

KEATS'S "ON FIRST LOOKING INTO CHAPMAN'S
HOMER" — AN INTERPRETATION

SILVIA MUSSI DA SILVA CLARO

Much have I traveled 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-browed 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 stared at the Pacific — and all his men
Looked at each other with a wild surmise —
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

Keats read Pope's version of Homer prior to Chapman's but he himself declares in "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" * that he breathed the "pure serene" of Homer's work for the first time through the "loud and bold" voice of the Elizabethan translator. This sonnet was written in October 1816 after Keats had spent a whole night reading Homer translated by Chapman.¹

"On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" was the first successful piece of poetry of Keat's career and reveals many of his characteristic poetic processes. This sonnet was the fruit of the poet's intense experience upon reading Homer as translated by Chapman. The word "into" in the title of the sonnet indicates a true attempt to penetrate the spirit of the Greek bard's work.

1 — According to Clarke's report, *apud* John Middleton Murray, *Keats*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1962), p. 145.

The compact structure of the sonnet denotes that it arose from a single impression: discovery. The octave tells about the speaker's previous experiences, his travels in the realms of gold and the Western islands which, according to Greek mythology, pertain to Apollo. The speaker declares he had previously heard of Homer's powerful dominion and this statement is a preparation to the last and culminating step in the first part:

Yet did I never breathe its pure serene
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:

The adversative "yet", introducing the statement, stresses that the speaker's direct approach to Homer through Chapman was a greater experience than any of his previous literary contacts with Homer's "demesne". The depth of this contact is expressed by the verb "to breathe", that is, penetrating into every cell, producing vital reactions. The first eight lines present a progressive searching — the speaker goes round the Western islands, he hears of Homer and finally gets in touch with him. The effects of the explorer's discovery upon himself are portrayed in the sestet and are conveniently preceded by a colon which stands for a transition between the two movements of the sonnet. One introduces the other. The second part describes the traveler's feelings in the moment of discovery. His sensations are those of a successful explorer, represented by an astronomer who finds a new planet and a navigator who contemplates an unknown ocean. All the images refer to exploration and this gives unity to the poem.

One can infer, of course, from the nature of the subject — the poet's reaction after reading a literary masterpiece — that this voyage evokes and intellectual and emotional excursion through the realms of Western literature. The idea of artistic creativity is added to the expressions "realms of gold" and "goodly states and kingdoms" by the reference to Apollo in the fourth line. The journey round the Western islands stands for a journey through Western literature attempting to reach Homer's "demesne".

The culminant image in Keat's sonnet presents Cortez standing on an isthmus which separates the Caribbean Sea from the Pacific ocean. It is the Pacific and not the Caribbean Sea that attracts Cortez' fixed stare because the Pacific was unknown up to that moment. This ocean completely absorbs Cortez. The Pacific is considered to exert a

fascination upon men because it suggests an undecipherable mystery. Although one work of art does not explain the other, Melville's *Moby Dick* helps to understand the mysterious "pure serene" of the Pacific in Keat's sonnet.

WHEN gliding by the Bashee isles we emerged at last upon the great South Sea: were it not for other things, I could have greeted my dear Pacific with uncounted thanks, for now the long supplication of my youth was answered; that serene ocean rolled eastwards from me a thousand leagues of blue.

There is, one knows not what sweet mistery about this sea, whose gently awfully stirrings seem to speak of some hidden soul beneath;

.....
for here, millions of mixed shades and shadows, drowned dreams, somnambulisms, reveries, all that we call lives and souls, lie dreaming, dreaming still; tossing like slumberers in their beds; the ever-rolling waves but made so by their restlessness.

To any meditative Magian rover, this serene Pacific, once beheld, must ever after be the sea of his adoption. It rolls the midmost waters of the world, the Indian Ocean and Atlantic being but ist arms. The same waves wash the moles of the new-built Californian towns, but yesterday planted, by the recentest race of men, and lave the faded but still gorgeous skirts of Asiatic lands, older than Abraham; while all between flot milky mays of coral isles, and low-lying, endless, unknown Archipelagoes, and impenetrable Japans. Thus this mysterious, divine Pacific zones the world's whole bulk about; makes all coasts one bay to it; seems the tide-beating heart of earth. Lifted by those eternal swells, you needs must own the seductive god, bowing your head to Pan.²

Moby Dick concerns the search of the Pequod after the White Whale, through the seas. The ship is commanded by the progressively-obsessed Ahab. Transcendentally, the problems involved are those inherent to man in universe — the varied elements of the crew stand for mankind in general which leaves the land for many a reason and is irresistibly attracted to the sea where they are tossed between strange forces eventually identified with good or evil. The ship corresponds to a moving island where everybody can stay and observe what is around them. As Cortez ("On First

2 — Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc., 1958), p. 476-477.

