

JOHN KEATS

"A thing of beauty is a joy forever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

The first tribute which we may pay to this dispenser of lyrical gems, is that he confirms the old Roman proverb, "*Poeta nascitur, non fit.*" During his whole lifetime circumstances seemed to be so ordering themselves against him as to prevent the fulfilment of his poetical aspirations.

He was born and, as far as we know, spent the first fifteen years of his life, in an hostelry, which environment does not, as a general rule, inspire poetical ambitions or promote them. His next occupation was as a surgeon's apprentice where he conceived the happy idea of expressing himself poetically, and, through the influence of Leigh Hunt, he directed all his energy towards this work.

So that, when Shelley, Byron, Wordsworth, and other contemporary poets were racking their brains over the French Revolution, new philosophies, the apparent misery of the world, and advocating impossible modes of reform, we find Keats living apart as a constant devotee of love and beauty, which was his poetic creed, as he briefly expresses it,

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

His first publication, worthy of note, was *Endymion* which appeared in 1818 and brought a storm of adverse criticism from the *Quarterly Review* and *Blackwood's Magazine*. Nothing daunted, he continued working and his third volume, including *Lamia*, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, the fragment *Hyperion*, and the five great odes—*To a Nightingale*, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, *To Psyche*, *To Autumn* and on *Melancholy*—was published in the summer of 1820. In these he confirmed his right to fame and made ample amends for whatever faults he might have been charged with in *Endymion*.

We find when we read his poetry that Keats has a mastery of expression almost unparalleled; he is neither obscure nor too lucid; he is not carried away by beautiful sounds nor, when greatly inspired, does he allow himself

to become abstract or metaphysical. He is always impressive and presents even non-existing things without strain or labour. He did not allow himself to become didactic, as Southey and Wordsworth, and preach sermons, of which people are naturally suspicious. If what Keats maintained and thought really existed, such as his doctrine of truth and beauty, it would be a source of great pleasure, and no inconvenience, at least to the world.

Endymion, his first great work, is a moon allegory portraying the searches of a poetic soul for the perfect. The only substantial charge that can be brought against this poem is that the story is somewhat obscured by lengthy digressions. The moon peers out from behind the clouds, but is soon obscured. Here Keats teaches that human love and love of the ideal are identical. He shows all the poetic gifts, in this poem, which he mastered to perfection in his third volume. His rare descriptive power, wealth of imagery, and careful selection of words are clearly evident. He describes the resting place of Adonis with much beauty;

“Above his head
Four lily stalks did their white honours wed
To make a coronal; and round him grew
All tendrils green, of every bloom and hue,
Together interwin'd and trammel'd fresh:
The vine of glossy sprout; the ivy mesh,
Shading its Ethiop berries; and woodbine,
Of velvet leaves and bugle-blooms divine;
Convolvulus in streaked vases flush;
The creeper, mellowing for an autumn blush;
And virgin's bower trailing airily;
With others of the sisterhood.”

The fourth book of this poem is remarkable for its many fine odes and lyrics. Leigh Hunt's influence is apparent and we find a packed imagery derived from Spencer.

But it is in Keats' third volume that his right to fame lies. It appeared in the summer of 1820 and no other volume in the English language has such a constancy of perfection. The first of these poems, *Lamia*, is taken from an old witch story. The opening lines have a wealth of imagery and epithet:

"Upon a time, before the faery broods
Drove Nymph and Satyr from the prosperous woods
Before King Oberon's bright diadem,
Sceptre, and mantle, clasp'd with dewy gems,
Frighted away the Dryads and the Fauns
From rushes green, and brakes, and cowslip'd lawns,
The ever-smitten Hermes empty left
His golden throne, bent warm on amorous theft:"

His descriptions through the whole poem do not fall below the level of this artistic piece. In the poem he shows how the charm of poetry and romance fades at the touch of golden philosophy.

