

# The Saturday Review

## of LITERATURE

EDITED BY HENRY SEIDEL CANBY

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### What Is Beauty?

AND so the atom has melted like Hamlet's substantial flesh and become a mere congeries of vibrations. With it goes matter in any form resembling our everyday conception of reality; and the most lucid description of the basis of our corporeality is still Shakespeare's "We are such stuff as dreams are made on; and our little life is rounded with a sleep."

For twenty years, more or less, or ever since the new Physics began its revelations, we have been told just this, not only in books which few read but in lectures that many hear, in the Sunday supplements, and now on the radio. The effect seems to be exactly nil. A potato to the viewing eye is still a potato, and the certainty that the sole reality of a chair that does not disintegrate upon investigation is its solidity beneath the sitter, apparently counts for nothing in our philosophy. It will count for little in space and time until some further scientific magic destroys at will even the illusion of appearance. But to suppose that thinking is to proceed unaffected by these new facts of existence is to misread history.

A resounding demonstration that things were not what they seemed, as by miracles real or supposed, sent men flocking in earlier centuries to moralists and theologians. Why not now? Partly, of course, because we are sceptical as to inexplicable miracles. But also for the excellent reason that moral philosophy is difficult and has no short cuts to unexpected revelation, and religion is subtle and requires an inner change, while science is relatively easy and yields at every pressure from the mentally alert some new and demonstrable hypothesis which seems to be a step toward a final explanation. The public indeed are more credulous than the scientists. When they substitute the authority of experiment for the authority of tradition they accept the one as fully as they believed in the other.

Yet the moment will come when the study of the nature of so-called matter will no longer be relevant to the needs of man. We shall comprehend the machine from bolt to bolt, and turn to the unsolved problems of the driver. In the meantime some reflections already clamor for notice. Landscape, the human form, light and shadow, speech, with which art, especially literary art, must deal, are, scientifically considered, modes of vibration, are rhythm if they are anything concrete that can be given a name. Their beauty, which in this utilitarian age has been regarded as a luxury, a non-essential, an intangible, is thus one of the few tangible attributes of a mysterious world. Motion, force, mean nothing of themselves to the senses except motion and force, but beauty is more than sensation, it is our perception of harmony in rhythms, and rhythm, unlike the appearance of matter, essentially exists.

Art then is a sound instinct. To feel the suavity of a snow-clad winter night is not to commit the pathetic fallacy, but rather to perceive a harmony of light in curving slope and silent elm and farm house adequately set, which is more real than earth and tree and building. And the insistence upon beauty in style and subject and final effect for all literature and all art is a sound instinct also. There is no way to make the dead representations of print or canvas or marble share the inner reality of what they imitate except through rhythm, static or active: this is the truth, which Keats said *was* beauty.

The jumbled ugliness of a modern street is, if you please, a misuse of the potential harmonies of

### The On-Looker

By AMY LOWELL

SUPPOSE I plant you  
Like wide-eyed Helen  
On the battlements  
Of weary Troy,  
Clutching the parapet with desperate hands.  
She, too, gazes at a battle-field  
Where bright vermilion plumes and metal whiteness  
Shock and sparkle and go down with groans.  
Her glances strike the rocking battle,  
Again—again—  
Recoiling from it  
Like baffled spear-heads fallen from a brazen shield.  
The ancients at her elbow counsel patience and contingencies.  
Such to a woman stretched upon a bed of battle  
Who bargained for this only in the whispering arras  
Enclosed about a midnight of enchantment.

### This Week



Comedies of H. A. Jones. By *William Lyon Phelps*.

Weberfield. By *J. Ranken Towse*.

Good Measure: The New International Encyclopædia Supplement. By *Lincoln MacVeagh*.

Material to the Artist. By *Christopher Morley*.

### Next Week, or Later

The Saint, the Poet, and the Psychologist. By *J. Middleton Murry*.

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The Weekly News-Magazine

matter. It has probably as evil an effect on the human race as bad sanitation, though the proof is not so easy. Nature, which seldom relapses into disorderly ugliness and is never squalid though by no means always beautiful, manifests surprising harmonies which are presumably not unconnected with the rhythmic qualities of composing matter, rocks that crystallize, ferns that cluster, trees that bend. Where man imitates nature's mistakes, whether in bad landscape or in bad breeding, he renders a service to descriptive science, but fails in art, for the evident reason that the imperfect rhythms he neglects for the facts of appearance are essential to any just rendering. That which makes for beauty rather than that which clogs harmony is most revelatory of truth. Good poetry tells more than prose, and may one day—as in the past—be regarded as more practical because more revealing in the lives of men.

