THE UNDERSTANDING OF JOHN KEATS[1]

BY BRIAN HOOKER,

THE facts of great men's lives are History; the truth of them is Religion; and the province of biography is therefore twofold. Thus it is good for us to know whatever may be known about such a man as John Keats; for he was great in being not only, as the world knows, a maker of poignantly beautiful poems, but also, as the world will ultimately learn, the great seer of his time. When we shall have realized the utter and literal accuracy of the last two lines of the ode *On a Grecian Urn,* we shall be on the road toward measuring the importance of Keats. Yet even now his figure looms large in the general view; and the distortion of that popular figure is the reason for Professor Hancock's new biography. From earlier accounts we are already fairly familiar with the history of his life; but the common idea of his personality is curiously mistaken. The name of Keats commonly suggests a consumptive, neurotic youth, all long hair and wild eyes, whose æsthetic sensuousness was

[1] *John Keats: A Literary Biography.* By Albert Elmer Hancock. Houghton, Mifflin and Company.

purified by soul-fire and bodily weakness: an ideal lecturer to young ladies: a sort of angelic degenerate. Now, this idea is absolutely and mischievously wrong. There is need therefore of a biography which shall give us a new and clear vision of the man. The facts of Keats' life are common property; it is time somebody told the truth about him.

In this worthy purpose Professor Hancock's volume curiously fails and even more curiously succeeds. Its success is due to scholarly co-ordination of facts and sane reasoning upon them; its failure is simply that Professor Hancock is too unlike John Keats. Knowledge of the facts and logical reasoning will enable you to understand Physiology; but they will not enable you to understand a man, unless there be some likeness in your natures: and in this sense it is as humanly impossible for Professor Hancock to understand Keats as for Othello to understand Hamlet. The curious thing is his blind success in pointing the way to understanding. It is as if you met Columbus in London, and asked him the way to America. "Oh," he would reply, "You mean The Indies. Go to Portugal and thence take ship and sail southwest." If you followed his directions, you would eventually get there, although not very directly. Yet Columbus did not understand American geography. This is a hard saying: it has the ungracious sound of denying a man credit for his accomplishment. But it is, unfortunately, just; and to evince its justice, we must consider briefly what manner of man Keats was.

There are three plain facts to remember about John Keats. And they are too often forgotten. The first is that he was untimely born; the second is that he was a man; the third is that he died very young. Each of these is true both physically and symbolically.

Keats was, in a word, an ancient Greek in modern England: that is, he had one word in his language for Beauty and Good. Something of the same instinct appears in our synonymous use of phrases like "bad-tempered" and "ugly-tempered." But Keats did not merely see, as we all do, that beauty is a good thing and that evil is usually ugly: he saw that what is beautiful is good and what is ugly is bad; that beauty and goodness are not two kindred things, but one and the same thing; and that what we call truth is merely another aspect of the same thing. Though we deny this nowadays, we may yet condescend to understand intelligently its meaning. The Venus of Melos is a marble woman harmoniously formed: every line of her answers and relates to every other line of her. Now, whereas our senses perceive this harmony in her we call her beautiful; whereas our minds appreciate the relation of line to line

we call her truly proportioned; whereas our souls may be moved by her to glorify God and to love woman we may say that she is good. There is one principle: Harmony, the idea of Relation; which, as it appeals to sense, intellect, or soul, we name Beauty, Truth, Goodness. Whatever violates harmony, disrupts or denies relation, that is in the same phases ugly, false, bad. All three are one. Inspired or insane, this was Keats' view of the Universe. He worshipped beauty, truth, and right. All three were one, and that One, personified, was God; Whose face was Beauty, whose Word was Truth, and whose Will was Love. Perhaps John Keats was a foolish dreamer; perhaps he was too wise a dreamer to fathom his own dreams. But certainly this faith of his was not intelligent. Probably he never sought to formulate it in intellectual terms like the above. He did not reason out the relation of beauty to truth; he simply saw that they were the same. He did not think: he knew. And here again he is Greek to his contemporaries and to us. For we are so saturated with the scientific habit of mind (which was invented only three hundred years ago) that we can hardly conceive of a man knowing anything except through logical thought. We have nearly forgotten a great human faculty obvious enough to an Asiatic or an Ancient: the faculty of intuition. Suppose Professor James were to declare, as Socrates did, that he trusted above his intellect a certain divine voice that sometimes spoke in his ear. We should not pay him the compliment of killing him; we should not even put him in a madhouse; we should laugh and say "Spiritualism." Yet there is one possible way of conceiving how Keats could know without reasoning. How do you know that you are you? How do you know that you love your mother? How do you know that there is a God? If you take refuge in saying that you do not know these things, there is no answer. Some people do know them, but you have forgotten how; and Keats had not. Moreover, as he had not attained his faith by reason, so he did not reason about it. It never occurred to him to call it Christianity; he called himself a Pagan, because rather than think about God in church, he naturally worshipped Him in the world—in the truth and loveliness of man and in the beautiful face of the earth. Here again he was like a Greek, that he felt not merely life but personality in nature. Tree and stream had their souls in nymph and dryad; flowers were very fairies, the moon mystically a virgin. These notions were to him no more mere fancies than they were physical facts: he no more expected to see a dryad come out of an oak than to see the soul come out of a man. None the less, he felt that the souls were there, personal and alive; and he loved the world like a woman. But this kind of nature-worship two thousand

