

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE E LETTERATURE STRANIERE
UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

1

ANNO XIX 2011

L'ANALISI
LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA

FACOLTÀ DI SCIENZE LINGUISTICHE
E LETTERATURE STRANIERE

UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE

1

ANNO XIX 2011

PUBBLICAZIONE SEMESTRALE

L'ANALISI LINGUISTICA E LETTERARIA
Facoltà di Scienze Linguistiche e Letterature straniere
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore
Anno XIX - 1/2011
ISSN 1122-1917

Direzione

GIUSEPPE BERNARDELLI
LUISA CAMAIORA
GIOVANNI GOBBER
MARISA VERNA

Comitato scientifico

GIUSEPPE BERNARDELLI – LUISA CAMAIORA – BONA CAMBIAGHI
ARTURO CATTANEO – MARIA FRANCA FROLA – ENRICA GALAZZI
GIOVANNI GOBBER – DANTE LIANO – MARGHERITA ULRYCH
MARISA VERNA – SERENA VITALE – MARIA TERESA ZANOLA

Segreteria di redazione

LAURA BALBIANI – SARAH BIGI – COSTANZA CUCCHI
MARIACRISTINA PEDRAZZINI – VITTORIA PRENCIPE

I contributi di questa pubblicazione sono stati sottoposti alla valutazione
di due *Peer Reviewers* in forma rigorosamente anonima

© 2012 EDUCatt - Ente per il Diritto allo Studio Universitario dell'Università Cattolica
Largo Gemelli 1, 20123 Milano - tel. 02.72342235 - fax 02.80.53.215
e-mail: editoriale.dsu@educatt.it (*produzione*); librario.dsu@educatt.it (*distribuzione*);
web: www.educatt.it/libri

Redazione della Rivista: redazione.all@unicatt.it - *web*: www.educatt.it/libri/all

Questo volume è stato stampato nel mese di luglio 2012
presso la Litografia Solari - Peschiera Borromeo (Milano)

FICTIONALIZING KEATS'S LAST JOURNEY: THE YOUNG MAN AND THE SEA

ANNA ANSELMO

1. *The beginning is the end is the beginning*

The present work is concerned with the sea voyage which initiated the final chapter of John Keats's life. Diagnosed with consumption over the summer of 1820, Keats was urged by his doctors to spend the winter in Italy: arrangements for his departure were made by his publisher, John Taylor, who secured a passage on the brigantine *Maria Crowther* for both Keats and his travel companion Joseph Severn. Keats's last journey is here considered not as a mere collection of real-life facts, but as a narrative with strong symbolic and fictional echoes. The sea, such a vital source of inspiration in Keats's poetry, had an ultimately disruptive effect on his earthly parable: he, who had "leaped headlong into the Sea"¹ in his poetry, now leaped into dangerous waters, which, despite the promise of hope, belied their deadly call. The letters written by Keats and Severn, dating roughly from August to November 1820, are here used as textual evidence of the highly symbolic value of the voyage.

This study will first chronicle the stages of Keats's journey: along the Channel, around the Iberian Peninsula, through Gibraltar, and eventually into the Mediterranean. What is further presented here, through the perusal of the letters, are the literary undertones of Keats's voyage, which echoes the crossing of the river Acheron on Charon's boat, the shipwreck in Byron's *Don Juan*, the *Ancient Mariner's* putrescent wait in the calm sea, and Leigh Hunt's own journey to Italy. Finally, the echoes of life and death in Keats's reflections with regard to his passage at sea will be explored: just as sea water is symbolically connected both to birth and to the afterlife, so is Keats's voyage ripe with suggestions of life and death. The sea is interpreted as a *non-place* and the *Maria Crowther* as a *heterotopia* in order to prove that Keats experienced his five-week journey as a barren no-man's-land separating London from Rome, past from present, creativity from silence, the experience of love from the weight of solitude, life from death. The day Keats left London was, in fact, the day he started dying; it was, at the same time, the beginning of Keats's poetic afterlife, of the romantic legend he was to become. The beginning was the end was the beginning.

¹ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, H.E. Rollins ed., 2 vols., Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1958, vol. 1, p. 374.

2. "Save me, God, for the waters / Have closed in on my very being"². *London to Naples: John Keats at sea*

The ship was moored along the Thames, at Tower Dock. Keats and Severn met there early in the morning, on Sunday, 17th September. The overcast sky promised rain. Woodhouse, Taylor and Haslam had tagged along: they boarded the ship, told Keats they would accompany him as far as Gravesend. They all stood on deck, stared in the direction of the estuary: clouds were gathering downstream, looking ominous, but there was no question of their voyage being delayed. Their captain was a weathered seaman and the *Maria Crowther* was a good ship, used to rough passages: two-masted, weighing 127 tonnes, she was a respectable brig, with a history of scuttling back and forth across the Channel, and across the Irish sea, carrying cargoes that took up most of the space below deck. Keats and Severn settled in and found that room for accommodation was cramped. Their cabin had been divided from the hold by a narrow galley: it was small, horse-shoe-shaped and low-ceilinged; there were six beds, little more than wooden bunks, with struts installed along one side to stop occupants from rolling out in bad weather. A thick cloth further divided the cabin: female passengers were expected. The cramped wooden smell of it was strong, and the air was damp, altogether inhospitable. "The cabin was like a vault. The bunks were like coffins"³.

The *Maria Crowther* weighed anchor around lunchtime, slowly sailing down the Thames, reversing the path of those ships which hundreds of years before had sailed upstream in the indomitable search for darkness. Severn was gloomy, melancholy, anxious. It was in his nature to be. He had left a loving mother and the comforts of a settled life; the long voyage scared him, the thought of seasickness weighed down on him, a haunting threat. He had forgotten his passport, he told Keats and the others, he would have to send for it in Gravesend. Keats cheered him up, ever the stout, bittersweet comedian, hiding the pain, the fear, and the physical ailments behind the noise and colour of his "waggery"⁴. They reached Gravesend late in the afternoon, in time for supper: Haslam set off to sort out Severn's passport; Woodhouse asked Keats for a lock of his hair and Keats complied. The warm drizzle sent him to bed early.

