

'THIS LIVING HAND'*

by

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I NEED NOT say how deeply honoured I am by your invitation to deliver this lecture on the 150th anniversary of the death of John Keats. This whole series of lectures, so imaginatively and appropriately conceived in the poet's memory, was given a wonderful start two years ago by the inaugural address in this place by Lord Evans. Listening to Lord Evans's most beautifully composed and comprehensive survey, I found myself, as many of you must have done, echoing Keat's own words about Shakespeare: 'He has left nothing to say about nothing or anything'. Listening then to Lord Evans, comfortably as I thought, I had no idea, of course, that I should be your next lecturer; if I had known, perhaps I should not have been so comfortable; for, truly, he has left us nothing to say.

However, it is true that your kindness has given me some small compensatory advantage; I mean the occasion, the anniversary, the exact anniversary of Keat's death in Rome 150 years ago. Yet even here I do find a personal difficulty, which I hope you will let me indulge by explaining for a few seconds. It is this. Although it seems hardly wise to say so just after the decimalisation of our currency, one of our least good habits is surely the magic we attach to multiples of five and of ten. And it is a magic, or superstition, or perhaps something worse, when applied to the lives of great men. I am not discounting, of course, the natural and worthy desire to find some occasion to remind ourselves of these men and their works; that is admirable; but the magic of fives and tens is not quite that. It contains, or so I believe, some element of possessiveness, that we can, somehow, sum them, by this Pythagorean ritual, reduce them to order, our order. I need not detain you with the many instances of this; here is only one example, relating to Keats. In the year 1896, exactly halfway in our 150 years, there was in Boston, Massachusetts, a small band of people who seemed convinced that they owned Keats. They did, in fact, own, by purchase or sometimes more dubious means, a vast amount of items, manuscripts and so on, concerned with the poet, which eventually formed the basis of the greatest Keats collection in the world, at Harvard; but in their daily talk and letters, it is not only the poet's work they seem to possess but Keats himself. On 23 February 1896 one enthusiastic Bostonian lady actually exclaimed, 'Seventy-five years since we lost Johnny!'—and she added, 'And we have never ceased to regret him, have we?' (Incidentally, she celebrated Keats's death-day with ivy-wreaths, candles, daffodils and joss-sticks.)

Now it is this kind of naive possessiveness, associated often, if I am right, with numerical anniversaries, that we must try to avoid. It is not the birth or the death,

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but the life and the work that matter; and the life and the work remain, so often, a mystery, a mystery that we can hardly hope to touch. Keats once more has the perfect words for this himself—as for most things in human life—in yet another of his famous remarks about Shakespeare: ‘A Man’s life of any worth is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life . . . Shakespeare led a life of Allegory; his works are the comments on it.’ It is with a full sense of that allegory, that mystery, that these brief comments are made; any biographer of Keats must feel that sense. All the same, I would wish to take up the challenge of the anniversary in one way.

Since we are thinking, by the magic of numbers, of that day in Rome when this strange, vivid, tragic and magnificent life ended, we are also led to think of that other February day, one year and twenty days earlier, when the onset of Keats’s fatal disease made itself so dramatically known. Let us look at those last 386 days, which he himself came to call so bitterly ‘my posthumous life’. I do not mean—and in fact it is the last thing I want to do—to look at them in any sense as a medical case history. What I mean to suggest is that we should not wholly accept Keats’s despairing verdict of his own last days; that we should look on that time not as an isolated cut-off detached area, divorced from everything that life had meant for him, but as a living part of his whole previous existence, still showing all the themes for whose sake he had, in his short life, battled and written: not the dying patient, but the still-living poet. This is not the line that biographers of Keats have always taken. That great American scholar, my friend Claude Finney—he died only a few weeks ago, and I should like this to be something of a tribute to his memory—Claude Finney’s work, thirty-five years ago, was the foundation of all serious Keats scholarship of our own time. Yet even he virtually ended his two unequalled volumes on the evolution of Keats’s poetry at the moment on 3 February 1820 when the first lung haemorrhage announced openly Keats’s disease: as if Keats somehow ceased to be a poet and a person with that first drop of blood. Keats certainly had the direst premonitions of death; but they were always mixed with the warmest images of life. ‘This living hand’ he wrote, in the mysterious lines from which I take my title

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping

and though he goes on to paint a picture of that hand reaching from the grave, it is the warm image that stays with us: again:

When this warm scribe my hand is in the grave

Such a life as Keats’s, lived so abundantly and warmly for the twenty-four years before illness, was bound to spill over and suffuse the final twenty-fifth year.

