

Textes et contextes

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université de Bourgogne

9 | 2014

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Misplaced Labels: Picturing Keats from Severn to Ruskin

Étiquettes mal placées : l'image de Keats, de Severn à Ruskin

Article publié le 01 décembre 2014.

Caroline Bertonèche

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1. 'Writ in Water': Keats and Severn, a Double Portrait
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Betwixt you and I – certainly I have gained more from poor Keats who is dead and gone than from any other source – he introduced [me] to all the learned men I know – and helped me on my painting by his great mind – and then his Friendship and death are so interwoven with my name that it will be forever an honor to me.

1. 'Writ in Water': Keats and Severn, a Double Portrait

- 1 This revelation in a letter, buried for much too long in the archives of the Keats House, in Hampstead, from the now famous 'Friend of Keats', Joseph Severn – travelling partner and sole companion during the last days of John Keats in Rome –, is now part of a collection of letters and memoirs edited by Grant Scott in 2005; a selection of extracts and annotated bits of family correspondence in addition to the transcription of Severn's most significant, although incomplete, manuscripts which seem to have shed new light on Keats's art and name/fame. This material has forced the Keatsian scholarship to re-examine the Keats-Severn controversy, propelled by many to the higher sphere of undying love and Christian self-sacrifice, as well as dig deeper into Keats's unlikely 'posthumous existence'¹ – as he himself called it – of two artists brought together by the necessities of money, personal interest and tuberculosis. A common path(ology) which has somewhat survived the test of time: from the shared cabin on board the *Maria Crowther* to the twin tombs and epitaphs in the Rome Protestant Cemetery. Such a literary perspective, in the form of a tale or a myth, from the ship to the grave, is symptomatic of the growing interest, amongst Romantic scholars, for this somewhat dysfunctional relationship, at times ignored (as if Severn had been, in his twenties, buried alive along with Keats) at times over-idealised: 'It is perhaps the most dramatic foreshortening of any life in literary history (Scott 2005: 1). Food for thought or rather food for naught and yet the substance of a large Victorian heritage, forever in love with this sentimental journey south of two 'poet-painters' (Oscar Wilde) whose fates rely on an interwoven tapestry of Names; one of which will, of course, be John Ruskin. Only to his brother and under the seal of family secrecy can Severn trust the privacy of confession to admit the truth – the ugly truth: 'I have gained more from poor Keats who is dead and gone than from any other source' (Scott 2005: 269). Severn here unmasked: the statement bears his own signature. Circumstances also seem to partially clear his name. At William Haslam's requests and John Taylor's, Keats's editor, we know that Severn had been but a poor substitute for Charles Brown, being urged to take the

best friend's place at the last minute. In the end, there was just simply no one else who was willing to go. The attraction and privilege of an apparent 'devotion'² to the 'great' but 'poor' poet was the right to leave England and the restricted circles of the Royal Academy for the promise of a more fashionable exile and its range of Italian influences. However, the flaw Severn displayed when he sought to expand rapidly and sometimes with poor judgement his artistic community was failing to discriminate between some of his more frivolous encounters with lords and countesses and such stronger bonds as the one he helped establish between the two Johns: the Romantic poet, Keats, and the Victorian critic, Ruskin. Contrary to Severn's own emancipation from the quarantine of the 'Cockney poet' in Naples into the healthier ranks of nobility in Rome, William Sharp, Severn's first biographer, despite a certain carelessness in providing his readership with reliable facts and resources, gives nonetheless a more objective version of how the painter was in many ways rewarded for his attachment to the poet. He finally insists on how such an affiliation allowed the Severn circle to extend itself beyond social and temporal limitations:

The unexpected reward which his devotion to Keats had won him was not long delayed in the coming, and it is pleasant to know that, as one instance, so good a judge of art and literature as Mr. Erskine of Linlathen first took an interest in the young artist, and commissioned a picture from him, on account of his connection with the poet, whose early death was even then regarded by not a few as a disastrous loss to English literature. Later on, he won the friendship of Mr. Ruskin, Mr. Gladstone, and other eminent men, primarily on the same account. 'You would be surprised', he writes, 'how often I am pointed out here as the friend of Keats (Sharp 1892: 147-48).

