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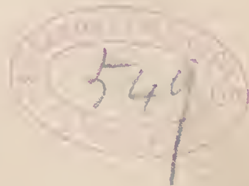
THE APOTHECARY POET

BY

WILLIAM OSLER



BALTIMORE
THE FRIEDENWALD COMPANY
1896

Johns Hopkins Hospital Historical Club,
October 29, 1895.

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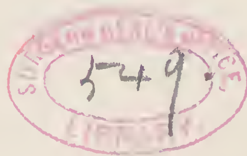

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[From *The Johns Hopkins Hospital Bulletin*, No. 58, January, 1896.]

JOHN KEATS—THE APOTHECARY POET.

We have the very highest authority for the statement that "the lunatic, the lover, and the poet, are of imagination all compact." In a more comprehensive division, with a keener discernment, Plato recognizes a madness which is not an evil, but a divine gift, and the source of the chiefest blessings granted to men. Of this divine madness poetry occupies one of the fourfold partitions. Here is his definition: "The third kind is the madness of those who are possessed by the Muses; which, taking hold of a delicate and virgin soul, and there inspiring frenzy, awakens lyrical and all other numbers; with these adorning the myriad actions of ancient heroes for the instruction of posterity. But he who, having no touch of the Muses' madness in his soul, comes to the door and thinks that he will get into the temple by the help of art—he, I say, and his poetry are not admitted; the sane man disappears and is nowhere when he enters into rivalry with the madman."

Here, in a few words, we have expressed the very pith and marrow of the nature of poetry, and a clearer distinction than is drawn by many modern writers of the relation of the art to the spirit, of the form to the thought. By the help of art, without the Muses' madness, no man enters the temple. The poet is a "light and winged and holy thing," whose inspiration, genius, faculty, whatever we may choose to call it, is allied to madness—he is possessed or inspired. Oliver Wendell Holmes has expressed this very charmingly in more modern terms, speaking of his own condition when composing

the Chambered Nautilus. "In writing the poem I was filled with a better feeling, the highest state of mental exaltation and the most crystalline clairvoyance that had ever been granted to me—I mean that lucid vision of one's thought and all forms of expression which will be at once precise and musical, which is the poet's special gift, however large or small in amount or value."* To the base mechanical of the working-day world, this lucid vision, this crystalline clairvoyance and mental exaltation is indeed a madness working in the brain, a state which he cannot understand, a Holy of Holies into which he cannot enter.

I.

When all the circumstances are taken into account, the English Parnassus affords no parallel to the career of Keats—Adonais, as we love to call him—whose birthday, one hundred years ago, we celebrate to-day.

Born at the sign of the "Swan and Hoop," Moorgate Pavement, the son of the head ostler, his parentage and the social atmosphere of his early years conspired to produce an ordinary beer-loving, pugnacious cockney; but instead there was fashioned one of the clearest, sweetest, and strongest singers of the century, whose advent sets at naught all laws of heredity, as his development transcends all laws of environment.

Keats' father succeeded to "Mine Host of the Swan and Hoop," but died when the poet was only eight years old. His grandmother was in comfortable circumstances, and Keats was sent to a school at Enfield, kept by the father of Charles Cowden Clarke. Here among other accomplishments he developed his knuckles, and received a second-hand introduction to the Greek Pantheon. He is described by one of his schoolfellows as "the pet prize-fighter with terrier courage," but in the last two years at school he studied hard and took

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*In a private letter which is published in a notice of Dr. Holmes, J. H. H. Bulletin, October, 1894.

all the prizes. The influence of the Clarkes upon Keats was strong and formative, particularly that of the younger one, Charles Cowden, who was an usher in the school. In the poem addressed to him he frankly acknowledges this great debt, "you first taught me all the sweets of song."

In 1810 his mother died of consumption, and during a long illness Keats nursed her with incessant devotion.

On the completion of his fifteenth year he was removed from school and apprenticed to Mr. Hammond, a surgeon at Edmonton. The terms of the old indenture as surgeon's apprentice are quaint enough. I have one of my uncle, Edward Osler, dated 1811. The surgeon, for a consideration of £40, without board, undertook the care and education for five years of the apprentices, of whom there were often four or five. The number of specific negatives in the ordinary indenture indicates the rough and ready character of the Tom Sawyers of that date. The young apprentice promised not "to haunt taverns or playhouses, not to play at dice or cards, nor absent himself from his said master's service day or night unlawfully, but in all things as a faithful apprentice he shall behave himself towards his said master and all his during the said term."