Let us see how, event by event, this was the Keats of the whole previous life, not the bloodless, posthumous ghost of his own phrase. The beginning of this process is, of course, the moment of his first haemorrhage: I make no apology for reading to you again this moving scene recounted by his friend Charles Brown:

'This Living Hand'

One night, at eleven O'clock, he came into the house in a state that looked like fierce intoxication. Such a state in him, I knew, was impossible; it therefore was the more fearful. I asked hurriedly: 'What is the matter?—you are fevered?' 'Yes, yes,' he answered, 'I was on the outside of the stage this bitter day till I was severely chilled,—but now I don't feel it. Fevered!—of course, a little.' He mildly and instantly yielded, a property of his nature towards any friend, to my request that he should go to bed. I followed with the best immediate remedy in my power. I entered his chamber as he leapt into bed. On entering the cold sheets, before his head was on the pillow, he slightly coughed, and I heard him say—'That is blood from my mouth.' I went towards him; he was examining a single drop of blood upon the sheet. 'Bring me the candle, Brown; and let me see this blood.' After regarding it steadfastly, he looked up in my face, with a calmness of countenance that I can never forget and said—'I know the colour of that blood;—it is arterial blood;—I cannot be deceived in that colour;—that drop of blood is my death-warrant;—I must die.'

Now this deeply touching account has often been quoted; but not always, I believe, with the emphasis we should give it. 'That drop of blood is my death-warrant;—I must die' has often been given a romantic, flamboyant turn, as if it were a gesture, a kind of poetic challenge to fate. Surely the key words occur just before; he said this 'with a calmness of countenance that I can never forget'. It was a plain statement of fact; and it came not from some figment of romantic overstatement, but from Keats the student and qualified practitioner of medicine. We must recollect that Keats had studied and practised medicine for six years of his short twenty-four; six years, the same number exactly that he had practised poetry, with the odd year of overlap between the two. He was, in practice, as much a medical man as a poet; and this is a purely medical statement. He had been vividly informed about arterial bleeding by his master at Guy's Hospital, Astley Cooper. Cooper's standard surgical lectures began with one, omitted in the printed versions, which included the warning story of a Guy's dresser—and that was what Keats was, a Guy's dresser—who had opened a patient's artery and killed him. (Incidentally, it was probably hearing this lecture that made Keats give up surgery.) Not only did he know about arterial bleeding, he knew the case-histories of lung-haemorrhage in three of his own family. Keats's uncle had coughed blood at New Year 1808; he was a serviceman, and we know his case from his doctor's report to his commanding officer. He died in just under eleven months on 22 November 1808. The onset of the disease in Keats's own mother is a little more difficult to date; most signs indicate it was early in 1809, and she died on 10 March 1810—say twelve months or so. Keats's younger brother Tom first coughed blood at New Year 1818; on December 1 he died—eleven months. When Keats said 'death-warrant' and 'I must die', he meant 'in eleven or twelve months'. It was an accurate, considered medical statement, made on the basis of experience: as we know, he died in twelve months and twenty days, during which he hardly ever allowed himself the delusive hope that he might recover. His first reaction was in concord with his long medical training; as the 'well-educated practitioner' that the Court of Examiners of the Society of Apothecaries had announced him to be.