Looking Into Chapman's Homer") on the peak, the mariners in the Pequod are eager to penetrate the mystery of water and the whale but they do not dare throw themselves into the unknown element. Each one explains the mystery in terms of his own inner world. Also the vision of the watcher of the skies is limited by his own ken. In Melville's odyssey of the human destiny the Pacific is presented as the main magnified symbol of all the meanings attributed to water. The importance of this ocean is inferred by its being reached almost in the end of the voyage only, as a goal the crew was directed to. It is also the field where the principal contest takes place. Significantly, Ishmael, the only character in the book who has an uncompromised vision of the problems, has been longing for the Pacific throughout the voyage; it was the long supplication of his youth. In the same way, Keat's sonnet presents Cortez beholding the Pacific as the last and culminating image intended to quench the speaker's thirst for what lies beyond. Up to the moment of their discovery both Ishmael and Keats's adventurer were gliding round the Bashee and the Western islands respectively, looking for something else.

Both Melville's novel and Keats's sonnet describe the Pacific as being "serene". Melville's quotation specifies the reasons for such an attractive and mysterious stillness. Man is impelled to the Pacific because it seems to possess some hidden soul that stirs something inside him. The reason why this hidden soul is capable of so affecting man is that its essence and the essence of man are the same. In water — the proper element to reflect and to refract — there lies a projection of human nature in the form of shades, shadows, drowned dreams, somnambulisms, reveries. Or rather — it depends on the point of view — we are a projection of all this. Anyway, water mirrors an unquenchable human desire for something which is figured but can't be grasped because it is only an image which doesn't exist by itself. Many times man is destroyed by his human inability to survive in the unfamiliar region where he pursues his dreams. The restlessness of human life and soul is rocked in the Pacific as it is evident from its ever-rolling waves that convey an impression of serenity by being continuous and uniform as the movement of a rocking cradle. The intimate identity between the Pacific and the human soul is explained to be the result of the permanent contact the Pacific has maintained with the human race throughout time. It beheld

the primitive civilization in Asia and it washes the most recent American towns. It has witnessed the history of mankind and there has been time enough for continual mutual assimilation. There is water all over the globe, but the Pacific is the main body of water (the Atlantic and the Indian being its arms only), the real tide-beating heart of earth. That is why it is preferred by all its observers. It is Ishmael and Cortez's adoption although they stare at this ocean from diametrically opposed positions — the Bashee islands near Formosa and a peak in Darien, Central America. The tone in *Moby Dick* is prophetic, that is, there is a special accent in the novelist's voice: he sings the universe or something universal, without saying anything precise about it; it is just a song.³ This is the reason why one feels that the meaning in *Moby Dick* spreads out of it: it expands and reaches back and forth. Cortez could have been attracted to the Pacific for the same reason described by Melville.

The ethereal stillness of the planet observed by the watcher of the skies in Keats's sonnet has the same power to evoke the unknown as the strange "pure serene" of the Pacific. The planet "swims" into the explorer's ken. This verb attributes special qualities to the object discovered; it appears as if moved by a kinetic and a static energy at the same time. Swimming involves the idea of reaching a balance through movement and conveys an impression of ethereal stillness which suggests the unknown. Besides, "swim" reminds us of water which, in this poem, is connected with discovery.

It has been said that "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" is so successful in producing excitement by itself that "it is almost impossible not to forget that it is all about a book — Chapman's translation of *Homer*."⁴ This is not completely true. Of course, there is a direct communication of emotion, but one can perceive there exists an intimate connection between the emotional response — which is the sonnet — and the particular experience which inspired it. The images appearing in Keat's sonnet fully convey the poet's impression upon his first reading Chapman's translation of Homer because they are made up of the same elements

3 — E. M. Forster, *The Aspects of the Novel*, (Great Britain: Hazell Watson & Ltd., 1927), p. 129.