And therefore, so long as there are fine minds that feel finely there can be no complete satisfaction in the urbanized world of slovenly houses,  
(Continued on page 525)

### The New Life of Keats

By CHAUNCEY BREWSTER TINKER

CONSIDERED merely as a story, the life of Keats is rather dull. The stocky and occasionally pugnacious little Cockney, with an apothecary's diploma and a tendency to tuberculosis, is not precisely fitted for the heroic rôle in a modern romance after the French manner. Even the love-affair with Fanny Brawne, poignant as it is, contains no plot ready-made for the novelist, be he romancer or realist. Keats fascinates us simply because he is a poet; and Miss Lowell has done both wisely and characteristically in fixing her attention upon the miracle of his poetic development. Hers is a serious, an intensely serious, piece of work.\* With a thoroughness of method usually considered academic, she has set out to produce a biography of Keats that shall supersede Sir Sidney Colvin's, and to mingle with it a critique of the poems that shall take precedence of all earlier studies of Keats. The book should, therefore, be approached with seriousness of purpose, or not at all. Readers of "Ariel" or even of Miss Mayne's "Life of Byron," who may feel an impulse to read a novel masquerading as a biography, will do well to pass this book by.

The most valuable feature of Miss Lowell's biography is the amount of new material which it contains. This is, of course, the *raison d'être* of any new biography, and it is especially true in this instance, since we have already a good life of Keats; but Miss Lowell's book is, in a sense, new in kind. It is preëminently the work of a book-collector. Miss Lowell is herself the possessor of a magnificent collection of manuscripts, letters, first editions, and early works relating to Keats, on the resources of which she has drawn with peculiar knowledge and gusto. And she knows the treasures belonging to other collectors—collectors form a brotherhood—and she has been permitted to use them freely. I know of no modern biography which makes more continuous use of such documents. It is no longer possible to shut oneself up in the Harvard Library or the British Museum to produce a definitive biography; from now on, scholars must be content to range from Brookline, Mass., to San Gabriel, Cal. It will be a pleasant experience, for book-collectors, though eccentric, are, in general, gracious. Moreover, they are in possession of a vast amount of information, acquired through years of affectionate intimacy with their books, with odd title-pages, original documents, holographs, A.L.s's, and what not. It was once the fashion to despise such knowledge, and there are still scholars foolish enough to sneer at collectors; but their day is done. The fashion is *passé*. Anybody who will look through Miss Lowell's book and note the use she has made of the Day Collection, of her own peerless possessions, and of the Woodhouse volume in Mr. Morgan's library, will see at once that the private libraries of this country are to be, henceforth, among the chosen fields of scholarship. Serious English scholars will have to humble themselves and come to our shores, swallowing their emotions as best they may. The world will be a little slow to concede this. In particular will the English critics be slow, for England feels a not unnatural resentment at the transfer of such riches to America. Miss Lowell must, therefore, expect a "certain condescension" in the English reviewers of her book, and a rather grudging

\*John Keats. By Amy Lowell. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1925. 2 vols.

ing, if not belittling, estimate of the new material in her book. But—happily—such reviews pass quickly away, leaving a mere scar on the victim's memory. The reviews pass. The book remains.

In spite of our haste, an example of these new sources must be given. Of the Woodhouse volume, Miss Lowell says,

A few selections from this volume, notably the list of Keats's books, were copied and sent to Sir Sidney Colvin, but the bulk of the volume has never before been read. Through the courtesy of Mr. Morgan, and the kindness of his very able librarian, Miss Belle de Costa Greene, I have been permitted not only to examine the book, but to transcribe it in full. It has been most interesting to find the answers to certain letters in this book in my own collection. The result of the two records is a fuller story of various events in Keats's life than it has been possible to give hitherto.

There is a vast amount of information such as that to be gathered by scholars in this country.