- 2 The last quote mentioned by Sharp is an excerpt from one of the most famous of Severn's family letters written from l'Accricia near Rome, on 4 October 1824, to his sister Maria, in which the painter admits that his partnership with Keats has provided him with a considerable success on the Italian pictorial scene. In addition, Severn reveals that, instead of building his life and art in the shadow of Keats's name, he has planned his artistic career in collaboration with Keats's fame. Finally, Severn views his indebtedness to the poet, not as a belittling crutch but rather as a rewarding source of pride:

Owing to this Lady's death I have added a number of great and serviceable friends to my future life - is it not singular that to my acquaintance (sic) - and then gave me this order for the 'Lear' - my coming with Keats and friendship for him - will be a never fading Laurel, for everyone knows it, as Keats's name is rising, and everyone respects my character for it. - You would be surprised, how often it is mentioned to me - and how I am pointed out as the friend of the Poet Keats. - It was the work of Providence for my good both in mind and fortune. - I can never cease to remember it, and be thankful to God - for turning to good what I began so carelessly. - it was a risk indeed (Scott 2005: 262).

- 3 As time passed, Severn's allusions to the significance of this complex partnership with Keats grew in length and number as the painter was looking for a stronger motive to justify his trip to Italy, turning the whole experience into a positive adventure, whatever the setbacks, for the sake of family purposes and peace of mind:

I hope still to have the happiness to see my poor dear Mother, and should now be on my way but for the losses I have had, yet still if something turns up I shall set off to England for I long to come and see you all it will be 17 years in October since you & I sailed down the Thames with poor Keats, I see you now in my mind's eye, and the blue coat you had on, I can never forget you - how pale you look'd at the scene we had passed and how I trembled - yet all this was for the best, for I could not expect to have done what I have done here, or certainly made so many friends who are capable of serving my family (Scott 2005: 340)

- 4 Keats therefore became the centre of the Severn family's main preoccupations as did his daily state of mind and the status of his bad health in exchange for Severn's ever increasing role in what Lord Brock called the poet's 'tragedy of the last illness'. A new poet-painter brotherhood (a first glimpse into the Pre-Raphaelite heritage surely) which, despite the unhappy circumstances, was to bear more than one fruit, resulting in the marriage of one family of artists to another: Severn's son, Arthur, with Ruskin's Scottish cousin and ward, Miss Joan Ruskin Agnew. This proud union, Severn announced once again in one of his numerous letters to his sister Maria, on 7 December 1870, while he was still British consulate, in Rome: 'You'll be surprised

to hear that the sixth marriage in my dear family is soon to take place – Arthur is to be married to Miss Joan Agnew who has a house & garden on Denmark Hill’ (Scott 2005: 529). Severn’s own merit relies indeed upon his own ambition and his stubbornness in refusing to share with others some of his closer relations, somewhat selfishly perhaps but convinced, in the long run, that keeping his circle intact would result in a fortunate outcome for everyone.

2. Sons and Daughters: Severn, Ruskin and the Family Name

- 5 John Ruskin, impressed by the scope of Severn’s influential circle, draws, in his *Praeterita*, an incredibly vivid portrait of the ‘lovingly humorous’ painter, after having first come upon him and George Richmond, at Severn’s house in Via Rasella, when he visited Rome for the first time in 1840:

But there is nothing in any circle that never I saw or heard of, like Mr. Joseph Severn then was in Rome. He understood everybody, native and foreign, civil and ecclesiastic, in what was nicest in them, and never saw anything else than the nicest; or saw what other people got angry about as only a humorous part of the nature of things. (...) Lightly sagacious, lovingly humorous, daintily sentimental, he was in council with the cardinals to-day, and at picnic in Campagna with the brightest English belles to-morrow; and caught the hearts of all in the golden net of his good will and good understanding, as if life were but for him the rippling chant of his favourite song, – ‘Gente, e qui l’uccellatore’ (II, 249).

