



UDC 821.111-1.KEA:75.035.3

Original scientific paper

Accepted for publication on 26 September 2003

The Optics of the Pre-Raphaelite Keats¹

Tatjana Jukić

Faculty of Philosophy, Zagreb

The early Pre-Raphaelite fascination with John Keats demonstrates, *inter alia*, a special value of *Italianicity* for Victorian culture (to borrow a term coined by Roland Barthes). In my article I focus on the assumption that the Pre-Raphaelite paintings from Keats utilize his poetry in the same way in which Keats's poetry utilizes Italy. While Keats speaks of sensuality and violence from within a *cordon sanitaire* constructed out of an imaginary Italy, the Pre-Raphaelites use Keats's poetry as a *cordon sanitaire* within their own – visual – discourse, to show yet withhold the representation of excessive violence and desire.

“Our lives are Swiss – so still, so Cool,” says Emily Dickinson, “Till some odd afternoon/ The Alps neglect their Curtains/ And we look farther on!” Looking past the curtain reveals that “Italy stands the other side!” Still, “like a guard between – the solemn Alps – the siren Alps/ Forever intervene”.

Dickinson's poem about phantasmatic territories and the limits of vision has already been used as a rhetorical passageway to a critical text – an epigraph to Sandra Gilbert's article about Italy as a cultural concept generating maternal metaphors for Victorian women writers. Alongside Freud and his comparison of the subliminal to the excavation sites of ancient towns in southern Europe, Gilbert uses Emily Dickinson, with her own specific mapping of repression, as a thoroughfare to feminist cultural geography. I would like to argue, however, that Dickinson's poem – with its frustrated vision of the Other, its curtains, oddities and interventions – might just as well be used as a parable of a more general predicament of Victorian visuality, yet a parable also of the beguiling visibility of the contemporary theories that use Victorianism as a stage of their own performance.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was presented at a symposium on “Literature and the Visual” (University of Tours and the British Council, Tours, September 2001), and will be published in the proceedings.



Capitalising on the profitable optics of Dickinson's poem, I intend to address the complex Victorian handling of visibility by focusing on the Pre-Raphaelite painting as its representative practice. Pre-Raphaelitism is representative of Victorianism not only because it so beguilingly constructs a frustrated vision of the (geographic, sexual, ethnic, discursive) Other, thus further galvanising the Victorian practice of social and cultural interventionism in the field of vision, but also because of the excessive visibility of the Pre-Raphaelites in contemporary critical revisions of Victorianism. Therefore, if Dickinson's poem be seen as a potential parable of Victorian visibility (not least because of its American vista), the Pre-Raphaelite practice could be described as its synecdoche, a part invested with the communicative value of the whole. Synecdoche as a trope is particularly relevant here, with its repression of the extraneous on the one hand, and its accumulation of rhetorical value, on the other. As such, it is operable in discussions of contemporary theory, with its emphasis on symbolic capital and repression, but also when it comes to analysing Victorian culture and its own peculiar merger of profit and repression. Further in this process of *figuring out*, as it were, one can hardly turn a blind eye to Keats, whose visionary rhetoric provided an ample source of material for Pre-Raphaelite narrative paintings. In the sense that Keats can be described as visionary not only because of his Romantic *imagination*, but also because of his recurrent use of ekphrasis – the figure operating precisely on the uneasy borderline between the visible and the invisible – the Pre-Raphaelite illustrations of the ekphrastic Keats operate themselves as a synecdoche of the Pre-Raphaelite visual practice, pushing the issues of the symbolic capital and repression to their limits.

Lastly, the however figurative view that I am trying to outline here is socially and culturally constructed the other side of the Alps, just as is the case with the I/eye of my articulation. In other words (the words of the Other?), I occupy the very stage of the invisible or the obscured of Dickinson's poem. It would be misleading, though, to claim that my reading of the Pre-Raphaelite optics is therefore the otherwise irretrievable discourse of the Other. Rather than that, I see it as a work on an unstable borderline separating yet bringing together the one and the Other in all their guises, the borderline that Dickinson figured out as the intervening curtain, with its fascinating potential to manipulate the performance of vision. As such, it foregrounds the contingency of dialogue, which requires an impossible space of the no man's land, be it the dialogue of different media, cultures, histories or theories. The rhetorical value of the Pre-Raphaelite Keats thus lies above all in its potential to *figure out* the otherwise invisible logic of exchange, figuration and transference themselves.

An exchange involving Keats affected the very fashioning of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. In his memoirs of Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood William Holman Hunt says that his decisive meeting with Dante Gabriel Rossetti, prior to the actual formation of the Brotherhood, was a result of Rossetti's fascination with Hunt's painting from Keats, when he first saw Hunt's *The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro*



during the *Drunkness Attending the Revelry (The Eve of St. Agnes)* (1847-8) at the Royal Academy exhibition, in May 1848.

According to Hunt, the Royal Academy accepted the painting though it lacked close finish, presumably because it was not too large, since Millais' incomplete but larger *Cymon and Iphigenia* had not been placed at all. Hunt's narrative painting, however, was "hung somewhat high up in the Architectural Room, but in a good light" (1905: I 105). Having seen the painting, Rossetti approached him, "loudly declaring that my picture 'The Eve of St. Agnes' was the best in the collection" (1905: I 105). Hunt hastens to add that "the fact that the subject was taken from Keats made [Rossetti] the more unrestrained, for I think no one had ever before painted any subject from this still little-known poet" (1905: I 106). In addition, illustrating Keats had been the first task proposed to the members of the Cyclographic Society, a debating club of young painters initiated by Rossetti, Hunt and Millais before the founding of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Also, once the Brotherhood was founded, the first painting exhibited with the PRB initials was Millais' *Lorenzo and Isabella* (1849) based on an episode of Keats' "Isabella, or the Pot of Basil".