In another aspect, this study of Keats is, in a very particular sense, the work of a poet. It is a study, by one of the "new school," of the man whom she regards as the most significant and forward-looking poet of his generation. Her thesis is, briefly, this,—that John Keats was the great forerunner of modern, *i. e.*, contemporary, poetry. "I do not mean," says Miss Lowell, "that he *wrote* as the modern poets do, but that he *thought* as they do, and as his contemporaries most emphatically did not." This is, we fear, somewhat inflammatory. No one acquainted with the facts will be disposed to dispute the statement that Keats is today the most popular poet of his generation. That his spirit is the *most modern*, many—and, in particular, the disciple of Coleridge—will deny. Be this as it may, Miss Lowell has made a study of every line of Keats, almost in the posture of pupil before master. She has a great deal to say on behalf of Keats, and she says it in no unfaltering tone. She also says it at length. Her analysis of "Endymion," which includes a survey of its "sources"—notably Drayton—is the most elaborate study of that poem which has ever been made. Her estimate of it is not extreme; though she finds the first book charming and the second fervid, she concedes that the third is "heavy and labored"; and yet this discussion is spread over 133 pages. But what of that? There are over 1,200 in the entire book. But the reader will always find the remarks stimulating, even when he may dissent. And dissent Miss Lowell, who has the courage of her convictions and her profession, expects from other courageous souls, even when their profession is different from hers.



When poets take up the critic's pen, they seldom show much deference to their predecessors—hence, indeed, the eager interest with which we read their opinions. They rather enjoy flouting and scattering the critics. What do critics know about the composition of poetry? Listen to the words of a poet! And so Miss Lowell dogmatizes as few critics can permit themselves to do. For example, she says of the "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "No ~~art~~ had anything to do with it." She believes that the first creative impulse of the poet was derived from the Elgin Marbles. She makes little of the great Vase of Sosibios, and, unless I am mistaken, does not mention the Borghese Vase, with its "leaf-fring'd legend." Now none of these is, of course, *the thing that Keats saw as he wrote*, the thing in his mind's eye; the hints by which his kindling imagination built up the "Attic shape" were, we believe, many. An urn may well have been among them. We must remember that the productions of Flaxman enjoyed a general popularity, that classic cameos, medallions, and urns—in particular, the Portland Vase—enjoyed a general popularity, and it would be well for us all to concede that these, along with the classic landscapes of Claude (whose tremendous popularity in England has never yet been correctly stated), merged one and all into that marble "brede" of classic figures which bodied itself forth in Keats's imagination as the Grecian Urn. That any or all of them account for the glory of the poem neither Miss Lowell nor the present writer would for an instant contend. It is one of those inescapable controversies about matters which are really not of first importance.

A poet's study of poems is, I repeat, always interesting. There are studies of origins here which

will be scanned by all students of Keats, and there are felicities of statement which may be deemed final. In particular will the study of "Hyperion" arrest all future critics of Keats. Miss Lowell is not at one with those who regard it as the purest creation of his genius. Her remarks on its relation to the so-called "Reconstruction of Hyperion" are perhaps the best that have been offered in explanation of that strange and unfortunate thing. On the whole, it may be said that these critical studies of Miss Lowell's will appeal to many as the most delightful portion of a delightful book. The author can afford to forget those who affect to consider her work not worth doing at all; for there are some, among the strictest sect of the Pharisees, who decline to regard her poet himself as of any great importance. She must herself have heard of some of these in the neighborhood of Boston.

In the treatment of Keats's personality, there is an occasional reminder of the biographer's sex. I trust that this assertion may be accepted as free from scornful intention. Miss Lowell, for instance, shows a skill truly feminine in dealing with the complex relations of her book with Colvin's. The most ardent devotee of the English biographer can hardly take exception to the general attitude of the American. The most careful record of indebtedness, down to negligible details, is carefully made by a scrupulous author. On p. viii of the preface, Miss Lowell has made a happy apology for her book which is as winning as it is tactful. A creature of the male sex does not always find so happy a solution of personal difficulties.



Again, it is particularly interesting to read a woman's account of Keats's relations with Fanny Brawne. Men have had much to say about the mistress of Keats's soul, and much of it has been neither chivalrous nor sensible. Let a woman try her hand. Miss Lowell thinks that the chief need of Keats's emotional life was feminine appreciation and care:

Keats never got over his need for a mother; and we must never forget this salient trait in his character. He was always seeking to fill up a void in his life of which he was only half aware. . . . One of the many reasons for Keats's failure in his relations with Fanny Brawne was that he sought in her a mother as well as lover, and she had not yet grown up enough to stand to him in both capacities.

In the light of this general consideration, she presents an analysis of the affair which is not lightly to be set aside.