4 — Murray, *Op. cit.*, p. 147.

peculiar to the Greek epics. This is why the poem transmits its subject-matter so fluently and appropriately.

The first outstanding point to be noticed in this stimulus-response relationship is that Keats's imagery evokes an intellectual search and discovery by means of a travel of expansion by land and water; also *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are attempts to discover the mysteries of the human soul, through the expansion of a race. In *The Iliad* the Trojan war stands for the Greeks' conquering power and their establishment on the Asiatic shore; however, human passions are the real detonation of the conflict as well as the ingredient which keeps the fire burning. Each character has his particular incentive for taking or not taking part in the battle — Achillès refuses his allegiance to King Agamemnon because of their disagreement on returning the girl Chryseis, ransomed by her father; Agamemnon's decision to attack is due to a beguiling dream Zeus gave to him to satisfy Thetis who wanted to take revenge on the Greeks for what they had done to her son; the battle between the Greeks and the Trojans is but the extension of a particular quarrel between Paris and Menelaus over Helena; Paris escaped unharmed from the duel because of Aphrodite's inclination toward him; his weakness is a cause for the war; the only reason why Achillès decides to enter the battle again is to revenge his friend Patroclus, slain by Hector; Hector's individual stoic courage supports Troy for some time; the end of the epic presents Achillès' self-control rather than the Greeks' victory over Troy: the final episode describes the two enemies, Achillès and Priam, weeping together over the remains of a war that reflects the common misery of both. *The Iliad* was conceived to be the narrative of an angry man's adventures.

An angry man — there is my story: the bitter rancour of Achillès, prince of the house of Peleus, which brought a thousand troubles upon the Achaian host.⁵

The fight between the two nations is the fight of many emotional interests and it culminates not with territorial expanse only but with maturation of the human spirit. Keat's Cortez is also presented in a meditative attitude. His eagle eyes and his silence suggest the deep impression his discovery has made upon him.

5 — Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1960), p. 11.

The *Odyssey* relates the Greeks' first attempts of a long travel over the sea but at the same time it records how the human intelligence and skill was capable of defeating adversity and of adapting itself to new situations throughout the sea journey that led the hero back home. During his ten-year wandering over unknown seas and lands, Odysseus fought Poseidon — who stands for adversity — and defeated him by being shrewd, prudent and patient. He succeeded by not being obsessed by revenge: he kept being good — hearted to his companions, and gentle to Nausicäa. He was sensitive to everything which happened around him. The only way to connect Odysseus' adventures and the final domestic episode in the epic is to consider his varied experiences as agents that force him to develop an ability to defend himself, to analyse things around him sharply, to understand himself better and so to establish a plausible relationship between himself and his environment. Only by being a vagrant for so many years he is able to come back to where he belongs to — his kingdom and the affection of his wife and his son. After traveling round the world, he returns to his origins, as it is suggested by his meeting his father and mother in Hades, which is the place Odysseus is going to after his own death (according to Dante's *Hell*). The cycle of life is complete: origins and ends are to be found in the same place. Odysseus has seen much of human passions during his travels in the world of the living and the dead. He can thus evaluate his private world in terms of the exterior world. For example, he is able to compare Climnestra's and Helen's unfaithfulness to Penelope's fidelity. The justice he carries out when he returns home is the direct result of the life he has lived, suffering and making other people suffer, as he himself says. He violently punishes the suitors, the guilty maids, the traitor Melantius and only stops fighting the family of the suitors because Athens orders him to do so. As one can see, Odysseus' travels do not result in material discoveries only but in many revelations concerning the human spirit.

In Keats's sonnet, a journey is also a pretext for intellectual discovery. Some particular common points between the *Odyssey* and Keats's sonnet are worthwhile to be noticed in order to stress the stimulus-response relationship between them. Both Odysseus and the speaker in the sonnet travel over the sea. The culminant image in the sonnet presents Cortez staring at the Pacific for the

first time. The choice of this special image instead of any other may be explained if one takes into consideration Clarke's report. Clarke was Keats's most intimate friend at that time (1816) and they read Chapman's *Homer* in folio together.

And Clarke remembered turning up the shipwreck at the end of the fifth *Odyssey* and Keats's 'delighted stare' at a vivid phrase —

Then forth he came, his both knees
 falt'ring, both
His strong hands hanging, down and all
 with froth
His cheeks and nostrils flowing, voice
 and breath
Spent to all use, and down he sank to
 death.