Monday 18th was a good day: Keats woke up croaky, but felt quite well. Severn went ashore to get supplies he had forgotten to pack, so Keats asked him to buy some laudanum, against seasickness, Severn surmised. Keats spent the day on deck, talking to Taylor, Woodhouse and Haslam, and waiting for Severn's passport as well as for the last passenger to arrive. A Mrs Pidgeon had come on board the night before, now there arrived Miss Cotterell, the young woman for whom Mrs Pidgeon would act as chaperon. To Keats's dismay, the new passenger was evidently consumptive, a dreary, morbid anticipation of what he would look and feel like in a couple of months' time. Severn wrote that both

² Psalm 69:1, Lament, in *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Darton, Longman, and Todd Ltd., London 1994, p. 881.

³ A. Motion, *Keats*, Faber and Faber, London 1997, p. 538. The salient details of Keats's journey are taken from this text.

⁴ Joseph Severn to William Haslam, Journal-Letter, 17-21 September 1820, in *Joseph Severn: Letters and Memoirs*, G.F. Scott ed., Ashgate, Aldershot 2005, p. 99.

Keats and Miss Cotterell refused to be treated as patients and that both played down their illness. And yet, the eighteen-year-old, pale and sickly Miss Cotterell was but a shadow, a ghost of everything a person her age should be, and Keats felt the injustice of it all, as well as the pang of recognition that came with it. He, "who had never conquered his uneasiness in the face of illness, was now to be faced with a living image of his own disease for the whole voyage"⁵.

They said their goodbyes to Taylor, Woodhouse, and Haslam, and left Gravesend around six p.m., Severn's passport safely on board. They sailed all night. The morning brought the passage out into the Channel. They were met by angry waves born of cross-currents, and by other ships barring their course. The traffic and the uneasy open waters were rough on the passengers: they could not keep their breakfast down. They took to their cabin and Keats played the doctor, as he would many times during the voyage, worrying about Miss Cotterell's weather-induced fainting, and trying to bring her comfort by dictating to Severn and Mrs Pidgeon what to do. As the *Maria Crowther* sailed on around the Isle of Thanet and towards Dover, the passengers quieted down. On Wednesday 20th, they were in Brighton, sailing in calm seas, but their trials were far from over: the wind was blowing from the south-west and the sea grew angrier and angrier. Keats warned Severn: "a storm was hatching"⁶. He was right. The winds picked up around two in the afternoon, pitching the ship: all their luggage fell across the cabin floor and the passengers had no choice but stay in their beds. Keats was fearless, all his focus on reassuring the female passengers, while Severn, uncharacteristically bold, climbed on deck to see the storm, and said it was beautiful⁷. Beautiful, but deadly, in all its sublime, mountain-like succession of waves. It was relentless. "[B]y evening the planks of their cabin walls had begun to separate"⁸, and water was flooding in at an alarming pace. The captain and his men worked to clear the water the ship had taken on board. They had to turn back to Dover.

When the storm subsided, the *Maria Crowther* was becalmed for a couple of days. Keats lowered his guard, forgot all his efforts at self-possession for a moment, and allowed himself to regret leaving. At Dungeness, he went ashore with Severn, walked on the beach taking advantage of the brief spell of sunlight, and toyed with the idea of giving up the voyage altogether. What was Italy to him if not a vague hope of recovery in which he could not bring himself to believe? He was undecieved by his friends' loving encouragements and by the doctors' advice that had sounded less like hope than desperation. Once Keats and Severn were back on board, the ship started slowly towards Brighton, headed for Portsmouth. As they approached, the captain told them he intended to put into harbour until the weather settled. Keats disembarked at Portsmouth and talked poor, worried Severn into allowing him to go back to London should things with his health get any worse.

They had been at sea for a few days and yet they had been unable to leave the coast: England seemed to be calling out to Keats, keeping him pinned to its friendly coasts. The

⁵ A. Ward, *John Keats: the Making of a Poet*, The Viking Press, New York 1963, p. 375.

⁶ G.F. Scott ed., *Joseph Severn: Letters and Memoirs*, p. 100.

⁷ *Ibidem*

⁸ A. Motion, *Keats*, p. 541.

land and the sea were conspiring against him, trying to turn his resolve to ashes, and he was close to giving up. He remembered that his friends, the Snooks, lived in Bedhampton, and told Severn they should visit. He burst in on the Snooks unannounced, happy to see familiar faces, but sad to revisit better times, hopeful and optimistic, when the future held more than the prospect of solitary illness in Rome. Brown was only seven miles away, the Snooks told him, at the Dilkes'. It was then, during that night spent at his friends', that Keats chose which course to take: bad weather and snail-paced, lingering sailing had fed his indecision about the voyage; now, with Brown and his London life still so close, he felt he was ready to give up all hopes of recovery and return to Hampstead. Dying with Fanny at his side did not sound so horrible after all, but he somehow resisted the temptation and resolved to proceed to Italy.

The *Maria Crowther* left Portsmouth on 29th September with a fair wind. The ship now sailed along smoothly, faster than it had ever been. Shortly, they were passing the Isle of Wight, and Keats longed for the open sea, a memory-less place. They went ashore again along the coast of Dorset, in Studland Bay. Severn thought Keats was improving in health and spirits; simple and often emotionally naïve, Severn believed in the outward signs of recovery in a man who knew all too well how to use the outside to cover up the inside.