- 6 A few decades later, Ruskin’s protégée was to marry Severn’s son and become part of the father-painter’s enlarged family, here associated to the memory of Keats as well as to the changes that occurred throughout the years on the Italian scene:

So you want to know what Joan said about her visit to you & here it is ‘Arthur and I went on Monday last to see your Sister (our Aunt Maria) & found her very well. I thought her such a sweet old Lady & very handsome. I hope to be able to go & see her pretty often’ – There now I think you’ll be well pleased with my daughter Joan (...) The

selling of my picture of Keats Grave has been a great feather in my cap – I am glad to hear that poor dear Tom is able to go up & down the stairs, and that you showd (sic) off in a new gown for Joan's visit & that have summer days—What you say about the climate changing is certainly true. Easter is no longer very fine at Rome but has always a touch of winter & I think your Easter is now better than when we remember it as children.³

- 7 In the same way Grant Scott drew our scholarly attention on the added value of Severn's private letters and the knowledge we might gain from their publication, Rachel Dickinson has done very much the same in her edition of Joan Severn's 'sense and nonsense letters' to John Ruskin. The name of Severn comes up once again in the most recent compilations of epistolary scholarship on Ruskin. No surprise there. In the same way that the last letter we quoted could very well come right out of a Jane Austen novel or be included in Rachel Dickinson's sensible research, there are valuable details on Severn's patriarchy and patronage as well as on Ruskin's opinions on the ideal arts, on travel or on education hidden behind the apparent nonsense of (fe)male affectation. The letters, although unsubstantial at times, work as a substitute for the critic's personal diary. Similarly, Arthur Severn's recollections of his father-in-law show insight into the realm of the writer's personal confessions and 'prove extremely interesting, considering the author's intimate association with Ruskin and his great talent as a raconteur'.⁴ This talent Arthur surely inherited from his father whose company and stories several of the century's greatest minds never ceased to enjoy. If the letter to his brother Thomas Severn, written in Rome and dated 10 June 1872, recalls a visit from Arthur and Joan at John Ruskin's request in 'the north of Italy', it also mentions the homage paid to a noble line of painters and storytellers; a Ruskin-Severn collaborative piece of memorabilia celebrated in the form of a picture by Joseph Severn of Joan (Agnew Ruskin) Severn, 'the charming Bride':

Lately, I have had the delight of a visit from my Arthur & his Bride with Mr. J Ruskin, Mrs Hilliard & her daughter & Mr Godwin. This was indeed a treat & no doubt my desire to return was partly caused by the charming Bride offering me an asylum in her house at Herne Hill fearing that I might have been left pennyless. In the recent visit she showed me great affection & I was able to draw her picture &

produce one of my best works – This journey is an invite of Mr. John Ruskins, but I fear at this moment they may be hampered with the rain & inundations in the north of Italy – my Arthur is pursuing his painting tho' not quite brilliantly as at first, he has now the misfortune of a little independence which may impede his working.⁵

- 8 When the older generation painted and immortalised the next, the younger heirs were always eager to preserve the cultural authority of their elders. Needless to say that both Severn and Ruskin owe a great deal of their posthumous glow to the care of a grateful couple, named guardians of the artists' secrets and revelations. They felt entitled to keep their titles, so to speak, the ones they claimed to have rightly inherited. Beyond the closed circle of friends and family, such claims opened a new pathway into a larger political landscape and 'economy of art' (Ruskin 2008: 101-02). Inscribing the name of the poet as a *trompe-l'œil* instead of a genuine epigraph would then make for a powerful statement on the aesthetics of writing, the value of art and the birth of modern criticism: Ruskin's response, however deceitful, to Keats's own '(pathetic) fallacies'.⁶ In the end, Arthur and Joan survived, whatever the cost, forever indebted and perhaps slightly burdened by two, dare we say three, famous last names: Severn, Ruskin and Keats.