*The sea had soaked his heart through...*⁶

This passage describes Odysseus after his shipwreck near King Alcinous' shore. The direct contact of a shipwrecked with water is extremely exhausting since man is required to expend a lot of energy to keep up with the strange forces in the sea. Consequently Odysseus had his knees faltering, his voice and breath worn out completely, and he was marked by his contact with water as one can deduce from his being covered with foam. The line which most attracted Keat's "delighted stare" was "The sea had soaked his heart through..." as it is indicated by Clarke's italics. The *Odyssey's* presentation of the sea's effects upon the human soul must have impressed Keats considerably and this resulted in his precise and convincing image of Cortez looking at the ocean. This is the culminating step in the sonnet. Pip's episode in *Moby Dick* is useful to illustrate the possible effects of the sea on man:

The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes: and the miser-merman Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; and among the joyous, heartless, ever-juvenile eternities, Pip saw the multitudinous, God omnipresent, coral insects that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs.⁷

6 — Murray, *op. cit.* p. 146.

7 — Melville, *op. cit.* p. 411.

Pip's body kept floating and he escaped alive. But as his soul had an intimate contact with the primary mysteries of life in the depths of water, the little negro could no longer adapt himself to the human logic. Therefore he was considered to be mad.

Both Keats's sonnet and the *Odyssey* develop through a journey to the West. It is the way which leads Odysseus home — the longed-for objective throughout his voyage. Returning from Troy he suffers every form of adversity and Aeolus gives him the winds, all tied up in a bag, except the West wind which would blow him homewards. In the same way, Keats's explorer goes round the Western islands in order to find out what he is looking for. The Western rout was the first successful course in circumnavigation and this clearly shows that in a way man's curiosity leads him to the starting point. Beginnings and ends are tied up inseparably.

In both Homer's work and Keats's sonnet the hero plays an outstanding role. *The Iliad* is also called *The Story of Achillès* and the *Odyssey*, as the title says, is build up around Odysseus' wanderings. Achillès' figure occupies a central position in the story and the deep analysis of his character is vital in the development of the plot. He is responsible for the delay of Troy's destiny and its final defeat. *The Iliad* is a study of Achillès' virtues and defects. He is ambitious, courageous, prudent, honest and faithful. He is a leader and learns from his experiences. On the other hand he is excessively violent sometimes; in the beginning of the story he lacks emotional control. In the same way, Odysseus' adventures in the *Odyssey* serve to test the hero's tenacity. His audacity causes him to meet all kinds of perils and his deep sensitiveness is responsible for his successes and for his mistakes. Odysseus is shrewd, prudent, faithful and pious and therefore overcomes adversity. Homer's heroes suffer and sacrifice themselves to get what they must. They are not superhuman themselves. Their extraordinary actions are but the result of the god's intervention. The gods themselves are described as being dominated by human passions. They protect or persecute people according to their own inclination, without any impartiality.

Fate is always hanging over the heroes in *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. It is written that Achillès will die when Hector dies; after the Trojan war Odysseus is the only warrior not permitted to go home immediately, by a decree of the gods.

Odysseus and Achillês are endowed with a strong will power which causes them to endure hardships boldly and stoicly. They are worthy to be praised because they use all their might to do what they think to be right, in spite of their human limitations.

Diante dum mundo em que nada está no lugar, em que o acaso, o destino, os deuses, freqüentemente pouco respeitáveis, têm papel enorme, o homem aparece como o herói essencial, grande por sua inteligência, talento e coração. O poeta sente como que uma revelação dum mundo desconhecido, um espanto, diante da razão e vontade capazes de fazer heróis; e é isso que êle canta.⁸

By presenting the miseries and the glories of mankind, the purpose of these two epics is to sing man's destiny — a daily conquest and a travel which reveals his inquenchable curiosity for what is beyond. A deep faith in human accomplishments can be detected in every detail.