We know but little of the days of Keats' apprenticeship. A brother student said, "he was an idle, loafing fellow, always writing poetry." In 1814, in the fourth year of his indenture, the pupil and master had a serious quarrel, and the contract was broken by mutual consent. It would appear from the following sentence in a letter to his brother, that more than words passed between them: "I daresay you have altered also—every man does—our bodies every seven years are completely fresh material'd. Seven years ago it was not this hand that clinch'd itself against Hammond."*

At the end of the apprenticeship the student "walked" one

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* The extracts are taken from the new edition of the *Letters* by Forman. Reeves & Turner, London, 1895.

of the hospitals for a time before presenting himself at the College of Surgeons or the Apothecary's Hall. Keats went to the, at that time, United Hospitals of Guy's and St. Thomas, where he studied during the sessions of 1814–15 and 1815–16. He became a dresser at Guy's in the latter year under Mr. Lucas, and on July 25, 1816, he passed the Apothecary's Hall. The details of Keats' life as a medical student are very scanty. In after years one or two of his fellow-students placed on record their impressions of him. He doesn't seem to have been a very brilliant student. Poetry rather than surgery was followed as a vocation; one of his fellow-students says, "all other pursuits were to his mind mean and tame." Yet he acquired some degree of technical skill, and performed with credit the minor operations which fell to the hand of a dresser. He must have been a fairly diligent student to have obtained even the minimum qualifications of the "Hall" before the completion of his twenty-first year. In the *Biographical History of Guy's Hospital* Dr. Wilks states that Sir Astley Cooper took a special interest in Keats.

What attraction could the career of an apothecary offer to a man already much "travelled in the realms of gold," and who was capable at twenty of writing such a sonnet as that on Chapman's Homer? So far as we know he never practiced or made any effort to get established; and in 1817 he abandoned the profession, apparently not without opposition. In a letter to his friend Brown, dated September 23d, 1819, he says, "In no period of my life have I acted with any self-will but in throwing up the apothecary profession."

During the next four years he led, to use his own words, "a fitful life, here and there, no anchor." While a student he had made friends in a literary circle, of which Leigh Hunt and Haydon, the artist, were members, and he had a number of intimates—Brown, Taylor, Bailey, Dilke, and others—among the coming men in art and science. From his letters to them, to his brother George (who had emigrated with his wife to America), and to his sister Fanny, we glean glimpses

of his life at this period. His correspondence reveals, too, so far as it can, the man as he was, his aspirations, thoughts, and hopes.

II.

The spirit of *negative capability* dominated these years—the capability, as he expresses it, "of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable searching after fact and reason." The native hue of any resolution which he may have entertained—and we shall learn that he had such—was soon sicklied o'er, and he lapsed into idleness so far as any remunerative work was concerned. A practical woman like Mrs. Abey, the wife of the trustee of his mother's estate, condoned his conduct with the words "the Keatses were ever indolent, that they would ever be so, and that it was born in them." In a letter to his brother he uses the right word. Here is his confession: "This morning I am in a sort of temper, indolent and supremely careless—I long after a stanza or two of Thomson's 'Castle of Indolence'—my passions are all asleep from my having slumbered till nearly eleven and weakened the animal fibre all over me to a delightful sensation about three degrees this side of faintness. If I had teeth of pearl and the breath of lilies, I should call it languor; but as I am* I must call it laziness. . . . . This is the only happiness and is a rare instance of the advantage of the body overpowering the mind."

