



Posthuman Keats Poetry as Assemblage

by Anna Anselmo

ABSTRACT: This article explores the notions of flotsam, jetsam and hybridity in John Keats's poetry in order to provide a critical reading informed by posthumanist theories, and, more specifically, Donna Haraway's *cyborg*. It starts with the metaphor of debris and the linguistic-literary metaphor of texture/textus. It then proceeds to elucidate how Keats deals with flotsam and jetsam in his work. A short overview of the theory of organic unity begins the last section of the article, which focuses on the poet's penchant for hybrid poetic endeavours and envisions some of his work as a metaphorical manifestation of the *cyborg* myth.

KEY WORDS: Keats; posthumanism; cyborg; assemblage; Donna Haraway

INTRODUCTION: A TALE OF TWO METAPHORS

This essay hinges on two governing metaphors: the first is flotsam and jetsam; the second is the notion of texture/textus (see Halliday and Hasan; see Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*) and its (metaphorical) implication with surgical stitching, the notion of assemblage (see Nayar), and the *cyborg* myth (see Haraway). In the Victorian Acts of Parliament (*OED*), the mention of "All Goods derelict, jetsam, flotsam, and wreck brought or coming into the United Kingdom" serves to identify flotsam and



jetsam as undesirable debris; in literature, this translates as that which does (should) not make it into the definitive version of a text. As for texture, it has been variously employed as a concept in both literary and linguistic studies: on the one hand, it offers an image of texts that function as conglomerates where multiple threads—narrative, thematic, rhetorical, semantic—come together to constitute a virtually seamless whole, on the other, it addresses the fundamental structural (cohesion) and logical-semantic (coherence) connectedness that texts present and are expected to present. The focus is on the text being perceived as a “holistic communicative event and not as a disjointed random sequence of sentences” (Shreve 169). Texture underscores some form of (organic) unity; while working mostly at the level of syntax and lexis, texture can be abstracted so as to provide the overview of a text, an appraisal at the macro-structural level where matters of overall cohesion and coherence may be more relevant and more dependent on conventional theories of organic unity.

For what concerns the metaphor of stitching, my focus is on the jarring irregularities of surgical stitching and on its figurative potential in a posthuman perspective. In the context of the present essay, the ontological stance of critical posthumanism is forgone in favour of some relevant implications of Donna Haraway’s *cyborg*. Posthuman is thus to be intended somewhat literally as an *after*(thought), as denoting a theoretical and textual space beyond humanism and beyond what is conventionally identified as human, which serves my purpose metaphorically, in that it helps to read Keats as *after/beyond* poetry, as producing texts that are assemblages, cutting across genre borders and literary etiquette. It is my contention that Keats not only trades in flotsam and jetsam, but also tends to produce poetry which thematises irregularity, metaphorically presenting stitching, scarring and generic as well as semantic unevenness. I thus read Keats’s poetry as a posthuman assemblage, a raucous juxtaposition of elements.

In what follows, I draw on some of Keats’s macro-textual and micro-textual idiosyncrasies to read his poetry in the light of Haraway’s posthuman *cyborg*, a “creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction” (150). Much like a *cyborg*, poetry is somewhat cybernetic itself, a creature born of the hybridising processes of socio-literary constraints and individual craftsmanship. Within this framework, Keatsian poetics encounter further hybridisation in the materiality of his texts as both published works and thematisations of cross-generic and compositional processes. The first section of the essay is devoted to Keats’s rendition of flotsam and jetsam; the second focuses on my contention that Keats’s poetry has posthuman features.

FLOTSAM, JETSAM AND ALL THINGS DEBRIS-LIKE

Victor Frankenstein recalls his creative process in the following way: “The dissecting room and the slaughter-house furnished many of my materials [...]” (Shelley, *Frankenstein* 37). The first implication of such compositional method is connected to the underlying notion of a creative process that consists almost solely of gathering waste. Frankenstein works with bits and pieces of corpses and carcasses; he also, and more importantly, works with bodies that have ceased to be recognized as such by virtue of their being dead. “We think or believe that the body is sovereign and



specifically, that *my body is mine*" (Schehr 59), but when *corps* becomes corpse, Schehr continues, playing on the French word for "body" (*corps*), it belongs to nobody and it stops being an object of desire; it is, in fact, "cast off, burnt, buried, discarded" (Schehr 59). Victor thus claims for himself that which nobody owns and nobody wants. In itself, regardless of Victor's end game, the act is unnatural, subversive in its etymological sense of *subvertere* (i.e. turn upside down). As a metaphor, Victor's creative process serves to identify some trends in Keats's conception and use of his poetic material.

