

JOHN KEATS

On First Looking into Chapman's Homer¹

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 Apollo² hold.
 5 Oft of one wide expanse had I been told
 That deep-browed Homer ruled as his demesne;
 Yet did I never breathe its pure serene³
 Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold:
 Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
 10 When a new planet swims into his ken;⁴
 Or like stout Cortez⁵ 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.

1816

Keats makes us *see* literature as a “wide expanse” by greatly developing this **metaphor** and complementing it with **similes** likening reading to the sighting of a “new planet” and the first glimpse of an undiscovered ocean. More important, he shows us what literature means and why it matters by allowing us to share with him the subjective experience of reading and the complex sensations it inspires—the dizzying exhilaration of discovery; the sense of power, accomplishment, and pride that comes of achieving something difficult; the wonder we feel in those rare moments when a much-anticipated experience turns out to be even greater than we had imagined it would be.

It isn't the definitions of words alone that bring this experience to life for us as we read Keats's poem, but also their sensual qualities—the way the words look, sound, and even feel in our mouths because of the particular way they are put together on the page. The sensation of excitement—of a racing heart and mind—is reproduced in us as we read the poem. For example, notice how the lines in the middle run into each other, but then Keats forces us to slow down at the poem's end—stopped short by that dash and comma in the poem's final lines, just as Cortez and his men are when they reach the edge of the known world and peer into what lies beyond.

WHAT ARE THE GENRES OF LITERATURE?

The conversation that is literature, as well as the conversation about literature, invites all comers, requiring neither a visa nor a special license of any kind. Yet literary studies, like all disciplines, has developed its own terminology and its own

1. George Chapman's were among the most famous Renaissance translations of Homer; he completed his *Iliad* in 1611, his *Odyssey* in 1616. Keats wrote the sonnet after being led to Chapman by a former teacher and reading the *Iliad* all night long.

2. Greek god of poetry and music. *Fealty*: literally, the loyalty owed by a vassal to his feudal lord.

3. Atmosphere.

4. Range of vision; awareness.

5. Actually, Balboa; he first viewed the Pacific from Darien, in Panama.