

Mr. Murry on Keats

KEATS AND SHAKESPEARE. By J. MIDDLETON MURRY. New York: Oxford University Press. 1925. \$4.75.

Reviewed by ARNOLD WHITRIDGE

IT MIGHT seem that after Amy Lowell's monumental biography there was nothing more to be said about Keats. Probably as far as the actual life is concerned there is no more to be said, but it does not lie within the power of man or woman to say the last word about Keats's poetry.

In the volume before us Mr. Middleton Murry has taken Matthew Arnold's phrase, "He is with Shakespeare," which Arnold expressly limited to the magic of Keats's language, and by expanding it he has attempted to show the essential similarity of Shakespeare's and Keats's genius. As may be inferred from the title Mr. Murry is a lover of Keats, and like all true lovers, whenever the perfect one is under discussion, he is impatient of anything less than headlong admiration. "Keats and Shakespeare are alike," says Mr. Murry, "because they are both pure poets, and pure poetry consists in the power so to express a perception that it appears at the same time to reveal a new aspect of beauty and a new aspect of truth." Whether we agree with the author or not we must admit that he has boldly grasped the bull by the horns. He makes his way at the very outset to the best known, most characteristic, and the most difficult lines in Keats's poetry:

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

That capacity to see and to feel what life is was something possessed to the full by Keats and Shakespeare alone. If we understand Mr. Murry rightly that is the conclusion at which he wishes us to arrive. Keats and Shakespeare were alike in that being poets they were more complete than other men. George Moore's anthology, "Pure Poetry," suggests a very different definition but for the present let us accept this more exalted conception—"the pure poet submits himself steadily, persistently, and unflinchingly to life."

the comparison is launched Shakespeare is
and Mr. Murry confines his attention to
Literary criticism under any conditions is a
business; the sheer understanding of great
poetry, let alone the judgment of it, requires an agile
imagination, but the author of this volume is not
content with understanding or appreciation. Without
attempting any objective study of the poems he
has undertaken "to elucidate the deep and natural
movement of the poet's soul which underlies them." It
may well be asked whether we know enough
about any man's soul to discuss its natural movement
as confidently as does Mr. Murry. He threads his
way through Keats's subconscious self without a
shadow of diffidence. The result will disappoint
those readers who expect startlingly original revelations.
He finds, as many a critic has found before,
that there is the closest relation between a man's
poetry and the facts of his life.

In the first "Hyperion," for instance, he identifies Keats himself with Apollo, explaining the fragmentary character of the poem by the fact that it was written to afford some relief from the pain of contemplating the suffering of his dying brother. With the death of Tom Keats the poem automatically came to an end. Again, into the great Odes Mr. Murry reads the yearning of Keats for the love of Fanny Brawne. No one can refute his opinion, but after all is that yearning the dominant thing? Can we believe that the greatest lyric poems of the language were inspired by the "arch voice of the suburban belle?" Surely it is just as likely that the very opposite is true; that Keats only rose to the heights when he escaped from her influence, and that when Fanny Brawne is uppermost in his mind instead of the "Ode to a Nightingale" we get that travesty of himself that *Blackwood's* and the *Quarterly* seized upon as the real man.

Once this idea of autobiography in poetry gets hold of a critic it gives him no peace. It sounds so plausible, and yet, given the same data, no two critics arrive at the same conclusion. Amy Lowell, who certainly had at her command all available information on the life of Keats, finds "Hyperion" a failure, "not because it is not good, but because it is not honest." Mr. Middleton Murry maintains that the whole value of the poem lies in "the utter fidelity of Keats to his own experience." There is of

course nothing surprising in this disagreement. For the last three hundred years scholars have been quarreling about the sincerity of Shakespeare's Sonnets. The question is, does it matter? Having decided with Wordsworth that "with this key Shakespeare unlocked his heart" are we any nearer to an understanding or an appreciation of the Sonnets? Or suppose we agree with Mr. Murry that "Lamia" is "imaginative autobiography of the most exact and faithful kind," although Amy Lowell thinks it is nothing of the sort, are we any nearer to the poem itself?

