

"are prone to confuse matters by saying that since the fiction is good, the 'facts' must be correct, or that since the facts are incorrect, the fiction is bound to be poor." Brooks explores the world of Faulkner in another spirit, which he defines in his opening chapter: "Faulkner, to be sure, has much to tell us about life in Mississippi and in the South generally. He is indeed concerned with human beings and human values. But his novels are neither case studies nor moral treatises. They are works of art and have to be read as such." Brooks is consistent throughout his volume in reading them as works of art. And therefore one feels, as one reads this critical examination of the stories about The Yoknapatawpha Country, that their greatness is not in their strange and fascinating local color, but in their universality.

The conclusions reached by Brooks, after his scrupulous tracing of the histories of Faulkner's characters, are consistently bold and challenging. He does not find that the violence and abnormality of these characters indicate cynicism or nihilism in the author. The world of Faulkner's fiction "embodies its own principles of order" and serves as "an excellent mirror of the perennial triumphs and defeats of the human spirit." Brooks not only defends the normality and universality of Faulkner's vision, but unhesitatingly claims that he is a great religious writer and that his characters can be understood only on Christian premises. "Faulkner's work speaks ultimately of the possibilities and capacities of the human spirit for finding and embodying meaning." It will probably take some time for students and readers of Faulkner to adjust themselves to this masterly and provocative study. But controversialists who disagree with Brooks will not find it easy to invalidate his lucid and conscientious interpretation.

Reviewed by LOUIS I. BREDVOLD

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### *Keats: Poet or Patient?*

**John Keats**, by Walter Jackson Bate.  
Cambridge: *Harvard University Press*,  
1963. xii & 732 pp. \$10.00.

**John Keats: The Making of a Poet**,  
by Aileen Ward. *New York: The Viking  
Press*, 1963. xii & 450 pp. \$7.50.

FOR OVER A CENTURY, men labored under the impression that Keats was a poet. Then the critics found out that he was one of them—not merely a poet, but a Critic. Since then Keats' magic casements have held a blackboard scribbled with a dreary chalk forlorn. But these prize-winning biographies (the National Book Award for Miss Ward, the Pulitzer for Mr. Bate) turn us back toward the realization that the great and enduring words of Keats are those that deal with Ruth amid the alien corn, not those that describe Negative Capability.

Miss Ward changes the emphasis, it is true, only by returning to Victorian concerns. She is far more interested in the letters to Fanny Brawne than in the literary letters sent to George Keats. She draws an essentially romantic picture of the doomed poet, though she tries to give a modern and scientific air to the business by using Freud rather than an evil Fate as the key to this tragedy. Keats is cursed with a formidable concatenation of psychic, physical and social ailments (Oedipal feelings for his mother, inferiority feelings about his height, syphilis, and treacherous friends). But all this flourishing of the clinical only serves as cover for the sentimental. Miss Ward comes as Keats' analyst, but stays to mother him. (Do you know why stout Cortez stands on a *peak* in Darien? Miss Ward does. It is because poor Johnny was only five feet tall. Presumably, if he had been a six-footer, the Pacific would have been described from within a ravine.)

This is a Keats who is haunted by his Lamia-Belle Dame mother, at whose deathbed the young poet sat and perhaps—according to one of Miss Ward's wildest surmises—appropriately caught the infection that carried him off twelve years later. Not even Amy Lowell had pushed back the date of Keats' illness that far. Naturally, Miss Ward hears death in the gratings of that sore throat that bothered Keats throughout his twenty-second year, though Professor Bate demonstrates that the medical evidence tells heavily against any connection between the throat trouble and his final illness. The former very likely arose from the poisons emanated by bad teeth (a common, not very romantic condition in the nineteenth century); the latter was probably contracted at the end of the "sore-throat year" (1818), and did not move into its active phase until late 1819, when the great poems were all written.

The crushing tragedy of Keats' death does not have to be played up with the kind of *Fernverbindung* with every part of his life that Miss Ward indulges in. If Keats was self-conscious

about his stature (which was not so terribly short for the period), the awareness must have acted more as spur than repressant; for Keats was extraordinarily tough, both physically and mentally. He was heavysset, not frail; quick (and efficient) with his fists as a boy; surprisingly resilient throughout the months when his sturdy frame prolonged the struggle with death. When he began writing poetry, his long hair was not taken by strangers as the mark of an aesthete, but of a sailor. During his period as a medical student, he served heavy hours in the clinic. When he arrived in Rome, already dying, the doctor could not believe anyone so energetic and unwasted was consumptive. And the disease did not take him off until—as the autopsy showed—it had destroyed both lungs almost entirely.

