

THREE ODES.

(Being a short study on Keats.)

BY H. T. NICHOL, B.A.

I.—Were I disposed to differ from any of the conclusions of that wisest, gentlest, most lovable of critics, the Autocrat of the Breakfast Table, it should be in his estimate of Keats. He places him among that "numerous class of poets who have a certain kind of moon-light genius given them to compensate for their imperfection of nature. Their want of mental colouring matter makes them sensitive to those impressions which stronger minds neglect or never feel at all. Many of them die young, and all of them are tinged with melancholy." Softly, softly, Doctor! Keats, a moon-light poet! To me he is far better described in those lines of his own:—

"Innumerable of stains and splendid dyes,
As are the tiger-moth's deep-damasked wings."

None richer in all lovely colour—a very opal in their complexity—a prison-house of lightnings, the heart of fire burning ever restlessly within. Fragile he was, it is true and "died young": iridescent as the peacock's neck, like it too easily ruffled by too rude a breath, and its beauty marred. And "melancholy"—certainly. His genius could not otherwise have had that richness of colour which I claim for it. "We speak rashly," says Mr. Ruskin, "of gay colour, and sad colour, for colour cannot at once be good and gay. All good colour is in some degree pensive, *the loveliest melancholy*, and the purest and most thoughtful minds are those which love colour the most." But the melancholy is not the black unholy Grief of Spenser—

" . . . all in sable sorrowfully clad,
Downe hanging his dull head with heavy eare,"

but Milton's *Penseroso*, loving to pace quiet cloisters, and draw sweet inspiration from—

"Storied windows richly light
Casting a dim religious light."

And in fact it is to the pervading presence of this holy ennobling melancholy that the three odes which I have selected largely owe their loveliness. And I have chosen these, because I think they display the evident beauties of Keats's genius at their highest, uniting exquisite subtlety of perception with utter perfectness of form.

I should take them in the following order, that "To a Nightingale,"—"To Autumn,"—"To a Grecian Urn."

It is instructive to compare with the first a poem often assigned as companion to it, Shelley's "Skylark"; and from the comparison to learn the genius of either poet. The chief characteristic of Shelley's is, I think, its exultation—joy of aspiration become a pain from its intensity—a yearning of the spirit to burst all bounds, and renew the attempt of Icarus however vain—a personal aim still. Keats' is rather a renunciation of self—an emptying of it to be able to contain the more of the envied sweetness. The one active, the other passive—the one, the ecstasy of a S. Stephen, painful only because momentarily incomplete; the other, that of a S. Catharine, intense in its utter self-abnegation. Listen to this *Nunc Dimittis*:—

"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 soul."

The pathos of the next stanza cannot easily be excelled. The attribute of immortality establishes a sympathy between all souls in the brotherhood of grief:—

"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."

Yes, for all time the same angel voice charming to tears all sick hearts, and rescuing them from that

" . . . gradual furnace of the world
In whose hot air our spirits are upreared,
Until they crumble, or else grow like steel—
Which kills in us the bloom, the youth, the spring,
Which leaves the fierce necessity to feel,
But takes away the power."

What strikes one most after the wealth of ideas in this ode is their warmth, their spontaneity, their absolute necessity. He furnishes us with what he prays for himself—

" . . . a beaker full of the warm south,
Full of the true the blusful Hippocrene."

We feel it in all our being—a draught of the Gods' nectar which lifts the material veil, and enables us to contemplate the true.

II. The second ode is a striking and admirable piece of natural description, gliding without constraint in the second stanza into exquisite allegory. The pleasant Kentish landscape—its glad rural wealth and quiet—its bending hazel bushes—and, on the edge of the stanza, a fringe of late blooming flowers, over which the drowsy murmur of the bees lulls us to accept without surprise the charming impersonations which follow—can any thing be more perfect?

Here I must again insist on the noble element of colour—deep in all the full glow of the half-reaped corn and its mingling poppies, and passing into the matchless evanescent hues of an Autumn evening—

"While barbed clouds bloom the soft-dying day,
And touch the stubble plains with rosy hue."

III.—The third, I think, sums up the conclusion of all poetry—

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

It is the philosophy of Plato—that the beautiful is nothing else than the visible form of the good. It is the true dualism which sees in the *ideal* the only true reality—the world as it is in the mind of God—and whose truth is proved by the sympathy it provokes between all pure minds in all time. The perfection of the art of the forgotten sculptor who has arrested action at its height of enjoyment—the very golden mean, before palling or regret or decay has entered—is only equalled by the exquisite appreciation of the poet who has interpreted it for us. And the *rapport* of these two souls, so many many ages apart what does it not prove to us of the absolute eternity and unchangeableness of good?

Now I have trespassed too long on the Editors' space. Yet these odes are not nearly exhausted. How should they be? for like the glories of a sunset they defy—rather escape—illustration—unless indeed one be a Turner. It would need truly the poet's own art of—

"fitting aptest words to things,"

to do them justice.

Keats has left comparatively little work, yet such is its perfection that it warrants us in according him a place among the noblest bards. As some one has said I do not now remember who, "if Shakspeare himself had died as young he would have left nothing comparable to his."

That element of colour to which I have so often and strongly alluded as one of his most admirable character-