On 1st October, the *Maria Crowther* left the Channel for the open sea. Here, finally, was oblivion. The sea held no memories, no dear faces, no places resonating with dreams and disappointed hopes. It was immense and beautifully non-descript, empty of signs of a previous life. Keats was finally dreadfully alone and the die was cast: there was no going back now. What lay ahead was all he had left. The weather was fine and he spent time on deck, reading, toying with presents Fanny had given him. He watched the stars grow brighter and the tip of Brittany appear and then disappear as they sailed around it. The Bay of Biscay changed everything: they were tossed about in a storm for three days, the ship pitching and rolling with the angry sea. Severn was miserable, while Keats and Miss Cotterell took turns to be ill: the foul-smelling, cramped cabin made the young girl faint, but if the portholes were open, the riotous stormy air breezing through made Keats sick; it even caused him an haemorrhage. The fear, discomfort, danger and misery of the voyage were worsened by a picaresque adventure: approaching Trafalgar, the *Maria Crowther* was made to heave-to by two Portuguese men-of-war, who believed the British ship was carrying revolutionaries to Spain. The incident was soon resolved and the *Maria Crowther* soldiered on. Keats was further sinking into the depths of depression: he was weak in body and, as Severn found out, in mind. The laudanum Keats had asked him to buy in Gravesend was no antidote for seasickness, it was an escape route, should things get worse; and the young, sick poet was beginning to think the worse was now⁹. The prospect of "the extended misery of a long illness ... the dismal nights – the impossibility of receiving any sort of comfort – and above all the wasting of his body and helplessness – these he had determined on escaping"¹⁰. Severn managed to talk him out of using the laudanum.

⁹ R. Gittings (*John Keats*, Heinemann, London 1968, p. 416) and A. Motion (*Keats*, p. 544) believe this revelation to have taken place some time between the Bay of Biscay and Naples on the basis of Severn's letter to John Taylor, 25-26 January, 1820, in *Letters*, vol. 2, pp. 371-373, p. 372.

¹⁰ *The Letters of John Keats*, H.E. Rollins ed., vol. 2, p. 372.

They were becalmed in Cape St. Vincent. At first, Keats spent time on deck enjoying the quiet, but soon the dead-like sight of the sea grew disturbing and felt worse than the storms. When the wind picked up again and the ship sailed through the straits of Gibraltar, Keats was relieved, not knowing that the final part of his journey would prove the most difficult. The last few weeks at sea were wordless: neither Keats nor Severn wrote letters during that time¹¹. As soon as the *Maria Crowther* entered the Mediterranean, Keats suffered another severe haemorrhage, which left him weak and feverish. The following weeks were an exhausting, despairing hallucination: Keats slipped in and out of consciousness, too weak to crawl out of his bunk, confined to a rocking coffin, nauseous and sweaty. They reached Naples at dawn, on 21st October, after a thirty-four-day long voyage during which Keats's life had shrunk beyond imagination. For a moment, Naples felt like a dream: "the shimmering water, the darting brilliant boats, the great curve of the harbour and the purple cone of the volcano, with its plume of smoke edged golden by the morning sun"¹². But then came the news that they were quarantined. There had been an outbreak of typhus in London around the time the *Maria Crowther* had left Tower Dock: for safety reasons, ten more days on board were required of the crew and passengers. So the misery continued until 31st October: Keats set foot on Italian soil the day of his twenty-fifth birthday, and thus hastened down the dreadful path towards his death.

3. *Byron, Coleridge, and Hunt: the literary echoes of Keats's last journey*

Literature, the great soul within Keats's soul, had slowly dwindled and faded out as the poet's physical conditions worsened. Tuberculosis had amplified Keats's naturally morbid temperament and reduced him to incoherent distress and fretfulness, not to mention irritability and borderline paranoia; at the same time, it had dried up any interest he had in poetry. At a time of profound suffering, when the awareness of approaching death and the steady decrease of hope conspired to strip him of his characteristic resilience and soldiering pride, worshipping at the altar of poetry seemed fruitless. A life dedicated to language and literature had produced modest sales, some reviews and much unrest, and then disease had come to wipe out even the remotest chance of fame. When Keats boarded the *Maria Crowther*, the thought of poetry had become haunting and painful, a manic, obsessive reminder that his reputation and talents were now beyond redemption. Yet, Gittings reminds us, "the last few months left to Keats, though barren of poetry, a time when he felt he had lost his vocation forever, have nevertheless a living poetry of their own"¹³. The poet's voyage across the sea, in particular, resounds with literary echoes.

¹¹ Both Keats and Severn resumed writing once they reached Naples. Severn wrote to Haslam on 22nd October (he had not written since 21st September) and Keats wrote to Mrs Brawne on 24th October (his last letter from the *Maria Crowther* had been written on 30th September). This accounts for the dearth of information with regard to the last part of the journey.

¹² R. Gittings, *John Keats*, p. 417.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

As Keats settled in his cabin, on the morning of 17th September, his thoughts were of Fanny and the life he was about to leave: he had brought with him a few presents she had given him. Poetry had found room in his luggage: along with some clothes and his new thick coat, Keats had packed Shakespeare's *Works*, the first two cantos of *Don Juan*, and the manuscripts of a few of his own poems. It was, surprisingly, Byron, who resounded the most loudly during the long, exhausting journey. Bad weather plagued the *Maria Crowther* during her tempestuous time in the Channel, where she was "groaning for a fortnight"¹⁴, and hit her again near the Bay of Biscay. The first storm caught the ship on 20th September, off Brighton: the wind was coming from the south-west, seemingly favourable at first, but growing stronger and fiercer. The storm broke in the early afternoon: Keats, Severn and their two travel companions stayed inside the cabin, hoping to weather the worst of it in a short time. But the fury of the wind and rain was terrible. Severn, frightened, yet fascinated by this prodigy of nature, clambered up on deck, to see it for himself:

the waves were in mountains – and rocked the ship – the watery horizon was like a Mountainous Country – but the ship's motion was beautifully to the sea – falling from one wave to the other in a very lovely manner – the sea each time crossing the deck and one side of the ship being level with the water¹⁵.