If his first thoughts were based on his professional medical past, his next thoughts, in the second massive haemorrhage, which, we can infer, followed, were entirely personal. They were of his fiancée, Fanny Brawne, and, as he put it in a hasty note to her, 'the Love which has so long been my pleasure and torment'. Now, nothing has caused more antics—and I don't think this is too strong a word—nothing has caused more antics among students of Keats than Fanny Brawne. Ninety years ago, you

will remember, no less a person than Matthew Arnold, categorized one of Keats's letters to her by saying: 'It is the sort of love-letter of a surgeon's apprentice which one might hear read out in a breach of promise case, or in the Divorce Court': so Arnold, magisterially never deigning to explain whether the hypothetical surgeon's apprentice was suing or being sued for breach of promise or for divorce: but he led the way for ninety years of nonsense. Every one took extreme views. Critics such as John Middleton Murry first made violent attacks on Fanny Brawne—she 'killed' Keats—and then, having made spectacular recantation—'Mea culpa, mea culpa', Murry exclaimed—went to the other extreme and honoured her almost as his guardian saint. All this largely was on the basis of Keats's letters to her. Hers to him do not survive, though one of the Bostonians I mentioned earlier actually proposed to fake them as a joke, a scheme which luckily failed to get off the ground.

But really, if one reads his letters to her, once again in the context of his whole life and not merely of this last fatal year, there is no need for these extremes: no need to choose between the Bostonian verdict of 'Minx minxissima' or Murry's verdict of 'extraordinary integrity'. What emerges is how Fanny changed, a deep change of personality which is surely not at all unknown in girls of only eighteen or nineteen. She was, as Keats called her, a minx, she became a mature and sympathetic woman. And she became that—as I believe you can read between the lines of his letters—through the experience of nursing and caring for a desperately sick man. I have written elsewhere, 'The day-by-day physical task of nursing a sick man in that age was something that could have destroyed a conventional love-affair. With Fanny it was a challenge to which her strong and practical nature responded'. Again, look at *her* past. Her own father had died, also of tuberculosis, also penniless, before she was in her teens. Life had been a hard school for her. If she was, when Keats first met her, flippant and silly—and I'm sure she was—she had this latent talent for dealing with disaster. Keats's need brought it out. This last year of his created Fanny as a person.

And there was another Fanny too, who leaps to life at this time, his sister Fanny, his sixteen-year-old sister. In the first throes of illness, he writes more letters to his sister than he does even to his fiancée; and again, this is completely of a piece with his life, viewed as a whole. Keats thought of himself as a guardian to this young sister. Just over two years before, he had written to her: 'You will preserve all my Letters and I will secure yours—and thus in the course of time we shall each of us have a good Bundle—which, hereafter, when things may have strangely altered and god knows what happened, we may read over together and look with pleasure on times past.' Well, he did not 'secure' hers; but she kept nearly every single one of that bundle of four dozen letters he wrote her. I think she only gave away one, in a long lifetime that lasted another seventy years. Her descendants knew and largely honoured her feelings: and that is why forty-three of the forty-eight letters are now, by their gift, in the British Museum. This is the largest surviving body of letters by Keats to any one single person; it is the largest collection of items in Keats's handwriting that we have in this country; and it is one of the most charming and touching series of human documents in the world. Here is an extract from one, only a few days after he was taken ill.

'This Living Hand'

I have a very pleasant room for a sick person. A Sopha bed is made up for me in the front Parlour. . . . How much more comfortable than a dull room up stairs, where one gets tired of the pattern of the bed curtains. Besides I see all that passes—for instance now, this morning, if I had been in my own room, I should not have seen the coals brought in. On Sunday between the hours of twelve and one I descried a Pot boy. I conjectured it might be the one o'Clock beer—Old women with bobbins and red cloaks and unpresuming bonnets I see creeping about the heath. Gipseys after hare skins and silver spoons. Then goes by a fellow with a wooden clock under his arm that strikes a hundred and more. Then comes the old french emigrant (who has been very well to do in france) with his hands joined behind on his hips, and his face full of political schemes.

