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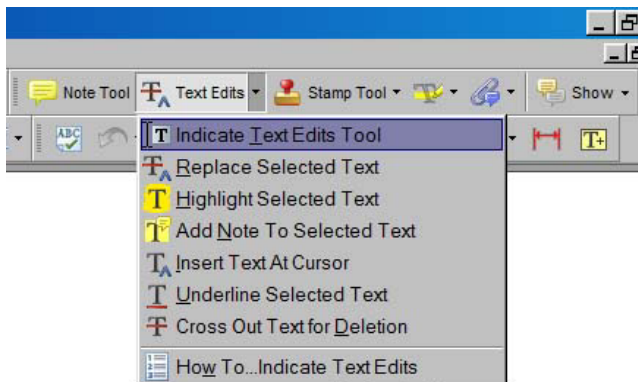
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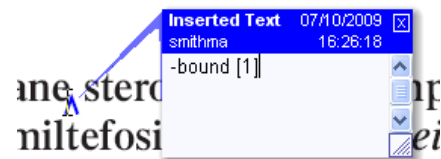
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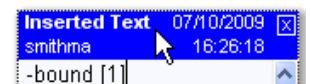
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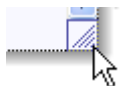


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Review

DENISE GIGANTE, *The Keats Brothers: The Life of John and George*. Pp. 499. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011. £25.00 (ISBN 978 0 674 04856 0).

FEW lives have been so thoroughly documented as the short, hot-burning one of John Keats; fewer have been so consistently mythologized. The tropes have been in circulation at least since Leigh Hunt's early praise in *Lord Byron and Some of His Contemporaries* (1825): the consumptive young seer, a fragile victim of dull times and inspired communicant with the beyond. Given handy visual form in the upwardly-gazing face immortalized in Joseph Severn's 1819 miniature, these old saws of romantic ideology needed scant revision for Jane Campion's culture-industry prestige piece, *Bright Star* (2009), where Fanny Brawne and a willowy Keats lie among flowers and chase doomed love.

Denise Gigante's new book adds to the tradition of Keats worship by weaving another thread into the familiar story. *The Keats Brothers* is conceived as a double-biography, 'a life' in the singular in which the lives of two Keats brothers are positioned as mutually reflecting storylines. More robust than Tom, less creative than John, the family's middle child, George, is for Gigante best understood as a kind of spiritual double for his older, more literary sibling. But where John abandoned medicine and 'travell'd in the realms of gold' only in poetry ('Chapman's Homer', 1), George sought actual gold in the semi-civilized wilds of the United States. Gigante's biography follows this pair, 'the poet' and 'the adventurer' (as her image captions label them) on what it styles as twinned adventures: 'While John delved into the dark ravines of human consciousness, and ultimately into the black hole that is death, George made his way past wolves, black bears, wild pigs, and catfish weighing as much as humans' (2). This early sentence suggests the main pleasures of the book: Gigante's sometimes-arresting prose and her vivid descriptions of the western-American object world, c.1818 (when George

sailed for America). It also gives us the book's structure in microcosm. The sentence's 'meanwhile' effect, like the book's, must work hard to create a single storyline from two, such that, for example, '[w]hile the poet was wrangling with his Muse, the pioneer brother was pursuing the serpentine course of the Ohio River into the Western Country' (225). Such jump-cuts, increasingly acrobatic as the book proceeds, betray the narrative difficulties that necessarily attend this effort to 'put[] John's life and work in a transatlantic context' (2).

Unlike Gigante herself, whose research into the early American West is among the book's strengths, John could never quite comprehend New World geography. Gigante suggests compellingly that it was the unimaginable remoteness of George and Georgiana that let John dilate, in his long letters to them, on matters he might otherwise have kept private; this is why those letters contain many of his most lasting statements on art. George's own story is fascinating on its own terms. But Gigante wants to do something besides retrace material links between the brothers, and something more than add vast new depth to what we know about George. (She does both things.) Instead, she aims to forge an abstract, even metaphysical parallel between 'the Cockney Pioneer' and 'the Cockney Poet' (7). Both men 'deserv[e] a place,' she says, 'in the visionary company of Romanticism. While the medium of their dreams may have differed, the two eldest Keats brothers... embodied sibling forms of the phenomenon we call Romanticism' (7).

This namecheck of Harold Bloom's 1961 study gives notice that *The Keats Brothers* will not tell us much about 'the phenomenon we call Romanticism' beyond what we already know. (The acknowledgements cite Bloom as a 'spiritual father' [464]). And the book's initial hedge concerning the key concept of Romanticism—why do 'we call' it that?—doesn't change the fact that the book's framing ideas are conventional in the extreme. George is a 'romantic idealist' on a 'visionary quest' (162); John is a 'timelessly wise young poet' (245); and both dare, in their own ways, 'to imagine the impossible' (211). Torn from the well-worn playbook of romantic ideology, such stereotypes find corollaries in the jargon

of pop-psychology that crops up with strange regularity throughout the volume. This language describes George (for example) as ‘a consummate people pleaser’ (12), while John, haunted by ‘mental demons’ (78), ‘was determined to make something meaningful of all the pain’ (52). The persistence of such conceits might be taken as an inevitable consequence of biography as such: the messy business of life must always be made to fit some pre-existing form. Or it might be read as a sign of Gigante’s effort to cross over into the world of popular writing—a blurb on the back says *The Keats Brothers* ‘has some of the appeal of a *New Yorker* profile’. But in fact, the book’s recycled mysticism, like its odd fidelity to the tropes of conventionalized biopics, turns out to be fundamental to its very design, since Gigante seeks to show that a shared ‘spirit’ and ‘mysterious quality’ (414) linked the brothers’ twinned errands into wilderness.

In contrast with such speculations, *The Keats Brothers*’ strongest sections describe the early United States with minute and concrete particularity. These bring to life scenes never before imagined in reference to John’s hyper-classicized poetry. We get man-sized catfish, but also intricate portraits of the early sawmill and steamboat industries (in which George flourished and finally went broke); shantytowns populated by grifters and con-men (the naturalist John James Audubon appears as a significant player); and events like the ‘squirrel frolic’ (229), an orgy of hunting and whisky drinking that formed part of the backdrop to George’s qualified failures in early Kentucky. Gigante relates, too, the story of one Anna Hazard Barker, who met George on a visit to Kentucky, and happened to have in her

commonplace book pressed flowers taken from John’s Italian grave—a grave George himself would never see. To thank her for the flower, George mailed to this stranger from Boston John’s original MS copy of ‘To Autumn’. A note tells us that the handwritten page, no doubt charged with accrued melancholy from its circuits of transatlantic circulation, now resides in the Harvard Library. These closely-observed vignettes will be what we recommend Gigante’s book to readers of *Notes and Queries*.

It’s disappointing, then, that such locally effective moments—and there are many—are so quickly recuperated into a narrative structure in which popular and academic clichés compete for pride of place, a dynamic that can leave the impression of a scholarly book condescending to an ‘accessible’ style it can’t, in any case, quite pull off. Early in the book, a faux-lyrical dip into the second person asks us to imagine ourselves traveling with the book’s linked brothers: ‘To follow George and John Keats on their bifurcated paths in life, you, dear reader, must prepare for adventure. You are advised to dress warmly and pack some calomel, for you will be walking the deck on the open seas...’ (3). If Gigante’s sometimes laboured volume leaves untroubled the supremacy of Walter Jackson Bate’s *John Keats* (1963), it does add a dimension to the standard story of this Romantic Poet, namely the surprising, catfish-thick wilderness of George’s America, where ‘you will... own slaves’ (4).

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