No one will deny Mr. Murry's resourcefulness, his courage in pushing out beyond the old frontiers of literary criticism, but there is a danger in concentrating too much attention upon a poet's soul. Before long we lose sight of the poetry altogether and the study of poetry becomes a mere province of psychology. Mr. Murry seems to us unreasonably impatient of any method of criticism other than his own. He virtually tells us that we must take Fanny Brawne with the Odes or he will not let us have the Odes at all. Not only must we not judge Keats, but we must definitely surrender our judgment when we get within his vicinity. That was the attitude of the nineteenth century about Shakespeare: "Others abide our question, Thou art free." Keats and Shakespeare being "complete" men and therefore "pure" poets must be accepted *en bloc*. "Let us make up our minds" says the author, "that we will accept genius as a whole, whatever effort and whatever pain it may cost us." Surely the trend of criticism is all the other way. For better or worse even Shakespeare has to submit to our questioning. "Hamlet" is played in modern dress in order that the layman may judge for himself whether Shakespeare is as universal and timeless as the scholars have been telling him. If we are prepared to separate the wheat from the tares in Shakespeare there is no valid reason for keeping Keats sacrosanct. Mr. Murry considers criticism of Keats paramount to condescension, but the man who loves poetry cannot help asking why he loves it, and as soon as that question is asked the business of criticism has inevitably begun.

Shaped Fire

TWO LIVES. By WILLIAM ELLERY LEONARD. New York: B. W. Huebsch-Viking Press. 1925. \$2.

Reviewed by G. R. ELLIOTT
Amherst College

ON personal grounds the author would not at first allow this poem to be printed except "as manuscript" for his friends, in a few dozen copies. These circulated widely, however, in America and Europe, attracting the interest of critics so various as H. L. Mencken, Professor Bliss Perry, Floyd Dell, Professor C. H. Herford, Van Wyck Brooks, Professor Otto Jespersen, and so on. In its private form the work has been glanced at circumspically in several periodicals, including *The Saturday Review* (Nov. 28, 1925). It is now publicly issued in England and America, with some additions. It is a sequence of 214 swift and varied sonnets constituting, without doubt, a great American narrative poem. It has in it something of the best of the present and the past: it throbs with the continuous life-blood of our poetry. It has also plenty of failings—which may easily be overemphasized by traditionalists who find the viewpoint too radical, and by "contemporaneans" who find the form too conservative. But on the whole it is a work of distinguished genius that has reached, with the aid of long poetic tradition, the summit of contemporary realism.

Based on a terrible crisis in the author's own life, the poem is "realistic" with a vengeance. But it is also magnanimous. The poet has mastered his bitter experience and risen above it. He writes with a constant fire of mind that shapes all his moods into one glowing structure of art. Flashes of fine lyric ecstasy are followed by penetrating analyses of cause and motive; sombre facts of circumstance and desire are developed in scenes of mellow loveliness; grim, sardonic humor alternates with yearning tenderness or ethical meditation. But the whole is a single stately music. It grows steadily upon the reader from the first until the last line.

A sense of cosmic fate arises at the very beginning, where the two lives, man and girl, approach each other. Each had been starved of love: each seems destined and yet dangerous for the other. The man (who narrates the story) has a youth of grim

poverty and struggle behind him in the East, and visions of poetry ahead in the West. He gets a position as college teacher in a western capitol city, where his life begins to warm and expand. The place combines for him the eager activity of the West, the charm of "shimmering Indian lake and hill," and the stately beauty of "the world's white cities famous far away." He rejoices in a rented attic room in one of the town's finest mansions. It is owned by a stoical old gentleman, former soldier and statesman, now failing in health and devoted to economy.

Wild tales of that white house were whispered me
Across the neighbor's fence. An old dame said:
"A beautiful mother paced, with bended head
And fingers, muttering monotonously,
That porch in other days, and seemed to see
Only the squirrels burying nuts and bread,
Which over the rail she tossed them fitfully. . . .

Of such parentage is the girl of the story. She lives now alone with her father, absorbed in housework and craving fuller scope for an ardent nature. She and the lonely scholar-poet are enmeshed by love, inevitably. The extent of her inherited insanity (concealed, from mixed motives, by relatives and friends) is only gradually revealed to him. Pity and fear weave themselves darkly into the rich new fabric of his life. In the highest gaiety of the honeymoon, while the two are watching at Niagara

The Sun's great waters flash and fall and bound
(I thinking what ten thousand years had done
And, mid my love, yet hearing still their sound)
a dreadful premonition arises from "that charmed brink," from "the gliding shimmer of that green downward curve."