And so on—and—this is my point—how much it tells us about Keats: not only the feeling for a younger member of his family—'passing the love of women', he once said, but the fact that he, confined to a dull bed, is thinking not of himself but how he can entertain her in her dull orphaned life. More than that: it shows his great power as a poet, that of sympathetically identifying himself with, or rather losing his identity in every thing and every body still actively working. It is exactly how, in health, his friend Severn had seen him *become* everything he himself viewed on Hampstead Heath. 'Nothing seemed to escape him', wrote Severn, 'the song of a bird and the undernote of response from covert or hedge, the rustle of some animal, the changing of the green and brown lights and furtive shadows, the motions of the wind . . . and the wayfaring of the clouds; even the features and gestures of passing tramps, the colour of one woman's hair, the smile on one child's face, the furtive animalism below the deceptive humanity in many of the vagrants, even the hats, clothes, shoes, wherever these conveyed the remotest hint as to the real self of the wearer.' Illness had, at first, in no way damped this power of creative imagination in Keats.

Yet as the weeks went on, this power of imagination began slowly to take its own toll. What if he should suffer another sudden haemorrhage, and 'go off', as he said 'like a frog in a frost?' The thought became a nervous obsession, constricting his chest and making him hardly dare breath. At this point, early in March, by the best of fortune for Keats and for the world, a new doctor was called in, Dr. Robert Bree. I say it was fortunate, for Dr. Bree has been harshly handled by some biographers of Keats, notably Sir William Hale-White, who implied that Bree, although an F.R.C.P. and a Fellow of the Royal Society, was totally at fault in his diagnosis that 'there is no organic defect whatever—the disease is on his *mind*.' In the first place, this account of Bree's diagnosis comes from Keats's friend Brown, who on at least one other occasion, mistook medical terms; and secondly, Bree, who takes an honourable place in Hunter and Macalpine's excellent *Three Hundred Years of Psychiatry*, found exactly the right psychological treatment for Keats. He took him off the starvation diet—'pseudo-victuals' Keats called it—that he had been subjected to, gave him ordinary food and wine, stopped the senseless blood-letting, and allowed him mild sedatives. The proof of the pudding was, literally, in the eating. Given confidence and strength by this new régime, Keats actually completed the task, which he had put aside, of getting his poems ready for publication. This book, perhaps, the finest single volume of poems ever produced by an English poet, might have had to go unrevised, or even have been abandoned altogether, if it had not been for Dr. Bree. There was another vital activity that Keats also owed to the new doctor. He

was able, with the energy of the normal diet, to leave the house and visit his friends. Friendship was perhaps next to poetry itself in Keats's warm and outgoing nature. However much he led his own secret life, however much, as he comments, his friends 'do not know me . . . because I have in my own breast so great a resource', all the massive evidence of his letters show how vastly he valued them. On 25 March, Keats's erratic friend the painter B. R. Haydon at last exhibited in the West End his gigantic work *Christ's Entry into Jerusalem*. In Renaissance style, Haydon had painted into the crowd of Jewish bystanders Keats himself, enthusiastic and shouting, by far the most lifelike picture we have of the poet, an amazing likeness. What is even more amazing is that Keats found the enthusiasm and the strength to be there at the private view, delighted with its success as the artist himself observed. Six months before, annoyed at Haydon's usual double-dealing over money, Keats had exclaimed, 'for friendship, that is at an end'; in fact, as usual, his own good-hearted nature and the value he put on friendship had conquered any hard feeling. This incident shows, as much as anything in his life, how even acute illness could not alter his habitual friendly wish to help and support a fellow-artist.