According to Nicholas Roe, it was in the second half of December 1816 that Percy Shelley may have "cautioned [Keats] not to hurry his earliest attempts into print" (132). Years later, in 1820, Keats would remind Shelley of this piece of advice in a letter: "I remember you advising me not to publish my first-blights, on Hampstead Heath" (Rollins 2: 323). Keats never heeded his fellow-poet's advice; in fact, he did not seem to take kindly to Shelley at all, due to a certain "sensitivity about social class" (126) that meant, in Hunt's words, he saw "in every man of birth a sort of natural enemy" (qtd. in Roe 126). *Poems* was published in March 1817 (Barnard, "First Fruits or 'First Blights': A New Account of the Publishing History of Keats's *Poems* (1817).", 71-101) bearing a dedication to Leigh Hunt and a note that read as follows: "The Short Pieces in the middle of the book, as well as some of the Sonnets, were written at an earlier period than the rest of the poems" (qtd. in Buxton Forman 3). Shelley's friendly warning, Keats's 1820 reference to his first collection of poems as "first-blights", and the note he had affixed to the volume, all point in the same direction: Keats's tendency to publish flotsam and jetsam.

A collection of diverse pieces in terms of time of composition, form, themes, achievement and scope, *Poems* was a motley crew of Keats's idiosyncratic, self-taught path to poetic excellence. Uneven to the degree of not warranting publication, Keats's collection was as full of gems as it was of half-formed *exercises de style*. The paradox of publishing such a volume is easily elucidated: publication implies some form of both definition and definitiveness; what is published is intended as finished, the past participle itself grammatically rendering the finality involved in letting go of one's textual creature in order to let it float in the sea of public reception. While Keats was adamant on finishing his work (he stubbornly believed in bringing what he started to a conclusion), he sometimes felt he had fallen short of the mark in terms of achieving polished, *finished* status for his work. Therefore, his forays into publication are often followed by regret and a sense of inadequacy. Yet, publish he did. If, following Stuart Mill, printed poetry is to be considered as "a soliloquy in full dress and on the stage" (71), Keats missed both the performative element inherent in the act of publishing one's writing and Shelley's implication that, prior to being offered to the public, his poetry should be "in full dress".

In his 1820 letter to Shelley (Rollins 2: 322-323), Keats also addresses the matter of what was to be his last volume of poetry—*Lamia, Isabella ... And Other Poems*—in the following manner: "Most of the Poems in the volume I send you have been written above two years, and would never have been publish'd but from a hope of gain; so you see I am inclined enough to take your advice now" (Rollins 2: 323). Here the performativity of publication—at least in its most practical incarnation as the money to be got out of it—is addressed, but the reluctance remains identical. The impulse to relinquish his poetry, despite a deep-seated uneasiness with regards to it, can be



compared to Victor Frankenstein's uneasiness with regard to his own creative process, exhilarating and horrifying at the same time. Keats, too, seems to be gathering debris into the wholeness of a collection of poetry and letting it go for lack of a better option. *Poems 1817* are qualified as "first-blights", something that should have been discarded and buried, as Shelley suggested, as Schehr suggests corpses are. *Poems* are further liable to public apology in the form of the note regarding dates of composition Keats wanted to be added to the volume. His 1820 poems, he lets go of in pursuit of practicality, and yet, they, too bear an advertisement, though none of Keats's doing this time (Barnard, *John Keats* 634):

If any apology be thought necessary for the appearance of the unfinished poem of *Hyperion*, the publishers beg to state that they alone are responsible, as it was printed at their particular request, and contrary to the wish of the author. The poem was intended to have been of equal length with *Endymion*, but the reception given to that work discouraged the author from proceeding. (Barnard, *John Keats* 514)

In fact, in its ontological status as fragment, *Hyperion* was perfectly attuned to the rising fashion of the time. As early as 1813, *Edinburgh Reviewer's* very own Francis Jeffrey had remarked on the vogue for producing fragments (see Janowitz 479), and yet Keats's editors thought it wise to apologise for what should conventionally be lumped together with literary waste and debris, an unfinished poem. More than that, the mention of *Endymion* serves to implicitly point their finger at the Scotch reviewers and, by way of that, squeezing in a defence of *Endymion*.