By inherited tendency death is for the girl "a shining lure." Yet she thrills with the joy and beauty of life. She is one of the most entrancing creations of English poetry. The poet blends in her, magically, the different charms of her western neighborhood. Her loveliness is at once wild and homely. As house-mistress she has sometimes "vagrant fancies wild," sometimes "shifts a happy homing enterprise." In company, she moves with a shy grace among her beloved household objects. Alone, her song has a yearning fitfulness:

I listened. . . It grew fainter. . . It arose
Higher within the haunted house somewhere,—
Until, O clear on that September air,
From out my attic window forth it flows—
An old French folksong of the outre-mer. . .

And she is lithe and eager for out-of-doors. During a visit to the sea-coast:

One sunrise, I remember, as I woke
I missed her; and I followed down a path
Below the cliffs; there off a little beach
I spied her, as the mists about her broke
(Her love and laughter just beyond my reach),
There in the salt-sea billows at her bath.

In her new love she is "a thirsting wild thing at a forest brook," But her old attachments relax not a whit. She and her husband must live in the white "haunted house" with the father. The girl is more and more perplexed between the opposing claims and temperaments of the two men she loves:

No twofold engine of outrageous hate
Had been so mad, so merciless a fate!

Grotesque and sordid details play tragically into the situation. The father's economy floods the house with noisy, gossiping roomers. Chattering advice of neighbors and friends increases the girl's confusion. Her doctor makes fateful errors. "Man blunders with her being to the last." The very source of her peculiar loveliness becomes a means of her destruction:

She lacked—O terrible beauty of her fate—
Uncannily all power to doubt or hate.

She blames herself for all troubles and broods on these, "Filled with herself though selfless in her love." She senses and exaggerates her husband's bondage, and aims to set him free for his life-work. This idea becomes so fixed that it is only intensified by the death of her father. The husband is now arranging a change of residence and a new mode of life for both:

The haunted house should be our house no more,
And ours no more those waters of distress!
The lakes about our City they were Four—
And one most lovely in its loneliness,
With sunrise, like a prophet, on its shore!

But she, in a black moment, brings about her own death—after stripping from her finger her wedding-ring, "In some wild thought it was no more her own."

Part Three shows the rebuilding of the man's shattered life. He struggles with the ghoulis horrors of nervous collapse; the slanders of a commu-

nity anxious to unload its own share of responsibility upon the stranger, and above all his conscience and remorse. He grasps at every available source of help, from baseball games all the way to the traditional peace of religion. The little man, though his "utmost soul" is

Ready for God, still as a leaf grown steady
After the tempest on a shivered stalk

He also waives (unlike so many "realists" of the current palliatives of the scientific and humanitarian imagination. The blackest contours of his disaster become in retrospect no less but more distinct; he "suffers her suffering even as she lay prone." However, he has the "savior-energy of sportsmanship," grips again his part in the amazing human game, and learns mystically his share of "the Will that suffers, conquers, sings." The strength and beauty of the human mind shaping its way through an undisguised chaos—this is what Mr. Leonard succeeds extraordinarily in conveying. If in the middle of the poem the reader is shaken and harrowed, at the end he finds himself lifted, stilled, spiritually renewed.

Stories Old and New

NOTES AND ANECDOTES OF MANY YEARS. By JOSEPH BUCKLIN BISHOP. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1925. \$2.50.

Reviewed by ROYAL J. DAVIS

DRAWING upon a varied experience and a rich memory, Mr. Bishop has brought out a collection of anecdotes and comment which are at once entertaining and illuminating. Not all the stories he has assembled are amusing; some of them are intended to reveal an important characteristic of the man to whom they refer. This is true particularly of the anecdotes related of General Goethals and having to do with his digging of the Panama Canal, although a goodly number of even these have an infusion of humor.

One of the best stories of the lot is utterly lacking in serious purpose. Sir James Barrie, during his visit to this country in the early days of the World War, was a guest at a dinner at which a lively dispute arose concerning a man of international reputation. One of the guests assailed the man's character violently. The others defended him, taking the line that while he might have made mistakes, he was a fine fellow nevertheless. When there came a lull in the wrangle, Barrie, who had apparently been paying no attention to it, without looking up from his plate remarked in a low voice: "He was an infernal scoundrel, but 'twas his only fault."