The gospel of "living" as against that of "doing," which Milton preached in the celebrated sonnet on his blindness, found in Keats a warm advocate. "Let us not, therefore," he says, "go hurrying about and collecting honey, bee-like buzzing here and there for a knowledge of what is not to be arrived at, but let us open our leaves like a flower, and be passive and receptive, budding patiently under the eye of Apollo, and taking truths from every noble insect that favors

* Especially as I have a black-eye.

us with a visit." Fatal to encourage in an active man of affairs, this dreamy state, this passive existence, favors in "bards of passion and of mirth" the development of a fruitful mental attitude. The dreamer spins from his "own inwards his own airy citadel"; and as the spider needs but few points of leaves and twigs from which to begin his airy circuit, so, Keats says, "man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine web of his soul, and weave a tapestry empyrean, full of symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his wanderings, of distinctness for his luxury." All the while Keats was "budding patiently," feeling his powers expand, and with the "viewless wings Poesy" taking ever larger flights. An absorption in ideals, a yearning passion for the beautiful, was, he says, his master-passion. Matthew Arnold remarks it was with him "an intellectual and spiritual passion. It is 'connected and made one' as Keats declares that in his case it was 'with the ambition of the intellect.' It is, as he again says, the mighty abstract Idea of Beauty in all things." Listen to one or two striking passages from his letters: "This morning Poetry has conquered,—I have relapsed into those abstractions which are my only life." "I feel more and more every day, as my imagination strengthens, that I do not live in this world alone, but in a thousand worlds. No sooner am I alone than shapes of epic greatness are stationed round me, and serve my spirit the office which is equivalent to a King's body-guard. Then 'Tragedy with scepter'd pall comes sweeping by.'" "What the imagination seizes as beauty must be truth," the expression in prose of his ever memorable lines,

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

III.

Keats' first published work, a small volume of poems issued in 1817, contained the verses written while he was a student

and before he had abandoned the profession. With the exception of one or two small pieces it contained nothing of note. The sonnet on Chapman's Homer, written while he was a pupil at Guy's, was the most remarkable poem of the collection. In 1818 appeared *Endymion*, a poetic romance, an ambitious work, which, in the autumn of the year, was mercilessly "cut up" in the *Quarterly* and in *Blackwood.* Popularly these reviews are believed to have caused Keats' early death—a belief fostered by the jaunty rhyme of Byron:

> "'Tis strange the mind, that very fiery particle,
> Should let itself be snuffed out by an article."

The truth is, no event in Keats' life so warmly commends him to us, or shows more clearly the genuine robustness of his mind than his attitude in this much discussed episode. In the first place, he had a clear, for so young a man an extraordinarily clear, perception of the limitation of his own powers and the value of his work. The preface to Endymion, one of the most remarkable ever written, contains his own lucid judgment. He felt that his foundations were "too sandy," that the poem was an immature, feverish attempt, in which he had moved, as he says, from the leading-strings to the go-cart. Did any critic ever sketch with firmer hand the mental condition of a young man in transition? "The imagination of a boy is healthy, and the mature imagination of a man is healthy; but there is a space of life between, in which the soul is in a ferment, the character undecided, the way of life uncertain, the ambition thick-sighted; thence proceeds mawkishness, and all the thousand bitters which those men I speak of must necessarily taste in going over the following pages." It cannot be denied that there are in *Endymion*, as the *Quarterly Review* puts it, "the most incongruous ideas in the most uncouth language," but the poem has lines of splendid merit, some indeed which have passed into the daily life of the people.

Naturally the criticism of the *Quarterly* and of *Blackwood* rankled deeply in his over-sensitive heart, but after the first

pangs he appears to have accepted the castigation in a truly philosophic way. In a letter to his friend Hersey, dated Oct. 9th, 1818, he writes, "Praise or blame has but a momentary effect on the man whose love of beauty in the abstract makes him a severe critic in his own works. My own domestic criticism has given me pain without comparison beyond what *Blackwood* or the *Quarterly* could possibly inflict,—and also when I feel I am right, no external praise can give me such a glow as my own solitary reperception and ratification of what is fine. J. S. is perfectly right in regard to the slipshod Endymion. That it is so is no fault of mine. No!—though it may sound a little paradoxical, it is as good as I had power to make it—by myself." And he adds, "I will write independently,—I have written independently *without judgment*. I may write independently, and *with judgment* hereafter. The Genius of Poetry must work out its own salvation in a man." A young man of twenty-three who could write this, whatever else he possessed, had the *mens sana*, and could not be killed by a dozen reviews.

In June 1820 appeared Keats' third work, "*Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St. Agnes, and other poems*," which placed him in the first rank of English writers. I will quote briefly the criticisms of two masters.