This repeated positioning of Keats at the very beginning of the history of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood is not merely a rhetorical strategy with the agenda of promoting a manipulative myth of origin, as if Keats' discourse possessed some sort of powerful rhetoric of inception surpassing analysis. Quite the contrary, it is a rhetoric which synecdochises Keats, as it were, so as to focus on the consensual function of his discourse in the production of Pre-Raphaelite visuality, because these initial emergences of discourse operate actually as a site of consensus, of an agreement on the basis of which the consumers of discourse decide how to communicate with the whole. Though Gérard Genette reserves this consensual function for the first sentences of novels², it seems that the inaugural taking place of discourse works similarly in most narratives, be they novels, memoirs, histories, biographies or, possibly, even narrative paintings. The fact that in the case of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood this inaugural taking place of discourse is so manifestly liminal, positioning the site of its inception as the beguiling though intervening curtain towards the Other discourse and the medium, bestows a contractual value to the very act of transference.

Liminality here involves thus not merely its predictable psychoanalytic performance or the intertextual *conditio sine qua non* of any discourse, but covers an entire plethora of interactive borderlines until they start producing borderliness itself. One of them is surely the psychosexual border towards maturity – a rite of passage – produced socially as the networking of institutional legitimisation. At the time of the formation of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, that is, Rossetti, Millais and Holman Hunt were practically teenagers, confined to the margins of the Royal Academy, as the principal Victorian site of

² Genette 1990:71.



institutional visibility. Hunt's story about the founding of the Brotherhood shows that even Millais, as the acclaimed wonder boy of the Royal Academy and later its chair, got rejected on the grounds that his painting lacked close finish, which is but another word for an incomplete or else an immature performance – the performance lacking closure, the performance stuck on the borderline. Hunt's remark that his painting, though incomplete, was accepted because it was smaller than Millais' indicates that this kind of borderliness could by no means be allocated the position of absolute visibility, the kind of visibility that Millais' large painting would require. Equally important, however, is the fact that this kind of visual borderliness was not altogether rejected, but was allocated precisely the scope of the margin of the exhibiting area. It could be sanctioned as the visual perimeter, occupying quite literally the position of liminal visibility: in Hunt's words, his painting was hung "somewhat high up", but "in a good light".

By prefiguring the paradoxically protracted and deferred passage towards maturity, Keats' biography and his precocious works could confirm this position on the borderline and grant its unstable optics an air of legitimacy. Moreover, Keats' own ekphrastic figuration of discourse continually destabilises fixed limits of vision, performing similarly to Dickinson's siren curtain, which produces visibility and invisibility as negotiable terms. Thus it comes as no surprise that the Pre-Raphaelite paintings produced just before and immediately following the founding of the Brotherhood advance or even overdo the specific visual work of Keats' poetry, pushing to the limit the very liminality of psycho-sexual, social and institutional positions as the position of visibility.

It should also be noted that early Pre-Raphaelitism works recurrently with two Keats' poems, "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Isabella, or the Pot of Basil", pushing them forth into visibility while simultaneously suppressing the rest of Keats' discourse. Insofar as, from the Pre-Raphaelite point of view, "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Isabella, or the Pot of Basil" come to perform as macroscopic representatives of Keats' work, suppressing the rest of his discourse into invisibility, one might say that they too operate synecdochically. As synecdoches, they too produce symbolic surplus value and manage repression, on the very borderline of the discourse they are departing from.

Furthermore, the discourse that gets managed in this way is not predictably ekphrastic. Ekphrasis – the trope denoting a scriptural representation of a visual artefact – capitalises on the visibility of the subjects it produces, while disrupting their visual authority, which is a procedure typical of Keats (for instance, in his "Ode on a Grecian Urn"). Keats' poems taken up by the Pre-Raphaelites, notably by Holman Hunt and Millais, however, lack the manipulating control of ekphrastic discourse and get managed instead by the narrative potential of the represented visibility. In other words, both poems seem to be operating contrary to ekphrasis, in that in both the penetrating performance of vision generates the narration, and then disrupts its interpretive limits.

The very title of "The Eve of St. Agnes" indicates that its story is conditioned by visibility, in this case by a vision-based ritual, frequently depicted by Keats, the Pre-Raphaelites, and Tennyson. According to an explanation adopted by the Victorians, a



maiden shall be granted a vision of her lover on the eve of St. Agnes, provided she duly performed in a ritual involving a strict control of her gaze (according to Keats, she is not to look back or sideways). In Keats' poem, this ritual is performed by Madeline, a figure from a distant past and a conveniently distant southern country (judging by the names of Porphyro and Angela, probably Italy, the very location of Dickinson's odd visions), represented in her bedchamber while performing the rite. The anticipated dream vision, however, is disrupted by another visual project, that of voyeurism: under cover of the night, Porphyro sneaks into the palace in order to spy on Madeline undressing, and eventually takes advantage of her dream vision by having an intercourse with her as she sleeps and wakes up. When Madeline finds out that the intercourse was not (only) an effect of her dream vision, but a result of Porphyro's sexual optics, she agrees to elope with him. The end of Keats' story describes the two lovers as they are sneaking away from the palace of Madeline's father, while nobody is watching, emphasising that Madeline and Porphyro move as half-visible phantoms into the night – in other words, that to the very end the narration is stipulated by various performances of vision and visibility.