Keats, however, was at the mercy of his own friends in one important sense; that is, he had no settled home. He was only a paying lodger in Brown's house at Hampstead. Now Brown wanted to let the house, as he did every summer, to make money. Keats had to turn out, for the summer months. Another friend, Leigh Hunt, got him lodgings near himself in Kentish Town; but the one snag about these was that they were the other side of the Heath from Fanny Brawne. This begins the time when he writes the appalling, agonized jealous letters to Fanny: violent phrases such as 'You must be mine to die upon the rack if I want you.'—'I will resent my heart having been made a football'—'I appeal to you by the blood of that Christ you believe in.' Since they were published over ninety years ago, these letters have caused a great deal of comment and argument. I think the most usual idea has been that they are the letters of a man whose judgment is distorted by illness. Now the motive for this verdict is obviously to be fair to Keats, somehow to excuse these shattering exposures of his state of mind; but I am not sure that it is entirely fair to Keats—I mean, to isolate these letters from all the rest of his life, as if they were not in any way a part of it. Once more, we should look at this episode in the light of his whole life: a life in which even in his schooldays he was noticed as being—I quote from a schoolfellow 'in every thing the creature of passion. . . This violence and vehemence—this pugnacity and generosity of disposition—in passions of tears or outrageous fits of laughter always in extremes'. This does not merely apply to his schooltime. Here is Keats writing in mature health about someone who had offended him: 'I consider it my duty to be prudently revengeful. I will hang over his head like a sword by a hair. I will be opium to his vanity—if I cannot injure his interests—He is a rat and he shall have ratsbane to his vanity—I will harm him all I possibly can.'

Now this is in exactly the same tone of voice as his outburst to Fanny—'I cannot brook the wolfsbane of fashion and foppery and tattle. You must be mine to die upon the rack if I want you'—and—I'm aware that what I'm saying now may be difficult to understand—this is the kind of motive force that made him what we honour today, that made him a poet. Let me explain; or better, let Keats explain

'This Living Hand'

himself. His own analysis of his own nature is, I think, amazing; one can hardly think of anyone so young who had such complete self-knowledge. Here he is on the sources of his poetic impulse: 'I feel I must again begin with my poetry—for if I am not in action mind or Body I am in pain—and from that I suffer greatly by going into parties where from the rules of society and a natural pride I am obliged to smother my Spirit and look like an Idiot—because I feel my impulses given way to would too much amaze them—I live under an everlasting restraint—Never relieved except when I am composing'. 'My impulses given way to would too much amaze . . . an everlasting restraint—Never relieved except when I am composing':—this is the sort of thing that really goes on inside a poet's head, the way any creative person, scientific or artistic, actually works; the sort of thing that we biographers, I'm afraid, with our instinct for order, logic, cause and effect in telling a life-story, often falsify and miss the source of the inner power. It was this inner smothered violence that made Keats a poet. When he could not relieve it, as he said, by composing poems, it burst out in a way that startles us, as it does in some parts of his letters to Fanny.

Luckily, just at this time, in the summer of 1820, the poems took over again, in a way that gave him relief. He was too agitated to compose new poems; but the proofs of his coming book gave him once more the chance to be a poet. Many of the poems, he saw, needed improvement or revision. The Houghton Library at Harvard actually has his proof-sheets for the title poem of the book, *Lamia*, and we can see how Keats, helped by his publisher's tactful literary adviser, Richard Woodhouse, gave us the final version of the poem. One passage shows clearly how, even though weak and ill, he could still put forward all his former poetic force. In the dramatic ending of the poem, the old philosopher exposes to his young pupil Lycius, before the assembled company, that the wife Lycius has just married is no woman but a disguised serpent, a lamia, a she-demon. In the manuscript Keats had given to his publishers, he had somehow slightly muffed the vital ten lines where this exposure is made: like this.

'Fool!' said the sophist in an undertone
Gruff with contempt; which a death-nighing moan
From Lycius answer'd, as he sank supine
Upon the Couch where Lamia's beauties pine.
'Fool! Fool!' repeated he, while his eyes still
Relented not, nor mov'd; 'from every ill
That youth might suffer have I shielded thee
Up to this very hour, and shall I see
Thee married to a Serpent? Pray you Mark
Corinthians! A Serpent, plain and stark!'

Now, apart from the general feeling of weakness and lack of climax, there was a good deal else unsatisfactory about those ten lines, as his publishers saw. There was the false rhyme of 'supine' and 'pine', there was the awkward run-on of 'see Thee'—'and shall I see Thee married'; there was the somewhat stagey repetition of the word 'Serpent', and, worst of all, the odd word 'stark', put in as a rhyme for 'Mark', and all too liable to be misconstrued as meaning 'naked'. Nothing shows more clearly how professional Keats was as a poet than the way he now cut the offending lines

Robert Gittings

down from ten to eight, tightened the whole construction, and produced this:

'Fool!' said the sophist in an under-tone
Gruff with contempt; which a death-nighing moan
From Lycius answer'd, as heart-struck and lost
He sank supine beside the aching ghost.
'Fool! Fool!' repeated he, while his eyes still
Relented not, nor mov'd; 'from every ill
Of life have I preserv'd thee to this day,
And shall I see thee made a serpent's prey?'