3. 'A Joy for Ever': Ruskin and the Keats Legacy

- 9 If Ruskin was in awe of Joseph Severn's efficiency in equally pleasing all the members of his Anglo-Italian coterie, he was certainly most thankful, as were many others at that time – Shelley, to name just one – to have brought Keats to Italy. Keats, the Londoner; Keats, the Hampstead poet: the only Romantic who had never travelled abroad before or even expressed the desire to leave England. Yet Keats, by way of fantasy and exoticism, had dreamt of Italy as a heavenly place of culture – a place he came to discover, or uncover rather, with glimpses of disappointment, blinded as he was by his affliction and the remnants of his pathology. Because he never made it to Venice, he kept of the city 'whose Name was [literally] writ in water' a better image than the one he drew out of a gloomy Rome. In addition to the

time he spent with Severn, this is also something he shared with Ruskin, aside from the many labels that were forced onto his Italian heritage. Venice is here approached from another angle, the symbol of its inherent richness in terms of nature and perspective: the roots of an artistic rapprochement, beyond the imperatives of history or chronology. Keats and Ruskin: a 'Romantic Victorian' pair with a common friend, a reliable circle, connections leading to a similar understanding of art and criticism. If Byron and Shelley belonged to a larger group of British poets and painters who did indeed travel to this unique spot (in time) – 'Lord Byron, we hear, has taken a house for three years, at Venice; whether we shall see him or not, I do not know. The number of English who pass through this town is very great'⁷ – Keats, on the other hand, would have to be content with just picturing its beauties from afar and invent his own Gothic revival with no real image in mind, all the while lacking in what the Romantics would promote as cultural experience. By reconstructing, in the unfinished *Eve of St. Mark*, a Venitian sanctuary for his heroin, whose discovery marks the climax of this holy fragment, Keats seems to be wandering off with her, away from dark thoughts but his mind restructured by a Book of legends and pious poetry. This ceremonial, more than simply honouring the power of evocation amongst the ruins, gives the poet a chance to revel in architectural delight by piecing back together some of his original Italian models. The poet trusts his fancy to do all the work, he who had ventured no further than the shores of his native country. The poem is not just written but carved in stone with monumental words – the first labelled reference or reverence to the 'stones of Venice'⁸ which would later become so dear to Ruskin:

Untir'd she read the legend page
Of holy Mark from youth to age;
On land, on seas, in pagan-chains,
Rejoicing for his many pains.
[...]
At length her constant eyelids come
Upon the fervent martyrdom;
Then lastly to his holy shrine,
Exalt amid the tapers' shine
At Venice (v.89-92 &115-19) (Stillinger 1978: 242)

- 10 The Saint-Agnes scenery, the stage of Keats's other celebrated Eve, is also tinged with Venetian splendor, fantasized to the point of beatification. The visual prowess, the mysticism, the profuse sense of detail and subtext in Vittore Carpaccio's works would become the center of everyone's attention, Keats, Ruskin, Burne-Jones, all equally enraptured by a feeling of distant familiarity; Carpaccio's *Legend of Saint Ursula* (1490), more particularly, fascinated Ruskin, when he visited Venice in 1869, 'after having had his attention drawn to the artist by Burne-Jones': 'There she lies, so real, that when the room's quite quiet, I get afraid of waking her' (he writes to Joan Severn, Venice, 19 September 1876, before painting his own *Copy of the Head of St. Ursula from Carpaccio's The Dream of St. Ursula*, 1877) (Hewison/Warrell/Wildman 2000: 264). Struck by the rediscovery of these works, the substance of which will inspire his later theories on modern art, Ruskin will bring to what can only be labeled as tradition a sense of novelty and euphoria, thus conceived by the Pre-Raphaelites as an artistic revival. Keats himself shaped his own version of an English Romantic art on the basis of an open heritage where Venice, forever unvisited, is not as such a place of memory but a place where the imagination can easily flourish and thus be memorialized: a memorial of the unknown, the inheritance of which cannot be grasped or claimed but certainly invented. Keats, long before Shelley, clearly stands out as the premature voice and posthumous embodiment of those visual influences, whether they were extracted from the world of architecture or from the spectre of Italian paintings. Although a stranger to Italy's most famous landmarks, Keats mapped his own geography of transition, he who understood very early on that no truth is worth writing except in the name of art's essential mutability. Between his *Eve of St. Agnes* and Millais's version of it, or between Carpaccio's and Burne-Jones's pictures, Keats, protected by Severn and then honored by Ruskin will give rise to both the Italianate charm of Shelley's *Adonais* as well as the chain of words and images which held the Pre-Raphaelite School together. The virtue, maybe even the glory, of the Keatsian aesthetics (in which Ruskin found great material to work on) is to have overcome the obstacles of distance and inexperience by promoting an attachment to some of the long-lasting values and universal labels of art. Keats, like Kant, a genius eager to transcend place and origin by versifying on something he never really saw or as such experienced. The result is the solid durability of his

