

Keats's "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer": an oceanic sonnet

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Keats's "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer"¹ is so densely rich and intricately comprehensive that it would not be hyperbolic to rank it alongside Shakespeare's sonnets as one of the supreme achievements of English language poetry. Unfortunately, the virtually universal esteem in which the poem is held has not been matched by the kind of close reading that it deserves and demands. An attempt at such a reading is what this essay aims to provide.

I

In terms of poetic form, the poem is a Petrarchan (Italian) sonnet, and so it is composed of an octave (containing two distinct quatrains) and a sestet.² The thematic content of the sonnet mirrors this structure. In outline, the subject matter is this:

Octave: travel

(a) Quatrain 1: to many places in general

(b) Quatrain 2: to one place in particular

Sestet: discovery and exploration

The language supports this structure. The first quatrain has "much" and "many" (bis), and it is filled with plural nouns ("realms," "states," "kingdoms," "islands," "bards"). On the other hand, the second quatrain has only singular nouns and verbs, with no plurals at all. In the sestet, since the speaker feels like a discoverer alone, the language is predominantly singular, with two exceptions. The one exception is the parenthetically

¹ The text that is used here is that contained in the now authoritative *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (Harvard U., 1978). [The text is also available in a "reading edition": *The Complete Poems* (Belknap/Harvard, 1982).]

² The rhyme scheme is the typical and conventional abbaabbacddcd. The meter is iambic pentameter, and only eleven of its seventy feet are not iambic (of which seven are in the sestet).

(within em dashes) described non-discoverers who constitute the crew of Cortez's ship, while the other is the rhyme of "skies" and "eyes," a rhyme that suggests that there are many things to discover ("skies") and that a diversity of human faculties ("eyes") is available to engage in the task of discovery (seeing).³

The two most fundamental human impulses toward travel, discovery, and exploration are adumbrated in the two sets of rhymes of the octave. The first set ("gold," "hold," "told,"⁴ "bold") represents the boldness that humans need in order to hold on to the gold of which they have been told and which—once they have found it—they have told (counted). The second set ("seen," "been," "demesne," "serene") represents the human ability to reside in a domain (demesne) characterized by being and seeing⁵ and serenity, i.e., the ability to be content through the intellectual vision or understanding that constitutes their ability genuinely to be. In short, the two rhyme sets of the octave suggest that the two fundamental aspects of humanity are acquisitiveness and contemplation, holding and beholding.

The sestet indicates that even though the second of these is ranked higher than the first, the two are intimately related. After all, human acquisitiveness can be either for material possessions or for mental possessions. However, even if neither type of acquisition ever can be satisfied fully, mental acquisition is more likely to lead to peace and serenity than material acquisition is. This dichotomy will culminate in the difference between Cortez and his men.

The speaker's mood reflects this duality as he moves from a mood of restful recollective speech at the beginning to a mood of restless projective silence at the end.

Precisely who the speaker is remains indeterminate. One cannot assume that it is Keats, nor can one assume even that it is a male.⁶ All that one can say is that the speaker is a person whose explorations in certain realms will be revealed through the speech that is presented to the reader in the form of this sonnet.

³ The pun on "eyes" and "I's" supports this. This is echoed by the placement of the word "I" as the third word (and syllable) of the first lines of both the octave and sestet. Such word play is characteristic of Keats. In her *The Odes of John Keats* (Cambridge, MA, 1983), Helen Vendler emphasizes Keats's "talent for puns" (174).

⁴ It must be kept in mind that the English verb "to tell" can mean either "to give a narrative account" or "to count."

⁵ In the poem as a whole, the dominant sense is sight, followed (not closely) by hearing. This emphasis suggests that for the speaker, first-hand eyes-on knowledge is preferable to secondhand hearsay opinion, and autonomous seeking is preferable to dependent obeying.

⁶ For simplicity's sake, throughout this essay, the speaker will be designated by the pronoun "he," but it could just as well be "she."

II

The speaker begins boldly with the spondee “Much have,” a phrase that suggests the human desire to have more, the material acquisitiveness of humans. In addition, the “have” / “trav-” jingle indicates that material acquisition is a basic motivational impulse for exploration. The rigors and dangers involved in such an enterprise are suggested by the word “travel,” one of three words in the first two lines that came to English through French (“travell’d,” “realms,” “states”).⁷ The origin of “travel” in “travailler” (“to work-hard” / “to exert-oneself-laboriously” / “to travail”) contains intimations of onerous toil and childbirth, which elegantly convey both the difficulty and the promise of exploratory travel. The speaker (“I”), then, has exerted himself in some sphere. That sphere is presented initially as traveling, but one already may suspect that travel is a metaphor for some other endeavor. What precisely that other endeavor is—and in which non-geographical sphere (realm) it transpires—will not be deducible until the second quatrain.