"No one else in English poetry save Shakespeare," says Matthew Arnold, "has in expression quite the fascinating facility of Keats, his perfection of loveliness. 'I think,' he said humbly, 'I shall be among the English poets after my death.' He is; he is with Shakespeare."

Lowell, speaking of his wonderful power in the choice of words, says, "Men's thoughts and opinions are in a great degree the vassals of him who invents a new phrase or reapplies an old one. The thought or feeling a thousand times repeated becomes his at last who utters it best. . . . As soon as we have discovered the word for our joy or our sorrow we are no longer its serfs, but its lords. We reward the discoverer of an anæsthetic for the body and make him a member of all the

societies, but him who finds a nepenthe for the soul we elect into the small Academy of the Immortals."

And I will add a criticism on the letters by Edward Fitzgerald: "Talking of Keats, do not forget to read Lord Houghton's Life and Letters of him; in which you will find what you may not have guessed from his poetry (though almost unfathomably deep in that also) the strong masculine sense and humor, etc., of the man; more akin to Shakespeare, I am tempted to think, in a perfect circle of poetic faculties, than any poet since."

IV.

Very few indications of his professional training are to be found in Keats' letters; fewer still in the poems. Referring to his studies, he says, in one of the early poems (the epistle to George Felton Mathew), "far different cares beckon me sternly from soft Lydian airs." During the four years from 1817 to 1820 he made fitful efforts to bestir himself into action, and on several occasions his thoughts turned toward his calling. In a letter to his brother, written in February, 1819, he says, "I have been at different times turning it in my head whether I should go to Edinburgh and study for a physician; I am afraid I should not take kindly to it; I am sure I could not take fees—and yet I should like to do so; it is not worse than writing poems and hanging them up to be fly-blown on the Review shambles." In 1818 he wrote to his friend Reynolds, "Were I to study physic, or rather medicine, again, I feel it would not make the least difference in my poetry; when the mind is in its infancy a bias is in reality a bias, but when we acquire more strength, a bias becomes no bias," adding that he is glad he had not given away his medical books, "which I shall again look over, to keep alive the little I know thitherwards." In May, 1820, when convalescent from the first attack of hæmoptysis, he wrote to Dilke, "I have my choice of three things—or at least two—South America or surgeon to an Indiaman, which last will be my fate." A year before,

in a letter to Miss Jeffreys, he spoke of voyaging to and from India for a few years, but in June, 1819, he tells his sister that he has given up the idea of an Indiaman, and that he "was preparing to enquire for a situation with an apothecary." Allusions to or analogies drawn from medical subjects are rare in his letters. In one place, in writing from Devonshire, he says, "When I think of Wordsworth's sonnet, 'Vanguard of Liberty! Ye men of Keats!' the degraded race about me are *pulvis ipecac simplex*—a strong dose."

He played a medical prank on his friend Brown, who had let his house to a man named Nathan Benjamin. The water which furnished the house was in a tank lined with lime, which impregnated the water unpleasantly. Keats wrote the following short note to Brown:

Sir :—By drinking your damn'd tank water I have got the gravel. What reparation can you make to me and my family?

NATHAN BENJAMIN.

Brown accordingly surprised his tenant with the following answer:

Sir :—I cannot offer you any remuneration until your gravel shall have formed itself into a stone, when I will cut you with pleasure.

C. BROWN.

In a letter to James Rice he tells one of the best maternal impression stories extant: "Would you like a true story? There was a man and his wife who, being to go a long journey on foot, in the course of their travels came to a river which rolled knee-deep over the pebbles. In these cases the man generally pulls off his shoes and stockings and carries the woman over on his back. This man did so. And his wife being pregnant, and troubled, as in such cases is very common, with strange longings, took the strangest that ever was heard of. Seeing her husband's foot, a handsome one enough, looked very clean and tempting in the clear water, on their arrival at the other bank she earnestly demanded a bit of it. He being an affectionate fellow, and fearing for

the comeliness of his child, gave her a bit which he cut off with his clasp-knife. Not satisfied, she asked for another morsel. Supposing there might be twins, he gave her a slice more. Not yet contented, she craved another piece. 'You wretch,' cries the man, 'would you wish me to kill myself? Take that,' upon which he stabbed her with the knife, cut her open, and found three children in her belly: two of them very comfortable with their mouths shut, the third with its eyes and mouth stark staring wide open. 'Who would have thought it!' cried the widower, and pursued his journey."