But the fear and danger were not over:

... When the dusk came[,] the sea began to rush in from the side of our Cabin from an opening in the planks. This made us rather long faced – for it came by pails-full – again I got out – and said to Keats – "here's <a> pretty music for you" – with the greatest calmness he answered me – only 'Water parted from the Sea'¹⁶.

The fury of the sea must have been impressive: sublime and terrifying. The ship "staggering from crest to trough of the waves, and clambering up again, the sea flowing across the foredeck with each plunge" forced the passengers to "lay in the dark" for hours, "listening to the groan of the pumps, the shouts of the crew, and the crash of the waves outside"¹⁷. Keats retained enough of his wits to remember music from the life he had left behind and quote from T. A. Arne's opera *Artaxerses* (1762). The sea was not done with them: once the captain decided to turn the ship around and retrace his steps back to Dover, things slightly improved, but "the horrible agitation continued in the ship lengthways – here were the pumps working – the sails squalling the confused voices of the sailors – the

¹⁴ *Joseph Severn: Letters and Memoirs*, G. F. Scott ed., p. 104.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101.

¹⁷ A. Ward, *Keats*, p. 376.

things rattling about in every direction – and us poor devils pinn'd up in our beds like ghosts by daylight"¹⁸.

The second severe storm hit them once they had turned into the Bay of Biscay: the open sea was worse than the narrow Channel. Everyone, but the captain and a watchman, was driven below decks: for three days “the sea boiled round them so fiercely that at times even the crew thought they might sink”¹⁹. The “riotously bucking cabin”²⁰ was crowded, foul-smelling, damp, as the sea roared, raged, bellowed, pounded around them.

It was once they were safe and approaching Trafalgar that Keats took up Byron's *Don Juan*, Canto II, and was “reduced to fury”²¹. Here were stanzas upon stanzas recounting a shipwreck: satire and Byron's funambulist genius conspired to create a detailed portrait of desperation at sea that oozed sarcasm and cynicism. Keats, who had just been through two *bona fide* storms at sea, could not help recognizing the picture and despising the caricature. Byron had got everything right, even, incredibly, Keats's personal lovesickness and dereliction. “Love,” Byron chanted,

who heroically breathes a vein,
Shrinks from the application of hot towels,
And purgatives are dangerous to its reign,
Seasickness death: his love was perfect, how else
Could Juan's passion, while the billows roar
Resist his stomach, ne'er at sea before?²²

Keats, plagued by thoughts of his own lost love and by his stomach and lungs, could not appreciate the joke. But Byron went much further: his poetic shipwreck was a mirror-image of Keats's real life. Nothing was missing: “waves oozing from the port-hole” that made berths “a little damp”²³; the strong gale that might “carry away, perhaps, a mast or so”²⁴; the ship that was thrown “right into the trough of the sea”, and the pumps that sounded for “there were four feet water found”²⁵; the water that washed the decks and made “a scene men do not soon forget”²⁶; and, finally, the masts that were cut away and the ship that lay “like a mere log”²⁷. To such an ‘amused’ scene of destruction, Byron added a little humane touch:

It may be easily supposed, while this
Was going on, some people were unquiet,

¹⁸ *Joseph Severn: Letters and Memoirs*, G.F. Scott ed., pp. 101-102.

¹⁹ A. Motion, *Keats*, p. 544.

²⁰ *Ibidem*

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 545.

²² Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, in 2 vols., John Murray, London 1849, II.XXIII.

²³ *Ibid.*, II.XXV.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, II.XXVI.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, II.XXVII.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, II.XXXI.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, II.XXXII.

That passengers would find it much amiss,
To lose their lives as well as spoil their diet²⁸.

Many years later, Severn would remember Keats's fury and indignation. Throwing down the book, he had exclaimed:

This gives me the most horrid idea of human nature, that a man like Byron should have exhausted all the pleasures of the world so completely that there was nothing left for him but to laugh and gloat over the most solemn and heart rending [scenes] of human misery – this storm of his is one of the most diabolical attempts ever made upon our sympathies, and I have no doubt it will [fascinate] thousands into [extreme] obduracy of heart – the tendency of Byron's poetry is based on paltry originality, that of being new by making solemn things gay & gay things solemn²⁹.

Keats's bitterness had to do with his feeling that his own tragedies were being turned into an aristocrat's joke, as well as knowing that his own poetry, his own world view, would never, while he lived, achieve the same status as Byron's. So there he was, broke, living the tragedy of a deadly disease, and reading the fictionalization of it in an incredibly talented snob's bestseller. He felt cheated.

Shortly after the Bay of Biscay, there came another event, reminiscent of literature. The calm at Cape St. Vincent was ripe with echoes: both anaphoric and cataphoric. There was something eerie about the sudden stillness of the sea after witnessing the troubling experience of the mighty swell and terrible roar of the billows: Keats forgot his anger about Byron and was reminded that dull nothingness could be even worse for his mind and body. Nothing moved for days, the wind a most remarkable absentee. That dreadful stillness was the *Ancient Mariner's*:

Down dropt the breeze, the sails dropt down,
'Twas sad as sad could be;
And we did speak only to break
The silence of the sea!

All in a hot and copper sky,
The bloody sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand,
No bigger than the moon.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, II.XXXIII.

²⁹ G.F. Scott, *Joseph Severn: Biographical Notes on Keats*, in *The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers, 1816-1878*, H.E. Rollins ed., 2 vols., Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1948, vol. 2, pp. 134-138, p. 134. Scholars have since questioned the veracity of Severn's report of this episode, suggesting that such a reaction may have been uncharacteristic of Keats. W.J. Bate, for example (*John Keats*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass. 1963, p. 664), maintains that Severn may have reported the episode "with some expansion".