The speaker declares that he has traveled much (meaning presumably both widely and often) through “realms of gold.” In the literal, geographical sense, the phrase denotes lands filled with gold, i.e., materially wealthy kingdoms. However, the phrase also carries additional layers of association. First, it evokes the fabled land of El Dorado (literally, the golden [place]), and in this sense, the speaker is already preparing the reader for the introduction of the Spanish explorer Cortez in the final four lines of the poem. Second, it may evoke realms of non-material excellence and/or perfection. Finally, it may evoke the primal period of perfection, the golden age, from which all other ages are a decline.

The “And” that opens the second line could be taken additively (as equivalent to “in addition”), but the repetition of the word “realms” in the word “kingdoms” suggests that it is rather to be taken as introducing an appositive (as equivalent to “that is”). This latter would make the “goodly states and kingdoms” not places over and above the “realms of gold,” but rather a restatement and specification of those realms. In addition, this equivalence makes one conjecture that “gold” can be “goodly,” a conjecture that is strengthened by the similarity of the two words.

⁷ Also, cf. “fealty” (4), “demesne” (6), and “surmise” (13).

A person travels after gold, physically seeking it, but a person sees what is good. This dichotomy establishes the double nature of human grasping, namely clutching physically with one's hands, as it were, and understanding with one's intellect.

This is reflected in the presence of the word "seen" at the end of the second line. If the "And" had been meant additively, the word "seen" would have been superfluous and surprising.⁸ However, its presence introduces the second aspect of human acquisitiveness. In this way, the initial distich is bracketed by having much (material grasping) at its beginning and seeing (mental grasping) at its end.

In the second half of the first quatrain, the parallelism between geographical traveling and literary traveling begins to emerge (although it will not become explicit until the second quatrain). After all, the only "western islands" of which Apollo could be the feudal lord would be the islands that constitute much of Greece, the Greek islands. The speaker presents these islands as held by poets ("bards") who inhabit them as tenant farmers would inhabit the estate surrounding a medieval manor. Apollo is the god of music (μουσική), which includes poetry (ποίησις).⁹ This suggests that these island territories are landed estates on which words are farmed, i.e., they are realms of golden words.

In the anonymous ancient Greek fable, *About Homer and Hesiod and Their Birth and Contest*, one finds the following (tr. mine):

when these words had been uttered [by Homer], they assert them to have been so wondered-at by the Hellenes [= Greeks] so that they were proclaimed [to be] golden. (316)

They put up in Delphi [as a tribute to Homer's verses] a silver bowl, he having inscribed it to Apollo thus: "Lord Phoebus [Apollo], I, Homer, have given you then a beautiful/noble gift for the thoughts [that you have given me]; and would that you would cause fame to follow me always." (324)

⁸ There are other words that could have been here, such as "too" or "found" or "known" or (to maintain the rhyme) "keen."

⁹ He is also the god of medicine (ιατρική = λύσις), prophecy (μαντική), and archery (τοξική), which taken together evoke healing, seeing, and seeking targets or goals.

Such a conjunction of gold and words in verse binds the realms of the beginning of the quatrain to the bards at its end. This association, together with the invoking of Apollo, who is especially closely allied to Homer (who even was asserted by some to have been Apollo's descendant: 314 end),—this associative cluster in the first quatrain prepares the way subliminally for the focus on Homer in the second quatrain.

III

In the first quatrain, the speaker had discussed many places, but in the second quatrain, he focuses on one place. In addition, the many places of the first quatrain are places of which the speaker claims to have had direct experience (places to which he had traveled), but the one place of the second quatrain is a place of which the speaker claims to have had only hearsay knowledge (a place of which he had been told, but to which he does not claim to have traveled). Furthermore, this new realm is not as clearly bounded as are the realms of the initial quatrain. Finally, the frequency with which the speaker has heard of this one place is emphasized in the echoing spondee "Oft of" that opens the quatrain.

The first thing that the speaker tells us about this unique place is that, as far as he knows, it has no confining limits: it is not a "realm" or "kingdom" or "island," but rather it is a "wide expanse." Nonetheless, it has in common with the Greek islands of the first quatrain that it too is presented as structured like a medieval landed estate ("demesne"). The ruler of this domain is the Greek epic poet Homer, which suggests that the expanse is the land of Hellas as a whole (especially mainland Greece).

In this first distich of the second quatrain, one must reckon with what appears to be a massive historical inaccuracy. Even though one could take fealty to Apollo literally without compromise to the geographical narrative, one cannot do the same with Homer. The plain truth is that Homer was not a ruler. Homer was a poet.

The only way to restore accuracy to the statement "Homer was a ruler" is to deduce that "ruler" means "poet" or "writer." Such a deduction leads one beyond the ostensible subject of the poem to its actual subject, thus:

if ruling is writing,
then realms are works of literature,
and traveling is reading.

