

BG-L-Kea

John Keats

AN INTRODUCTION AND A SELECTION BY

Richard Church



PHOENIX HOUSE

LONDON

Julius Cantor

44.

PURE SERENE

Sir,—The “pure serene” of Keats’s “Chapman’s Homer” sonnet (published in March, 1817) is referred to by Mr. W. M. Parker, in his interesting article on Cary, in your issue of August 19 as a possible debt to Cary’s Dante (January, 1814):—

Light is none,
Save that which cometh from the pure serene
Of ne’er disturbed ether.

The suggestion was first made by Mr. Paget Toynbee in *The Times Literary Supplement* for June 16, 1921, and accepted by Professor E. de Sélincourt in the fifth edition of his “Poems of John Keats,” though there is no mention of Cary in Keats’s Letters until June 10, 1818. It seems to have escaped the notice of all commentators that this striking phrase also occurs in Coleridge’s “Hymn before Sunrise in the Vale of Chamouni,” first printed in the *Morning Post* of September 11, 1802, but not published till August, 1817, in “Sibylline Leaves”:—

. . . the avalanche, unheard,
Shoots downward, glittering through the pure serene.
Neither Keats, therefore, nor Cary, can have borrowed from Coleridge except on the wild supposition that the original cutting of 1802 might have been pasted or copied into an album, and thus have come into the possession of one or the other of them, or both. Failing that, we are faced with a remarkable literary coincidence—three independent inventors of a by no means obvious phrase (for the debt of Keats to Cary is by no means proven).

But whether Coleridge alone started the ball rolling or not, we are still entitled to ask where he got the ball from. “Pure serene” is clearly a Latinism, and Coleridge was a widely read classical scholar; he was also keenly interested in celestial phenomena, as a reference to “Anima Poetae” will clearly show. This being the case, let us turn to Suetonius, “Life of Augustus”:—

“After the death of Julius Caesar a circular rainbow suddenly appeared round the sun, in a clear and cloudless sky (*liquido ac puro sereno*).”
And so the striking phrase which is the subject of this letter, turns out to be dangerously like a lazy schoolboy’s literal translation of two Latin words.

Yours faithfully,

O. H. T. DUDLEY.

Grange Mead, Addlestone.

(Other Letters to the Editor on page 468)

(Me lo regaló Ethel Gray,
en Mendoza.)