For its part, *Endymion* is the most conspicuous example of Keats's predilection for flotsam and jetsam. In the letter to Percy Shelley quoted above, he writes about his "[...] poor poem, which I would willingly take the trouble to unwrite, if possible [...]" (Rollins 2: 322), and continues by confessing that his "mind was like a pack of scattered cards" (Rollins 2: 323) when he wrote it. Keats's word choice, the deverbative adjective "scattered," signals his sense of inadequacy, and his feeling that lack of order and system accounts for the digressive, unstructured nature of *Endymion*. Yet, it is the paratext to *Endymion* which proves more interesting: two prefaces were written for the volume; one was rejected as per the publishers' suggestion, the second is even more controversial in portraying the poem as a reluctantly published work. Inadequate and faulty in the eyes of its author, *Endymion* must be let go and judgment must be passed upon it almost as a rite of necessary cleansing and initiation that leads to bigger and better poetic endeavours.

The rejected preface is candid in its several (ill-advised at best) admissions. Firstly:

I fought under disadvantages. Before I began I had no inward feel of being able to finish; and as I proceeded my steps were all uncertain. So this Poem must rather be considered as an endeavour than a thing accomplished; a poor prologue to what, if I live, I humbly hope to do. In duty to the Public I should have kept it back for a year or two, knowing it to be so faulty; but I really cannot do so,—by repetition my favourite passages sound vapid in my ears, and I would rather redeem myself with a new Poem should this one be found of any interest. (Barnard, *John Keats* 506)

Completed but not finished, not accomplished, *Endymion* is an endeavour, an attempt at something; the kind of verse one keeps for oneself and does not dare



present, following Stuart Mill's metaphor, in "full dress" on the public stage of print. Flotsam and jetsam as it stands, something that is not worthy of revision or delayed publication, Keats lets it go as one does a wreck: in fact, he writes, "I have not any particular affection for any particular phrase, word, or letter in the whole affair" (Barnard, *John Keats* 506-7).

The published preface to *Endymion* is perhaps even more problematic than the rejected one, more stubbornly set on admitting the poem's inadequacy and the poet's unease towards it. Once more, *Endymion* is "a feverish attempt" and not "a deed accomplished," impossible to edit or improve, its "foundations are too sandy," it is a "youngster" that should "die away" (Barnard, *John Keats* 505). As during a sea funeral, the corpse Schehr calls "undesirable" is released to the waters. The problem with these particular waters, those of publishing and the reading public, is that they are not pits of oblivion as the sea can be. Both the publishing industry and the reading public expect a *corps*, a work that is finished, yet alive, vibrating with semantic echoes and the sound of language. They do not expect a corpse, bits of wreckage left behind.

STITCHING, THE CYBORG AND THE POSTHUMAN POEM

Texture can be defined as what distinguishes a text from a non-text, that is, what shows it as functioning "as a unity with respect to its environment" (Halliday and Hasan 2). The notion, dependent on the presence of connective devices in and an overhanging logical structure to the text, is the linguistic equivalent to what Roland Barthes says about text when retracing its etymological roots to the Latin word *textus* and the verb *texere* (Barthes, *The Pleasure of The Text*, 76). According to Barthes, *text* needs to be associated to *tissue*, emphasising "the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving" (Barthes, *The Pleasure of The Text* 64). There is more to the idea than a literary counterpoint to Halliday: a missing link between two conceptual frameworks for the reading and composing of literature. On the one hand, organic unity, the closest predecessor of texture, on the other, the metaphor of surgical stitching, and its implications of unevenness, its potential for scarring, and the inescapable materiality of its visibility.

The idea of organic unity is first found in Plato's *Phaedrus*: "Every literary work must be constructed like a living creature with a body of its own that lacks neither head nor feet but has middle parts and extremities fashioned suitably to each other and to the whole" (qtd. in Osborne 210). 'Suitability' is to be understood as the capability to bring "a dispersed plurality under a single form, seeing it all together" (Osborne 210). The idea is expounded in *Gorgias*: "orators and all other craftsmen do not choose the components of their work at haphazard but in accordance with the idea of the work and dispose them in an orderly way so that each is suitable to each and all harmonise together" (qtd. in Osborne 210). The notion reappears in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "The chief forms of beauty are order, symmetry, and determinate size" (qtd. in Osborne 210). In Aristotle's *Poetics*, organic unity is contextualized in terms of narrative structure (plot), that is, "the arrangement of the incidents" (23), more specifically, "a whole" of a "certain magnitude" which has "a beginning, a middle, and an end" and shows an "orderly arrangement of parts" (29). Relevance (otherwise



known as 'unity of plot') is another Aristotelian inflection of organic unity: the structural union of the parts of a text has to be such that "if anyone of them is displaced or removed, the whole will be disjointed or disturbed. For a thing whose presence or absence makes no visible difference, is not an organic part of the whole" (33).