This realization forces one to return to the beginning of the poem in order to translate its ostensible statements into its actual statements. Thus, the speaker forces the reader to engage in an act of translation just as he is about to speak of a translation. Such an act of translation leads one to see that in the first quatrain, the speaker actually was describing his reading of fine works of literature, most narrowly the lyric poetry of ancient Greece. Such reading had driven him inexorably toward the peak of ancient Greek verse, the epic poetic world of Homer.

The speaker had become familiar with Homer by hearsay, which must mean by schooling and pre-Chapman translations, but none of this had conveyed the essence of Homer, none had allowed him to “breathe its pure serene.” Chapman’s translation is presented here as paradigmatic of perfect translation,¹⁰ translation that allows one to see into an author’s true meaning. The speaker gives proof of the extent to which he has assimilated the work of Homer by joining to the name “Homer” the mimicked Homeric epithet “deep-brow’d.”

For the speaker, seeing into Homer’s true meaning was a thrilling discovery. Hence, the emphasis in the sestet shifts to an examination of that feeling of discovery.

IV

The shift to discovery in the sestet is signaled by the word “Then” in the opening spondee (“Then felt”). The speaker goes on to compare his feelings on discovering Homer to the feelings of two other persons engaged in acts of discovery.

First, he compares himself to an anonymous “watcher of the skies,” an astronomer, who discovers a new planet. This planet “swims” into his view (“ken”). The way that this is phrased is striking and suggestive. The use of the verb “swims” to denote the

¹⁰ This is not the place to discuss the actual ‘objective’ fidelity of Chapman’s translation. However, it at least should be noted that it does not seem to justify the speaker’s exuberance. One suspects that it is being used as the paradigm of an ideal up to which the historical translation does not live. One might further suspect that in a poem where nothing is meant quite in its apparent meaning, the choice of Chapman as paradigmatic may have something to do with his name, which means “peddler” or “seller.” Indeed, is a translator, can a translator be, any more than a peddler of secondhand wares that are no substitute for reading texts in the original language.

planet's movement through space invites the reader to see the cosmos as an ocean alive with creatures.

Such a conception has a Biblical resonance, and it evokes the Biblical creation account (Genesis 1:2, 6-8 [KJV]):

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters....

And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which *were* under the firmament from the waters which *were* above the firmament: and it was so.

And God called the firmament 'Heaven.'

Just as in the Bible, the cosmos is seen as composed of two vast oceans separated by a firmament, so here the entire cosmos is seen as one vast ocean.¹¹ As an ocean, the entire cosmos is presented as a fit object of discovery and exploration.

In terms of the movement of the octave, this would suggest that works of great literature are oceans of story that readers contemplate as an astronomer contemplates the "skies."

Then the speaker brings his image down from heaven to earth, from exploring the ocean of the sky to exploring the oceans of the earth.

The speaker now compares himself to Cortez, the Spanish explorer¹² of the New World. Cortez is described first and foremost as a person of strength and resolve ("stout"). Second, he has "eagle eyes," a phrase that suggests acuteness of vision, a vision that is both sensory and intellectual, as what follows will indicate. In addition, the comparison to an eagle, the bird of Jupiter and a symbol of the Roman Empire, evokes images of imperialism. However, the imperialism that is decisive here is the imperialism (comprehensiveness) of vision rather than the imperialism of rapacious conquest.

¹¹ This notion is perpetuated in our term "astronaut," whose Latin roots mean "star sailor."

¹² Here Cortez is treated only *qua* explorer with a complete suppression of Cortez *qua* conquistador.

This distinction is echoed in the two rhyme sets of the sestet: (1) eyes-surmise-skies; (2) men-ken-Darien. On the one hand, the beholding (“eyes”) of the heavens (“skies”) inspires speculative contemplation (“surmise”). On the other hand, when humans (“men”) focus on a narrow earthly goal (“Darien”),¹³ they achieve descriptive technical knowledge (“ken”). A further suggestion would be that the former is heavenly, while the latter is mundane.

Cortez stares¹⁴ out at the Pacific Ocean from a mountaintop in Panama (“Darien”). He is speechless (“silent”).

This is perplexing because the speaker seems to be presenting Cortez, the conquering colonizer of Mexico, as the discoverer of the Pacific Ocean, a patently inaccurate statement. Any well-educated schoolchild would have known that the discoverer of the Pacific Ocean was Balboa. Certainly Keats would have known this:

He [i.e., Keats] had a tolerably retentive memory, and the quantity that he read was surprising. He must in those last months [at Enfield when he was thirteen years of age] have exhausted the school library, which consisted principally of abridgements of all the voyages and travels of any note.¹⁵

The speaker’s range of allusions suggests that he had an education equal to Keats’s. It would be foolish to assume that the speaker (or Keats) committed an error here. Therefore, the substitution of Cortez for Balboa must have been deliberate.¹⁶ Why, then would the speaker in this context prefer the name “Cortez” to the name “Balboa”?