Day after day, day after day,
 We stuck, nor breath nor motion,
 As idle as a painted ship
 Upon a painted ocean.

Water, water, everywhere,
 And all the boards did shrink,
 Water, water, everywhere,
 Nor any drop to drink³⁰.

Leigh Hunt, voyaging to Italy only eighteen months later than Keats, remembered the ominous calm at the Bay of Biscay and confessed the naiveté of the amateur sea voyager. "A calm in the Bay of Biscay, after what we had heard and read of it, sounded to us like repose in a boiling cauldron," he wrote, "But a calm, after all, is not repose"³¹. The terms he used to describe what he saw are reminiscent both of Coleridge's *Mariner*, and of what must have been Keats's self-same experience at Cape St. Vincent.

[A calm] is a very untrusting and unpleasant thing, the ship taking a very gawky motion, as if playing the buffoon; and the sea heaving in huge oily-looking fields, like a carpet lifted. Sometimes it appears to be striped into great ribbons ... the sea ... swelling with foul and putrid substances³².

4. "*O ship! New billows sweep thee out / Seaward. What wilt thou? Hold the port, be stout*"³³.
The last summer in Hampstead and the sea of life and death.

The ocean with its vastness, its blue green,
 Its ships, its rocks, its caves, its hopes, its fears –
 Its voice mysterious – which whose hears
 Must think on what will be and what has been³⁴.

John Keats wrote these lines in August 1816 while vacationing in Margate, by the sea. His fascination with the great deep is obvious in the enumerative enthusiasm, typical of his early poetry. In these lines, the sea is celebrated for its vastness and mystery, for its vitality

³⁰ S.T. Coleridge, *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, II, in *Samuel Taylor Coleridge Selected Poetry*, H.J. Jackson ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford 1994, pp. 107-122.

³¹ L. Hunt, *The Autobiography of Leigh Hunt*, Smith, Elder & Co., London 1860, pp. 293-294.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 294.

³³ Horace, *Odes*, I, 14: "O navis, referent in mare te novi fluctus. O quid agis! Fortiter occupa portum." Given above in W.E. Gladstone's translation, in W.E. Gladstone, *The Odes of Horace*, John Murray, London 1894, p. 18.

³⁴ J. Keats, "To my Brother George", in *John Keats, The Complete Poems*, J. Barnard ed., Penguin Books, London 1988, p. 64.

(its “blue greens”, its ships crossing), for its ‘lifelessness’ (its concave and convex spaces), and for being the repository of things past and things to come. The sea, ambiguous by nature, holds the hopes and fears of men and is, itself, both bringer and harbinger of hope and fear. Keats always understood the sea. He understood its profound ambiguity, the “attractiveness and fearsomeness”³⁵ that countless cosmogonies have handed down to us. All his life Keats stared and wondered, wide-eyed, at this prodigy of vast beauty and unfathomable, redoubtable depths. It was, perhaps, narratively appropriate that his death should also come through the sea.

While water is a symbol of birth, it is also the matrix of profound divisiveness: fresh water is the bringer of life, the quencher of thirst, the foundation of communities and social units, a loving mother; salt water, on the other hand, is its alluring, deadly counterpart. As Bachelard points out, “water, the substance of life, is also the substance of death...”³⁶, claiming lives as a tribute to appease its “incomplete unrest”³⁷. The sea is a siren: its shapeless fluid beauty entices, while its dangers, its secrets, its hidden depths and mysteries are death traps. Seawater is undrinkable, it is inscrutable, uncontrollable. Hesiod and Homer call it ‘barren’, ‘sterile’. The Bible presents its violence, its destructive force in the flood that swallows all lands and all people, the ultimate act of annihilation and recreation. Seawater is thus “emblematic of forces of birth, destruction and renewal,” it is a “locus of suffering and regeneration”³⁸. It is the promise of life and the all-encompassing, all-devouring power of death³⁹.

“My Physician tells me I must contrive to pass the Winter in Italy”⁴⁰, Keats wrote his sister on 5th July 1820. Days earlier, he had suffered a strong haemorrhage which left no doubts as to his diagnosis. His doctors, Dr Lambe and Dr Darling, concurred: Italy “was the only hope”⁴¹. A voyage, then: the “mighty swell”⁴² of the sea was to be his salvation, his own personal journey into the liquid womb of a great mother, his descent into holy waters of baptism, in order to “die into life”⁴³. He would “plunge [his] head beneath water,” so that the old, consumptive man would become “completely immersed and buried”⁴⁴, and the new recovered man could suddenly appear from under the watery surface. The sea called out to Keats and promised him life. On the same 5th July⁴⁵ Keats wrote Fanny

³⁵ G.B. Kauvar, *The Other Poetry of Keats*, Associated University Presses, Cranbury, New Jersey 1969, p. 141.

³⁶ G. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams: an Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, The Dallas Institute on Humanities and Culture, Dallas 1983, p. 72.

³⁷ P. Larkin, *Talking in Bed*, l. 5, in *Philip Larkin Collected Poems*, A. Thwaite ed., Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, Macmillan, New York 2004.

³⁸ M. Dalton, *A Process in the Weather of the Heart: the Boatman Paintings of Gerald Squires*, “Newfoundland Studies”, XI, 1995, 1, pp. 32-52, p. 36.

³⁹ Cfr. J. Keats, “On the Sea”, in *John Keats, The Complete Poems*, J. Barnard ed., p. 101.

⁴⁰ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, H.E. Rollins ed., vol. 2, p. 305.

⁴¹ R. Gittings, *John Keats*, p. 401.

⁴² J. Keats, “On the Sea”, p. 101.