As a result, the reading of "The Eve of St. Agnes" produces a radical interpretive uncertainty, because what gets repeatedly questioned is the very generating positionality of the story: the notion of visibility. Thus Madeline's dream vision is evidently an effect of the ritual visibility of "Agnesian" discourse and of Madeline and the narrator disciplining their optics, which means that what is relevant is not the truth or the falsehood of what Madeline sees, but the success of Madeline's and the narrator's performance – quite as is the case with performatives as speech-acts (promises, threats, seductions). Still, at the point when their performance is to be judged as felicitous or not, its limit is blurred, because it starts co-performing with voyeurism, which too depends on a careful orchestration of visibility until it yields a desired effect, beyond the criteria of truth or falsehood. The boundary between the dream vision and voyeurism is further destabilised once it becomes manifest that the position of the narrator – who as it were sees it all but is himself invisible to the story – is in itself the position of a voyeur. The most disturbing destabilising of visibility is produced when this same principle is applied to visibility as a means of social control: at the end, when sneaking away from the guards and unlatching a heavy door, Madeline and Porphyro are represented as phantoms, the figures operating as the borderline cases of visibility, whose ability to perform on the negotiable perimeter of visibility is both a way to achieve sexual gratification, and a way to avoid the social sanctioning of unregulated sexual gratification. Moreover, since their negotiable visibility, as well as the narrator's voyeuristic performance, are the effect of the scriptural rather than the pictorial discourse, one might just as well argue that Keats' discourse actually reproduces the condition of its narrative, in that it effects a sensuous gratification of its readers precisely by denying them a possibly menacing consummate vision in favour of its safer, hyperactive and negotiable liminality. What might be disturbing here, at least to a contemporary reader familiar with the tenets of literary theory, of course, is the proposi-



tion that negotiable liminality can be a socially safer choice specifically because it hinders consummate interpretation.

“Isabella, or the Pot of Basil”, the other poem favoured by the Pre-Raphaelites, performs in much the same way. Again, the reader is offered a story of forbidden love and frustrated sexual gratification, taking place in a conveniently distant past and a conveniently foreign country – this time manifestly identified as the Italy of Boccaccio. Instead of Madeline and Porphyro, the stage is occupied by Isabella and Lorenzo, divided socially, because Isabella is a sister of rich Florentine merchants, while Lorenzo is but their employee. Like Madeline and Porphyro, they too can meet only at night, when nobody can see them, so that light once again operates as the agent of social control, reminding one of Bentham’s project of panoptic control. In other words, like Madeline and Porphyro, Isabella and Lorenzo must perform as phantoms, on the very perimeter of visibility, if they are to escape social supervision. However, the agents of overseeing (Isabella’s brothers) manage, quite literally, to catch a glimpse of the forbidden affair, and decide to regulate the functioning of the family by killing Lorenzo and burying him in the woods – by subduing him to invisibility, as it were. Thus repressed, Lorenzo nevertheless manages to perform back to visibility by appearing to Isabella as a ghost or a dream vision, defying social supervision as a figure of liminal visibility, now within the shrouding confines of Isabella’s subjectivity. After her communication with the ghost of Lorenzo, Isabella exhumes his head and buries it in the pot of basil, so that Lorenzo can once again perform on the boundary between visibility and invisibility: his visibility is eventually an effect of the ghastly metaphorical slippage from the invisible matter buried in the pot onto its visible corollary, figured *out* as the monstrously burgeoning basil.

This narrative procedure of Keats’ (or Boccaccio’s) story produces, however, not merely the uncanny of its own narrative material, but also a parable of the operation of the Freudian uncanny in general, in that it narrates the necessity of a symbolic representation of the repressed or the uncanny – the necessity of the metaphorical slippage which manages representation of the repressed material only as a figural displacement. In other words, the burgeoning basil illustrates the performing principle of the repressed, in that it displaces the material of the unspeakable (here serviceably narrated as a twice buried head of a decaying corpse) out into a manageable visible symptom, which can work only symbolically, indicating a psychological condition through a movement of trope. The issue of visibility enacts thus another negotiable borderline – the grey area between sanity and insanity, just as in Freud mnemonic symbols enact the displacing figuration of hysteria. The work of the borderline is made visible by the narrative procedure representing Isabella’s clairvoyant vision of the figure of dead Lorenzo as dream-like (as an effect of liminal consciousness), while the equally liminal performance of the pot of basil is granted a fully approved narrative visibility. In thus strangely replicating Isabella’s distorted vision from the point of view of narrative authority (the displacing work of the pot of basil viewed as reliable and omniscient narration), the narrator himself performs in the spectacle of liminal visibility, further destabilising the borderline between sanity and



madness, just as – by narratively replicating voyeurism in “The Eve of St. Agnes” – he renegotiates the optics of sexuality. Also, Isabella’s madness is narrated as an effect of the inability to condone social supervision, which brings about a radical instability of the subject and a hyperproduction of the discourse of madness as the discourse of the Other. Thus once again Keats constructs his narration out of the two conflicting regimes of visibility and invisibility, whose constant repositioning yields eventually only a bewildering deconstruction of focal positions.³

Furthermore, the burgeoning basil produced as a visible figural displacement of the repressed decaying matter is not only a highly operable illustration of this process, but also an illustration of the labour of metaphor itself, as the frustrating stipulation of any representation. While this might seem all too obvious and equally relevant to all discourse production, what strikes me as particularly relevant for Keats and the Pre-Raphaelites is a specifically visual structuring of the metaphor and its performance, so that the very theoretical question of representability is figurally displaced onto the question of visibility: representation equals visibility, while the material resisting representation is positioned as invisible, though representation itself is but a displacement of the invisible onto figures of visibility, burgeoning into a plethora of cognitive metaphors (as in illustration, *theoria*, speculation, insight, lucidity, etc.). This process, which continually enacts its predicament of figuring out (meaning insight, cognition, interpretation) as figuring out, that is, as the figural displacement of the Other resisting representation out into the however figural visibility of representation, seems itself successfully figured out into the discourse which feeds on the very negotiable boundary between the visual and its Other, as is the case with the Pre-Raphaelite illustrations of the subjects from Keats. Moreover, the increased visibility of the Pre-Raphaelites in recent revisions of Victorian legacy, especially after the comprehensive exhibition of their work at Tate in 1984, seems to be related to the institutionalisation of the theories which promote border-crossing between the visible and its Other as their fundamental interest, be it the border between media, discourses, scientific disciplines, cultures or psychosexual formations. Almost as if a revisionist focus on the Pre-Raphaelites, with their liminal positionalities and laborious optics, might in return legitimise some more border-crossing and facilitate another institutional consensus, just as a revisionist focus on Keats, with his own liminal positionalities and laborious visibility, facilitated the founding of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as one of the most influential though (or because?) most unstable and disputed institutions of Victorian culture.