years before had vanished from the earth; the intuitive fashion of his faith was nearly as strange to his own time as to ours; and the Trinity of his adoration was not then understanded of the people, and is not yet. John Keats was untimely born.

Now this divine vision of Keats was at once his greatness and his ruin. For him, as for us all, the pillar of fire was also the *ignis-fatuus:* that which makes you most human makes you only human. But if we are to understand how Keats was no more than a man, we must begin by realizing that he was no less. We think of him as an hereditary consumptive; but consumption is not hereditary; and up to within two or three years of his death Keats was as sound as a bell. We think of him as an unearthly idealist; but he was an extremely earthly one. He did not go about with his head in the clouds: he went about looking at flowers' faces, men's thoughts and women's eyes; full of a glad human hunger to gather the flowers, shake hands with the men, and kiss the women. At school he was noted for hitting other little boys very hard upon the nose. Later on, men called him "Junkets," and considered him a good fellow. He went through the grim training of a medical student without queasiness. He was wholesome enough to live twenty-four years without imagining himself in love. Again, we think of him as an æsthete; but he was precisely the opposite. An æsthete is a man who is less sensitive than other people: because he cannot enjoy ordinary pleasures, he spends his life seeking joys keen enough to thrill his dull nerves. He drinks absinthe because claret is insipid; but Keats drank claret because even that pale beverage threw him into ecstasy. He felt not less, but very much more than most people. The average man does not feel that sweet peas are alive; a Greek vase does not agonize him with the vision of impossible beauty. And the tragic defect in Keats was simply that he felt too much. The ascetic and the æsthete hate the world because it is not heaven; the ordinary man likes the world well enough as it is; but none of them suffers much from its imperfections, because none of them cares much for it. If a mere acquaintance proves a liar, you will not suffer much, although you may despise him for it; but suppose your best friend lies to you? So the very intensity of Keats' love for the world made him suffer intensely over her shortcomings. For he loved her not as a man loves his wife, understandingly, finding in her very faults new opportunities for loving; but as a boy loves a girl, impatiently, tortured by her faults precisely because he adores her beauties. This note is everywhere in his poetry. His trouble is not that life is evil: his trouble is that life is so beautiful that its imperfection is unbearable. He finds Melancholy not among horrors:

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 hath her sovran shrine . . .

Here is the tragic defect—here, in the very heart of his greatness. Keats worshipped Harmony without seeing that discord is part of harmony. If you would see Keats truly, compare him with Mr. Swinburne: his beauty-worship, his paganism, his melancholy. Keats was no ascetic to despise the world, no æsthete to defile it: he was a man who loved his life; but . . . he was only a man.

Keats loved the world not wisely but too well. And when the whole world's beauty and bitterness were incarnate for him in one woman, he lost heart and died. Of course, the immediate manner of his death was that bacteria ate up his lungs; but no less determining causes were the medical ignorance of the day which bled and starved him, and the unfulfilling love which devoured his heart. There is a notion afloat that Fanny Brawne did not much care for Keats. The whole trouble was that she did care utterly: she gave him all that she was—and it was not enough. She was a healthy, ordinary little girl in her teens: vivid, pert, fashionable, good-natured. If she had refused this great creature who demanded Elysium of her, he might have gone on worshipping, like Dante; but his Aphrodite revealed herself to him, and he found that she was only Fanny Brawne. At the same time, the grim hand of Consumption clutched at his life; and Keats, who had always the courage of the fighter, had not the courage to endure. As a doctor, he believed the disease incurable; and now the Rose of all roses, only dreamed of before, was given into his hand—and was only a rose, at last. *Et tu, Amor!* He turned his face to the wall. It is easy to call this despair cowardly, this agony over the unfulfilment of ideals, morbid and boyish. The only answer is that Keats was twenty-five years old. If Shakespeare had lived no longer, we should know him only as a minor poet, somewhat morbidly voluptuous. John Keats died very young.

