

SENSUOUS AND SCHOLARLY READING IN
KEATS'S 'ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S
HOMER'

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Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;
Round many western islands have I been
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne;
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
When a new planet swims into his ken;
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
He star'd at the Pacific – and all his men
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise –
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.¹

What kind of a reader of poetry is Keats in this sonnet, or what kind of a reader are we invited to imagine him as? A related question may be: what kind of reader of poetry does the writer imagine he is speaking to?

At first sight the poem points up the fallacy that reading can take place in some vacuum of critical or scholarly objectivity; rather, reading is an unashamedly subjective process. Keats doesn't truly get Homer until he can get at him through the aspic of received opinion, of what he has 'been told', which furnishes Homer with his reputation as a classic: august, 'deep-brow'd' (the tinge of archaism seems deliberately clichéd or hackneyed) but

¹ Jack Stillinger, ed., *The Poems of John Keats* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 64.

somewhat staid and off-putting for that. The writer-reader of this poem needs to be able to respond to literature in a fresh and original way: he needs to be able to touch the text, to think independently about it, to make Homer his own, as the title suggests Chapman has. The plodding iambs audible in the octave mimic how Homer is supposed to have been embalmed in dreary convention. The turn comes, conventionally enough, at the beginning of the sestet, but it ushers in livelier, lither metrical movements, which take the measure of Chapman's Homer's 'swimming' into Keats's ken: the strong stresses, equal in weight, which bolster the first six syllables of 'Then felt I like some watcher of the skies', make the manner of Chapman's speaking out loud and bold to Keats as reader speak out loud and bold to Keats's reader; the holding off of the up-and-down movement of iambic rhythm until 'watcher of the skies' realizes the skyward impulse of the line, momentarily defying gravity. For it is, above all, a poem about how reading great literature gets you high. Appropriately, Keats ends the poem on a high, 'upon a peak in Darien' with Cortez. This is no superior scholar looking down at the ignorant reader (if anything we look down at him, his littleness set into perspective by the metaphorical ocean), feeling smug about the fact he now has Homer under his belt; rather, he evinces humility before the work of art, awestruck and dumbstruck by it. His final silence recognizes the superfluity of any critical response; the creative response, though, is a different matter.

However, the ambiguous energy of this poem derives from the way the procedures, or possibly the postures, of scholarship persist as a force both within it and around it: 'Every possible echo in this sonnet of Keats's reading has been exhaustively traced', Walter Jackson Bate (88) wearily observed in the latter regard.² 'Chapman's Homer' admits of a pedantic precision, even as its particularizing of the translation counters the airy, insubstantial Homer of hearsay; then again 'Chapman's Homer' isn't the book's exact title, so would this be a scholarly shorthand instantly recognisable to those in the know, or is it the forgetful fudging of someone for whom bibliographical accuracy isn't much of a priority? Similarly 'Looking into', as a synonym for reading, sits

² Walter Jackson Bate, *John Keats* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963), 88.

nicely on the cusp of innocence and experience. There is a looking into which is conducive to the curiosity, to the childlike wonder which can come of the virgin reading that is the occasion for Keats's poem: 'On *First* Looking into . . .'. The poem's governing metaphor, accordingly, is one of exploration: hence the comparison of the speaker's initiation into Homer to the discovery of New Mexico by the Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortés; factually speaking this is incorrect since New Mexico was discovered by Vasco Núñez de Balboa, although whether this was a simple error by Keats is debatable, as we shall see. 'Looking into' also captures the element of serendipity that often attends the best moments in reading. We can imagine the poet dutifully lifting Chapman's Homer off the shelf and skimming over it, not expecting much because much is expected; but then a line or two catches his jaded eye, a rhythm resonates, and he is drawn in, almost against himself, like Odysseus in earshot of the Sirens. Or we might imagine the book being picked up at random, as a diversion from other studies – another glimpse of the exploratory reader who will look out books other than those he has been told he ought to.

'Looking into' gives us a feel for Keats's sensuous interest in what he reads, and it is no accident that he has chosen a sensory synonym for reading to communicate this – hearing, ('Till I heard . . .'), feeling ('Then felt I . . .'), and even perhaps smell ('breathe its pure serene'), in addition to sight, enhance the sensory dimension in the poem proper. Chapman's words stand up off the page for Keats: he looks into rather than reads because perceptive reading involves looking past the two-dimensional surface of words, which renders them lifeless on the page, and seeing them in the three-dimensional depth that can fully realize the Homeric 'wide expanse'. And the poem invites us to read it thus: to attend to *how* Keats reads, rather than exhaustively tracing what he reads – to imaginatively flesh out, as it were, the dramatic context in which the act of reading unfolds. But there is an alternative sense of 'Looking into', which is also part of the three-dimensional depth those words open up. It could allude to in-depth research, reading around, cross-referencing, looking up: connotations which tell against the virgin reading, and which point to an oxymoronic conjunction with 'First'. That oxymoron opens up an expanse in time as well as in space by silently implying that there will be, or have already been (from the poem's perspective of hindsight),

other, later 'looking into's, which will lead to revaluations of the first in the light of the reader's enhanced knowledge and experience. Yet experience doesn't necessarily enhance or enlighten in this poem, and may lead instead back to the flat, somewhat surfeited, feeling of the much travelled speaker's opening line.