It is for this reason that I would like to focus on two early Pre-Raphaelite paintings from Keats, which participated in the founding of the Brotherhood – Holman Hunt’s *The*

³ It is worth noting that Keats departs from Boccaccio by insisting on a detailed account of the early symptoms of Isabella’s madness (in Boccaccio’s version, the account of madness is relatively subdued and is narrated only eventually, at the end of the story). See Stillinger 1971: 42 and Pearce 1991: 91.





Flight of Madeline and Porphyro dated 1847-8 and Millais' *Lorenzo and Isabella* dated 1849 – rather than on two mature Pre-Raphaelite works from Keats, painted in the 1860s, when brothers went their separate ways (Millais' *The Eve of St. Agnes*, 1863, and Holman Hunt's *Isabella with the Pot of Basil*, 1866-8). For the same reason one should consider a persuasive visual logic of historical diagrams and chronological tables, which organise and manage their otherwise disorderly verbal contents by positioning them according to optical boundaries and the territorial protocols of visibility. Chronological tables position the founding of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood in 1848, alongside a series of the revolutions on the Continent, in practically the same field with the publication of the unruly Brontë novels, *The Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. The discourse of early Pre-Raphaelitism – as well as the novels of the Brontë sisters – are thus seen as likely metonymical slippages of the great revolution, symbolically representing the performance of violence and the establishment of new institutions in more marginal social terms (those of culture). The persuasive visual logic of chronological tables is further reinforced by a number of critical approaches to Victorian discourse. Nancy Armstrong emphasises that many novels published in Britain around 1848 open with “violent scenes of punishment and exclusion” (1996: 157); many surveys of Pre-Raphaelitism, even those of a coffee-table kind, mention the revolutionary 1848 – the year of the founding of the Brotherhood – as a symptomatic fact. In her critical revision of the Pre-Raphaelite Keats, Julie F. Codell offers a manifest link between the symbolic function of Keats and the symbolic meaning of 1848, saying that, active “in illustrating Keats's poetry, artists of the PRB were equally influenced by Keats's biography in their rebellious 1848 articulation of their relationship to the past and in their hostility to the Royal Academy” (1995: 341).

Though it is true that the early Pre-Raphaelitism as well as the British novels of the late 1840s can be persuasively read from the point of view of the revolutionary 1848 and the institutionalisation of new discourses, it should also be noted that their positioning – as opposed to the dominant new discourses on the Continent – was markedly marginal, insofar as they were located in the sphere of art and culture without a major border-crossing towards other, socially more central discourses of the realm. It is equally possible to argue that the new British discourses of the late 1840s perform actually as Isabella's basil, figuring *out* the conveniently marginal and thus endurable and sanitised performance of violence which – if entirely stifled – might have radically destabilised the more central systems of (political) representation. In other words, the Pre-Raphaelite revolutionising of the dominant Victorian visual discourses – in that it was conveniently small-scale, transposed onto Keats, dislocated into historicized and southern stories – might actually be seen as regulative, because it operated as a kind of symbolic vaccine protecting the realm against the true, big-scale revolutionary contagion from the Continent. Its operation was therefore quite similar to the operation of the specifically British notion of the gentleman – the social category resistant to translation into foreign languages – which vaccinated Britain, so to speak, against the eighteenth-century revolu-



Fig. 1.

tionary contagion from France, by softening the boundary between the commercial capital and the symbolic capital.

Even if this proposition seems too overtly Foucauldian, tempting one to locate its own invisible recesses, it seems operative, especially considering the specifics of the 1848 Royal Academy exhibition of the Pre-Raphaelite works, in terms of the visibility simultaneously granted and denied to the young painters' work. It is further supported by the visual dynamics of the early Pre-Raphaelite work itself, which reproduces the very conditions of its production and consumption.

Hunt's 1848 version of *The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro* (fig. 1) illustrates the end of Keats' poem, the last three out of 42 stanzas, nine lines each. The lovers, who have just illicitly consummated their sexual passion, are represented while running away from the palace of Madeline's father into a raging snow-storm, terrified by the sight of the bloodhounds, the porter and the violent drinking party of likely avengers. The painting was exhibited in the Royal Academy alongside the text of the 41st stanza of Keats' poem:

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;
Like phantoms, to the iron porch, they glide;
Where lay the porter, in uneasy sprawl,
With a huge empty flagon by his side:



The wakeful bloodhound rose, and shook his hide,
 But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:
 By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide: -
 The chains lie silent on the footworn stones; -
 The key turns, and the door upon its hinges groans.

Hunt chooses to illustrate the three-stanza performance of lacking but fear-generating social supervision, not the sexual performance of Keats' lovers, although 17 stanzas preceding the scene of the flight represent in detail the work of sexual desire, voyeurism, seduction and consummation. Madeline and Porphyro are seen unlatching the door and getting away towards the edges of the painting (towards the space of the pictorial invisibility), making it clear that visibility is no longer an agent of illicit sexual stimulation, but a prerequisite of social surveillance. Moreover, while the frightened lovers occupy the perimeter of the pictorial space (conveniently figured out as a massive door), the centre stage is occupied by the figure of the drunken porter, protruding into the space of the frame.

The protruding figure of debilitated control, however, is an obstacle not only to the escaping lovers, about to disappear into the night, but also to the viewer, whose gaze can enter the pictorial space only after it – however symbolically – passes the sleeping guard. It is only then that the gaze can cross the border of the painting and possess visually the illicit lover figures to the right, and the drunken revelry to the left, the figures constituting the narrative centre of Keats' poem. The narrative situation depicted by Hunt reproduces thus the positioning of the viewer, whose gaze performs exactly like the lover figures, gliding like a phantom into the wide hall of the pictorial space.