poetry writing, valuable in that there is no end as to how much of its substance can be recycled by others. From Victorian labeling, always keen to advertise a weaker, Ophelia-like Keats with effeminate lines of conduct feeding on sexual madness as a genre, to a diluted sense of modernity like Ruskin's, the writers (or painters), whatever their choice of label, have found plenty of hidden and altered sources to imitate in Keats's poems. The hand of Ruskin extends to other dignified heirs: Francis Scott Fitzgerald in *Tender is the Night*, Virginia Woolf in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Tony Harrison in his 'Kumquat for John Keats', Willem De Kooning and his own abstract version of an epitaphic homage in the painting entitled *...Whose Name was Writ in Water*, Dan Simmons's Keats cybrid in his science-fiction trilogy, Gérard Genette even, in *Palimpsestes*, translating Keats's verse, in the space of a footnote...⁹ Keats thus reborn as a concept: fictional, linguistic, expressionist, industrial, mechanic. Caught up in the endless cycles/circles of Keatsian brotherhoods (from one affiliation to the next), such tributes in the forms of palimpsests, whether displaced, deconstructed or mislabeled, have always been at the heart of post-Romantic investigation and speculation. Other references seemed to be more easily identifiable in the works of contemporaries and successors, much more versed, and yet not always so convincingly, in the different modes of portraiture, posthumous representation and cultural travel. The source of endless questions, some still unanswered. Was John Keats really 'killed off by one critique' or 'snuffed out by an Article (XI, 60) (Steffan, Steffan & Pratt 1973: 412)'? What became of the engagement with Fanny Brawne? Was he really buried with some of her letters? Why does the mystery of the sick poet or of the young dead icon continue to live on? In this context, Keats, still the subject today of renewed, popular interest (in light of Jane Campion's most recent homage in *Bright Star*), whatever the outrageous label attached to the poet's name, is certainly unique.

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1 'Then I am afraid to encounter the proing and coning of anything interesting to me in England. I have an (sic) habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence'. Letter from Keats to Charles Brown written in Rome, 30 November 1820 (Rollins 1958: II, 359).

2 'In 1820, at Haslam's suggestion, he went with Keats to Rome, where his painting was accepted for the sake of the man he had served so well'. (Richardson 1980: 104)

3 Letter from Joseph Severn to his sister Maria, Rome, Scala Dante, 5 July 1875, in London Metropolitan Archives, Unpublished Letters by Joseph Severn MSS., n°1-192.

4 'On Arthur Severn's Recollections of Ruskin', *London News* (1903).

5 London Metropolitan Archives, Unpublished Letters by Joseph Severn MSS., n°1-192.

6 “Taking, therefore, this wide field, it is surely a very notable circumstance, to begin with, that this pathetic fallacy is eminently characteristic of modern painting. For instance, Keats, describing a wave breaking out at sea, says of it—‘Down whose green back the short-lived foam, all hoar,/Bursts gradual, with a wayward indolence (*Endymion*, II, 350)’. That is quite perfect, as an example of the modern manner. The idea of the peculiar action which foam rolls down a long, large wave could not have been given by any other words so well as by this ‘wayward indolence’ But Homer would never have written, never thought of , such words”. (Bloom 1965: 77)