The estate of Keats' mother was greatly involved, and it does not appear that he received much from the trustee, Mr. Abbey. His books were not successful, and having no love for the ordinary hack work in literature, he was largely dependent upon the bounty of his friends, from whom in several of the letters the receipt of money is acknowledged. Who could resist a charming borrower who could thus write: "I am your debtor; I must ever remain so; nor do I wish to be clear of my rational debt; there is a comfort in throwing oneself on the charity of one's friends—'tis like the albatross sleeping on its wings. I will be to you wine in the cellar, and the more modestly, or rather, indolently I retire into the backward bin, the more Falerne will I be at the drinking." We must remember, however, that Keats had reasonable expectations. He says to Haydon, December 23d, 1818, "I have a little money, which may enable me to study and to travel for three or four years." He had enough wisdom to try to be "correct in money matters and to have in my desk," as he says, "the chronicles of them to refer to and to know my worldly non-estate."

To the worries of uncertain health and greatly embarrassed affairs there were added, in the summer of 1819, the pangs, one can hardly say of disprized, but certainly of hopeless love. Writing to his friend Reynolds, May 3d, 1818, in comparing life to a large mansion of many apartments, he says pathetically that he could only describe two; the first, Infant or

Thoughtless Chamber, in which we remain as long as we do not think; and the second, the Chamber of Maiden-Thought, in which at first we become intoxicated with the light and atmosphere, until it gradually darkens and we see not well the exit and we feel the "burden of the mystery." For his friends he hopes the third Chamber of Life may be filled with the wine of love and the bread of friendship. Poor fellow! Within a year the younger Aphrodite, in the shape of Fanny Brawne, beckoned to him from the door of this third chamber. Through her came no peace to his soul, and the Muses' inspiration was displaced by a passion which rocked him as the "winds rock the ravens on high"—by Plato's fourth variety of madness, which brought him sorrow and "leaden-eyed despair." The publication of Keats' letters to Fanny Brawne can be justified; it must also be regretted. While there are some letters which we should be loth to miss, there are others the publication of which have wronged his memory. Whether of a young poet as Keats, or of an old philosopher as Swift, such maudlin cooings and despairing wails should be ruled out of court with the writings of paranoiacs.

V.

Keats' mother died of consumption in 1810. In the winter of 1817–18 he nursed his brother Tom with the same disease. In the spring they spent several months together in Devonshire, which Keats compares to Lydia Languish, "very entertaining when it smiles, but cursedly subject to sympathetic moisture." In the summer he took a trip through Scotland, and in the Island of Mull caught a cold, which settled in his throat. In a letter dated Inverness, August 6th, he speaks of his throat as in "a fair way of getting quite well." On his return to Hampstead we hear of it again; and in September he writes "I am confined by Sawrey's mandate in the house now, and have as yet only gone out in fear of the damp night." During the last three months of the year he again nursed his brother Tom, who died in December. From this time the

continual references to the sore throat are ominous. On December 31st he complains to Fanny Keats that a sore throat keeps him in the house, and he speaks of it again in January letters. In a February letter to his sister he says that the sore throat has haunted him at intervals for nearly a twelvemonth. In June and July he speaks of it again, but the summer spent in the Isle of Wight and at Winchester did him good, and in September he writes to one of his friends that he had got rid of his "haunting sore throat." I have laid stress upon this particular feature, as there can be but little question that the tuberculosis of which he died began, as is common enough, with this localization. For more than a year there had been constant exposure while nursing his brother, and under conditions, in Devonshire at least, most favorable to infection. The depression of the Review attacks in the autumn of 1818 must also be taken into account. Through the summer of 1818 there are occasional references to an irritable state of health apart from the throat trouble—unfitting him for mental exertion. "I think if I had a free and healthy and lasting organization of heart and lungs as strong as an ox's, so as to bear unhurt the shock of an extreme thought and sensation without weariness, I could pass my life very nearly alone, though it should last eighty years. But I feel my body too weak to support me to the height, I am obliged continually to check myself and be nothing." If we may judge by the absence of any references in the letters, the autumn of the year was passed in good health, but on December 20th he wrote that he was "fearful lest the weather should affect my throat, which on exertion or cold continually threatens me."