A drop of acid touches some of these anecdotes, with the usual excellent effect. Mr. Bishop was with William Winter at one of Beerbohm Tree's melodramatic performances of "Hamlet." When the melancholy Dane, dying in the glare of the spotlight, declaimed, "The rest is silence," Winter ejaculated: "Thank God!" Another anecdote of Winter is of a very different kind. Walking up to Bishop's desk one day in the *Tribune* office, he held out in the palm of his hand a small watch. "That watch," he explained, "was sent to me by Adelaide Neilson. It reached me simultaneously with the news of her death. 'Twas as though she had said: 'Take it. I have done with time.'"

Among the delightful bits quoted by Mr. Bishop is one of his own devising. Charles Francis Adams, who had often given Mr. Bishop the opportunity of seeing him exemplify the Adams trait of disagreeing with everybody else, once astonished Bishop by saying: "You are talking sense. That's what I think." Not unnaturally Mr. Bishop replied: "Adams, I have known you for a quarter of a century and you have never agreed with me before. You shake my confidence in the soundness of my own views."

Mr. Bishop's gamut ranges from Horace Greeley and Henry Ward Beecher to John Hay and Theodore Roosevelt. Borrowing a word from Isaac Disraeli, he begins with "A Plea for Anecdoteage." But Mr. Bishop's anecdoteage is its own sufficient justification.

The BOWLING GREEN

Abraham Lincoln

IT is a fine thing to turn loose a poet on the job of biography; especially when it is so shrewd, simple, and tough a poet as Carl Sandburg. Mr. Strunsky has spoken lately of a tendency of the biography of irony to decline into the biography of snicker. Sandburg's "Lincoln,"* in this age of biography, is a different sort of life-story altogether; the biography of poetry. Sandburg has written this book exactly as he writes his verse: there is the same musical, melancholy cadence, the same vivid touch upon tangible and visible essentials, the same occasional (but fortunately rare) slither upon a bit of too slippery sentiment. The Rootabaga note, as one might call it, just a few times seems to me to betray him; but even where it does it comes, somehow, as a part of the story because it is part of Carl himself, the old darling. I only mention my one or two anxieties about occasional fragments of the book because they enforce my private notion that in any really great piece of work the imperfections, if they are of the right sort, are a needful element of the greatness. Sandburg has achieved the crowning success of having done the one book that he, of all men now living, was specially designated to do. The Rootabaga fairytaler has hit upon the queerest fairy-tale of all. If there is anything characteristically American, in its comedy and tragedy and sentiment, this is it; as American as Will Rogers or Henry Ford's fiddler. With magnificent shrewdness Sandburg does not tell the whole story. He leaves it at the point where Lincoln, after cording up his trunks himself and tacking on them a card—*A. Lincoln, The White House, Washington*—gets on the train at Springfield. The engine with a queer big stovepipe, the man with a queer big stovepipe, and newly growing whiskers (tragic or pathetic attempt to be modish?) go off into the misty horizon. "Goodbye, Abe."

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"Perhaps poetry, art, human behavior in this country, which has need to build on its own traditions, would be served by a life of Lincoln stressing the fifty-two years previous to his Presidency." So Sandburg in his preface; perhaps it is important that he puts poetry first in the possible beneficiaries of his labor. The greatest tribute that could be paid this beautifully moving book would be, for a modest while anyhow, an increase in the general tract of silence. Sandburg whittles Lincoln out of the arbor vitae, and chip by chip the effigy comes clean. And the effect on "human behavior" is powerful, as Sandburg hoped it might be. This is a prairie history, with prairie horizons, woven of a thousand anecdotes, traditions, sayings, memories. It is the fruit of thousands of conversations and gleanings, and behind and within all are the silences of Lincoln, the silences of Sandburg too. There are two kinds of silence: silence absolute, and silence while someone else is talking. Both are in this book. And in it the corn grows and the stars prick their patterns and the axe clips deep into the trunk and country boys have their feet in the clear shallows of Knob Creek. There is in it the poet's sense of life; the same sense of life you find in the *Aeneid*.