This basic notion has had enormous fortune in Western thought: it was given new lease of life by Kant and the German Romantics; it was then taken over by Coleridge, who powerfully put it forward in his criticism of Shakespeare: organic form, says Coleridge, translating Schlegel,

[...] is innate, it shapes as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one and the same with the perfection of its outward form. Such as the life is, such is the form. Nature, the prime genial artist, inexhaustible in diverse powers, is equally inexhaustible in forms; – each exterior is the physiognomy of the being within[...]. (qtd. in Foakes 53)

"The idea that a work of art should be a structure composed of orderly parts suitably fashioned and adapted to the central idea of the work" (Osborne 210) has become commonplace.

One cursory look at Keats's narrative poems, and organic unity clearly appears as an unsuitable conceptual framework for their reception, as it does not account for either their compositional process or the craftsmanship in them. In terms of macrostructure, Keats has been shown as treating his work as flotsam and jetsam, debris, whose publication embodies a form of liberation from immaturity and inadequacy, a rite of passage, as well as a surrender to the practicalities of survival in the non-business of poetry writing. *Endymion*, for one, fails to function as an organism in which all parts are related, indispensable, and conceived in proportion to the whole; its narrative is riddled with incidents and digressions exhibiting a maze-like course. Critics of *Lamia* flounder in their attempts to offer allegorical readings of the poem that can account for all its characters, their motives, and for the uncanny narrative arc: in Jack Stillinger's words, "critics have not yet been able to discover an allegorical interpretation ... that accords with the various elements of story, character and tone" (68). One recent critical essay on *The Eve of St. Agnes* claims the poem to be a "stumbling block for critics looking to 'make sense' of from an ideational point of view" (Betz 301-2).

If Plato considered literary works as *suitable* bodies, governed by the proportion of their parts and an inner logic, then the options for Keats's readers are close to none: either face the fact that the narrative blanket is always too short and therefore focus on specificities, versification, reception, history, etc.; or, and this is the path I intend to take, read Keats's texts like bodies of a different kind, neither Plato's multiplicity under a single form nor Leonardo's heteronormative Vitruvian man. This is where Barthes' notion of *tissue* represents a first, important link in my argumentative chain: the weaving metaphor underlies unity, but allows for multiplicity in the recognition that it is multiple threads that go into forming one (loosely intended, and not synonymous of unitary), and those threads are perpetually at work. The text, to Barthes, continually works itself out. This is a flexible enough notion for us to think of Keats's poems, his narrative poems especially, as wholes through which radically different threads are spun.



The argument can be taken further by exploiting Donna Haraway's *cyborg* myth: Haraway sees the *cyborg* as a fiction (150), a sort of compositional paradigm to be used in order to subvert the politics and poetry of phallogentrism (175). To Haraway, then, the *cyborg* is rooted in social interaction as well as in the imagination. What draws the *cyborg* closer to Keats is Haraway's use of the concept as a tool to map social and bodily reality (150), as a tool that is closely related to the seizing, deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation of writing. Haraway, for one, sees the *cyborg* myth as subverting "myriad organic wholes", among which is the poem (152), the ultimate white male fetish. It is in the annihilation of the poem as organic whole that the *cyborg* offers insight into Keats's work.

A third necessary element in my analysis is, once again, the metaphor of surgical stitching and Victor Frankenstein's creative process. Victor creates by collecting scraps, albeit select ones. The implication is that scraps not only belong to two different species (human and animal, the dissecting room and the slaughterhouse), but are also forced into unity by way of surgical stitching. Coarser than weaving, stitching is nonetheless a craft, bound, more than its loom-operated counterpart, to the materiality of its existence. One may not be able to feel the single threads of a piece of fabric, but one will be able to feel the stitching joining two parts of a garment. Victor's creature is monstrous, but it is, in its way, whole. A body made up of bodies. An interspecies body. A body showing its seams. The creature's "liminal, hybrid nature is already hinted at when Walton describes him as 'a being which had the shape of a man, but apparently of gigantic structure'" (Carretero-González 56). The creature is undoubtedly a *cyborg*, blurring the boundary between human and animal, come to life through the intersection of nature and technology. Keats's poems appear to be bodies of the same interspecies as Victor's creature: *cyborgs*, in that they partake of different genres and different registers; *cyborgs*, in that they subvert the fetishist order of all things poetry by alternating high and low, polite and vulgar (i.e. from the *vulgus*). Further, they appear monstrous and artificial in their stubborn insistence on thematising the creative process, the poet's literary influences, and his perpetual sense of inadequacy. Made from parts visibly stitched together, gracelessly grafted onto another, they are metaphorically *cyborg*-like.