On February 3d the smouldering fires broke out, after he had been exposed in a stage ride, in an attack of hæmoptysis. From this date we can trace in the letters the melancholy progress of the disease. In April and May the lung symptoms became less pronounced, but in spite of much nervous irritability and weakness, he was able to direct the publication of

his third little volume of poems. On June 22d he had a return of the spitting of blood, which lasted several days. The serious nature of the disease was by this time evident to both the patient and his physicians. He acknowledges that it will be a long, tedious affair, and that a winter in Italy may be necessary. "'Tis not yet consumption," he writes Fanny Keats, "but it would be were I to remain in this climate all the winter." This, too, was a time of terrible mental distress, as he became madly jealous of his best friend, C. A. Brown. The letters of this period to Fanny Brawne tell of the "damned moments" of one who "dotes yet doubts, suspects, yet fondly loves."

Preparations were made for his journey to Italy, which he speaks of "as marching up to a battery." He sailed for Naples, which was reached after a tedious voyage about the end of October. Severn, the artist, accompanied him, and has given (*Atlantic Monthly*, April, 1863) a touching account of the last months of his friend's life. Realizing fully the hopelessness of his condition, like many a brave man in a similar plight, he wished to take his life. Severn states, "In a little basket of medicines I had bought at Gravesend at his request there was a bottle of laudanum, and this I afterwards found was destined by him 'to close his mortal career,' when no hope was left, and prevent a long, lingering death, for my poor sake. When the dismal time came, and Sir James Clark was unable to encounter Keats' penetrating look and eager demand, he insisted on having the bottle, which I had already put away. Then came the most touching scenes. He now explained to me the exact procedure of his gradual dissolution, enumerated my deprivations and toils, and dwelt upon the danger to my life, and certainly to my fortunes, from my continued attendance upon him. One whole day was spent in earnest representations of this sort, to which, at the same time that they wrung my heart to hear and his to utter, I was obliged to oppose a firm resistance. On the second day, his

tender appeal turned to despair, in all the power of his ardent imagination and bursting heart." *

In Rome, Keats was under the care of Dr. (afterwards Sir James) Clark, who, with Severn, watched him with assiduous care throughout the winter months. Unlike so many consumptives, Keats had none of the *spes phthisica*, which carries them hopefully to the very gates of the grave. He knew how desperate was his state. "I feel," he said, "the flowers growing over me." "When will this posthumous life come to an end?" On February 14th he requested Severn to have inscribed on his grave-stone the words,

> "Here lies one whose name was writ in water."

On February 27th he passed away quietly in Severn's arms.

All lovers of poetry cherish Keats' memory for the splendor of the verse with which he has enriched our literature. There is also that deep pathos in a life cut off in the promise of such rich fruit. He is numbered among "the inheritors of unfulfilled renown," with Catullus and Marlowe, with Chatterton and Shelley, whom we mourn as doubly dead in that they died so young.

It was with true prophetic insight that he wrote in 1818 to his brother George,

> "What though I leave this dull and earthly mould,
> Yet shall my spirit lofty converse hold
> With after times."

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* Under similar circumstances one of the gentlest and most loving of men whom it has been my lot to attend was more successful, and when he realized fully that a slow, lingering death awaited him, took the laudanum with which for months he had been provided. In such a case, whose heart will not echo the kindly words with which Burton closes his celebrated section on suicide? "Who knows how he may be tempted? It is his case; it may be thine. *Quae sua sors hodie est, cras fore vestra potest.* We ought not to be so rash and rigorous in our censures as some are; charity will judge and hope the best; God be merciful unto us all!"

Shelley, who was so soon to join this "gentle band," and find with Keats "a grave among the eternal," has expressed the world's sorrow in his noble elegy. I quote in conclusion his less well-known fragment:

> "Here lieth one whose name was writ on water."
>   But, ere the breath that could erase it blew,
> Death, in remorse for that fell slaughter,
>   Death, the immortalizing winter, flew
>   Athwart the stream,—and time's printless torrent grew
> A scroll of crystal, blazoning the name
>   Of Adonais. . . .