Hyperion was written to atone, and does atone, for the faults of Enydmion. It is a length of epic frieze, or the beautiful arc of an unfinished cathedral. The poem shows the effect of Keats' careful and consistent polishing. It was inspired by Dante and we can see in it the influence of Dante's "Purgatory." The poem is flawless, every sentence perfectly balanced, every word correctly chosen, and his imagery not too profuse. He describes nature in the same beautiful way in which nature strikes our senses. We get this in his description of a rainstorm:

"When in midday the sickening East wind
Ships sudden to the south, the small warm rain
Melts out the frozen incense from all flowers
And fills the air with so much pleasant health
That even the dying man forgets his shroud;"

The lover of Keats will not find this extract in his volume as this piece was written in the revised Hyperion which, as it did not equal the first one published, was rejected. The influence of Milton and Spencer is apparent. He is unconsciously kept from straying by Milton and approaches him more closely than any other poet. His description of Hyperion reminds us of Milton's description of Satan in its stately selection of words:

"Golden his hair of short Numidian curl,
Regal his shape majestic, a vast shade
In the midst of his own brightness, like the bulk
Of Memnon's image at the set of sun
To one who travels from the dusking East:"

For some reason Hyperion was not finished. Keats explained that he was using too many Miltonic inversions

while later poets say that the poem was intrinsically incapable of being finished. We must remember, however, that Keats was attempting at the age of twenty-four what Milton did after thirty years of careful preparation.

His Ode on a Grecian Urn stands as the finest piece of poetry in the English language on an external subject. He claims that the figures on the urn are happiest for their joy is yet to come, and more real because more lasting. *La Belle Dame sans Merci* is by many thought to be the most perfect of English lyrics. *St. Agnes Eve* is a most delightful story, as well as a perfect poem. In it we find the same pathos as in *Romeo and Juliet*. The ending lines are beautifully sad, and we mourn sincerely the death of old Angela, who helped the lovers to escape, and especially for the pious old beadsman who:

“After thousand aves told

For aye unsought for slept among his ashes cold.”

In his ode to the Nightingale beauty has swallowed up sorrow. Many claim this to be his greatest completed work. The ode to *Psyche* stands midway in style between *Endymion* and *Hyperion* with a somewhat luxurious style. Here, like Shakespeare, when he becomes impassioned he does not become abstract, and this is the reason that he is easily understood by the average man. The ode to *Melancholy* with the other odes and his letters give us an idea of Keats' love of beauty. From the highest beauty we pass into pain, and from extreme joy to sorrow. He expresses this very clearly in his ode to *Melancholy*;

“She dwells with beauty—beauty that must die
And Joy whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh
Turning to poison while the bee mouth sips:
Ay, in the very temple of Delight
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine.”

There is truth in what he says for we know that we are sad to see the end of the perfect day. His other poems such as “*Fancy*,” “*Lines on Mermaid Tavern*,” “*Bards of Passion and Mirth*,” and “*Robin Hood*” are famous mainly because they are impromptu composition written in his letters home.

Unfortunately, for poetry and its lovers, this spring of lyricism was cut off by an incurable disease at the early

age of twenty-six, carrying, doubtless, with him many unread gems of thought and expression. The mournings of his friends were voiced by Shelley's "Adonais" and his enemies rebuked by Byron. We cannot, when we see his struggle against adversity, but admire his character. His vivid descriptions of Olympian gods, their habits and abodes not only almost convince us of their existence, but that he was an intimate acquaintance of theirs and knew them as well as Tacitus did the Germans. We do not think of him as an English poet, but as a Grecian one, reared from his infancy amid the scenes where Olympic rulers were supposed to have thundered forth their laws and shot their avenging thunderbolts. He far surpasses those who have had these advantages. He has matched the subjects of his poems and earned immortality. He has touched the strings of an Olympic lyre and they have responded beautifully and harmoniously. He was a natural singer, and tells us this with his own lips. He had the eye of a real poet for beauty. As a poet he reached the summits often, and summits are rarely reached; and they prove his claim to be numbered among the English poets who have given permanent truths a form of supreme beauty.

C. J. CAMPBELL, '26.



AT NIGHTFALL

I need so much the quiet of your love
After the day's loud strife;
I need your calm—all other things above
After the stress of life.
I crave the haven that in your dear heart lies,
After all toil is done;
I need the star-shine of your heavenly eyes,
After the day's great sun.

—Charles Harrison Towne.

"Then let us smile when skies are gray,
And laugh at stormy weather,
And sing life's lonesome times away:
So sorry and the dearest day