The same toughness marks his poetry. Under some deceptive romantic softness of vocabulary, the most individual marks of this man are rapid growth, self-criticism, development of form. This "romantic" was the greatest master since Milton of the classical forms in our language—ode, sonnet, epic. Though it is interesting (and sad) to speculate on what this young man might have done had he lived, the only reason why these speculations inevitably move toward a comparison with Shakespeare—both these books end with a reference to Keats as Shakespeare's peer—is the fact that the poet had already accomplished such great things when he died. The "unfulfilled-promise" theme has its place, but it often masks a sentimentality that is less interested in his real achievements than in the myth of the blighted blossom. Miss Ward's eyes dazzle; he died young.

Bate's eyes, however, are clear and open and patient, and his book is not about what might have been, but what is. Keats is not the mere "might-have-been" of English poetry, but one of its great masters. This is all he ever wanted to be; despite the cruelty of early death, he accomplished what he set out, with painful effort, to do. Who of us can say that?

Less tears, then, and more effort on our part to understand Keats' victory over time—that is the program of Bate's book. He is properly sceptical about the syphilis, the early premonitions of death, the omnipresent ghost of his mother, the treacherous friends; (but, since his anger is saved up for solid objects, he properly roasts the villain who served as guardian and thief over the Keats orphans' inheritance). Professor Bate is a great Johnson scholar, and appropriate sentences from our greatest critic come to him at every turn of Keats' life. Nor is this only a matter of

quotes. Something of Johnson's hard, human understanding exists in Bate. Though it may seem strange to compare these seven hundred pages of exhaustive analysis to the quick pictures Johnson drew in his lives of the poets, there are many paragraphs devoted to Keats' friends which have a Johnsonian touch:

In some respects Severn is not more reliable than Haydon. Each was what we should call an honest man—indeed a good man—unless we begin to eliminate most of humanity from consideration. But neither Haydon nor Severn had a very firm purchase on fact. . .

Any book so lengthy must in time reveal almost as much of the man who writes it as of its subject; and it is for qualities in the mind at work on this material that we put up with some of the digressions, the bits from monographs, the puzzling inclusiveness. (Why summarize the plot of *Hyperion* in twelve pages for people who are taking the trouble to read this learned study?) Bate, though he is no Boswell, stands very well indeed the prolonged exposure to which he has laid himself open.

The apparent inconcinnity between this giant volume and the short life it records is explained by the fact that the things that mattered to Keats matter to Bate—the dilemma of the modern poet, the need simultaneously to use tradition and to escape it, the stroke by which literature goes (as in the pivoting from octave to sestet in "How many bards" or "Much have I travell'd") from interpreting to *becoming* man's natural environment. Here a great drama was played out in the short years of Keat's brilliant experimenting. He found the key problems from the outset, and coped with them in a way that can be adequately discussed only in terms of the metric and mythic and dramatic problems that inhibit the modern poet.

Aristotle called art the poet's making (*poesis*) of a traditional character's doing (*praxis*) to bring about the audience's seeing (*theoria*). The plight of modern artists is that the traditional stories and the audience exist at an almost inaccessible remove from the poet's narrowed place and resources. His subject is himself contemplating himself at work. Poetry itself is the *praxis* as well as the *poesis*, and its own *theoria* as well. Keats discerned this with something approaching desperation; and made attempts upon the ancient *praxis* of myth, upon the *theoriai* of the modern consciousness, which foreshadow all the best efforts of twentieth-century poets to use their own

plight as a means for bursting out of the confinement of poetry in an irrelevant isolation from the broad world's concerns. It is an exciting achievement, here described in detail; and it is largely a tale of triumph, not defeat.

But there is, of course, the inescapable, intrusive, too early death of Keats—which, if it was not his defeat, was certainly our loss. Bate, by his sheer control and accumulation of detail, makes his final pages far more touching than the end of Miss Ward's book, in which she rails at the friends she thinks should have flocked around the dying poet in Rome. Here, too, Bate follows his great exemplar—in this case, Johnson's life of Savage, where every restraint placed upon one's sympathy makes it cut a deeper channel.

It is a very great book, the kind Keats deserves; and written in accordance with Keats' own wish, expressed with typically classical restraint: "English ought to be kept up."

Reviewed by GARRY WILLS