The possessive of the title and its attendant notions of ownership add to the ambiguity. You can make an author your own, you can harness Homer to your own imaginative ends as both Chapman and Keats do, thus finding a means of getting on terms, of levelling literary power relations – another way in which this poem means to defy gravity, by shrugging off the weighty reputations of the greats that give to what Harold Bloom termed the anxiety of influence. It is further significant, in this connection, that it is Chapman's Homer Keats reads: in order to be able to touch the text, to 'breathe its pure serene', he has to encounter it in an impure form, in translation; to respond in an original way he has to forgo reading Homer in the original, heedless of the purist, and implicitly scholarly, imperatives that would hold the ancient Greek sacred, and would hold with Robert Frost that poetry is what gets lost in translation. The poem can be read as a critique of the various modes of poet-worship that intimidate and inhibit the reader. The description of the many western islands 'which bards in fealty to Apollo hold' also suggests that readers – bearing in mind that the mythical-sounding locations mentioned in the opening lines are metaphorical, places he has visited via the medium of literature – are held in fealty to bards, whom they often regard as gods: and the line attains a sceptical perspective on this conception of the reader-writer relationship by counting the present poet out of the collective noun, 'bards' (again, the archaic strain seems indicative of the redundancy of the word, gently parodying its self-importance); although this must be a view to which he has previously subscribed and only gained his freedom from in becoming a poet himself. In 'fealty', a feudalistic term denoting the fidelity of a tenant or vassal to his lord, we have the other sense of ownership at work in the poem, which serves to affirm hierarchical literary power relations. Thus Homer 'ruled' in the literary territory he staked out for himself with such masterful poetry.

Yet in attaining a non-subservient readerly relationship with Homer Keats does not deconstruct the feudal model in the way we

might expect; indeed, his empowerment as reader occasions a reaffirming of the hierarchies. For he associates himself with Cortez, and it is Cortez's patrician qualities which are emphasized: his rule over the mere mortals, 'men', who follow him with fealty, who are in some sense owned by him, are 'his'. Such possessiveness befits a colonizing Conquistador with a reputation for rapaciousness, as several critics have observed. He is, moreover, 'stout Cortez'. The *OED* sense 1 of 'stout', 'Proud, fierce, brave, resolute', seems germane to the portrait of Cortez as patrician, as does sense 1b: 'Stately, magnificent, splendid. *Obs.*' That '*Obs.*' may be yet another sign of parodic archaism (the last listed entry is dated 1450) which functions alongside *OED* sense 1a: 'Proud, haughty, arrogant. Often coupled with *proud*. *To make it stout*: to swagger. *Obs.*' (the last listed entry under 1a is 1851, some 35 years after Keats's poem, so in this case '*Obs.*' to us but not to him). Proud, haughty, arrogant, this watcher of the skies begins to seem more like the smug scholar flaunting his familiarity with the classics. And looking again it is not, contrary to what I said earlier, Cortez/Keats who is humbly dumbstruck by what he has seen/read; his is an eagle-eyed, almost visionary insight. The bafflement belongs to the 'wild surmise' of the dumb plebeian men, who stand in for the ignorant readers potentially being looked down upon.

Such a double take is consistent with Keats's own looking again at the poem for republication in his 1817 *Poems*. In revising it, he substituted 'eagle eyes' for the 'wondr'ing eyes' he had originally ascribed to Cortez, and 'Yet did I never breathe its pure serene' for 'Yet could I never judge what men could mean': he said to Charles Cowden Clarke (his friend and mentor, whom had introduced him to Chapman's Homer) that he had rejected the earlier version of line seven on the grounds that it was 'bald, and too simply wondering'.³ But whilst we must recognise that the poem offers a more complex take on the wonder of a first encounter with a great author, it is hard to square this aspect of it with a knowingness that extends to the self-parodic swaggering of Keats as stout Cortez: that itself must seem a wild interpretative surmise, too simply ironic a reading of a poem, as perhaps Keats knew.