⁴³ “Hyperion, A Fragment”, III. 130, in J. Keats, *The Complete Poems*, pp. 283-307, p. 306.

⁴⁴ St. J Chrysostom, *Homily*, quoted in R. D. V. Glasgow, *The Concept of Water*, R. Glasgow Books, online edition, 2009, p. 303; to be found on <http://books.google.com>.

⁴⁵ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, H.E. Rollins ed., vol. 2, p. 305. Rollins suggests 5th July 1820, but the date is unsure.

Brawne, relating the very same news: "They talk of my going to Italy"⁴⁶. But his letter bore no sign of hope, no promise of recovery, no belief in survival, quite the contrary: "'Tis certain I shall never recover if I am to be so long separate from you"⁴⁷. The distance to Italy seemed impossible to bridge: instead of leading him towards salvation, the sea, deprived of all its restorative, lifeful powers, would be the cause of his separation from Fanny, hence the cause of his death.

As July turned into August, Keats was nowhere near making a decision, but whatever hopes he harboured of avoiding a sea voyage to Italy were now gone. "'Tis not yet Consumption," he wrote his sister on 13th August, "but it would be were I to remain in this climate all the Winter"⁴⁸. He was "thinking of ... voyaging ... to Italy"⁴⁹. And yet, writing to his beloved Fanny, he sang a completely different tune: "I feel it almost impossible to go to Italy, the fact is I cannot leave you"⁵⁰. The distant prospect of recovery spurred him and abandoned him in turns. In his troubled, utterly distressed mind, the sea was at once his killer and his saviour. The 'see-saw' of emotions was dizzying: on the one hand, there were doctors and concerned friends urging him towards the sea, and away from a likely deadly British winter; on the other, there was the ominous blue-blackness of the sea that threatened to kill him by snatching him away from everything he had ever known, ever wanted, ever loved. The weight of these thoughts was unbearable.

"We are at home on the land", Michael Ferber writes, "The sea has always been alien and dangerous"⁵¹, for it binds us to rules contrary to our nature. Yet, sometimes, we are forced by circumstances to put to sea, and make a "path under surges that threaten to engulf"⁵² us. "A voyage," Auden reminds us, "is a necessary evil, a crossing of that which separates or estranges"⁵³; it is only undertaken in order to reach a specific goal, which otherwise could not be attained. The sea is a "place of purgatorial suffering;" "the putting to sea, the wandering is never *voluntarily* entered upon as a pleasure. It is a pain which must be accepted as cure, the death that leads to rebirth"⁵⁴. It is in the voyage, then, that the ambiguity of the sea, its inner dialectic between life and death, most evidently comes to life; and it was in this dialectic that Keats was caught during the summer of 1820. Unwilling to undertake a journey that would be the death of his spirit, he nonetheless consented to do it to salvage his body, at least. The pain of separation, the dangers of the treacherous deep, the awareness of deadly solitude, and the fear of illness coloured the prospect of the weeks he would spend on a ship, voyaging towards the dim hope of survival.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 303.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 312.

⁵¹ M. Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, p. 179.

⁵² Sophocles, *Antigone*, quoted in Th.C.W. Oudemans – A.P.M.H. Lardinois, *Tragic Ambiguity: Anthropology, Philosophy and Sophocles' Antigone*, E.J. Brill, Leiden 1951, p. 120.

⁵³ W.H. Auden, *The Enchafed Flood or the Romantic Iconography of the Sea*, Faber and Faber, London 1951, p. 19.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

He chose life. Yet he knew he was travelling towards death. “This journey to Italy wakes me at daylight every morning and haunts me horribly”, he wrote to his publisher and friend, John Taylor, “I shall endeavour to go, though it be with the sensation of marching up against a Battery⁵⁵. To Brown he confided: “A winter in England would, I have not a doubt, kill me, so I have resolved to go to Italy...”⁵⁶ He added, “Not that I have great hopes of that – for, I think, there is a core of disease in me, not easy to pull out”⁵⁷. The same day, he inquired about “a Passage to Leghorn by Sea”⁵⁸. Early in September, after a severe haemorrhage, the trials and tribulations of finding a companion for his journey, and the difficult task of raising funds for travel expenses, he characteristically swept away all sadness and distress to write to his sister: “I ... feel very impatient to get on board as the sea air is expected to be of great benefit to me”⁵⁹. On 13th September, in Fanny Brawne’s Literary pocket Book, the following words are pencilled: “Mr. Keats left Hampstead”⁶⁰.

The siren call of the sea, alternating prospects of life and visions of certain death, was a pivotal motif at this time in Keats’s life. His voyage was the epitome of a no-win situation: within, it nurtured the contradicting coexistence of life and death, that most fearful ambiguity of saltwater. To stay was a death sentence that would nonetheless make Keats feel alive. To leave was an act of hope towards life, yet it was “to die a little”⁶¹. No hero goes to sea for the sake of it: for “a wide sea voyage severs us at once – it makes us conscious of being cast loose from the secured anchorage of settled life and set adrift upon a doubtful world”⁶². Jason was trying to get to the Golden Fleece and Odysseus was trying to get back home. John Keats was trying, against all odds, to stay alive, and, all the while, he was voyaging through the deadly, uncontrollable sea, slowly and inexorably slipping away towards the greatest, most dreaded voyage of all.

5. “Sea, that art clothed with the sun and the rain, / ... Thy large embraces are keen like pain”⁶³. *Non-place and Heterotopia in Keats’s Last Journey*

Keats wrote only one letter during his voyage: it was addressed to Charles Brown, and bore the date 30th September, when the *Maria Crowther* was moored off Yarmouth, in the Isle of Wight. The sheer dearth of words, which characterized the thirty-four days

⁵⁵ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, H.E. Rollins ed., vol. 2, p. 315.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

⁶⁰ Quoted in R. Gittings, *John Keats*, p. 408.

