

LITERATURE.

JOHN KEATS.

ALTHOUGH all the poems of Keats were published within four years, few writers have called forth criticism so widely diverse. His first book was published in 1817, and Leigh Hunt was, at that time, apparently the only critic who recognized the fact that it contained a promise of something of the grandeur and beauty of the old masters. After referring to the poetical excellence of the Lake School—then by no means popular—he continues:—

“From the time of Milton till lately, scarcely a tree has been planted that can be called a poet's own. People got shoots from France that ended in nothing but a little barren wood from which they made flutes for young gentlemen and fan-sticks for ladies. The rich and enchanted ground of real poetry, fertile with all that English succulence could produce, bright with all that Italian sunshine could lend, and haunted with exquisite humanities, had become invisible to mortal eyes like the garden of Eden:

“‘And from that time those graces were not found.’

“These graces; however, are reappearing, and one of the greatest evidences is the little volume before us; for the work is not one of mere imitation or a complication of ingenious and promising things that merely announce a better, and that after all might only help to keep up a bad system. But here is a young poet giving himself up to his own impressions and revelling in poetry for its own sake.”

This, together with the publication of *Endymion*, provoked the severest possible attack upon Keats, the authorship of which is usually ascribed to Lockhart. In an article eminently malicious and lacking in the essentials of true criticism, he attempts to extinguish the young poet.

“To witness the disease of any human understanding, however feeble, is distressing; but the spectacle of an able mind reduced to a state of insanity is, of course, ten times more afflicting. It is with such sorrow as this that we have contemplated the case of Mr. John Keats. This young man appears to have received from nature talents of an excellent, perhaps even of a superior order—talents which, devoted to the purposes of any useful profession, must have rendered him a respectable, if not an eminent citizen. . . . For some time we were in hopes he would get off with a violent fit or two (of metromanie), but of late the symptoms are terrible. 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*.’”

A month later, Gifford, whose name has reached us only as “a noteless blot on a remembered name,” criticized, according to his lights, *Endymion*, dwelling with keen delight upon imperfections everywhere manifest, but painfully unable to catch even a passing glimpse of the rich lights of fancy and rare charms which appeal to all true lovers of poetry.

A general impression existed for years that these reviews were, in a great measure, responsible for the illness and death of Keats. It is only since greater facilities for knowing the man have been offered through the wider distribution of his letters, that one realizes his nobility of soul and heroic purpose in life. His was a nature of fine sensibility and noble humility, but by no means weak or dependent upon popular approval. A sense of imperfect achievement by no means deadened his consciousness of innate power.

“Praise or blame,” he writes, “has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic of his own work. . . . I will write independently. I have written independently, without judgment. I may write independently and with judgment 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 upon the 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. . . . There is but one way for me. The road lies through application, study and thought. I will pursue it.”

After the publication of *Lamia*, *Hyperion*, *Eve of St. Agnes*, and the famous Odes “*To a Nightingale*,” “*On a Grecian Urn*,” “*To Autumn*,” etc., (which Swinburne characterizes as “The triumphant achievement and accomplishment of the very utmost beauty possible to human words,” and again says of them, “Greater lyrical poetry the world may have seen than any that is in these; lovelier it has never seen nor even can it possibly see”), Francis Jeffrey contributed an article to the *Edinburgh Review*, in which, for the first time, Keats' poems received fair and judicial attention from the popular critics of his day.

After referring at length in a highly appreciative manner to his poems, Jeffrey continues:

“The models upon which Keats has formed himself in ‘*Endymion*,’—the earliest and by much the most considerable of his poems—are obviously the *Faithful Shepherdess*, by Fletcher, and the *Sad Shepherd* of Ben Jonson, the exquisite meters and inspired diction of which he has copied with great boldness and fidelity, and, like his great origi-