7 Letter from Shelley written in Milan, 20 April 1818 (Shelley 1845: 106).

8 ‘The religious sentiment and symbolism of their [the Pre-Raphaelites] first works owed much to the High Church Revival – the Oxford Movement – and in all its phases Pre-Raphaelite art owed something to John Ruskin who was an undergraduate at Christ Church and returned later in his life to the University as Slade Professor. Some of the Pre-Raphaelites’ earliest and most important patrons lived in Oxford – above all Thomas Combe whose collection of paintings is now in the Ashmolean Museum. It was in the Oxford Union that their most important attempt at mural painting was made. Burne-Jones and Morris discovered Rossetti’s art when they were undergraduates in Exeter College and the Aesthetic movement into which one strand of Pre-Raphaelitism developed, originated in Oxford’. (Whiteley 1993: 9) (Hewison/Warrell/Wildman 2000: 87-125)

9 « (...) la *transformation* (‘traduction’) *homophonique* (Nadirpher propose ici le mot-valise *traducson*) (...) consiste à donner d’un texte un équivalent phonique approximatif en employant d’autres mots, de la même langue ou d’une autre. L’archétype oulipien de la transformation homophonique interlinguistique (de l’anglais en français) est cette exclamation de François Le Lionnais devant les primates du Jardin des Plantes, évidemment inspirée d’un célèbre vers de Keats : ‘Un singe de beauté est un jouet pour l’hiver’ ». (Genette 1982 : 60)

English

We are now close to celebrating the 200-year anniversary of the poet's death and yet the name of Keats is still misread (or misspelled) as is the exact date of his birth or the age when he died: the substance of a myth almost always pathologically incorrect. Naming or misnaming is a 'clinical fact', writes Pierre Bayard, one as infectious as the multiple forms (or labels) which have been gradually implanted onto his last name: Keats, Keatses... John, renamed 'Jack', 'whose name was writ in [murky] water'!

Looking back at some of the friendships and relationships which existed between John Keats, the dying poet in Rome, Joseph Severn, the nursing companion and 'Friend of Keats' and John Ruskin, a member of Severn's extended family (Ruskin's cousin married his son, Arthur Severn), this paper reflects on how one artistic circle seems to generate the next. In this particular case, the labels are infinite: a Romantic and a Victorian, a British and an Italian, a literary and a pictorial, a poetic and a critical vision of Italy. From Naples to Venice, two of the greatest English minds of the nineteenth century, Keats and Ruskin, meet and offer to the world their 'modern manner' of writing by associating poetry to criticism, nature to culture, painting to words.

Français

Alors que nous nous apprêtons à célébrer les 200 ans de la mort du poète, le nom de Keats, l'âge qu'il avait quand il mourut mais également la date exacte de sa naissance font, encore aujourd'hui, l'objet de multiples erreurs de lecture (ou d'écriture) : la source d'un mythe dont la substance n'est autre que pathologiquement incorrecte. Nommer ou renommer est un « fait clinique », nous dit Pierre Bayard, un acte tout aussi infectieux que les formes d'appellation multiples qui sont venues se greffer sur le nom de famille du poète : Keats, Keatses... ou bien sur son prénom, John devenu « Jack », « dont le nom [sera à jamais] écrit dans l'eau » – une eau trouble !

En s'intéressant, par voie de filiation, aux amitiés et relations qui se créèrent autour des personnages de John Keats, le poète agonisant à Rome, Joseph Severn, le compagnon des derniers jours ou « Ami de Keats » et John Ruskin, membre du cercle familial de Severn (la cousine de Ruskin épousa son fils, Arthur Severn), cet article s'interroge sur le devoir de mémoire et d'appartenance qui lie une génération à une autre, un cercle artistique à un autre. Dans ce contexte précis, les qualificatifs abondent : romantique et victorien, britannique et italien, littéraire et pictural, poétique et critique, le tout sur fond d'exil, de dissémination du patrimoine, de mise en scène visionnaire d'une Italie sculptée à son image. De Naples à Venise, deux des plus grands génies anglais du dix-neuvième siècle aux prénoms identiques, Keats et Ruskin, se rencontrent et se répondent pour établir ensemble, avec la manière, une nouvelle modernité dans l'écriture, au croisement de la poésie et de la critique d'art, de la nature et de la culture, de l'image et du mot.

Caroline Bertonèche

Maître de conférences, littérature anglaise, Université Stendhal – Grenoble 3,
CEMRA (EA 3016), 25bis cours Berriat, 38000 Grenoble