⁶¹ E. Haraucourt, *Le Rondel de l'Adieu*, in *Seul*, BiblioLife, online edition 2008, p. 12; to be found on <http://books.google.com>.

⁶² W. Irving, *The Voyage*, in *The Sketch-Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*, G.P. Putnam and Son, New York 1868, p. 20.

⁶³ A. Swinburne, *The Triumph of Time*, 1866, ll. 266, 268; online at *Representative Poetry Online*: <http://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/poem/2104.html>. The original text is in *Swinburne's Collected Poetical Works*, 2 vols., Heinemann, London 1924, vol. 1, pp. 34-47.

Keats spent at sea, is eloquent enough: his letter writing may have grown more sporadic, but his words grew stronger, clearer, and louder. The emotional and mental states Keats attempted to convey seem to be staring down at us in capital letters even after two hundred years. The thought of death was constantly on Keats's mind, as was the thought of life, that is, the thought of the life he might have had, and wished he had had, with Fanny. The letter shows that Keats had lost hope of recovery and that he was slowly becoming aware of his state of separation, and experiencing the sea voyage as the actualization of that separation. Keats was no traveller, as a traveller is one who enjoys a journey, intent on learning and experiencing the sense impressions and the vivid images he encounters; he was, in fact, a passenger, one whose journey is defined according to the persistent, pounding reality of a destination. His peculiar situation as a passenger posited his voyage across the sea as a transit: the physical spaces of the ship and the sea were blotted out, as they hardly retained any tangible reality; they became vestiges of space inhabited by Keats's own psychological space. He found himself faced with a sea voyage, which interposed "a gulf, not merely imaginary, but real"⁶⁴ between two very distinct places, the one he came from and the one he was sailing to.

London and Rome were, still are, what Augé would call anthropological places⁶⁵: they are cities occupied by people who inhabit them, work within them, defend them, design their ever-changing shapes, trace their boundaries, mould their urban physiognomy. People colour these cities with the weight of their lives, with their spatial and cultural perceptions, their linguistic mores, and with the set of relations they entertain with the cityscape and their fellow-city-dwellers. The texture of cultural and ethnological history courses through anthropological places and creates their identitarian geometry. A place is a repository of identity, both collective and individual. London was Keats's point of departure: the physical existence of its streets, houses, parks, theatres, and city coaches was a marker of Keats's identity; furthermore, its collective quality, creative of social life, made London Keats's place of initiation, as his adulthood, poetic creativity, and love life all originated and developed within its organized framework. If London, as an anthropological place of departure, symbolized Keats's individual life experience, Rome was the cradle of the centuries-long, collective experience of European history: not only was it the great initiator of modernity on whose footsteps all successors followed, but it was also the cultural matrix from which literature and art originated. Rome resonated with history, myth, literature, rhetoric, and the echoes of a magical world. For Keats, Rome had been a life-long dream; now, it was the final destination of his voyage. Rome's anthropological weight had shrunk in the presence of Keats's pressing need to receive proper treatment for his condition and spend a mild winter. Rome was thus the anthropological place of arrival, antithetical to London, the anthropological place of departure; London had seen life, love, poetry, and health; Rome would see death, loneliness, silence, and disease. In-between, there lay the sea.

⁶⁴ W. Irving, *Voyage*, p. 20.

⁶⁵ M. Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, Verso, London 1995, p. 42.

At once time-keeper, through the reiterative rhythm of waves and tides, and bringer of timelessness, the sea is suspended in time; its rather uniform vastness, a repetition of motion, makes it nameless, shapeless, ungraspable, wrought in anonymity. In the final phase of Keats's existential parable the sea was thus nondescript, transitory, a mere crossing detached from either past or future. The sea of Keats's last voyage was the imposing reality of an identity-less present in which friend and foe, love and loss, life and death became, in fact, ghosts, lost in the "vast space of waters" that was like "a blank space in existence" where "all is vacancy"⁶⁶. Incarnation of "the middle of nowhere", the sea was, for Keats, time suspended: the "great [separator]" before the arrival of death, "the great divorcer forever"⁶⁷. In the non-descript present of his non-place, Keats's wishes cancelled each other out, almost as if to signify the transitoriness of his voyage, devoid of a hold on reality. "I wish for death every day and night to deliver me from these pains," he wrote, "and then I wish death away, for death would destroy even those pains which are better than nothing"⁶⁸.

In this perspective, the sea of Keats's voyage may be understood as a *non-place*⁶⁹: it is a transient experience, an extended, suspended moment in time without a specific spatial boundary or a specific spatial radication. The *Maria Crowther* itself becomes a *heterotopia*. "The boat," Michel Foucault writes "is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea"⁷⁰. Heterotopias, as Foucault defines them, are places with indubitable physical existence, but which point to a space beyond that existence, almost as if they were stretching in all directions, somehow pulverizing their physicality.

Heterotopias are 'counter-spaces': not fully mapped or accounted for, they exist in a time-paused or temporary dimension⁷¹. The *Maria Crowther* possessed, in fact, both qualities: on the one hand, it was suspended, it existed in a moment in-between which lacked the specifics of the passing of time; the days on board dragged on, blending one into the other, besmeared with the sameness of the waves, all adventure lost in the alternate, coordinate-less world of the sea. On the other hand, the *Maria Crowther* was transitory, a space of crossing which could only resolve into arrival at its destination. On the ship time and space blended: Keats lived the eternity of a voyage that became endless, stranded, as he was, outside the rules and laws of life on land; at the same time Keats experienced the transitoriness of the crossing, a painful rite of passage, as he mentally kept reaching backwards to London and an irretrievable past, stained by regrets of time badly spent, and forwards to Rome and an inscrutable future, whose deathly tune seemed nonetheless to be audible.

