TREASURE OF THE MONTH – MARCH 2015

John Keats Portrait by Joseph Severn

Pen and ink, watercolour.

‘My Physician tells me I must contrive to pass the Winter in Italy,’ John Keats wrote to his sister Fanny on 5th July 1820. At only twenty-four years old, Keats was suffering from tuberculosis, the deadly disease which had plagued his family, taking the lives of his mother in 1810 and his brother Tom in December 1818. Keats felt the onset of the disease in February 1820, on a bitterly cold night after travelling on the outside of a stagecoach (to save money) from London to Hampstead, where he was staying with his friend Charles Brown. On Keats’s arrival Charles Brown immediately saw that he was very ill and helped him to bed. In Brown’s own words, ‘On entering the cold sheets. . he slightly coughed, and I heard him say “That is blood from my mouth” . . . After examining it steadfastly, he looked up in my face, with a calmness I can never forget, and said “I know the colour of that blood; it is arterial blood . . . I must die.”

The poet’s condition gradually deteriorated over the coming months. In early spring of 1820 Keats wrote that he felt like ‘a poor prisoner,’ confined to his ‘sopha bed’ in Wentworth Place, forbidden by his doctors ‘even to read poetry, much less write it,’ and weak from the frequent bleedings and meagre diet that were the accepted treatment for tuberculosis at that time. After another dangerous haemorrhage in May he moved into the home of his friend and fellow poet, Leigh Hunt. Joseph Severn visited Keats there and was shocked by his wasted appearance, writing that ‘Poor Keats is still nearer the next world . . . and seems prepossessed that he cannot recover’.

In July Keats received a letter from Shelley, who had moved to Italy in 1818, generously inviting Keats to visit him and his wife Mary in Pisa. Keats politely declined, though admitted in his reply dated 16th August, ‘There is no doubt that an English winter would put an end to me . . . therefore I must either voyage or journey to Italy as a soldier marches up to a battery’. And so he did. It was decided that Keats would go to Rome, as it was considered the best for medical care and there was an excellent Scottish physician there, Dr James Clark, who would come to care for Keats diligently during his days in Rome.

Joseph Severn, at this time only an acquaintance of the poet, accompanied Keats to Italy and they set sail from London in the *Maria Crowther* on the 18th September 1820. After a harrowing voyage they reached the bay of Naples, on the 21st October, where they discovered that a typhus epidemic in London meant that a quarantine had been imposed for all incoming ships, and they were forced to remain in the crowded harbour in the stifling heat for ten days. After the experience Severn wrote to his friend William Haslam describing the ‘loathsome misery’ of quarantine, and expressed his relief and surprise that despite his poor health Keats had ‘passed what I must have thought would kill myself’.

After an 8 day journey through Italy, Keats and Severn finally made it to Rome and arrived at 26 Piazza di Spagna. Here Severn cared for Keats in the last few months of his life, including playing Haydn to him on a piano that they rented, to Keats’s delight. Severn was praised for his devotion by Percy Bysshe Shelley in the preface to his elegy *Adonais*, which was written upon Keats’s death in 1821. Shelley writes that he was informed that Severn ‘almost risked his own life, and sacrificed every prospect to unwearied attendance upon his dying friend’, and rightly calls Severn a ‘virtuous man’.

Joseph Severn was an artist who trained at the Royal Academy in London from 1815 to 1820. He was primarily a historical painter, which was regarded as the most prestigious genre of painting. Severn was not a portrait artist by training, but the sketch we have here in the Keats-Shelley House is nevertheless very moving. The sketch, which resides in the Keats Room above his bed, was drawn by Severn less than a month prior to the poet’s death. Severn has written under this portrait: ‘28 January, 1821, 3 o’clock morning, drawn to keep me awake. A deadly sweat was on him all this night’. Keats’s exhausted features, caught in the light of the fire, cast a shadow on the wall, and his hair is visibly stuck to his temple with the sweat from a fever. The sketch is a testament to Severn’s friendship and devotion as he cared for Keats, determined to keep watch on him throughout the night. The drawing was presented by Eleanor Furneaux, Arthur Severn’s twin sister in1911. It is an affecting portrait of Keats in the final month of his illness.

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