Keats's sonnet denotes its being inspired in Homer's work by the important function attributed to the hero. He is a man chosen to represent mankind's feats conveniently. Throughout the poem the vague notion of an explorer and of a watcher of the skies develops into the definite presence of Cortez in the final lines. It is known it was Balboa who discovered the Pacific and not Cortez. But what matters in the context is not Cortez' particular historical role but his personification as a hero — a man who reaches the peak, makes a discovery through his own efforts and is sensitive enough to enjoy what he has discovered. Therefore, all the human accomplishments described in the poem — the surrounding of the Western islands (by Columbus), the conquering of the realms of gold (by Cortez and Pizarro) and the crossing of the Darien (by Balboa) are summed up in the outstanding figure of stout Cortez.

Cortez had become for him the type of all conquistadors, absorbing into himself, like Percival or Lancelot, the feats and glamour of a dozen minor heroes.⁹

8 — Robert Aubreton, *Introdução a Homero* (S.P.: Faculdade de Filosofia, Ciências e Letras da Univ. de S. Paulo, 1956, p. 207.

9 — Joseph Warren Beach, "Keats's Realms of Gold", *PMLA*, XLIV (March, 1934), p. 256.

In the poem Cortez has eagle eyes. The eyes of an eagle suggest penetrating efficiency, haughtiness and resolution. Indeed, Cortez' penetrating look at the sea conveys his pride: he is conscious of his great conquest achieved through intelligence and effort. His resolution denotes his human necessity to continually march forward.

Cortez attempting to penetrate the mysteries of water without being able to leave the earth he firmly stands on is a common image in Keats' poetry and it is usually known as "the visionary on the shore." Both the explorer and the watcher of the skies remain on earth while their eyes scrutinize space and water fixedly and eagerly. Cortez' attitude reminds us of Odysseus listening to the sirens while strongly tied to the mast of his boat. Although Cortez stays on the peak, he must be dreaming of an eagle's flight ("eagle eyes"). As an eagle on the nest, he stands on the peak; it is high and it offers a relatively good view. Keats's hero, as Homer's, dreams of great deeds and tries to accomplish them in spite of his human limitations. He is, indeed, a "visionary on the shore."

"On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" reveals Keat's belief in actual experience as the best means to knowledge. The close contact with the physical world propitiates discovery. Scrutinizing earth, sky and water exercises the human faculties and makes one able to find a new planet or an unknown ocean. There is an interplay between man and his environment. Man projects himself into the space he contemplates and the notion of such immensities causes effects upon on him. The image of the watcher of the skies stresses the penetration of the outer world into the human range of sight. The new planet "swims into his ken." Cortez' figure beholding the Pacific presents his eagle-eyes silently penetrating into the water. A man must change after such an experience. Keats thought we school an intelligence and make it a soul. Human life is a vale of soul-making.¹⁰ Each man is the result of what he has lived; only through experience the human intelligent essence can acquire the individual traits which will make each man unique and insubstitutable. Each experience is non-transferable since it causes special effects. This is why the images in the sonnet are so concrete and the particular details make

10 — Boris Ford, *From Blake to Byron* (London: Penguin, 1957), p. 222.

each situation unique. Beauty, Though intrinsically desirable, in nota passive ideal to be reached for in a rarer atmosphere than earth's. The importance given by Keats to each particular experience makes one think of the particular effects his contact with Chapman's Homer could have caused on his make-up as a poet.

Keats approaches such an immense dominion as Homer's through the synthetic form of a Petrarchan sonnet. Not a word is wasted. The title itself indicates concentration on a single dramatic situation — the speaker's discovery of Chapman's Homer — which is developed through precise images gradually disposed in the octave and the sestet. The use of dramatic images permits the direct contact between action and the reader. No further explanations are necessary. This economy intensifies the effect of the poem. Each expression is liable to many levels of interpretation and therefore each word carries a greater amount of energy. Keat's power of concentration only appears in his best poems.

In Keat's sonnet the contact between man and his environment is made mainly through impressions. To be sensitive is the basic requirement to receive impressions, Cortez' eagle eyes and his attentive silence before the ocean are indicative of his sensitivity. He is able, thus, to receive the impression conveyed by his vision. On the contrary, his companions are not: they just look at one another in a wild surmise. For Keats, being sensitive is not only a natural gift, but a quality developed by training. By going round the Western islands and by dwelling the realms of gold and goodly states and kingdoms, an explorer makes his eyes sharper to stare at the Pacific and breathe its pure serene deeply.

Keats's career is the most brilliant example in literature of the education of a sensibility.