⁶⁶ W. Irving, *Voyage*, p. 19.

⁶⁷ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, H.E. Rollins ed., vol. 2, p. 345.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁷⁰ M. Foucault – J. Miskowiec, *Of Other Spaces*, "Diacritics", XVI, 1986, 1, pp. 22-27, p. 27.

⁷¹ See B. Selman, *Pirate Heterotopias*, in *Deptford. TV Diaries II – Pirate Strategies*, J. Anderson – A. Hadzi ed., Openmute, London 2008, pp. 19-36.

6. "I will go back to the great sweet mother, / Mother and lover of men, the sea"⁷². *Keats and the Charon Complex*

Ancient funeral rites showed awareness of the connection of men to the vegetable world. In *Water and Dreams*, Bachelard narrates how the Celts sometimes placed their dead within a hollowed tree trunk, which they later surrendered to the waters⁷³. In fact, water, the principle of life, is also the principle of death: the dead are consigned to hollowed wood and then to water as if to a mother's womb. Symbolically, this gesture proves man's desire to visualize death as a return to the maternal⁷⁴. The funeral rite, symbolically celebrated as a voyage, allows the live participants to experience death vicariously as a 'first' journey, a return to the source. Death is a voyage and voyage is death.

On October 24th, while quarantined in Naples, Keats wrote a letter to Mrs Brawne, Fanny's mother, for he did not dare try and reach Fanny if not second-hand. The letter contained short news of the passage at sea and insistent references to Keats's own state of mind: "I do not feel in the world"⁷⁵, he wrote. While the voyage had been a barren no-man's-land, a timeless suspension between then and now, London and Rome, it had also been infused with a finality that went beyond a mere missing link, out of time and out of anthropological space. In many ways, Keats's weeks at sea had been his first weeks as a dead man. The *Maria Crowther* had welcomed him below deck, enveloped him in its hollowed wooden womb, had been his own *Todtenbaum*⁷⁶. The cramped cabin space, the low ceiling, the minuscule bunks conspired to turn the ship's hold into a vault. Many times during the voyage would Keats be trapped within the cabin, pinned to his bunk, breathing in the dampness and humidity of wet wood while the ship rolled and pitched to the sea. Many times would he feel trapped in a wooden prison that was as likely to cause his death on the spot as to delay it until Italy.

But Italy already felt like "the other side", like the riverbank of Acheron. Here, then, did Keats's life come to embody the 'Charon complex'⁷⁷: the *Maria Crowther* was a ship of the dead, ferrying Keats from one side of death to the next. This takes us back to the beginning, to the very ambiguity and contradiction of Keats's departure from London: whether or not he allowed himself to believe in recovery was ultimately irrelevant: leaving was dying, but so was staying. And once he had left, once he had fought and won his own last battle in Bedhampton against the stubborn, miserable fate that urged him to leave, once he realized that he "could not leave [his] lungs or stomach or other worse things behind [him]"⁷⁸; then was he like one of Dante's souls, amassed on the banks of Acheron, cursing the world, their loved ones, their earthly lives⁷⁹, and irresistibly craving the voyage.

⁷² A. Swinburne, *The Triumph of Time*, II, pp. 257-258.

⁷³ G. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 72.

⁷⁴ C.G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, quoted in G. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 74.

⁷⁵ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, H.E. Rollins ed., vol. 2, p. 349.

⁷⁶ The tree of death, part of the funeral rites mentioned at the beginning of this section.

⁷⁷ G. Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 72.

⁷⁸ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, H.E. Rollins ed., vol. 2, 345.

⁷⁹ Cfr. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, III, in *La Divina Commedia: con pagine critiche*, U. Bosco – G. Reggio ed., 3 vols., Le Monnier, Firenze 1998-1999.

A “sense of darkness”⁸⁰ came over Keats and once he arrived in Naples he finally perceived how far behind him his life was: “every man who can row his boat and walk and talk seems a different being from myself”⁸¹, he wrote Mrs Brawne. Gloomy with the sheer beauty of Naples and the deep-seated awareness that what would once have inspired him was nothing to him now, he continued: “O what an account I could give you of the Bay of Naples, if I could once more feel myself a Citizen of this world”⁸². A few days later, on 1st November, concluding a raving, desperate letter to Brown, he asked: “Was I born for this end?”⁸³.

7. “*Here lies one whose name was writ in water*”. *The end*

“I have an habitual feeling of my real life having past, and that I am leading a posthumous existence”⁸⁴, Keats wrote to Brown in his last letter, on 30th November. His posthumous existence dragged on, dutifully, if rather feverishly, recorded by Severn. One evening, on 23rd February 1820, Keats lay in bed, resting, when suddenly he clutched Severn’s hand and whispered: “Lift me up – I am dying – I shall die easy – don’t be frightened – thank God it has come”⁸⁵. Severn held him, then, out of exhaustion, released him and simply held his hand. Severn drifted off, in and out of sleep; when he jolted awake at eleven, he realized Keats was dead. The months in Rome had been torture, physical, psychological. Now it was finally over. While still alive Keats asked that no name be written on his grave. The epitaph he had chosen for himself read: “Here lies one whose name was writ in water”. Water, the tireless, ominous companion of his last months, to which he had consigned all hopes, dreams, ambitions, all the bitterness of love and life un-lived, was to have his name too, and drag it to its inscrutable, unreachable bottom. So it was that John Keats slipped away in watery silence. After all, he “always made an awkward bow”⁸⁶.

⁸⁰ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, H.E. Rollins ed., vol. 2, p. 345.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 348.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 350.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

⁸⁴ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, H.E. Rollins ed., vol. 2, p. 359.

⁸⁵ A. Motion, *Keats*, p. 566.

⁸⁶ *The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821*, H.E. Rollins ed., vol. 2, p. 360.