The heightened tension, the suspense by which the fatal term 'serpent' is delayed until the last word but one, the exclusion of anything loose or vague or wandering, are all the marks of a poet at the height of his powers. This is still the Keats of the wonderful year before illness, when he composed nearly every poem that makes this book, as I said, perhaps the finest single book of poems by any English poet.

Yet, as we know, its successful publication, the almost universal acclaim by reviewers—so different from his first two books—coincided with further haemorrhages, and the decision, which he himself felt was a wrong one, to send him to Italy as a last hope. 'He is advised—nay ordered', said a friend, 'to go to Italy; but in such a state it is a hopeless doom.' And it was a decision that accentuated another theme that had haunted Keats's life ever since he was twenty-one—lack of money. Keats, we know, had spent nearly all his available inheritance on a full six- or seven-year medical training—and just how expensive that training was appears in all the letters of his fellow-students at hospital. He had then given up medicine for poetry, at the last possible moment, and never earned a penny since. Now, as a final resort, he appealed to his ex-guardian, the City businessman Richard Abbey, for a loan. We may see at Keats House, Hampstead, Abbey's not very gracious reply:

Bad debts for the last two years have cut down the profits of our business to nothing, so that I can scarcely take out enough for my private expence—It is therefore not in my power to lend you any thing.

And then, as if ashamed of this curt dismissal, a postscript:

When you are able to call I shall be glad to see you, as I should not like to see you want 'maintenance for the day'.

In other words, not a large loan for the Italian journey, but perhaps a small one to tide Keats over. Now Abbey was clearly not a likeable man; he knew the Keats family-history, and he was quite capable of coolly calculating how little time Keats had to live, and how little chance *he* would have of getting back any substantial loan. There is no need, however, to suppose he withheld money that was Keats's. The fact is that the whole Keats family, including the poet, had a very human failing, with which we can all sympathize. They all thought they had more money than they actually had; and they always blamed someone else when they found they hadn't. Later on, we find Keats's sister writing the most violent and abusive letters about Keats's solicitor friend, John Hamilton Reynolds, who had been handling her affairs; she practically accuses him of embezzlement and her brother George adds his own violent abuse.

'This Living Hand'

When you look at the figures you find poor Reynolds had been working for her for eight years free of charge; all he had done was to put aside a very small sum simply to cover his fees. Keats, in his own lifetime, also wildly accused the family solicitor. We can't say that Abbey showed anything worse than lack of sympathy; but it is pleasant to record that the situation was saved by a more sympathetic businessman. Keats's journey to Italy, and many of his expenses till his death, were paid by his publisher's brother, a Derbyshire banker, who, as his own obituary says, was 'ever ready to assist those deserving of confidence'.

By the time Keats reached Italy he was beyond much assistance from other people. All he had to lean on was himself; his companion, Joseph Severn, was a puzzled and—naturally—very alarmed young man: not, in fact, even someone who knew Keats very well. What Keats now had to depend on was himself: 'because I have in my own breast so great a resource', he had said. He had to draw on everything in his past life for the last effort of facing death. It is amazing how much he did. He even began to plan another long poem, in which, according to Severn, the guiding principle was to be that of moral beauty, that beauty which he had extolled in dozens of sayings and poems all through his lifetime; he certainly gave, in his last existing letter, one of his most penetrating definitions of how a poem is made, to stand beside the other pronouncements about poetry that fill his earlier letters: 'the knowledge of contrast', he wrote, 'feeling for light and shade, all that information (primitive sense) necessary for a poem'. In those words, less than three months before his death, I think we may feel that he never gave up being a poet.