In his memoirs, published much later, in 1905, Hunt explained that he had chosen Keats because he wanted to illustrate a holiness of honourable and responsible love, as opposed to the weakness of arrogance and intemperance (1905: I 85). This late explanation, however, is but a rhetorical veil concealing the sanitary paradoxes of Hunt's Keats, just as the meticulous representation of the layered clothes of Hunt's Madeline and Porphyro conceals their preceding nudity. Julia Saville notices the same sanitising procedure when analysing similar remarks Hunt made concerning *The Lady of Shalott*, saying that "the very fact that he feels compelled to emphasize his moral intention in this way, suggests that he himself sensed a moral ambiguity in his painting" (1992: 79).

Hunt's sanitary paradox in the case of his visualized Keats is effected precisely at the point of border-crossing from the narrative poem into a narrative painting. Narrative painting too necessitates the labour of synecdoche: in order to pictorialize Keats' narration, Hunt had to select a single episode with so much representative value that it could stand for the narrative in its entirety. The visual representation thus capitalises on Keats while simultaneously suppressing a huge part of his narrative into invisibility. The specific sanitary operation of this synecdoche allows for a visual figuring out of the repressed precisely because it contains it as its own subliminal substance (indeed, as its own sub-stance), just as the detailed representation of the lush velvety clothes figures



out the invisible bodies of Madeline and Porphyro. Indeed, the representation of their clothes – Madeline in a purplish dress, a Horatian purple-patch anchoring the colour-scheme of the painting, and Porphyro with a phallic belt between his thighs – is in itself a metaphor of the sexually performing body eschewing representation. The represented clothes are a kind of a slipping screen, an intervening curtain, regulating the socially visible performance of sexuality, in the same way as the pictorial performance requires canvas in order to screen representation (of nudity, for instance). Madeline and Porphyro are thus indeed dressed up, in more ways than one: their being represented as dressed up is an act of visual trimming, of visual dressing up, or else of visual disciplining which uncannily reproduces the very condition of pictorial representation⁴. The same kind of rhetoric applies to the logical extension of the metaphor: they are dressed up to the eyes. The lover figures appear overdressed, dressed too finely for the occasion, but also overdressed as in overtrim or overdisciplined. Still, the metaphorical overdisciplining reaches only to the eyes, as if vision, however disciplined, cannot or should not be denied phantasmatic activity.

The fact that Hunt chose the very end of Keats' narrative for his visual outlet supports the operation of the sanitary synecdoche of control, because the basic narrative logic of any story requires that the ending be an outcome of the beginning and the middle, and in being so accommodate and contain their narrative performance. Thus the final three stanzas represented by Hunt's narrative painting accommodate and contain, as their sub-stance, the bulk of preceding stanzas representing a difficult crux of visual acts culminating in a sexual act. This sub-stance is hence both represented, because it participates in the narrative, and withdrawn, because it performs in the symbolic territory of the Other (the other medium and the other text). What Hunt's painting is actually staging is a sanitary paradox of visibility, which makes it possible to represent an excess of a strangely ocular desire as a pictorial minus-device, effected precisely on the unstable territory of the various border-crossings that it works with. The sanitary paradox of the Pre-Raphaelites seems all the more performative in view of the fact that the Pre-Raphaelites were often criticised for their excessively myopic optics, for showing too much too clearly - too many sharply delineated details, too much colour⁵. Yet this excess of the visible too is at least partly effected by a frantic work of the visual metaphorizing propelled precisely by the energy of the invisible Other.

⁴ Concerning a similar problem in film adaptations of Jane Austen's novels, see Jukić 1999.

⁵ According to Lindsay Smith, "just as the stereoscope was regarded as a novel instrument because of its power to 'show', Pre-Raphaelite painting attracted criticism in part because of its emphasis upon an extreme optical fidelity. The heightened effect of three dimensions in photographic stereograms, and an extreme commitment to the reproduction of detail in Pre-Raphaelite painting, were denounced for the same reason - namely, for showing too much" (217: 1995). Or, in the words of Camille Paglia, "Pre-Raphaelite painting begins with Keatsian ardor for the minutiae of organic nature. (...) Everything in Pre-Raphaelite painting is seen *too clearly*. The eye is invited but coerced. Part triumphs over the whole, exerting an uncomfortable pressure on the viewer" (1991: 490, emphasis C.P.).





Furthermore, Hunt's sanitary performance of visual rebellion merely reproduces the sanitary paradox of Keats himself. In producing his painting of Madeline and Porphyro, Hunt uses the narrative space of Keats' poem as a discursive *cordon sanitaire*, which enables him to simultaneously represent and withhold the excess of sensuous vision. Keats, on the other hand, does the same by dislocating the excess of sensuality into a symbolically colonised territory of the medieval or Renaissance Italy⁶, which then performs as a phantasmatic *cordon sanitaire* accommodating and containing the disruptive and hypersensual work of vision. This phantasmatic quality of Italy as a symbolic *cordon sanitaire* is particularly engaging, since both Keats, at the time of writing "The Eve of St. Agnes" and "Isabella, or the Pot of Basil", and Hunt, at the time of painting *The Flight of Madeline and Porphyro*, constructed Italy as a phantasmatic locus not yet inscribed in their biographies – a phantasmatic locus of the desired Other to be ever more fully consumed and possessed.