Professor Hancock for the most part brings out admirably those component events and experiences which went to the making of Keats. He depicts well many phases of the man: what he misses is the very man himself—the central note of his nature by which all is to be understood. It is like saying truly that water is two parts hydrogen to one of oxygen, and failing to say that it is a liquid. Thus he gives an excellent account of Keats' time, showing the anachronism of Keats' religion, and

the political aspect of the famous criticisms; he emphasizes well the normal, manly side of Keats; he codifies clearly Keats' philosophy of life and theory of poetry; and he struggles with his Idealism. But he misconceives the ideal. He emphasizes Keats' intellect as the support of belief, attributing to him the fine scientific faculty of suspended judgment. It is well to remind us that Keats had a fine intellect; but he kept it in its place. It merely said Amen to his faith; and his limit of reason was not the suspended judgment of the scientist, but the intuitive revelation of the seer. Again, in showing Keats' wholesomeness he constantly represents him as controlling his love of beauty by his respect for virtue or for truth, like the ordinary man to-day; but to Keats the three were literally one. He was temperate not because excess is wicked or foolish, but because it is more pleasant to be stimulated than to be drunk. The best thing in the book is its defence of Keats from the charge of mere æstheticism both in act and in theory. Yet Professor Hancock always does this by some imputation of restraint; and there was no such thing there. The striking instance of this is the account of Keats' love and death. Professor Hancock, in pointing out the sane and manly side of Keats' loving, represents him as unloverlike, as fighting against love; and the despair of the last months is excused as the insanity of illness. The *Letters* reveal with tragic certainty that he struggled only for more love; and that his despair was the bitterly sane conclusion that there was no more to win. Perhaps the clearest measure of Professor Hancock's achievement, however, is his interpretation of the poems. There is much finely critical appreciation, particularly in his analyses of *Endymion, Lamia,* and *Hyperion.* But the whole point of *Lamia* is that Keats meant it for a tragedy; the important thing about *Hyperion* is that Keats did not think it worth finishing; and the key to *Endymion* is that the Indian Bacchante was Artemis herself, after all. In defending *The Eve of St. Agnes* from the charge of over-sensuousness, he insists almost pruriently upon the punctilious propriety of Porphyro. *Venus and Adonis* might with equal fitness be similarly defended; and neither poem is very greatly in need of that or any other defence. Finally, it seems that somebody has called the *Ode to a Nightingale* illogical. And this dangerous charge Professor Hancock attempts to dispel by a logical synopsis:

"1. It is night. The song of the nightingale has stirred the poet to a mood of rapture almost intoxicating. He is for the moment, happy beyond man's common privilege.

"2. He desires a continuance of this rapture, and seeks to share the bird's exalted life. As a means he first thinks of wine. He chooses southern wine be-

cause it is lighter and has more of the inspiration of the fabled waters of Hippocrene than the harsh beverages of the north.

"3. He admonishes the nightingale to escape wholly from this melancholy world, where joy is ephemeral and human fate is laden with misery.

"4. He promises to follow the bird in flight. But on second thought he will not use wine as a means. He will fly on the invisible wings of poetry. Momentarily he is lifted by illusion."

And so on. The above is perhaps enough, whatever excuse may be offered for its perpetration, to indicate how far Professor Hancock may possibly enter into the spirit of Keats. One has an ugly vision of the blasphemed poet writhing in his nameless grave.

And yet the book is well worth reading. Only lack of space prevents the emphasis of its evident merits on the same scale with its faults which are less easy to see. It often points the way to the truth even where it is mistaken; and to have shown Keats fully and truly would have ranked it among really important biographies. For the greatest trouble in the world is the devilish idea that evil may be beautiful and that some ugly things are good. The glory of Keats is that he saw and said the supreme truth of this matter; and his tragedy and our own is the failure to realize that saying:

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

But, God help us! it is so much more than we know; and even Keats could not know it wholly.

Brian Hooker.