If, in Haraway's words, the "cyborg myth is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions and dangerous possibilities" (154), then the *cyborg* is a powerful metaphor to pinpoint the detonating effect that Keats's poetic stitching at both macro- and micro-textual level could accomplish. Macro-structurally, Keats disregards the mandate of organic unity and the notion of a monolithic text in which *tout se tient*: this is easily seen in digressions in *Endymion*. A further example of Keats's disregard for boundaries lies in his use of rhyme, often stigmatized by his contemporaries (see Conder; see Wilson Croker), that divorces sound from content, exploding the signifier to the detriment of the signified: the codified association of rhyming words in semantic terms is fractured by Keats's wilful assembling, and overcrowding, of sounds. In *Hyperion*, a supposedly narrative poem, nothing happens because everything has already happened off-stage, as it were. The only true characters remaining are sound and silence, overpowering in their presence, and pointing to Keats grafting *ante-litteram* dramatic monologue onto a poetic endeavour which ends up merely



thematizing the gods' voices (Anselmo, "The Thundering Voice of the Gods: Sound and Silence in John Keats's *Hyperion*").

Coleman and Fraser state that: "The human body, with its motor skills and its moving parts, shares a special kinship with the machine, and indeed there has long been a fascination with the unstable boundaries between them" (3). The body of the word partakes of this special kinship with the machine, the former being the finished product, the latter being the craftsmanship, the devices and mechanisms (even the terminology is reminiscent of machines) of literature writing. Keats's poetry, then, is a hybrid body, its technique and thought-processes a machinery. More than that, Keats's poetry partakes of a process which would prove to be all the rage in his time, but which he intensified by electing it as his privileged compositional method. Denise Gigante aptly describes Victor Frankenstein's *modus operandi* by referring to:

another "mechanistic" process in vogue during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries: the mode of anthologizing beauties. Volumes of "Beauties" were produced from recycled parts, which could be culled either from a single poetic corpus or from several corpora (as in the case of *The Beauties of Milton, Thomson, and Young* [1783]) to form a composite textual body in the Frankensteinian mode. (584)

The question remains, of course, as to "whether this process of clipping and culling and stitching together calls more attention to the individual beauties or to the fissures in the overall product" (584).

Keats has recently been dubbed posthuman by Ron Broglio, in a critical posthumanist perspective: Broglio reads *Ode to Autumn* as the fruitful meeting of nature and technology, in which "we see the poet taking up ways of being in the world that are different from the human" (36). Broglio further links this approach to Keats's notions of the "chameleon poet" (Rollins 1: 386-7) and "negative capability" (Rollins 1: 193): identifying the poetical character as having no character, no self at all, Keats virtually claims that "The poet functions like a handyman doing whatever odd job is called for. To survive living with such a protean identity and mutable task calls for 'negative capability'" (Broglio 36). From such a posthuman perspective, poetry "is not illuminating and expressing one's experiences. Rather, poetry is opening up to a non-human phenomenology of wonder beyond fact, reason, and mimetic description" (Broglio 36).

My claim is that Keats's posthumanism lies in rendering his poetry hybrid at a micro-textual level: by thematizing his creative process as well as grafting seemingly inappropriate, didactic, or virtually disruptive elements into his writing, he aims to defamiliarize poetic form and content. Just as Victor's creature is neither fully human—despite being endowed with bone-deep humanity and sensitivity—nor inhuman, but other-than-human, so is Keats's poetry other-than-poetical, managing the impossible balance between intense lyricism and the unpoetical banal. In his discussion of how the figure of the hybrid has superseded that of metamorphosis in representations of transformation, Harvey L. Hix carries out a comparative analysis of the two in order to account for the change. The first and foremost characteristic of the hybrid is that it is made up of elements that create a new whole, a sum of all the parts, identifiable with none of them (273-278). The hybrid can thus be better explained in terms of an assemblage "made up of circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds" (Ansell-Pearson