There are, to be sure, moments when the reader feels that Keats is being somewhat overcharged with praise. He is defended against every conceivable criticism. There was no indecision or vulgarity, no bumptiousness—despite his treatment of Shelley—no sensuality, no commonplace thinking. Miss Lowell even sets down, admiringly, his youthful stupidities on the subject of religion. Is not this almost worship? We pull ourselves together and remember that Keats was overfond of wine, that he liked sparring-matches and bear-baiting—he could give an excellent imitation of a bear on his hind legs striking at his tormentors—that he enjoyed risking a five-pound note, and could very gleefully punch a man in the eye. He was a very human young chap, full of all sorts of hungers and fears and half-realized powers. It is appalling to remember how young he was! How shall one analyze and criticize that stirring mass of possibilities, a boy of twenty-three? For Keats, not Chatterton, is the marvellous boy of English literature. As soon as one tries to characterize him or to assess his powers, one finds himself slipping into this awe-struck attitude of Miss Lowell's. Matthew Arnold thought Keats had been "pawed" by his admirers. No doubt. But to rid one's mind of astonishment and of awe is to "fall on the other." Without the vision of the heart one does not know the truth about Keats. Perhaps, after all, the old way is the wiser way.

## Saturday Review Index

The Index for the *Saturday Review of Literature* has now been published. It will be sent free to all libraries on the list of subscribers and on request to any other subscriber.

## A Gloomy Dean

A STUDY OF THE PROSE WORKS OF JOHN DONNE. By E. M. SIMPSON. New York: Oxford University Press. 1924. \$5.

Reviewed by BEN C. CLOUGH  
Brown University

THREE hundred years ago John Donne was Dean of St. Paul's, and the most admired preacher in London. As poet he was admired, too, though that was a subterranean fame. Most of his poems had not been printed, but in the manuscript commonplace-books so prized by seventeenth century personages they figured largely. Indeed some of these books—like the O'Flahertie Ms. now in Harvard College Library—consisted chiefly of Donne's poems, and though we have no poetical Mss. in Donne's own hand, he must have furnished the text for these private transcriptions. It is probable that a time came when he regretted their circulation. Many of them were, to say the least, indecorous writing for a clergyman, and three years before Donne became Dean of St. Paul's Ben Jonson told Drummond of Hawthornden that Donne "now, since he was made Doctor, repenteth highly, and seeketh to destroy all his poems."

However this may be, in 1631 Donne preached his own funeral sermon in St. Paul's, had his portrait painted in his winding-sheet (a marble effigy copied from this portrait may be seen in the cathedral today), and died. Two years later his collected poems were printed.



From 1633—the date of the published poems—to 1925 Donne's fame has suffered considerable vicissitudes. In the eighteenth century he was largely forgotten, and so (but for Coleridge's discerning taste) in the early nineteenth. Today he has been rediscovered, reedited, reprinted. But—understood? That is another matter. Though it would be easy to assemble today a choice little shelf of Donniana—Dr. Jessopp's study, for example, and Mr. Gosse's "Life and Letters of John Donne," and Professor Grierson's admirable edition of the poems, and Mr. L. P. Smith's selections from the sermons—something eludes us, and we do not feel that we see John Donne so clearly as did his first and best biographer, Izaak Walton. Perhaps this is because, as the late Professor Raleigh once remarked to me, students of Donne have usually been captured by one aspect of his genius, and slighted the others.

New light is welcome, then, and Mrs. Simpson's book gives us much. Modestly called "A Study of the Prose Works of John Donne," as a matter of fact it adds to the Donne canon, for one sermon and some highly significant letters are here printed for the first time. As for the prose works in general, they are inaccessible (Alvord's incomplete edition of 1839 being now rare), but to say truth it is better to read what Mrs. Simpson says of them than to plough through the originals, many of which are but desperately ingenious exercises in theology.



Mrs. Simpson has done well to give us twenty pages on Donne's "Biathanatos," for this work so shocked the clergyman in Dean Alvord that he simply omitted it from his edition of the works. It is a tedious theological argument in defense of suicide, and its chief interest today lies in the pretty obvious fact that Donne was trifling with the idea of killing himself when he wrote the piece. To him it was no mere academic disputation "whether," as he puts it, "Self-Homicide is so naturally sinne that it may never be otherwise." The work was printed during Donne's lifetime, and he himself said of it: "It is a book written by *Jack Donne* and not by *Dr. Donne*"—*i. e.*, in his younger and unreformed days. Nevertheless he cherished it, and wrote to a friend who had a manuscript copy, "If I die, I only forbid it the Presse, and the Fire: publish it not, but yet burn it not." He had put too much of himself into it to part with it lightly.

Mrs. Simpson's discussions are as judicious as they are scholarly, and a perusal of them clarifies one's notions about Donne's poetry. But the morbid strain of the poems becomes more morbid in prose, and if we call Dean Inge "gloomy," what word can we find for this great predecessor of his?