And there is another and a deeper sense, in which Keats seems to remain a poet up to his very last hour, and in which, it also seems his two callings of poet and of medical practitioner were somehow joined: or rather, that we can see they had never been essentially opposed, but were really different aspects of the same quality, of the same kind of life. It is true that in these last two or three months, Keats often touches the depths. His mad anger when Severn, a convinced Christian—which Keats was not—stopped him committing suicide with the bottle of laudanum he had bought for that purpose: the childish fury with which he dashed out of Severn's hands the cups of coffee his friend offered—all this is well known. Severn, and others who saw him, even judged him insane. Yet there was, even in the worst of what Severn called 'the most dreadful scenes', a kind of heroic idealism. Long years afterwards, when it was suggested that Keats should have had a priest for a bedside conversion, his old friend Leigh Hunt rose up to deny that Keats would ever have accepted this. He would never, Hunt said, even under the most appalling circumstances, have gone back on his own deeply-held beliefs.

What then were these beliefs? They are scattered all up and down his letters, they appear in many of his poems, all over the half-dozen years that he filled with creation. They take many forms and they are embodied into many ideas which have become in these 150 years part of our own thought: such ideas as Negative Capability, 'that is' Keats explains 'when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason': such as the chameleon poet, who has no identity because he takes on the nature of everything he observes; 'foul or fair', Keats says, 'high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated': such again as his philosophic

concept of life as what he calls 'a vale of soul-making', where the function of 'a world of pains and troubles is' he says, 'to school an Intelligence and make it a soul.' What they come to, in the main, is the power of sympathetic imagination to transcend itself, to lose itself in the lives, and very often in the sufferings, of others, even in the suffering beneath joy—'being too happy in thy happiness', as he says of the nightingale. And the soul, or the intelligence becoming a soul, once lost in this identification, then finds its own resolving solution. 'The setting sun will always set me to rights—or if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its existence and pick about the Gravel'.

In case it seems too easy, it must be emphasized too that this loss of identity in other things and other people, is not in any way a philosophy of escape. Keats makes that clear. Even while entering into other people's lives, losing your identity in them, you still deliberately keep yourself aware of what Keats calls, in his *Ode on Melancholy*, 'the wakeful anguish of the soul', your own human feeling; otherwise, you could not enter with full continuing sympathy into theirs. 'The man who thinks much of his fellows', said Keats, '[is he] who is brave enough to volunteer for uncomfortable hours'.

This is the philosophy that Keats puts forward as his way to live as a poet; but it must have occurred to many of you that this description does not in any way apply solely to the life of a poet only. It could well be that Keats is talking about the attitude of the good medical practitioner, the sympathy, the alertness, the judgment and identification at all points that he too needs. To put it another way: the most consistent symbol in all Keats's work is that of the god Apollo. He appears in Keats's first great sonnet as a sort of presiding guardian over those realms of imagination 'which bards in fealty to Apollo hold'. The unfinished epic *Hyperion*, has, as its real hero, the newly-made god Apollo; and Apollo, I need again not remind you, was the god of poetry and of healing. He is portrayed everywhere in Keats as learning to be a healer and a poet through his power of sympathetic imagination—and, in case this should sound sentimental, Keats makes it clear that this imagination, this sympathy, must always be accompanied by the exercise of knowledge—'Knowledge enormous makes a god of me', Apollo cries, in the agony of self-creation by self-loss.

Some such actual transformation as this, we may think, took place in the last few weeks of Keats's own life; or rather the stored-up beliefs of his whole life as poet and doctor took their full effect. He identified himself not with the terrors of death he was undergoing, but with those of the terrified young man beside him, Joseph Severn, himself on the verge of nervous collapse. 'Did you ever see anyone die?' he asked, 'Well then I pity you poor Severn': then reassuring 'Now you must be firm for it will not last long.' He continually warned Severn not to inhale his dying breath, as he himself had done when he caught the infection from his brother Tom. In every way, as a poet and as a medical adviser, he put himself in Severn's place; and some of his last words to Severn actually were 'Don't be frightened'. From then, until death, he clasped Severn's hand in his own: the living hand, warm, capable, the hand of a poet and a physician.