³ Charles Cowden Clarke, *Recollections of Writers* (Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press, 1969), 130.

I want to explore this complexity via some concluding reflections on the Cortez-Balboa mix-up, first flagged up by eagle-eyed Tennyson in Francis Palgrave's *The Golden Treasury*: 'history requires here *Balboa*'.⁴ The extensive critical debate surrounding this matter turns on the question of intention: did Keats mean to write Cortez, or was it an unintentional error? In a 1956 article C. V. Wicker makes the case for the former, challenging what he identifies as the consensus view – that Keats mistakenly wrote Cortez for Balboa, having conflated in his mind two episodes from William Robertson's *History of America*. He argues that it is a misreading to assume the poem is about Keats's discovery of Chapman's Homer, by which he means 'discovery *in the sense of finding what no one has ever found before*'.⁵ Balboa, therefore, is not required, because Keats is not claiming that he was the first to discover Chapman's Homer, which is not to negate the element of personal revelation: Cortez would have been no less moved by the sight described in the poem for the fact that Balboa had got there first, and Keats is no less moved, and his poem no less moving, because others happen to have picked up the book before him. The logic is incontrovertible, although it doesn't actually prove that Keats meant Cortez. Wicker's line of inquiry is taken up by Charles J. Rzepka in a 2010 book, which has a chapter largely given over to the Cortez or Balboa question.⁶ As well as amplifying Wicker's contention about the improbability of none of Keats's friends (or more to the point, Rzepka suggests, his enemies: namely the critic John Wilson Croker who was notoriously hostile in his reviews of Keats's work) noticing the 'mistake', or indeed anyone, including Keats, noticing it in the 45 years before Tennyson did, Rzepka argues for the appropriateness of Keats's deliberate choice of Cortez in full knowledge of Balboa's precedence based on the 'belatedness' which he deems an important motif in the poem. This is also there in the title: 'First' may contain the self-admonitory admission that he could and should have looked into it sooner than

⁴ Francis Turner Palgrave, ed., *The Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language*. (1861; rpt. New York: Walter J. Black, Inc., 1932), 298.

⁵ C. V. Wicker, 'Cortez – Not Balboa'. *College English* 17.7 (1956): 383-387 (383).

⁶ Charles J. Rzepka, *Selected Studies in Romantic and American Literature, History, and Culture: Inventions and Interventions* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010).

he did. But towards the end of the chapter Rzepka makes a related but different suggestion, and an intriguing one: '[Keats] might even have been aware of the possibility that his stereoscopic allusion to Balboa could be mistaken for a mistake by inattentive readers'.⁷ If Keats meant Cortez to seem like a mistake in order to pull up his readers for not spotting it, wouldn't that be an endorsement of the scholarly reader/reading of his poem, Keats's sloppiness in this respect having a heuristic function? Rzepka's reading of the poem suggests so, his reference to 'inattentive readers' sounding a note of schoolmasterly reprimand akin to Tennyson's, which complements his sense of a speaker conscious of having fallen behind with his homework. But Keats could have meant Cortez to seem like a mistake for the opposite reason: to lampoon the irritable reaching after fact and reason so alien to his poetic sensibility that informs the scholarly reading. That is a possibility given some credence by Jerome McGann, who infers a playfulness that means to preserve the moment of childlike wonder – the 'Rosebud moment' as he characterizes it (invoking *Citizen Kane*) – against the more mature readerly mindsets that would stifle it: 'The poem's absurd error is the sign that it has pledged its allegiance to what would mortally embarrass a grown-up consciousness. (And so scholarship, than which nothing else is more grown up, hastens to explain away the error.)'⁸ But 'absurd' surely overplays what many have found entirely plausible, and it invests the poem with a level of irony, ironically, that sits uneasily with the Rosebud moment, as I have already suggested. My own feeling is that the question of whether or not Keats meant Cortez, or whether he meant Cortez to seem like a mistake, is one that 'On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer' poses to subtle effect. Keats's expunged first thought 'Yet never could I judge what men could mean' could almost read as a comment on the difficulty of judging the poem in terms of intention (as well as being both a reader and a writer in this poem, Keats sees through the eyes of his own reader). That the line was expunged may owe in part to its coming to seem to Keats too bald a statement of intentional fallacy. Besides, it is not quite an intentional fallacy that Keats is after. For in order to fully enter into

⁷ *Selected Studies in Romantic and American Literature*, 246.

⁸ Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 123.

the drama of the poem and the act of reading it mediates I think we do need to weigh the innocence of a mistake against the strategies of the scholar and/or pseudo-scholar – to weigh them in a way, though, that shows us capable of being in mysteries, uncertainties, doubts.

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