154). While the latter definition is referred to the body (human *and* cyborg), I here take it to be emblematic of the instances of hybridity in Keats's poetry, which specifically manifest in at least three ways: firstly, open reference to other poets' names and to literary echoes in his own poetry, in order to add layers of meaning and prestige to his work, on the one hand, while, on the other, to showcase both a sense of inadequacy and a modicum of register variation; secondly, his tendency to break through the narrative pact by directly intervening in his work; thirdly, the constant interchange of genre and register, the latter by interweaving colloquialisms and neologisms in his text as well as offering relatively didactic stances.

Keats's walking tour of Scotland in the summer of 1818 offers a good starting point: during the tour, he visits both the house and tomb of Robert Burns. The form he chooses to epitomise the experience is the sonnet, always a testing ground: the octave plays itself out through the contrast between the beauty of the cemetery and the coldness of the scene, which does not inspire the emotional reaction the poet expected. The reader is thus led through the first eight lines, expecting a *volta* in line nine that Keats anticipates halfway through the pentameter in line eight. This premature break of the conventional form anticipates the imperfect rhyme of the final couplet, in which Keats tears through the literary veil of his lucid argumentation to end on a self-deprecating note and an apostrophe to Burns: "[...] Burns! With honour due / I have often honoured thee. Great Shadow, hide / Thy face! I sin against thy native skies" (Barnard, *John Keats* 257 ll. 12-14). The premature semi-*volta*, the imperfect rhyming couplet at the end, and the exclamation marks framing this violent admission of frustration and inadequacy, all point to that visible stitching that has the sonnet veer towards assemblage. According to Hix: "In hybridity, the border between system and environment is not breached, it's just not clear where it is or whether there is a border" (275). In Keats's poetry, the border between poet, word, and environment is both marked and porous: if, in line with the *cyborg* myth, Keats transgresses the boundaries of form, both in the organisation of content and in the use of rhyme, so that there is a boundary, a seam to transgress; he also offers potent fusions (Haraway 154), in that he squeezes together the jarring elements of beauty and coldness, poetic form par excellence (the sonnet) and formal recalcitrance, reflections on his own poetic efforts and a self-conscious bow to the greatness of a celebrated predecessor in the poetry trade.

In *Isabella*, Keats remediates Boccaccio in sixty-three stanzas (Canani). Stanzas XIX and XX are of interest to us: at a climatic moment in the narrative, the moment in which Isabella's brothers realise she is in love with Lorenzo, so, ideally, the moment in which Lorenzo's fate is sealed, Keats rips the reader out of the narrative by an apostrophe to Boccaccio: the first stanza is an apology, the poet's sense of inadequacy communicated through the expression "venturing syllables" (Barnard, *John Keats* 244 l. 151), at once a thematising of sound and the difficult balance between tentativeness and bravery; the second stanza is one of Keats's many didactic moments, in which his desire to pay tribute to a great writer is accompanied by his self-appointed role as a populariser of Italian prose literature (something he learned from Leigh Hunt). While an apology in the shape of an apostrophe to a past writer and a literary mission statement are both a potential occurrence in poetry, Keats's positioning of the two one-third into his narrative, willingly disrupts the flow of events by creating a suture.



Manuela Rossini shows how for a long time literature proper was “dematerialized and disembodied [...] abstracted in the negative sense of being denied its physical basis” (162). In this sense, Keats not only finds himself immersed in the material culture of publishing and periodical reviewing of his time, but in his willing narrative fracture in *Isabella*, he produces a double form of embodiment: through the materiality of the soon-to-be-published word, both Boccaccio and himself become an ineluctable presence. Furthermore, Keats willingly breaks the narrative pact, whereby the reader accepts to be led through the maze of the story the author spins, without being subjected to either the author’s process or the so-called tricks of his trade. In fracturing *Isabella*, Keats breaks into his own creation, a voice within the poetic voice, and virtually multiplies authorial voices. Uninterested in binarisms, Keats’s “poetically incorrect” behaviour is once again reminiscent of the *cyborg* myth, disruptive of such binary oppositions as that of maker/made (Haraway 177). Keats’s persistence in establishing an explicit dialogue with Boccaccio obliterates him as a single maker and his poem as a single product: Keats is, in fact, made by Boccaccio, who is the primary maker of a story Keats remediates; analogously, Keats’s poem is made and remade, laid bare to the reading public as multiple layers of “madness”.