When you open this book at the frontispiece and see the photograph of Lincoln's axe-helve, with his name cut into it; or when you find pictured the stone on which he scratched his poor betrothal, July 4, 1833, you are startled, perhaps, by the painful intimation that the Lincoln legends were facts; that it all really did happen very much as you had always heard. That is the dangerous thing about the fairy-tales you erect in your own heart: they often prove to be true. The Lincoln legends have gone so deep into us that few now can dispassionately scrutinize them; but it does appear that he was much the kind of man we would have hoped. We have scrutinized them; but now, through Sandburg's sober shrewdness, we know that the Lincoln of our dreams was something pretty close to the actual. When I speak of Sandburg's shrewdness, I mean, for example, the way he estimates the precise value of the

*Mr. Sandburg's work, which is to be issued by Harcourt, Brace & Co., will not be published until the end of next week.

small-town gossip about Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln. He seems to understand exactly, as few people do, just how far to credit mere tittle-tattle. There are some temperaments for which a farce like "Abie's Irish Rose" is as profoundly disturbing and tragic as "Hamlet." The story of Lincoln and Mrs. Lincoln is perhaps one of those reversible comedies.

You will be reading this book anyway; that I take for granted, and it will give you silences of your own. You will find, then, that Lincoln was thus and so; but the important thing, as Carl Sandburg himself would insist, is the effect, if any, on human behavior. A queer notion keeps coming to me. It is customary, in reading of these wilderness boyhoods and of the hardships and makeshifts of pioneer days, to lament for ourselves the disappearance of that old gruelling life, tough ordeals, and its Spartan pangs. What have we got, we ask ourselves, in the civilization we know, that can produce the genuine article of humanity? And then I wonder whether the wilderness of a modern city doesn't nourish a pioneering spirit as hardy as any of old Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois? The actual physical stress may be different but it is almost as severe; and the mental strain is surely much more intense. If great achievements spring from great anxieties and sufferings, then surely New York as we see it should be as potent to germinate great citizens, great artists, as New Salem or Springfield ninety years ago. C. E. M. Joad, one of what some reviewer has humorously called the Dollar Soothsayers, viz. the authors of Dutton's admirable little "Today and Tomorrow" Series, has written a gorgeously candid tractate, "Thrasymachus, or The Future of Morals." At the conclusion of his essay he admits that all he can foresee for the next fifty years is a growing backwash of Puritanism which will bring about a natural and commendable growth in hypocrisy; the world will tend to become "a paradise for the average man and a hell for the exceptional one." There can be no real morality until "the life-force can contrive again to send a great religious teacher into the world." In the world as we see it, Joad says, "those who think the least have the best of it." And as for American civilization, its objects are "to substitute cleanliness for beauty, mechanism for men, and hypocrisy for morals. It devotes so much energy to obtaining the means to make life possible, that it has none left to practice the art of living. And the drift of British development follows increasingly the course set by America."

Joad's book will startle and trouble some of its readers, but it runs marvellously close to the current of a million minds nowadays. And his suggestion that we shall be happier by not attempting to think comes with queer force just after we have read Sandburg's "Lincoln" which causes one to do a good deal of—well, if not thinking, at any rate musing. When another "great religious teacher" comes, or another Lincoln, the outcry of anger and derision will be even fiercer than before. The megaphones are bigger. But I cling to the thought that if he comes it will not necessarily be from the great corn-growing prairie. Perhaps the almost incredibly complex and dangerous hardships of some great city with its subtle stimuli to heart and nerve and appetite, will beget and toughen that spiritual pioneer. And his biography, when written, might even show as frontispiece some common symbol just as romantic and laborious as Lincoln's worn axe-handle; if it were only a brief-case he had carried in the daily swink of the subway.

There is one final thought that comes about Lincoln, which must have struck anyone who has studied the photographs of his face. Perhaps he was singularly unskilful in a matter where most of us are very adept—the art of deceiving himself. It is hard, somehow, to imagine him outwitting his own sombre and humorous judgment by any specious sophistries. As we study that face we love him almost as we all love the most lovable person we know—ourselves. We love him because we see in him what everyone secretly knows, the capacity for suffering. As Carl Sandburg suggests, there is a parable of Abe in the story of the Indiana boy who said to Lincoln, "Abe, I don't s'pose there's anybody on earth likes gingerbread better'n I do—and gets less'n I do."

As long as such books as this can be written, and can move us as deeply as they do, we have nobly saved, and not meanly lost, the wealth of that greatest American fairy tale.

CHRISTOPHER MORLEY.