Millais' *Lorenzo and Isabella* (fig. 2) works in much the same way, and this fraternizing vision of the early Pre-Raphaelites is all the more fascinating considering a discrepancy in Millais' and Hunt's subsequent careers and interests. While Hunt works with the narrative conclusion of Keats' poem, *Lorenzo and Isabella* is an illustration of the beginning of Keats' text: it telescopes the initial twenty or so stanzas out of the total of 63 stanzas, eight lines each. Again the viewer is offered a view of two desiring yet illicit lover figures, dressed up to the eyes, surrounded by the figures of social control (Isabella's violent brothers and the rest of the family). When exhibited at the RA in 1849, it was placed alongside the text of the first and the 21st stanzas:

Fair Isabel, poor simple Isabel!
Lorenzo, a young palmer in Love's eye!
They could not in the self-same mansion dwell
Without some stir of heart, some malady;
They could not sit at meals but feel how well
It soothed each to be the other by.

These brethren having found by many signs
What love Lorenzo for their sister had,
And how she lov'd him too, each unconfines

⁶ Though the poem never states that the story takes place in Italy, the names of Madeline, Porphyro and Angela, and the description of architecture imply the imaginary space of the medieval or Renaissance Italy. Moreover, in an early version of the poem Keats identifies Porphyro as a "Signor" (Keats 1934: 217). Though some of the names of the guests at the party are Anglo-Norman or Germanic, it is quite clear that Keats' symbolically appropriated Italy can accommodate and contain these Anglo-Norman or Germanic traces, in the same way that it accommodates and contains a description of luscious Oriental fruits, in stanza XXX.





Fig. 2.

His bitter thoughts to other, well nigh mad
That he, the servant of their trade designs,
Should in their sister's love be blithe and glad,
When 'twas their plan to coax her by degrees
To some high noble and his olive-trees.

Like Hunt's Madeline and Porphyro, Millais' lover figures – though the central narrative figures – are represented only after the secondary frame to the painting is established. Similarly to Hunt's porter, who is breaking towards the frame, denying an immediate visual access to the lover figures, Millais introduces the secondary ban in the figure of the cruel brother. The brother's luminously white and massive leg is doubly borderly: first, because it is a secondary borderline banning a safe passage to the central narrative interest of the painting (the figures of Isabella and Lorenzo), and secondly, because its intended violence performs on an uncanny borderline between the represented events (Isabella's brother is shown kicking a dog) and the symbolic violence enacted on the viewer's gaze. Only after a however figurative showdown with the representation of Isabella's cruel brother is the viewer's gaze in for a performance. This visual performance involves a consumption of metaphorized sexuality: Lorenzo is offering Isabella one half of





the blood-red orange, thus effecting a typically Freudian transfer of sexuality onto a symbol in yet another spectacle of borderline rhetoric.

Millais' telescoping of Keats is again comparable to the sanitary paradox of Keats' own discourse: while Keats constructs a discursive *cordón sanitaire* out of the symbolically colonized Italy (a symbolically colonized text by Boccaccio), Millais uses Keats' narrative as the *cordón sanitaire* of his own – visual – discourse, enabling him to show yet withhold the representation of excessive desire. The represented is once more visible, but also invisible, because performing in the symbolic location of the Other (medium, text). Once again it both is (because the telescoped stanzas anticipate the remaining forty or so) and is not (because, strictly speaking, the painting illustrates only the bit of text exhibited next to the painting, while the rest is suppressed into invisibility). The performance of Millais' painting thus seems to be sensual and disruptive, yet fully respectful of social control and discipline.

As a result, Millais' painting too stages the paradox of visibility, with the same regulative function that motivated Keats to exploit the symbolic locus of Italy. Millais' handling of this paradox, however, is somewhat different. Since *Lorenzo and Isabella* anticipates the narrative invisible, Millais makes sure to include a number of visual figures, which operate as the anticipating symbols cocooning the narration yet to evolve. One of these is the said split blood-red orange, anticipating the narrative work of sex and violence. The painting, however, accommodates and contains some more symbolic anticipation, with a visual logic that requires that it be not what it looks like. The representation of the terrace wall accommodates and contains the pot of basil, which anticipates yet defers the location of Lorenzo's head, and relates it to the title of the poem, operating thus as a visual subjunctive, in a game of proleptic hide-and-seek. The terrace wall contains also a pot of passion-flower, as an admissible metaphorical displacement of forbidden desires (playing on a possible erotic slippage of both passion and flower); the representation of the falcon clutching at the chair and the crushing of nuts symbolises the gruesome murder of Lorenzo; the representation of the salt spilt on the table symbolises anger and quarrelling.

The game of proleptic hide-and-seek is particularly relevant here, since Millais' painting too enacts visibility as the means of cognition and control. The very subject of the painting is a careful orchestration of looking, in which looking is made an instrument of control. Isabella is represented with her eyes downcast, hiding her desire. Her not looking, however, makes her ignorant of her brothers' knowledge – she does not see what they are up to. At the same time, her not looking makes her doubly vulnerable as the object of vision: she is being visually possessed both by the figures from within the painting (Lorenzo, her brothers), and by the viewer this side of the canvas. That Lorenzo is ignorant of Isabella's brothers' knowledge is once again indicated by the staging of several interactive visions: Lorenzo is focusing on Isabella, instead of looking out for the brothers. Lorenzo's fervent erotic gaze focusing on Isabella, however, is the object of the gaze of one of the brothers (the one with the falcon). As a result, in Millais' painting it is



precisely the act of looking that gets to be constructed as the sign which motivates the brothers' disciplining action and propels the narrative. Millais thus seems to imply that knowing how to look is a crucial precondition for a safe practice of representation and for safe sensual pleasures. After all, only skilful and disciplined viewers will spot a passion flower and detect its metaphorical invisible, which in turn enables them to take pleasure in the act of representation. Millais' painting thus performs as properly Victorian and pure, but one should by no means turn a blind eye to the symbolic procedure, which effects this Victorian purity only by simultaneously staging an excess of desire *and* a radical sanitation of the figures in the field of vision.