It is possible that the speaker is presenting Cortez as rediscovering the Pacific Ocean, as the speaker has rediscovered Homer. However, it is difficult to ignore the powerful way in which the name “Cortez” is mentioned: it links a double spondee (“stout Cortez

¹³ How narrow low earthly goals are may be implied by the speaker’s decision to prefer for Panama the alternate name “Darien,” which could be a pun on the French phrase “de rien.” In other words, one perhaps may infer that narrow earthly goals are worth next to nothing. On Keats and puns, see footnote 3 above.

¹⁴ The hidden word “star” in “star’d” links Cortez to the astronomer whom the speaker mentions first. On Keats and puns, see footnote 3 above.

¹⁵ Charles Cowden Clarke, “Recollections of John Keats,” in Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (London, 1878), 123-124.

¹⁶ What Helen Vendler says of the “Ode to Autumn” applies equally to this sonnet: “linked things,...linked actions, linked syntax—all not arbitrarily linked, but linked by minutest design” (277).

when"). The name rings out "loud and bold." Perhaps, then, the name's meaning is being given prominence. What is that meaning?

First, the initial syllable "cor" is the Latin word for "heart," which would give the first of the two spondees the meaning "stout heart," a phrase that would have resonated with contemporary readers who recalled its use by Sir Walter Scott (in *Marmion*, for example). Second, the name itself could be a pun on the Latin word for the outer shell of the brain ("cortex"),¹⁷ in which case the name would encapsulate an inspired fusion of head and heart.¹⁸

Thus, the name "Cortez" is richer in connotation than the name "Balboa" (which the speaker could have written "Balbo'" without altering the meter).

Cortez is presented staring at the Pacific. The word "pacific" is the only three-syllable foot in the sonnet. It is an amphibrach that lengthens line twelve to eleven syllables and stresses the central section of the word. The lengthening of this line has the consequence of making the last line, which rhymes with it, seem one syllable short by comparison. In addition, the central section stress leaves an "if" ringing in our ears.

This suggests that in the back of Cortez's mind is the question "what if?" with regard to the Pacific Ocean, a question that has been answered already with regard to the Atlantic Ocean. Having crossed one ocean, Cortez realizes that there is another ocean still to cross, and perhaps after that still another. This explains the charged silence with which he stares. The word "silent" is a spondee, a loud silence, like the silence of outer space, that signals the vast oceans that are still left to be crossed, as the eleventh syllable of the last line is still left to be filled in.

The sestet circles back to the octave in a way that makes the poem a circle that mirrors the never-ending circle of exploratory reading that lies ahead of the reader who identifies with Cortez (and the speaker). The name "Pacific" ("peaceful") echoes the "serene" of the second quatrain. In addition, the parenthesis about Cortez's men functions as a miniature Homeric digression. Furthermore, the "peak" of the sestet's last line (sixth syllable) echoes the "speak" of the octave's last line (sixth syllable).

¹⁷ Since Keats was a physician, this association would have seemed quite natural to him.

¹⁸ There is a third possible suggestion in that the name's alternate spelling "cortes" is the Spanish word for "houses of parliament" or "courts," which might suggest that Cortez is a legislator, perhaps a legislator of future possibilities.

The difference between Cortez and his crew is striking. The men of the crew look only at each other, presumably wondering why Cortez is staring out at the ocean rather than seeking the crass gain that was their chief motivation for embarking on such a hazardous journey. Cortez, on the other hand, is looking to the horizon of new possibility that now lies before him waiting to be explored for its own sake.

The peak in Panama on which Cortez stands thus coincides with the peak toward which the sonnet has risen. However, it is not an absolute peak, any more than Cortez's standing on the mountaintop is an end to his desire for further travel, further exploration, further discovery.

The final circling of the sonnet back on itself is through the theme of vision that was announced in the title ("looking") and echoed in the first quatrain ("seen"). The sestet circles back to, and completes, that trope with the following density of vision words: "watcher" (9), "ken" (10), "eyes" (11), "star'd" (12), and "look'd" (13). In addition, the trope is invisible in the fourteenth line in the word "peak," which is a pun on "peek."

The hidden "peek" (sight) mirrors the hidden syllable, which points to the hidden horizons that are still left to explore.

In short, a vast ocean of possibility stretches before the eyes of the astronomer, Cortez, and the speaker. In addition, since the desire to acquire material wealth through travel and exploration has proven to be a metaphor for the desire to acquire mental wealth through reading and thinking, the reader is being invited to consider first looking into "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" as the embarkation point for an unending exploration (reading) of the ocean of literature.