Keats had from the first, and kept throughout his life, a marvellous sense of the particular, and this sense fed and sustained his poetic power

He made an explicit connection between this capacity for sensitive openness and the true character of a poet.¹¹

Sensitivity should not, thus, work by itself. One notices there is a control in the behavior of both Cortez and the watcher of the skies. Their feelings at the moment of

11 — Ford, *op. cit.* p. 20.

discovery are emphasized (“Then felt I like a watcher of the skies” . . . “or like stout Cortez”), but these men do not abandon themselves to emotion. They are disciplined by their previous experiences — one is a watcher of the skies and the other an experienced navigator — and they are accustomed to observing reality as such. Therefore, they feel what they look at, but they are not involved by emotions up to the point of escaping reality. Reason supervises emotion. Although the imagination of Cortez and of the watcher of the skies may infer a thousand meanings from the ocean and the new planet, these meanings are just suggested and the discoveries are portrayed through an objective eye. There is no distortion whatsoever. “A scrupulous fidelity to the object of attention”¹² is preserved. The mind is always attentive to the products of imagination. Sensations are organized by thought. Both are necessary to a real knowledge.

Keats, thought that impressions should be received and accepted as they are and not forced into rational systems merely for the sake of building systems. One must have the courage to face things as they are. Cortez’ silent contact with the Pacific reveals a shock between man and the power of water, but it also denotes a complete acceptance of what he is not able to explain. Keats called this attitude “negative capability”.

He gave as an essential property of the poet ‘negative capability’, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. . . . He was confident enough to let his thoughts and motives lie in their puzzling ambiguity, and patient enough not to thrust them into a false coherence.¹³

Maybe this concept explain Keats’s attraction toward Odysseus — the hero who based all his strategy on the knowledge he had got by contemplating his environment and accepting it, whether good or bad. It may also be the reason why Keats chose to portray his own hero in that contemplative attitude gazing at the ocean. Water and sky are far away from social sophistication and permit man to cultivate his impulses without forcing them into artificial social patterns.

12 — Ford, *op. cit.* p. 221.

13 — Ford, *op. cit.* p. 222.

In "On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer" there is a romantic duality between actuality and desire. The octave presents what the speaker knows and introduces his longing for something he has heard of. The sestet presents the accomplishment of his desire. The romantic attempt to reconcile desire and reality may result in despair when the reconciliation is not possible; it provokes infinite joy when it is successful. This is why the lines describing the discoveries of the watcher of the skies and Cortez are pervaded with intense excitement and ecstasy. Both the new planet and the Pacific appear as if they were a vision, suddenly and ethereally as suggested by the expression "swim into his ken." Keats's language is a language of faith.

One may ask how Homer's classic epic inspired a romantic piece as Keats's sonnet. However, Keats acquainted himself with a version of Homer where romantic superstructure was superimposed on the submerged foundations of Greek verse. Chapman's translation was made in verse and it was animated all over with an inextinguishable fire.

The objections which a just and adequate judgement may bring against Chapman's master work, his translation of Homer, may be summed up in three epithets: it is romantic, laborious, Elizabethan. The qualities implied by these epithets are the reverse of those which should distinguish a translator of Homer; but setting this apart and considering the poems as in the main original, the superstructure of a romantic poet on the submerged foundations of Greek verse, no praise can be too warm or high for the power, the freshness, the infatigable strength and the inextinguishable fire which animate this exalted work.¹⁴

No wonder, thus, that in Keats's sonnet images based on concrete experience are involved by an intense emotional excitement that melts everything into it. Chapman's Homer was the catalyst to Keats's own poetical tendencies: it served to awaken his creative power. The English poet mentions the "loud" and "bold" voice of the Elizabethan translator particularly. For Keats, Chapman's loud and bold voice must have been the proper tone to sing man's virtues and weaknesses. It was through Chapman that Keats had his "first important contact with the world of Greek culture —

14 — "Chapman", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 14th ed., vol. 5.

a world that was to enrich his imagination and excite him more than any other.”¹⁵ “On First Looking Into Chapman’s Homer” reveals that Keats understood the limits a translation imposes on a work of art. Cortez is on the peak and therefore his vision of the ocean — which stands for the immensity of Homer’s dominion — is limited.

15 — Bernard Grebanier, *English Literature*, vol. II (2 vol.; New York Barrons Educational Series, 1959), p. 450.