Furthermore, Lorenzo's features are, according to Julie F. Codell, a strange mixture of Keats' portrait and Millais' self-portrait (1995: 347). If that is so, the problem lies not so much in a possible identification of Millais with Lorenzo and Keats, but in a radical decentering of vision and a scepticism implanted in its phantasmatic potential, because it presupposes a potentially disturbing blurring of the boundary between the narrative and its narrator, or else between the viewer and the viewed, as if the viewer himself or herself is potentially the viewed in another frame or field of vision. In other words, Millais' *Lorenzo and Isabella* effects a wariness of panoptic control, a fear of being spotted while making a wrong move (or while exchanging a wrong glance), by the authority forever suspended from the field of vision. Since the generation of such a fear presupposes an internalisation of discipline⁷ and its capillary social and psychological functioning, it follows that the realm of phantasm and its visions gets affected as well. The borderline between various levels of visibility is in Millais no longer the however unstable territory of visual manipulation, but the territory that admits a more pressing operation of control. Unlike the pictorial space of Madeline and Porphyro, who manage to get away from the palace because surveillance is portrayed as debilitated (far from panoptic); their ending – though a snow storm – is happy compared to the madness and death of Isabella, effected through a careful work of social supervision.

This barely visible difference between the early Pre-Raphaelite paintings of Holman Hunt and Millais seems to foreshadow the difference in their future careers. While Millais renounced the Pre-Raphaelite protocols rather early and started producing paintings which earned him a title and the position as the chair of the Royal Academy, Holman Hunt spent his entire life developing the "original" Pre-Raphaelite tenets and fighting for a professional recognition. The symbolic social territories that they occupied register this difference even more clearly: while the mature Millais inhabited the symbolic centre of Victorian visuality, as the chair of the Royal Academy, Holman Hunt was a compulsive traveller, occupying the unstable symbolic borderlines on which he continually renegotiated the construction of various cultural, sexual, religious Others (Italy, Egypt, the Holy Land).

⁷ See Miller 1988. Nancy Armstrong analyses the death of Bill Sikes in Dickens' *Oliver Twist* as a case of such internalised panopticism, when the murderer is pushed to death by the phantasmatic vision of Nancy, the prostitute he had murdered (1996: 164).



Fig. 3.

The difference becomes fully visible in their 1860ies paintings from Keats, when Millais painted his wife as Madeline, undressing in her boudoir, while Holman Hunt painted his wife as Isabella, madly hugging the pot of basil. Seemingly both paintings enact similar visions, because both portray solitary female figures engrossed by their sensuality, oblivious of the viewer, no longer ensnared by the figures of social control. Also, neither obscures the central optic interest of the representation – the undressing of Madeline, Isabella’s adoration of her dead lover’s body – as was the case with the 1848 paintings from Keats. Still, their visual emancipation of sensuality is, as Julie F. Codell notes (1995: 365), secured by the fact that their sitters (their wives) symbolise legitimate sexuality or, one might say, a legitimate phantasmatic activity. Also, these later paintings from Keats seem safer, because they conform to the Victorian norm of representing single female figures in safely claustrophobic interiors. This visual practice, according to Susan P. Casteras, promotes the female figures as

however problematic keepers of the hearth, while legitimising actually the voyeuristic position of the male gaze (Casteras 1996).

There is, however, a visible difference between the two. While the viewer of the mature Millais is positioned undeniably as a voyeur, about to cross an unstable boundary between seeing and sensuously possessing the object of vision, Holman Hunt’s viewer replicates the position of Isabella’s brothers who are surveying their mad sister in order to locate the position of the decaying skull. Likewise, Millais’ Madeline is shown undressing, as if wishing to strip the hindering canvas off her body (though the very show is but one of its effects). Holman Hunt’s Isabella (fig. 3), on the other hand, is shown laying bare the paradox of visibility: the decaying skull can be seen only if figured out onto the





enveloping flower-pot, which reproduces its contents by further figuring them out as artificial symbols (here a number of small artificial skulls decorating the outside of the pot). In addition, the representation of the pot is suffocated by a meticulous rendering of the surrounding interior, seen as a conglomerate of the finely woven cloth. The representation of the layers of cloth, as if reproducing the canvas itself, thus literally dresses the painting up to the eyes and – however paradoxically – lays it bare, because it debunks the protocols of dressing up as a precondition of visibility as such. Lastly, the mature Millais departs from his adolescent want for a recognisably foreign *cordon sanitaire* in order to construct a self-centred phantasmatic locus void of historical or geographic specificity⁸. Holman Hunt, on the other hand, began painting his *Isabella* in Italy, reverting it into a *memento mori* after his wife and the model for the figure of Isabella had died in childbirth, and was buried in Florence. However ghastly, the painting of Keats' *Isabella* performed for Holman Hunt precisely as the pot of basil – a necessary mourning instrument metaphorizing the forever invisible into visibility, yet painfully exposing its otherwise soothing paradox. In other words, the painting eventually laid bare the condition of its own consumption, as a nearly unendurable metaphorical slippage of so many interactive Others – of representability, of foreignness, sexuality, gender and death. Incidentally or not, Millais' *The Eve of St. Agnes* – at least according to the information provided by Julie F. Codell in 1995 – was kept in the very symbolic centre of the realm, in the Royal Collection of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother. Holman Hunt's *Isabella, with the Pot of Basil*, on the other hand, can be seen in the Laing Art Gallery, in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, conveniently near yet another border (a relatively soft one, between England and Scotland).