Keats’s didactic streak is officially inaugurated in *Sleep and Poetry*, being the poet’s first sustained reflection on the creative process in the form of a poetic plan to reach the heights of literature. He writes: “O for ten years, that I may overwhelm / Myself in poesy; so I may do the deed / That my own soul has to itself decreed” (Barnard, *John Keats* 85 ll. 96-98). He then recites the genres he wishes to visit and revisit in what amounts to a self-schooling programme in the art of poetry. In opposition to the Wordsworthian reverse motion in *The Prelude*, Keats only looks forward in terms of his education, implicitly admitting, once again, to a deep-seated sense of inadequacy: his mind as yet permeable, his talents untested, but his plan definite. This poetic manifesto is part of the “first blights” mentioned above, its naiveté obvious not only in its words, reminiscent of a curriculum more than poem, but also in its clear Huntian echoes. Leigh Hunt being both an implicit and an explicit source of inspiration for Keats’s 1817 collection. In *Sleep and Poetry* one finds more than just didactics and a familiar tendency to juxtapose pretty verbal pictures, their connections to the points in the manifesto unspoken, and thus difficult to identify. In fact, the last three stanzas abruptly start with three glorious names in the history of literature and the word: Sappho, King Alfred, and Petrarch; their appearance, too, seemingly grafted onto lines of which Keats writes: “[...] howsoever they be done, / I leave them as a father does his son” (Barnard, *John Keats* l. 404)

Endymion ends my quick survey of hybridity in Keats. A single word in the poem is of interest to the argument here: “Therefore” (Barnard, *John Keats* 107 l. 34). It comes after Keats establishes the connection between beauty and our very survival as human beings: nature and poetry give solace and happiness when experienced, but their beauty haunts us, is always with us, keeps us alive. “Therefore” marks the introduction of Keats’s actual subject, the story of Endymion, but it does so by jarring the reader with the dry tone of logical argumentation, out of context and out of genre, remarkably unpoetical. This exemplifies Keats’s tendency to write using mixed registers, a tendency which he probably learned from Leigh Hunt and which he took in a different direction eventually; a tendency which has been amply documented as



being part and parcel of Keats's Cockney poetry. Keats's use of language was remarked upon in detail during his lifetime and has recently been subjected to closer scrutiny (Anselmo, *The Poetics of Uncontrollability in Keats's Endymion*); it is relevant to the argument in the present essay insofar as it showcases Keats mixing genres and registers, as well as working within the paradigm of subversion identified by Haraway with her *cyborg*. On the one hand, Keats's use of a connective such as "therefore" points towards lucidity, perspicuity, and attention to cause-effect relationships that would best be suited to the language reform advocated by bishop Sprat on behalf of the Royal Society some hundred and fifty years before Keats's time (see Sprat). An obvious marker of signposting, "therefore" abruptly interrupts Keats's introductory lines to *Endymion* and quite literally swerves the reader into the beginning of the story. The reviewers' response (see Matthews) to Keats's use of the connective indicates the characteristic post-standardisation interest in the use of English. At the same time, this linguistic characteristic of Keats's as well as his unstoppable yearning for neologism, specifically in the shape of compounding, are a *cyborg*-like attempt at appropriating language: his writing constitutes itself as *cyborg* in that it aims at debunking the phallogocentric myth of perfect communication, of one code that translates all meaning (Haraway 175); it aims at deterritorialising poetry.

CONCLUSION: READING POSTHUMAN KEATS

Keats appears to be most himself in the gaps between the lyric and the colloquial, the narrative and the digression. If it is true that "stitching body parts together creates a unity, yet their visibility as scars acknowledges the multiple human and non-human origins of the self-same" (Rossini 162), then the stitching in Keats creates unity that is not organic but protean, diverse; it creates materiality and visibility in scarring his body of words with superimpositions, sound thematisation, unexpected authorial interventions. "With the help of stitches [...]" we turn "dead parts into a single body, separate words into a single story, these are the ghosts that haunt the posthuman [...]" (Rossini 162). These are the ghosts that haunt Keats's *cyborg* poetry.

