to make my friends proud of my memory---but I have lov'd the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remembered."

To me, that is the most pathetic thing in all the annals of John Keats: to think that he was that near to death and, with all the confident assurance that he had possessed at times before, then to feel that he was leaving no imperishable monument to his fame. The thought there expressed goes hand in hand with the deprecatory gesture of the Roman epitaph.

Yet in the golden May of his supreme creativeness, the year before, he had attained a "poetic mastery" that, as Middleton Murry says, "can be compared with nothing in English literature save Shakespeare's in his maturity". How could that be accomplished by a young man who at that time was only a little past 23 years of age? He had to have some secret fount of inspiration, something that could strike the fire of pure poetry from the flint of every-day existence. There is part of an answer as to how this miracle was accomplished. And we have it in two immortal lines from the ever young Keats himself:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty",--- that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.