By insisting on the borderliness of Holman Hunt I would by no means want to suggest that Millais is a conservative painter, as opposed to a more liberal and cosmopolitan Holman Hunt. Quite the contrary: Holman Hunt's paintings produced in Egypt and the Holy Land are obvious products of British cultural imperialism and colonialism, inviting a sharp peek of cultural theory. Rather than that, I wanted to explore the early Pre-Raphaelite exploitation of the symbolic borderlines towards the Other, those grey areas that are no longer "ours", but are not quite yet altogether Other – those unstable and undetermined territories of exchange, dialogue, quarantine, sanitation. The lissome Pre-Raphaelite construction of Italy and Italianicity is precisely one such borderline, accommodating and containing various other borders – as a stage of so many Grand Tours (themselves rites of *passage*), with its traces of history, its proverbial Southern sensuality, its dreaded Catholicism, its being perceived as a borderline towards the real (of) East and the real (of) South. This symbolic geography of Italy has a similar function in the quoted poem by Emily Dickinson, as the site accommodating and containing a disruptive labour of vision, but in Dickinson already transfigured into a geography of the Other. Keats' Italy, adopted by the Pre-Raphaelites, on the other hand, is suspended in its

⁸ Concerning Millais' historical and geographic inaccuracies, see Codell 1995.



borderline operation – the operation of the curtain, of Dickinson’s intervening Alps. The contained Other of Keats and the Pre-Raphaelites is the colonial territory of the Orient: in both “The Eve of St. Agnes” and “Isabella, or the Pot of Basil” the Italian palaces are represented as repositories of displaced Oriental labour, wealth and most sordid violence. Thus “The Eve of St. Agnes” stages a description of luscious fruits imported from Samarkand and the Lebanon, while “Isabella, or the Pot of Basil” accommodates metaphors invoking the toil and the gruesome deaths of Ceylonese pearl-divers.

This opens up a possibility that – thanks to the unstoppable work of the various borderlines towards the Other – the current heightened visibility of the Pre-Raphaelites in criticism and in popular culture performs as another such borderline, accommodating, containing and sanitising that Victorian Otherness which resists the focus of contemporary theory. If that is so, the Pre-Raphaelite handling of Keats might turn out to have the value of a parable, illuminating dark recesses of interpretive procedures, and thus performing very much *theoretically*.

Another aspect of this illumination is a theorizing angle on the proposition that – in its critical exploitation of the Oriental Other and the very notions of borders, crossings and transgressions – contemporary criticism reproduces the colonial dynamics of cognitive and institutional appropriation, by contriving, ever more performatively, to subject its Others to a panoptic gaze.

And lastly, the discussion of the Pre-Raphaelite Keats has necessitated an agile work on territorialising, so to speak, the positionality of my own voice and my own perspective. Which happens to be determined by the cultural locus that in the past decades has come to perform like the Italy of the Victorian Keats – accommodating and containing the disruptive vision of the real (of the Orient). While Europe stretching east of Italy was in the mid-nineteenth century Britain constructed as the real Other, with Italy as the boundary, the British twentieth century constructed the indeterminable territory of the Balkans as the borderline towards the real Other – the borderline conveniently anticipated by the figure of Bram Stoker’s bloodthirsty Transylvanian count getting as far as the late-Victorian London. After all, Sean Connery’s James Bond – as perhaps the most famous figure that has ever crossed the line between literature and the visual – never makes it to the cold-war Russia. His confrontation with the eastern Other in *From Russia with Love* is staged at that uneasy stretch from Istanbul to Venice where borderlines are represented as a matter of life and death.

REFERENCES

Armstrong, Nancy (1996). “The Politics of Domestic Fiction: Dickens, Thackeray and the Brontës”. *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. A Reader* (ed. Kiernan Ryan). London and New York: Arnold. 157-165.



- Casteras, Susan P. (1996). "The unsettled hearth: P.H. Calderon's 'Lord! Thy Will Be Done' and the problematics of women in Victorian interiors". *Re-Framing the Pre-Raphaelites. Historical and Theoretical Essays* (ed. Ellen Harding). Aldershot: Scholar Press. 149-172.
- Codell, Julie F. (1995). "Painting Keats: Pre-Raphaelite Artists Between Social Transgressions and Painterly Conventions". *Victorian Poetry*. 33/3-4. 341-370. Genette, Gérard (1990). "The Pragmatic Status of Narrative Fiction". *Style*. 24/I. 59-72.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. (1984, 1996). "From *Patria* to *Matria*: Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Risorgimento". *Victorian Women Poets. A Critical Reader* (ed. Angela Leighton). Oxford and Cambridge (Mass.): Blackwell. 24-52.
- Hunt, William Holman (1905). *Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood*. London and New York: Macmillan.
- Jukić, Tatjana (1999). "A Lasting Performance: Jane Austen". *Links & Letters*. 6. 23-34.
- Keats, John (1934). *The Poetical Works of John Keats* (ed. Harry Buxton Forman). London: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, D.A. (1988). *The Novel and the Police*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press.
- Paglia, Camille (1991). *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Pearce, Lynne (1991). *Woman / Image / Text. Readings in Pre-Raphaelite Art and Literature*. New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Saville, Julia (1992). "'The Lady of Shalott': a Lacanian romance". *Word & Image*. 8/1. 71-87.
- Smith, Lindsay (1995). *Victorian Photography, Painting and Poetry. The Enigma of Visibility in Ruskin, Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites*. Cambridge, New York and Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Stillinger, Jack (1971). *The Hoodwinking of Madeline and Other Essays on Keats' Poems*. Chicago and London: University of Illinois Press.

OPTIKA PREDRAFAELITSKOG KEATSA

Fascinacija Keatsom ranoga predrafaelitizma primjer je, među inim, simboličke vrijednosti koju različitim konstrukcijama i prikazima Italije pripisuje viktorska kultura. U svome tekstu usredotočila sam se na razradu hipoteze da se predrafaelitsko slikarstvo koristi Keatsovom poezijom na isti način na koji se Keatsova poezija koristi Italijom. Naime, kao što Keats prikazuje senzualnost i nasilje unutar "sanitarnog kordona" koji konstruira iz poengležene, imaginarne Italije, predrafaeliti se koriste Keatsovom poezijom kao "sanitarnim kordonom" unutar vlastitog – vizualnog – diskursa, kako bi istodobno prikazali i uskratili prikaz ekscesa nasilja i žudnje.