WORKS CITED

- Ansell-Pearson, Keith. *Germinal Life: the Difference and Repetition of Deleuze*. Routledge, 1999.
- Anselmo, Anna. "Thundering Voice of the Gods: Sound and Silence in John Keats's *Hyperion*." Forthcoming, 2020.
- . *The Poetics of Uncontrollability in Keats's Endymion: Language Theory and Romantic Periodicals*. Cambridge Scholars, 2016.
- Barnard, John. *John Keats: The Complete Poems*. Penguin, 2003.
- . "First Fruits or 'First Blights': A New Account of the Publishing History of Keats's *Poems* (1817)." *Romanticism*, July 2006, pp. 71-101.



Barthes, Roland. "From Work to Text." *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Poststructural Criticism*, edited by Josué V. Harari, Cornell University Press, 1979, pp. 73-88.

---. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Hill and Wang, 1975.

Betz, Laura W. "Keats and the Charm of Words: Making Sense of *The Eve of St. Agnes*." *Studies in Romanticism*, Fall 2008, pp. 299-319.

Broglio, Ron. "Romantic." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, edited by Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 29-40.

Buxton Forman, Harry. *The Complete Works of John Keats: Poems published in 1817, Endymion*, vol. 1. Crowell, 1895.

Canani, Marco. "A Trial of Invention, a Change in the Intellect: John Keats's Remediation of Boccaccio in *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil*." Forthcoming, 2019.

Carretero-González, Margarita. "The Posthuman that Could Have Been: Mary Shelley's Creature." *Relations: Beyond Anthropocentrism*, 2016, pp. 53-64.

Coleman, Deirdre, and Fraser, Hilary. *Minds, Bodies, Machines: 1770-1930*. Palgrave, 2011.

Conder, Josiah. "Poems. By John Keats." *The Eclectic Review*, September 1817, pp. 267-275.

Croker, John W. "Review of John Keats's *Endymion*." *The Quarterly Review*, April 1818, pp. 204-208.

Foaks, Reginald A. *Coleridge's Criticism of Shakespeare: a Selection*. The Athlone Press, 1989.

Gigante, Denise. "Facing the Ugly: the Case of Frankenstein." *ELH*, Summer 2000, pp. 565-587.

Halliday, Michael A.K., and Ruqaiya Hasan. *Cohesion in English*. Longman, 1976.

Haraway, Donna. *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*. Routledge, 1991.

Hix, Harvey L. "Hybridity is the New Metamorphosis." *Comparative Critical Studies*, 2012, pp. 271-283.

Janowitz, Anne. "The Romantic Fragment." *A Companion to Romanticism*, edited by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Publishing, 1999, pp. 479-488.

Matthews, George M., editor. *John Keats: the Critical Heritage*. Routledge, 2003.

Osborne, Harold. "Organic Unity Again." *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 1976, pp. 210-217.

The Oxford English Dictionary Online. www.oed.com. Accessed 1st Mar. 2019.

Roe, Nicholas. *John Keats: a New Life*. Yale University Press, 2012.

Rollins, Hyder E., editor. *The Letters of John Keats*, 2 vols. Harvard University Press, 1958.

Rossini, Manuela. "Bodies." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*, edited by Bruce Clarke and Manuela Rossini, Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 153-169.

Schehr, Laurence R. "Foucault's Body." *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy*, 1994, pp. 59-75.



Shreve, Gregory M. "Text Linguistics, Translating, and Interpreting." *The Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies and Linguistics*, edited by Kirsten Malmkjaer, Routledge, 2018.

Stillinger, Jack. *Romantic Complexity*. University of Illinois Press, 2006.

Stuart Mill, John. *The Right and Wrong of State Interference with Corporation and Church Property*. Parker and Son, 1859.

Anna Anselmo received a Ph. D. in English Literature from the Catholic University in Milan. She has been Director of Studies for a celebrated International Language School and taught English at the University of Brescia. She is currently teaching English Language and Culture at Université de la Vallée d'Aoste and English Translation at the University of Milan. Her research focuses on British Romanticism (John Keats, Leigh Hunt, and Romantic Periodicals in particular), the Digital Humanities, and the poetry of Seamus Heaney. She has published on Keats, Hunt, Claire Clairmont, and Seamus Heaney. She is the editor of two collections of poetry: *An Introduction to Gray and Goldsmith* (2011) and *Twentieth-Century Poets: A Selection with Notes* (2011). Her monograph, titled *The Poetics of Uncontrollability in Keats' Endymion: Language Theory and Romantic Periodicals*, was published in 2016 (Cambridge Scholars).

a.anselmo@univda.it